



Account of Purley on Thames

River Traffic

Introduction

From the very earliest days the river Thames has been one of the principal highways of England. It was a route into the heart of England for invaders but it was also a route along which much of early trade flowed. Nowadays it is as busy as ever but there is very little commercial traffic left and the Environment Agency accounts for the vast bulk as it still uses the river for lock and river maintenance.

Conflicts between users

A perennial problem was a conflict between the three principal users of the river. The boatmen wanted a clear run up and down with no obstructions, the fishermen wanted to put obstacles in to catch fish, eg eel traps and the millers wanted to damn up parts to get a good head of water for their water mills. Because the fishermen and millers were residents of one particular point they could build their weirs and defend them whereas the boatmen were faced with obstruction all along the river and for several centuries it became virtually un-navigable. In 1369 King Edward called for a report as the situation was getting out of hand and John Grey of Rotherfield was commissioned to survey the stretch between Henley and Streatley.

The solution eventually arrived at was the flash lock. This consisted of a permanent weir with a removable section. When a boat wanted to get through the section was removed and the boat either flashed through going downstream or was winched through going upstream. The remains of one of these types of winches can be seen in the car park of the Boathouse Surgery in Pangbourne, although this example was used to haul boats up a slipway. The millers often levied very high charges for this service and often one boat got stranded when the river level fell suddenly as another boat was being flashed through at the lock below. When the Thames Commissioners were formed in 1771 a timetable was devised so that a good bulk of water would arrive at a lock just as it was time to open it. For Mapledurham Lock the times were 7.30 am on Wednesdays and 10.30 am on Saturdays.

The commissioners eventually built a series of pound locks and Mapledurham lock was opened in the summer of 1777 with a toll of 3d per ton for boats going upstream, downstream boats were charged three half pence unless they had already paid the upstream charge when passage was free.

Barges

The river was considered navigable from London to Lechlade and most of the barges were owned and operated by their masters who lived aboard and were prepared to carry almost anything or anyone. We have records of at least two occasions when royalty passed through Purley by boat, in the early 1300s when King Edward II passed in his Royal Barge having just held court at Whitchurch. In 1940 the present Queen, then Princess Elizabeth, passed by on a steamer.

Wrecks and mishaps were frequent and of those which came to grief in our stretch the Banbury Dick in 1801 and the King's Arms in 1726 are recorded. The King's Arms was carrying malt from Abingdon to London and the owners had already paid duty on their cargo. In the county sessions of 11th April 1726 they appealed for the duty on 130 quarters of malt to be repaid and they were awarded 3/6 rebate on each quarter.

The Tow Path

Most of the barges were too large to be rowed and the river too bendy for sails to be used so most of the heavy traffic was towed by horse and a towpath had to be maintained. In Purley this was mainly on the south side of the river but at the end of where River Gardens now is, a chain ferry was built to carry horses to the north bank for the short stretch to Ferry cottage near Tilehurst Station where a second ferry returned the horses to the south bank. This lasted until the early 1940s when it was finally abandoned as by then most of the traffic was powered by internal combustion engines or steam power.

Personal boats

In the 19th century it became fashionable to have a grand house on the banks of the Thames and to own one's own boat. In addition commercial operators such as the Salter brothers began regular steamer services for leisure passengers and the whole character of river traffic began to change. Riverside Inns went up market and instead of catering to the bargemen they were providing overnight accommodation and meals for the passers by. Hardwick House set up a pavilion with tables seats and hammocks on their island and encouraged passers by to stop and cook themselves a meal using the facilities provided – at a cost.

Other people built house boats and lived permanently on the river, Some of these were monstrous – the Satsuma built at Hampton in 1888 had a main saloon of 750 sqft with six bedrooms 10 ft by 12 ft with stained glass windows and a deck 20ft above river level. Some were rented out for short periods. The Water Lily was advertised as having two saloons with fireplaces and parquet floors, electric bells, hot and cold running water and a good servant's bedroom.

The number of small boats mushroomed. There were punts, skiffs, sailing dinghies and a plethora of other types. At first they all required manpower to propel them but gradually the switch was made to powered launches and one only has to pay a short visit to Mapledurham Lock in midsummer to see the vast amount and variety of traffic coming now from all over the country. Rowing Clubs appeared up and down the river and it is not uncommon to see eights or fours from either Reading or Pangbourne in our stretch of the river. The Dolphin Centre at Pangbourne provides boating facilities for young people and they often venture down to Mapledurham or beyond in their Kayaks. Once a year there is the raft race where one can witness the ingenuity of man in devising means of travelling over water (or in the water in many cases).

Official Boats

During the winter season most of the river is closed to traffic, however this is the opportunity for the several agencies to work on the locks and the river basin. The NRA have a fleet of boats for carrying heavy loads and also for dredging and smaller boats for inspections.

Swan Upping

A quite different type of traffic occurs in July when the two bodies who own the swans make their journey along the Thames stopping to mark their birds on the bill.

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