

SOME NOTES ON THE WEY NAVIGATION and RIVER WEY

The Wey Navigation was constructed soon after an act of Parliament was passed in 1651. Sir Richard Weston, of Sutton Place, (more recently the home of oil magnate Paul Getty) and three partners financed the work which entailed cutting about ten miles where the River Wey's course was unsuitable for boats. The cost was £15000 and the scheme enabled barges to be taken from the Thames to Guildford. In 1760 a further four miles of canal was authorised and this extended the navigable section to Godalming. Later the Wey Navigation was linked to Basingstoke and this was intended to eventually reach the Bristol area but this section was never built. In 1816 the Wey-Arun Navigation was opened and this enabled boats to sail from Guildford to the English Channel.

In the nineteenth century the canal boom gave way to the great railway expansion and by 1845 the iron way had reached Guildford. Soon, all canals were being hard pressed to compete with the more speedy railways and many were forced to close and were later abandoned altogether. One of the first to suffer was the Wey-Arun which ceased commercially in 1871. The Basingstoke Canal struggled on for several years but in 1914 the last boat reached the Basingstoke terminus having taken three months to get there! The Wey Navigation, although also declining as a commercial carrier continued in business until the nineteen-sixties and it is surprising to learn that the last horse drawn barge plied the waterway until 1961, and grain was carried to Coxes Lock Mill until 1969. In 1964 the Wey Navigation was given to the National Trust and four years later the Godalming Navigation was also acquired for the nation.

Due to restoration work: it is still possible to navigate from the Thames to Godalming and attempts are being made to restore the Basingstoke Canal for pleasure use. One interested body is also hoping to restore the Wey Arun Navigation although it seems unlikely that the full length will ever be completely navigable again because some sections have been ploughed out.

The Wey Navigation is, with the Godalming Navigation, 19½ miles in length (Godalming Wharf to the Thames). There are seventeen locks and gates, and thirty four bridges to pass. The total fall from Godalming to the Thames is about ninety feet. At Godalming the canal is about 140 feet above sea level.

From Godalming the towing path is on the left bank and the canal passes through wide meadows, some of which are rather wet in Winter and Spring. At about two miles the entrance to the Wey-Arun Canal is passed. Soon after passing beneath a railway bridge St. Catherines lock house is passed and later the lock itself. Shalford church can be seen to the left. Nearing Guildford a sandy bank is crossed. This sand has been eroded from the hill above atop which is the old ruin of St. Catherines Chapel. A short distance after this is the entrance to Ferry Lane. Here there used to be a foot ferry that is said to date from the middle ages. Note Chaucers Well (the water is drinkable). Eventually there will be a footbridge here to carry the North Downs Way. The large meadows on the right are often purposely flooded in winter so that they can freeze over for skating. Now almost into Guildford Tumbling Bay and the town lock are passed. The large buildings to the right are first the Yvonne Arnaud Theatre and then Debenhams Store. In the town walkers must pass through the 'bus station and then regain the towing path after passing under the new bridge. Here the path is well used but after crossing the By Pass it is often quite overgrown, until the Row Barge is passed. Once past Guildford the canal is "out in the country" again. Although the canal is quite peaceful over most of its length the section at Ryfleet is due to have the new M25 motorway constructed next to it for about a mile.

BOOK: "Londons Lost Route to the Sea" by Paul Vine.