

THE RIVER LEA 1571-1767:

A River Navigation prior to canalisation

by

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ABSTRACT

In pre-industrial England river navigations were subject to improvement by canalisation, the introduction of artificial navigation cuts and pound locks. Along the Lea this did not happen until 1767. Before that the navigation, except for one short period, relied upon a less efficient technology, the provision of flashes from fishing weirs, turnpikes and mills. Yet the river was still an important transport route, particularly for the supply of grain, meal and malt to London. It had been this during the mediaeval period, but not by the middle of the sixteenth century.

Then in 1571 the City of London sponsored legislation to construct a canal from the Lea to London. Parliamentary opposition thwarted the original ambitious scheme, so two cheaper, shorter canals were considered, but never built. Instead an ambitious and unique river improvement scheme was successfully implemented. This experimental navigation (reducing reliance on flashes to a minimum) survived 20 years, before persistent and violent opposition from land carriers closed it.

A Star Chamber case upheld the rights of the bargemen, but the experimental navigation was not restored. Instead the traditional flash-lock navigation re-appeared, and was to last, with only minor improvement, until 1767. In the intervening years the navigation continued to expand and prosper. This despite the admitted problems of relying on flashes and tides, and despite a series of major disputes with the New River Company, the millers, fishermen and riparian land-owners. Conflict there certainly was, but also compromise.

Ultimately all parties were prepared to accept the conflicting rights of other users, provided they could defend their own. Commissions of Sewers provided an effective administrative forum to effect and authorise such compromise, even after the appointment of a body of Trustees in 1739.

That the Lea was an adequate navigation before canalisation, despite a 'second-best' technology and an unpaid part-time administrative structure means that a valid comparison with the concept of Appropriate Technology, discussed in modern-day development theory, is possible.

PREFACE

In the final preparation of this thesis I have benefitted greatly from the supervision of Dr John Miller, who became my tutor on the retirement of Dr K.G.T. McDonnell. This thesis is an unplanned development of an unexpected hobby. I owe a lot to several people who have helped along the way. To Dr Dennis Smith, at whose night classes on Industrial Archaeology I first grew interested in the river Lea. To Ted Lyons at Melody Maker and Dr Elisabeth Muller at CDS, managers who were kind enough to accommodate my need for time off mid-week to research. To Dr Shirley Jarman, for being there with encouragement at a time I needed it. To Janet Levy, for her assistance when typing up an earlier draft. To Roberta Lewis, for drawing many maps for me. To Professor S. R. Dennison, who taught me at Newcastle University many years ago, and who played an essential role in commenting on my earlier draft and in acting throughout as a moral tutor.

Documentation of the Lea and its environs is spread over several depositories. I should like to thank the archivists, librarians and staff at several locations, for their help on visits and for their replies to letters: Miss Betty Masters at the City of London Record Office; Miss J. Coburn and Mrs Joan Kenealy at the Greater London Record Office; Mr Peter Walne at the Hertfordshire Record Office; Mr Victor Gray at Essex Record Office; Mr Harcourt Williams, archivist to the Marquis of Salisbury; Mr M. Lovett and Mr M. Damonsing of the Thames Water Authority; Mr P.N. Turner of the Borough of Enfield Library Services; staff at the Bodleian Library, the Surrey, Hampshire and Northamptonshire Record Office; at the local history sections of libraries in Tower Hamlets, Stratford, Leyton, Hackney, Walthamstow and Cheshunt; and of course at the Public Record Office at Chancery Lane and Kew.

In addition several people have courteously replied to unsolicited letters, some of which have been lengthy: Mr. R.R. Aspinall, Librarian to the Port of London Authority, Dr. Ken Bascombe; Major General Mark Bond; Mr Ralph Broadhurst of the Society of Dyers and Colourists; Dr Colin Brooks; Miss A. Corbishley, Record Officer to the Treasury Solicitor, Professor Kerry Downes; Mr Charles Hadfield; Mr Michael Handford; Mrs D.M. Hetherington; Mr Anthony Kirby; Mr K.G. McKenna, Executive Officer to the Law Society; Mr John Montgomery, Clerk to the Salters Company; Mr Charles Marmoy of the Huguenot Society; Dr Valerie Pearl; Mr David Perman of the Ware Society; Miss M.L. Robertson, Curator of Manuscripts to the Huntington Collection; Dr Violet Rowe; Dr Joan Thirsk; Mr Alan Thompson, Mrs Jane Whaley, of Harrowby Mss Trust; and Mrs Elizabeth Wood.

A couple of replies have not been retained in my files, and I apologise for omitting their names from the above list.

There are three more names to be added, but they also provided me with unexpected treats. Professor A.W. Skempton, who pointed out a map I had missed, the survey of the river between Hertford and Ware made by Whittenbury in 1733(Figure,7); ----Professor

Bernard Rudden, for showing me that Christopher Wren's survey of the Lea could still be found, when previous enquiries had proved fruitless; an officer of the Thames Water Authority, whose name I have mislaid, who told me that some records of the Lea Commission of Sewers had been found in a disused sewage works and deposited with Enfield Library Services.

There is some debate about the proper spelling of the river's name. Indeed during the period under review it was often known as Ware River. Throughout I have used the spelling Lea, except when it is necessary to use the legal spelling, Lee, as adopted in the Acts of 1739 and 1767. Thus the river Lea, but the Trustees of the River Lee appointed in 1739, and the Lee Navigation for the canalised river after 1767.

At points in the text an asterisk has been used to indicate words or phrases explained in the Glossary (Appendix 2). All quotes retain their original spelling and punctuation.

In the period of Old Style dating, the year is taken to begin on 1 January. Also some attempt has been made in footnotes to provide biographical information of some of the maltsters and barge-owners whose names occur in the text. The pursuit of biographical information is very much a work in progress.

One final important point, this is for my mum and dad.

Plaistow, July 1986