

THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE STROUDWATER CANAL

Stroud is situated on the River Frome on the banks of which are many mills, mostly connected with the clothing manufacture.

It is approximately 8 miles from Gloucester and much the same distance from Framilode where the Frome runs into the River Severn, so that coal coming from the Forest of Dean and other materials coming from ports in the Bristol Channel came to Framilode or Gloucester and then were carried inland by pack horse or wheeled traffic over low lying roads which were notoriously impassable in winter.

In 1727 a scheme was suggested to make the River Frome navigable, but fierce arguments broke out, and petitions were raised chiefly by the mill owners and the clothiers. They were against the scheme as they thought they would lose water from their mill ponds and their mills would be standing idle, especially in the summer time when the water was low. However in 1730 an Act of Parliament was passed in favour of the scheme, but it was never completed.

In 1740 Richard Cambridge of Whitminster House, an amateur boat builder, poet and gentleman, who had a pleasure barge designed like a Venetian gondola built for navigating the Severn, obtained permission from his neighbours to make the lower part of the Frome navigable at his own expence. He transported both the Prince of Wales when he came to dine with him on the "Severn Gondola", in 1750 and also stone for building operations at Whitminster.

In 1755 John Dallaway of Brimscombe revived interest in the

possibility of a navigation and in the early part of that year he raised a small subscription to finance a new survey of the river by Thomas Yeomans. The latter worked out a scheme which would cost about £8,145, but suggested £10,000 to cover extra expenses. On August 13th, 1756 a meeting was called at the George Inn, Stroud to appoint new Commissioners in the place of some 160 who had died since the Act of 1730. Only 10 Commissioners were present and as these were insufficient the meeting was adjourned until 3rd September. Again few Commissioners attended and then they could not agree so that five successive meetings were held without any business transacted.

The idea was to deepen and widen the Frome to allow trows and other boats of up to 70 tons burden to be hauled up to Fromebridge, while smaller boats of half size would be able to pass up the Stonehouse branch of the Frome to Wallbridge above Stroud. Each of the fourteen mills which were on its banks were to be bypassed with a lock from the mill pond into a new cut which would lead into the river again a short distance below the mill dam. In this way only a lockful of water from the mills supply would be taken for each vessel. The locks must therefore have been pound locks, and even this slight loss of water would be compensated for by a two acre reservoir dug in a field at Wallbridge.

Yet another scheme was proposed by Messrs. Kemmett, Wynde, Pynnock and Bridge, to undertake the work at their own expense without locks, by shifting the cargoes into boxes at every mill into other boats by means of a crane. This plan for container cargoes was

accepted and a second Act of Parliament was passed. Work began on 4th August, 1758 with the same powers as were given to the Commissioners of the 1730 Act, subject to forfeiture if work was not finished by Lady Day, 1761.

In April of that year, the undertakers realized their work would not be finished in time and asked for an extension of time from 2 years to 8 years, but by August they ran short of money, work halted, and they tried to sell some of their machinery. The Frome was actually used, where the work had been done. Purnell and Co. the owners of Framilode and Fromebridge mills, although very much against the scheme, seemed to have benefited from the Kemmett's work, for they were using it in 1775. The undertakers continued to work boats up the Frome as far as Bonds Mill until spring, 1763 when the undertaking was abandoned and trade on the Frome ceased.

In 1774, seven years after the rights of the undertakers had expired, William Dallaway son of John Dallaway had the Frome re-surveyed by the same Thomas Yeomans who had surveyed it in 1755, and he suggested a new cut to run along side the Frome and thus avoid any interference with the mill dams. The Commissioners met, appointed new men in place of those who had died and sought permission to make a canal as far as Wallbridge. Messrs. Priday and Dadford made a survey and estimated the cost at £16,750 but subscribers were asked to promise £20,000 in £100 shares, just in case there were extra expenses.

On the 2nd February, a committee met at Framilode at 9.00a.m.

to see the tide come up the Severn and select a suitable place for the first tide lock. Most of the line of the canal had been staked out as far as the Bristol Road, the land measured and negotiations opened for purchase, and an advertisement inserted in the Gloucester Journal invited tenders for digging. The clay was examined to test its firmness for brick making, rough ashlar, seasoned oak and green elm were sought for locks and Thomas Bartlett, newly appointed mason, searched for suitable stone at Gatcombe and Tintern.

On the 23rd February 1775 John Priday was appointed Engineer and Surveyor at a salary of £100 per year. He promised to devote a quarter of his time to the work, and he was instructed to start cutting right away. He ordered planks for barrow-ways and special spades and giving instructions to John Greaves and Robert Perry who were to be in charge of the cutters, the work began late March 1775.

On March 8th a Mr. Yates gave permission for the cutters to move onto his land including a piece of pasture, known as "Carters Close" at Framilode. Arkell the tenant did not object to the work commencing so on April 4th John Greaves and his gang moved onto Carters Close and by the 19th April had cut all but the last twelve yards. Then a protest was received from William Purnell of Framilode Mill, Purnell stated he had leased Carters Close and it had only been sublet to Arkell. The Committee, knowing his opposition to the canal, was convinced he had bought the land in secret, to stop the work. Purnell and other millowners who had opposed the canal held a meeting on 10th July, 1775, and in consequence, Purnell issued a writ

against the Canal Co. for trespass, digging the turf and destroying the herbage on his land.

The case was heard on 4th August and tried before a special jury at Gloucester Assizes, the decision being that the committee had exceeded the powers of the 1730 Act. A week later, after frantic discussions, the committee ordered all work to be left except Framilode Lock which would be damaged by frost unless finished before winter; when this was done all men were stood off, and work was at a standstill. On 24th August a special general meeting of subscribers decided to obtain a fresh Act of Parliament to authorize a canal, but Purnell was not easily persuaded to let them cut into his land, and he obtained 50 guineas for a small piece of land.

Work restarted, but still things did not go smoothly for the Commissioners were always interfering in the work of the Engineer. In May he was given notice, and Edward Lingard was appointed in his place in July. Lingard fetched navvies from as far as Warwickshire and Leicestershire, so that by September, a hundred men were working in four gangs between the Severn and the Bristol Road. The section was completed and the first load of coal was landed at Bristol Road Wharf on 17th December 1755.

Lingard's work proved unsatisfactory and he was dismissed on November 5th 1777, a Thomas Freen being appointed in his place. He also failed to give satisfaction and was dismissed three months later. After that Benjamin Grazebrook, the clerk supervised the rest of the work.

By February 1778 the canal was opened as far as Chippenham Platt, and work commenced on the next section up to Ryford. This was completed in January 1779, by which time the committee had only £830 left out of the £20,000 originally subscribed. A further £10,000 was raised later, and some of the subscribers agreed to lend another £2,000 to finish the work. The final length was completed in July 1779 and on the 21st July the first boat to travel the length of the canal was the Committee's own barge, built specially for the official opening.

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Sources

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