

THE 120th MEETING OF A. H. S. HELD ON WEDNESDAY 29th JANUARY 2020

Peter said that he knew about 2 plaques set in the walls of Aynhoe Park House. He received an email from Nick Allen, who used to give tours of the House when it was owned by the Mutual Housing Association, enclosing an email from a Doctor Audrey Carpenter from Leicestershire, who had made a study of the Desaguliers Plaques.

Thomas Cartwright married Mary Desaguliers. In his will her father left instructions to Mary requesting that 2 marble plaques commemorating an action he took part in at Cherbourg, and had brought back, should be installed on walls at Aynhoe Park.

Audrey has compiled a history, with a full translation of the Latin words in them.

She hoped that they are still there, & said that any news on their fate would be much appreciated. Peter went there recently and found the plaques in place where they had originally been. He thanked her for all the work she had done and the translations. James Perkins had not been there, but Peter has prepared a detailed history of them, and will let him have it next time he sees him.

ENGLAND'S CANALS – PAST AND PRESENT.

In 1760 roads were in a terrible state. They were hard, deep ruts in summer, and absolute quagmires in winter. The Duke of Bridgewater owned coal mines outside Manchester. He had gone on the Grand Tour & seen canals in other countries, & wanted a canal to transport coal into the centre of the city. He engaged a millwright, James Brindley, to oversee the work. It was completed by 1769. Only 6 miles long it had no locks, but it had an aqueduct to cross a river. A picture from a contemporary book shows a boat drawn by two horses, being pulled over the aqueduct above the River Irwell.

The Bridgewater Canal came to the attention of several industrialists, the most prominent of whom was Josiah Wedgwood, the young pottery manufacturer, who was just starting up his business. He was motivated by the fact that much of his china didn't reach its destination intact because of the poor roads, and he was a principal mover of a massive project to form the first major canal.

Brindley looked at the main rivers, Mersey, Trent, Thames & Severn and came up with the idea of a Grand Cross, with canals to link all these rivers.

The first of these, the Trent & Mersey, was to be a 93-mile canal with over 70 locks, and something completely new, a 1¾-mile tunnel under Harecastle Hill. Brindley set national standards, where all the locks were 72 feet long and 7 feet wide. It followed that the boats therefore had to be a maximum of 70 feet long by 6 foot 10 inches wide, and thus we have the narrowboats whose dimensions have remained unchanged. The main consideration in keeping the locks 7 feet wide was the difficulty in cutting the tunnel any wider than this for men on boards to walk boats through them.

Tolls could be charged for the carriage of coal, timber, etc., and to enable land to be compulsorily purchased. The Oxford Canal was approved by a meeting in 1768, and its Act of Parliament was passed in April 1769. Work started that year. Brindley was again in charge, although he died from overworking before it was completed. By 1787 it got to Aynho, and Oxford by 1790, making a through route from Liverpool to London. Vast quantities of coal, timber, iron, stone, grain, wool, etc. were transported to factories, and finished goods were sent to major towns and ports. These canals paved the way for the Industrial Revolution to take place.

The North Oxford Canal had only 4 locks. The southern part with 9 locks at Napton up to the summit, & 31 down to Oxford, retained all its foibles to become one of the most popular touring routes in the country. Most noteworthy is the 5½-mile stretch in the middle. When a double-width canal the Grand Union Canal, was proposed to run from Birmingham to Brentford on the Thames around 1805, they wanted to use this short stretch. The South Oxford Canal realised that it was bound to lose a great deal of trade to the new one, so the directors got a clause written into the new Act, guaranteeing compensation for its loss of trade, by outrageously high tolls for all Grand Union boats using this short stretch. So it paid high dividends for many years. Then in 1793 canal mania hit Britain. No fewer than 21 schemes were agreed.

The reason for this increase was that entrepreneurs began to realise the full potential of canals. Companies were entitled to charge tolls for every ton of cargo carried, so shares for the various canal companies were in great demand as they were considered a licence to print money. An official

experiment established that the most amount of coal carried by a horse and cart was 2 tons. But the same horse could pull a boat on water carrying 50 tons, 25 times as much. Original shares could only be bought at the initial meeting. Newspaper reports of that time mentioned shares that had cost £140 each were soon selling for over £1100.

Canal engineers such as Brindley, Jessop, Rennie and Telford became household names. Gangs of labourers, known as navigators or navvies, using only picks, shovels, & wheelbarrows toiled long hours to construct not only the canals & locks, but also bridges, aqueducts and the first long tunnels. One difficulty was the very winding route chosen by Brindley. His route from the top lock at Marston Doles to Claydon top lock is over 11 miles long, but as the crow flies, this is less than 5 miles. Rosa and Peter did "The Worm" 19 times in all, so called not only because it twists and turns like a worm, but also because there is one particular landmark, the Wormleighton Mast. There is a good pub at Fenny Compton and a marina. After a few locks is Cropredy, with a lock cottage, shop, two pubs and lots of boats. Then you come to Banbury Museum, and Tooley's Boatyard.

Now a bit of history. The canals flourished until the mid-1800s, when the coming of the railway led to a steady decline. There were improvements, the introduction of the diesel engine to replace the horse, with no feeding, watering and stabling, but the decline continued until the end of WW2, by which time only a handful of companies were still operating. Most of the canals had been nationalised, and successive governments were happy to let them fall into disuse, as they could then save the cost of maintaining them. Luckily all was not lost, as a small band of enthusiasts got together to fight to preserve this heritage. It had all started in 1939, when a newly married writer, Tom Rolt, and his wife resolved to buy a narrowboat and convert it to live on and escape the rat-race by touring the canal system. This is where the local connection comes in. He found the boat he was looking for here at Banbury, and fitted most of it out himself with the assistance of Mr Tooley at Tooleys boatyard, the oldest continuously working boatyard in the country, now the centrepiece of the new Museum. Rolt was the 1st to have a fixed bath on a narrowboat. Other innovations were a huge water tank, a dressing table, wardrobe, bookshelves & 2 huge easy chairs. He and his wife spent a year touring the canal system, meeting and befriending many of the old boatmen and their families, and recording details of the life and times of that day. They would probably have continued had it not been for the war. In his spare time Tom Rolt wrote a book about his travels and the way he feared that canal life would disappear, which was eventually published in 1944. A fellow canal enthusiast, Robert Aickman, was so taken with the book that he arranged a meeting with Rolt, and as a result they formed the Inland Waterways Association, which fought the government tooth and nail to prevent waterways being closed. In 1955 the Government declared that the Oxford Canal was one of those that would be left to decay and finally be filled in. The I W A called a meeting at Oxford Town Hall. Many M. P. s and dignitaries and 400 people attended. A resolution was carried and the Govt. backed down, and the canal was saved.

During the 1970s and 80s pleasure cruising really took off. Due to the IWA's efforts many canals were saved, and derelict ones restored, due to the introduction of lottery funding, and this is continuing to this day. The bridge across the canal to Castle Quay car park was named the Tom Rolt Bridge in his honour. Photos were shown of Aynho Wharf in 1909 and in 2009. There are boats moored on both sides a long way south of Aynho Wharf Bridge.

A pleasant walk is along the towpath to Somerton lock. It is about a mile and a half each way, to the deepest lock on the Oxford Canal. There was a unique lock cottage – unique because it was the only one which didn't have a road running anywhere near.

Another good stretch is a short walk from Thrupp. There are good pubs, the Rock of Gibraltar at Enslow, the Jolly Boatman on the main road just before Kidlington, both with tables outside right on the canal, and the Boat Inn at Thrupp. The Canal finally approaches Oxford, with 2 possible routes to the Thames, one via Duke's Cut, if you are going upstream towards Lechlade, and the other at Isis lock, the last one on the canal.

Life for the working boatmen was very hard. They were not well paid, and living conditions were difficult. On a 70 ft boat, the front 60 feet formed the cargo hold, and the whole family had only a cabin 10 ft long by 7 ft in which to live, eat and sleep. Pictures of different types of boats were shown. They are all called narrowboats. A barge is an open boat used solely for transporting goods or collecting rubbish. If you ever wish to spend a week on a boat and go touring, either by hiring or

using a hotel boat, there are no fewer than eight rings, circular journeys, so you don't have to go somewhere and return the same way. They are The Stourport Ring from the centre of Birmingham to Wolverhampton & Stourport, onto the River Severn to Worcester, and then back to Birmingham.

The Warwickshire Ring right up through the centre of Birmingham, then through Rugby, Leamington Spa, Warwick & back to Birmingham.

Peter said that for his first year they had gone up the Thames to Lechlade, & the next year down the Thames, under Tower Bridge to Limehouse Basin, then up the rivers Lee & Stort. By then they had visited as much of the south as they could, so they decided to move to Aynho, so that they could easily explore the rest of the country. They put their furniture into store, and set off to travel the Kennet & Avon Canal while they were between houses, past Bruce Tunnel to Bath. Both up and down they had to face the 29 Caen Hill locks.

Their 1st first big trip from Aynho involved 2 rings, the Four Counties and the Cheshire rings. They went through Birmingham, and up the Trent & Mersey Canal. They reached the Harecastle Tunnel, but their headlight failed soon after entering, making the passage difficult. They went up the Macclesfield Canal, & were planning to go right round this ring, but learned that very week vandals had attacked boats, & stolen a dog & a mobile phone. With only two of them they decided to go back down the Macclesfield, and then with the help of their son Tony, who had joined them, to Llangollen. The most exciting part of the trip was the famous Pontcysyllte Aqueduct. This is an iron trough $\frac{1}{4}$ of a mile long, which crosses a valley, which at one point is 126 feet below. On one side is a towpath and a substantial railing. On the other you have just the edge of the trough, which is only a few inches above water level, with a sheer drop of 126 feet to the valley below. The homeward journey was via the Shropshire Union Canal, which was very wide compared with the narrow Llangollen.

Next year they first went on the Leicestershire Ring. This had the Foxton Locks, which are different to normal locks, and you have to operate the paddles in a certain order, so they had a resident lock keeper (Mick & Crystal Jones previously from Partridge Green near Southwater) to ensure that it was all done correctly. They had a 2nd trip that year, round the Avon Ring. Pictures showed Rosa driving over the A 34 Road at Wootton Wawen near Stratford, & an even longer Edstone Aqueduct. They moored opposite the Royal Shakespeare Theatre. Actors Timothy West & David Suchet, who are both canal enthusiasts, used live on their narrowboats while performing here.

Next year they went round the Stourport Ring, & then the Staffordshire and Worcestershire Canal. In 2002 they spent the Queen's Jubilee weekend in Birmingham. This is the place, which has changed most in all the country since they hired their 1st holiday boat there in 1985. They stopped to decorate the boat with flags & bunting bought to celebrate the Jubilee. The centre was thronged with people, and as they had an attractive decorated boat many clapped and cheered as they went along the new Brindleyplace, which rejuvenated by lottery grants, is now a vibrant hive of activity, with The National Indoor Arena, a Sea Life Centre, a massive Conference Centre and Symphony Hall, not to mention dozens of pubs, cafes and restaurants. Then they explored some of Birmingham's lesser-known canals. One thing you may not know is that 4 canals meet under the middle of Spaghetti Junction. One of the few remaining local areas they hadn't explored was the only round trip you can do from Aynho – The London Ring. Two tunnels at Braunston and Blisworth were followed by busy Stoke Bruerne. Then it was down to the Thames. Here was a delightful shot of Clifton Hampden, an idyllic spot. By then they had had Petrosa completely repainted.

In 2003 Rosa discovered that she had breast cancer. She was cured, but had to take tablets to prevent it recurring, which drained her energy. In 2004 they decided to have one last trip to Chester. Neither of them had been there before. They reached the city & moored at Tower Wharf. They loved the place, walked round the walls and explored the city. However after a couple of days Rosa said that she felt completely drained, so Peter took her and the dog home by train. He went back and met Tony, who had been going to join them there anyway. They went down the newly restored Anderton Boat Lift, and moored up below it on the River Weaver. There are huge Locks here. They went as far as an enormous Chemical Works. Opposite this just a few feet the other side of the far bank lies the Manchester Ship Canal, the Mersey Estuary and a distant Liverpool. They got back to the Trent & Mersey, and came down to the Harecastle Tunnel. This time Tony drove through the Tunnel without any problems at all. He got off at Stoke-on-Trent, as he had to get back to work, and Peter brought Petrosa back on his own. One more trip was made with Keith & Carol to the deep Somerton Lock

and back again. There was a final family photo taken near Banbury Lock. Altogether Petrosa had travelled 5408 miles, & gone through 3765 locks in 2613 engine hours.

Somewhat reluctantly having owned her for 11 years, Peter sold her to David King & Julie. She is still moored in the same place, and they have now owned her for over 15 years.

Peter went to the Beale Park Boat Show where he found a small Barrowboat, with a wheel on the front so it can be wheeled about using the oars through holes in the transom. It came unvarnished so they did this in the greenhouse. He bought an old Volvo car to keep it in, and to take him to wherever on the canal he wanted to take it. He added a tiny electric motor and battery, so that he could travel the canals in absolute silence, and do a lot of fishing. He really enjoyed his boat, licenced and with a new I W A flag flying. Rosa had a few trips in Pet 2 before she died.

Fairly early on he started going up the River Cherwell (not the canal) near Nell Bridge. It is quite a high bridge. Only occasional canoes and very small boats can go here. At one point a train goes by very close. In 2006 he went to the Beale Park Boat Show, & gave the boat builder his first motorised trip in one of his boats across the lake and onto the River Thames. It could very easily be wheeled about. Here it was ready to be launched at Aynho Wharf. The next photo was on the Thames. Because his boat is so silent he can pass a heron without it moving off. He did quite a lot of fishing. He liked to visit the Aylesbury Arm of the Grand Union Canal. This was a very little-used part of the canal system, & in many places bunches of reeds almost completely filled the canal, so that he had to push himself through. This was very good for fishing, because towpath anglers ignored them.

This is a tiny bridge across the canal just north of Lower Heyford. It has to be raised by canal boats, but Peter's is probably the only motorised boat that could pass under it. Another picture was of fishing at one of the lakes at Nell Bridge Farm. His best carp was caught right there, 22½ pounds.

A good friend for many years was "Mortimer Bones" who wrote a blog about her boat in Canal Boat magazine. She came on a short trip with him. Pictures showed Mark is driving past his old boat Petrosa. Rachael, Rebecca and Janet enjoyed it too. Pictures were shown of Banbury Canal Days. In 2009 he won a prize for the best ghost. In 2011 he used some of the same flags and bunting he had used on Petrosa for the Queen's Golden Jubilee for her Diamond Jubilee.

He showed the top half of Towpath Talk Magazine Sept 2014. Then the bottom half of the Magazine. By then he was getting arthritis in his left wrist, and it became worse in 2017, so he put a sign on his boat "My last Banbury Canal Day" in 2017. This worked and two people contacted him. The first one agreed to buy the boat, so Peter sold it to him.

The Barrowboat had been on 487 trips, travelling 1603 miles, and gone through 308 small locks. It was used for 118 engine hours.

Peter said that for him the main beauty of the canals is that although they have been in existence for 230 years, they still function just as well now as they did in the 1790s.

Forthcoming Meetings

Wednesday 26th February – Local Boys Save the Day – a story of D-Day by Chris Bazeley

Wednesday 25th March – The Hunger Winter – by Imogen Matthews

Wednesday 29th April – The Waddesdon It Girls – by Maureen Paterson