

The River Trent at Muskham



Photograph taken from the riverbank footpath [Ferry Road] at the junction of Mackleys Lane, North Muskham: looking north (downstream). OS Ref: SK798589

As residents become all too aware at times, North Muskham sits on the west bank of the River Trent, sandwiched between the river, the A1 [Great North Road], and the east coast railway line. In consequence, the village is long and narrow and, most of the time, we take these neighbouring assets for granted. In fact, for many residents, the immediacy of those assets may be the reason they found the village so attractive in the first place.

Now and again, however, these features make us aware of their presence. The Trent can burst its banks, and cover the washland; the A1 can back up - most Fridays - or close due to accidents; and, on summer nights, with windows open and a westerly breeze, we can hear trains hum their way north or south.

Whilst, in historic terms, the Great North Road and the railway are fairly new features, the River Trent has commanded this vale for millennia. In medieval times, and beyond, Newark was known as the 'Key to the North'. Militarily, if you held Newark, or rather the crossing of the River Trent, you had control of much of the east side of England. The garrison at Newark Castle controlled the ancient Fosse Way, from Exeter to Lincoln, and the north - south route over the river, whether the crossings in Newark and at South Muskham, or round by Winthorpe to the Muskham ford.

At 185 miles (298km) long, the River Trent is the third longest river in the United Kingdom and drains a huge land area of eastern England. Beginning in north Staffordshire it flows south, through Stoke on Trent before swinging east to Burton then northeast through Nottingham and on to Newark on Trent. At Newark, the Trent does something almost unique; it turns north towards the sea, joining the Humber estuary to enter the North Sea. The Muskham area marks the point of that turn north.

The Trespasser

Whilst the river is fairly well tamed nowadays, it was known as one of the most 'lively' rivers in Europe - 'The Trespasser' - flooding and cutting new pathways. The current line of the river, between the villages North Muskham and Holme, is believed to have been carved out in a great flood well before the 1600 date oft quoted.



View of Holme village and church, across the River Trent from North Muskham (Church - OS Ref: SK803592)

It is know that, at one time, the river, or a main channel, flowed east of Holme village by Langford church (SK821590) a route now know as 'Slough Dyke'. An interesting review is to go into Google Earth and put in a North Muskham postcode, say NG23 6ER, and take a look around the area. You can see old river routes curving around from Bathley and South Muskham, currently on the west side, across the valley to Langford on the east - all routes that various river channels have taken over the centuries.

Through time, the Trent has been an important thoroughfare. Evidence of Bronze Age and Roman activity are found within the Trent Vale and North Muskham is not excluded. Bronze age evidence is found in North Muskham from the Lakeview development south to beyond Crab Lane, around Burr ridge Farm.

Throughout history, man will have made various improvements to the Trent. The Romans created the Fosdyke waterway, which runs from the Trent, at Torksey to the Witham at Lincoln. This created an inland access to the Wash and North Sea.

Later, the Vikings used the river, as a route into the eastern counties where they first raided then settled. Torksey has evidence of Viking activity and Repton, between Derby and Burton, is known to have been a major settlement in the later 800s.

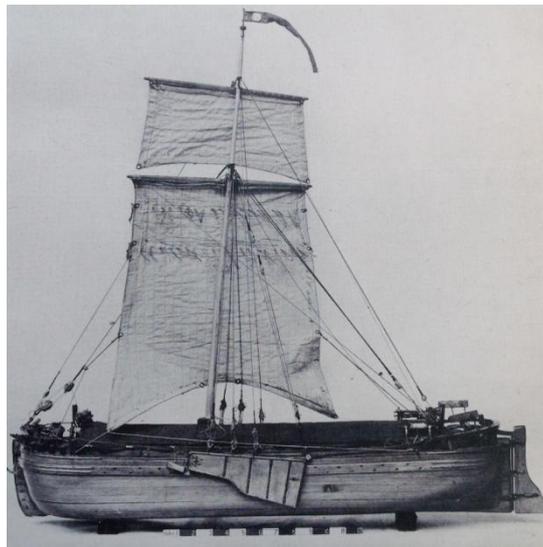
Though we know the river moved across the landscape as it wore banks away, formed oxbow lakes, and cut new channels during floods, we have little data about which ancient channel was used when. In addition, before taming, many stretches would have been multi-channelled, some with quite large islands in the middle, and, in parts, very shallow. Through North Muskham there were two areas referred to a 'shoals' - wide shallow areas, difficult for boats to pass and, at low water, probably easy to walk across.

In the article 'The Muskham Cross' mention was made of the Muskham ford which was guarded during the Pilgrimage of Grace, and which is bound to have played a part in the Civil War, when Newark was under siege- the Newark Governor owned much of Holme.

Improving River Traffic

It was really in the latter part of the eighteenth century when waterway navigation really took off, though various earlier schemes were undertaken a little earlier. All were private enterprise projects, put together by landowners wanting to earn tolls for usage and industrialists, wanting to shift their goods to market more efficiently than packhorses or carters. Each scheme needing an act of Parliament, and lobbying by both backers and objectors, to get consent to proceed.

Upstream of Nottingham, some very early projects had been undertaken, including work to extend the navigable Trent towards Burton around 1700. Then, in 1766 came the Trent & Mersey Canal, with the famous principal engineer James Brindley.



The type of barge used on the upper Trent before the building of towpaths
(sample photograph - Thunderboat)

In Newark there was a problem. The main channel of the Trent flowed on the north side of the island, by Averham, Kelham and South Muskham and the towns folk of Newark wanted better navigation through the town. In 1772, an Act of Parliament authorised the building of two locks and the 'Newark Navigation Commissioners' was created to manage this route. The river downstream, through Muskham, was still too shallow for good tonnages.

William Jessop

In a previous article, 'Driving North from Newark', I wrote about one of the greatest engineers John Smeaton and the building of Smeaton's Arches. That article began in Plymouth, with the building of the Eddystone Rock lighthouse. For this next part of the story of the Trent, we again return to Plymouth. It was there Smeaton met Josias Jessop, a shipwright of Devonport, who he took on to oversee the lighthouse building work. They became great friend and, when Josias died in 1761, Smeaton acted as guardian to Josias' 16 year old son William, taking him on as his pupil. As a very young engineer, Jessop worked with Smeaton on canal construction in Yorkshire and it is almost impossible to envisage that he was not Smeaton's right-hand-man building our road north from Newark. Jessop, encouraged by Smeaton, gradually began to take on projects separately, developing into a hugely capable, but modest, engineer. He worked on waterways, docks, roads, and some very early railways.

In 1783 the 'Trent Navigation Company' was formed to improve the navigable Trent downstream of Nottingham. Jessop was the obviously man to call. An engineer capable of taming the mighty River Trent.

This was not a canal job. There were currents, tides, shoals, potential flooding and no enclosed land at the side on which to create a towpath. In addition, there were restrictions on investment and, at that time, no more locks were to be built.

Smeaton surveyed the route. His plan was to deepen the river by dredging and narrowing the channel, blocking off side channels to send the water flow along a main route. The other problem was to create a towpath, then referred to as a haling path. To date, river traffic had used the tides and sail or, in places, boats had been hauled by hand.

Clapper Gates

In order to build towpaths, Jessop had to negotiate with landowners to allow a path along their banks. These negotiations required the payment of an annual 'way-leave' - a rent for the right. That, of course, was not the only problem. These paths would pass through farmers fields, some with livestock. Farmers wanted assurances that gates could not be left open and animals escape. This led Jessop to come up with an amazingly simple, but very clever invention; unique to the Trent. An invention that walkers today pass through without appreciating the inspirational engineering involved. That is the Clapper gate.



Clapper Gate: various examples along the River Trent. This one towards Cromwell Lock (OS Ref: SK805606)

Two opposed gates, with no fasteners, both mounted on a single post, both set for automatic closing. The gates are set at a height so the towing rope from horse to barge would clear the top. The bargee, walking a horse along the towpath, could shout 'whoa', while he opens the first gate, then 'walk on' and the horse would push through the second. The bargee would walk through and let go the first gate; hey-presto. All passed through with hardly an interruption and any livestock remain secure.

Cromwell Lock

The Trent became a major thoroughfare and the Trent Navigation Company earned good profits despite the restriction of the two old locks in Newark. When the railways arrived, water transport had to change to compete. The river needed to take larger boats. The plan was to build six new locks between Cromwell and Holme Pierrepont, known as Holme Lock, and dredge the river. After a good deal of negotiation, the Act went through in 1909, and Cromwell Lock was opened in 1911. At the same time, Newark Town Lock was improved, allowing transport of petroleum up the Trent. The remainder of the improvements were delayed by World War One but gradually completed with the building of the final lock at Hazelford Ferry and rebuilding Nether Lock in Newark around 1926.

Apart from the oil barges running into the 1990s, the classic combination on the Trent had been a powered barge with two or three dumb barges, i.e. without engines, towed behind.



A Trent barge, the Leicester Trader. The last known surviving dumb barge, now the Newark Heritage Barge floating museum.

The waterways were Nationalised in 1948 and further improvements were made up to 1960. At this stage, Cromwell had two locks in tandem, which were joined together so it could accommodate eight Trent Barges. By 1964 the Trent was

carrying over one million tons of freight a year, much of it petroleum tankers running up to Colwick. Some of these vessels were still running in the 1990s, but river transport was being killed off by rail and road.



Cromwell Lock, or rather both locks, today. One leads into the other, giving the Lock Keeper the choice of using both, for large craft, or just the smaller one for leisure craft . (OS Ref: SK809612)

As for the tow paths, their working life was over when barges were fitted engines and the horses retired. I doubt if there is anyone alive who has witnessed a horse-drawn barge travel up the Trent. Today, it would be impossible with riverside adoption by householders and a variety of planting. In North Muskham, by the Wildlife Lake, the riverbank was planted up with willow trees in the 1980s. These have grown into mighty specimens, completely blocking off any towing option - possibly part of the planting scheme.

Remembering Jessop, and the way-leaves negotiated, the riverside towpaths were always owned by the landowner who was paid for the right to use them. A commercial deal, never a public right-of-way. At nationalisation, they were not part of the equation, presumably because, in the past, they had been rented and were now no longer needed.

In North Muskham, the river bank from a little south of the Muskham Ferry Inn, up to by Trent Farm House, north of Mackleys Lane, was an existing highway before the towpaths were built. On that stretch, there were no field boundaries to cross and, in effect, horses pulling barges would walk along the public road. The area of the riverbank from the pub and on through the clapper gate to Burrige Marsh, was towpath, as was the area north of Trent Farm House - the North Marsh. Owners of this land, surprisingly, received way-leave payments until the 1970s or '80s - about 15 shillings (75p) per year - by cheque!

Today, of course, towpaths offer quiet places for leisure and, like old railway lines, are being opened up for public use. For North Muskham, our areas of towpath were not public land and part was a forgotten highway. Whilst we now have a right to walk along the riverbank to Cromwell Lock, it took years of argument and negotiation, involving very many people, to achieve,. That, however, is another story.