

River Nar - Harnessing a River



Telford - were creating new infrastructure across the country, the harnessing of west Norfolk's little River Nar was in on the game early.

It was another idea overtaken by technology.

In the days when roads were still hardly worth the name and horses dragging coal waggons - and coal was the most important cargo - through winter quagmires were the cutting edge of land-bound goods haulage, almost any waterway with enough water offered an alternative.

Thus, in the mid and late 18th century, as the Industrial Revolution gathered pace and the great canal builders - James Brindley, William Jessop, John Rennie, Thomas

The idea was simple. The Nar, a tributary of the Great Ouse which was already a major navigation, could be canalised to connect the village of Narborough to King's Lynn and beyond. Narborough was no metropolis - even a hundred years later, White's Gazetteer noted just 390 residents - but it was 12 miles on the way east to the market town of Swaffham and thence to East Dereham.

More importantly, Narborough was the seat of the Spelman family, Narborough Hall having been built by one Judge Spelman in the time of Henry VIII. There was thus the money and influence to get legislation for the creation of a navigable waterway from what was essentially a trout stream. John Spelman, the then squire, opined that 'it must greatly increase the Commerce' of the surrounding towns and in 1750, he helped raise the petition from those towns. The bill met with no opposition and was passed in 1751.



The appointed commissioners employed surveyors John Aram and Langley Edwards, who recommended a scheme involving seven staunches, one open pen sluice and a basin at West Acre above Narborough. It wasn't big league - the river would take horse-towed lighters carrying up to 10 tons or eight chaldrons of coal - but it would still beat the roads of the day.

Tolls would be levied though not on pleasure boats nor on goods carried no further than a furlong above Setchey bridge (five miles upstream from Lynn and now on the A10). There would, furthermore, no 'haling by horses between King's Lynn and Sandringham Eau where the tide ebbs and flows' and watermen were forbidden to carry guns or nets 'to fowl or fish therewith'.



Work, under Edwards' supervision, didn't actually start until September 1757 and then soon overran budget with £1,900 of the £2,500 estimate spent after 12 months and the river still nowhere near navigable. The commissioners gave Edwards another four months to complete the job on the pain of a £20 weekly penalty and then, when it became clear that two more staunches would be needed, they told him to pay for them himself though whether he did is unclear. Either way, the navigation opened in August 1759.

From the outset however, it struggled financially. In 1760, the commissioners considered a new cut to the Great Ouse near Wiggshall St. Peter where the Nar turns north and parallel with the bigger river before joining it. It would have cut out 10 miles for

cargoes heading to and from Ely and Cambridge which many of them were. But the idea was dropped, for the commissioners were already losing interest. By June 1763, there was no quorum for the monthly meeting and no further meetings were minuted.

Enter next, in 1765, another Spelman, the Reverend Henry, who managed to obtain a second Act which, among other things, blamed the original commissioners for damage to the system through allowing in boats of too great a burden. It required the prevention of damage 'by rude and disorderly persons managing or employed on boats' and provided for £800 to be spent on repairs with Spelman lending a further £1,345.

Whether navigation ever actually went above Narborough is debatable but there were two short branches lower down, one to Wormegay - now empty - and another to Blackborough Priory. But the complete Nar system included only one pound-lock, still visible beneath the A47 at Narborough. Ten staunches were built in the five miles below Narborough, all but one of them apparently of the water-profligate guillotine type.

The exception was Upper Bonemill which was fitted with mitre gates at some time, probably to avoid the emptying of nearly a mile of river below Narborough every time a boat used it which would have left the bonemill waterwheel high and dry until water built up again.



Narborough was the main destination, coal, timber, corn and malt being the principal cargoes which probably explains why, by the mid-nineteenth century, the navigation was owned by the Marriott brothers, maltsters and corn and coal merchants of Narborough. And it was they who were holding the parcel when the music stopped. For in the 1840s, there came a proposal for a railway and that could only mean one thing for laborious water transport.

The Marriotts resisted, saying the Lynn and Dereham railway was 'unnecessary and without any promise of return'. But when it reached Narborough in 1846 and Dereham in 1848, the Nar navigation was more or less history.



Navigation to Narborough ended in 1884, though steam tugs and barges still used the lowest reaches of the river until well into the 20th century, notably those of the fragrantly named West Norfolk Farmers Manure Company bringing ammonia-rich gas water to their factory from Cambridge gasworks.

But when they packed up in 1932, the Nar river mouth became a mere mooring place, and with the building of a tidal sluice in the early 1980s, even that ceased.

Today, the only traffic following the river is pedestrian on the Nar Valley Way. But on the lowest reaches of the river, walkers can still see industrial relics of the busier times. And all the way up to Narborough, they can walk the embankments between which the straightened river was made to run and they can reflect that it was a good enough idea at the time but only until a better idea reduced it once again to a quiet backwater. For that, at least the walkers can be grateful.

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