



Once upon a time, in the Middle Ages, when East Anglia became the richest part of the country, (on the back of the sheep), Wells-next-the-Sea was a commercial hub, a port for the small sailing ships that carried much of the nation's trade. Coal came in, grain went out and fishing boats ranged as far as Iceland. In the time of Elizabeth I, it was the leading port in north Norfolk with, in 1580, nineteen ship of over sixteen tons.

Location was the key, more or less in the middle of the north Norfolk coast and thus with a wide catchment. But its critical mass had come through church politics at the beginning of the 13th century when King John granted a development charter to Ramsey Abbey. The Abbey, in the south-western Fens, is a long way from Wells but it was collecting and trading in grain from a large area and chose Wells as its port, mainly because it wasn't part of the see of the Bishop of Norwich. And Wells remained important, despite a difficult channel made more so by land grabs which drained marshes on either side and reduced tidal scour. A similar scam ruined the port of Cley along the coast and in both places there was legal action but not before the damage was done. Wells struggled on until 1859 when the Earl of Leicester's own land grab incidentally improved things a little by the building of the bank from the quay to the Point, confining the channel to a relatively straight line.

It was about then that Wells, twice the size of Fakenham at the time, got the railway when other small north Norfolk ports didn't. Indeed, within a decade it had two, not to mention 40 pubs and inns - plus beer houses - but then malting was a local industry and so still for that matter was grain handling, as the later landmark building on the quay, built in 1903 but now converted to flats, tells visitors. In a local context, Wells had stayed in front.



Except that it was shortly to discover that the railway was a two-edged sword. It could serve a quay but it could also carry more goods more safely and more quickly to and from other parts of the country than any number of coasting sail traders. Much of the railway's business was soon at the expense of the port, and of the drovers, the coaches and, by extension, the inns.

The railway in the end had a shorter time than all of them for within another hundred years, that business had gone to the roads. The Wells railway, already in decline, never really recovered from the 1953 flood and it closed in 1964 under the Beeching axe. And by then, the port and its shipping were in no shape to resume. Economies of scale were demanding larger ships and the Wells channel made Lynn, Wisbech and Boston better options.



In the '70s and '80s, Wells Harbour still looked like a commercial port but, the occasional small coaster apart, no longer was. The famous Albatros, the Dutch North Sea

Klipper and last sail trader to and from the UK, worked valiantly in the early '90s but its last cargo contract expired in '96 and it returned to Holland.

And local demographics were changing. A booming South-east was sending retirees bearing cashed-in house equity in search of retirement homes and high earners or inheritors simply with cash seeking second homes, both groups to outbid wage earners in a stripped-out local economy increasingly dependent on those incomers. Wells was no longer generating wealth so much as merely attracting it, and there are plenty of lessons in the wider economy to demonstrate that economic cul-de-sac.

It was now a small town, half the size of Fakenham, picturesque with its alleys and yards and buildings from the old days, but semi-barren commercially, a place which fished a bit, fixed a few boats but generally catered for weekenders, the superannuated and for visitors and their seasonal whims. It was a nice place to live - fashionable even, for the moneyed - but stagnation in aspic beckoned.

Enter then the Wells Harbour Project and its proponents, a scheme simple in concept but of potentially wide ranging significance.

The proposition is this. Wells remains roughly midway along what is lately referred to as the Saltmarsh Coast, the stretch between Salthouse and Holme. This is a coast of great beauty, dotted with small erstwhile ports which ooze as much history as they do mud, all of them now given over to leisure sailing so far as they remain navigable which, for small craft, they mostly do. On sunny weekends, lanes and streets along the coast are clogged with Jags, Beamers and Discoveries, many from inside the M25. Wells, its biggest settlement and, now in the time of Elizabeth II, still its biggest port, could and should be its focus.



Turn again then to the quay, the only stone built quay on that coast and a major asset on the local leisure/heritage front.

Take leisure. The number of craft cruising the British coast is rising steadily. If the port was more welcoming, say with showers, pontoon moorings and well presented information - all taken for granted elsewhere on the cruising circuit - it would put the place more firmly on the map. While more cruisers have come to Wells in recent years, there is room for another 200 or so on drying moorings and over 200 small craft on running moorings. The harbour resource, in short, is still substantially underused.



And then heritage. On the quay stands the Old Lifeboat House, a listed Victorian building in the early English gothic style, one of two remaining examples - and the least modified - in the UK of a once standard RNLI design. The lifeboat long ago moved to a new house at

the Point to be near the sea and the building subsequently served as a reading room, fire station, Home Guard HQ, cricket changing room and cafe. Lately it has housed the Harbour Commission's office and Wells Maritime Museum.

It needs sympathetic restoration, not least because spring tides with a following wind have for years sloshed around its walls, but it has style and presence and rings of another age. And on early on a sunny morning, when the sun gets under its eastern cloister, it is a lovely place to sit.

Refurbish it, goes the thinking, and defend it against flood and not only would it remain as a major feature but it would make a long term base for the Harbour Commission which has run the harbour for over three centuries and, right now, is orchestrating the Harbour Project.

There will be more. Phase 2 includes a Maritime Heritage Centre just across Beach Road with a view among other things to building on the historical collection already held by the Maritime Museum. It would inform on the geography, history, trades, fisheries and other aspects of the coast with exhibitions, programmes for schools, information on the area's attractions and links with maritime museums and centres worldwide. Equally, this new building of over 600 sq m would double as a conference venue with electronic meeting facilities not now available within 25 miles.

A self-guided Heritage Walk would include the harbour and its old buildings. Vessels with history are beginning to accumulate and not as part of some depressing static display because these vessels still work. The centre piece is Albatros which returned to Wells three years ago and, faced with a dearth of sail cargoes and huge insurance premiums even if they were found, switched to sail training and corporate hospitality. Juno, a replica barge, and Chieftain, a Liverpool class lifeboat, already run summer trips from the quay amid the fishing boats. Wells is also the base for Britain's largest fleet of 12 metre Sharpies.

It is hoped that other historic craft might come, and they might indeed, because it all begins to look like a new critical mass. . .

A third phase will include further refurbishment of the quay to benefit fishermen and other harbour users and the provision of pontoons additional to those already in place. There will be improved playground and sports facilities off Beach Road and measures to solve the town's parking and traffic problems that would otherwise be exacerbated by the project.

The scheme will cost around £2.4 m, two thirds of that for the first two phases.

Commencement furthermore seems imminent. The larger part of the funding is being sought from the Heritage Lottery Fund, EU Objective II funds and the East of England Development Agency. The remainder, it is hoped, will come from North Norfolk District Council, the County Council and the Harbour Commissioners together with contributions in



the form of pro bono professional services.

In which case, a major maritime asset will gradually be rejoining the local economy as a cash generator. In a town of 2,850 where 29% are retired - roughly twice the national average - its effect could be the key to, among other things, greater protection for Wells from the worst effects of second home syndrome. While job creation is expected to be modest initially - perhaps 20 direct and indirect jobs early on - more visitors should reflect in more profits for the enterprises which serve them. That in turn should increase the admittedly still slim chance that younger people, essential for local economic sustainability, could earn a full living locally and get on to the local property ladder, a tad ambitious in North Norfolk lately perhaps but there is plenty of ambition in Wells these days.

Link: www.members.aol.com/wellsonsea. Click on 'harbour information' and then 'Wells harbour Project'.