

A HISTORY OF THE RIVER THAMES AT EYNSHAM

by Maureen McCreadie¹

Bill and Maureen McCreadie have been Eynsham's lock keepers for more than 33 years. Bill was appointed MBE in 2003, and they retire this year. Since 1995 Maureen has edited Roundabout, the monthly magazine of the three Eynsham churches, and for a number of years she has organized the sale of cream teas at the lock at weekends during the summer, the proceeds going to a variety of charities.



1. aerial photo of Eynsham weir, lock and lock-keeper's house, looking downstream

First time visitors to Eynsham Lock often ask the question "Why is it here?" The simple answer is that, like all 44 locks on the River Thames, it

is here to enable the safe passage of boats up or downstream by bypassing the weir. It follows that the next question is "Why is there a weir?" To this question there is no one simple answer and we need to go back a long way in time to seek out some of the reasons for weirs.

In all probability the river that we know as the Thames was flowing prior to the great upheavals and earth spasms that took place around 30 million years ago, upheavals that at one end of the scale formed the majestic Alps and then with their outer ripple effect pushed up the clay-covered chalklands of the Thames Valley to form ridges rather than mountains. Nevertheless these great forces must have played a tremendous part in the formative years of the Thames Valley. The Ice Age which began in this region around 2 million years ago naturally influenced the development of our river and it is likely that the Thames rising in what we now know as the Cotswolds, would have had swampy areas, brisk channels of flowing water, gravel banks and pools of water on a course some 20 miles north of the present channel. Then it had no estuary of its own; for a million years ago it was a tributary of the Rhine and it was only as the ice moved south that the course of the Thames as we know it today was formed.

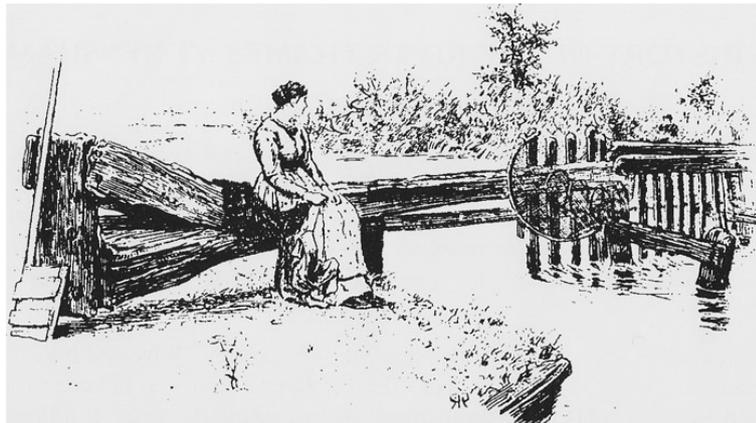
¹ As published in the Eynsham Record 21 (2004), pages 3-9.

Archaeological evidence suggests that possibly as long ago as three hundred thousand years before Christ, man was roaming the Thames Valley. By the Middle Stone Age man was becoming more adept at making tools and it is possible that crude rafts or hollowed-out tree trunks enabled the river valley dwellers to 'get afloat'. At this time the flow of the Thames was entirely natural resulting in many shallows around which the heavy dug-out canoe would have to be carried, so the lightweight coracle was developed using the whippy young branches of willow and hides. These one-man fishing boats are usually associated with Wales where they are still in use today, but for early man they were ideal for fishing any waters. The current slogan of the Waterways section of the Environment Agency 'the Thames your river for life' has always been true. Early man lived beside it because it provided water for himself, his animals and later the deposits from flood waters fertilised the soil for growing crops. Around Swinford it is likely that Celtic settlers lived on and farmed the floodplain in the summer months retreating to Beacon Hill as the floods rose in the autumn and winter. The river provided food in the form of fish, not only caught from simple boats but later trapped by the building of weirs at places where the river was shallow, and certainly by Roman times the Thames was well established as a highway for commerce.

Early weirs were constructed not only to catch fish but also for milling and navigation. A miller needed to build up a good head of water, directing it into a leat to keep his mill wheel turning, and for this large volumes of water were required. This meant that often, rather than lose his head of water, a miller would keep barges waiting for days until it suited him to let them through 'his' weir. Navigation weirs were usually constructed at the lower end of a set of shallows so raising the depth of the river for some distance above, the distance between weirs being governed by the fall of the river bed, locally about twenty inches to the mile. They were built mainly of timber and brushwood in two parallel rows with the space between filled with stone, turfs and other local material. There was no way of regulating the flow of water to enable vessels to pass through the weirs, except by means of a central span of 15 to 20 feet fitted with removable timber paddles kept in place against a beam by the pressure of upstream water. When a barge needed to pass upstream, the paddles were removed and the barge, lifted by the release of the pent up water, was then hauled by rope and manpower through the gap in the weir. Coming downstream the barge was carried through the opening by the released flush (or flash) of water, thus giving rise to the name 'flash lock'. Progress in either direction was slow and the passage through the weir meant that the reach above it would virtually be emptied and the process of building up a head of water would have to start all over again.

Until 1350 the jurisdiction of the river belonged to the Crown and in the eleventh century Edward the Confessor proclaimed that mills, fisheries and other works that might hinder navigation should be removed. Since fish and flour were of vital importance to the local riverside populations, this and subsequent similar orders by later monarchs were totally disregarded. Future navigability of the Thames would be achieved by breaking up the river into reaches and making each reach deep enough to enable barges to operate without grounding. To a certain extent, millers were already doing this even if it was for their own ends and not that of navigation! There was a third interested party, the riparian owner whose riverside lands and fish traps would often be unseasonably flooded by the flash of water released for the passage of a vessel.

The answer to the problem of how to be fair to all interested parties came in the form of the pound lock, the type in use at Eynsham and all other lock sites on the Thames today. The pound lock is a chamber with pairs of mitred gates at each end, a design conceived by Leonardo da Vinci about 1495, and this method of moving vessels from one reach level to another uses far less water than flashing a barge through a weir and does not flood the adjoining land. The earliest locks were built at Iffley, Sandford and Swift Ditch, Abingdon by the Oxford-Burcot Commission in the late 1620s, but it took another 300 years to create a navigable waterway between Cricklade in Wiltshire and the tideway. It was not until the formation of the Thames Conservancy in 1857 that work began in earnest culminating in the building of Eynsham Lock and Kings Lock (the next lock downstream), the last pound locks to be built on the river in 1928.



2. Eynsham weir: a picturesque 19th century drawing by Percy Roberts

So what had been happening at Eynsham and Swinford during all these centuries of flash locks and arguments. Hilaire Belloc in his book *The Historic Thames* refers to 'the Roman town of Eynsham' suggesting perhaps that the Thames at Eynsham would have been used as a method of transporting goods in Roman times but sadly there is no evidence to support this theory, there was no Roman

town here!. However, we know that by the 14th century building stone from Taynton was being taken by wagon to Eynsham and thence by river and used at Merton College, Oxford (1310-78) and at Windsor Castle (1358-68). By about 1539 there was a weir built across the shallows in the river at Eynsham about 100 metres downstream of the present weir, probably built by the monks to catch fish. At that time it was known as Bolde's or Swithin's Weir. Eynsham has an important role in the history of Thames transport. The Journal of the Railway and Canal Historical Society Vol XIV No. 3 July 1968 contains an extremely interesting article about Eynsham which begins "It is curious that scarcely any book about the River Thames makes more than a passing reference to Eynsham.

Thames historians seem unaware that Eynsham was for at least six centuries a trading port on the upper Thames with its own connecting waterway and wharf..." In the days of Eynsham Abbey much coming and going would be on the river. Two Eynsham watermen are named 'Robert Navigator' and 'Robert le Rower' as occupiers of tenements next to the waterway. Eynsham Wharf was built at the confluence of the Chil and Limb Brooks (where the Talbot Inn now stands). The wharf continued to flourish long after the dissolution of the Abbey and bargemasters Richard Townsend and John Pate were both men of 'Aynsham'.

Stone from Taynton Quarry was loaded at Eynsham Wharf for the rebuilding of London after the Great Fire in 1666. These barges would then return with sea-coal. In 1650 the wharf was known as 'Bitteralls' and access was through 'Bitterall Lane' (later Mead Lane). from the Cassington Road. A good account of the history of Eynsham Wharf appeared in Eynsham Record no. 17 but it is interesting to note that trade ceased at the Wharf in 1925, only three years before the construction of Eynsham pound lock.

In 1795 'Bolde's Weir' on the main river which was owned by Lord Abingdon was in such a poor state that he was told that he could not collect any more three shilling tolls from passing boats until it was repaired. In the mid-19th century the state of the river above Oxford was causing many difficulties for navigation due to lack of dredging and flooding due to inadequate weirs. Boats coming off the Oxford Canal via Duke's Cut had to pay the Bolde's Weir Keeper two shillings and ninepence per boat for a 'flask' (or flash) of water. In 1852 a survey found "Ensham Weir in a state totally unfit to pass barges, and the waterway very inadequate to pass floods". George Treacher (Surveyor of the Thames Commissioners) stated "It is obvious ... that whatever may be proposed will not have its full effect, unless a systematic management of the drawing of the several weirs from one end of the district to the other be enforced." This system was eventually introduced and it is still in use today. However there were no immediate improvements so when a Royal

Commission examined the state of the Thames in 1866, proposals were put to them for discontinuing navigation above Oxford except for the part connecting Duke's Cut with Eynsham Wharf Stream. A new weir, designed for river control, was not built until 1886 by the Thames Conservancy on the site of the present weir which was last rebuilt in 1993. Prior to the building of the pound lock in 1928, larger boats still passed up or downstream on a flash of water through a single beamed gate at one side of the weir operated by a uniformed lock keeper. There was a timetable for operating flashes: for Eynsham it was at 5 pm on Mondays and 8 pm on Thursdays. Smaller craft could pass at any time using the boat rollers which allowed craft to be hauled over the weir without a flash of water.

Lock and weir-keeping seems to have been a very casual occupation before the time of the Thames Commissioners but it was not until several years after the whole river came under the jurisdiction of the Thames Conservancy that lock and weir keeping became a regular, paid occupation. Thacker in *Thames Highway II* refers to a Henry Taunt visit to this area in 1872 when Pinkhill Lock was in a ruinous condition and did not have its own lock-keeper. A Mr. R Treadwell was appointed in 1866 to take charge of the river between New Bridge and Kings Weir at 52 shillings per month and lived in the lock house close to the bridge at Eynsham. When he died in 1881 he was succeeded by his son. Records show that lock-keepers often died in harness and were succeeded by another member of the family. Sadly there are also many references to drownings of both lock keepers and members of their families and the old Eynsham Weir was the scene of a family tragedy when a visitor drowned himself and his two children. 'Eynsham Weir Order Book' found in the loft of the current lock office gives some insight into the keeper's life at the beginning of the 20th century. The orders were handwritten into the book by John Laurie, Chief Inspector. Keepers were instructed to keep the water at Head Water, but in times of flood were allowed to let fall below! During the last flood at Eynsham the Head Water level went up to 34" above. When the river was rising or falling, keepers were instructed to take water levels every hour from 7 am to 7 pm and "upon occasions of heavy water (and at any other time) to inspect their weir (or water) during the night and in the early morning." Other duties included removing dead animals from the river and collecting live specimens of fish which could be suffering from cancer for an association that had been formed to experiment with these fish. On the other hand they were forbidden to kill or trap otters. Keepers were entitled to 7 days paid leave annually and a further 7 days at intervals, "provided such leave involves no cost to the Conservators." Qualified substitutes had to be named! There was also a uniform issued which "must be worn as a whole and not in part when the wearers are on duty." However this did not have to

be worn for dirty work or winter gardening. Keepers' pay has never been generous and many early employees supplemented their income by selling garden produce or refreshments. However this was not always favoured by the Conservators: "It has been noticed that certain lock and weir keepers appear to spend much time in dispensing ginger beer and other refreshments to the public and I have been directed to place a check on the practice. Lock and Weir Keepers are reminded that their first duty is the management of their lock and weir."

However this did not mean that a lock keeper's wife could not provide refreshments and Clyde Eddy in 1938 writes in his book *Voyaging down the Thames* that at Eynsham "A lock has long since replaced the weir and on a sign hanging before the lock keeper's house has the magic word TEAS." "Thin slices of buttered bread, jam, lettuce, cake and a pot tea with milk and sugar served to me in the parlor of the house." Mr Eddy then examined the engraved plate of a large clock and discovered that it had been presented to the lock keeper on his retirement from the Royal Navy. He was told later that all but one of the Thames lock keepers were former Navy men, the one exception was ex-Army. When the current Eynsham lock keeper joined the Thames Conservancy in 1966 this was still a common practice although ex-police officers had also joined the ranks of men who had their pensions to supplement the meagre pay of a lock keeper. It was only as more young men with families became employed that a stand was made for a modern pay structure and conditions, including better housing. This was not really achieved until the early 1980s under Thames Water and after the demise of the Thames Conservancy.

Eric de Mare in his 1952 publication *Time on the Thames* includes a wonderful observation by the King's lock keeper of the time (King's is our next door neighbour). "The life is healthy and though it gives fairly hard work in the summer, in winter there is time enough to develop one's personal interests, for one is off duty by sundown." "A well-built cottage and an adequate garden are provided free ... pay can be augmented by running a tea garden, selling garden produce, making boating or fishing accessories." "For a nature lover, a poet or a philosopher, fond of quiet things, could there be a better way of living than to be a lock keeper on the Upper Thames?" There are some aspects of lock keeping at Eynsham about which this romantic description is still appropriate but not for much longer, I fear. The 21st century Thames lock keeper will have little time to stand and stare as he wrestles with ever increasing mounds of paperwork and regulations and draws up business plans to raise the profile of his lock as well as the money to carry out these plans.