Notes on Basingstoke Canal past and present

I walked a stretch of the canal in Woking and so I looked at some of Woking’s history and how it inter-related with the history of the canal.

“the largest town in Surrey is least appreciated. It merits only a few lines in published histories of the county and is usually dismissed as uninteresting a dull dormitory town with no redeeming features. To others it is a railway station or the place from where the coach to Heathrow goes.” (A. Crosby, 2003: Xiii)

Four ancient parishes – Woking, Horsell, Pyrford and Byfleet form the borough of Woking which lays across the watershed between the basins of the river Wey (which has several tributaries and streams) and the river Bourne. In the late 1640s Sir Richard Weston was enthusiastic about the idea of building a canal to and in 1651, under his sponsorship, parliament passed an Act authorising the improvement of the Wey from Weybridge to Guildford (either side of Woking). Links to London were improved and Woking became tied in more closely with expanding regional economic development. Even so potential in that area of north-west Surrey was limited and it didn’t have resources such as coal to generate more expansion – a concern to landowners who wanted to increase land rent income. Therefore, in the late 1770s a group of Hampshire landowners promoted a new canal scheme to link Basingstoke with the Thames via the Wey Navigation at Byfleet. This was intended to open up heaths and commons and allow agricultural produce to be sent to feed ‘the voracious appetite of London” (ibid p.51). Construction began in 1788 and below is part of a map that was published by J. Lindley and W. Crosley in 1793, the year the canal was opened through the Woking area, “… which emphasises the empty and unpopulated heaths and commons across which the waterway was constructed, its route using as much of such land as possible to minimise costs and disruption to agricultural estates”(ibid p. 51)
The canal was completed in September 1794 original costs having been exceeded by 60 percent and in 1859 the arrears of interest on the original debt of £32,000 were said to be £105,000. Plans to extend further to Newbury or the south coast didn’t come to fruition and the Basingstoke Canal ‘settled down to a slow and almost entirely unprofitable existence as an agricultural carrier’ (ibid p.51).

Its busiest period was the 1830s and 1840s when it was used to carry construction materials for the new railway that paralleled its route and for the development of the army town of Aldershot. The rise of land from New Haw to Brookwood was 90 feet achieved by six locks at Woodham, five at Goldsworth and St Johns and three at Brookwood. Some limited development was stimulated by the canal. The demand for bricks to build lock chambers and bridges encouraged local production at Goldsworth, St Johns and Knaphill and at Kiln Bridge, the wharf there, together with brickworks and the new Rowbarge public house, was the origin of the new community of St. Johns. In the longer term the canal helped to shape the growth of Woking – there being only eight bridges between Byfleet and Brookwood and just two in the area of the town centre. This constrained development, acting as a barrier and focusing traffic onto a small number of crossing places. Even today, closely followed by Victoria Way it sharply defines the edge of central Woking.

The Basingstoke Canal Navigation Company went bankrupt in 1866, having seven owners during the next fifty years each of which found the canal to be nothing but a financial liability, despite some small, brief, success in developing a timber trade from London docks. This wasn’t just a problem for this Canal alone as, eventually, the whole waterways system was eclipsed due to the development of road and rail transport, plus industries and the importance of agriculture was declining in the South. Also during the 19th Century London and Bristol were increasingly being supplied with produce from other parts of England and from abroad instead of from neighbouring counties.

By the end of the 19th Century the Basingstoke Canal was largely disused for commercial traffic above Woking. “Beyond the town its idyllic setting, where it passed through fields and pinewoods, lent it a certain charm and there was a modest amount of pleasure boating. That, too, eventually disappeared as the canal silted up and became heavily overgrown with vegetation. Coal was still brought in to Woking gasworks until 1936 when the Woking District Gas Company stopped manufacturing its own gas. The Basingstoke Canal never died completed but it was not included when the Government nationalised the inland waterways system in 1947 (see here [http://www.canalroutes.net/Basingstoke-Canal.html]) and the last commercial traffic to Woking was a load of timber delivered to Spanton’s Yard by Chertsey Road in 1949.

After 157 years the canal had closed completely, lying weed-choked, silted and decaying, and people who knew Woking in the 1950s and 1960s will recall the sight, the remaining water scarcely visible in summer amid the riot of vegetation, the locks crumbling and the towpath overgrown. (A. Crosby. p.53)

Work to totally restore the canal began in earnest in 1973, after years of campaigning and lobbying by the Surrey & Hampshire Canal Society. Hampshire County Council bought one
stretch in 1970 and in 1976 Surrey County council purchased the rest of the canal between Woking and Frimley. It took over 15 years to complete the task of clearing, dredging and rebuilding every lock, supported by armies of volunteer labourers and publicised by boat rallies and public events. The canal was formally reopened in May 1991 at a cost of 4 million pounds.

_The Basingstoke Canal is a working waterway once more, much lauded for its scenic beauty and the high quality of the work which was done, and benefiting from its closeness to so many large centres of population._ (A. Crosby. p.202).

The Canal has a navigable distance of 32 miles. It has always had a water supply problem, sometimes running short of water to enable lock operation in the summer. Passages through the Woodham, St. John’s and combined Brookwood/Deepcut flights are on a controlled pre-booked basis only on a limited number to days per week so that the locks can be caulked after use to save water. This helps to maintain water levels on the remainder of the canal. The Basingstoke Canal is still a cul-de-sac, having lost its last five miles and there are still suggestions to follow through the early 19th Century plans and build a link to another waterway (Crocker et al: 2013).


This site also provides a very informative historical timeline [http://www.canalroutes.net/Basingstoke-Canal.html](http://www.canalroutes.net/Basingstoke-Canal.html)


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