

Oxfordshire

OPENING THE RIVER 1560-1635

This is an **edited extract** from our forthcoming EPE paperback *Henley-on-Thames: Town, Trade and River* (Phillimore 2009), by Simon Townley. See the publication for full text, illustrations and maps.

In the summer of 1635, the Oxford scholar Thomas Crosfield made the following entry in his diary:

The last of August 1635 a barge was brought up the Thames to Oxford, which was the first ever came.

The statement was not literally true: river traffic made the journey frequently in the early Middle Ages, before the river's upper stretches became increasingly tortuous and obstructed. But this was certainly the first barge to complete the journey in living memory, and possibly for 180 years or more. How and why did this change come about?¹

By the mid 15th century, if not before, serious commercial traffic to Oxford had probably ceased altogether. Yet in the 1560s the river was certainly passable as far as Culham, some 10 miles downstream from Oxford. We know this from an unusually detailed source which casts an illuminating window on the mid 16th-century river trade: the accounts of Thomas West of Wallingford, an enterprising young trader, barge-owner and shopkeeper who died in the winter of 1573–4. West's probate inventory contains not just the standard list of household items, but extensive details of his business dealings. Debts owed him show that he had an extensive trade network stretching from Deptford below London to way beyond Oxford, with stockpiles of wood and coal stored on riverside wharfs at Pangbourne, Wallingford, Burcot, and Culham. Goods for Oxford were generally transferred to wagon at Burcot, where West had his own agent. His area of activity included Henley, where we find him dealing in barley, malt, fish and tar.²

West has been presented as a pioneer, his ability to penetrate so far upstream attributed partly to a portable winch mentioned in his accounts. This, it has been suggested, allowed him to haul himself upstream through semi-derelict flashlocks or weirs, and certainly when it needed repair in 1567 he was unable to proceed without it. But in fact this was probably a standard item on all river barges, either an onboard winch similar to that described in the accident at Hambleden lock in 1383 (see Panel 2), or a standard barrel-windlass used mainly for raising and lowering the mast. In reality, the river may have always remained passable for some vessels as far as Burcot or Culham, and the changes taking place were perhaps not so much technological as economic. Oxford, like Wallingford itself, was only just emerging from a long period of stagnation, which had probably made it uneconomical to ship valuable cargoes up the tortuous and neglected stretches of river beyond Henley. That a hard-headed trader like West now found it worthwhile suggests that the balance was shifting, and he may not, in fact, have been

unique. In 1585 a petitioner in a dispute over flashlocks claimed that the number of barges on the lower Thames was 'increased from ten or twelve to fourscore', while the upper river had probably always remained open for shallow-draught barges and punts carrying local produce and cereal for mills.³

Even so, West may have needed an adventurer's nerve to navigate what must, after a century of neglect, have been a difficult and dangerous passage. The problem was compounded by the fact that barges were becoming larger. West's accounts tell us little about his vessel or his volume of trade, but according to a contemporary barges 'were become of greater burthen, almost double what they used to be', while barge-masters often 'laded them beyond reason'. If true, this helps explain why the relatively narrow Culham–Oxford stretch remained so difficult. Quite apart from the lack of maintenance, the gradient there is steeper than on any other stretch of the river, making it hard to maintain an adequate head of water without especially large mill-dams.⁴

Whatever the case, West's activities are typical of a new-found interest in upstream navigation, which in the next century received the backing of state legislation. An Act of 1604 charged 18 commissioners (recruited from the counties of Oxfordshire, Berkshire, Wiltshire and Gloucestershire) to re-open the river from Burcot to Oxford, empowering them to raise taxes, engage labourers and engineers, and agree compensation. The work proved sporadic, but in 1623 a new Act set up a more efficient commission of eight (four each from the city and university of Oxford), and this time they were successful. The commissioners' most tangible achievement was the construction of the first three gated pound-locks on the Thames, at Culham, Iffley and Sandford, a technology which was still very new in England. Trans-shipment from Burcot (already cheaper than using roads alone) was still necessary in 1628, but a wharf was built at Oxford's Folly Bridge soon after, and the first barge, as we have seen, made its successful maiden voyage to Oxford just a few years later. The opening of the Burcot–Oxford section restored navigation not only from London to Oxford but much further. The 1623 Act expressly stated that the Thames westward from Oxford was for many miles 'already navigable and passable for boats of good burthens and contents', while in 1641 the water poet John Taylor succeeded in rowing as far as Cirencester, and dragging his boat across to the Severn – admittedly a far cry from navigating a river barge, but symptomatic of the growing recognition of the potential for inland water transport.⁵

What factors drove these brave new initiatives? First must surely have been the regeneration and growing demands of Oxford, since the financial investment needed was considerable. Oxford City Council raised taxes and loans to meet its engineering costs, and once reopened the river and its new locks required constant attention, as the collapse of the Culham lock at Swift Ditch in 1650 clearly showed. What made it worthwhile were the anticipated benefits of a restored river trade with London. The 1623 Act expressly mentioned plans to export Headington building stone to the capital and Oxford's increasing need for cheap coal, fuel 'and other necessities', while the 1604 Act looked forward more generally to the 'benefit and enrichment' of the city and county. A lesser reason, again symptomatic of the expanding economy, was to reduce increasing wear and tear on the medieval road system. Both Acts mentioned the problem, and in 1630 a Royal Proclamation forbade the use of 4-wheeled carts on roads to London.⁶

That is not to say that the restoration of upstream navigation solved the familiar difficulties of medieval river transport. From Culham to London bargemen still relied

on flashlocks, and the old issue of lock-keepers charging excessive tolls or refusing passage persisted into the 18th century, despite government attempts to regulate it. So, too, did dependence on the weather, which could delay barges for weeks or months if water levels were too low or too deep. The real (and continuing) dangers associated with flashlocks were graphically illustrated in a series of petitions during the 1580s, some decades before the Oxford-Burcot Commission, but broadly contemporary with West's activities. Behind them was one John Bishop, who in an address to the queen's minister Lord Burghley alleged not only that locks on the Thames were increasing in number and size, causing more fatal accidents, but that many were illegal and run by unscrupulous owners. His slightly later and highly emotive attack in verse (addressed to the queen herself) did not go unchallenged, but demonstrates both the genuine risks faced by barge-owners such as West and his successors, and the contemporary strength of feeling:

One Farmer [the lock-keeper] hath a lock in store/That hath made many a child to weep/Their mothers beg from door to door/Their fathers drowned in the deep.

At Farmer's lock four men be lost/of late I put you out of doubt/three were drowned, the streams them tossed/the fourth he had his brains knocked out.⁷

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¹ Boas, F S (ed.), *The Diary of Thomas Crosfield, Fellow of The Queen's College, Oxford* (1935), 80.

² Prior, M, 'The Accounts of Thomas West of Wallingford, a Sixteenth-Century Trader on the Thames', *Oxoniensia* 46 (1981), 73–93.

³ **West, winches, and Oxford:** *ibid.* 73–4; Prior, M, *Fisher Row: Fishermen, Bargemen, and Canal Boatmen in Oxford, 1500–1900* (1982), 112–14; Wilson, D G, *The Thames: Record of a Working Waterway* (1987), 30–2; Peberdy, R B, 'Navigation on the River Thames between London and Oxford in the Late Middle Ages: a Reconsideration', *Oxoniensia*, 61 (1996), 312–13, 325–30. **1585 petition:** Thacker, F S, *The Thames Highway* (1968 edn), I, 53.

⁴ **Barge size:** Thacker, *Highway*, I, 53; Peberdy, 'Navigation', 330. **River:** Wilson, *Thames*, 30–2.

⁵ **Acts, locks and Oxford:** Act for clearing the passage by Water from London to ... Oxford, 3 Jas 1, c. 20; Act for making the River of Thames navigable from Bercot, 21 Jas I, c. 32; *VCH Oxon.* IV, 291–2; Prior, *Fisher Row*, 114–22. **1628:** Boas (ed.), *Crosfield's Diary*, 21. **Taylor:** Taylor, J, *John Taylor's Last Voyage* (1641); *New DNB*.

⁶ **Oxford:** *VCH Oxon.* IV, 291–2. **Culham lock and roads:** Philip, I G, 'River Navigation at Oxford during the Civil War and Commonwealth', *Oxoniensia*, 2 (1937), 154, 160, 164.

⁷ **Later legislation:** Act to prevent exactions of the occupiers of locks and wears upon the Thames, 6 & 7 Wm III, c. 16; and see Chapter 7. **Weather:** *VCH Oxon.* IV, 292. **Bishop:** Thacker, *Highway*, I, 45–57; Prior, *Fisher Row*, 116–17; BL, Lansdowne MS 30, ff. 41–51.