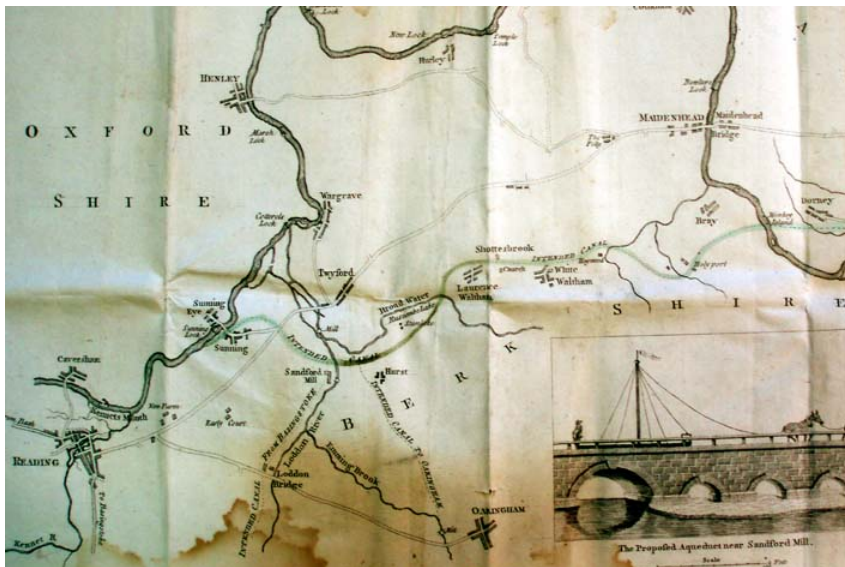


Oxfordshire

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.

RIVER IMPROVEMENTS 1750-1800



Part of the proposed canal from Sonning (above Henley) to Monkey Island (below Maidenhead), which would have bypassed the large northern loop in the Thames and diverted barge traffic away from Henley, Marlow and Maidenhead. The proposal led to bitter antagonism between those who stood to gain and those (including the Thames Commissioners and inhabitants of the bypassed towns) who stood to lose. A related scheme proposed a canal from the mouth of the River Kennett at Reading. (Oxfordshire Record Office)

Despite the Thames's crucial importance, improvement during the 18th century was surprisingly slow in coming. Complaints about exorbitant charges remained common, and in the 1770s bargemasters were still negotiating the medieval-style flashlocks which John Bishop complained of in the 1580s – now in massively larger barges, which ran increased risk of running aground and blocking the river.

One reason was the lack of a single co-ordinating body with the funds and authority to do what was necessary. A Parliamentary Act of 1751 tried to address the problem by creating a Thames Commission to regulate costs, locks and river traffic west of Staines. But as it lacked the power to build new locks or towpaths and had a ludicrously large membership of several hundred – everyone, in fact, with land worth over £100 a year in the seven riverside counties, together with representatives of every riverside town and of Oxford University – it not surprisingly proved ineffective. Only with a further Act 20 years later was the Commission empowered to replace old flashlocks with poundlocks, and to borrow up to £50,000 (secured on lock tolls) for the purpose.

Thereafter a belated programme of improvements slowly got underway, with a string of ten new locks from Taplow to Mapledurham completed by 1778, and more by the 1790s. In this, Henley people were instrumental. The Commission included several scientifically minded landowners such as General Conway of Park Place and Sambrooke Freeman (died 1782) of Fawley Court, while several of the locks around Henley were designed by their friend Humphrey Gainsborough, the town's Congregationalist minister (see above). Gainsborough collected the tolls from the keepers, and maintained an interest in the locks' operation to the end of his life: it was while returning from this task (and reportedly chatting about locks with local gentlemen) that he died suddenly in meadows near Henley in 1776.

A more intractable obstacle to improvement was self-interest. Despite the enthusiasm of most Henley landowners, those further downstream feared that new poundlocks would flood their lands, and repeatedly opposed their construction. An anonymous letter in 1794 urged them 'to form ... an invincible phalanx' against 'the present alarming junto of the Commissioners', and on one occasion a group of 60 hostile landowners was said to have swamped a Commission meeting which was discussing the building of new locks below Taplow.

The beleaguered Commission faced further challenges from promoters of canals, who accused it of not doing enough and threatened to bypass the river, though here, too, self interest was paramount. During the early 18th century, when engineering work on the River Kennet turned Newbury into a major inland port, the people of Reading responded with a remarkable show of orchestrated violence, fearing that the improvements would damage their town. Works were smashed, and bargemen using the new cut (among them the Henley bargemaster John Usher) met with death threats and hostile stone-throwing mobs. Fifty years later, Reading's inhabitants took a rather different view of a proposed canal from Reading or Sonning to below Maidenhead, which they believed would benefit the town. Opposition this time came from proprietors and traders in the places which would have been catastrophically bypassed, including Henley. Similar battles between canal companies, riverside landowners and those responsible for the Thames rumbled on into the 19th century, fought through a series of polemical and often abusive pamphlets in which public and self-interest can be hard to disentangle.¹

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¹ **Thames:** Acts 3 Geo. II, c. 11; 24 Geo. II, c. 8; 11 Geo III, c. 45; Vanderstegen, W, *Present State of the Thames Considered* (1794); Thacker, F S, *The Thames Highway* (1968 edn), I, 105–98. **Conway etc:** Tyler, 'Gainsborough'. **Kennet violence:** Willan, T S, 'The Navigation of the Thames and Kennet, 1600–1750', *Berks Archaeol. Jnl*, 40 (1936), 151–6. **1770–4 canal proposals:** Vanderstegen, op. cit. 6–7; *Gent. Mag.* 41 (1771), 56; ORO, CH/N/III/i–ii.