When the Canal came past Emsworth.....

by Andrew Butler

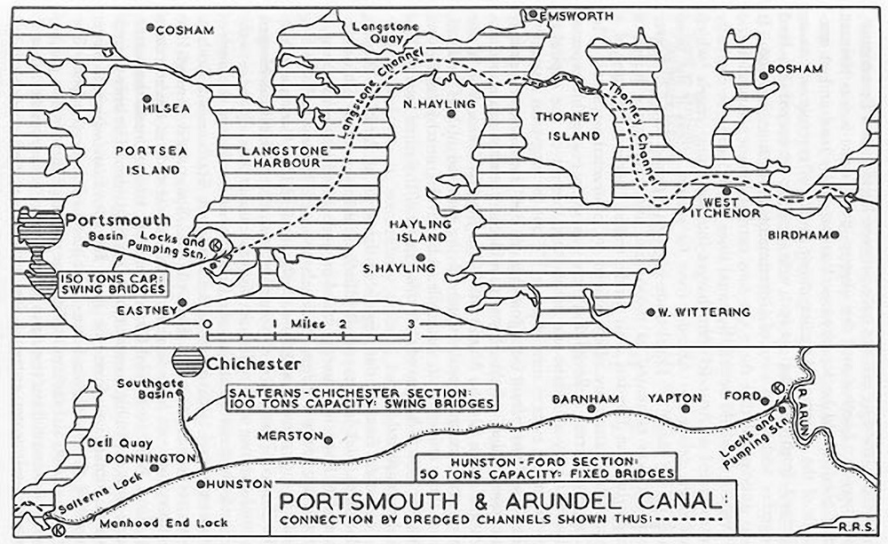
During the mid 1800s, Chichester Harbour was a busy, tidal environment that supported a mix of commercial, fishing and other vessels. If you had been standing on the quay at Emsworth, you would have seen all manner of vessels – fishing boats, working the lucrative oyster beds and inshore waters; naval vessels and revenue boats; small trading vessels – and even, perhaps late at night, smuggling cutters and luggers. But a canal barge? Surely not!

And yet for just 32 years, from 1823 until 1855, those canal barges – usually towed by the steam tug *Egremont* (named after the 3rd Earl of Egremont who financed much of the project) – would have been commonplace as well, making their way from London, along a complex and expensive combination of natural and man-made waterways, into the heart of Portsmouth. But why on earth would you build a canal from London to Portsmouth, when both cities are already major maritime ports?

The answer lies in the need to guarantee a reliable route for naval supplies – especially the gold bullion needed to pay the sailors based in Portsmouth – and particularly in times of war. Around 1800, the British Empire was approaching its zenith, and Portsmouth was a critical component for Britain to project its naval power around the world. But supply routes from London to Portsmouth were risky. Highwaymen ruled swathes of the A3 turnpike. So transportation by road was simple, but carried the risk of highway robbery.

Sadly, the equally simple route by sea around Kent and the English Channel was fraught with the danger of French corsairs. While regarded as pirates by the British, these privateers often carried letters of warrant, issued by the French government, that authorised them to attack British naval and merchant vessels at will. Chief among them was a businessman and slave trader named Robert Surcouf, who achieved particular infamy in 1813 when attempts by the 10-gun schooner *HMS Alphea* to board his cutter *Renard* resulted in the sinking of the Royal Navy ship. But I digress…

John Rennie, the renowned canal engineer, proposed a canal route from London to Portsmouth as early as 1802. So, in 1817, an act of parliament was passed to authorise the building of a secure inland waterway, at a cost of £101,250. Wherever possible, the plan utilised existing rivers and canals. The River Wey was already navigable from the Thames at Weybridge as far as Godalming, and the River Arun could be navigated from the sea to Houghton Bridge, just upstream from Arundel. The act of parliament authorised four new canal stretches:



1. Upgrading the River Arun to navigable status, from Houghton Bridge upstream to Pallingham.

2. A new link from Pallingham with the River Wey at Shalford, near Guildford.

3. Ford (on the River Arun) to Hunston, with a spur into Chichester, and then on to meet Chichester Harbour at Salterns, near Birdham Pool.

4. Milton sea lock from Langstone Harbour (near the Thatched House in Southsea), leading to a final canal basin, now lost, below the Cascades Shopping Centre.

The map above shows the route of the canal that is most relevant to those living in Emsworth. So, the rest of our story will focus on those two local sections that can be explored today, plus the saltwater stretch past Emsworth.

After a frantic five year period of construction, the new canal was fully opened by 1823 – with a final building cost of around £125,000. The Portsea section, and the stretch from Langstone Harbour to Chichester, opened even earlier in 1822. But the effort was not restricted to just inland waterways. To enable barge traffic to navigate the section from Salterns to Portsmouth at all times, without using the outer harbour entrances, the route through Chichester and Langstone Harbours was dredged, including the Great Deep that separates Thorney Island from the mainland, which formed part of the new waterway. Not even the ancient Wadeway (from Langstone to Hayling Island) was immune. The low-tide land route (dating back at least to Roman times) was breached in 1821, and replaced by a wooden swing bridge to carry vehicular and foot traffic. And when the 'Billy Line' railway bridge was built in 1867, it too was designed with a swing mechanism to allow the larger boats through (even though by then the canal was defunct).

Once fully open, the canal section through Portsea was problematic from the very start, as saltwater seepage from the Milton sea-lock into Langstone Harbour contaminated many of the freshwater wells upon which the Portsmouth residents relied. In addition, the promised cargo volumes never materialised. During the first year of opening, only 3650 tons of freight used the canal (less than 8% of the planned quantity).

So, the Portsea section's life was brief – by 1830 the whole section from Langstone Harbour to the Arundel Street basin was abandoned, and the Milton sea lock was converted to a quay where the barges offloaded their cargo. The section from Salterns to Ford was easier to maintain, but as with so many canals, the arrival of the railway meant that its days were numbered too. Trains provided a much quicker and cheaper method of transporting naval supplies from London to Portsmouth,

eroding the strategic importance of the canal and making its survival dependent purely on revenue. By 1840, the cargo traffic had dwindled to just a few hundred tons a year, and the section from Hunston to Ford was abandoned in 1847.

That left just the Chichester spur and the canal section to Langstone Harbour – explaining the peculiar 90 degree bend that today's boats have to navigate south of Chichester. The Portsmouth & Arundel Canal Company ceased to function in 1855 (although the company was not formally wound up until 1896). But the section to Chichester – now rather grandly named the Chichester Ship Canal – enjoyed modest success through the nineteenth century, and only finally stopped carrying cargo in 1906. Sadly, by 1928, the investment in the A286 and B2201 roads made navigation from the city to the harbour impossible. The area around the Salterns entrance lock evolved into today's Chichester Marina, and the section from Hunston to the canal basin in Chichester became largely unused for the next 50 years. But the canal has enjoyed a welcome renaissance since the creation of the Chichester Ship Canal Trust, and boats can now make their way almost to the B2201 Crosbie Bridge.

Thankfully, there are many opportunities to remember the Portsmouth & Arundel Canal, all along its length – but it often needs a bit of imagination. Street names like Arundel Street, Canal Walk, Locksway Road and Towpath Mead all hint at their original roles, and the deep embankment from Fratton to Portsmouth & Southsea station is built straight along the disused canal bed. At the eastern end, the area around the Thatched House pub has lots of visual artefacts.

Across the harbour, it is easy to walk the towpath from Salterns to Hunston, where the canal swings north towards Chichester. Beyond here, the waymarked canal path from Hunston to Ford is peppered with tantalising clues, with some sections of the canal still easy to spot. But many of the old bridges are hard to visualize these days. Tack Lee Bridge, in Yapton, is the only fully intact bridge that can be navigated both over and under. Now perched incongruously in a modern housing estate, the entrance road to five houses travels under the bridge along the route of the canal. Nearby Burndell Bridge (near the aptly named Navigation Drive) is also worth a visit. And to properly follow in the footsteps of the boatmen who used this short lived but vitally important waterway, why not conclude your walk at the Ship & Anchor pub, located just north of the original (but now rather overgrown) canal entrance lock on the River Arun at Ford.

Map sources: Chichester Ship Canal, Royal Institution of Naval Architects, Gosport History