

The Road into Town

By 1700 the village of West Thorney was a thriving fishing and farming community clustered around its 500 year old church. The quickest and safest method of travel was by sea but the islanders still needed a land route to take their livestock to market in Emsworth. Over the centuries a wadeway had been built across the mile or so of tidal creeks and saltmarshes which separated Thorney from the mainland. Its most likely route is that of the modern road, snaking north across the marshes to a midway point at Eames Island, and then to the shore somewhere near what is now the junction of Thorney Road and Thornham Lane.

Once ashore the route into town may have been along the shore or in a straight line east and north of where the deckhouses are now to join up with King Street; either way the final hurdle was the River Ems. The Ems reached the sea through saltmarshes where the Slipper Mill Pond is today. Travellers could either negotiate another wadeway or follow the shoreline along which is now Slipper Lane to cross the river further up.

But these ancient paths were about to be disrupted. In the mid-1700s Thomas Hendy set about converting the Ems estuary into an industrial complex. He dug out the marshland to create the Slipper Mill Pond to power his mill. He used the spoil to create Hendy's quay for his shipyard, confining the Ems to Dolphin Creek. A quay for the mill was constructed – it still exists as the north bank of the marina. King Street was given a kink to the south leading to a repositioned wadeway. The new wadeway led to a track along the shoreline of what is now the deckhouse estate and so to Thorney. And that is why there is a public footpath along the west bank of the marina to this day.

A map of about 1820 records the Thorney wadeway as a "Causeway for carriages at low water" but only a few years later it was cut through, as was Hayling's, as part of the strategic inland waterway from London to Portsmouth. Hayling soon got a bridge but Thorney had to wait until 1870 when the Wickor and Stansbury Banks were completed and the reclaimed land dried out. Thorney Road was constructed linking the island to the main road, and Eames Farm was built on Eames Island.

Today this once busy highway is just a little-used footpath but, if you care to don your wellies, around low water you can walk its route west from the junction of Thorney Road and Thornham Lane, past the deckhouses and north beside the marina. Then scramble down the bank, ford the Ems, and walk up King Street. And as you go reflect on the many people who have walked this way before and the changes which have happened to the path over time.

Only a little speculation has gone into this article. It is based on documented history provided by local historian Tony Yoward to whom I am most grateful, with additional material by David J Rudkin.

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