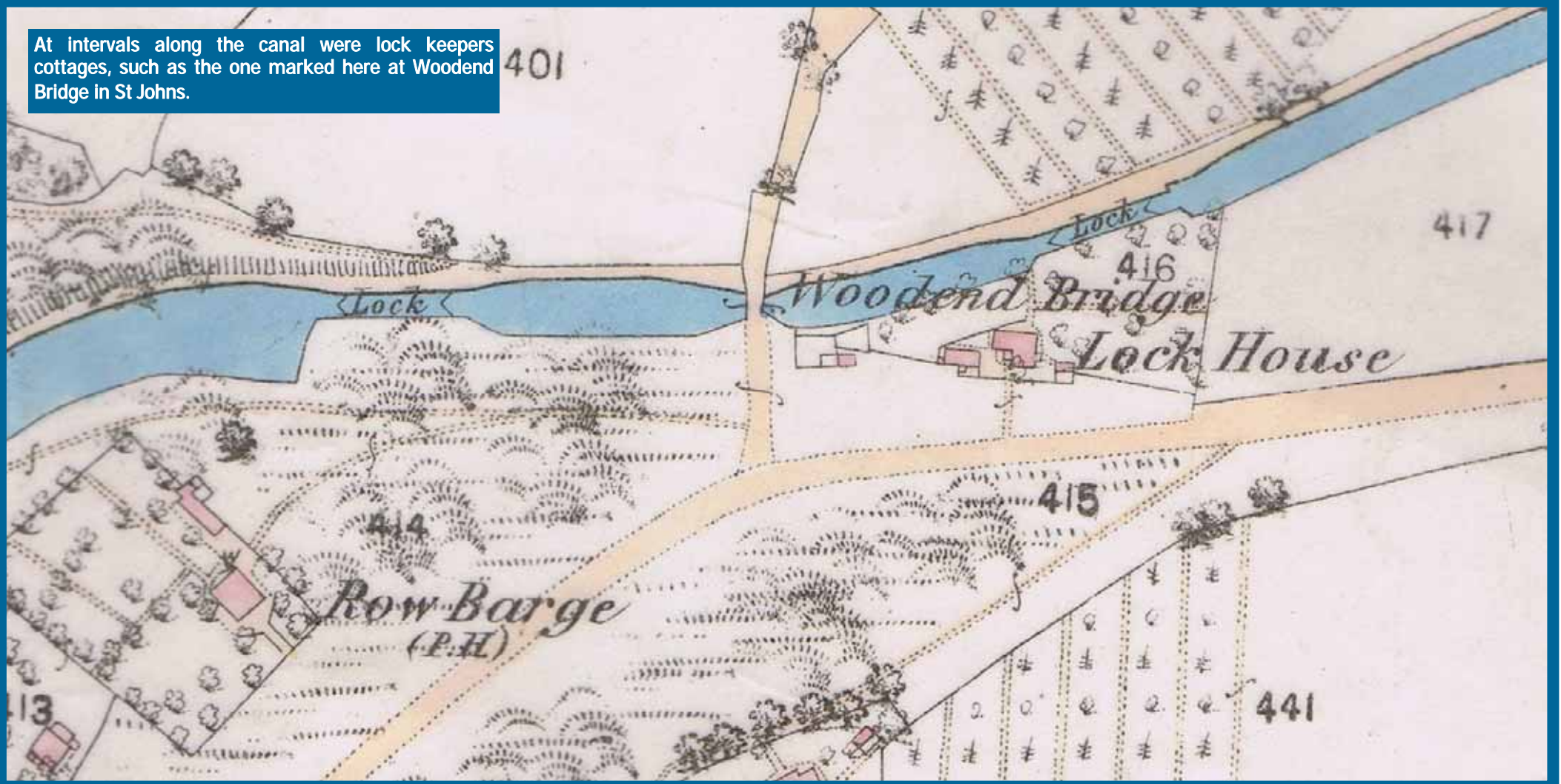


CANAL MANIA & THE BUILDING OF THE BASINGSTOKE CANAL

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At intervals along the canal were lock keepers cottages, such as the one marked here at Woodend Bridge in St Johns.



In the early 1770's the townsfolk of Basingstoke devised a scheme to build a canal from their town to the Thames near Reading, but for various reasons the scheme failed and it was not until later that decade that another route was proposed. The new route was to use the cheap common lands of Hampshire

and Surrey to help save money (and possibly opposition) to link with the Wey Navigation at Woodham and so reach the capital via the Thames at Weybridge.

Because of the American War money was not immediately forthcoming and it was not until

the late 1780's before work could begin. In the meantime the promoters of the waterway were keen to show what sort of impact their canal would have on the area, claiming that something like 6,300 tons of flour could be carried from mills in Hampshire and Surrey to the capital each year, with 5,500 tons of

For many years the barge 'Glendower' could be seen decaying at Goldsworth before restoration of the canal meant it was cleared away.





heritagewalks.org

The five set of locks at Goldsworth brought the canal up from the Woking Pound to skirt Hermitage Hill, after which three more locks were required at Brookwood. Unfortunately in the early part of the 20th century most of these locks were badly decayed and barges could only travel below lock seven at Langmans Bridge.

timber, 2,500 tons of malt and 1,000 tons of pottery, paper and bark also being carried downstream, with coal (6,500 tons), groceries (1,500 tons) and other items carried on the return journey. All these goods, they claimed, amounted to 30,700 tons of goods being carried each year, bringing in £7,783.8s.4d in tolls annually!

The precise figures of June 1787 probably helped to persuade some to invest in the Basingstoke Canal, but unfortunately it would probably be some time (if ever) before they saw much return on their investment. Most of the canals in the midlands and north were 'industrial' canals, serving specific industries such as coal mines, iron works or the potteries – the Basingstoke Canal was an agricultural waterway, with customers spread across many industries, some quite seasonal and not very stable. The result was the canal was never a great success.

Work started on digging the canal in 1788 at Woodham (with other navvies working on the construction of the Greywell Tunnel in Hampshire). Work was obviously slow with the canal needing six locks to raise it from the waters of the Wey Navigation, up onto the common land of Woking where a level 'pound' could be maintained until Goldsworth Hill was encountered.

For part of this first section the canal followed

the slight valley of the Rive Ditch, an iron-stained stream that used to feed the ancient Sheerwater Lake and formed the 'vale' of Vale Farm. The lake was rich with fish that were sold to the London market, so Lord Onslow ensured that Sheerwater and the ditch that supplied it could not be used to add water to the canal. The lack of a good water supply was also to be a problem that until quite recently was hard to resolve.

As well as the six locks at Woodham, and the slight embankment as it skirted the lake, a few bridges also had to be constructed and it is probable that some of the bricks used in their construction were made locally, as in December 1788 Mr Pinkerton, the contractor employed to build the waterway, was advised that a 'Mr Wildgoose of Horsell' would know the best places in the area where clay could be found. Whether these were some of the thousands of bricks that within a few years were found to be faulty is not known, but the pits opened up for the canal continued to be used for several decades in the Kiln Bridge area and in what is now Goldsworth Park.

By 1791 the canal was opened as far as Horsell, but with just twenty-eight ton of goods being carried that first year and only 173 tons the following year when the canal opened to Pirbright Bridge, it was soon clear that the original estimates were going to be way out. In

fact in only three years during its entire history did the canal carry more than 30,000 tons of goods!

It would be another two years before the canal was complete with the canal's biggest engineering challenge requiring a deep cutting and a number of locks in quick succession to raise the waterway to almost its full height above sea-level (with just one more lock required in Hampshire), before the canal could reach Basingstoke – the first barge mooring there on the 4th September 1794.

The cost of transporting goods on the canal was set in September 1794 as 12s per ton on goods carried between London and Basingstoke, with 4s8d per ton being the toll from London to Horsell (and an extra shilling for good to be carried on to Pirbright). That was excluding wharfage, weighing, landing and housing, but even at those prices the canal was not a tremendous success and within a couple of years the canal was in administration.

In June 1856, in an attempt to make the canal more profitable, tolls were levied as follows. For Manure carried below Goldsworth it was 4d per ton, for coal 6d, and all other goods 8d per ton, whilst between Goldsworth and Pirbright (where eight locks had to be negotiated) manure was charged at a penny per ton per mile, with 6d for coal and a shilling for all other goods.

MORE BRIDGES OVER TROUBLED WATERS



A number of bridges had to be built across the canal to carry the mainly light and infrequent horse-drawn farm carts from one side the other. They were simple brick-arched affairs, several of which still survive such as Woodend and Langmans Bridges at Goldsworth where Slocock's Nursery (mentioned last week) needed to get plants from their fields of what is now

Goldsworth Park to the packing sheds and offices at Goldsworth House.

They have managed to survive as they carry little traffic, but most of the main road bridges (such as this one at Pirbright Bridge - above) were not so lucky with heavy traction engines trundling across taking goods to the army camps at Pirbright and Inkerman

Barracks at St Johns.

In 1899 the military paid for a new bridge to be constructed at Kiln Bridge in St Johns realising that the old structure could not cope with the loads, but unfortunately didn't do the same at Hermitage Road Bridge which in 1906 actually collapsed under the weight of an engine carrying potatoes to the barracks up the road!



Even the temporary wooden bridge built at Hermitage Road to replace the old collapsed brick arch was not considered safe, although it survived until the 1920's when it was finally replaced.

WAS 'PROGRESS' A 'STEP' TO FAR?



Not all the bridges over the canal were for horses and carts, and at Goldsworth on the path from Horsell Moor to the Twin Bridges over the railway to Mount Hermon a simple wooden 'step' bridge was constructed (above).

I say 'simple' – which in construction terms it was - but the height required to allow barges

to traverse underneath, meant that from the pedestrian's point of view getting up and over the high bridge was far from a simple act.

In the 20th century, even though the canal was being used less and less, when they came to rebuild the old bridge they had to allow for barges to still pass. And so the answer was to build a 'swing bridge' (below) that was able to pivot (on the Horsell side) allowing pedestrians

to now cross with just a few steps and ramps for bicycles and prams.

Progress, however, with the building of Lockfield Drive in the late 20th century, meant that a new bridge was required and the old name of 'Step Bridge' is once again appropriate – and those on wheels are no longer cared for.

