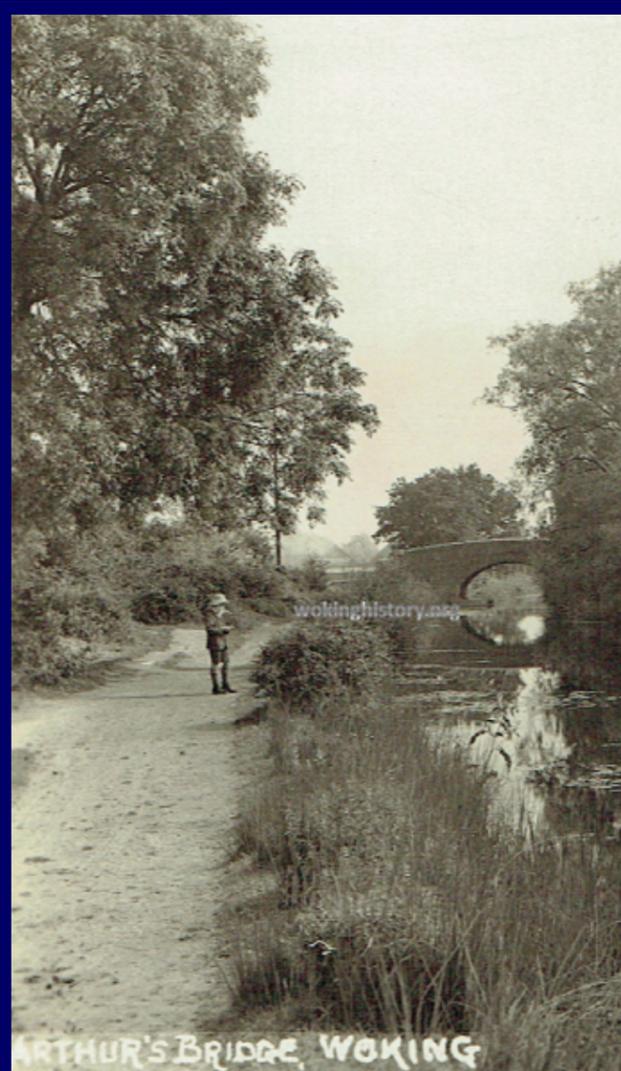


HOUSEBOATS & VANDALISM ON THE BASINGSTOKE CANAL

Iain Wakeford 2018



Scotland Lock
West Byfleet. 8.



ARTHUR'S BRIDGE, WOKING

Ever since the opening of the Basingstoke Canal to Horsell in 1788 (and on to Basingstoke by 1794), boats had been occasionally moored along the waterway in Woking. But these would have been working boats, continually on the move, and only stopping in the area for one or two nights at the most. By the early 1960's when the canal was no longer being commercially used, the permanent mooring of houseboats along the waterway was quite another matter

The problem started in September 1962 when Woking Council served enforcement notices relating to the use of land near Arthur's Bridge and at St John's Lye for mooring houseboats (and the digging of pits for foul sewage). Five boats had apparently been brought to Arthurs Bridge at the end of 1961, with one at St John's Lye being moved there early in 1962.

Back in 1951 the government had apparently confirmed that planning permission for the

The council argued that mooring boats permanently beside the towpath would give 'little privacy to the owners and at the same time would be a source of embarrassment to passers-by'.

For centuries working boats had moored alongside the canal, but only for a day or two.

mooring of houseboats did not require planning permission, but in Woking the canal company had still submitted applications to the council 'to keep the records straight', until 1961 when pressure of work meant that the applications ceased to be submitted. Of course whilst technically the mooring of a canal boat might not require planning permission, the digging of a cesspit for a permanently moored houseboat probably did – especially as it fell upon the council to see that the pits were regularly emptied. The council also argued that standards had changed since the early 1950's and that 'in all of the appeal sites there were difficulties with regard to access and parking space, there was no provision of main drainage and refuse collection and confliction with the major planning proposals for the area as defined in the Approved Town Map'.

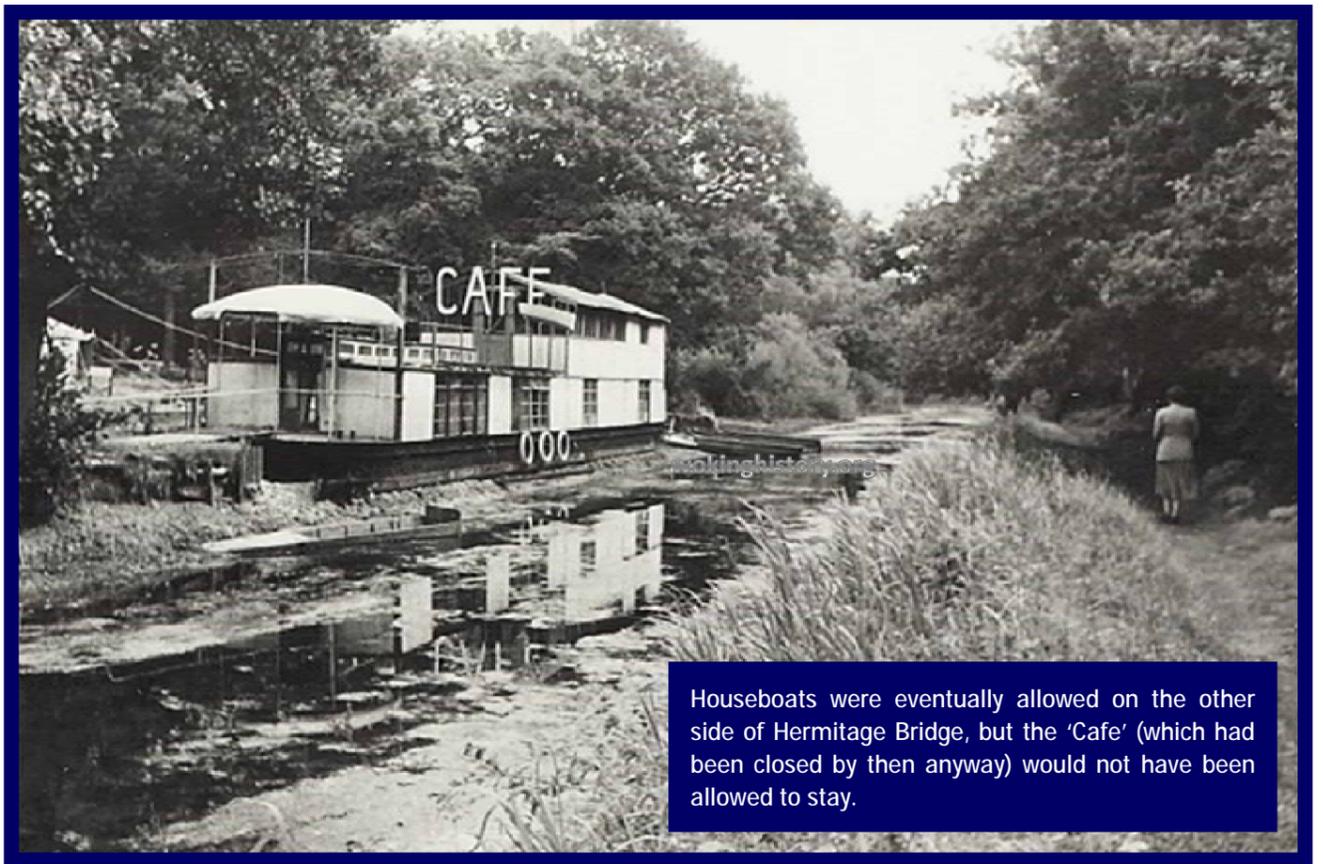
The canal owners pointed out that the 'waste arrangements caused no interference with health and hygiene'. 'Each boat was served with electricity and sewage arrangements were that an Elsan pit was limed regularly' and 'each

tenant maintains a high standard of cleanliness and sanitation and no criticism can be levelled on this account'.

Nevertheless the council decided to refuse planning permission for the mooring of houseboats at eight sites between Sheerwater and Pirbright bridges, and in the spring of 1963 a Public Inquiry was called to look into the situation. The outcome of the inquiry was that only two of the eight sites were allowed (Arthurs Bridge and Hermitage Bridge), with planning permission to be reviewed every five years.

The canal owner, the New Basingstoke Canal Company, had argued that by placing pairs of houseboats at regular intervals along the waterway it would help with security. The houseboat owners were obliged to become honorary bailiffs for the waterway, and their 'supervision and work as watchdogs performed a valuable service in keeping down vandalism'.

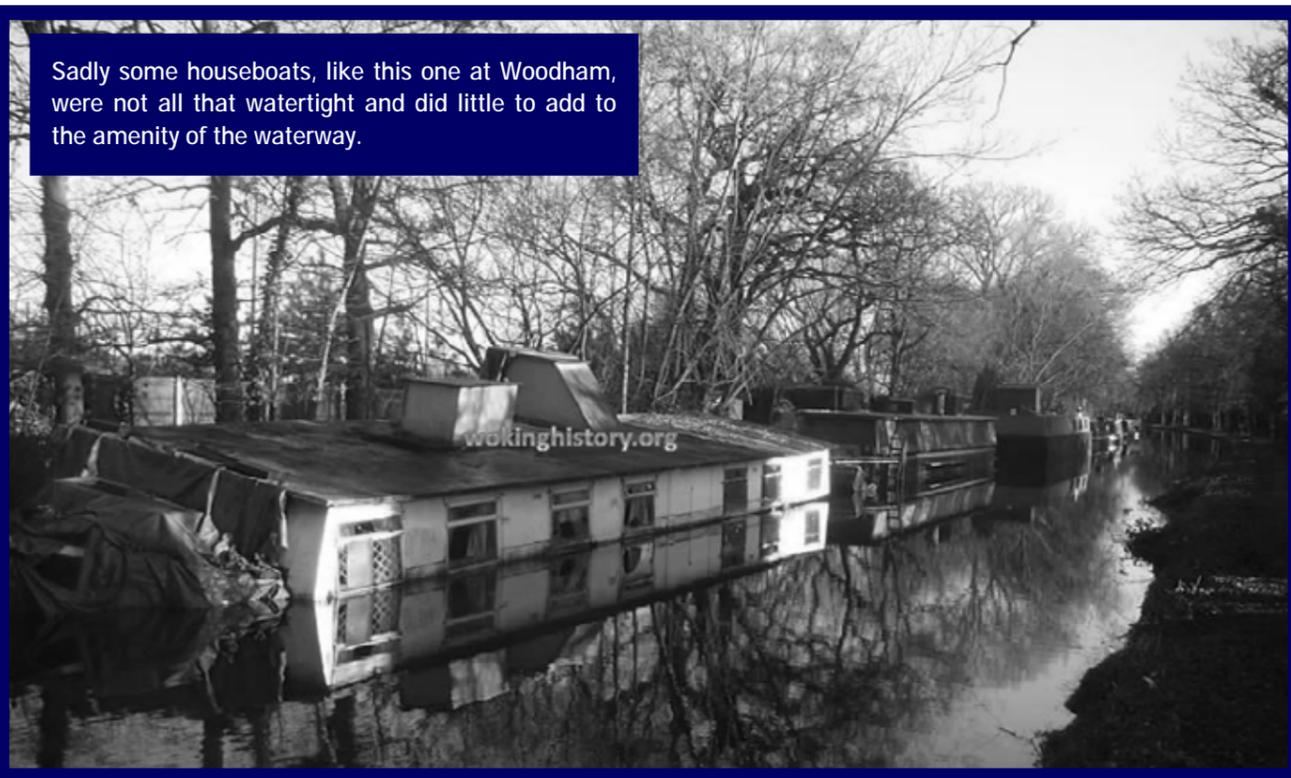
Mrs Marshall, the General Manager of the canal, told the inquiry about hooliganism on the waterway. 'A favourite trick was to pick the lock on the sluice gate, causing flooding. A day and night watch was kept at Sheerwater and boat-owners tried to keep vandalism down to a minimum.'



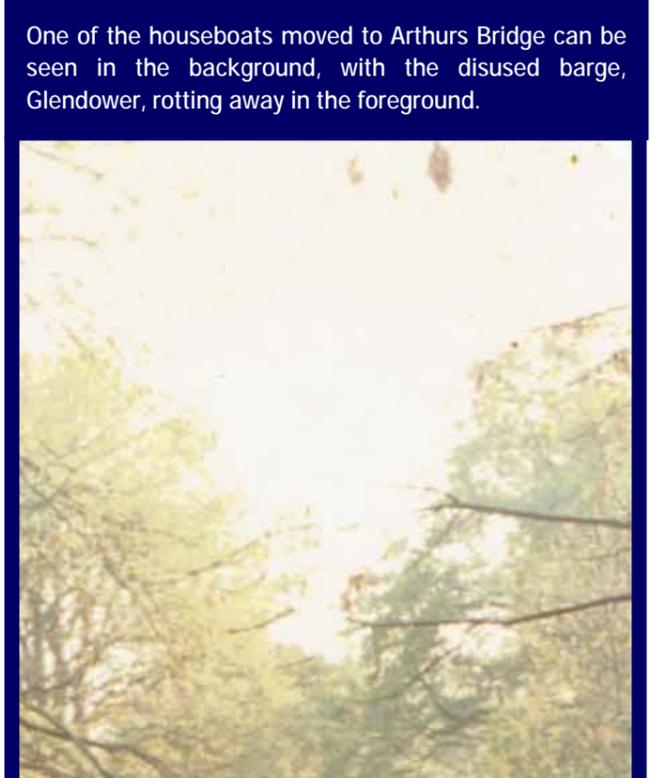
Houseboats were eventually allowed on the other side of Hermitage Bridge, but the 'Cafe' (which had been closed by then anyway) would not have been allowed to stay.

She went on to state that 'lock keepers' work is made almost impossible by the damage caused along the waterway and on one occasion children made gunpowder at school to blow open a bridge which they had already damaged with an axe'.

I know it is probably wrong (and I certainly would not condone their actions), but part of me cannot help admire the ingenuity of the pupils – and wonder what their Chemistry teacher thought of their actions at the time!



Sadly some houseboats, like this one at Woodham, were not all that watertight and did little to add to the amenity of the waterway.



One of the houseboats moved to Arthurs Bridge can be seen in the background, with the disused barge, Glendower, rotting away in the foreground.

