

THE FORMATION OF THE SURREY & HAMPSHIRE CANAL SOCIETY

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Last week I looked at the history of Horsell Common and the Preservation Society that bought the world-famous wildlife site in 1966 so that today it can still be appreciated by everyone for its beauty – a great recreational asset that Woking should be proud of.

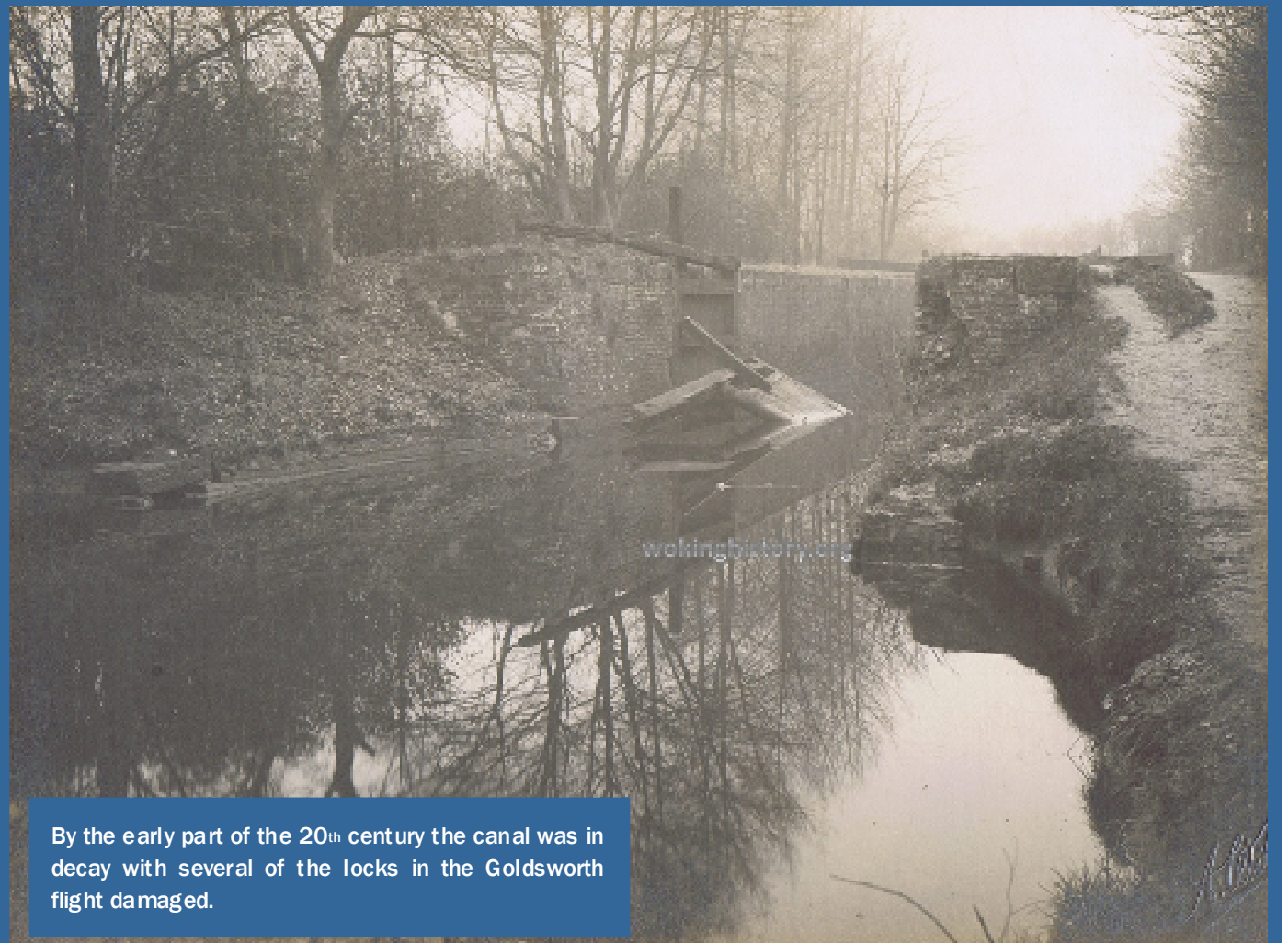
But whilst Horsell Common was quietly being looked after in the mid to late 1960's, another great asset of this area – the Basingstoke Canal – was ferociously being fought over by those who wished to preserve and restore it to its former glory, and those who just saw it as a water resource (and not a particularly profitable one at that).

Whilst the owners of Horsell Common cared for their property, the owners of the canal were increasingly being seen as the 'enemy' by those who wanted to save the decaying waterway.

Originally built in the 1780's the canal was never a tremendous financial success. Unlike many in the midlands and north of the country this was essentially an 'agricultural' canal (rather than an industrial one), without much regular trade.

By the early part of the 20th century the canal company was in liquidation and there were major problems with maintenance. In Woking the council were forced to replace many of the major road bridges, and several of the locks in the Goldsworth flight were derelict.

In the 1920's a new owner, A.J. Harmsworth, did manage to revive its fortunes for a while, but with traffic virtually restricted to the lower



By the early part of the 20th century the canal was in decay with several of the locks in the Goldsworth flight damaged.

reaches, commercial barges were few and far between. In the mid 1930's coal ceased to be carried to the gas works at Boundary Road in Woking, and by the end of the 1940's timber was no longer being carried to the wharves at Chertsey Road Bridge and Horsell Moor.

When Harmsworth died in 1947, the canal almost died with him. Eventually the New Basingstoke Canal Company took over, but by 1966 it was clear that their view of the

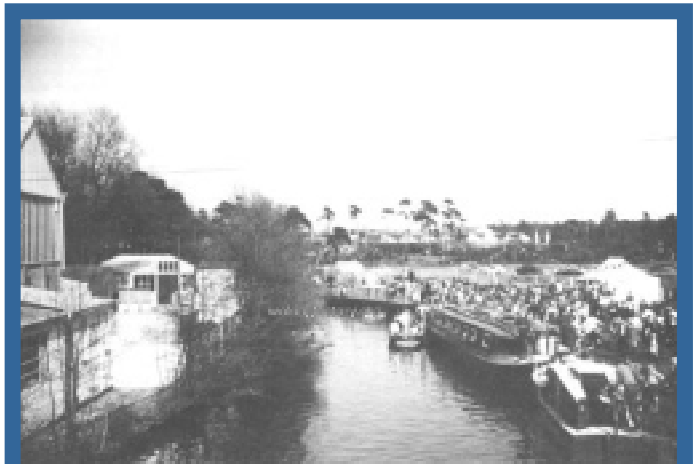
waterway was merely as a water supply, with plans to replace the derelict locks with weirs and to 'culvert' parts of the course so that development could take place on the land.

At Easter 1961 a party of boats attempted to ascend the canal, but were largely thwarted at lock fifteen at Pirbright, but in 1962 the Home Counties branch of the Inland Waterways Association did manage to hold a rally in the Woking pound, with about thirty craft making it to Monument Bridge (pictured below). A couple of years later, however, the Monument Bridge section again had to be cleared of rubbish, with a group of fifteen volunteers removing about 15 tons 'ranging from old bicycles to milk crates'.

Something had to be done, and when the New Basingstoke Canal Company announced its plans to close the waterway, there were howls of protest in the local press with Jim Woolgar from Brookwood and Les Harris at the Hermitage in St Johns leading the charge of 'Letters to the Press' in the Woking area.



Most of the bridges over the canal were replaced by Woking Council, with temporary wooden bridges like this one at Chertsey Road, being built until permanent replacements could be provided in the early 1920's.





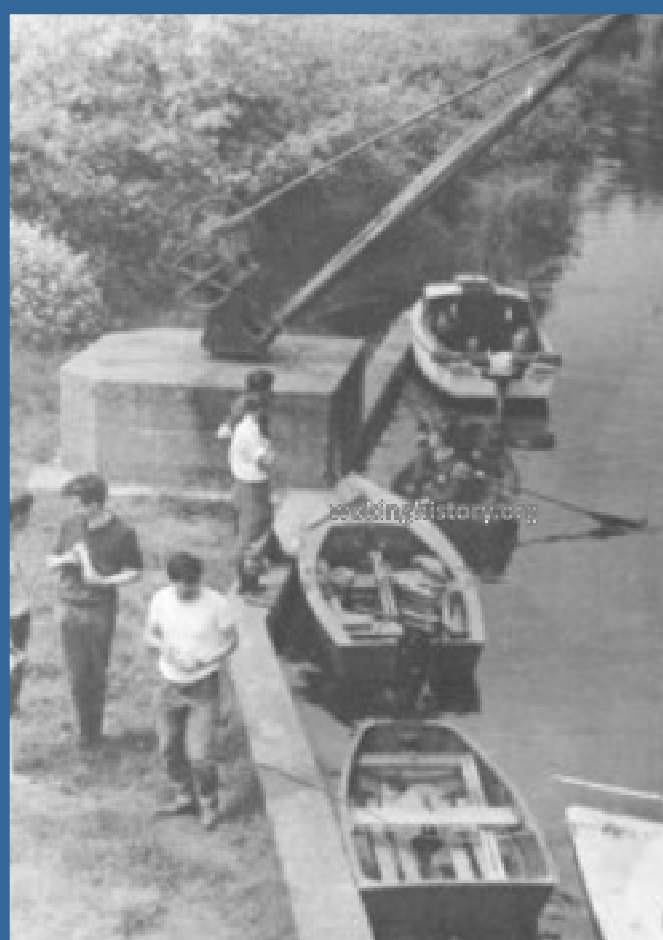
The result was the formation in 1966 of the Surrey and Hampshire Canal Society – the aim of which was to restore the canal, with hopefully the co-operation of the owners. When it was clear that that was never going to be

possible the society started to campaign for public ownership, but in the meantime held public meetings, collected a more than 10,000 signature petition, and organised a protest cruise to Lock One at New Haw where a sign was attached to the gate proclaiming

'Amenity or eyesore?
Beauty or decay,
Action needed now,
To save this waterway.

A year later they published their own plan – The Basingstoke Canal – The Case for Restoration', and as we shall see in this column over the coming years (as we look back on items that made the news in the late 20th century), the Surrey & Hampshire Canal Society eventually achieved much of what they wanted, although not without a struggle and a lot of hard work.

It was only in the lower sections that the waterway was reasonably clear, but even here tons of rubbish had to be removed to make it navigable.



Members of the newly formed Society in 1967, attempting to navigate the canal at Monument Bridge (above) and Swing Bridge (below)

