

Zoom Talk: Wey & Arun Canal Trust

Delivered on: 9th June 2021

Haywards Heath & District Probus Club

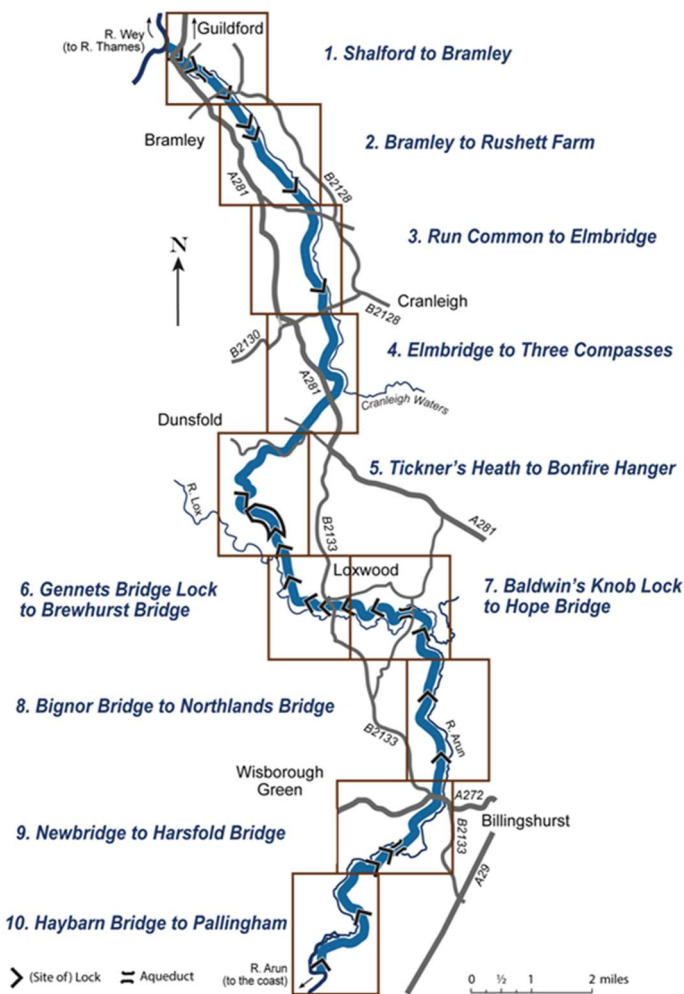
Given By: Ian Ellis



The Wey & Arun Canal Trust

Members of the Haywards Heath & District Probus Club and others were treated to a splendid and interesting talk via Zoom given by Ian Ellis on 9th June 2021. The talk was about the work of the Wey & Arun Canal Trust in maintaining the canal and the recent developments on it.

The text below is derived and excerpted from the sources listed at the end of this document.



Introduction

Around two hundred years ago, canals were the main arteries of Britain for transporting goods. They were slow but faster than taking heavy objects by cart along muddy tracks. They were quiet and economical to use. Their heyday was early in the 19th century before the 1840s when railways burst on the scene, but eventually it was the railways that finally sounded the death knell for most canals.

The river Wey was made navigable from Weybridge to Guildford in 1653 and extended to Godalming 90 years later. The Arun has existed as a tidal navigation as far inland as Pallingham Quay, near Pulborough, since 1575.

The 23-mile Wey & Arun Canal - comprising of the combined Arun Navigation and the Wey & Arun Junction Canal - was once the national inland waterway network's only connection to the English Channel. Now known as 'London's lost route to the sea', in the 19th century it was a safe route from London to ports such as Portsmouth, at times when ships, following the South coast, were at risk from attack by the French navy.

In the 19th century, you could meander by boat from London to Littlehampton on the south coast of England via Weybridge, Guildford, Pulborough and Arundel. This was just part of a once-extensive system of inland waterways covering England and Wales. The route was via the rivers Wey and Arun, linked between Shalford in Surrey, and Pallingham in Sussex, by the 23-mile Wey & Arun Canal. Although it was only one part of an extensive system, the Wey & Arun Canal formed a vital link, the only one between the south coast and the Thames, linking London and the busy river Thames with the English Channel - and beyond.

What are Canals?

Canals are waterways channels, or artificial waterways, for water conveyance, or to service water transport vehicles. They may also help with irrigation. In a way, you can think of a canal as being an artificial version of a river. In most cases, a canal will have a series of dams and locks that create reservoirs of low-speed current flow. A canal is also known as a *Navigation* when it runs parallel to a river and shares part of its waters and drainage basin and leverages its resources by building dams and locks to increase and lengthen its stretches of slack water levels while staying in its valley.

Quick Timeline

- The first scheme to link the Wey and the Arun was proposed in 1641. Headwaters of the rivers were 2 miles apart, and a canal to bridge them down to a navigable upper reach was submitted as a bill to Parliament but was dropped at the committee stage.
- Another scheme, to tie in the Adur and Mole was suggested in 1663 but was not pursued.
- In 1810, the 3rd Earl of Egremont began to promote the idea of a canal to link the Wey and Arun.
- A survey was carried out in 1811 by Francis and Netlam Giles for an alternative, 37 miles long canal, from the Croydon, Merstham and Godstone Railway at Merstham to Newbridge, via Three Bridges, Crawley and Horsham. A petition was presented to Parliament, but the scheme went no further.
- An Act of Parliament received Royal Assent on 19th April 1813, for making and maintaining a navigable canal, to unite the Rivers Wey and Arun. It authorised the construction of a canal from the Godalming Navigation (an extension of the River Wey) near Shalford, south of Guildford to the northern terminus of the Arun Navigation at Newbridge. The canal was 18.5 miles long, had 23 locks and was suitable for 30-ton barges. Construction was completed in September 1816.
- The canal was never very prosperous but did reasonably well. However, the opening of the Guildford and Horsham Railway, was just too much competition for the canal. There were also engineering problems with only a few sources of water to tap into, compounded by porous subsoils at summit level, which led to water shortages. Although the canal was offered for sale in 1870, it was officially abandoned in 1871, with the land sold to many along its route. The canal company was wound up in 1910.

Although known today as the *Wey & Arun Canal*, it actually consists of two canals:

- The first was the *Arun Navigation*, which gave trading vessels from the south coast access to Newbridge Wharf near Billingshurst and was opened in 1787.
- In 1813, an Act of Parliament, backed by the 3rd Earl of Egremont of Petworth House, authorised the building of a further canal, the *Wey & Arun Junction Canal* which extended the navigation from Newbridge up to Stonebridge Wharf south of Guildford on the Godalming portion of the river Wey.

The River Arun was used in an unimproved condition for centuries, but work was carried out on the river itself and the port of Arundel in the 16th century, which allowed boats to reach Pallingham Quay against the north of the parish of Pulborough by 1575.

Started in 1816 and closed in 1871

In 1816, the *Wey & Arun Junction Canal* opened to great fanfare, linking the Wey Navigation (near Guildford) to the south coast via the Arun Navigation. Conceived during the Napoleonic Wars, the canal was intended to provide a safe, efficient route from London to Portsmouth to carry goods supplying the dockyards as well as gunpowder and heavy munitions such as cannons (see [here](http://lbscr.org/)). Many of the River Arun meanders were canalised south of Pulborough to shorten the route for barges from Amberley carrying lime from the chalk pits down to the coastal towns for their construction. In its heyday, the canal carried many tons of cargo but the end of the war with France, and the arrival of the railways, sounded the death knell for the *Wey & Arun Junction Canal* as a business, and by 1871 it was formally closed.

Following the Industrial Revolution, commercial trade on the canal gradually increased, with 23,000 tons carried at its peak in 1839. However, the railways were becoming established as the new form of transport. When they first arrived in Sussex, the railways had little impact. The London, Brighton and South Coast Railway between London and Portsmouth passed through Pulborough and Amberley (see: <http://lbscr.org/>). In 1865, the railway line between Guildford and Horsham opened in direct competition with the canal. Although carrying charges were cheaper, the canal could not compete with the railway for speed and convenience. By 1868 canal traffic had virtually ceased, and in 1871 this caused an Act of Abandonment to be passed. By this time, parts of the canal were almost derelict although occasional traffic carried on after official closure.

Further south, the Arun Navigation managed to survive until the start of the 20th century before it also succumbed to the elements and the ravages of neglect. On abandonment, the canal was sold off, mostly to the estates from which the land had originally been taken, but, in many cases, there is no record of resale. Although neglected, in the few places where it is close to civilisation, it was still regarded as a feature of local interest – for example, Rowner Lock near Billingshurst is shown on local postcards in the early 1900s despite it having been disused for over 30 years.

For most of its length, however, the canal remained no more than a stagnant, muddy, and overgrown depression in the ground. And that is how it remained so for almost a century, unloved and largely forgotten - that is, until 1970 when a group of enthusiasts formed the Wey & Arun Canal Society, which later became the *Wey & Arun Canal Trust*.

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One of the main reasons the canal failed was due to the lack of water. The same problem exists today and some of the restored locks need water to be pumped up stream which is very expensive. One of the main benefits of restoration is the amenity value as a wildlife corridor and tow-path use by walkers and cyclists as well as dog walkers etc.

Rebirth

Canal travel reached its low point after the Second World War. But since then, there has been a steady growth of interest. There are about 3,000 miles of navigable canal in England and another 2,500 which could be restored. Many people take canal boat holidays, enjoying the slow and steady progress around the backs of houses and factories to reach open countryside. This interest has been heightened in recent years by actors Timothy West and Prunella Scales starring in a TV series about their favourite hobby.

Interest in the Wey & Arun Canal was sparked by the publication in 1965 of a book by P.A.L. Vine (*London's Lost Route to the Sea*). As a result, the Daily Telegraph weekend magazine carried a 5-page article about the Wey & Arun Canal.

In 1968, a local group of enthusiasts became interested in the canal, and having carried out some research into its history, formed the Wey & Arun Canal Society in 1970, with a view to reopening the canal. The Society evolved into The Wey & Arun Canal Trust in 1973 (a private company limited by guarantee with no share capital, and the present custodians of the canal restoration).

In 1990, the restoration was identified by the Inland Waterways Association's Restoration Committee as one of those where significant progress was being made, and which would benefit from the backing of the Association. The Waterway Recovery Group, which gave active support to restoration schemes, developed a strategy of "a guaranteed labour force for guaranteed work" in 1992, which ensured that local societies would have the funding and relevant planning permission in place before a group of volunteers arrived to carry out the work. The Wey & Arun Canal was one of three schemes where working parties were run in this way. The practical outworking of this approach was demonstrated in the following year, when a section of the canal at Billingshurst was cleared, and three accommodation bridges were rebuilt by a working party of 250 people, as part of a Waterway Recovery Group initiative called "Dig Deep".

The Trust and its work

Restoration of the waterway started in 1971, initially by the *Wey & Arun Canal Society* and then the *Wey & Arun Canal Trust*. The Trust aims to restore the canal back to life, from the River Wey at Shalford to the River Arun at Pallingham, near Pulborough in West Sussex. Since then, restoration by the Trust has led to several miles being restored to the standard navigable by narrowboats and small tour barges. Work is continuing, with the ultimate aim of reopening the entire canal to navigation.

The Trust has reached agreements with several landowners to allow restoration work to be undertaken over half the length of the 23-mile canal. By 2009, twenty-four bridges had been reconstructed, eleven locks restored, two aqueducts reinstated, and several miles of canal bed cleared and dredged.

Thanks to the work of the Trust and its volunteers, many miles of towpath are now available for walkers, cyclists and riders, with free routes available to download at the Trust's website. As part of its aim to create a 23-mile 'green corridor' through the West Sussex and Surrey countryside, the Trust has also created Hunt Nature Park at Shalford, a wetland wildlife area leased from Surrey County Council - for wildlife enthusiasts, the Park and its viewing platform is a must visit.

Today, more than 200 years after it opened, over 3,000 members and volunteers are working hard to reopen the Wey & Arun Canal for leisure. Already several miles of the Canal are in regular use by small boats, canoes, and the Trust's own trip boats.

One of the major projects has been the building of the B2133 Loxwood High Street Bridge and the new Loxwood Lock, costing approximately £2 million.



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The first fully navigable section of the canal in Surrey, which is part of the Summit Level between Dunsfold and Alfold, was officially opened by actress and Surrey Hills patron Dame Penelope Keith, in early October 2016. In a project costing around £700,000, a new Compass Bridge was also opened at the same time at the Alfold entrance to Dunsfold Aerodrome. It replaced a 1930s concrete causeway which was blocking the waterway.

Boats cruise along the idyllic Loxwood Link section of the canal on the Surrey/West Sussex border. Public trips run every Saturday, Sunday and Bank Holiday Monday from April until October, except Easter Sunday and Easter Monday. The Trust also runs special cruises in the evenings as well as children's events.

Achievements

So far, the Trust's achievements have been:

- 9 LOCKS restored/rebuilt
- 11 BRIDGES rebuilt/restored
- 4 miles of Navigable Water

So far, most of the money used to restore the canal has come from donations, fundraising activities, and legacies.

More information on the Trust

A photo-history of the canal's restoration to date and the latest progress reports may be found on the Trust's website.

More information on the Trust, how to join, become a volunteer or support its activities with a donation, is available on the Wey & Arun Canal Trust website: <https://weyarun.org.uk/>

The Trust's address is:

Fritchfold Farm, Vicarage Hill, Loxwood, Billingshurst RH14 0RH, West Sussex. Telephone: 01403 752403

Other Sussex Canals

Over in Chichester, there is another canal which links the city with the harbour. Boats can and do use the first part of the canal near Chichester Station, but unfortunately navigation comes to an abrupt halt after that. One day, it is hoped that the major blockage will be removed – although much work has already been done, it will be another mighty task.

Over in the far east of the county of Sussex, there is a short stretch of the *Royal Military Canal* in Sussex – the rest is in Kent. This is a handsome canal well worth following on foot.

Sources:

<https://www.westsussex.gov.uk/leisure-recreation-and-community/places-to-visit-and-explore/wey-and-arun-canal/>

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About the Speaker

Leaving Birmingham University in 1961, Ian worked for the Rank Organisation from 1964 to 1993 with a six-year break (from 1980 to 1986) working for Scottish & Newcastle Breweries in Newcastle.

From 1993, he joined the ranks of the 'self-employed', firstly as European Consultant for an American manufacturer of instant lottery tickets, secondly as UK sales agent for an Indian manufacturer of bingo and raffle tickets, and finally, with his wife, as importers of redemption tickets (used in amusement arcades) from another American manufacturer. He suggests his life could be described as a *'Life in Leisure'*!

Ian lived in Haywards Heath from 1987 (just after the Great Storm) to 2007 during some of which time he served on the District and Town Council.

After moving to Pulborough, he became involved with the local RNLI branch, the Pulborough Society (as Chairman) and the Wey & Arun Canal Trust – for the Trust, he presents talks about the Canal either in person or by Zoom.

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