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# WATERWAYS TO STRATFORD

by  
*Charles Hadfield*  
and  
*John Norris*

WITH PLATES AND MAPS



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THIS BOOK  
IS RESPECTFULLY DEDICATED  
TO THE MEMORY OF

*William James*

who saw too far and moved too quickly,  
and so failed

came up. As far as can be judged from old pictures, the usual barges on the river were about 35 ft long, flat-bottomed or nearly so, sometimes steered with an oar, and with a square sail on a mast, fixed forward, which could be lowered to pass under bridges.<sup>28</sup> There was no horse-towing path, then or later, on either the Upper or the Lower river, towing being done when necessary by gangs of men.

Since there was no outside body with power to regulate the river, the Commissioners under the 1662 Act being long dead, the Borough of Evesham and other local people sought an Act in 1751 to settle tolls and other matters. This Act<sup>29</sup> laid down the tolls to be charged, roughly according to distance, and declared that the river was open to all from 29 September 1751 on payment of them. Merchandise, for instance, was to pay a maximum toll of 4s a ton from Tewkesbury to Stratford, and bricks 10d. Coal was the exception. From Tewkesbury up as far as Evesham it yielded a relatively high toll, which did not then increase for longer distances, probably because coal carried by land would be likely to compete with it should the toll rise above 1s 6d a ton. Lord Windsor, to whom the Lower river had reverted, and who at that time had his own barges and was trading in coal below Bidford, sadly complained that these tolls were lower than had ever been paid, but they seem quite enough, since millers still had the power to make a charge when they were obliged to draw water. In addition, certain special payments were authorized, such as the sixpenny toll for barges through Evesham lock, and the special charge of 2s 6d per laden boat through Tewkesbury, Pershore, Evesham and Stratford locks then paid to a private owner.

## CHAPTER II

## The Perrotts and the Lower Avon

IN 1754 Herbert, Lord Windsor and Mountjoy, leased the Lower river to Joseph Biddle of Evesham for nine years with the same rights that had been granted to Mark Ramell in 1703, apparently at a rent of £630 p.a., Biddle to keep the navigation works repaired. In exchange he was authorized to collect 2d a ton on coal and merchandise from Tewkesbury to Pershore and 3d for all traffic beyond Pershore to Stratford provided he did not exceed the rates laid down in the Act. Then in 1758 Lord Windsor died and his title lapsed. The estate fell into Chancery, and on 20 December 1759 the Court offered the Lower Avon for sale. It was bought by Joshua Poole acting on behalf of George Perrott, who took over in June 1760, Biddle being still lessee and continuing his rent.

George Perrott was a London lawyer of Yorkshire birth who had taken silk in 1759, and was in 1763 to become a judge (or baron) of the Court of Exchequer. In that year, Biddle's lease having expired, Perrott took over the river himself, Biddle having assured him that the locks were in good order. They were not. Perrott alleged that he had let them go to 'Ruin and Decay in so much that both before and immediately after the expiration of the said lease the Navigation was entirely stopt in many parts of the River'.<sup>30</sup> Repairs had to be done, and the river was closed for some months, till an advertisement dated 15 August in the Birmingham newspaper announced that the navigation would be reopened in a fortnight.<sup>31</sup> Perrott was helped in his management by his cousin Andrew, who signed this advertisement, and who later became one of the trustees of his will.

From Michaelmas 1763 to 1768 he spent some £4,000 on rebuilding and repairing the works, and then found some of his

trade threatened by a bill introduced in 1769 for a canal from near Coventry to Oxford. His petition against the Oxford canal is useful for the picture it gives of contemporary trade. Before and at the time of the 1751 Act, he says,

divers large Quantities of Coals were brought up the said River Avon, and landed at Evesham and Stratford upon Avon . . . great part whereof were afterwards conveyed to, and sold at, Oxford, Chipping Norton, Woodstock, and divers other Places, in the County of Oxford; and great Quantities of Corn and Grain were brought from the County of Oxford, to Evesham and Stratford upon Avon . . . and there, and at other Mills upon the said River, ground into Flour, and sent down the said River, to Bristol, and other Places up and down the Severn, and other Part of the said Grain was sent down the said River unground, to the same Places; and divers Quantities of Merchant Goods were carried up and down the said River.<sup>32</sup>

He seems also to have feared that essential Avon water would be diverted to the Oxford canal, for that company in another connexion later remarked that 'The case is exactly similar to that of Mr. Baron Perrott to whom such compensation was offered if he could have proved that his water would have been injured'.<sup>33</sup>

George Perrott seems to have put the river into good shape, and to have raised its capacity rather above 40-ton barges, for in 1795 a barge registered at Gloucester under the Registration Act of that year, the *Good Intent* of Tewkesbury, 47 tons, with a crew of four men, was shown as trading regularly from Tewkesbury to Stratford, and it seems unlikely that a local craft would steadily trade underladen. This and an inquest on 'one Edward, a waterman (surname unknown)' who was hit by the tiller and thrown overboard when his barge grounded during a flood in December 1810 are two of the rare personal touches that lighten the history of the navigation.

In April 1767 there had been trouble with the corn barges, when several hundred Persons, chiefly Women and Children, assembled in the Neighbourhood of Pershore, in order to intercept and pillage some Vessels, laden with Corn and Meal, that were going down the River Avon; Notice of which being sent to the Commanding Officer of the Dragoons quartered in this City (Worcester), desiring a Military Aid, a Party of them marched that day to Pershore, and a Justice of the Peace being likewise applied to, he also attended and causing the Riot Act to be read, the Mob thought proper to disperse, without committing any Violence.<sup>34</sup>

George Perrott about 1770 built Perrott House in Bridge Street, Pershore, still one of the loveliest houses there, and in 1775, because of ill-health, retired from the Bench to Pershore, 'where his social and other amiable qualities rendered him beloved by all that knew him'.<sup>35</sup> He died in 1780. His nephew George had spent the earlier part of his life in India becoming a Nabob, and on hearing of the death of his uncle returned in 1781 with his pockets well-lined, but, unlike some of his contemporaries, 'with the most unblemished Reputation and spotless Honour'.<sup>36</sup> He inherited the river and the estate, and by 1793 had built and moved to Craycombe House in Fladbury overlooking the Avon.

The Oxford canal had not after all turned out to be an immediate threat, for it had reached Banbury from the north in 1778, and there had stopped on the edge of the country where it would have taken trade from the Avon. The company did not begin construction again till about 1785, or complete their line to Oxford till the beginning of 1790. By this date, however, another canal also seemed likely to take Avon business, that which was first talked of in 1789 and was authorized by an Act of 1791 to run from Birmingham to Worcester. It seemed likely that when it was finished this Worcester & Birmingham canal would affect the Lower Avon, for coal coming down it from the collieries on the Birmingham and later the Dudley canals might be landed at convenient points and carried by land to places like Evesham and Pershore. Tewkesbury, which itself had a good trade by water, was unlikely to be affected. This trade can be gauged from a contemporary advertisement, which described 'Coal Wharfs, Warehouses etc. on the Quay . . . comprising Two Enclosed Wharfs capable of containing 1200 tons of coal and . . . a Range of Warehouses, newly and most substantially built'.<sup>37</sup> Indeed later on, in 1810, Tewkesbury came into the news as a point of departure for a projected canal to Cheltenham that was never constructed.

Curiously enough, Perrott did not oppose the two Worcester & Birmingham bills, or join the long queue of other waterway owners seeking compensation from the new company. He does, however, seem to have realized that he was faced with a possible threat, for in 1793 he sought and obtained an Act<sup>38</sup> to set aside his uncle's will and sell his rights in the Avon, so that he could add to his estate at Fladbury. The preamble to the Act says:

the said Navigation of the River Avon hath been gradually improving for Thirty Years last past, and is now let on Lease, whereof Two

Years or thereabouts are now unexpired, at the Rent of £1,227 per annum, and could now sell to advantage, but on account of the Navigations that have already taken place, and other Navigations which are still projecting, the Value of such Navigation is become precarious, and is attended with a Risque which may be dangerous to an individual Proprietor.

The Stratford-upon-Avon canal was being promoted at this time, and it is likely that nephew George had it in mind that the new company would buy the navigation. However, the promoters went forward for a canal from a junction with the Worcester & Birmingham canal at King's Norton near Birmingham to Stratford by way of Hockley and Lapworth, but without provision for joining the Upper Avon. Naturally the Worcester & Birmingham, which had been authorized two years before, wanted the King's Norton junction to be made, and George therefore saw an opportunity. He gave up his idea of selling the river, and instead supported the Stratford company, persuading the committee members that the opportunity should be taken of getting inserted in their bill a clause entitling him to compensation for any loss he should suffer due to coal and other goods carried on that canal competing with his own river.

The Stratford Act containing this clause was passed in the same year 1793. In it Perrott is described as the sole owner of the Lower Avon, and also entitled to a toll on all goods passing from the Lower to the Upper Avon, and to tolls on goods landed between Evesham lock and Bidford on the Upper river. It was enacted that the Worcester & Birmingham Company would make up to him his current receipts of £1,227 p.a. should they fall below that figure before the Stratford canal was completed. After its opening, it would pay him £400 a year as compensation for his expected loss of tolls. This payment is still made by British Waterways as successors of the Worcester & Birmingham Canal Company to the Lower Avon Navigation Trust as successors of George Perrott.

Perrott was insured against loss, and now became a leading light in the Stratford Canal Company, taking the chair in 1794 at the second meeting of shareholders and at many later ones, sitting on the committee in 1794-5 and from 1798 onwards, and holding the post of treasurer, which indicates considerable financial resources, from 1795 to 1798. He had 35 shares in 1803 and 30 when he died.

It is likely that while he so strongly supported and helped the Stratford Company, he had it in mind that the canal would one day

join the Avon, and so form a link in a through route to the Severn that would also include his own navigation. Certainly the first suggestion of such a junction came in 1798, when he was prominent in canal affairs, and in 1800 he thought well enough of the river's prospects to commute the land tax on the Avon lock at Tewkesbury for £1,247. However, his hope was to be deferred, for in 1802 cutting of the canal had for the time being to stop at Kingswood for lack of money. In 1804 the discouraged Perrott wrote to the Worcester & Birmingham Company to draw its attention to the forthcoming auction of the tolls, clearly in the hope that it would lease them.<sup>39</sup> It did not do so, and when in early 1807 that canal was opened to Tardebigge wharf, some coal probably began to be carried by land thence to Evesham wharf to compete with that coming up the river.<sup>40</sup>

At some time between March 1804 and June 1808 it seems likely that the eight-fifteenths of the Upper Avon that were leasehold also came into Perrott hands, for on the later date the tolls of the Upper river were advertised for sale side by side with those of the Lower.<sup>41</sup> Now or later the Lower river was leased to Thomas Milton till 1816, when the navigation was again advertised for letting. Milton probably took it again, for in November 1819 he won an appeal against an assessment for poor rates on the tolls taken in Bengeworth (Evesham) parish. It was a battle many canal companies were fighting about the same time.

George Perrott died on 5 January 1806, and his rights in the river passed to his son George Wigley Perrott, who seems to have taken no active part in the affairs of the Stratford Canal Company apart from shareholding. He in turn died on 9 May 1831 after a long illness, and was succeeded by Edmund Thomas Perrott. It was during the lifetime of G. W. Perrott that the family fortunes began that long downwards slide that is recorded in the series of mortgages held in the Worcestershire Record Office, which begins with that of two-thirds of the Avon for £2,000 in October 1812. The income of the Perrotts from the river did not fall below the guaranteed £1,227 p.a. till 1815, when a deficiency payment was made for the last quarter, followed by two more for the first half of 1816, the three totalling £170. On 24 June the Stratford canal was opened, now at last connected to the Upper Avon after all, and thereafter the agreed £400 p.a. was paid, although when the Worcester & Birmingham Company was short of money, as frequently it was, the instalments fell somewhat in arrears.

In September 1820, five years after the Worcester & Birming-

ham canal had been opened and had provided a new source of coal carried to Tewkesbury and up the Avon, it was reported to the canal committee that one of the locks on the Lower river was about 3 ft too short to 'admit of the passage of Boats of the ordinary Length', presumably canal narrow boats, and the clerk wrote to Perrott asking him to lengthen it. He replied that he would look into the matter, and 'that he shall be happy to give evry facility to boats etc. carried up the Avon from Tewkesbury'.<sup>42</sup> The lock must have been altered, for later all the Lower river locks were large enough to take such craft.

Towards the end of 1825 meetings were held at Tewkesbury to decide what could be done to prevent flooding downwards from Pershore, and there was talk of a bill for improving the existing flood-gates, sluices and weirs and for building a new weir at Tewkesbury, and also for amending the 1751 Act by seeking powers to levy drainage rates and in other ways, but no action seems to have followed.<sup>43</sup>

Perrott's lessee was still Thomas Milton, whose rent had to be reduced because of bad trade. Perrott was then asked whether he would sell the Lower Avon, and asked £26,000, his net income for the previous ten years being quoted at £675 p.a. plus the £400 annuity.<sup>44</sup> Then in July 1828 a deputation was sent to him from the Worcester & Birmingham Company 'with power to treat and agree with him for taking the Tolls of the Lower Navigation of the River Avon'.<sup>45</sup> Perrott replied that the present lessee wanted the river for one year longer, after which he was willing to negotiate. In fact, Milton had almost reached the end of his lease when the river was advertised for letting in May 1830. It was said that it never suffered from shortage of water, as often did the Severn, and that 'The Trade in Coal, as well as Grain, Flour, Timber, and Merchandize, of all descriptions is very considerable, and capable of great improvement by any spirited individual or individuals willing to give attention to its capabilities'.<sup>46</sup>

In July 1830, immediately after a dispute over the tolls to be levied at Evesham had been settled by Perrott with the Upper Avon proprietors, the canal company agreed to lease the Lower Avon for 21 years at £1,000 p.a. less £120 p.a. in consideration of its undertaking the liability for repairs, 'the Lessees, within the first seven years of the Term to erect Eleven new pair of Lock Gates equal to those lately erected . . . by Mr Perrott. The Lessees to do all in their power to promote the Trade on the Navigation.'<sup>47</sup> In May the leasehold 'Coal Yard and Wharf, with the Warehouses,

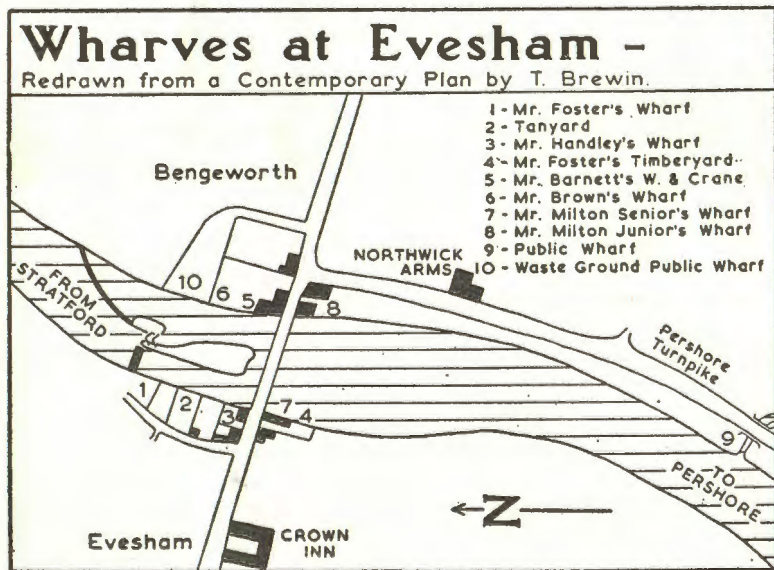
Stables, Counting-house, Weighing Machine, and Appurtenances, as now occupied by Mr Wm. Milton, on the south side of the Bridge of Evesham' were put up for sale, together with the 'Freehold Coal Yard and Wharf, with the Warehouses, Stables, Gighouse, and Appurtenances, also occupied by Mr Wm. Milton, and situate at Bengeworth . . . on the north side of Evesham Bridge'.<sup>48</sup> They were quickly sold.

The reason for the canal lease can probably be found in the competition that existed at the time for the market in coal of the Severn Valley. The mines of Shropshire, which lay not far from the river near Broseley, had lost their former importance, but supplies were available from some Staffordshire and Worcestershire mines by way of the Staffordshire & Worcestershire canal which joined the Severn at Stourport, and from others by the Worcester & Birmingham canal into the river at Worcester. These supplies from the north competed against those available from the mines of the Forest of Dean which pressed up towards Gloucester, Cheltenham and Tewkesbury. The Worcester & Birmingham Company therefore tried to gain an advantage for itself by leasing or controlling other companies in the area. From 1810 to 1821 and from 1853 onwards it controlled the Droitwich canal, through which passed a large coal trade upwards to Droitwich and salt trade downwards to the river, and in the fifties also promoted and financed the Droitwich Junction canal to link its own waterway to the salt-field. In 1825 it took over a lease of the Coombe Hill canal from the Severn below the Haw bridge to Coombe Hill near Cheltenham, in order to improve its Cheltenham trade, but in 1850 was forestalled in renewing this lease by the Staffordshire & Worcestershire Company, who had been quicker off the mark. The lease of the Lower Avon was therefore part of an accepted policy of control. The local incentive was the possibility that the Stratford-upon-Avon Canal Company, itself linked with the Upper Avon, and supplying coal down river as far as Evesham, would try and extend the market for its coal further down the river. The lease ensured that in practice the boundary between two spheres of influence lay at Evesham.

The canal company was now responsible for maintaining the Lower river, which was just as well, for in February 1835 E. W. Oldaker, himself a shareholder in the Stratford canal, was appointed receiver of the Perrott estates, including the Avon, to secure the interest on a total debt of £13,000. It seems to have done it efficiently. In December 1835, for instance, when it received a

letter from three carriers complaining of the state of the works on the river, it sent the surveyor at once to do what was needed.<sup>49</sup> Then in 1850 Perrott's solicitors wrote from Pershore to say that they had had an offer for the lease—this may have been true—and asking whether the canal company wished to renew. It did, and in May 1851 took the river for a further 21 years from Michaelmas at £850 p.a. 'subject to the Lessees keeping the Locks, Buildings, &c. in good repair'.<sup>50</sup> In 1850 also, owing to its failure to renew the lease of the Coombe Hill canal, the Worcester & Birmingham jointly with the Midland railway built a short siding from Avon side at Tewkesbury to the railway so that coal cargoes brought down the canal and the Severn could be unloaded there and sent by rail to Cheltenham in competition with that carried by Coombe Hill and from the Forest of Dean. The scheme does not appear to have worked, for the siding was taken up again in 1857.

When George May wrote his history of Evesham, published in 1845, he said that the 'convenient quays and wharfs near Evesham bridge also afford commodious landing and warehouse-room for goods of every description'. There was a public wharf and a piece of waste-ground used also for this purpose, two timber-yards and six private wharves, all except the first grouped round old Eve-



sham bridge with its eight arches. The town was a centre for a considerable coal trade into the countryside round about, though this trade had been lessened by the building of the Stratford & Moreton tramway from the canal basin at Stratford to Moreton in Marsh and Shipston.

During this time the Severn itself was not the river we now know. Until the Severn Commission was established in 1842 after years of argument between groups headed by two rival canal companies, and the promotion of many schemes, the river was a very unsatisfactory navigation. Without locks and undredged, the trows and other craft working on it had to depend upon flood water if they were to carry full loads, which otherwise had to be varied according to the depth. There were times when little traffic of any kind could pass. By the end of 1846 the Commission had built locks at Diglis near Worcester and at points up to Stourport, and by dredging had obtained a 6 ft channel from Diglis to Gloucester. This proved impossible to maintain, and in August 1858 a new lock was opened at Upper Lode, Tewkesbury. One of the reasons for siting it there was 'to pen up a greater depth of water . . . and by that means effect a great improvement in the Avon Navigation',<sup>51</sup> meaning the section between the Severn and Avon lock. Upwards from Tewkesbury the Severn was now an excellent navigation, from which the Worcester & Birmingham as lessees of the Lower Avon could get full benefit, but downstream to Gloucester it was still unsatisfactory till further improvements made in 1874 provided a steady minimum depth.

During the second canal lease and before 1868 the last male Perrott died, and the rent was then paid partly as an annuity to Mrs Perrott, and partly to the other owners of the navigation under Perrott's will. It was the end of an ownership that had lasted over a century.

## NOTES

### THE AVON NAVIGATION

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