

THE CANAL THAT NEVER WAS.

Back in the eighteenth century there were of course no railways and the roads were no more than tracks and in a very poor state. Travel and trade were difficult and dependant to a large extent on either coastal shipping and rivers or cumbersome wagons and packhorses.

The national situation as far as transport was concerned changed with the construction of the Bridgewater Canal in Manchester in 1761 and arguably started the industrial revolution. This canal proved to be a huge financial success and sparked plans for canals all over the country, known as the 'Canal Mania'. Many rivers previously difficult to navigate were improved with the construction of locks and in some instances a re-routing of the river along a shorter and more suitable course. This is what happened to the River Stort which became truly navigable from London via the River Lee to Bishop's Stortford in 1769.

Canals and navigable rivers were now seen as the transport of the future, railways would not be seen for more than half a century. Every inland town and city wanted to have access to a canal to transport its produce and wares to markets and to bring in raw materials and other necessities. But while Bishop's Stortford could trade with London, the situation to the north of that town was very different. Cambridge lacked any direct waterway route to the south and Saffron Walden had no access to a navigable waterway at all.

In 1778, on the initiative of the City of London the line of a canal was surveyed between the end of the navigation at Bishop's Stortford and Cambridge by an eminent surveyor and engineer of the day called Robert Whitworth. This canal would have been along the line of the railway which came many years later. There would have been a series of locks between Stansted and the vicinity of the Fullers End crossing where the canal would have entered a tunnel about three quarters of a mile long passing between the old Broom Farm and what is now Park Road, emerging on Old Mead Road.

At a meeting at Great Chesterford of the interested parties it was requested that the route of the canal be moved east at Saffron Walden to better serve that town. This re-routing would have taken the canal across the Audley End estate and brought it close to the almshouses in Abbey Lane. At about the same time another canal, again starting at Bishop's Stortford was surveyed by another eminent engineer of the day, John Rennie. This one would have followed the Whitworth one as far as Great Chesterford and then turned east to pass about five miles south of Cambridge to enter the Brandon river on the border of Norfolk. There was strong opposition to these canals by Lord Howard of Audley End and the Hon. Percy Wyndham of Shortgrove near Newport. Property owners rallied under Lord Howards leadership and a canal was never built.

In 1811 the scheme was revived and a new route surveyed between Bishop's Stortford and Cambridge again by John Rennie. This new canal, while largely following the same line as the 1778 one would have had a longer tunnel through Elsenham from 'near Elsenham Windmill to Old Mead Farm', a distance of one mile 340 yards. As before a series of locks would have brought the canal up from Stansted to Elsenham where the canal would have entered the tunnel, this would have been the highest point on the navigation. Canals need a considerable supply of water to the highest point and this would have been achieved by the construction of a series of reservoirs to the South of the High Street in Elsenham towards the sand pit. There would have been a short feeder canal taking the water from the reservoirs to the summit level.

This 1811 scheme, like the others before it failed to materialise and the mania to build canals died out, few canals were built after the early nineteenth century. Elsenham had to wait until the middle of the nineteenth century for the railway mania to bring a decent transport link between London and Cambridge.

How different Elsenham would be today if a canal had been built but of course it wasn't. To this day it takes two or three weeks to travel by inland waterway from Bishops Stortford to Cambridge, a distance of about 250 miles!

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