

## St Catherine's Lock to the Winchester wharves

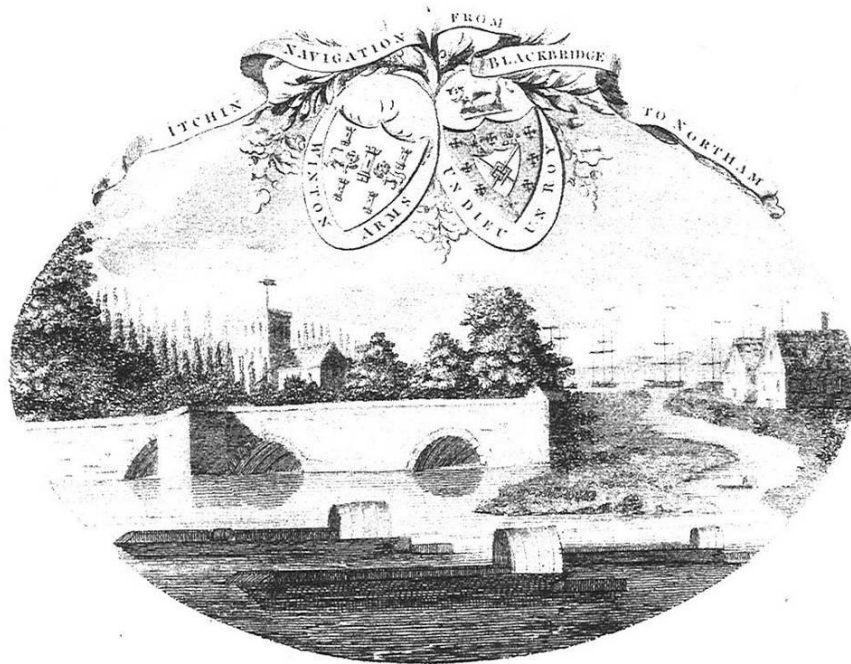
One of Winchester's favourite walks takes you south from the city's famous Cathedral and College, past the steep slopes of St Catherine's Hill to a rather weedy barrier across the Itchen Navigation.

It's a short walk, just under a mile in length, but it passes through an area of captivating natural beauty. This is also an area with a rich past, from pre-Roman times onwards.

This article explores some of that history, with the aim of making walking this Winchester stretch of the Itchen Navigation even more rewarding.

### The Itchen Navigation

For 150 years, the Itchen Navigation provided a vital water route for moving heavy cargoes between Winchester and the wharves of Northam in Southampton, 12 miles to the south.



1767 etching courtesy of Hampshire Record Office

Records suggest that its construction was fully completed by 1710, but the Navigation may already have been in use before that. In 1697, a Winchester rector noted in his diary that the first boat had arrived, and the following year, that a boat load of coal had been delivered to the wharf at Blackbridge, the northernmost point of the waterway.

Coal was the main cargo carried by the barges that plied the new waterway, and a major source of revenue: 480 bushels were delivered to Winchester College in the year 1792–1793 for cooking, while in 1817, 712 bushels were delivered to warm the 'Gentlemen of the College' – in other words, the students. Coal was also used to warm the Porter's Lodge and to supply the College's brew-house.

When a new railway linking Winchester to Southampton was opened in 1839, it spelled the beginning of the end for commercial barge traffic. Tonnage accounts for the period 1840 to 1848 spell out the drastic impact of railway competition – the weight of cargoes carried fell by 40%, from 1220 to 710 tonnes. The collapse was rapid, and the last goods barge made its way up the waterway to Winchester in 1869.

## St Catherine's Lock

St Catherine's Lock, the top lock of the Navigation, is one of its best preserved features. The wooden lock gates here once levelled out the last stretch of the Navigation for the final run to the wharves at Winchester.

There are no more barges now, and a sturdy brick weir replaces the lock's upper gates. The sound of water rushing out reverberates in the brick chamber below, which is still visible, together with the sill for the upper lock gates. The overgrown trees and ivy that long obscured it have now been cleared. You can also make out the remains of a mill which once stood on the lock's western side.



Image left: Colour engraving of St. Catherine's Lock by W. Westhall 1840

Image right: Photo of St. Catherine's Lock 2010 by Dennis Bright

If there aren't many people around, you may catch sight of wagtails feeding by the rushing waters below the barrier, or in the weedy surface upstream. Little grebes feed here too, diving and disappearing under water for an amazing length of time. If you're very lucky, there may even be the rare emerald flash of a kingfisher.

## St Catherine's Cottage

About 500 feet north of St Catherine's Lock, a small cottage once stood, as shown on an 1873 Ordnance Survey map. The cottage, also known as Halfway House, is just visible in the photo of the mill shown below.

One of the occupants of the cottage apparently sold the boys of Winchester College freshly baked cakes, which were ingeniously passed across the Navigation on a rope and pulley system.

The last tenant of the cottage, a Mr Marriner, died in 1956, and the cottage, already derelict, was sold in 1957 at the same time as the meadows to the west. It was demolished and no trace of it now remains.

## An ancient setting

The whole area around St Catherine's Lock is steeped in ancient history. Above the lock are the grassy slopes St Catherine's Hill, crowned by two ditches and banks – the remains of what was once an Iron Age hill fort.



Winchester from St. Catherine's Hill, colour engraving by G.S. Shepherd c.1820

The fort appears to have been abandoned in about 100BC, and is likely to have acted as a commercial centre and refuge in times of danger, rather than primarily a residential centre. Winchester's main Iron Age settlement, Oram's Arbour, lies on the steep slopes west of Winchester's town centre.

An excavation of St Catherine's Hill in the late 1920s suggests that the fort's original entrance lay to its north-east side. Excavations a decade later revealed a large area of an early farming field system just to the south of the Hill, and a small late Iron Age or Romano-British settlement.

In medieval times, St Catherine's Hill became a place of Christian worship. In the middle of the 12<sup>th</sup> century, a small chapel was built at its crown, where a clump of tall grey-trunked beech trees now stand. It survived into the late 1530s, when like so many buildings from the old religion it was destroyed under the sweeping reforms brought by Henry VIII.

Today, the earthworks are a popular walk after a steep climb up steps starting from near the Lock, and children enjoy treading their way round the ancient maze that lies inside them. The maze was probably first cut into the closely cropped turf sometime between 1647 and 1710, and then re-cut in the 1830s.

In the valley to the south of St Catherine's Hill, where the parishes of Chilcomb and Twyford meet, you'll find a less happy memorial – the so-called 'Death Pits' which mark the place of burial for local people who died in the outbreak of plague in Winchester in 1666.

Just up the Itchen Navigation from St Catherine's Hill is Tunbridge, the crossing point for present-day Garnier Road. The road follows the line of an ancient track or drove, probably used first by Iron Age people taking their precious cattle down from the safety of the hill fort to graze the meadows and drink water at a gravelly area on the River Itchen.



To the east, the track joined a Roman road running from Winchester to Portsmouth. The road later became known as Bull Drove, clearly pointing to its ancient usage.

### **The timber mill**

While the amount of cargo brought up the Navigation dropped sharply after the railway arrived, the cost of repairs to its locks and bridges remained substantial. In the year 1846-1847 alone, £654 was spent on labour and materials.

In 1861, repairs to St Catherine's Lock cost a total of £80. Out of this, £6 was paid to Henry Palmer for undertaking 29 days of carpentry. Palmer, who lived in one of the Wharf cottages in Winchester, was for many years in charge of repairs to the Navigation's locks and bridges, earning £14 and 9 shillings over one six-month period.

Perhaps to boost the Navigation's income, a timber mill was built on the western side of St Catherine's Lock. This meant reconstructing the entire west side of the lock chamber to make space for a mill wheel. You can see the traces today: a rounded brick recess and two stone-bearing blocks to support the mill wheel shaft.



Old waterwheel brickwork at St. Catherine's Lock 2010 by Dennis Bright

The mill was an interesting construction. The mill wheel was at right angles to the lock chamber, and was powered by water taken off the Navigation above the Lock, which went into a holding basin, and then was released to power the mill wheel. Presumably this design did not interfere with the actual working of the lock and would only use water when the lock wasn't in operation – although by 1863 only two barges were operating.

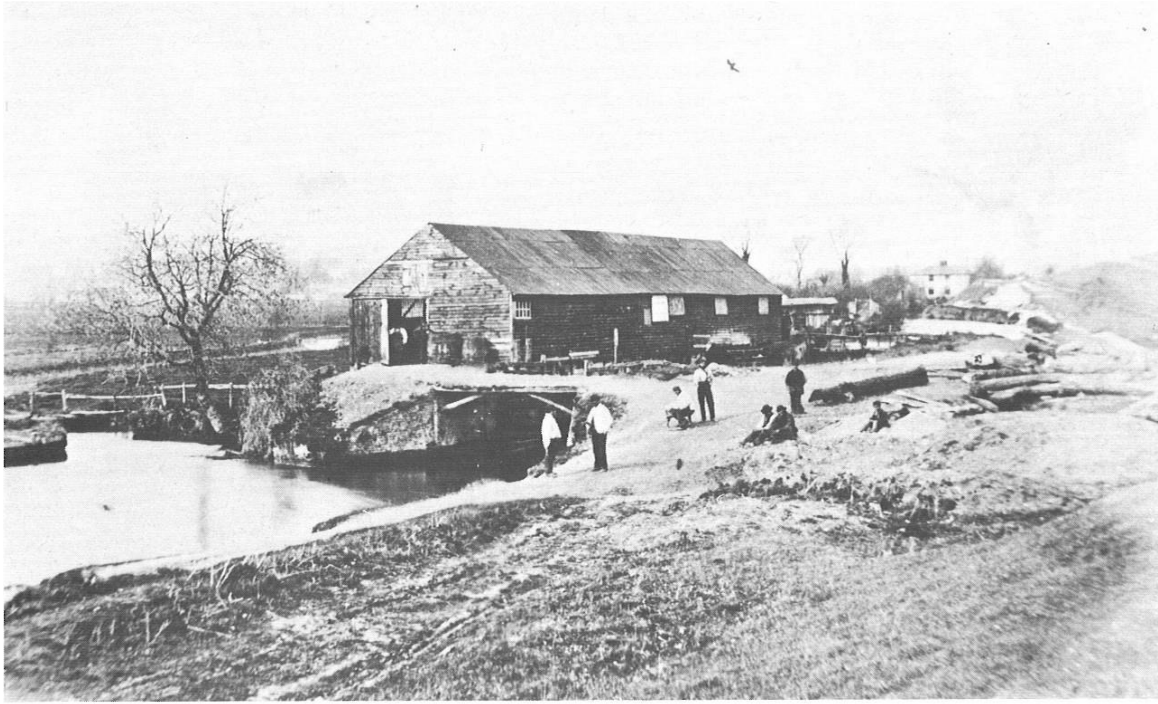


Photo of timber mill at St. Catherine's Lock c. 1870

Henry Wheeler is listed as the timber mill's owner in William White's 1859 Directory of Hampshire. He was born about 1826 in Winchester. From the population census records, completed every decade since the start of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, we know that at the age of 15 he was living in St Thomas' parish and worked as a turner. By the age of 35, he was married with three children, had become a master turner, and lived at the mill.

He paid £3 rent a year for surplus water from the Navigation to power his mill, as well as rent for fishing privileges, and provided timber (mostly oak and beech), worth some £162, for all the locks and bridges. Kelly's Directory for 1867 no longer lists a mill at St Catherine's Lock, but the Itchen Navigation Company accounts for 1867 note that Wheeler paid a year's rent of £24 for another timber mill at Allbrook, near Eastleigh.

As his business with the Navigation declined, Wheeler moved in 1870 to a house he had built in Allbrook. His business expanded with the Eastleigh mill, which produced '...all kinds of wood railway fastenings'. He no doubt saw a better future in supplying the railway's timber needs.

Wheeler died in 1882, but his business was carried on by his son, Henry Edmund Wheeler, with a Mr Coombs, and by the 1920s, was taken over by Travis and Arnold, the builders' merchants. This firm later became Travis Perkins – still doing business in Hampshire through its five branches.

### **Winchester College: sporting pursuits**

Winchester College owns both sides of the Navigation down to Tunbridge, and its students have made good use of the Navigation, and particularly St Catherine's Lock, known in their schoolboy jargon as the 'First Pot', for swimming.

They also enjoyed performing acrobatic feats on the mill. In Firth's *Winchester* we read that: 'In the old days, boys bathed after tea all along the canal...and adventurous spirits would run down the sloping roof of a water-mill to do a 'pot-houser', just clearing the mill wheel'.

The sporting traditions continue, and you can often see members of the Winchester Boat Club, first set up in 1867, skimming along in their eights, fours, and even single sculls along the stretch from Wharf Bridge down to St Catherine's Lock. The club's boat shed, originally on the west side of the Navigation, now stands on the eastern side near the site of the old Domum wharf.



Photo of Winchester College boathouse courtesy of Winchester College

The original Navigation at first posed some challenges for rowers, who could only use four-oared boats due to its narrowness. At Tunbridge, the bridge was so narrow that rowers had to pull their oars in as their boats rushed through. The bridge was eventually widened and by 1870, the College magazine, *The Wykehamist*, reports: 'Thanks to the new bridge, there was no necessity for shortening oars.'



Image left: photo of Tunbridge by W. Savage c.1875



Image right: photo of rower at Tunbridge 2008

When commercial traffic ended, the fabric of the Navigation deteriorated, and by 1877, St Catherine's Lock was in poor repair. *The Wykehamist* reported: 'Owing to the breaking of the 'Pot' gates the Club has not been able to race. A dam was put up to enable races to be rowed.' This dam prevented the usual scour of the moving water, so the course silted up and had to be dredged in 1887.

But in 1898, the situation improved, and *The Wykehamist* reported: 'The gates of First Pot are being strengthened by replacing the deal supports by oak ones. At the same time, the hatches are being cut right down to the bed of the river to draw away much of the mud.' Perhaps the dredging undertaken recently by the College is a continuing response to an old problem.

## **Rail and road transport**

The narrow strip of land between the Navigation and the foot of St Catherine's Hill has long been a transport corridor, with both rail and road links squeezed into it.

In the 1880s, the Didcot, Newbury and Southampton Railway was built just beyond the Navigation towpath. This line was itself later squeezed to accommodate the automobile – the construction of the Winchester Bypass, opened in 1938, required the line of the railway to be moved in places. The bottom of the steep slope of St Catherine's Hill was sliced away, cutting it off from the Navigation and the water meadows.

## **Blackbridge and the Winchester wharves**

The Navigation ends at Blackbridge, just south of Winchester's city walls. Originally made of wood, the bridge was rebuilt in stone by Bishop Morley in 1670. It provided an important crossing point over the River Itchen, linking Wharf Hill to College Street.

The construction of the Itchen Navigation created a thriving sub-community in Winchester. Immediately to the south of Blackbridge there was once a busy area of wharves where the cargoes that had travelled up the Navigation were unloaded.

There were two wharves on its eastern banks – the Wharf and Domum Wharf. On the west side was College Wharf. Many businesses were associated with these wharves. There were coal pens for the coal merchants – Misterys Moody, Meacher, Meader, Pyott, and Watt, and others. A malthouse for brewing, and stables, grew up on the north side of Wharf Hill.

A second bridge, Wharf Bridge, was built just below the Wharf. Above it were Wharf Farm and Wharf Dairy, whose buildings still exist. The farm buildings are shown on the 1871 Ordnance Survey map, and dairy delivery wagons were a familiar sight until the 1950s.

## **Into modern times**

Today, this last historic mile of the Itchen Navigation is being actively developed as an environmental and recreational resource for future generations to enjoy.

The intrusion of the Winchester Bypass, squeezed uncomfortably between St Catherine's Hill and the waterway, was removed with the construction of the M3 motorway to the east.

The slopes of St Catherine's Hill down to the Navigation have been restored and replanted, and the hill is now again connected to the town and can be easily accessed. Managed by the Hampshire and Isle of Wight Wildlife Trust, it is a haven for wildlife and walkers.

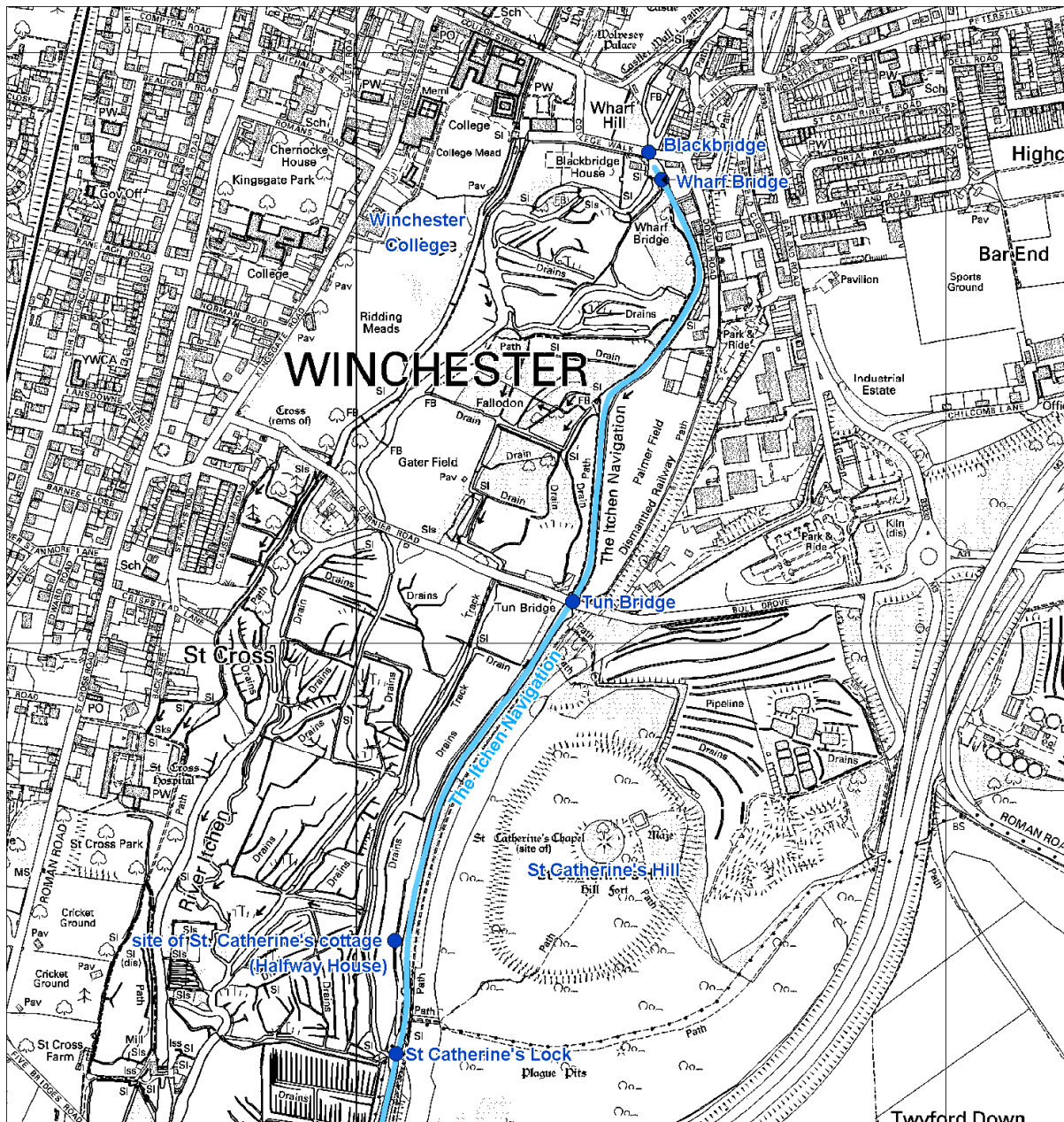
The Trust and its volunteers have now cleared St Catherine's Lock of encroaching trees and shrubs, and important wildlife monitoring projects, for example of butterflies, bats and the rare water vole, are underway.

The rowing course from the Boat House at Wharf Bridge down to St Catherine's Lock has been dredged by the College, and the silt removed, allowing the water to run strongly at its original depth.

These are all hopeful signs that this little part of Hampshire will continue to give local people and visitors enjoyment for many years to come.

*Terry Gould, Itchen Navigation Volunteer Heritage Researcher  
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## **Acknowledgements**

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