

The Itchen Navigation at work by Terry Gould

The Itchen Navigation canal that links Winchester to Southampton may be a peaceful wildlife habitat today, but it was once an important business. Proprietors, barge owners and bargemen all relied on it for their livelihood. Its commercial role finally ended in the 1850s, killed off by the arrival of the railways.

How were goods transported before the Navigation?

Although many goods were moved in earlier times by horse and cart, heavy goods were transported up the River Itchen from at least medieval times. Much of the stone used to build Winchester Cathedral, quarried on the Isle of Wight, probably arrived by this route. But the use of the river for freight was also a source of some conflict.

For example, in the 13th century disputes arose between the bishops who received income from the mills along the river, and the river users who claimed the mills stopped navigation. In 1617, a report by the Commissioner of Sewers describes how the river was being 'impeded to free passage'.

Clearly a new way of transporting goods inland was needed. The Itchen Navigation was built in the late 17th century under a 1665 Act of Parliament. It was funded by private investors who would **'make the river Navigable and Passable for Boats, barges and other vessels ... by removal of impediments that may hinder Navigation ... in Hawling of Boats with Horse or Men'** in exchange for a monopoly of the haulage on the new Navigation.

What was the business of the Navigation?

The Navigation made use of existing river and irrigation channels, together with new cuts and locks built specifically to bypass mills and reduce the distance the barges had to travel. This revolutionary means of transport provided a much easier and less contentious way of moving goods from the seaport of Southampton to Winchester.

The core business of the Itchen Navigation was the transport of bulk items. Coal, caulm (a kind of powdered anthracite coal), lime, timber, grain and occasionally hay were loaded on flat bottomed barges.

Where before a cart carried a couple of tonnes, each barge could carry 20 to 30 tonnes or more, a huge improvement in efficiency. As one of the 19th century Navigation owners, George Hollis, said: **'There were not enough wagons and horses in all Winchester to carry the same tonnage as carried on the canal'**.

Who owned the Navigation?

The early owners of the Navigation also owned the barges as part of their monopoly. This situation inevitably gave rise to some complaints. A 1767 Act of Parliament begins: **'The Proprietor doth not only demand and impose exorbitant Rates ... but frequently refuses to carry, and convey by Water, Coals and other such Goods ... as interfere with his own trade.'** For example, in 1771, the proprietors John Moody and William Meader were accused of bringing up a cargo from their ship that had arrived many days after another ship.

Perhaps the best example of a proprietor monopolising the Navigation trade is John D'Arcy, who took over ownership of the Navigation from Moody and Meader, and operated coasters carrying coal to Southampton. He was a barrister from Ireland, with interests in coal mines there.

There were complaints about D'Arcy not having enough barges in operation, the poor condition of the barges, and insufficient horses to pull the barges. These were serious enough to lead to a new Navigation act being passed in 1795. D'Arcy still did not make the required improvements, and a new owner, George Hollis, D'Arcy's agent, took over in 1800.

In 1802, a fourth Act finally put an end to the monopoly ownership of both the water way and its trade, and opened the Navigation to all barge owners who paid tolls.

Several Winchester coal merchants were then able to become barge owners. For example, the records of 1802-3 show that Edward Knapp, W. Earle, J. Paul, H.R. Hanley and Mary Anne Knapp owned a barge jointly with W.H. Gater of West End and T. Black of Southampton.

The number of barges on the Navigation at any one time varied. A draft of a lease in 1795, for example, mentions six barges '**now afloat on the Navigation, together with tarpawlings, handspikes, and 8 horses now used for drawing the barges**'. The 1803 Defence Acts register for Winchester lists five barges, not decked, and capable of carrying a total of 150 tonnes.

What were the profits and costs?

The wars with France, with danger to coastal shipping, saw trade increase on inland waterways. From 1796 to 1802, traffic on the Itchen Navigation was substantial. Some 18,000 tonnes of goods were carried, generating revenue of about £3,700 in the currency of the period.

The original Navigation act set the charges on the Navigation at one half of the cost of carriage by wagon. The tolls were later raised at least a couple of times. A substantial and valuable part of the Navigation's trade was coal, the main form of heating. To carry a chaldron (an old measure of 25.5 hundredweight) of coal up the Itchen Navigation from Northam to Winchester cost three shillings.

In Winchester, the coal merchants sold a lot of their coal to Winchester Cathedral, Winchester College and some other institutions. For example, in 1775, the charitable foundation, St John's almshouse, bought eight bushels of coal at 10 shillings and two pence per bushel from Edward Pyott, a coal merchant at Winchester Wharf.

The Navigation also generated income from the sale of water to power mills, such as the timber mill at St Catherine's lock, and from the use of the Navigation by Winchester College bathers.

How were cargoes brought up the Navigation?

Most of the goods came up from Southampton to Winchester, with barges typically returning to Southampton empty.

Cargo ships came into Southampton and moored in the river above Northam. Barges came alongside to receive the cargo, and then moved it up the river to Woodmill, the sea lock at the start of the journey up the Navigation. Occasionally there were long waits, and ships would have to unload at Northam Wharf and reload into barges, at an additional cost.

We also know about how the bargemen brought cargoes into Winchester. A barge was propelled by four men with long poles, and one steersman from the ship up to Woodmill. On the Navigation, the laden barges were towed upstream by a combination of horses pulling on a towrope, and men pushing with poles.

Richard Baigent's 1837 watercolour on the next page shows two men on the barge, one steering and one poling. Another man was on the towpath with two horses.



Water colour by Richard Baigent, 1837. Two men on a barge at Winchester and another man on the towpath with two horses. The church of St. Cross is in the background.

Who worked on the barges?

Information about the people who actually worked the barges – the bargees – is relatively scarce, but we do have some fascinating snippets.

Like the barge owners, most of the bargemen lived in Winchester, and the city's records give us some tantalising glimpses of their lives. For example, the Mayor of Winchester could exempt bargemen from being pressed into the navy, an ever-present danger during the Napoleonic Wars.

The list of bargemen exempted in 1793 show six crews, mostly of five men each. The barge owned by Edward Knapp and others, mentioned above, had Richard Welsh as master, and John Philpott, George Bright, John Hounsam, and Andrew Holdaway as crew.

Other evidence comes from place names. The Bargees' Cottages at 37–40 Wharf Hill in Winchester date from the early part of the 17th century.

The bargemen may have had a reputation of being a bit on the rough side, and it seems they were not above doing a little poaching. A Statute for the Itchen Navigation, entitled *Caution to Bargemen and Others* says that '**any person navigating or working on any Boat, Barge, or other Vessel on the Navigation, and carrying on board any fishing net, gun, Engine, or other instrument for taking fish or game shall be fined £5 for each offence**'.

We also know the name of the last bargeman to work on the Navigation. He was Henry Strepp, who died aged 87 in 1930. Census records show that he lived most of his life at several addresses in Water Lane, St John's Parish, Winchester.

Why did the Navigation's commercial role come to an end?

The Navigation carried cargoes beginning in the late 1600s until 1869 when only one barge was in operation to deliver the last cargo. Competition from a new revolution in transport, the railway, proved to be too much for the Navigation.

The railway could move bulk cargoes readily and more quickly. Francis Giles designed the Southampton docks in 1836, and was also charged with the design of the London and Southern railway. This meant, from the start, dock and railway were integrated and cargoes arriving at the port could be unloaded by steam powered cranes directly onto railway wagons. In June 1839, the railway arrived in Winchester. The Navigation and its trade began to decline until 1869. The age of the Itchen Navigation as a working thoroughfare was over.

Sources:

Edwin Course, *The Itchen Navigation*, 1983

Hampshire Record Office, various documents relating to the Itchen Navigation

Winchester Museums, *Winchester Cathedral and the College from the South East*, watercolour by Richard Baigent, 1837

This article was researched and written by Terry Gould for the Hampshire & Isle of Wight Wildlife Trust as part of the Itchen Navigation Heritage Trail Project; a lottery funded project which aims to conserve the Itchen Navigation for the future.