

## September 2014: 'The Basingstoke Canal'

On 29 September 2014 The Chertsey Society Monthly Meeting commenced in the Church Hall at 19.52 with fifty members and guests present. The Chairman Malcolm Loveday brought us up to date on matters arising since April 2014. It was noted that Mr Billy Reynolds, Town Crier visited the Black Cherry Fair, as his role as the Town Crier for the first time.

The main speaker was Mr Roger Carsdale, of the Basingstoke Canal Society.

Today the canal is 90% navigable though it was threatened with closure 100 years ago. The Duke of Bridgewater had commenced the canal after his father's death. The same man owned a coalmine, which wasn't profitable due to flooding.

The Basingstoke Canal was planned to reach London. William Jessup was the engineer/surveyor engaged to commence its building. One section was from West Byfleet to Basingstoke, which continued from Basingstoke to Odiham. They raised £86,000, formed a Committee then they ran out of money. Time passed by and a John Pinkerton was re-engaged as a Surveyor. The Earl of Tylney Estate was framed by the Canal near Basingstoke. There were 29 locks, many bridges and once more the canal funds were exhausted. The railway network was commenced in 1839, using the canal to transport the raw material required for the building of the track. At that time there were about 1500 inhabitants in Aldershot and 50,000 soldiers. In 1869 the canal project was bankrupt, with no immediate buyers coming forward. Eventually St Aubyn, a solicitor purchased the canal in 1871, though suspected of being a villain. Over the years there were many other purchasers of the canal, one being owners by the names of Jones and Dommes, another solicitor Frederick Dimsdale. He said he paid £12,000 for the canal. A lady became rather suspicious and took him to Court. Once more the canal was sold in 1883. The purpose of the canal was for recreational purposes. A Frederick Seager Hunt bought the company and it was renamed the Woking-Aldershot and Basingstoke canal in 1897-1908. The Nately Brickworks used the canal to transport their bricks. Once more the canal failed and Ernest Holly was involved but he was yet another crock. In 1904 an MP, Horatio Bottomley, financed the Canal and eventually he was sent to prison. One of the Lockkeepers had 14 children and the last usage of the canal was on 18 Feb. 1910. The Harmsworth family lived on a boat in Ash Vale. Alec Harmsworth purchased the canal in 1932. There were pill boxes built on the canals route and two cottages. The length of its route in 1947 was 32 miles. There has been some vandalism on the canal and the Army at Deepcut blew up some lock gates. The canal was breached which flooded the RAE airfield. Ash canal was also breached but the bank was repaired. There are still 118 lock gates to be built and bridges rebuilt.

Latterly Calshot Manor Bridge has been rebuilt near Deepcut. Then Watneys Brewery paid for a dredger to the Canal Company and coupled with a donation of a boat. Organised trips were undertaken on the canal enabling the raising of £¾ million for the company, therefore the canal was again reopened. Runnymede Council, along with Surrey Heath were reluctant to contribute to the scheme. Though later on Surrey Heath suddenly gave £90,000, a fine was paid against a company. Other Councils were more honourable.

The canals route does not now finish at Basingstoke, for when routing of the M3 was planned it took a large chunk of the canal away. Surveying of all the bridges is carried out by the company. With the resurfacing of the towpath near the airfield.

The canals plan is to eventually link Basingstoke and the Avon/Kennet canals together within the next two years. There is a Canal Centre sited at Mychett.

Following a considerable number of questions the speaker was thanked most sincerely by the Chairman and the meeting closed at 21.15 hours.

*Stephanie M. Hunt*