

# The River Trade of old Cambridgeshire

by

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**I**t is difficult, today, to think that Cambridge could ever have been a port. Yet a port it essentially was, until the railways of the 19th century, and the lorries and road tankers of the 20th, took over the carriage of goods that had once been water-borne.

"This river Cam is current through the heart of the Shire, with navigation to the sea, and is the life of trafficke to this Towne and Countie." These words formed part of an address which the Recorder of Cambridge read to King James I when, accompanied by his son, Prince Charles, he made a state visit to the town in 1615. They were true words indeed, for without the river few of the things on which

the very existence of Cambridgeshire people depended — food, fuel, building materials and a host of other goods — could have reached them, either at the time the Recorder was speaking, or in the past or for many years to come.

Without the river, for example, the stone quarried at Barnack, near Peterborough, would not easily have travelled to the sites of Ely, Crowland and the other great East Anglian monasteries; indeed, the monks themselves built many of the artificial channels between the main rivers, so as to make the transport of goods more easy. It was the river which brought to Cambridge the coal, the fenland

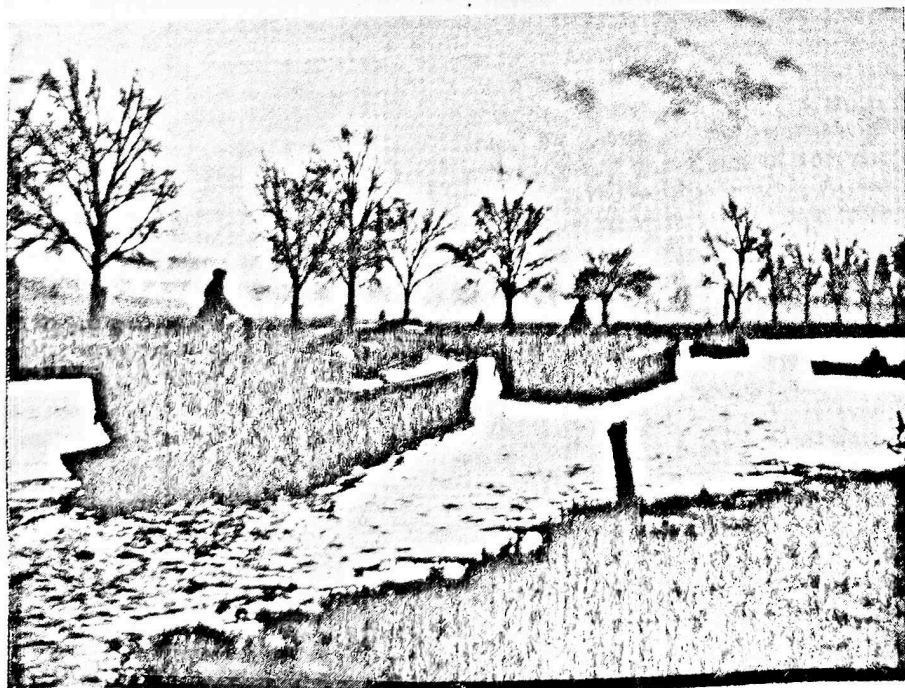
peat and sedge which were burned in the houses and colleges, a fact acknowledged by the old saying of the 17th century, that "in this town water kindleth fire".

The two great fairs of Midsummer and Stourbridge owed their very existence and their importance to the fact that most of the merchandise sold at them was carried by boats to the fair grounds. Even Reach Fair, granted by King John to the burgesses of Cambridge, was, until 1610, an important trade fair because ocean-going vessels could reach the village by means of the Lode which had been cut by the Romans as a link to the main river. And so firmly fixed in Cambridge minds was the importance of the river to trade, that when the railway was being planned, the first proposed site for the station was Laundress Green in Silver Street, near Newnham mill pool, and the second was Mid-summer Common, again close by the water.

The river systems of the Fens between Cambridge and the sea underwent many changes over the centuries, changes far too complicated to be dealt with here. It is enough to say that, until the mid 14th century, the Great Ouse entered the sea at Wisbech, with which port most of Cambridge's trade was carried on. Then, with the course of the river altered, King's Lynn became and remained, the entry and outlet port for goods to and from Cambridge and the riverside villages on the way. Once, tidal waters flowed as far as Waterbeach, making it possible for sea-going vessels to make their way to Cambridge, but in the 17th century a sluice was erected at Denver so, from then on, smaller craft — barges and lighters — were used for the carriage of freight to the town.

Because the river was so important to the life of Cambridge, it was essential that the waters of the Cam and Ouse between the town and the sea should be kept clear and fast-running, and that the locks regulating the varying levels of the rivers should be maintained in first-class repair. On many occasions, in the 17th and 18th centuries, the Mayor of Cambridge and the Vice-Chancellor of the University joined in petitioning Parliament to pass Acts for the cleansing of the river or for building new locks or restoring old ones, with the aim, as it was usually expressed, "of better preserving navigation between Cambridge and Lynn."

Any works of such nature cost



*A gang of steel lighters on their way, in the early 1930's, to collect gas water from the Cambridge Gas Works.*

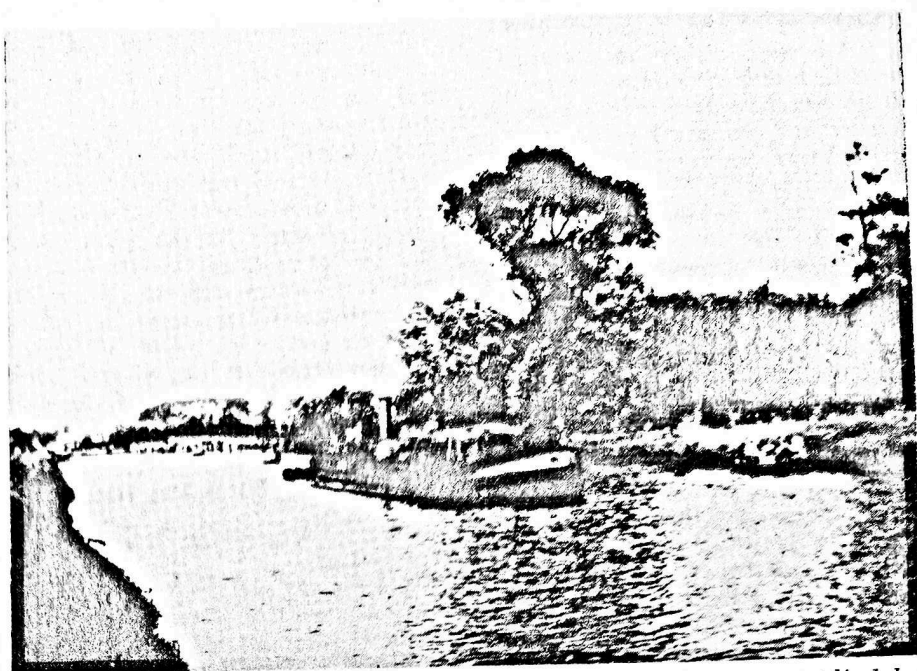
money. In 1702, a great deal of trouble was caused by silt and sand building up in the river between Newnham and Clayhithe. By an Act of Parliament of that year, a committee of officials, selected from both the town and the University, was set up. These officials were to act as Conservators of the river, a function their successors still perform, even though trading vessels no longer ply on it, for banks, weed clearance, locks and lock gates still have to be supervised.

The Conservators' immediate task, in 1702, was to see that the deposit of silt was cleared away; to pay for this, and for other works, they were empowered to levy tolls on all goods and passengers carried by boat. Thus, four shillings, for example, had to be paid on every tun of wine; 2 shillings on every 100 deal boards; 9d. on every chaldron (53 cwt) of coal; a shilling on every ton of timber, butter, cheese or salt fish; sixpence on every 1000 bricks or ton of clay or sand; a penny on every passenger.

### **Clayhithe toll board now in the Folk Museum**

Further Acts for regulating the tolls were passed in 1813, 1851 and 1884. The wooden toll board of 1851, which used to stand near Clayhithe bridge and is now in the Cambridge Folk Museum, shows not only the charges imposed in that year, but the wide range of goods still carried by river, although rail communications were by then established.

Hithes or wharves for the unloading of goods were to be found at all riverside villages; most of them have now disappeared, but a few remains of the old wooden stages can still be seen at Reach, Burwell, Horningsea and Swaffham. In Cambridge, in medieval times, there was a line of hithes between Quayside and Newnham Mills, but with the building of King's College most of them were demolished. But Quayside and Newnham long remained busy centres of the river trade, and many local men worked as bridge porters, unloading and delivering cargo. In winter their job was a precarious one, for if the river froze no boats could arrive or leave, so the porters were often forced to resort to begging. In normal times, in between the arrival of boats, they whiled away their time drinking, playing cards and even cock fighting in the alehouses, of which there were several on Quayside and in Silver Street, near Newnham mills.



*The steam cargo carrier Nancy which, from the 1890's to 1914 plied between Cambridge and King's Lynn.*

When sea-going vessels could reach Cambridge on the tides which ran far up the river, the boats used for trade were sail-rigged keels. But the craft we most associate with the Cam and Ouse were the single barges and the lighters which travelled in gangs of four or more. These lighters, flat-bottomed and built of oak, were provided with masts and small square sails for use when the wind was favourable; otherwise they were towed by horses. The most difficult part of the voyage from Cambridge to Lynn was from Denver onwards, where the waters are tidal. So the gangs of lighters were guided from Denver Sluice by pilots or helmsmen who slept in the pump room of the old sluice, or in the nearby Jennings Arms.

In non-tidal waters the horse took over, walking on the tow path where there was one, or in the river if there was not. Even where there were paths, though, they did not always run continuously on the same side of the river, so when a changeover had to be made, a boy urged the horse to swim across. Between Quayside and Newnham mills there was no towpath at all, so the horses walked on a raised causeway in the centre of the river. In shallow waters, and for changing from one side of the river to the other, the lightermen employed a barge spread or quant to propel their craft along.

To prevent cattle straying, farmers built low fences, called *jumps*, along the river banks. When one of these

was reached, the horse drew the lighters up to it and then stopped; the lighters moved on a little way to slacken the tow rope, and then the animal cleared the obstacle as in Constable's painting of *The Leaping Horse*. The fences were not supposed to be more than 3 feet high, and should any be found to exceed this maximum the lightermen simply, by means of a crowbar, knocked them down to the required height.

At toll-collecting points, in order to avoid delay, the money was usually wrapped up and thrown ashore. At Clayhithe, where the tow path changes sides, a man set out from the leading lighter in a small dinghy or cock boat, paid the tolls while the horses were crossing over the bridge, and then rejoined the last lighter as the gang moved on.

The lightermen were a rough, tough, hard-drinking set of men, extremely skilful in guiding their clumsy craft through the narrow fenland waterways. They lived on the lighters, sleeping and cooking their meals in the house lighter, and were the sworn enemies of landowners, whose game they often poached, and of undergraduates, delighting, for example, in deliberately fouling with their tow ropes the course of rowing eights. They kept a barge hook handy and did not hesitate to use it to attack anyone who tried to pilfer goods

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from the lighters; they were renowned in the riverside alehouses for the good stories they told and, strangely enough, they were very superstitious. They firmly believed in the many tales of haunted spots along the rivers, and would always keep their boats tied up on May Day when, it was said, the ghosts of those drowned in the fens always appeared.

To encourage their horses along, the lightermen used a peculiar chant of *woop-ho, woop-ha-weeeee* . . . , begun on a low note, then moving to a higher one and prolonged until the 'singer' was out of breath, and terminating in a mournful wail. In their dress, with their fur caps and their long-sleeved waistcoats of red or blue velvet with glass buttons, the old lightermen were easily distinguishable from other workers. By the mid 19th century, however, the coloured velvet had mostly given place to more sombre corduroy, and the fur caps to knitted ones with long red and green tassels.

The last century saw the coming of the steam tug to tow a gang of lighters, the steam cargo carriers and, finally, the steel lighters which could carry bulk liquids, chiefly the sticky gas water from the Cambridge gas works which

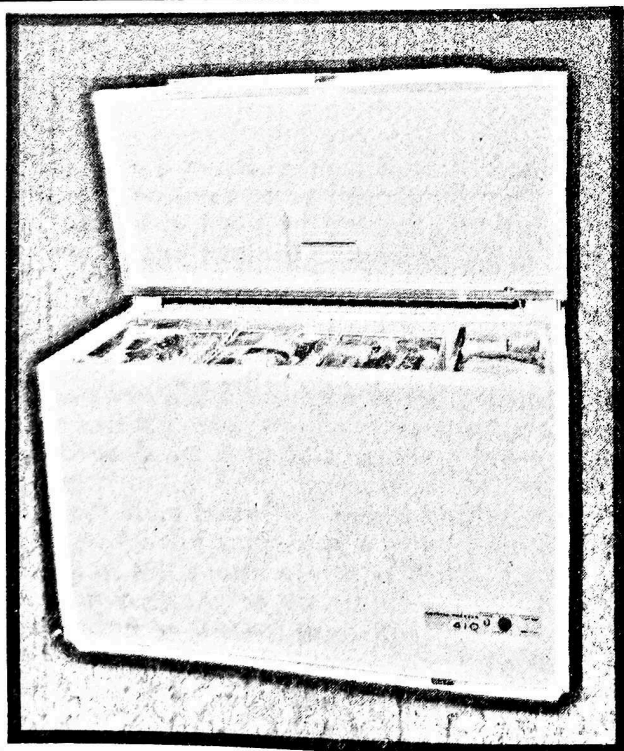
was used in the dye trade and for making fertilisers. The best known of the steam cargo carriers was the *Nancy*, which brought timber, wine and dry goods from Lynn and returned with vinegar from Cambridge and glue and parchment from Sawston. Greeted by all the riverside village children when she stopped to load and unload, for the skipper used to throw packets of sweets and locust beans to them, the *Nancy*, after sinking in a flood, was dragged to the railway line near Ely and was finally scrapped in 1933.

### ***The barges and lighters disappear***

The 1930's really saw the last of the barges and lighters, in their last days used mainly for the transport of sugar beet, gas water and bricks. With the improvements made to fen roads in the 1939 war, even the modern steel lighters were no longer needed, and today the Ouse River Board's gault lighters, and the oil tankers going to the great pumping stations are all that remain to remind us of the old river trade.

The "ghosts" of the last trading barges which, between 1896 and 1938, came to Cambridge where their living accommodation was examined by the local Sanitary Inspector, live on, as it were, in the pages of the final Inspections Register. This is now in the Folk Museum, and in it we read the names of these vessels: *Rose*, for example, *Mayflower*, *Pretoria*, *Lizzie*, *Charles*, *The Swan*, *Albion*, *Queen of the Cam*, *Eric* and *Enid*, the last two being the only ones recorded from 1929 to 1938.

At the height of the river trade, when it was possible to walk from one lighter to another all the way from Quayside in Cambridge to Newnham mills, the Cam and Ouse must have been lively rivers indeed, with their numerous craft, their busy hithes and the much-frequented taverns on their banks. Cambridge took some time in getting used to using rail instead of river for commercial purposes, and even as late as 1920 some coal was still coming to the town by water, and up to c. 1929 water-borne peat was still being delivered to Newnmarket Road, where Swann's brick-making firm found it excellent for the initial firing of their furnaces.



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