

CANAL SETTLEMENT IN FENNY STRATFORD

EDWARD LEGG

So much of Fenny Stratford's history in the nineteenth century can be linked with the railway that it is easy to overlook the earlier effects of the opening of the Grand Junction Canal. Yet within the town limits, that event quickly moulded the area around it, and created a completely new region of mixed settlement along the Simpson Road. Some mention has been made in a previous article of this development,¹ but it is now possible to enlarge on the information given therein, and also to deal with some aspects which were outside its scope.

The Grand Junction Canal was authorised by an Act of Parliament passed in 1795.² The route, as laid down in this area, is closely tied to the river Ouzel, and it will probably help to consider the terrain as the excavators first saw it, digging their way from Stoke Hammond, early in the year 1800.

The approach to Water Eaton was relatively easy, since the ground was almost level, but as they bypassed that village on the east, they were forced to raise an aqueduct to carry the canal over the Cottenham Brook, and thus enter the parish of Fenny Stratford.

From there to the point where it crosses Watling Street the canal continues for about a hundred yards as an aqueduct, and then cuts into the south-facing slope of a river valley in order to hold the level, and reduce the embanking to one side only. This, however, had the effect of splitting Manor farm in half.³ One hundred acres lay below the canal and the remainder above, together with the farmhouse. In order to overcome this difficulty a bridge was erected medially, to reconnect the two halves. This bridge remains to the present day.⁴ At Watling Street, a basin and wharf were built⁵ and the land was again made up on the south side. The canal was taken under the road, and to allow this to be done the road surface had to be raised about six feet above its former level. This in turn caused its diversion between Dropshort Farm and the Bull Hotel, and the road was realigned to the south of its old course in order to relieve the gradient.⁶ Even so the bridge was hump-backed like all the others over the canal in this locality and remained so until it was replaced by the present structure in 1926.

Continuing then along a shelf on the side of the river valley, the ground slowly flattens out and after approximately two hundred yards becomes so level that there is little or no embankment needed until after the canal crosses the Simpson Road. Here there is a hump-backed bridge and the road was raised to pass over the canal. From here the waterway follows the course of

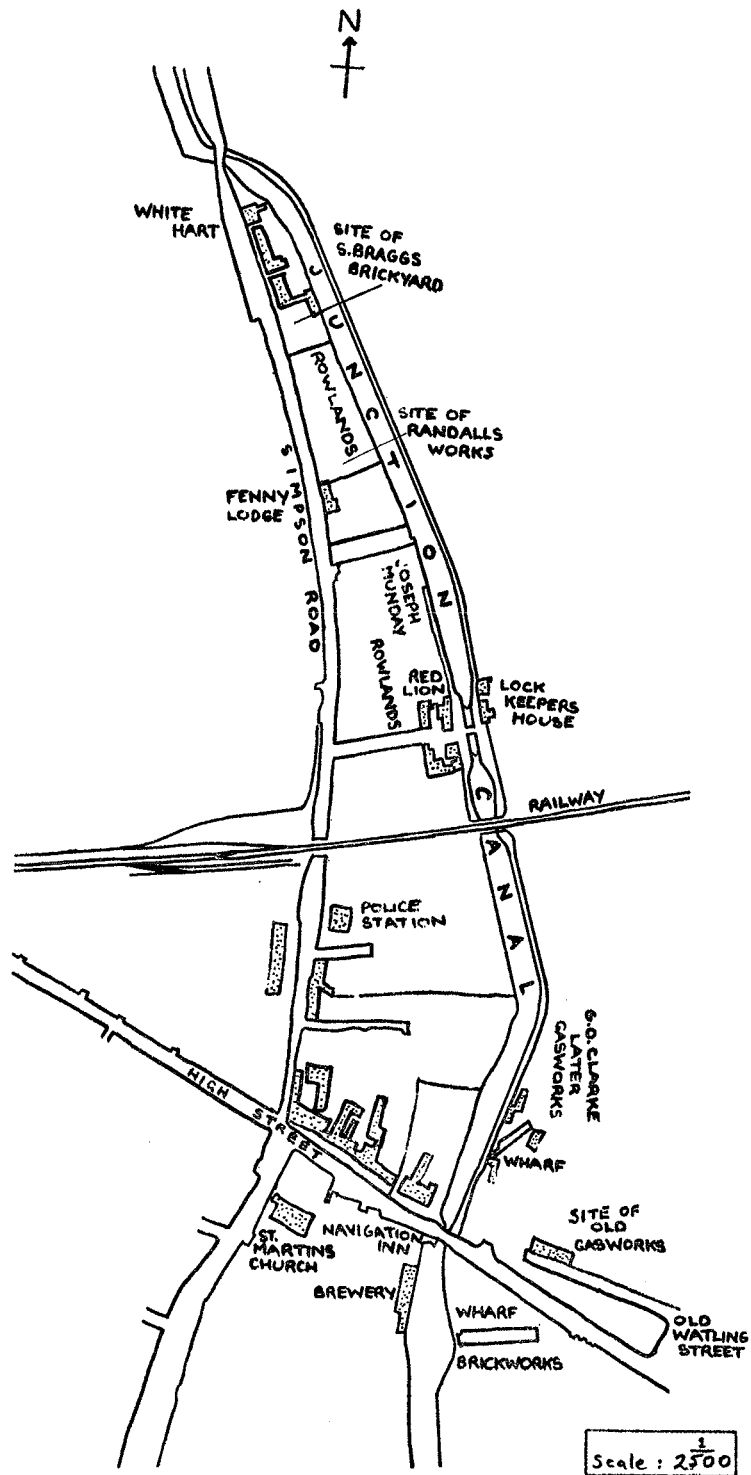


Fig. 1. Settlement of the Canal Era.

this road and as it crosses a small stream so the ground drops away and high embankments follow from here to Simpson.

This then was the situation at its opening.⁷ Apart from the crossing of Watling Street, there was no house, shop, or industry near it. Even the lock itself was not in existence, for no change in level had been planned between the locks at Soulbury and Cosgrove. Difficulties were very soon found in the construction of this section for, on the 8th June 1802, Mr. William Jessop, the Engineer, wrote in his report:—⁸

“It is now known that the principal cause of impediment was cutting through rocky ground between Fenny Stratford and Wolverton where no earth could be procured for lining the canal to make it capable of holding water, and that the practicable means of obtaining earth for the purpose was to fill it with water, leaky as it was, in order that the earth might be boated into it. The boating of earth is a very tedious procedure and the interference of the trade at the same time has made it more so than it would otherwise have been, and though the difference is in a great measure got over, it is not yet complete as the banks will not admit the water to be high enough for full loaded boats in a length of about two miles above Fenny Stratford. There are now to remedy this two temporary gates putting down to pen twelve inches of water in this part till the banks below are gradually raised and made watertight.”

Many temporary measures have a permanence that their originators never intended and the lock at Fenny Stratford was no exception. On the 8th October 1805 the Grand Junction Canal General Committee bowed to the inevitable as their minutes record:⁹

“Mr. Hammer having reported Mr. Townley’s Estimate for the removal of the lock at Fenny Stratford and it appearing from the Report of Mr. Provis and Mr. Bevan that the removal of the lock would be attended with much more considerable expense than is mentioned in that estimate and very injurious to the Canal. Ordered: That the said Lock shall continue.”

Presumably in the light of this report, the lock-keeper’s house was erected shortly afterwards, together with the engine house for the sluice immediately to the north. This lock was later to provide the focus for the Simpson Road development, but at that time business was concentrated on the wharf and its immediate vicinity. One change that took place immediately was the opening of the Navigation Inn at a house adjacent to the canal.¹⁰ This has now been replaced by the Bridge Hotel on the same site. On the opposite side of the road the new town wharf was being run by Philip Constable and Co.¹¹ No buildings or storage space were available on this site, nor were any erected, probably because all the ground had been made up and foundations would have been difficult. Constable, however, had also acquired property on the other side of the canal, which has now become a glucose factory, and here he erected a large warehouse immediately alongside the canal.¹² This originally had an archway in the centre to allow the use of a crane,¹³ and although this has been bricked up for over eighty years the break in the wall can be seen even to the present day. Philip Constable died in 1824¹⁴ leaving property at Fenny Stratford and Blisworth, and shares in the Grand Junction Canal. He

never resided in the town and following his death his executors sold the property piecemeal. A close in Aylesbury Street was split up into building plots;¹⁵ the warehouse and adjacent buildings were linked to the Bull Hotel and became first a brewery from 1853¹⁶ to 1910¹⁷, and then the glucose factory.

The wharf was acquired by Gregory Odell Clarke who was already building up quite a considerable business in competition with Constable and was eventually to exploit the canal to its fullest limits. G. O. Clarke had been born in Leighton Buzzard in 1788.¹⁸ He came to Fenny Stratford in 1820 when he married Charlotte Ivens.¹⁹ The couple moved into Fenny Lodge²⁰ and he set up business as a coal merchant. At first the coal must have been transferred from the canal via the town wharf, but Clarke soon purchased the land to the east of the canal on the Simpson side and constructed his own wharf.²¹ This then formed the basis for a rapid expansion into a large variety of trades. By 1827²² at the latest he was supplying lime and bricks, and from the considerable number of baptisms of brickmakers' children in the parish register it would appear that most of these bricks were being made on this site, using the clay which lay between the canal and the river. Slates, too, were being imported and although no earlier mention is found than the single "countess" slate supplied to the National School in August 1830 for threepence,²³ it would appear from the houses built in Aylesbury Street that tile had been completely ousted by 1825. In 1830 Clarke had also taken up malting and the sale of corn, etc.,²⁴ whilst in the same year he supplied an iron fence for the churchyard extension.²⁵

During the next decade the old clay pit was worked out,²⁶ and Clarke rented the field at the rear of the town wharf from Philip Pauncefort Duncombe, the Lord of the Manor.²⁷ Here he erected new kilns and this, together with another pit which he had established at Simpson, was used by him and his son William Edward Clarke until the end of the last century.²⁸

Gregory Odell Clarke's biggest venture came in June 1857 when he, with Robert Holdom, the owner of the brewery and others, set up the Fenny Stratford Gas Light and Coke Company to supply the town with gas.²⁹ The site of this works was close to the river with Clarke's yard between it and the canal,³⁰ and the two worked in partnership for the rest of the century. In 1910 the Gas Company took over the land which had belonged to Clarke and built a new works there.³¹ The retort house was erected at the canal side and until its closure in 1957 most of the coal was taken straight from the barges, across the towing path and through two large doors into the retorts.

Immediately to the north of the former gas works is the embankment and bridge of the Bedford branch line. When it was constructed, it passed through a grass field belonging to William Linnell on the West side of the canal, and another belonging to Thomas Powell on the east side.³² Consequently, apart from narrowing the southern approach to the lock, its immediate effects were minimal.

Meanwhile, opposite the lock keeper's house, the two landowners there had started to exploit the business possibilities. William Linnell had erected a house and shop³³, and William Poole had constructed a house on the other side of the lane leading to the locks. Of the two, the latter was the more

interesting, for after passing through several hands, the tenancy was taken by Edward Hollier, a coal merchant, about 1851,³⁴ and within two years he had converted it into a grocer's shop, bakery and beer house.³⁵ This became known as the Red Lion about 1869³⁶ and was rebuilt in 1901.³⁷ In 1864 another public house was built in the area. This was the White Hart adjacent to the Simpson bridge.³⁸ Until then Simpson Road had remained comparatively empty and, apart from Fenny Lodge, there were only a few barns and a couple of houses on Poole's land. All this changed: in the 1860s, Samuel Bragg, the owner of the White Hart, built six houses adjoining the inn, and converted much of the remaining land into a brickyard.³⁹ By this time William Poole had sold his close, which stretched from Fenny Lodge to the lane leading to the locks, to Thomas Chew who sold it in 1863⁴⁰ by auction to George Morrey. On the 2nd May 1867 this was again put up for sale by auction. This close had a long canal frontage north of the Red Lion and had been used by Edward Bristow when he had been in business as a general merchant in the eighteen thirties. This was then, together with the house next to the Fenny Lodge, occupied by James Baisley, a hay and corn dealer. Apart from this there were only three other houses on the site, occupied respectively by David Sear, Edward Inns and a shoemaker, Thomas Lockwood.⁴¹ Two of these cottages were bought by Joseph Hadley, a railway contractor from Linslade, who seems to have built four cottages adjoining these shortly afterwards; the remainder was purchased by John Munday, who established a timber yard on the wharf, complete with sawpit, as well as using it to receive and store other materials required in his building business.⁴² He, too, built four houses on the Simpson Road. At the same time, but independently, the other end of the Simpson Road was completely built over. The police station was opened in 1857,⁴³ and the five houses nearer the crossroads probably date from this period. Mr. Benford had the houses built in between, and opened the butcher's shop in 1869⁴⁴ whilst the terrace opposite, built by a Friendly Society, dates from the same time. The 1870s saw the arrival of the Randall Brothers' foundry. This moved from Denmark Street to the north side of Fenny Lodge.⁴⁵ It stayed there only a few years before moving to the corner of Cambridge Street about 1880.⁴⁶ This decade also saw the advent of the Rowland Brothers, who started their saw mills in 1874 on the west side of the Simpson Road, and gradually expanded into the canal settlement.⁴⁷ In the late nineteenth century they acquired part of the close above the Red Lion and shortly afterwards they purchased Samuel Bragg's cottages and land. Here on the site of his old brickworks, they erected in the 1880s, six more cottages.⁴⁸ Finally they moved their offices over the road and acquired the land where Randall's had been for the purpose of standing timber for seasoning.

In many ways this was the end of an era. Few changes have taken place since in that area and none of these has been influenced by the canal. Consequently, it remains, despite a few demolitions, an epitome of urban development in the latter years of the canal era.

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H. Hudson, Mr. A. H. Faulkner, The Rev. K. H. Wright, and also acknowledge the great help I received from the late Warren R. Dawson.

- ¹ *Records of Bucks.* Vol. XVII, 74 and 76.
- ² 35 Geo III c.8, c.43, c.85. 36 Geo III c.25.
- ³ The land in this section was purchased from the Trustees of the Duncombe estate on the 16th December, 1803. Five pieces of land totalling 5a. 0 r. 11 p. were bought for £470 6s. 2d. See Bucks County Record Office D/Du/3/72.
- ⁴ This is known locally as Hammond's bridge after Thomas Hammond who was tenant of Manor farm for most of the nineteenth century.
- ⁵ Enclosure Map 1813.
- ⁶ *The Beauties of England and Wales*, Britton & Brayley, 1801, see also D/Du/2/99.
- ⁷ 31 May 1800.
- ⁸ Minutes of Grand Junction Canal Company General Committee per Alan H. Faulkner.
- ⁹ Minutes as above.
- ¹⁰ This is first mentioned in the Rules of the Fenny Stratford Association for the Prosecution of Robbers. See also the Victualler's register.
- ¹¹ Enclosure Map 1813.
- ¹² Enclosure Map 1813.
- ¹³ 1st Edition 6" O.S., sheet 15.
- ¹⁴ Phillip Constable's will was proved at the P.C.C. on the 4th October, 1824.
- ¹⁵ Title deeds.
- ¹⁶ *Musson and Craven's directory* 1853.
- ¹⁷ *Fenny Stratford Independent*, 2 July, 1910.
- ¹⁸ Census Returns 1851. H.O./107/1723/18.
- ¹⁹ Index to Marriage Licences at B.R.O.
- ²⁰ Information supplied by the late Warren R. Dawson F.S.A.; see also Dawson Mss. in the Society's archives.
- ²¹ Dawson Mss. Pinfold 91.
- ²² Parish documents at St. Martin's church B4/18.
- ²³ Parish documents at St. Martin's Church B4/30.
- ²⁴ *Pigots Commercial Directory*, 1830.
- ²⁵ Parish documents at St. Martin's Church A1/22.
- ²⁶ Deposited plan of Bletchley-Bedford Railway 30 Nov. 1844.
- ²⁷ Duncombe deeds B.R.G. D/Du/6/24.
- ²⁸ *Post Office and Kelly's Directories* various editions.
- ²⁹ *Bletchley Gazette*, No. 1223.
- ³⁰ 1st Edition 6 O.S., sheet 15.
- ³¹ *North Bucks. Independent*, 9 Nov. 1910.
- ³² Deposited plan of Bletchley-Bedford Railway 30 Nov. 1844.
- ³³ *ibid.*
- ³⁴ Census returns 1851 H.O./107/1723/40.
- ³⁵ *Mussen and Craven's Directory* 1853.
- ³⁶ *P.O. Directory*, 4th Edition, 1869.
- ³⁷ *North Bucks. Times* 6 Oct. 1900. See also date on drainpipe.
- ³⁸ *P.O. Directory*, 3rd Ed. 1864.
- ³⁹ *Leighton Buzzard Observer*, Oct. 1863.
- ⁴⁰ *Leighton Buzzard Observer*, 23 July, 1863.
- ⁴¹ Duncombe deeds D/Du/3/91-97.
- ⁴² *P.O. Directory 1877. Kelly's directory 1887.*
- ⁴³ The police station has been enlarged on several occasions, but the original building remains as a nucleus.
- ⁴⁴ *P.O. Directory*, 4th Ed. 1869.
- ⁴⁵ *P.O. Directory*, 5th Ed. 1877. See also 1st Edition 6" O.S. sheet 15.
- ⁴⁶ *Kelly's Directory*, 1883.
- ⁴⁷ Compare the three editions of the 25" O.S. map.
- ⁴⁸ These houses shown on the 1898 O.S. map are slightly larger than Samuel Bragg's houses.