

Another splendid chapter in the history of the Stour's ancient navigation

We love our River Stour, winding gently through its beautiful valley, varying a little in level with the seasons, but not much. It was not always so. The river's flow was regulated three centuries ago to meet a rising demand for trade.

By the early 20th century, commercial traffic was coming to an end and the Stour's locks and sluice gates steadily deteriorated. Then, in 1968, the River Stour Trust was formed to keep the navigation of the river open to the public, and it has been responsible for much restoration. For some years the trust has been raising funds to replace the lock at Stratford St Mary, a major undertaking. It will be ceremonially opened this May as part of the trust's half century celebrations.

The Stour was the first English river to be made navigable. In the late 17th century the rapidly growing population of London presented a ready market for East Anglian goods. The problem was transport. A cartload of grain, bricks, butter, hay or malt could not be moved far on poor, uneven roads. A group of landowners and businessmen saw the River Stour as a solution. The trouble was, it could be

dangerously fast-flowing in rainy periods, yet shrink to a shallow trickle in summer drought. The answer was to regulate the flow with locks and sluice gates. An Act of Parliament was needed to permit this. In 1705 the Stour Navigation Act was passed, which allowed for these to be built along the river's 25 miles from Sudbury to the estuary. The Act appointed Commissioners of the Navigation to settle any disputes among users and landowners. In due course Golding Constable, John Constable's father, became one such.

The cost of the work was £4,800 (more than £1m in today's money), and it took some four years to complete. The investment paid off. When it was finished, more than 20 tons of cargo at a time could be carried by two linked barges, or lighters, all the way to the estuary. They were hauled by just one horse and a crew of two, typically a man and a boy. They would stop to take on cargo at mills and landing stages along the way. The load was then transferred to sailing barges at Manningtree and Mistley, and swiftly transported to London. Those craft would not come back empty. There was money to be made by transporting coal, or helping London get rid of stable straw, and 'night soil'. This could then be sold to farmers for spreading on the



White Horse on the Stour: Constable



Filling up: the restored lock at Stratford St Mary

fields. (Probably best not to contemplate the lack of hygiene in transporting grain and human or horse waste in the same vessel.)

The journey from Sudbury to Manningtree took about two days, and not just because of the 13 locks that had to be negotiated. Unfortunately a few landowners refused to allow a towpath on their land, so sometimes it was on one side of the river, and then the

other. If there was a nearby bridge, the horse could use that. Otherwise it was trained to jump onto the lighter and was floated across. One of John Constable's paintings, *The White Horse* (below, opposite), shows exactly that.

For more than a hundred years the lucrative trade continued, navigable rivers being the trunk roads of their day. It was the coming of the quicker, more efficient railways that put paid to the Stour as a commercial highway. Track reached Sudbury in 1849, leading to a gradual decline in river traffic, although lighters did still make the journey to and from the town up until the first

For information about the trust, its boat trips or its celebrations see:

www.riverstourtrust.org

To volunteer as a skipper or crew on one of the trust's electric boats contact:

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world war, and to Dedham mill until 1930.

The re-opening of the Stratford St Mary lock on 12 May completes a long period of improvement including the restoration of four of the river's original locks. However, despite work on Dedham lock some 28 years ago, that is not now operable, so the aim of making the river navigable from Sudbury to the sea is still to be achieved. But in the summer months the River Stour Trust runs boat trips between Dedham and Flatford. The electrically-powered boat *Stour Trusty II*, skippered by its own specially trained members (see box, above), departs from beside the Boathouse Restaurant (Dedham had its own boatyard once). With its quiet propulsion, this is a rare treat - a peaceful, magical enjoyment of the river, wildlife, flowers and beautiful countryside. If you have visitors, it's a truly memorable thing to do, for both children and adults.

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