THORPE HAMLET HISTORY GROUP

Article 14 : CLARENCE HARBOUR
By Robin Bowling

The first canal in Norwich was the one built by the Normans from the River Wensum to the Cathedral where Pull's Ferry is now. It was built to get the stone from Caen in France close to the building site. The stone was shipped in vessels called 'knorres', the cargo boats of the time. They were very like Viking longships but shorter and fatter, shallow draught so were no problem in the Rivers Yare and Wensum at that time.

Eight hundred years later and things were very different. Ships were bigger, harbour dues had increased, the rivers had silted up. The Norwich merchants were paying through the nose for their cargoes. At Great Yarmouth ships' cargoes were transhipped into wherries for shipment to the Norwich quays or heavy towage fees. High Spring tides were the only tides when shipment was possible, A solution had to be found.

After long and protracted negotiations a Bill was put through Parliament to build a harbour and a river passage from Lowestoft to Norwich. It would also allow passage to Beccles. The Bill was passed in 1827 and the money was raised by selling shares. I believe the Duke of Clarence, later to become King William IV, was an investor. A steam dredger was built at Ipswich in 1828 to dredge the river and dig out the New Cut. A sea lock (Mutford Lock) was built and a cut or canal was built from St. Olave's to Reedham to allow passage from Lowestoft to Norwich.

As soon as the Lowestoft end was built ships started loading for Beccles, the first cargo going up in a Humber 'Billy Boy'. When the cut to Reedham was finished the first shipments could begin to Norwich. The first shipment to Norwich was the same 'Billy Boy' that went to Beccles. The tug that was to tow it to Norwich was delayed in Great Yarmouth as the port authorities would not raise the bridge to let the tug through to meet the ship at Reedham. The tugmaster was determined to honour the tow agreement so he sawed off the tug's funnel and steamed through the bridge to meet the tug at Reedham. Meanwhile a smaller tug had been hired to tow the ship to Reedham. When the vessels rendezvoused and the master of the smaller tug was reluctant to relinquish the tow an altercation took place. One man fell in the river and was drowned.

The navigation survived the building of the railway and a second new cut at Thorpe Green was build to avoid two swing bridges. The cut created Thorpe Island. Navigation continued to Beccles with grain shipments until the end of the 1950s. The navigation across Breydon Water was improved with another Bill through Parliament. Breydon Water was deepened to 10 feet with the addition of Turn Tide jetty at the Norwich end of Breydon plus a training wall known as the 'Dicky Works'. Norwich remained a port with timber, building materials, roof slates and tiles, grain, cattle feed, invert sugar and mustard seed coming in and barley, scrap metal and fortified wines exported. The swing

and lift bridges and Mutford Lock were kept busy with vessels from Swannels Malting in Oulton Broad.

The first cargo ship to Norwich was the ‘Luna’ under Captain Moon and the last in 1986 was the Dutch coaster ‘Buccaneer’ under Captain Voss. The dredger was later owned by Great Eastern Railway and was named ‘Excavator or Dredger No. 1’, but was lovingly remembered by the crew as ‘The Thing’. As she was constructed mainly of teak she remained in service until 1916 when she succumbed to a German shell.