

Waterways and canal-building in Medieval England
Edited by John Blair, O.U.P., 2007.

This is a collection of twelve essays resulting from a colloquium held at Oxford in 1999. The multidisciplinary gathering called by the editor, John Blair, sought to question the assumption that so far as England was concerned, the middle ages were a period of limited river transport, and that instances of the improvement of rivers for navigation were extremely rare. The individual contributions to this collection are intended to provide evidence that this was not the case, at least until the middle of the thirteenth century when improvements in road transport may have impacted on the volume of goods transported by river. A wide range of sources and disciplines are drawn on to this end.

Fiona Edwards uses place-name evidence, along with the location of coin hoards, and pottery remains to explore the movement of goods and people across the Irish Sea and along the river systems of the north west, and from thence to eastern England. Similarly, Della Hooke uses charter evidence and place-names to identify the prevalence of features such as fish weirs and mills in the Anglo Saxon period, and then attempts to assess the extent to which these may have been impediments to the passage of river craft. Ann Cole also draws on place-names to locate settlements associated with river transportation, making special reference to *ea-tuns* which she suggests may have been places with particular responsibility for maintaining river navigation.

Mark Gardiner draws our attention to the often overlooked but locally and cumulatively significant smaller ports and landing places. He concludes that the total volume of goods carried in smaller craft may well have exceeded that freighted on larger vessels. Much of his material however relates to the coastal movement of goods rather than to river transport, and to the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, which while of interest in itself, does little to advance the general thesis of this book. John Langdon's chapter is based on the purveyor's accounts from 1294 to 1348. He uses this data to provide a detailed breakdown of the types of vessels employed, and their likely size and loading, with a view to calculating the efficiency of inland water transport.

This book is split into two parts. Part one described above, is intended to address issues of water transport in a general sense in relation to economic development; part two concentrates on the physical evidence for artificial watercourses.

The second section opens with a comprehensive primer in fluvial geomorphology by Ed Rhodes who suggests how techniques such as palynology and radiocarbon dating of fluvial sediments could be used to further research. James Bond uses both documentary and physical evidence to build a convincing case for the extent of medieval river navigation. This is a particularly helpful chapter as he provides many instances of the construction of artificial waterways, often accompanied by photographs. He concludes with a useful twelve point list of areas for further questions and research. Three succeeding chapters deal with the Somerset wetlands. This area was not only well served with waterways, but fortunately for the historian also has a well documented history, since for the most part they lay within the estates of Glastonbury Abbey and the bishopric of Wells. Stephen Rippon makes the important point that although some artificially constructed watercourses in this area could serve a variety of functions, this was not necessarily always so. The volume concludes with a re-examination of evidence relating to the navigability or otherwise of the river Itchen in Hampshire, and with a detailed consideration of the documentary and physical evidence for the navigability of the Thames above Oxford, which formed the original inspiration for the essays collected here.

The range of chapters is therefore diverse and reflects the book's origins. The drawback of this diversity is that whilst all of the contributions are interesting and worthwhile in themselves, they cannot all be said to address the argument which the editor sets out in the introduction. The reader who approaches this book seeking an answer to the question of the extent to which river transport was a significant factor in the English economy between 950 and 1250 is likely to be disappointed. However, the wealth of information contained here along with the excellent supporting illustrations more than compensates for this, and readers with a wider interest should not be misled by the book's title. Not only does the extent of the chapters' focus extend beyond purely river transport to coastal transport as described above, it also encompasses canal building in Wales, and even in the Mediterranean basin and Europe. Nor is it limited only to the medieval period, with three separate sections dealing with Roman canal building. It is a shame however that these have been included at the expense of a more focussed concentration on the central question which the book seeks to address. Nevertheless, as Blair acknowledges, this collection is intended as a starting point rather than a summing up of what is known on the subject, and as such it will be of value to those with an interest in inland water transport in this period.

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