

Cotswold Canals Restoration

Phase 1b. Saul Junction to The Ocean, Stonehouse

Project S14

Tape Recorded Reminiscences of Rev Malcolm Donald Relating to His Campaign to Prevent Closure of the Canal (1954).

by Penny Fernando April 2007 Issue 1

In 1953-54 the Rev. Malcolm Donald, almost by accident, organised the Stroudwater Restoration Committee to oppose a Bill that was being presented to Parliament which would allow the Stroudwater Canal to be abandoned. The fight to conserve the canal divided Stroud, although the Committee does not seem to have had great support from the man in the street.

The Bill was passed and the Canal was abandoned by Act of Parliament in 1954. However the Stroud case made the national press, which brought the plight of canals to public notice and raised popular support for canals to be conserved for recreational uses.

In 1979 Rev. Donald made more than three hours of tape recordings describing the saga and the tapes were subsequently deposited in Gloucestershire Archives . These notes describing the key events back in the 1950s were made in 2007 after listening to all the tapes.

REMINISCENCES of the Revd. Malcolm Donald, Vicar of Lower Cam regarding the group which was set up to oppose the extinction of navigation rights on the Stroudwater Canal in 1953-54.

Recorded in 1979. 4 sides (2x C90 tapes). Very rambling.

Local History interest, but no Industrial Archaeology or Heritage relevance.

Transcript of notes made by Penny Fernando for GSIA 20/12/06

Summary:

In 1953/4 the Revd. Malcolm Donald, almost by accident, organised the Stroudwater Restoration Committee to oppose a Bill that was being presented to Parliament which would allow the Stroudwater Canal to be abandoned. The fight to conserve the canal divided Stroud, although the Committee does not seem to have had great support from the man in the street.

The two local newspapers, "The Stroud News" and "The Stroud Journal" took opposing sides. Stroud's recently elected Conservative MP, Bobby Perkins, supported the Bill. Stroud's former MP Ben Parkin (Labour), who lived in Stonehouse and now represented Paddington North, led the opposition to the Bill in the House of Commons, but then withdrew his opposition at the 3rd reading on the basis of what subsequently proved to be incorrect information.

The Bill was passed and the Canal was abandoned by Act of Parliament in 1954. However the Stroud case made the national press, which brought the plight of canals to public notice and raised popular support for canals to be conserved for recreational uses.

The events about which Revd. Donald is reminiscing are described in a small pamphlet "**The End of the Stroudwater Navigation**" by **Geoffrey Sanders**, published by the Stroud News and Journal, **reprinted from the Stroud News and Journal of January 7th and 14th 1971.**

TAPE 1 side 1

Counter

0	<p>Autumn 1953 “sometime in October”: The Revd. Malcolm Donald (MD) had a boat which he brought down from the Midlands to moor at Saul Junction. To get back to Cam, he walked along the Stroudwater Canal to the Bristol Road to catch a bus. He noticed a pipe about 2ft diameter alongside the A38 across the canal at Whitminster Bridge, across the entrance to the lock just below the lower gates. He subsequently found out that it was a watermain. It was completely obstructing the navigation. There was not even enough headroom for a canoe. About the same time, or soon after this, he saw a report in the Stroud Journal about a public meeting to discuss the proposed Bill to permit the Stroudwater Canal Company to abandon the Stroudwater Canal. <i>(MD doesn't seem to have gone to the meeting. PF)</i> He wondered what this was all about, since the canal was clearly unusable because of the pipe and, to judge from its state, had been unused for quite a long time.</p>
75	<p>26th November 1953: MD wrote to a friend Teddy Edwards (TE) who was in the Inland Waterways Association, and who he knew from his previous parish, to ask him what it was all about. TE replied that he didn't really know. The Inland Waterways Association hadn't been invited to the public meeting. TE invited MD to form a committee to organise a local campaign against the closure. Commander Birch who lived in Amberley was a name suggested by TE to contact.</p>
	<p>Early December 1953: MD was told (or saw it reported) that the Stroudwater Canal Company were saying that no navigation was possible because of the state of the locks. The editor of the Stroud News, Jack Sollars, was quite supportive of keeping the canal open.</p>
	<p>January 1954: there was a new MP, Ben Parkin (Labour MP for Paddington North) who lived in Stonehouse.....<i>(This was very rambling, but I gathered that he wasn't a new MP, but that he had lost the Stroud seat at the previous General Election when the Conservatives won, and then subsequently got back into parliament in a safe Labour seat and went on to be involved in exposing landlords who intimidated their tenants and the Rachman affair. -PF)</i> MD contacted him.</p>
	<p>Ben Parkin was initially sceptical, because there was also another pipeline across the canal at Ebley, but later he supported the cause.</p>
	<p>Ben Parkin recommended Enid Airey of the CPRE as someone to get involved in the campaign. She lived at Woodchester.</p>
	<p>Feb. 1954: MD called a Public Meeting. <i>(I don't think he said where. PF)</i> – then follows another disjointed bit</p>
	<p>In Jan., Glos. CC opposed the Bill because it made inadequate provision for the road bridges. They did not oppose closure in principle. County Councillors had never had any chance to express their views. The Chairman said it had already been decided in committee. contd./</p>

	Tape 1 side 1 contd.
410	<p>The Inland Waterways Association (IWA) wanted to show a commercial use for the canal. <i>(I think the reference to Willow Wren –see end of final side – is in this section. PF)</i></p> <p>The last users were the gasworks. The last coal boat ran aground frequently and they stopped in 1940 or 42. It was taking 2 days from Ebley???? to Stroud.</p>
	The coal was coming from the Forest of Dean. The local manager wanted to go back to using the waterways because it was cheaper, but by now it was a nationalized industry; he was leant on from above and withdrew his support.
	<p>The Stroudwater Canal Company's case was that there was no demand for traffic and therefore no need to continue to maintain the canal.</p> <p>MD points out that the canal had not been maintained for many years and no maintenance leads to no demand.</p>
	This was a time when pleasure boating was just starting and the Boatshow had just started.
705	<p>MD tried to get an association of volunteers to clear and conserve the canal.</p> <p>Continues on side 2</p>

TAPE 1 Side 2

0	Mr Pollard, solicitor/ Barrister Mr Christie (<i>for whom?????</i>)
	After the meeting in Stroud in February 1954 ... (<i>I didn't hear a date. PF</i>) The Stroudwater Restoration Committee was formed. The IWA became the Petitioners against the Bill.
228	Ben Parkin (BP) had an nose for scandal: “where was the money that was coming in to the S-W Canal Co. (from property, water extraction etc.) going to?”
295	The Ramblers Association wanted the towpath as a right of way, but weren't interested in the navigation.
305	“ The Stroud News ”, (at that time there were two local papers) 12 th Feb., opposed the Committee and their opposition to the Bill. There was acrimonious division between the 2 local papers. The Stroud News supported the Bill and the Canal Co. vehemently. Reference to Stanley Marling (retired solicitor). Stroud's Conservative MP Bobby Perkins supported the Bill. He had defeated Ben Parkin in 1951 or 52.
375	MD notes that his own support for the Canal did him no good in the ecclesiastical world, or his career.
420	<i>No date</i>Ben Parkin called out “object” when the Bill was read out in the House of Commons, thus forcing a debate.
490	Parish Councils all along the Canal were unhelpful. They regarded stagnant water as a health risk.
520	2nd March. Cyril Boucher from the IWA wrote to MD saying he was coming to inspect. He was a retired civil engineer, “a man of vision” MD says. He was the IWA's Honorary Consulting Engineer. He visited on 9 th March and subsequently reported.
585	Mr Boucher's report estimated repairs to the lock gates would cost £12,000 and dredging to a 5ft depth £32,000.
645	MD was asked to look into (<i>by whom???</i>) The Maintenance Boat: what had happened to it? The tale was that the maintenance men were a reserved occupation and that they had spent the War sitting on the boat playing cards for money, whilst the weeds grew around them and finally the boat sank under them. This was vigorously refuted but the boat was never found.
689	Bridges became an important factor. A clearance of 7ft6in was needed for navigation. Bridges were the responsibility of the Canal Co. to maintain, but , if the Bill passed, GCC would become responsible for them. GCC wanted to flatten a humpbacked bridge near Stonehouse... <i>this continues on Tape 2.</i>

TAPE 2 Side 1

0	<i>GCC wanted to flatten a humpbacked bridge near Stonehouse-(at Bridgend?? see 648 below) but couldn't until the navigation had been stopped.</i>
161 - 194	Hoffman's were extracting water from the canal. If the Navigation was abandoned, the lock gates might not continue to hold water in the pound. Hoffman's didn't support the Restoration Committee, they were only interested in maintaining their water supply.
215 - 400 425 - 465	30th June 1954 Debate of the Bill in the House of Commons Ben Parkin spoke to oppose the Bill. Bobby Perkins spoke in support of the Bill. MPs were divided along party lines. The vote was LOST by a 32 majority against Ben Parkin, <u>but</u> the debate brought the campaign to save canals to public notice. The Bill proceeded to its Second Reading, in a private members committee.
570 - 590	Account of the 2 nd Reading. MD very depressed. Mrs Airey became the main defender of the canal. MD rather gave up on it. Ben Parkin suggested that some of the Restoration Committee ought to try to acquire shares in the Canal Company and thus get voting rights. This proved very difficult.
648	However, 20th July 1954 MD wrote to "The Citizen" contesting the cost to the Canal Co. of maintaining the bridges if the navigation were to be continued. (<i>This relates to Bridgend; presumably this was the "humpbacked bridge" referred to above.</i>) MD suggested that the Canal Co's statutory duty was only to maintain them for <u>horse</u> traffic, since that was what they were designed for; anything heavier was Glos CC's responsibility.
	<i>End of side. Continues on side 2</i>

0	
55	<p>Account of the 3rd Reading of the Bill in the House of Commons:</p> <p>There was a surprise development: when Ben Parkin stood up to speak he said that as the Canal Restoration Committee had now acquired a controlling interest in the shares of the Navigation Company*, he was withdrawing his opposition to the Bill. The Bill got its 3rd reading.</p>
140	<p>*this subsequently proved not to be true and MD seems to feel Ben Parkin rather let them down.</p>
195	<p>September 1954, after the 3rd reading: A cheque for £66 was sent to the Inland Waterways Association towards the costs of the case. The IWA paid the rest.</p>
255	<p>MD says that from then he was a “marked man”. He had to remove his boat from the mooring at Saul. No-one would give him a mooring and eventually he had to sell the boat “for a song”.</p>
285	<p>Summing Up: - What did we achieve?</p> <p>The Stroud case brought canals to public notice. The IWA gained publicity and growing public interest. The National Press got interested. The BBC had never mentioned it because it was too “controversial”. The BBC at that time had a policy of even-handedness and the Canal Co. would never respond. Canal cruiser hire firms started up on other waterways and canal holidays became popular.</p>
445	<p>A few months later he has listened to his tapes and wants to clarify a few things:</p>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Willow Wren Carrying Company (<i>this was on the first tape but I didn't make a note. I think they were on the R. Avon above Tewkesbury. PF</i>) always supported the Restoration Committee. • He cites the Lower Avon Navigation as a model of how to conserve a canal using volunteers.
515	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Stroudwater Restoration Committee's money-raising and publicity were amateurish and ineffective.
596	<p>End of recording.</p>
<p><i>I didn't get the impression from the Revd. Macdonald that there was ever much support from the general public in Stroud for conserving the Canal, but maybe the archives of the local papers would prove differently. PF</i></p>	