

# **SCHEMES FOR A LONDON TO CROYDON CANAL**

## CHAPTER 1 SCHEMES FOR A LONDON TO CROYDON CANAL

The Domesday survey of 1086 noted the existence of a church and a mill at Croydon, and a population of about 365. But by the mid-17th. century, Croydon had grown to become the principal town in east Surrey and an important market centre where agricultural produce from the neighbouring districts was collected for conveyance to London. Several small industries grew up in and around the town, which also became a seat of local government administration.

By as early as the 13th. century the town had expanded from its original Saxon site at Old Town towards higher ground to the east, and developed on the line of the present High Street. Here, on what was to become the Brighton Road, several coaching inns were later established. This road, however, like most of the roads in Surrey, was not kept in good repair. In 1718, when the Surrey and Sussex Turnpike Trust was set up, the road between Croydon, Godstone and East Grinstead was declared in the Act of incorporation to be "so very ruinous and almost impassable for the space of five months in the year that it is dangerous for all persons, horses, and other cattle to pass."<sup>[1]</sup>

The establishment of this and other turnpike trusts led to some improvements of the roads under their care, but they were still in general not suitable for heavy traffic. In 1805 James Malcolm in his "Compendium of Modern Husbandry" commented on the bad state of the roads in Surrey, and rebuked various turnpike trustees for neglecting their duty to maintain them. In particular, he gave the following geometrical description of the road running from Streatham southwards to Croydon:

"Before you enter the town of Croydon, the road is extremely convex, the sides being cut down very quick, it then spreads out until it is nearly level, it then becomes quite so, it afterwards passes into the concave, and very much so, it changes suddenly to the level, to the convex, to the inclined plane, and finishes in a convex."<sup>[2]</sup>

The inadequacy of the existing transport system between Croydon and London led to serious consideration being given, at the end of the 18th. century, to the possibility of forming a canal communication to provide an improved means of conveying goods.

In 1740 the River Arun had been rendered navigable by means of the Arun Navigation, to provide a route from Littlehampton to New bridge, and in 1790 an Act was passed to enable the River Ouse to be made navigable above Lewes. In 1778 the Act authorising the building of the Basingstoke Canal was passed. The construction work did not start until 1788, and it was not fully opened until September 1794. An Act passed in April, 1793, authorised the making of the Grand Junction Canal, to run from a junction with the Oxford Canal at Braunston to the River Thames at Brentford. This was opened from Uxbridge to Brentford in November, 1794, and throughout in October, 1800. At this period, too, various improvements were being carried out to the Thames Navigation.

It was in this context of increasing activity and interest in local navigable waterways, and the need for improved transport facilities in Surrey and around London that, in the summer of 1799, William Tatham published a scheme "for improving the City of London." This was a proposal for a line of canals encircling London and communicating by branches from it with docks and with existing and projected canals.

Among others, Tatham put forward a suggestion for a canal from Croydon to London:

"I think it may also merit consideration, how far water should be drawn from the sources of the river Wandle, (which, I am told, supplies several respectable manufactories with a moving power) in order to extend a communication to Croydon; for, although it would scarcely exceed ten miles in respect to water carriage, such a canal leading to the metropolis

of the nation, may have some alluring advantages in respect to the level, which would be thereby obtained, along the foot of the Surry hills; and in the numerous manufactures which the proximity of the City would add to such an inexhaustible power for mechanical operations. "

In a footnote Tatham added:

"I understand that the neighbourhood of Croydon..... is considerably covered with woods for a space of ten or fifteen miles across the country beyond it; and that there are not less than thirty water mills upon the river Wandle, to furnish the means of mutual conveyance to and from the metropolis; besides, an abundant demand for the transfers of agriculture.

These considerations ought to stimulate proprietors of lands near Croydon, to a minute investigation of their resources for canals."<sup>[3]</sup>

Soon after the publication of Tatham's pamphlet, and possibly "stimulated" by his suggestion, three separate investigations were made into the feasibility of constructing a canal from London to Croydon. All three were realised, in some form, a few years later.

In 1799, Ralph Dodd, a London civil engineer, was engaged by a number of local landowners and businessmen to make a survey, "to ascertain the practicability of an inland navigation from Croydon to the most eligible part of the River Thames." His introductory report to the subscribers was dated 26 November, 1799. <sup>[4]</sup>

The route he recommended commenced at Parson's Mead at West Croydon, ran north for about a mile, then turned eastwards to Woodside. Thence it ran northeast along the valley to the west of Beckenham close to Lewisham, then continued northwards along the Ravensbourne valley, curved to the west of Deptford and entered the Thames at Rotherhithe. The length was about 12 miles.

The canal, Dodd advised, should be "upon a small scale", 3 feet 6 inches deep, and 24 feet wide at the top, and with inclined planes rather than locks. He estimated the cost at £25,000. On 21 December, 1799, a meeting of "persons interested in the intended canal" (now referred to as the Croydon Canal) was held at the Greyhound Inn at Croydon, to consider Dodd's report. It was agreed that a canal from Croydon to Rotherhithe would be "of great utility" and it was resolved to raise the sum of £40,000 for its construction. Thirty-two of the promoters were elected to be a committee, for carrying the project into effect. <sup>[5]</sup>

The committee decided on a different route for the canal, and they engaged a Mr. Warner to survey a suitable line and draw up a plan.

Dodd was not involved any further in the planning of the Croydon Canal, and John Rennie was appointed as consulting engineer in his stead, and asked to report on Warner's plan. Rennie had previously worked on the engineering of a number of canals in the Midlands, as well as docks, harbours, and other works, and had a much greater experience than Dodd. On 8 October, 1800, he completed his report on "the line pointed out to me", which ran through higher ground a mile or so to the west of the route proposed by Dodd. This new line from Croydon crossed Croydon Common to Norwood, ran thence through Penge Common and Sydenham Common to Forest Wood, and then north via New Cross to Rotherhithe. Rennie gave alternative estimates, of £64,100 for a canal with locks, and £46,500 for a canal with inclined planes on a slightly different line between Forest Wood and New Cross. <sup>[6]</sup>

At a meeting of the subscribers held on 10 October, 1800, to consider Rennie's report, it was decided that the scheme for a canal with inclined planes be adopted. A petition was presented to the House of Commons on 18 February, 1801, for leave to bring in a Bill to authorise the building of the canal. During the progress of the Bill through both Houses of Parliament, a number of amendments were made, including additional clauses to protect the interests of the owners of mills on the River Wandle, and a curtailment of the route so that it joined the Grand Surrey Canal north of New Cross instead

of going all the way to Rotherhithe. The Royal Assent was given to the Croydon Canal Act of incorporation on 27 June, 1801. (41 Geo.III, cap.127)

Construction work began in January, 1802, and shortly afterwards the company decided that the canal should have locks instead of inclined planes. Progress was slow, and it was not until 23 October, 1809, that the canal was fully opened for traffic.

On 12 June, 1835, an Act was passed incorporating the London and Croydon Railway Company, and empowering them to build a railway from a junction with the London and Greenwich Railway north of New Cross, to Croydon. The company purchased the Croydon Canal property in July, 1836, and built their railway on parts of its route. The canal was closed on 22 August, 1836.

In February, 1800, soon after having been dropped by the Croydon Canal committee, Ralph Dodd published the outline of a scheme for a "Grand Surrey Canal". [7] This was to commence at the Thames at Rotherhithe, run south to Deptford, then southwest to Peckham and Camberwell, from where a branch was to go northwards to the Borough. From Camberwell the route ran in a generally southwesterly direction to terminate at some unspecified place on the River Wey Navigation. Communication would thus be effected with the Basingstoke Canal, which joined the Wey Navigation at Woodham.

Dodd envisaged an ultimate through route to Portsmouth and Southampton, either by an extension of the Basingstoke Canal, or a canal from the Wey. The scheme was presented in the form of a prospectus, and Dodd suggested that interested persons should organise a subscription fund, to defray the expense of his making a survey and preparing a detailed report.

Apparently a group of speculators was interested in principle, but favoured a much shorter canal entirely within Surrey, and they engaged Dodd to survey a line from Rotherhithe to Epsom. His report, dated 14 May, 1800, described a route from Rotherhithe to Camberwell as in his original proposal, but extended to the Thames near Vauxhall. From this line, at Kennington, the canal was to go via Clapham, Streatham, Mitcham and Malden, to Epsom. There were branches proposed from Norbiton to Kingston, and from Mitcham to Croydon, with a sub-branch from the latter at Mitcham Common to Carshalton.[8]

Thus Dodd's scheme was to some extent a rival to the Croydon Canal by virtue of the branch to Croydon. This, he wrote, would provide a connection to the Thames "in a superior manner and in a more eligible way", than the route he had earlier proposed for the Croydon Canal.

The Grand Surrey Canal promoters, meeting on 14 November, 1800, approved Dodd's scheme, and resolved to introduce a Bill in Parliament to authorise the making of the canal. The petition was duly presented to the House of Commons on 9 February, 1801.

During its passage through the Lords committee major curtailments of the route were made, and eventually the canal was authorised to be built only as far as Mitcham, the routes thence to Epsom, Kingston, Carshalton and Croydon being omitted. The Act incorporating the Grand Surrey Canal Company was passed on 21 May, 1801. (41 Geo.III, cap.31)

After construction had started, it was decided to establish a dock business, and a basin was built near the entrance to the canal at Rotherhithe which was formally opened in March, 1801. The dock concern proved to be reasonably profitable, so the basin was later enlarged, and there was little incentive to proceed with the forming of the canal beyond the junction with the Croydon Canal. It was built as far as Camberwell by 1810 but never extended farther, though later, during 1825-26, a short branch was built to Peckham.

In 1864, the Grand Surrey Canal Company was amalgamated with the neighbouring Commercial Docks Company, and the Greenland Dock was extended across the canal north of Plough Lane. The docks and canal were acquired by the Port of London Authority in 1908. The canal was closed in 1911 and was subsequently filled in and built over.

The third of the schemes for a canal from Croydon to the Thames, although probably the first chronologically, was promoted by a group headed by a number of owners and occupiers of mills and factories on the River Wandle. The general route proposed, from Croydon to Wandsworth, running to the east of the river, was ultimately adopted for a different form of transport: a railway - the Surrey Iron Railway, the subject of this study.

### ***References***

- 1.** Quoted in Mary Alderton, "Tollgates", article in *The Bourne Society Local History "Records*, Vol. XI, 1972..
- 2.** James Malcolm, *A Compendium of Modern Husbandry*, Vol.3, 1805.
- 3.** William Tatham, *Plan for improving the City of London by Means of Navigable Canals and Commercial Basins*, 1799.
- 4.** Ralph Dodd, Introductory "Report on the proposed Canal Navigation from Croydon to the River Thames at Rotherhithe, 1799.
- 5.** *The Times*, 25 December,1799.
- 6.** John Rennie's MS Reports, Vol.2 (institution of Civil Engineers Library.)
- 7.** "Mr. Dodd's Plan of the Grand Surry Canal", article in *The Commercial and Agricultural Magazine*, February,1800.
- 8.** Ralph Dodd, *Report on the intended Grand Surry Canal Navigation with General Estimate*,1800..