

Ware to Welwyn Garden City, September 4th 2014



From Ware the character of the river begins to change from the biodiversity of a highly managed regional park flanked by intensively farmed upland and linear urban settlements, all transfixed by a web of infrastructure that converges on London. Certainly, once past Hertford where its purpose as a navigation ceases, it becomes a rural river where the historic need to create a head of water for milling has left its mark.



At Ware, the onset of autumn is manifesting itself in a subdued, thoughtful and overcast day; the slowness of the moving river is only apparent through the leaf fall upon its surface.

All is quiet and introspective; a solitary lady paints the gazebos from across the river. The gazebos of Ware, overhang the river at the

bottom of town house gardens and are perhaps relics of a more gracious past where owners could participate in the life of the river from a detached point of view. They date from that time when part of the wealth of the town was derived from the transport of malt for the brewing industry to London by barge. Their presence lends a cultivated and genteel character reminiscent of the Isis or the Cam. Gazebos or garden houses have certainly been fashionable since the Renaissance but experienced an upsurge in popularity as a result of an interest



in Chinoiserie in the 18th and 19th centuries. There was an influential publication "Rural Architecture in the Chinese Taste" 1750 by John and William Halfpenny. In other towns, just as in many third world countries today it has been customary to site latrines over an ancient watercourse. This certainly happened in other similar sized industrial towns, where low lying marshland was developed for workers housing where waste from slum dwellings drained directly into the river. For example, in High Wycombe in Buckinghamshire the Wye became a convenient open sewer for the slum dwellings of workers in the furniture industry well into the 20th century.

There is a short green interlude in the river path between Ware and Hertford: on the outskirts of Ware, an elegant weir overfalls as two sheer sheets of water set at right angles to each other flanked by a lock complete with bypass channel and Victorian garden. The quiet neatness is only disturbed by the background susurruration of the weir. Not much further, an elegant viaduct, carrying the A10, its pillars scarified by graffiti, swings across lush, water meadows into Hertford. As the land levels, the silhouette of a gaunt industrial



building appears against the skyline. This is the Gauge House where the New River is siphoned off to supplement the original sources at Chadwell and Amwell Springs nearby to complete its journey at the East Reservoir in Stoke Newington. English Heritage manages the Gauge House, whilst the New River itself is the responsibility of Thames Water. The immediate flood plain valley is subject to a sensitive stewardship regime to restore the original marshland habitat. To this end it is grazed by a mixed herd of beef cattle and sheep.



Walking the river is always a mixture of huge vistas and intimate surprises. It can be a sensory concentrate of mysterious shady side channels that only have a clear function to those who know but to those who don't, they are luminous, green and tantalizingly inaccessible. Enter a lock chamber and sepulchral stillness is animated by the gush of water through the join in the lock gates. But if you happen to be afloat there is that little piece of magic when, with no greater effort than closing a gate and opening a sluice, you rise through dark into light. Above the lock the light turns from green to blue and the river snakes off towards the horizon.

Individualised, well-established moorings line the approach to Hertford. These boats are unlikely to go anywhere, hunkered down for the long haul with garden sheds, trellises and washing lines that betoken tenure. Long-term projects that have paused and held their breath for long enough to require



urgent maintenance if just to maintain the condition of a work in progress. Distinct from houses, this is the stuff of dreams and sturdy individualism that maintains independence whilst gradually losing traction upon reality. It is a fragile and vulnerable world, always under scrutiny, separated from orthodox living by choice and circumstance, never quite fixed but never free.

The river happens to be low today and the big apron of the weir crossed by a smart causeway bridge just before Hertford is overflowing demurely; if it were in spate and full to capacity I wouldn't fancy the chances for survival of the twiggy coots nest perched precariously on a jammed tree trunk on the sill.



Just alongside an improbably abundant allotment site, there is a much used and comfortably shabby narrowboat, the "Lion" is one of those peripatetic craft committed by agreement to roam the inland waterways indefinitely, a way of life parceled up into fortnightly sojourns that binds the owner to a similarly itinerant community. The owner emerges as I approach with a little Jack Russell, just in time to engage in conversation. Falling into step with him on his dog walk, he is Roger and has lived with his wife afloat for several years. They are free from the need to be connected to a specific site through working from the boat. Their independence suits them well and the national canal network is their oyster. The observations he makes range from the hospitality and comparative friendliness of different communities along the way to the lack of rubbish collection points along the Lee Navigation due to (in his view) a misguided policy decision by Lee Valley Regional Park Authority to encourage visitors to take their rubbish home with them by not supplying bins. He also remarked upon the abundance of wild horseradish and regretted that it was not enough to his taste for him to render it down for horseradish sauce.



Passing into Hertford, Victorian terraces cluster to the waterfront and there is an apparent easy intimacy between the river and life on its fringe that is a legacy of when this was a workaday community. Just a bridge away the scent fades and the river is lost where the channel splits at a weir. The river path evaporates and the



watercourse forms a partial moat around the Jacobean castle, ducks away under a main road and is inaccessible until it emerges once again on the outskirts of town in a pasture beside the football ground. From there on the way is impassible.



I never intended to walk as far as Welwyn Garden City. It seemed like a good idea at the time to follow that route out of Hertford since it promised to lead back to the river at some point. But this was not to be: the “Chain Walk” passes a riding stables, ducks under the railway viaduct, where it becomes a well used cycle path that follows the course of a redundant railway line connecting Hertford to Welwyn. It is a perfect green way, rising gently through dense wood into rich farmland and although nominally still part of the Lea Valley National Park, it soon leaves the river behind. Since it is not far to Welwyn, curiosity prompts me to carry on and head back home from there. Apart from some blatant fly tipping this is a pleasant and very well maintained trail and obviously a favourite commuting route between the two towns but due to the metaled surface it is very hard on the feet.





Reaching the outskirts of Welwyn Garden City is straightforward enough but finding the centre of town is another matter. At every junction in the maze of arterial roads approaching the centre a reassuring road sign promised that the station was no more than 2 miles away, until inevitably I was back where I had started. Asking for help, a kind lady who showed a way that took just ten minutes it was just ten minutes away, obvious if you are local and aware that some wag had turned the signposts around. Even outside the station, it was a challenge to find the entrance, which proved to be sequestered deep inside a shabby shopping mall, obvious for those who know.

Some reflections:

As the river approaches the limit of navigation, the extensive wetland character of the lower reaches is diminished. Once past the point where the New River is siphoned off from the old, it has ceased to be a labyrinth of channels, interconnecting reservoirs and gravel diggings. It becomes singular, constrained not only by its sheet piled banks but also by the built environment. However, beyond Hertford it changes again into a modest rural watercourse and remains as such except where it is dammed to create to create leisure amenities such as Stanborough Park and boating lake outside Welwyn, Lemsford Springs Nature Reserve or The Broadwater, an ornamental lake at Brocket Park.

The end of the navigation also signals the limit of the boating community, which is a significant part of the life of the river upstream from Leamouth, with the understanding that with the start of Lea Valley Navigation, this becomes subject to the regulatory controls imposed by the Canals and Rivers Trust.

Correspondingly, once the inherent need for a continuous towpath ceases, public access is sporadic and relies for continuity upon links in the existing footpath network, until it is re-established as the Upper Lea Valley Walk just outside Harpenden where it joins the Chiltern Way and continues into Luton.

The character of the river is no longer singular and controlled between Welwyn and Luton, its relationship with communities and landscape is serendipitous, sometimes formal, often left to its own devices, to meander within its own water meadows.

