

The Proposed Ship Canal Between Bridgwater Bay and the English Channel.

Chapter XXXV of Sydney Gardner Jarman. *History of Bridgwater*, 1889

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WHILST this work is passing through the press there is a most important project on foot for providing a Ship Canal from the Bristol Channel to the English Channel, thus making the West of England an island.

We first hear of the matter in 1825, in which year meetings were held at Bridgwater and other places in the West of England to consider what was termed "*one of the grandest schemes ever projected in this country.*" It was to construct a Ship Canal, capable of carrying vessels of 300 tons burden, from the Bristol Channel to the English Channel, by the entrance to the river Parrett through a canal, *via* Bridgwater, Ilminster, Chard, and Axminster, to Seaton, on the coast of Devon, thus forming the West of England into an island. The scheme, which was projected to obviate the necessity of navigation around the Land's End, was warmly approved of, and occasioned much excitement. Nearly the whole of the necessary capital was subscribed, but, *from circumstances affecting the capital of the whole kingdom*, says Phelps, in his *History of Somerset* (vol. 1, 60), the scheme did not take effect. An Act of Parliament had, however, been obtained for the construction of the Canal.

Since that time the project has been revived at intervals, but until the present time but little importance has been attached to it. Last year the matter again came forward, and the following extracts from a circular issued by the promoters will be read with interest

After many years of careful study and practical research by thoroughly experienced men of great eminence and repute with high professional scientific attainments, it is manifestly clear that the necessity for cutting a Maritime Ship Canal to connect the Bristol and English Channels has long been keenly felt and recognized by those most largely interested in Mercantile and Commercial pursuits, who fully appreciate the enormous advantages such an undertaking would afford. Having regard to the success which has attended similar enterprises elsewhere, combined with the desire there now exists for the establishment of Harbours of Refuge which may very easily and advantageously be incorporated therewith, it is considered that a very favourable opportunity now presents itself for bringing the scheme more prominently before the attention of the Public, and in a definite shape, with a view to its speedy promotion and development.

Eminent Engineers who have been consulted report with great confidence most favorably as to

the feasibility of the suggested undertaking, its great recommendatory features, and its prospects generally; and the proposal, briefly stated, is to construct a Ship Canal from Bridgwater Bay, commencing at Stolford in the parish of Stogursey, on the Somersetshire Coast, via Taunton (following pretty nearly the route of the existing Bridgwater and Taunton Canal), and terminating at Seaton, on the East Devon Coast, about a mile beyond the Estuary of the River Axe.

The length of the proposed Canal will be about 45 miles, its width varying from 120 to 200 feet, and its depth 26 feet, of sufficient capacity therefore for the largest Iron-clads, Ocean-going Steamers, and Mercantile and other Vessels of large tonnage.

By means of this New Waterway connecting the Bristol and English Channels a saving in distance will be effected of 280 miles, and its main object will be to avert the present necessity of Ships from the Bristol Channel to the English Channel Ports, France, Holland, Netherlands, Norway, the Baltic, and the Eastern and Scottish Coasts, and vice versa, being compelled, as now, to proceed around Land's End, the Lizard, &c. Ship-owners, Freighters, and others are unfortunately but too well aware of the many serious casualties annually occurring whilst rounding these dangerous portions of the coast, resulting in a lamentable sacrifice of life, the foundering of numerous vessels and their valuable cargoes, and the partial wreckage of many others. The prolonged and vexatious delay which, it involves is also attended with serious loss and inconvenience, and the proposed Ship Canal will, it is roughly estimated, effect a saving in this respect of at least fifty per cent, besides averting the dangers before referred to and hitherto experienced.

Stolford and Seaton, at either end of the proposed Canal, can easily be converted into Harbours of Refuge, which have become a pressing and acknowledged necessity on these Coasts, and in consideration of this the project, it is believed, would be sanctioned and supported not only by the Chambers of Commerce and other public bodies, Ship-owners, &c.-, but also by the Government, pecuniary aid. having already been promised by the Board of Trade to supplement local efforts in this direction.

At several points of the Canal, it is proposed to construct a series of wharf sidings in proximity to the more important Towns en route, and the use of these whilst affording a good deal of accommodation will, it is anticipated, prove a valuable and permanent source of income.

Another important consideration, so far as local interests are concerned, is that the low-lying lands through which the Canal will pass will be

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effectually and permanently drained thereby, and it is presumed that the Somersetshire Drainage Commissioners, Municipal Corporations, and other public bodies, will consequently readily give the scheme their approval and aid.

The cost of construction has been roughly estimated as £70,000 per mile.

Several of the more influential Ship-owners, Coal and Ironmasters in Wales who have already been consulted in the matter, regard the scheme with much favour, and it is confidently believed that a large amount of share capital would also be subscribed in Bristol, Gloucester, London, and the southern and eastern ports.

It is proposed to form a Syndicate to consist of a certain number of members, as may be agreed upon, for the purpose of promoting a Bill.

It may be said that the scheme has attracted a great deal of attention, but it is difficult to prognosticate as to the chances of its ever being brought to pass. At the same time it must be said that such an undertaking would confer great benefits on the town and neighbourhood, and the chances are that if accomplished it will prove a commercial success.

It may be interesting to notice that it was the Duke of Bridgwater who first (1759) aroused public attention to the national importance of constructing canals in the country. He set a worthy example, and expended a large amount of money in cutting a canal.