



Account of Purley on Thames

Mapledurham Lock

The Flash Lock

From mediaeval times there was a weir at Mapledurham, owned by the Lords of Mapledurham to store water for the use of their mill. In order to provide for navigation parts of the weir would be removed to allow vessels to pass. This process was known as flashing. Going downstream it was relatively easy as the bargeman merely had to steer for the gap and he was 'flashed' through. Going upstream was a lot more difficult and usually there was a windlass set into the bank a bit upstream and the vessel was attached to a rope and wound through against the current.

One or two of these windlasses have survived and the site of the one at Pangbourne is known. However we do not know where the one at Mapledurham was located, but it would almost certainly have been on the Oxfordshire side about a quarter of a mile above the mill.

The great difficulty with flash locks was that they lost a lot of water from the river and so reduced the level of the upper reach that it could sometimes be two or three days before there was enough water to run the mill. Naturally the millers were very loath to allow flashing and usually levied very high charges as well as making the barges wait. A secondary effect was that in the reach above the flash a boat could be grounded because of shortage of water.

After the formation of the Thames Commissioners in 1771 a timetable for the flashes was devised so that the water from one flash could be used to restore the reach below it to avoid flooding and shortages of water. The times for Mapledurham were set at 7.30 am on Wednesdays and 10.30 am on Saturdays. (ref 43)

Not very many keepers names are known but a report in 1580 said it was owned by Mr William Blunt and kept by Roberte Byrde. The list of 1585 gave Mr Michael Blunt as the owner and Robert Blunt as the keeper. (ref 43)

Lock Tolls

A House of Lords report dated 1681 gave the fee at Mapledurham as 1/8 but no tonnage was recorded. This had increased to 12/6 per 60 tons in 1720 and was back at 8/- in 1751.

In 1771 the toll was reported as having been set by order of 1754 at 8d for every 5 tons, but a report of 1772 gave it as 15/- for 150 tons. In 1775 it was stated as being 10/- for 140t, in 1791 as 8/- for 60t, in 1821 as 3/8 per 20 tons and in 1846 as 3d per 5 tons.

The First Pound Lock

Local people had petitioned the Commissioners for money to be spent on the Mapledurham reach and so it was agreed in 1776 to build a pound lock at Mapledurham. In fact the lock was built across a headland of Purley. It had wooden gates at each end with sloping banks of earth which became grassed. Stakes were erected to mark out the navigable channel and to allow boats to tie up while the lock was filled or emptied. It was opened in Summer 1777 and the flash lock was taken out of use in July. (ref 43)

In 1786 the Commissioners tried to rename the new lock as 'Purley Lock' but old traditions prevailed and 'Mapledurham' it has remained. (ref 43)

A toll of 3d per ton was levied on boats passing upstream. This included a 'free' return passage. Downstream boats were charged three half-pence. (ref 43)

A survey of the river was conducted in 1794 and for the first time we get a description of the lock. the falls were described as 'at the upper cill 4:0 at the lower cill 2:5 only. at the pen 4:2' The width was given as 18:2 and it was recorded that there were no flash and low water marks. There was only a 'centry box' to take care of the lock which would have provided shelter for the lock keeper who presumably lived in Purley village. (ref 532)

The lock had just been rebuilt of sound oak. Previously it had been made of fir. This latter had been done improperly by a Mr Nicholls. Some of the piles were rotted on the head but generally it was in good order. Soundings at the tail of the lock ranged from 3:9 to 3:3 and 3:0. Downstream the banks were 'much annoyed by bushes which cease opposite New Farm' Presumably the bushes made towing difficult. (ref 532)

In 1821 the toll had risen to £1.0.10d for a boat of 140t but it was proposed to return to the 1771 rate of 8d per 5t. By 1846 the rate had been reduced to 3d per 5t

The Geddes Family

A watch box was ordered in 1798 and this was the first year that the lock keeper was named in the official records. He was Alex Geddes and he was paid 24s monthly. In 1801 he asked for more money and offered to do small repairs and other jobs in exchange. Consideration was given to putting the Purley Ferry in his charge; but it was decided not to as it was 'too far away'. He obtained an advance to 47s however. (ref 43)

Geddes resigned in 1805 and his son James applied for the job and got it James died in 1816 and his widow Cecily was not only given the succession but the Commissioners decided to build a cottage for her. This was built on the island. She was given a pay rise to 70s a month in October 1822. Cecily resigned in May 1822 to be replaced in June by William Sheppard. (ref 43)

William Sheppard

Sheppard was to stay as lock keeper for 54 years, far and away the longest holder of the office. In 1832 the lock was reported as being in a dangerous condition, but what was done about it is unclear. (ref 43)

In 1849 the Metropolitan Water Company applied to lay their inlet pipes near the lock and in the same year a toll house was paid for, so presumably erected. (ref 43)

Competition from the railways was getting intense and in March 1853 Sheppard's wages were reduced by a half in common with all other lock keepers. Tolls were suspended for a year in a futile attempt to attract back the traffic. In 1854 his wages were further reduced from 52s to 24s a month but he was allowed to keep the pleasure tolls which were increasing steadily. His duties were also increased and he had to look after the Purley and Roebuck ferries as well as the lock. By 1866 he was back to 52s a month. (ref 43)

In 1868 a dispute arose with Mr C Blunt of Mapledurham House. It seemed to start with a dispute about the statutory compensation for the weir, but it became very personal between him and Sheppard who was forbidden to land on the Mapledurham side to obtain supplies in April. Mr Blunt complained about him to the Conservators and in June Sheppard was told to move to Hambleton. He was to be replaced by a Mrs Strange. He stayed where he was however and in September the transfer

orders were rescinded much to the very vocal annoyance of Blount.

To supplement his income Sheppard was a fisherman. He rented the right to net fish in the river and devised all sorts of traps for the fish including bag-nets and flue-nets. He was reported as having skinned the river clean of fish much above the size of a sprat and he was reputed to send as much as half a ton of fish at a time to Leadenhall Market in London. (ref 43)

William Sheppard retired in April 1882 after 54 years service . He died in April 1889 after having gone to live in Caversham but was buried in Purley Churchyard. (ref 141)

Keepers at the Turn of the century

R H Carter succeeded Sheppard as lock-keeper in 1882, He died in office in June 1887 (ref 43)

J C Timpson took over in 1887 but he resigned almost immediately in September in favour of John Collier who in his turn was replaced in October by Walter Crowe. (ref 43)

Walter and Sarah Crowe's daughter Maud died in January 1891 aged 8 and Walter followed soon after in June 1894 aged 59. (ref 141)

Crowe's place was taken by F Newcombe from Godstow and at his own request he exchanged positions in May 1897 with Stephen Wootton who was assistant at Richmond, He also took a drop in salary of 30s a month.

The new Lock

A new lock was built alongside the old pound lock and this was extensively enlarged in 1908. The new lock had brick sides and required far less water even though it was bigger.

Modern Lock Keepers

John James Thame was keeping in 1914 and there are several cases of his actions as a life saver. It was during this period that the rector of Purley, John Dudley Matthews, was drowned trying to cross the river.

Alfred Baldwin was keeping in 1924, William Edward Hatton in 1940 and Frederick G may in 1950.

Leslie Ledgerwood became keeper in 1956 but he stayed only one year. It was around this time that the Thames was extensively dredged and the dredgings were landed at Mapledurham Lock to be taken by lorry to the Pond Field where they were dumped. This necessitated improving the track from Mapledurham Drive.

Leonard Ovary took over in 1957 and during his time as lock keeper he was given the Best Kept Lock in 1971. He left in 1975 to be replaced by George Fielder who became well known on the river for his work in protecting and caring for the swans which were suffering badly from lead poisoning. George retired in April 2007.

Bibliography

43 The Thames Highway (Thacker 1920)

141 Purley Burials Register

532 Survey of Thames and Isis (1794)

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