

HARD TIMES FOR HORSTEAD AND COLTISHALL

by Margaret Bird

What happened to the villages which lost out when the Aylsham navigation opened in 1779? They had previously been head of navigation on a 32-mile river. Now this role was taken from them.

Margaret Bird, author of the Mary Hardy volumes, uses hitherto unresearched archives at King's College, Cambridge to explore this question in a talk arranged by the Bure Navigation Conservation Trust (BNCT) at Horstead on Thursday 23 September 2021.

Entitled "**Hard times for Horstead and Coltishall: The opening of the Aylsham navigation in 1779**" it is open to all.

Head of navigation: a key role

To be head of navigation gave a massive strategic advantage. Up to 1779 Horstead and Coltishall had served as the hub of a wide distribution network across north central Norfolk. Now coal, timber and bricks were instead brought by water to Aylsham. Businesses operating from the new canal basin sent out carts and wagons delivering to Reepham, Cawston and other coal-starved areas.

Buxton, Lamas and Aylsham all benefited from the newly navigable waterway linking them directly with Great Yarmouth and thus with London, Newcastle, the Low Countries and the Baltic.

But within a few months Coltishall's 50-year-old staithe-owner and innkeeper of the King's Head had died in desperate straits. His trade at the large King's Head Staithe, now occupied by the Rising Sun, had been badly damaged.

Trouble at the mill



[CAPTION] The wherry *Widgeon* at Horstead Watermill [courtesy the Norfolk Wherry Trust]

The photograph shows *Widgeon* in the mill pool at Horstead Mill in the early 20th century. The hatches are stacked to reveal the large open hold. The furled sail is lashed clear of the working area. The main force of the Bure is flowing along the lock stream, allowing the wherry to be loaded or unloaded in comparative safety.

The eighteenth-century miller found some of his trade taken by newly enlarged watermills upstream at Buxton, Burgh and Aylsham. Adding to his troubles as lock-keeper, he battled with skippers who resisted all attempts at regulating traffic through Coltishall Lock including a ban on night sailing. Used to unrestricted passage on tidal waterways, the men damaged the lock gates to get through.

The BNCT event on Thursday 23 September

Letters and reports held at King's College, as lords of the manor, reveal the sorry state of Horstead and Coltishall's commercial life in the late eighteenth century. Tax records in the National Archives confirm the story of decline. Margaret Bird will draw these threads together for her talk.

The meeting is in Horstead Tithe Barn, Rectory Road, Horstead, beside the church, 7.30 to 9 pm. There will be a charge of £3.00 for non-BNCT members. The wearing of face coverings is discretionary. Mainly on road parking in Rectory Road.