Some Future Directions for Waterways History

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In an earlier article, I attempted to assess the state of waterways history and suggested some ways in which its future might be enhanced. I did not discuss then the sort of subjects that future waterways history might cover. Before a range of research agendas are outlined, I must first stress, once again, that I do not seek to diminish the present or past efforts of waterways history writers, and would view with dismay and doubt any suggestion that present researchers should cease their present labours and turn to new areas. What is needed, however, is the entry of new researchers, who might well have only a restricted background in conventional waterways history and perhaps only limited knowledge of, and interest in, waterways themselves. I have suggested that these might be recruited from academic ranks (staff and students, loosely defined), but there are other sources, including many future retirees. Contributions could be made from those with diverse disciplinary backgrounds, such as studies in engineering, spatial planning, housing architectural conservation, historical geography, business and technical management, and cultural studies to “conventional” history.

What follows are some suggestions for future research – effectively, frameworks within which specific research agendas could be pursued. Many other possible areas for research are available, and it is hoped that this piece will inspire further considerations. A detailed examination of possibilities would take much more space, although the preparation and dissemination of such a study, setting out future research agendas, would constitute a very valuable piece of research in its own right.

Greater detail and/or greater depth?

My earlier article stressed the much greater accessibility of many new primary sources, which should facilitate the embellishment of many existing studies with further detail. The detailed exploitation of online sources is in its early stages; the mining of sources like British Newspaper Archive and Welsh Newspapers Online, resources that will widen as more runs of periodicals are digitised and indexed, may well yield detailed data as well as more localised and (often) quirky details.¹ Such data may put some flesh onto the bones of accounts like those fostered by Charles
Hadfield, so that, copious and exhaustive though these still appear, earlier studies could become the sketches upon which yet more detailed portraits are painted.

Historic photographs have come much to the fore in the past 50 years. Their mass dissemination via digitisation and the internet is now providing multiple images for interpretation and analysis; for this reason the maximum accuracy of details of place, orientation and date is essential. Again, greater accessibility may well produce enhanced detail, especially for periods since the 1950s. The decline of carrying on narrow canals and larger waterways has been well-described, but detailed photographic evidence may provide wider depictions of scenes, processes, craft and (sadly) people that are now long vanished.

This may be allied to the fruits of greater fieldwork. While much that presents historic insights is disappearing, the ability to record any remains with multiple digital images has made fieldwork easier, as has the availability of digitised historic maps.

These suggestions approach the concerns of conventional waterways history. The availability of materials should enable new studies that take up themes rather than pursue the history of individual waterways, although the latter remain valuable.

An increased depth of study could co-exist with greater detail, but might well emerge through the development of new perspectives on existing published and archive material. It is not always necessarily the case that extensive work is required on enlarged sources, as new approaches may view existing published data in new ways. Social historians, for instance, may focus on the working lives of boatpeople and (often unsung) construction and maintenance workers, or upon middle managers and proprietors. This may extend to other aspects of the lives of waterways people. Company housing, for instance, did not exist on the same scale as that provided by (or for) railway companies, but many canal owners did develop or acquire residential property, which might well interest students of the history of housing.

It remains possible that what could be encouraged might merely produce more and more data about less and less. However, beyond the attraction of new researchers, there may be other gains
from the thickening of histories with further details. It may be that these produce secondary sources that, combined with other studies, can provide foundations for wider histories. Similarly, a deepening of existing histories, employing greater analysis, perhaps asking questions to which primary sources may provide no direct answers, could provide a springboard for new historical accounts.

Coastal, estuarial and navigable waterspace

One possibility would be to consider the history of navigation into waterspace that goes beyond the immediate concerns of waterways history. Charles Hadfield and associates managed to map the history of most of the canal and river navigations of the British Isles. Exceptions included some smaller waterways in Ireland, Scotland and South Wales, and perhaps earlier waterways from the mediaeval period and before. While some codification of these histories awaits completion, there is an extensive range of waterborne navigation that still needs to be mapped (in some cases literally). This includes smaller waterways that were used incidentally for navigation, such as streams and lakes, and sections of inland river that proved incidentally navigable, but were not subject to formal navigation works.

In addition, there was (and sometimes remains) navigation upon large tidal rivers, estuarial and coastal navigation. These have been sporadically covered, but new systematic studies could be produced. If new accounts were to receive the Hadfield treatment, this would, of course, prove to be extremely ambitious. It would greatly enlarge the history of waterborne transport in the British Isles, but it would also present insights for “conventional” inland waterways history. Other forms of waterborne transport partly competed, and partly complemented, that by inland waterways. The possible inter-relationships would need to be studied and analysed.

This would go well beyond the concerns of many existing researchers (although there was a “Docks and Coastal Shipping” interest group until the late 1990s), and approach the concerns of maritime historians. Much of what has been published requires collation and codification, while unexplored areas would deal with very different sorts of primary sources and archives.

Comparative studies with waterways outside the British Isles
Reliance upon primary sources presents major problems when the framework for a further possible new direction, of comparative international studies, is considered. Charles Hadfield’s magnum opus *World Canals* did not spawn a range of country-by-country studies, although it built on studies like Robert Legget’s *Canals of Canada* from 1978. It employed secondary sources throughout, and the challenge for deeper studies based on primary sources has not, in general, been taken up.

A deepening and widening of knowledge could begin with the translation of secondary sources and, where possible, the codification of their results. Most British investigators face an obvious problem in access to archives. Distant archives provide major problems of access, but even worse, most records are not in English! I suspect that two initial approaches can be envisaged. One is to open out from studies of Britain, studying waterways in which British engineering and capital were involved; several Canadian canals provide a clear example. The other is to attempt country-by-country studies, using secondary sources. This would achieve a subsidiary aim, of the widening of knowledge about waterways outside the British Isles, and it would provide raw materials for comparative studies. Often such studies must be speculative, subject to amendment should new data and discussions become available. The very need for comparative studies would encourage the production of country-by-country studies.

Essential questions that comparative studies could explore relate to why British canals failed to be enlarged and developed, in contrast to those in continental Europe and parts of North America, and what British waterways owners, operators and supporters did or did not learn from experience elsewhere. Engineering approaches, and consequent structures, could be compared, building on the assertion, much-cited in evidence to the Royal Commission on Canals and Inland Waterways, that favourable topography in continental European waterways explained the greater investment in modernisation.²

While Charles Hadfield stressed that waterways outside Britain were generally State-owned and promoted, the position was more complicated; but varied institutional arrangements, and their
consequences, could be discussed. Finally, the development of waterways for leisure has varied from country to country, with some waterways in Canada, subject to declining freight use, retained for leisure long before this took place in the British Isles. Elsewhere, very varied leisure industries seem to have developed around inland waterways.

Counterfactual approaches

A difficult initiative, which involves much speculation, is to explore the counterfactual. Counterfactual approaches consider what might have happened if certain factors or events in history had developed differently.\(^3\) Ironically, it was a study of transport, by the U.S. econometrician Robert Fogel, that provided an early example of counterfactual history; Professor Fogel considered what would have happened if the U.S.A. had never developed railroads, but relied on the development of inland waterway and road transport.\(^4\) This was used, not to speculate about possible alternative histories, but to assess the actual impact that the railroads provided.

Britain’s waterways provide a more recent and modest example, in the decision to retain the smaller waterways in the 1960s, made at a time of financial crisis. I would contend that had the Minister of Transport been someone other than Barbara Castle (if, say, she had declined the portfolio, or if her predecessor, the former Scottish mineworker Tom Fraser, had remained in post), it seems probable that the Treasury line of major closures to limit public expenditure would have been followed.\(^5\) This suggests that Mrs Castle’s involvement was critical, although other examples could be used to demonstrate the opposite, that, whatever the personnel involved, a similar course of decisions might have been followed.

Some possible counterfactuals concern the failure to develop larger waterways, in contrast to the position elsewhere. For instance, the canals of the English Midlands were among the very smallest navigable freight waterways in the world. It is still not established conclusively why this was so, but the position should be considered had more far-sighted approaches prevailed from the outset. Certainly more ambitious engineering works, including those to secure water supplies, would have been required, and the cost and practicalities might have retarded the spread of waterways
development in areas where investment in larger waterways would have been inhibited. However, larger waterways might have increased industrial and extractive development in the English Midlands, which might have encouraged further enlargements and developments.

One might try to assess the economic impact had locomotive railways been developed later, or if waterways had developed to meet the challenge. Conversely, had Parliament simply allowed the extinguishment of waterways concerns, rather than insist, generally, that waterways should be retained and maintained under railway company ownership, it might have been that most waterways bar larger river navigations would have been closed by the 1880s. One might also consider the position if, as applied in other parts of Europe, both waterways and railways had been owned and developed by governments, rather than being promoted and owned by private concerns. Here counter-factual and international comparative studies would mesh.

There are many more questions, but all face the problem that they proceed through speculation, and may provide the impression that history proceeded through random events rather than through structures, or that single, easily modified factors operated, rather than multiple factors which need to be explained. Counter-factual approaches may be useful to pose questions and test the analysis of events, rather than to provide alternate histories. This relies upon analysis of findings rather than the consideration of primary evidence.

Environmental history, transport, and waterways

Counterfactual approaches could be applied to the widening and emerging field of environmental history. This includes analyses of what might have happened if the natural and adapted environment had not been modified for particular transport developments (including the development of whole modes) or if different modes had developed.

Environmental history can be viewed in various ways, one of which is to consider and highlight the environmental impact of particular forms of transport. Thus, attempts could be made to assess the impact of river navigation works on the ecological characteristics of unmodified rivers, especially on inland fisheries and water supplies for consumption and power generation; the latter was
a major source of practical legal controversy. Later issues about water pollution, flooding and amenity could be considered. Concerns of some similarity could apply to artificial canals (disruption to water regimes on river was a critical factor in the opposition to early schemes), but here the impact on recreational activities like shooting, that led to the diversion of routes, was significant. Although deemed adverse impacts on landscapes fostered mitigation measures with railways, this also took place with canals, shown in early examples such as the Falkirk Tunnel, protecting the view of Callendar House, and the Chirk Aqueduct, designed to blend with the appearance of the Ceiriog valley.

Environmental history can be viewed much more broadly, placing histories of transport within the history of processes of transformation of global environments. The environment – natural or adapted – need not be seen as an additional factor in economic development, but as the base for all human activity. Smaller inland waterways may have provided only limited factors in this transformation.

Finally, a subset of environmental history is the history of conservation. This can be viewed as the broad conservation of resources, or, more narrowly, as the conservation of environmental elements for such purposes as the protection of species and habitats, constituents deemed to be of historic importance, aesthetically valuable, or amenity or recreational resources. History can be viewed in terms of knowledge and perceptions of conservation, much of it cultural in origin (including the culture of scientific development). It would possible to link the development of Darwinian science and ecology, the consequences of industrial, urban and agricultural change, and the knowledge of nature, historic and resource conservation. These form part of the background for the growth of concern for the preservation of inland waterways and amenities.

Conservation history may thus also deal with attempts to conserve, crossing boundaries between the cultural, technical and political. The much-vaunted “saving” of waterways in the postwar period was influenced by much broader and longer-term movements to “save” significant historic, natural and cultural environments. Wider explanations of postwar inland waterways require some
grounding in the history (at least in outline from secondary sources) of postwar movements for conservation. This includes clashes between incommensurate elements of conservation (such as restoring the historic at the expense of valuable habitats), and against wider forces of development (such as the motorway system and urban renewal).

The development of pleasure boating and leisure

Finally, on a seemingly smaller scale, one specialism for which much more detail and depth may grow is that of the leisure use of waterways. Most transport history has focused on the movement of freight (and passengers), rather than leisure; waterways history has been no exception. However, it may well be that, as experience of freight movements pass into distant memory, much greater public attention will be paid to the history of pleasure boating. This could be considered over different periods, such as the past 60 years, for which oral memories, surviving vessels and photographic evidence and writings would apply. Times before the mid-1950s, going back to the beginning of medium-scale pleasure boating in the Norfolk and Suffolk Broads in the 1880s, are less accessible, although this is perhaps the formative period for the current scene. Even earlier, going back to small-scale boating on rivers and inland lakes, pleasure boating primarily involved small numbers of elite people, and little everyday experience and activities went recorded.

Partly corresponding to chronological periods, there have been developments in vessels, motive power, facilities and – perhaps critically - opportunities and motives. Many technological developments did not begin with inland waterways, and the growth of leisure boating (such as sailing, canoeing and powered craft for racing and exploring) on seas, estuaries and inland waters needs to be traced and explained. Similarly, vessels and engines tended to be developed for larger waterways and only later applied to leisure use on smaller inland waterways.

There are specialisms that could be developed here – enthusiasts for fibreglass Norman cruisers, or mahogany boats built by J H Taylor of Chester, for instance, have recorded much on internet sites. However, there is a more general narrative to be related and explained, that would begin with developments on the non-tidal Thames and the Broads, and then consider the growth of}
boating on river navigations, lakes and estuaries, and their gradual spread onto the canal system. This would relate holiday and leisure experiences to the growth of industries like those in hire boating, in boatbuilding and engine development, and, later, in campaigning and pressure to retain waterways and develop facilities for day and holiday use. Studies could be set within more general considerations of the growth of leisure time and activities, and the meanings which these embodied.

The history of other leisure uses of inland waterways – angling and towpath walking, for instance – seems hardly to have been considered, but there is scope for new, if perhaps less significant studies. Small-boat use on a limited scale, such as rowing boats or canoe (although the latter has a feature of canoe touring) could also be detailed. For that matter, incidental uses such as water supply and sales could be considered; for rivers, much has been written about the water regime for supply and drainage, and even about the history of catchment management, into which the role of navigation could be analysed.

Some Conclusions

I have suggested the framework for a series of research agendas that could take multiple lifetimes to complete. In no way am I suggesting that established researchers in waterways history should divert their efforts to any of these agendas. However, I would submit that if waterways history is to develop, it will depend upon the attraction of new researchers, who may well come from diverse backgrounds that differ greatly from those of most researchers. Some of these agendas might be pursued by new researchers, or correspond to their interests, and the only policy that can be commended is that established researchers in “conventional” waterways history are receptive to new investigations and approaches, and those who research them.

No doubt many further frameworks and agendas could be drawn up, and this would be a helpful task in itself. Some suggestions could be applied to other modes of transport, especially railways. I hope that this outline may spur or encourage new research and new researchers, rather than to dismiss or devalue longstanding approaches to waterways and transport history.
The National Library of Wales has made Welsh Newspapers Online freely accessible; it includes coverage of issues outside Wales. British Newspaper Archive is available by paid subscription, while national newspapers such as the Manchester Guardian/Observer and The Times are available through libraries which have subscribed to their collections.

Ughtred Kay-Shuttleworth, Reports of the Royal Commission appointed to enquire into and to report on the canals and inland navigations of the United Kingdom, especially the volume on foreign waterways. See also my piece: Ughtred Kay-Shuttleworth and Waterways Development, Journal of the Railway and Canal Historical Society 216, March 2013.


The remarkable Broadland memories website, with a wide range of recalled and archived material, provides examples. See http://www.broadlandmemories.co.uk/index.html, accessed 15 August 2015.