

## The River Wreake and its Influence on Rearsby History

The River Eye rises at Bescaby on the fringe of the Vale of Belvoir near the Leicestershire/Lincolnshire border. The confluence of the River Eye, Thorpe Brook and Scaford Brook occurs at the eastern edge of Melton Mowbray close to Sysonby Lodge to become the River Wreake, which then flows from east to west through the centre of the town. The width of its floodplain varies from about 70 metres at Melton Mowbray to about 700 metres at Thrussington and towards Rearsby in the lower reaches.

The total catchment area of the Rivers Wreake and Eye is over four hundred square kilometres. The catchment upstream of Melton is predominately rural with rolling open exposed ridges and valleys with sparse tree cover. Features such as ridge and furrow fields, hedge banks and enclosures indicate the historical development of the landscape. There are small settlements en route and scattered housing and farms. A flood storage reservoir is located on the Scaford Brook to the north of the town.

Melton Mowbray became the Wreake basin's trading centre in Anglo-Saxon times. Its market probably pre-dates the Norman conquest and is one of the few listed in the Domesday Book (1086). Melton continued as the main trading centre in the area throughout the Middle Ages and up to the present day.

The Wreake flows southwest through Leicestershire passing through Melton Mowbray, Asfordby, Frisby on the Wreake, Hoby, Brooksby, Thrussington, (where it is closest to Rearsby), and Ratcliffe on the Wreake to meet the a river Soar at Syston. The name *Wreake* was given by the Danish invaders of Leicestershire, who probably navigated the River Trent, then the River Soar and finally into the Wreake as they entered the district. Their word Wreake indicated that the river followed a tortuous, twisting and turning course.

The river Wreake, which forms a border to Rearsby on its northern boundary, is always accepted as being part of Rearsby but very little is written or recorded about it. Flowing through the Wreake valley, the river has been part of the history of villages and hamlets that sprung up along its banks. Its wide flood plain makes riverside inhabitants in villages and various other dwellings aware of its existence only during wet periods when local roads can become impassible and fields are flooded.

However, during one period of nearly a hundred years the river was canalised and became a major artery called the Melton Navigation canal. This helped to transform the development of the Wreake valley villages which were then dependent for transportation on a turnpike road that was slow and often difficult for transport and movement of people and goods. In the late eighteenth century, the river was made navigable by the construction of a series locks from the River Soar at Syston up to Melton Mowbray. The canal was just over fourteen miles long and rose a total of seventy one feet by means of twelve broad locks and these included locks at Ratcliffe on the Wreake, Rearsby and Thrussington where three of the nine mills on the river were located.

In many places the river was straightened to facilitate easier passage of barges and to this day several oxbow type lakes are still plain to see in the river valley along with weir pools associated with locks and mills. The canal serviced the villages on its banks and enabled carriers to move mainly coal from the Derbyshire coalfields up to Melton Mowbray and later to Oakham when the navigation was further extended. Market produce and wool was carried on the return journey.

During the heyday of the Melton Mowbray Navigation, the main wharfs were at Melton Basin and Rearsby. The traffic records figures indicated that there were nine other wharves, the precise location of most of them is conjectural. Thrussington Wharf with its proximity to Rearsby was situated just downstream of the double arched bridge at Thrussington on the Thrussington bank. It is noted that the double arches were built as a facility for barges to pass each other easily on the canal.

Melton Mowbray and Rearsby were the busiest wharfs. The main cargoes were coal, supplemented by barley, oats and wheat, granite, Mountsorrel stone, lime, wool and manure. Coal traffic amounted to 16,781 tons in 1797. In the year after Queen Victoria came to the throne over 40,000 tons of cargo were carried. In 1840 alone, over 4,000 tons of coal was unloaded at Rearsby Wharf. In addition to the traditional drawn horse barges used on the canal there was even the occasional barge equipped with sails that were lowered to go under the bridges. Barges could carry up to 40 tons of cargo and normally had a maximum draft of 3ft 6ins.

Rearsby Wharf is no more but was located between Ratcliffe mill and Rearsby mill close to the bend in Broome Lane next to the river, and was a major feature of the landscape. It was established in the early days of the Navigation by the Kirby family who maintained their interest in the site for over sixty years. The wharf, at the end of an artificial cut, was used to primarily to bring in coal for the villages of East Leicestershire.

During the nineteenth century Rearsby was a thriving community serviced by the canal and later the railway as well as the turnpike road. When the canal was at its peak in the first half of the nineteenth century Rearsby village was predominately involved with arable farming and the fields produced large crops of wheat, rye, barley, oats, potatoes beans and turnips. The village school, the Methodist Chapel and numerous other building were erected. Red bricked, slate roofed estate cottages were built universally for farm workers. Many villagers were engaged in the manufacture of hosiery and at peak their were over seventy framework knitting devices in operation in the village. The village was able to supply most of its needs from its inhabitants and there were several shops and a smithy, and different tradesmen plied their businesses mainly from home.

Rearsby Mill was one of the earliest buildings in the village and its origins date back to its construction by a nephew of William the Conqueror and was then detailed in the Domesday Book. No doubt it so many changes during its history before the coming of the Wreake Navigation and it was completely rebuilt in the 1820's. It included a bake house where the famous 100% Wholemeal Rearsby Loaf was produced (as well as the Warden Loaf made for Warden and Mathewson). In the course of its history it acquired a steam stack and an engine house for auxiliary power when river levels were low. These are no more but the iron water wheel still exists. Flour was transported by punt and wagon and there was a cobbled road and not just a track linking the Mill to the village. When the canal was abandoned the bridge at Rearsby mill was replaced by a flat iron bridge between existing piers.

There was also a thriving mill with a long history at Thrussington opposite Bleakmoor Wood where there was a canal lock, wire pool and a wharf. The buildings at the Mill are subject to ongoing works and many of the features of the working mill are still in place along with numerous artefacts. The mill is on the Leicestershire Round footpath and is readily accessible from Rearsby with various circular walk options. In addition, in conjunction with the property owners, Melton and Oakham Waterway Society is carrying out work to expose and showpiece the old lock and do some partial restoration including installing an old lock gate. There are plans to erect a display board to inform passing walkers of the history and future plans for the site.

The 'Melton Navigation' opened in 1794 and was initially extremely successful . During the 1820s the was competition at Melton from land carriage of good from the Wharfs at Hickling and Harby on the Grantham Canal. The competition forced transport tolls to be reduced and the Oakham Canal was never a financial success. This brought about its closure and the subsequent traffic on the Wreak Navigation was reduced by more than half. In 1846 the Syston and Peterborough Railway opened and canal tolls were dropped in an effort to maintain traffic but this was ineffective.

The canal was offered to the Soar Navigation Company and to Midlands Railway but they both refused. With the worsening financial position the company was unable to continue and the canal was closed in 1877 with the passing of an Act of Abandonment. Stone weirs were constructed at the locks to replace the lock gates thereby retaining water levels for the mills. A small amount of local traffic continued to use the navigation between locks for the next thirty years, and there was a

pleasure boat that plied the waters near Melton Mowbray. A few traces of the old canal can still be seen in the valley, but sadly the river is no longer navigable. The river level is predominately maintained at a low level well below the tops of its banks to maximise the removal of excess water in times of flooding.

There was a meticulous written record of the Melton Navigation during its history kept by the company of solicitors that were involved with all activities including the construction, operating, and eventual demolition of the Canal, but these records in their entirety were lost when the company relocated at the start of the twentieth century. A massive slice of local history records just went missing. There are a few sparse remains of the canal, although the river has largely reverted to its natural state. All that remains are snippets of information that have been gleaned from various third party accounts and records.

The Wreake makes its presence felt locally, but its banks are devoid of the intensive development which scars parts of Leicestershire, and its banks are green and pleasant. It is a relatively unknown part of the landscape. Like many rivers it has a long history, much of it unwritten, much of it lost. It is still vital as a water source and drainage route and has a leisure focus for fishermen and those who walk the rights of way that criss-cross its route. It is still possible to use small boats or canoes on parts of the river which is readily accessible at various locations. Discovery of the remnants of its history in the Wreake valley can still be enjoyed by all.

The Wreake comes under the auspices of the Environmental Agency whose main aim is to maintain the flow of the river and minimise flooding. It is graded by the Environment Agency as "B" quality, which is excellent for a Midlands river. River surveys allegedly report mayfly and stonefly nymphs, caddis fly larvae, dragonfly and damselfly nymphs and crayfish. Among the fish are perch, chub, pike, minnows, and trout. However the stocks within the river have been decimated in recent times by cormorants which breed locally and can be seen all year round on the river. Fishing rights are mainly privately owned. Otters are allegedly starting to repopulate the Wreake in its quieter stretches, but they are very shy creatures and difficult to locate.

Melton and Oakham Waterways Society was formed in 1997 with their objective being to maximise the social, economic, environmental and leisure opportunities from the restoration of the Melton Mowbray Navigation and the preservation of the Oakham Canal. MOWS supports many interests, including conservation, angling, walking, cycling, boating and local history. The long term object is to restore the Melton Navigation to its former glory. This is a very long term project but work has started at each end along with various activities at locations en route.

A stretch of waterway at Melton is navigable and the society has work boats that are actively used to maintain the waterway. At Syston, the stretch between the new Three-Way Bridge (championed by MOWS) at the Junction and the Gate Hangs Well pub contains a location for the first winding hole, the first lock site and possible overnight moorings outside the pub. The landowner at the Junction has expressed an interest at rebuilding the old toll house as a visitor centre, with canoe storage and camping to the rear, whilst several other riparian owners in the vicinity have expressed an interest in restoration. The website of the Melton and Oakham Waterways Society can be accessed via this link <https://meltonwaterways.org.uk/>.

Rearsby has become a commuter village with very little of its own industry, with two public houses only one shop. This process started with the demise of the Melton Navigation, and the coming of the railway. Labour intensive arable farming moved to pastoral farming specialising in cattle and sheep, and villagers were drawn to the industries of Leicester with the chance of steady jobs and regular income. The railway station was closed down in the 1950s, with road transport being readily available to all, and local industry declined. However the River Wreake remains important to Rearsby and in the future will play a greater part in people's lives as increasing leisure time will allow it to be developed and enjoyed for recreational purposes and be readily accessible to all.

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