

CHANGES ON THE RIVER IN THE 1850s

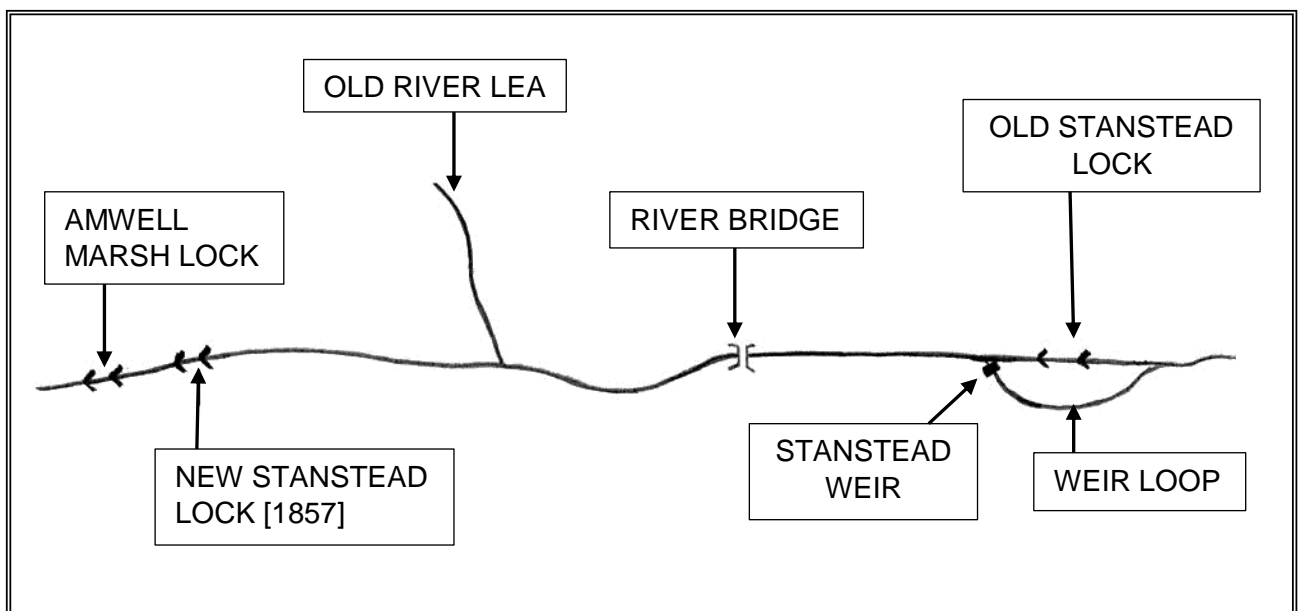
By
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Within the 1855 Act of Parliament concerning the Lea navigation were changes to the river in the vicinity of Stanstead Abbots. This allowed for the complete removal of Old Stanstead Lock and Weir with the level of water at Fields Weir upper gates being taken right back to just downstream of Amwell Marsh Lock, where a new lock was to be constructed. This new lock is today's Stanstead Lock and incorporates the drop in water level previously managed by both Amwell Marsh Lock and Old Stanstead Lock.



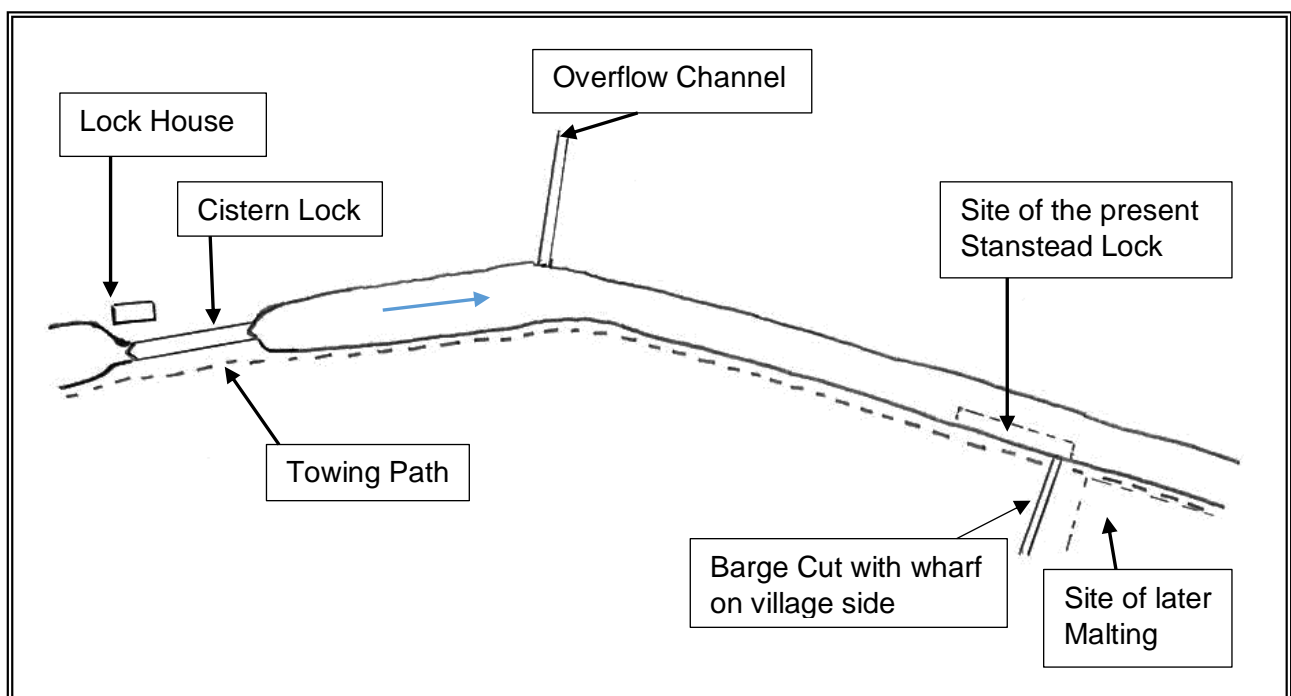
A modern view of Stanstead Lock looking upstream showing lower gates open

General Location of Locks and Weirs in the 1850's



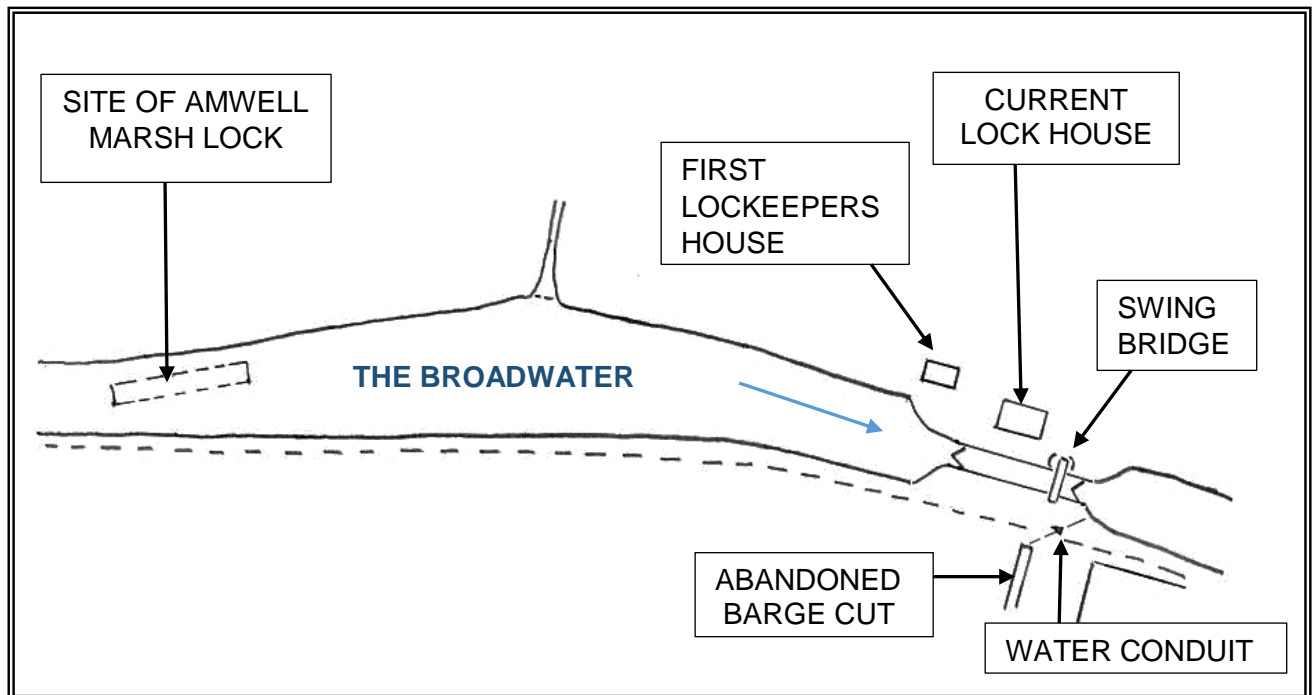
Amwell Marsh Lock dated from the major improvements carried out along the river in the mid 1760s which included the new navigation cut from the Tumbling Bay at Ware to just upstream of Stanstead Bridge. The Lock was sometimes referred to as Amwell North Lock and provided a drop in water level of about 4 feet 10 inches. At first it would seem that the stretch of river through the village was managed by locals. It is recorded in 1772 that Messrs Pepper and Hankin, two Stanstead Abbots businessmen, were jointly paid 4/- a week to look after both Locks and the Weir as well as the river between them. This arrangement lasted for about four years before the usual arrangement of Lock Keepers seems to have been introduced. Records are a little sparse for Amwell Marsh Lock but Francis Hornsby is known to have been the Lock Keeper employed between 1851 and its closure in 1857. Amwell Marsh Lock was located some 170 yards upstream of the present Stanstead Lock. Its location was subsequently entirely dug away during the construction of the wide stretch of river known locally as the Broadwater which is upstream of the present Stanstead Lock. It is probable that the extra width of the river was caused by the need to source a considerable amount of soil to raise the banks from Amwell Marsh Lock to the downstream side of the new lock. It being much cheaper and far more convenient to use soil so close to hand than to transport it in from afar.

Amwell Marsh Lock before the Changes of the 1850s



The river before the 1856-7 changes was much narrower along this stretch than it is today. The barge joined the river at a point which is now occupied by the current lock. It was cut off by the changes that occurred in the 1850s but its remains can still be seen today alongside the track that leads from Amwell Lane to the present lock.

Map showing the changes made to the river in 1856-7



The site of Amwell Marsh Lock was completely dug away with the formation of the wide stretch of the river that was constructed in the mid 1850s. This stretch of the river is known locally, perhaps not surprisingly, as "The Broadwater" The abandoned barge cut had an underground pipe constructed to allow water to escape to the river. This still exists today and can still convey water to the river in wetter periods.

Stanstead Lock opened in September 1857 with a width of 16 feet and overall length of 89 feet, an effective maximum boat length of 85 feet and a drop of 8 feet 9 inches. Once in operation both Amwell marsh Lock and Old Stanstead Lock were removed fairly promptly. A rather crude lock house was ready to be occupied by the 21st April 1859. This was a single storey house with a concrete floor and Lime plastered walls over lathes. It would seem from various reports that this house was far from satisfactory. Improvements include the laying of wooden floors, over the top of the concrete floors, in 1877. No doubt helping in reducing the cold and dampness that must have been prevalent in the house. A report of 1886 describes the house as being in bad condition with very objectionable sanitary arrangements that drain directly into the river. A new WC was provided and the original completely removed. A suggested improvement in 1898 would have seen the roof raised by 2 feet 6 inches and two bedrooms inserted in the roof space. The cost including damp course and other improvements were estimated at about £180. Perhaps to the Lock Keepers relief it was decided that £350 could be well spent on a brand new brick built house with three upstairs bedrooms. By 1899 twelve foot deep foundations were being dug for the new house. A considerable depth but found necessary due to the soft wet ground. The Lock House cost £345, being constructed by the well-known local firm of F. Hitch of Ware. A further £6 was expended on a 44 foot deep borehole down into the chalk and a hand pump to draw up fresh water. A date stone still to be seen today on the front of the building gives the build date of 1899. It is recorded that the Lock Keeper had moved in by June 1900.



The builders of the current Lock Keepers House have left to us an attractive date stone on the front of the building. The L. C. stands for Lee Conservancy.

The first known keeper was John Smith who transferred in from Ware Tumbling Bay in 1859 moving on to Hertford Lock in 1871. The second and third keepers were Edward Kadwell 1871 – 1879 and Henry Wilkinson 1880 to 1885. It is sad to relate that both fell into the Lock and drowned while walking along the top of the gates during the hours of darkness while carrying out their duties. The last keeper that the author can find details for was Bill White 1977 – 1987, when he moved on the Feildes Weir Lock



A modern view from upstream of Stanstead Lock showing closest to the camera, a modern extension to the original building. This lock is considered to be one of the most awkward locks to operate on Britain's Waterways,



An unusual feature of Stanstead Lock is the swing bridge which today provides access to the cruising club located on the north side of the navigation

Downstream of the river bridge Old Stanstead Lock, Stanstead weir and its associated loop were all removed during the alterations. The river was widened where the lock had been and the old loop was left as a pond dammed off from the river. It slowly silted up and by the middle of the C20th was just a curved marshy area. The location once occupied by Stanstead weir and the old loop associated with it have disappeared under a residential development and no visible traces remain.



A modern view of the river just downstream of the boatyard building in the vicinity of where the old loop once went off to the right. Old Stanstead Lock was located in what is now mid river a little beyond [downstream] of the blue barge in the centre of the picture. This view represents a very different scene to that which existed before 1857.

The work carried out in the mid 1850s certainly benefited the river authorities as it reduced both staffing and maintenance by removing a lock, a weir and abandoning the loop in the river. The drop in water level controlled by Old Stanstead Lock was incorporated in the new Stanstead Lock. This meant that the river level through the village was reduced by approximately 3 feet 6 inches. This helped in lowering the level of the water table in the vicinity of the village. It is interesting to note that after the 1850's more and more of the fields either side of the High Street were brought into residential or commercial use.

Note

The reader may wish to read an article specifically focused on Stanstead Old Lock which can be found within the media section of this website.

Stuart Moye October 2017