

Mill Bridge

Shelford (meaning shallow ford) was one of many places along the River Trent where crossing on foot was possible. This is almost certainly the reason for the existence of settlements in the area from the earliest times.

The use of the river as a means of moving bulk cargoes was so important that from the 12th century measures were taken to ensure that obstructions to navigation were removed and failure to do so incurred heavy fines. Around 1155, Henry II confirmed, in a charter granted to the borough of Nottingham, that no weir should be erected within a perch (about 16½ feet) of midstream. The charter also gave the burgesses of Nottingham the right to levy tolls on craft that used the Trent from Thrumpton to Newark. Article 33 of the Magna Carta has a clause demanding the removal of Kydells (weirs) on all rivers to ensure free passage for boats. In 1322 Edward II appointed a Crown official to safeguard the movement of boats and their cargoes on the Trent. Further protection was afforded in 1332 when Edward III proclaimed that landowners could not charge for boats being towed on banks that formed part of their estates.

Against this background, the conflict between free navigation of the Trent for trade and the use of its power for mills caused numerous disputes. Many of these lasted for several years.

For further information see:

Sir Thomas Stanhope of Shelford by Beryl Cobbing and Pamela Priestland Ashbracken. 2003
The River Trent by Richard Stone. Phillimore and Co. Ltd. 2005

In about 1576, Sir Thomas Stanhope constructed a weir, locks and mills and set out his fishgarths (fish traps) on the eastern bank of the river, at a place called Prior's Holt. The lock was an early form of "pound lock" where gates at each end formed a pound in which boats could be held pending a change in levels. Sir Thomas' lock was the first on the Trent and possibly only the second in the country.

In order to build the lock Sir Thomas had to excavate the ditch running down the side of Prior's Holt. The map shows the words "Here the earth is digged to bring the stream to the locks"



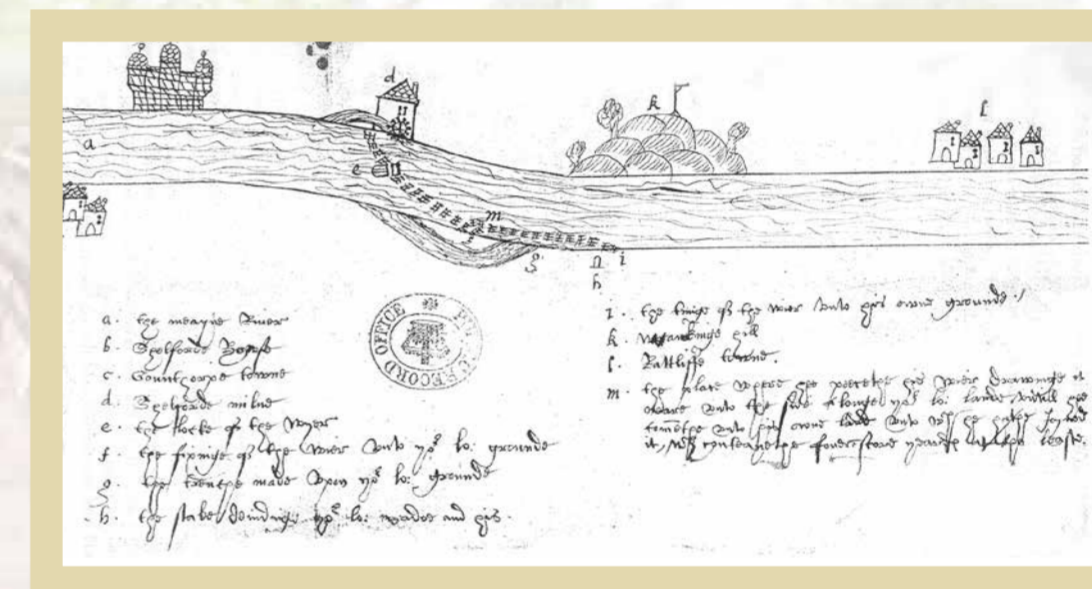
Mill Bridge today

From 1591 onwards petitions, letters and court depositions were used to protest about the effects the lock was having on fishing (river fish, including salmon, provided many families with their livelihood), navigation and flooding.

Sir Thomas' enemy, the Earl of Shrewsbury, seized this opportunity to increase the pressure on his old adversary.

Neighbours added fuel to the dispute by including a further list of grievances. For the next two years claims and counter claims contributed to a confused picture and the case was referred to the Privy Council.

In 1593 matters came to a head when the Earl's agent, Nicholas Williamson organised a group of men from across Nottinghamshire and Derbyshire to pull down the weir and dig a trench on the Stoke Bardolph side to divert the water away from the millstream. The case achieved national notoriety, principally because of the players involved.



Sketch map of riverside scene in 1593 (Public Record Office SP 46/49 f.128)

Today, traces of the millstream can still be seen traversing the meadows of Shelford. Although dried up in many places, its course can be seen from Prior's Holt along the line of the old Trent through what is now known as Swallow Plantation, under Stoke Ferry Lane rejoining the river at Ham's Bridge (ham meaning a bend in the river).

There is no trace of the locks or weir and the only remains of what once was a national soap opera is the mill bridge which crosses the dried up millstream which once was the River Trent.

Mill Bridge can be found down the footpath opposite between the cottages and at the end of a farm lane to the right; however no access is allowed from the footpath as it is private land.