

A brief history of Dedham Lock



River Stour Trust

Dedham Lock dates to the heyday of the navigation in the 1700s. Downstream cargo included flour from the many mills alongside the river, and other agricultural produce from the bountiful Suffolk land, such as grains. These were transported on Stour Lighters (a type of barge) for onward travel into Thames barges at Mistley; and then on to feed the growing population of London. Other downstream cargo included bricks from several local brickworks, such as Allen Brickworks which supplied bricks that were used in the construction of many well-known London buildings, including Liverpool Street Station, The Royal Albert Hall, and the Kensington museums.

Return loads included coal, used to fire the brick ovens and warm houses, and manufactured goods as well as the infamous London 'night soil', which was then spread onto the fields as a fertiliser. A virtuous circle that would be applauded today, but instead we now pump the 'night soil' straight back into the river. So much for 200 years of progress*!

[*check progress with the 'clean water initiative' between the River Stour Trust and Sudbury Town Council seeking to gain Designated Bathing Water status for the River Stour between the Granary Cut in Sudbury and Great Cornard Lock – more information on RST website]

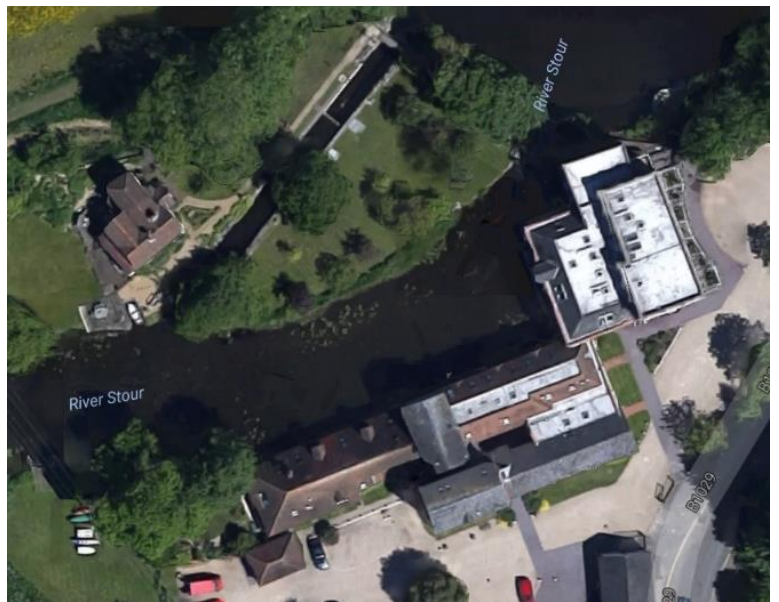
One of the reasons that the Navigation was so successful commercially was that one horse could tow two Lighters carrying 26 tonnes of cargo for 25 miles over two days. Whereas, that same horse pulling along in a wagon along the cart tracks of the day, would barely have managed half a ton.

At the time John Constable painted the lock in 1820, the mill was owned by his father Golding Constable, a prosperous mill-owner, which allowed the young Constable to indulge his passion for painting. We are grateful for his keen eye for detail, which tells us much about the river and its working people at the time.



Dedham Lock and Mill, c1820. Courtesy of the V&A Museum

As with so many of Constable's masterpieces, remarkably little has changed in the scene to this day. The lock is in the same place, as is the mill, now converted to apartments. The sluices in front of the mill which control the level of the water are still there in a modern form, and the footbridge still crosses the tail of the lock.



If you look in the bottom right-hand corner, you can see the old river where it entered the millpond. The riverbed today is dried up for most of the year, but in the winter floods it fills back up to Lock Cottage.

One of the anomalies is Constable's painting is the goalpost shaped lock lintel apparently sited below the tail of the lock. These were used to keep the wooden walls of the lock from falling in, and so would have been located alongside the gates. However, Constable must have moved it out of position, as otherwise it would have spoilt the composition of the centre of the picture. Similarly, Dedham Church tower has moved to the right, as again otherwise it would have clashed with the sailing boat waiting to load. In fact, the tower moves about in all of Constable's paintings to suit the composition – almost his signature mark. In those days it was called artistic licence – now it is Photoshop!

Also, if you look closely, even though the figure on the lock is tiny, you can still see that Constable wanted to show the bargee operating the spike and windlass system used to raise the gate sluices. This was a system unique to the Stour, which can still be seen on the top of the present gates.

When the River Stour Trust installed new gates at Flatford and Stratford St Mary we retained the original winding gear in place, for aesthetic reasons, even though the sluices are now operated by fully Health and Safety compliant windlasses.

The bottom gate showing the spike and windlass system for raising and lowering the sluices. These gates probably date back to 1933, but the windlass system has always been used on the river, a feature unique to Stour locks.



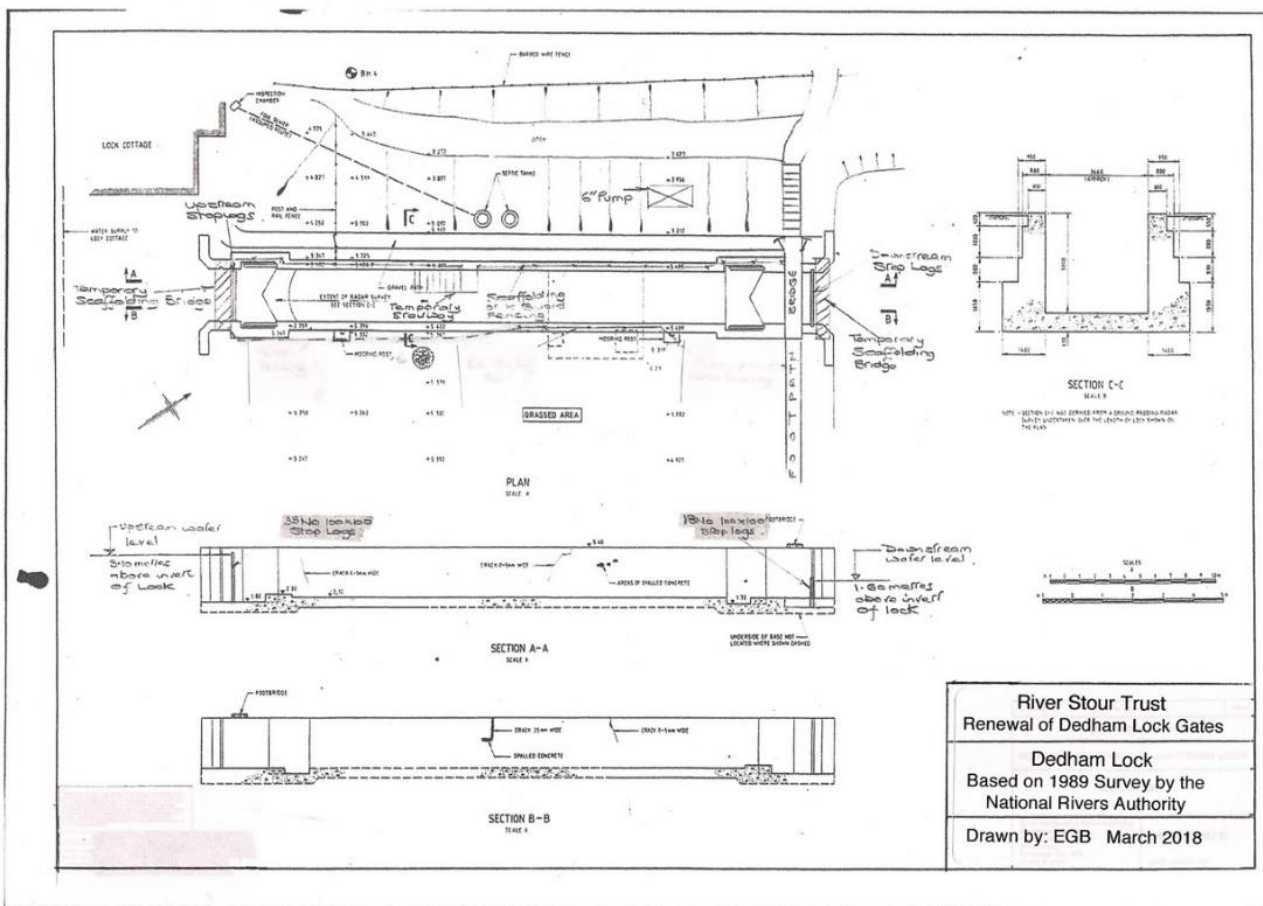
The original lock would have had wooden sides, but in the 1930s, the then Essex Water Company rebuilt the four locks at Brantham, Flatford, Dedham and Stratford St Mary with modern concrete chambers. This was done as a last-ditch attempt to revive commercial carrying on the lower river; and was a requirement of the company being granted the water extraction rights from the river. Even so there is little evidence that much or any commercial traffic passed through, but it is because of this that we still have the locks today. And bearing in mind the billions the subsequent water companies have made from the river, it probably scarcely made a blip on the balance sheet.

And so, the locks slumbered till the 1970s when the River Stour Trust started its restoration work. We were able to buy Flatford Lock from the Crown Estate, and in 1990, it was restored, with a £90,000 grant from Rio Tinto Zinc, probably worth three times that much today.

We did not have enough funds for new gates at Dedham and did not own the lock but instead we gave enough money to the National Rivers Authority, predecessor of the Environment Agency, to enable them to put new facing on the gates, enough to make them watertight.

However, in 2014 the EA finally declared the gates unsafe, and through passage had to stop. Bearing in mind these are probably the original 1933 gates, they have not done badly!

And so, we arrive to the present day. For those with an engineering interest, the detailed construction plan of the lock shows the cross-section of the walls as being a pyramid-like structure. This was needed to counteract the tendency of the walls to fall inwards and removes the need for lock lintels. Although, at Flatford and Great Cornard, the lintels were retained for aesthetic and nostalgic reasons. It also shows how strongly the locks were built, which ('touch wood', or rather now concrete) means they should stand for another good many years.



If anyone has any more information on the lock and its background, or has spotted any errors, please do get in touch – email us at administrator@riverstourtrust.org.