



**John Blair, ed.** *Waterways and Canal-Building in Medieval England*. Medieval History and Archaeology Series. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007. xiii + 315 pp. \$99.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-921715-1.

**Reviewed by** James A. Galloway (Institute of Historical Research, University of London)

**Published on** H-Albion (November, 2009)

**Commissioned by** Margaret McGlynn (University of Western Ontario)

## A Golden Age of Water Transport

“The starting point for this project,” writes John Blair in his preface to this volume, “was my growing conviction during the 1990s, as I worked on the medieval landscapes of the upper Thames region, that I was encountering watercourses that were neither natural nor recent, and could only be understood as relict canals” (p. v). This growing belief led Blair to convene a colloquium, held in Oxford in 1999, of scholars from a variety of disciplines whose own work seemed to be pointing in a similar direction, or whose expertise bore directly on the broader theme of watercourses and water transport in the Middle Ages. The papers presented at that meeting form the core of the present volume, developed over a number of years through the exchange of drafts and the addition of a number of invited contributors.

The result is a valuable and thought-provoking collection of essays, written from a variety of disciplinary perspectives and methodological approaches. Archaeology, place-name studies, and physical geography are all represented, as well as mainstream (if the pun be allowed) documentary history. Chronologically, the emphasis is on the period between the mid-tenth and mid-thirteenth centuries, although some essays review the Roman and early Saxon background, while others, notably those of Mark Gardiner and John Langdon, draw extensively on later medieval sources. Geographically, the core of the book focuses on the Thames, Severn, and Wash/Humber systems, which, Blair convincingly argues, were the core

economic and cultural conduits of England in the earlier and central Middle Ages. Two maps in Blair’s introductory chapter, on pages 16 and 18, graphically represent this centrality, based on the evidence of place-names, coin finds, and the later purveyance accounts.

Water transport in England, the evidence marshaled in this volume persuasively indicates, was a dynamic and vital system in the centuries immediately before and after the Norman Conquest. Not yet irreparably cluttered in their upper reaches by fish weirs, mill-dams, and bridges, the major rivers carried trade goods, domestic and imported, far inland and in return exported the produce of the countryside. Small landing places, indicated by the place-name element *hythe*, lined the banks of the rivers from their mouths to locations far inland. Gardiner’s chapter reviews the types and functions of these small ports and landing places and stresses their continuing role in the later Middle Ages. Significantly, as Ann Cole points out in her valuable analysis of water transport related place-names, the Thames had more *-hythe* place-names than any other river.

So crucial was access to water transport in these centuries that frequently works were undertaken to straighten and improve natural watercourses or to engineer entirely artificial stretches of canal. Ed Rhodes, a geographer, contributes a very useful chapter succinctly explaining river forms and processes as a means to understanding the causes and effects of human interven-

tion on fluvial systems. Using illustrated examples from the Thames and its tributaries, Rhodes identifies many stretches where artificial straightening has been carried out to improve navigation and perhaps to improve flow. Many of these modifications, identified from map evidence, cannot be dated, but Blair, in his concluding chapter on transport on the Upper Thames, provides ample proof that a good number originate in the early medieval period, including the eleventh century canalization of the river at Abingdon. Another key chapter—and the longest in the volume—is contributed by James Bond, who reviews the history of canal construction in the early Middle Ages and places it within a European context. Including as he does consideration of Roman and Carolingian canal building, Bond shows that medieval engineers could draw on a long technological tradition, albeit one largely ignored in traditional histories of water transport and water management in England.

Arguing from the early medievalist's perspective, Blair contrasts the "purposeful and dynamic" improvement of navigable waterways before c.1250 with their "fragmented and incoherent" attrition thereafter (p. 11). Later medievalists might retort that that fragmentation and incoherence was the result of a greater intensity of economic activity, more systematic exploitation of natural resources, and a decline in seigniorial power—a more complex and pluralistic socioeconomic system, in other words. As Della Hooke points out, it is unlikely that other users of river water had become sufficiently numerous in the early medieval period to create enormous problems for waterborne transport. By the early fourteenth century, however, regular bulk transport was largely confined to the lower stretches of the major river systems, as Langdon's chapter shows, summarizing an argument based on a systematic analysis of royal purveyance accounts and honed through debate with Brian Paul Hindle and James Frederick Edwards, Evan Jones, and others in

the 1990s. Then again, as Blair and Gardiner argue, different Thames-using worlds could coexist—long-distance, bulk transport on the one hand and local, small-vessel circuits of exchange on the other—which tended to become more separate as the Middle Ages progressed, but were never entirely severed.

There is much more in this volume than can be adequately discussed in this short review, which has tried to focus on the core themes. Mention should however be made of the group of chapters by Charles and Nancy Hollinrake, Stephen Rippon, and Christopher K. Currie, which focus on developments in southwest and southern England; and Fiona Edmond's study of early water transport in the northwest, a very different world in terms of the physical environment and economic activity. Rippon's chapter also draws attention to a special group of artificial watercourses, those that were constructed in and through reclaimed coastal wetlands. In the Somerset Levels, natural watercourses were straightened and artificial ones constructed, both for navigation and drainage. On the other side of England, the "Rhee Wall," a major artificial watercourse, was constructed for the sole purpose of flushing out the estuary of the river Rother at New Romney; being completely embanked, it had no marsh drainage function.

This is an important volume that bears upon many areas of English economic and social history. Those interested in the commercialization of English society, in the interaction of politics (local and central) and economics, in human interaction with the physical environment, and in the exploitation of fisheries and waterpower will all find much of value here, in addition to the major contributions that the volume makes to the history of river transport. If, as Blair intended, it is "a starting-point rather than a summing up," it is also a platform on which to stand and look with new insight, and new questions, at the waterways of medieval England (p. 18).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-albion>

**Citation:** James A. Galloway. Review of Blair, John, ed., *Waterways and Canal-Building in Medieval England*. H-Albion, H-Net Reviews. November, 2009.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=24150>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.