

# A Lost Lincolnshire Port



## *Anthony J. Pierce traces the rise and fall of river trade and boat building at Spalding*

The river Welland rises at Sibbertoft Fields in Northamptonshire and flows through Market Harborough to Stamford where it is joined by the river Gwash. Through Market Deeping, Crowland and Spalding the river reaches Surfleet where it is joined by the river Glen and Vernatts Drain before emptying into the Wash just beyond the village of Fosdyke, the lowest bridging point on the river.

The Welland today is a peaceful river, tidal only to the outskirts of Spalding, though until drainage improvements took place in the early 1950s the tidal current reached through the town of Spalding and beyond towards Stamford. Even when the tide continued above Spalding, no high masted sea going vessel could go higher owing to the existence of High Bridge over the river almost in the centre of Spalding.

Although no commercial trading is now carried on on the Welland, there is ample, if declining, evidence in the form of warehouses and merchants' houses on the banks of the river that Spalding was a thriving port in the mid-nineteenth century.

The river Welland has an enterprising history. During the twelfth century the Welland is reputed to have been celebrated for its immense shoals of sticklebacks which were caught and used to manure the land. An attempt was also made to obtain oil from them, but this must have been a time-consuming process. Nevertheless the quantity of these creatures was so great that at 4d (0.2p) per bushel a man could earn up to 4/- (20p) per day collecting them.

The Welland has been the subject of many Acts of Parliament, usually with regard to improving its flow either for navigation purposes, or for drainage of the surrounding land, or both. During the reign of Elizabeth I a Mr Thomas Lovell was given the task of Fen Drainage on Deeping Fen, through which the Welland flows. Lovell spent his entire savings – some £12,000 – on the project but, like so many other adventures, he lost all, largely as a result of the opposition of Fenmen who broke down the banks and earthworks he created.

Even earlier, in the reign of Henry III, the town of Spalding had been presented by jurors before the justices for neglecting to scour out and repair the Welland. By reason of this neglect it was claimed that great damage had accrued to surrounding land. The inhabitants pleaded that the Welland was, and had long been, an arm of the sea where tides ebbed and flowed twice in 24 hours and there was, therefore, no obligation to repair it.

In the reign of James I the Commissioners of Sewers found the Welland in such a bad state that they had to carry their boat between Spalding and Fosdyke for want of a current to carry them down the channel, the river being only six inches deep in places.

From this time until the present day, many schemes have been proposed and employed to ensure the Welland acts as a vital drain for the highly productive land around it. At various times the river has been widened and deepened, its course altered, and even locks built to improve flow and ease the passage of trading vessels.



## A Lost Lincolnshire Port (cont'd)



*The 'billy-boy' Laurel on the slipway of Pannell's boatyard at Spalding. A fisherman passes by in his pot- and net-laden dinghy.*

Mr J. Pannell, landlord of a Spalding public house, founded the longest established firm in the yard of his pub. In 1837 he was granted permission by the Welland Trustees to lay down a slipway on the bank of the Welland so that vessels could be hauled up for repair. This was in response to a request for proper repair facilities made by the owners and captains of ships using the river. At this time up to 40 or more sloops, ketches, schooners, brigs and lighters could often be seen between Fosdyke and Spalding.

Until his death in 1843, John Pannell carried on his business to be succeeded by his son, John Ellis Pannell. In 1888 he was succeeded by Mr Joseph E. Pannell who had learned his trade from his father and from experience in Boston. The business continued to flourish under Mr Pannell until the late 1920s when the fixing of a road bridge across the river virtually ended his trade, although he continued for a while working on craft used locally for wild-fowling.

Although this was undoubtedly the most prosperous of Spalding's boatyards, Pannell's was not the earliest. By 1792 Thomas Goodwin was at work upstream from the

centre of the port, although his yard was later moved downstream. By 1842 this yard was owned by Robert Richardson and a Captain Edward Todd Richardson came to the yard to learn his trade. Having spent some time in Spalding, Edward Richardson returned to Kings Lynn where his father had a boat-building yard. With the decline of his father's yard, Captain Richardson returned to Spalding to become Captain and part owner of a small coasting vessel the *Aurora*. This ship was built in his brother's yard and was probably launched sideways in local custom. The launching was on 25th September, 1847, and the *Aurora* was eventually lost off the mouth of the Tyne.

In addition to this yard and the Pannell's, a further yard was in operation along the Welland in the 1830s but it was short lived.

In 1842, 21 mariners, sloop and boat masters are listed as living in Spalding; the *Sarah Breeze*, *Mary Jane*, *Active* and *Mary Catherine* were some of the boats they sailed. Today the Welland sees few craft, but Spalding still bears the signs of being a port. ■



*The remarkable interior of Pannell's boatyard at Spalding beside the river Welland. No doubt the generations of Pannell's knew the exact position of everything that they needed, despite the apparent chaos. (All photos courtesy of the Spalding Gentleman's Society).*