

Gloucester Journal Report of the Second Reading of the Stroudwater Navigation Bill 1776

Gloucester Journal 19 Feb 1776.

HOUSE of COMMONS 12 February. The second reading of the Stroudwater navigation act came on and the counsel called in. Mr Bearcroft for the petitioners against the bill called several witnesses to prove that the intended navigable canal would be highly injurious to the land-owners and to the mill-owners on the river Stroudwater. These witnesses proved that the mills employed 5000 labourers, upon whom were dependent 4000 women, children, and others — that if the navigation took place, they would be thrown out of employment — that the mills had plenty of work, more than they could perform for want of water — that there are clothing, fulling, wire, corn and other mills. That the poor in general in that country were never better employed than at present — [Upon which the Speaker said significantly Ha ! that's good news however!] That some of the iron and steel mills had been erected at an expence of £7000, which would all be lost for want of water if this canal should be made. That the proposed cut was to be 42 feet wide, six feet deep and eight miles long through a soil of gravel and stone which would require a supply of water equal to a river of one inch depth and 12 feet long — But upon a cross examination it appeared that the engineer who had this account of the cut and the soil had been there only last Saturday, being sent down by the opposers of the bill since it was last in the house; his testimony therefore went but for little.

Mr Mansfield, counsel for the bill, remarked that the only arguments which would necessarily have weight with the house must turn on the utility of the proposed navigation, on the easiness of executing it and on its being practicable without damaging any one farther than the meer cutting through the lands, for which a compensation was made in the bill, points to which he should call witnesses. That the present navigation of the river was not effectual, but that he should prove the canal would be so.

Mr Leigh followed him and observed in few words that the objections started to this navigation were very extraordinary, for they were such as must necessarily be made to all navigations, that lands certainly must be cut thro' and that water to be sure was necessary to float barges — But that as to urging that the price of land carriage at present was cheaper than the price of the canal water carriage, it was too great an absurdity to demand a serious answer: he called in the engineer of the navigation Mr Yeomans, who deposed that the proposed cut would be exceedingly practicable; that the expence would be £20,000; that the utility of it to the whole country would be exceedingly great; that the river Stroudwater would suffer no loss of water which would not be made good to it by two reservoirs designed to retain the present waste of water, which runs every Sunday into the Severn. These were to be by the canal in one place, being cut three feet deeper than necessary for navigation, and in another two feet deeper; that he had made three surveys of the ground, and had at those times observed much water run to waste; that all the mills would to the full be as valuable after the Canal as at present; that the soil was the most favourable for a navigation as any he had ever seen; that the adjoining lands would suffer no detriment if the work was properly executed; that he had been long a practical and calculating engineer; that he had executed a navigation in Northamptonshire of 50 miles; and that he would undertake to execute this for £20,000.

Mr Bearcroft now replied to this evidence and arguments and the arguments of Messrs Leigh and Mansfield, but did no more than point out certain parts of his own witnesses evidence not invalidated by anything brought on the other side of the question.

Upon the counsel withdrawing, a slight debate ensued.

Mr Southwell opened the debate. He said he was a native of the county of Gloucester, and had the honour of representing it in Parliament; that he had no predilection for either party, but upon the best and most impartial information, which he had with all his industry been able to obtain, he was persuaded that the bill now proposed would be of great public utility, he should therefore give his vote for sending it to a Committee.

Mr Thomas Townshend said he should not take up the time of the House in debating the utility or inutility of navigation bills in general, though he had his doubts that the disadvantages rather preponderated on the whole, but did not ground his dissent to the present bill on the general principle of inutility but upon the particular circumstances which distinguished it from most others. He observed that there was one capital objection to the bill not pretended to be balanced on the other side, which was that 19 mills, which were situated on the river from the town of Stroud to the Severn, and 9000 people, whose daily employment and sustenance depended on those mills, would be very materially injured and thrown out of employment: add to this the damage done to the landholders in having their small inclosures cut thro' and flooded; and it afforded such reasons for rejecting the bill as could not be opposed on any grounds of utility, though those held out were certain, sufficient to intitle it to the sanction of the House.

Sir William Guise supported the bill very strenuously. He disclaimed any sort of partiality. He said private interest must give way to public convenience when compensation was the condition; that here the land-owners would have a very ample one, and that, allowing the premises to be true relative to the millers, yet the town of Stroud was situated in the midst of a very populous country, abounding with inhabitants, all of whom would be benefited in greater or lesser degree by the bill; consequently, even in this view, the local convenience of a few ought not to be sacrificed to the superior interests of the many.

Sir George Young spoke on the same side. He said it appeared by the evidence (Yeoman's the engineer) that the water necessary to fill the canal, by the method proposed, might be saved out the waste water and overflowings of the river in times of flood; that as reservoirs were intended to be made to preserve this water, the river would loose very little; and that the Sunday water, when the mills did not work, might by the same plan be applied to the same purposes.

Another member illustrated this argument still further, and insisted that the mills would never be materially affected, for there was more water now went to waste than was fully sufficient to answer all the purposes of the new Navigation. Those gentlemen besides relied much on the lowering of the value of coals and corn, by the great difference there was between a land and water carriage, the former in the proportion of one third, and the latter considerably cheaper, which was a matter of very great importance, when it was considered, that the bill in this respect would operate in its consequences to the benefit of upwards of 50,000 persons.

Mr Barrow opposed the bill strongly. He pointed out the certain evils and hardships it would produce, and said that nothing was even pretended to be held out as an equivalent, but the preference of water to land-carriage, which if it should prove of any advantage, would be extremely trifling. He had formed two computations, and that which promised best would be much too dear, at the price at which it was proposed to be purchased, that of throwing 5,000 persons out of immediate employment, besides remotely affecting almost as many more.

Mr Fielde condemned navigations in general; said they were too often founded in private jobs and personal interests; that by collecting water in the reservoirs, the lands on each side were

frequently overflowed and rendered good for nothing; that the landholders were not only cut off from all communication with the different parts of their own land, but lay at the mercy of the canal proprietors, who treated them as they pleased, and lest the case be ever so urgent, would not permit them to repair even the very injuries caused by themselves; and that in such a case, if a man determined to do himself justice, he would be obliged to commence a fresh action almost every day.

The Hon Mr Howard was very severe on the bill and schemers of all kinds; said he had been an old member, and recollected the time when the present race of engineers not so much as known, though they existed under another denomination. They were formerly called projectors; and the lobby used seldom to be without some of them, but the good sense of the house prevented it from taking any notice of them. He said he remembered one of this adventuring tribe, who proposed to search for the rich Spanish ships which were wrecked on our coast at the time of the Armada, in the reign of Queen Elizabeth. The projectors are now, says he, all transformed into engineers. The engineer forms plan, a set of men are found silly enough to adopt it, and cuts, canals and navigations are immediately to be set on foot, to the destruction of private property.

The question being then called for, the House divided: For the commitment 53. Against it 11.

Gloucester Journal Report of the Third Reading of the Stroudwater Navigation Bill 1776

Gloucester Journal 11 Mar 1776.

The Stroudwater Navigation bill was read a third time, passed, and ordered to the Lords for their concurrence.