

# WARNEFORD

Being The Life and Times of  
Harriet Elizabeth Wetherell Warneford



By  
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## CHAPTER FIVE

### Francis' Canal

THE next five years marked considerable changes throughout the country, not the least of these being a remarkable speeding up of transport.

The output of quantities of manufactured goods from the North and Midlands resulted in the Canal Boom. Canals increased as the most economical form of carrying goods, and spread a watery network all over the country. Most of these were private concerns, and local companies were floated in various districts. It was proposed to build a canal linking Swindon and Abingdon which would cut across part of some low-lying land belonging to Colonel Francis Warneford. He sponsored the project, and became one of the largest shareholders of the company.

He was happy to think that the canal came at a providential time for him, as he was suffering from the second post-war slump. Agriculture no longer played an important part in the economic development of the country, and many farms and waste lands reclaimed during the Napoleonic wars had been proved redundant and were allowed to slip back into a wild, uncultivated state. The population turned to the new industrialism for their livelihood. Francis, his rents falling, invested his resources in industrial shares and in the new canals.

As well as sponsoring the Wilts and Berks Canal, he took large shares in the New Oxford Canal to which the Wilts and Berks was a complement. At first he was elated to see that he had nearly trebled his investments, but the stroke which killed him was brought on by the gradual failure of his enterprise.

Canal cutting was a most expensive undertaking, and more and more companies had to be floated to secure sufficient funds for the work entailed. The Wilts and Berks Canal took only a few years to build, and Francis raised extra money to get the scheme ahead of a rival canal, the Kennet and Avon. He was constantly on the scene of operations urging on the "navigators," or "navvies" as the men who did the levelling, cutting and tunnelling were called. These men were very rough characters, recruited in large gangs from all over the kingdom by the contractors. Many of them were Irishmen who had come over from their impoverished country to seek work, and others were culled from the thousands of discharged soldiers and sailors to whom this work was a Godsend. They lived in large camps near the site of their labours and were the terror of the locality where they worked. Fortunately for the inhabitants of the hamlets and villages

around Swindon, the work was done ahead of schedule and the navigators soon passed on to build other canals.

Later on these same men were to build the first embankments to carry the iron rails, so in its turn the canal-making, with its exact levelling, its tunnels and cuttings, prepared the way for an even speedier form of transport—the railway.

To this day the remains of the old Wilts and Berks Canal can still be seen running parallel with its rival, the railroad, across what was once one of Francis Warneford's farms.

The water for the newly completed canal came from a large lake at Coate, near Swindon, and was regulated by hatches into the feeders. The bottom of the canal had been laid first with a deep layer of straw, two feet deep, then two or three feet of clay to which lime had been added, then the whole was left to dry, harden and settle down before the water was allowed to flow through.

There were four sets of locks through the villages, each twenty-five yards long, which were just big enough to take the barges, or long boats used on this stretch.

On the day of the "Great Opening" people came from all the neighbouring villages, estates and the town of Swindon to cheer the decorated boat which was the first to go through the locks.

The household of Warneford turned out en masse, Francis leading the procession in his new barouche, with Elizabeth carrying a lace parasol to protect her face from the scorching sun. Sitting opposite their parents were Caroline and Harriet, dressed in sprigged muslins and wearing wide-brimmed straw hats with blue ribbons. They were much admired as they drove up to the lock side with a flourish. Caroline looked as bored as usual, but Harriet took a great interest in everything.

The village street gay with bunting, the decorated arch under which the boat would pass, the bright garlands stretched tightly across the water for the barge to break, the booths selling home-made wines and ginger cakes and all sorts of fairings, and everyone with a smile on their faces and a bob and a curtsy for the Colonel and his party as they drew up to the place of honour by the lock.

Francis descended to inspect the final arrangements, while his ladies remained sitting in the carriage under the shade of an enormous beech tree. There were many other carriages at the canal side and also traps and gigs belonging to the well-to-do farmers and local merchants. There was a huddle and a bubble of excitement as friends and acquaintances greeted each other on this broiling August morning.

At eleven o'clock the crowd started to roar along the towpath. "She's a-comin'!" "She's a-comin'!"

Heads craned in the direction, small boys ran up and down, dogs barked, as the barge, all gay and bright with new paint and glorious with streamers of every hue, hove in sight, drawn by two great horses,

their brasses gleaming, their manes plaited with straw "dollies" and tiers of little brass bells sounding a carillon as their heads tossed up and down.

Francis stood with the director of the firm who had built the canal, beside the newly-engaged lock-keeper, who was mopping his brow with a red-spotted handkerchief as he apprehensively regarded the miscellaneous wheels and levers appertaining to his responsible task.

Encouraged by shouts and instructions, the barge slid into the pond, and the heavy timbers of the lock gate closed behind her. There she lay "as snug as a pea in a pod", the boatman at the tiller, all smiles—his good wife beside him in her best dress and the small children clutching her skirts and gazing with wide-eyed wonder at the crowd on the side of the lock.

The great moment of the Official Opening was at hand!

Francis tried his hand at the big wheel which turned the mechanism that closed the gates behind the boat. The Swindon Brass Band, assembled on the newly-mown green by the banks of the canal, started to play the National Anthem, and there were shouts of "Coom on, Squire!" as Francis doffed his coat and helped the lock-keeper to turn the sluice which let the water out. Amid cries of amazement the barge slowly sank to the new level, and Francis and his helper went to the other wheel to be ready to open the further gates of the pound.

Here the garlanded ribbons were stretched. The boat rocked gently—waiting for the signal. The team, which had been unharnessed, were taken down the ramp to the towpath and hitched on. At a given signal a pistol was fired, the horses plunged forward, the bow of the barge cut through the ribbons and they fell amid the flowers in the water, and *OUT* slid the long boat with a ripple and a swish.

The canal was declared OPEN!

Amid repeated cheers the barge continued on her stately progress between the green meadows, followed by those onlookers who were energetic enough to run along the towpath. Soon she was out of sight, and the sound of the bells on the horses' harness tinkled faintly to the ears of the now silent multitude beside the lock.

But the celebrations were by no means over. Long trestle tables, carried out on to the green from the village inn, were laden with all sorts and varieties of wines, cold collations and hot pies. Colonel Warneford and all those directly concerned with the building of the canal sat at a special table set aside for them and their ladies, and at other tables those not so closely connected with the "magnificent project" took their places—giving precedence where precedence was due.

The band played the softest and most beguiling airs, and everyone did justice to the spread before them which had been provided by the "munificence of the Wilts and Berks Canal Company". Many were

the toasts drunk that day. "It is an unforgettable occasion in the annals of our countryside," said Francis in his opening speech.

As the sun's rays began to slant, the local land-owners entered their carriages and bowled away up the leafy lanes where the shadows of the trees lay long and dark across their way.

But there were more junkettings for those who elected to stay and see the moon rise over the Downs. For them there was dancing on the green, village sports, wrestling, and, in the booths of the fair men, eccentricities of all kinds to be visited before nightfall. Even then, so it is told, the revels continued until the sun rose over the meadows and gilded the corn stooked in the harvest fields and the fairy lights and coloured lanterns burnt low and were eclipsed by the new day.

The Wilts and Berks Canal cost the enormous sum of £450,000, more than double the amount of the authorised capital. Francis and those other promoters, carried away by their ambition to cut out the rival project, the Kennet and Avon Canal, had made a bid to capture the whole of the trade between Bristol and London.

Alas, the Wilts and Berks! Although it endured into the twentieth century it returned no dividend to its disillusioned shareholders during the whole of its existence.

Francis Warneford was among those who lost the bulk of their capital. The failure of the canal eventually broke him. With the exception of the Warneford estate, and the penurious rents from his property in Ireland, he was ruined.

He had been ill-advised in the primary plans for building a waterway which was from the beginning only designed to take narrow boats of shallow draft. Because of this, the greatest difficulties were experienced during the winters, as the larger ice-breakers could not work upon it when it was frozen—which was for as long as seven weeks at a time, and when the rains came, it flooded remorselessly over its low banks.

But for the first twenty years it was one of the regular waterways of the locality and although not making money, it was not as yet losing any. Besides traffic in corn and minerals, there were pleasure craft, skiffs and passenger barges drawn by trotting horses.

It was considered a great treat for the Warneford family when Francis organised a day's trip to Uffington on his canal. The whole family and any friends who happened to be staying at Warneford would drive down to one of the locks near South Marston and embark on "Papa's Barge", a boat which Francis had specially constructed to enable him to travel up and down the canal in order to see how business was faring, to inspect lading wharves and to go into the costs of the repairs to locks, stables and cottages. It must have been a very pleasant way of seeing the countryside, gliding along in a barge on the still water, between lush green fields, far away from the dust and

confusion of the busy highways. For the Warneford family, "It was the most delightful and novel form of transport".

The party would disembark below Uffington and enter two carriages which had been sent to await them. Then off they would go, climbing the winding road which led to the summit of the Downs and to the ancient earthworks known as Uffington Castle. The horses could only plod very slowly up the steep, chalky, narrow Blowing Stone Hill, and every hundred yards the coachman would pull up his pair to allow them to get their wind before attempting the next stretch. At last the summit was achieved and the carriages turned onto the short sheep-nibbled turf of the Ridgeway.

The site of the Castle was the goal of the expedition, for from its grassy ramparts the most wonderful view of the countryside lay before their eyes. Here, high up on the topmost height of all, above the strange creature carved in the living turf, from which both Downs and Vale have taken their name, the Uffington Horse, they could see the country far below.

It was to the North that Francis always drew the attention of his party, for he could show them such landmarks as Farringdon Folly, rising boldly in the valley, the richly wooded and fertile fields of his estate, and "Look!" Harriet would cry, pointing. "There is Highworth Church Tower!"

Then they would sit down to an alfresco picnic sheltered by the tall banks from the cool breezes that swept the Downs, laden with thistle-down drifting like snow on the wind. They sat in one of the deep grass-grown ditches where, a thousand years ago in the year 871, the battle of Ashdown was fought when the Danes came from the East pillaging and ravaging the land, bent on conquering the whole country.

Francis would lie back, smoking his pipe and keeping his listeners entranced while he told them about those far-off battles. As a "Military man" he was very well versed in the wars and campaigns since the days of the Ancient Britons.

The year 871 was a year for Berkshire men to be proud of, for it was on them that the brunt of this battle fell, and it was their gallant stand at Uffington that saved England many years of Paganism. Had they given way at Ashdown, and had the reinforcements from over the North Sea come to a conquering instead of a beaten army that summer, there would have been nothing left to stop the Danes between Reading and Exeter. But stop them they did, and the memory of those battles still inspires the songs, the poetry and the folklore of the whole country around.

It was King Alfred's finest hour, and in honour of it, so tradition says, he caused his victorious army, the day after the battle, to carve the Great White Horse, the standard of Hengist, on the hillside just under the castle. Francis took a personal pride in the horse as though it had been his own regiment of Wiltshire Militia which had carved

the timeless memorial. The Warnefords had heard these stories many, many times but they never got tired of the telling.

By far the most enchanted listener was Harriet. Always in awe of her father, nevertheless she admired him more than any other person of her world, and although he did not appear to take much interest in her, he was, as the years went on, gradually becoming very fond of her. He recognised her virtues, her integrity, her loyalty, her fearlessness and her silent wisdom. Caroline was a disappointment; his affection for her had waned. He was disgusted by her hysteria, her fainting fits and her total disregard for all the things that he loved most.

Harriet eventually became his indispensable companion, and she became the only person from whom he would accept advice. She read the kind of books he liked and he fed her avid mind with volumes of great battles and the campaigns of Marlborough, not then so distant as to have become history but vital incidents in the memories of living man.

On the occasion which we have been describing of the Warneford family picnicking within the grassy ramparts of Uffington Castle, Harriet was just on the brink of adolescence. The world lay at her feet as the vista of the rich vale lying below the Downs, and her future was still a far-off dream, but the thread of her greatest love was already visible in the pattern of her fate. We hear her say so many times: "I would be happy to live here" (at Warneford) "for all my life, because I know there is no other place that I will ever call home."

The oft recalled picnic came to an end. The horses were harnessed to the carriages. From where they stood to enjoy a last look at the panorama now golden in the light of the setting sun, Francis pointed out proudly the course of his canal and bade them trace its progress as it cleaved its way like a silver ribbon through the verdant meadows. They saw the painted long boats, wisps of smoke ascending in the still air from the tall chimneys in the sterns, like children's toys, drawn sometimes by two horses or mules, sometimes by one, and occasionally by teams of little donkeys only able to achieve the speed of two miles an hour.

Night crept over the land, and already the fields and villages were deep in dusky shadow, as the two carriages left the high Downs still bright and clear in the low sunlight, and took the tortuous winding road down to Uffington.

That day, described so vividly in Harriet's journal, remains like a jewel as though it was written with the purpose to immortalise that afternoon of happiness for ever.

It may well have been the last time that Francis took his family for an "Uffington Picnic", for it was not so long after this that the canal began to fail, and he became increasingly concerned over the falling freight values.

The winter of 1818 was excessively severe and the canal was frozen solid for seven consecutive weeks. While hundreds of carefree skaters skimmed up and down the glassy surface and prayed that the frost might last, Francis, driving down to view his ice-bound barges moored idly by the quays, was filled with dismay.

But Harriet was not so sad, she was still too young to understand her father's financial commitments in the Wilts and Berks. She strapped on her curly-pointed skates, and skated from South Marston to Shrivenham in a record time.

Caroline permitted her devoted admirer, the curate with the hare lip, to push her painted sledge along the cut, with no hope of any rewards other than a haughty smile over the top of her ermine muff and an imperious order to "Push harder!"

The story of this obscure waterway is drawing to a close, but there are a few more facts about it before it disappears from these pages.

In those days the canal abounded in fish, tench, roach, perch, pike, carp, and eels. The bargemen netted a fair quantity of these by attaching nets to either side of their boats, and the farmers and village people fished from the banks. The lock-keeper obtained all he needed when he drained the water out of the pounds. Francis preserved the fishing rights on his land and took steps to protect his long reaches through a water bailiff, but in spite of all precautions a great number of fish were poached by gypsies, and other "unsavoury characters".

When twenty years later the railway snaked across the Warneford lands, five years after Francis death, the end of his canal was in sight. Slowly rot and decay set in. Nature took the site back into her possession and long grasses and wild flowers grew in ragged profusion along the towpath. Long years ago, when our grandfathers were still children, the last barge cut through the placid waters.

After this for a while, the place still survived, though no traffic was borne between the overgrown banks. It became the secluded resort of fishermen who, with rod and line, passed many a contemplative hour regarding their bobbing floats. But in a few years the weed became too dense to fish, the water dwindled and dried out of the cut, and the remaining pools were stagnant, and covered with green slime. They were used as tips for tins, old boots, rubbish, and even a dead cat or two.

With the death of the canal's foremost promoter a knell was sounded for those unhurried days. The splendid isolation of those who lived in remote country houses became a forgotten dream.

Francis and his generation are gone for ever. His house has vanished, and his canal is obliterated from the face of the countryside where it was once such a familiar landmark.