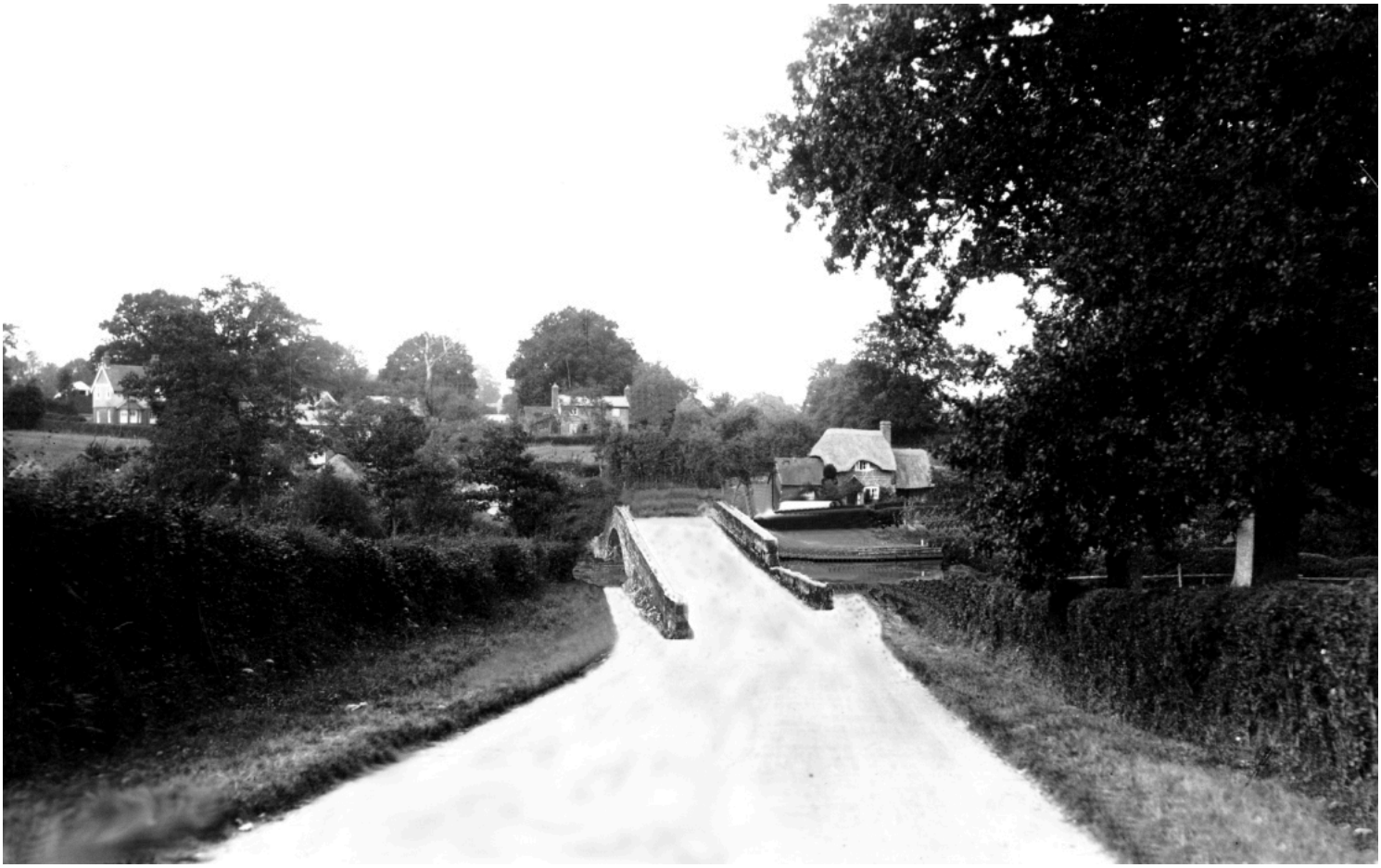
Tadley and District History Society

Berkshire & Hampshire Junction Canal

19th century proposals for a canal through Tadley linking the Kennet and Avon Canal and Basingstoke Canal

TADS project paper #06 – September 2025



A computer enhanced photograph of Dix Hill showing an artist's impression of what the canal might have looked like at Honey Mill Bridge (see map on page 2).

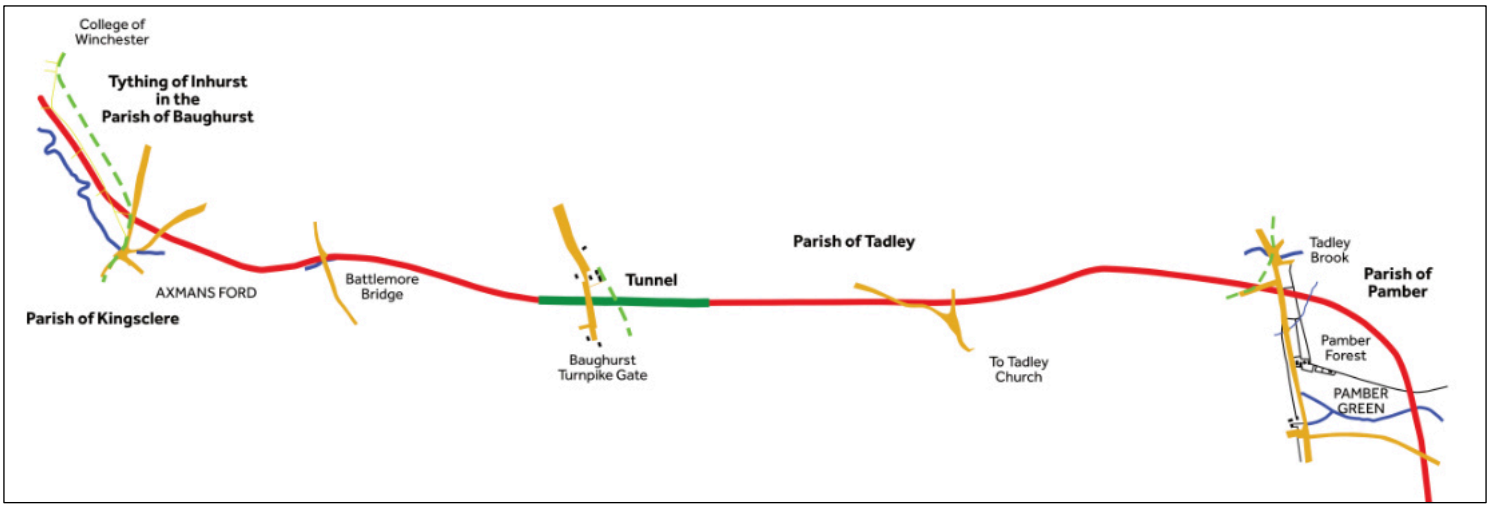
A canal in Tadley? What canal, you may ask? TADS 2000 publication, *Around Tadley – fact and fable* (pages 14-15), describes the plans, surveyed in the early 19th century, for two possible canal routes linking the Kennet and Avon Canal to the Basingstoke Canal. Before railways and motorways one of the main ways of transporting goods and people around the country was by water. Rivers were the motorways of their day. However, many were imperfect; eg routes not going where they were needed, rocks and rapids and a lack of water. Canals sought to solve some of these problems by joining rivers and bypassing obstacles. The 'Golden Age' of British canals is regarded as being between the 1770s and the 1830s. During this period huge sums were invested in canal building. Nationally the waterway system expanded to nearly 4,000 miles (6,400 kilometres) in length.

The benefits of a canal

In 1715 the Kennet Navigation Bill authorised the making of the River Kennet navigable from Reading to Newbury. Work commenced in 1718, under the supervision of surveyor and engineer John Hore of Newbury and was completed in 1723. Plans for a western section followed and on 17 April 1794 the Kennet and Avon Canal Act received the Royal Assent and construction began. The Newbury to Hungerford section was completed in 1798, and extended to Great Bedwyn in 1799. The section from Bath to Foxhangers was finished in 1804 and the canal opened in 1810 after 16 years of construction. Meanwhile, the Basingstoke Canal was completed in 1794.

It seems strange to record that for a time there was a scheme to run a canal through Tadley. Why? Not to benefit the village itself although it would have done so. Its function was to join the Kennet and Avon Canal with the Basingstoke Canal. The owners of the two canals were always looking for ways to increase traffic on their canals and over a thirty year period several schemes were proposed linking them, ranging from tentative outline schemes to comprehensive Acts of Parliament.

The first proposal was put forward by Mr Best of Basingstoke at a meeting of the Kennet and Avon Canal Company on 7 February 1794. He proposed a junction on the Kennet and Avon Canal near Hamstead Marshall, linking to the Basingstoke Canal at Old Basing. A later suggestion was proposed by Ralph Dodd in the early 1800s, suggesting a link to Basingstoke from the Andover Canal near Fullerton.



John Rennie's 1819 proposal

Following the opening of the Kennet and Avon Canal in 1810, John Rennie, a noted engineer of the day, surveyed a route and drew up plans for a 21 mile link to join the Kennet and Avon Canal (at Hamstead Marshall) with the Basingstoke Canal (at Old Basing) via Brimpton and Tadley. A short flight of locks would have brought the canal southward out of the Kennet Valley before crossing the river Enborne near Shalford Bridge. Three more locks would have taken the canal out of the Enborne valley to the south of Brimpton. For 10 miles (16 km) between Brimpton and Basingstoke, the canal would have followed contours, effectively increasing the length of the summit pound (the level section of the canal at its highest point) on the Basingstoke Canal to 30 miles (48 km). This long pound would have had a 0.85-mile (1.37 km) tunnel traversing the north side of Browning Hill near Baughurst; the tunnel entrances would have been near the Baughurst turnpike (at Axmansford) on the west and near St Peter's Church on the east.

The proposal was opposed by the Thames authorities, and was likely to have met with opposition from the Basingstoke Canal company. Although the Kennet and Avon Canal company initially endorsed the proposal they subsequently lost interest in favour of a link with the Grand Junction Canal. Together, the failure to reach the subscriptions target of £7,500, public opposition from local rich landowners and the depressed state of trade in 1820, caused the proposal to be dropped.

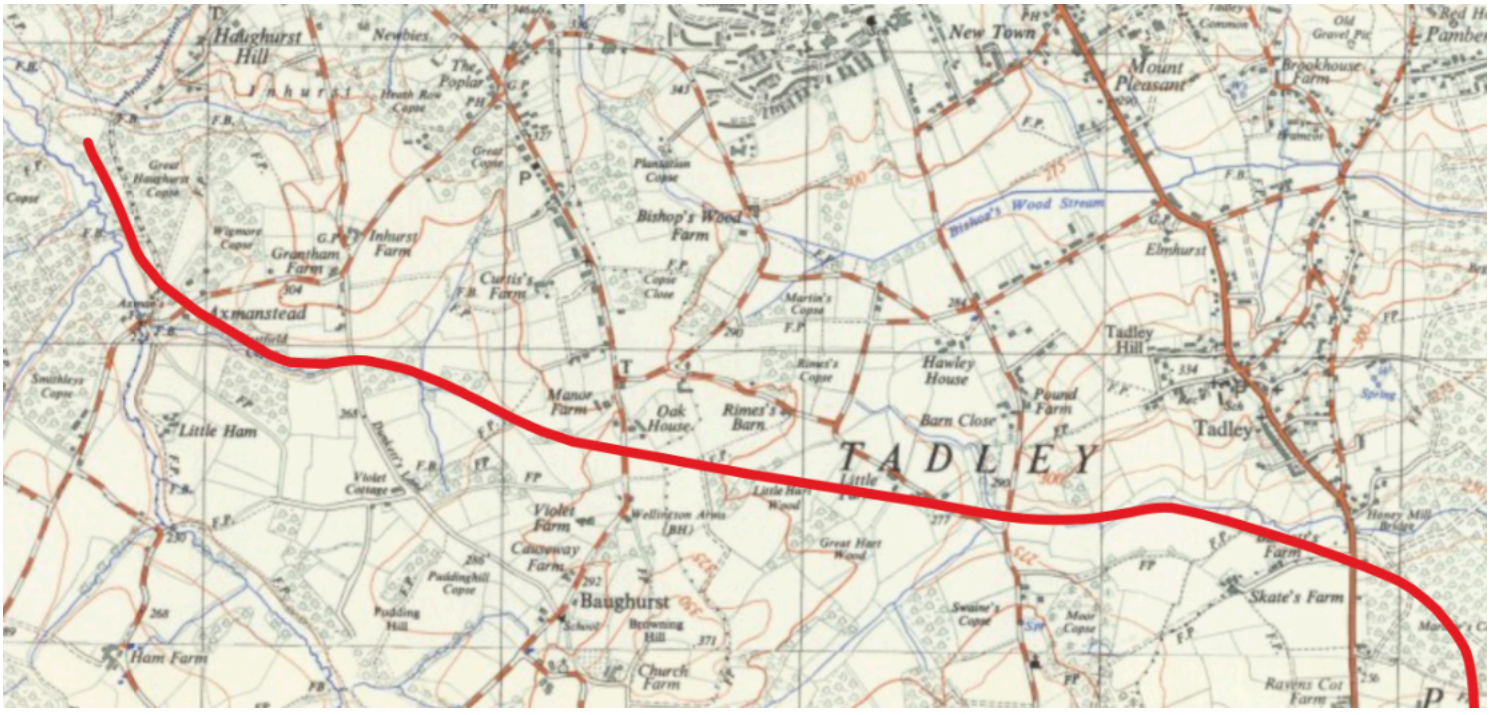
↑ Artist's impression of Frances Giles 1825 canal route through Tadley.

Francis Giles 1825 proposal

Rennie died in 1821 but Francis Giles, who had assisted him on a number of projects, surveyed a similar but shorter route totalling 13 miles (21 km).

Instead of branching off from the Kennet and Avon to the west of Newbury, Giles's route left between Midgham and Heale's Locks, running south to Brimpton before following Rennie's route. The proposal would have used a shorter tunnel of 0.5 miles (0.80 km) at Tadley, as well as the potential for an inclined plane at Sherborne St John. The proposal included aqueducts over the Enborne river, the Bow Brook and the Loddon river, and 38 bridges and approximately 12 locks. The summit of the canal would have been 100 feet (30 m) above the lowest points, and with no nearby watercourses to provide water, significant pumps would have been required to ensure sufficient water in the summit pound and through any subsequent locks. His much shorter route passed through Baughurst from just north of Axmansford Bridge, using the stream, a tributary of the Enborne as a 'fill up'. It then crossed the

↓ ↑ Frances Giles 1825 canal route through Tadley superimposed onto a six inch to the mile OS map (SU65 printed 1958).



Baughurst Road between 'The Wellington Arms' and St Stephen's Church. A suggested tunnel would take the route from Oak Cottage to the junction of Church Brook Lane and Rimes Lane. Here it 'takes' and follows the stream which becomes Silchester Brook as far as the main A340 at the junction with Skates Lane close to Honey Mill Bridge, south of what was 'The Fighting Cocks', just clipping the rear of Burrells Farm en route. The canal then enters the Pamber parish at Mariner's Copse before taking a sharp right hand bend crossing over New Road at Pamber Green (near 'Cottage Farm') then aligning itself due south through Pamber Plantation. This would take in Bow Brook, a tributary of the Loddon, to Pamber End behind Elm Park Farm before crossing Bramley Road (opposite 'The Queen's College Arms'). The small stream near Holly Bush Copse would be taken and the route move on to Monk (or West) Sherborne parish before finishing at Old Basing where it would join the Basingstoke Canal.

↑ river at Axemanford, looking north west, towards the Kennet and Avon canal. The link canal was proposed to run beside the river on the right hand side.

Estimate of the cost

The project was met with financial support totalling over £70,000 (equivalent to £8,369,637 in 2023), although the proposed cost of the construction was £105,000 (equivalent to £12,554,4555 in 2023) and the majority of local landowners opposed the plans. Figures from the time broke down the costs as follows:

'Estimate of the probable expense of making the intended Kennet and Basingstoke Canal, now to be called the Berks and Hants Junction Canal from the River Kennet Navigation at Midgham to the Basingstoke Canal at Basing':

The canal to be from 35 feet wide at top water and 5 feet deep.

To cutting embanking and puddling, gravelling towing path and fencing	£42,300.00
To bridges	£9,500.00
To seven locks	£12,600.00
To aqueducts and culverts	£14,000.00
To tunnel	£17,600.00
To land and damages	£9,000.00
	£105,000.00

Local Opinion

An opinion poll of the day was commissioned and the results of the owners and occupiers of the land were as follows: in favour of the proposed canal (eight owners, seven occupiers), against the proposed canal (20 owners, seven occupiers), neither for nor against the proposal (28 owners, 44 occupiers). It was hardly surprising that with such few people in favour of the proposal and so many undecided that the main opposition sought to rally their forces.

It was reported in the *Hampshire Chronicle* in January 1825 that a meeting of landowners and other interested parties had been held at 'The Hind's Head' in Aldermaston on 29 January 1825. The purpose of the meeting was to oppose the building of the canal and to that end, ten resolutions were passed by the meeting.

The Bill reached Parliamentary Sessions during 1825 and 1826, each time getting as far as having a Parliamentary Committee look into it, but no further. It received its first hearing on the 17 March 1825 when it was supported by 31 petitions to 16. However, when the bill reached parliamentary sessions it was rejected by Parliamentary Committee. Giles made an amendment to the proposals the following year to provide a pumping station by the River Enborne at Ashford Hill, although this resubmitted bill was rejected in 1826.The Bills did not reach the House of Lords. In 1825, the last item recorded was that the Committee reported near the end of the session that it did not have enough time to investigate

↓ A list of major shareholders showing the wide interest and willingness to invest in the future.

Shareholder	Amount
Thomas Merriman for Kennet and Avon Canal	£10,000
John R Birnie for Basingstoke Canal Navigation	£10,000
Sir Riachar Birnie, Bow Street	£2,000
Robert Sutton, Castle Alley	£1,000
Sir John William Lubbock	£1,000
John Alder Clarke, Mansion House	£1,000
Samuel Mills	£1,000
John Sloper, Pall Mall	£500
David Jones, Milbank Row	£1,000

Shareholder	Amount
Robert Addison, Bloomsbury Square	£500
J G Schweitzer	£1,000
John Disney	£300
Rev Webb Juppe, Carpenters Hall	£500
George Saunders, Oxford Street	£500
Han Sandys, Crane Court	£1,000
John Richard Birnie, Bow Street	£1,000
Thomas Merriman, Marlborough	£500
J E Bickeno, Furnivals Inn	£300

Shareholder	Amount
Thomas Hasher, General Post Office	£1,000
I S Salt, Lombard Street	£500
John Martin, Mount Street, Grovenor Square	£200
Corporation of Basingstoke	£300
William Hufsey	£200
Z C Staffs, New Street	£300
Henry Cook, Highgate	£500
Daniel Sutherland, Charles Street	£200
Plus an additional 47 shareholders making a total of £70,600	

fully. In 1826 the final remark recorded was that the Bill was deferred for another six months, taking it to the end of that session. Bills that run out of time at the end of a session automatically fail. This procedure has not changed in the last 197 years!!

Winchester, Feb. 1, 1821. [1703

JANUARY 29, 1825.

AT a Meeting of Land Owners and others, interested in opposing the proposed Junction between the Kennett and Avon and Basingstoke Canals, held this day at the Hind's Head Inn, in Aldermaston;

The Earl of FALMOUTH in the Chair;

1st. Resolved,—That the said proposed Junction Canal is considered by a very large majority of the Land Owners through whose property it would pass, as highly injurious to their interests & estates.

2d. That no possible benefit of a public nature can arise from such new Junction Canal, and consequently it is a mere speculation for private interests and emoluments.

3d. That, contrary to the ordinary course in such cases, the projectors of the said Junction Canal have determined to bring a Bill into Parliament for effecting their object, notwithstanding the decided objection of almost the whole in number, and at least nine-tenths in value, of the Land Owners.

4th. That under these circumstances, it appears to this Meeting that such a Bill ought not to be entertained by the House of Commons, according to the usual rules adopted by that Honourable House.

5th. That a Petition against it, stating the relative facts, and signed by the several Land Owners objecting, will suffice to prevent so unjust an inroad upon private rights.

6th. That a Committee of five Land Owners (which Committee shall be open to any other Land Owners objecting to the said Canal) be appointed to frame such Petition; and that Mr Holding be Secretary to such Committee.

7th. That the Committee so appointed be directed to see that the said Petition be framed and presented in the usual way, being first signed by the objecting parties.

8th. That in case such Petition, contrary to reasonable expectation, should not have the effect of preventing the progress of such a Bill, the said Committee shall have power to direct the employment of Counsel at the Bar of one or both Houses of Parliament, for the purpose of more effectually opposing it.

9th. That any expenses arising out of such opposition, shall be duly made out from time to time under the direction of the said Committee, and by them assessed upon the said Land Owners, proportionably to the extent of the Line of Canal which would pass through their property; the plan lodged with the Clerk of the Peace being taken as the guide for such assessment, and that the said Land Owners, or their agents, shall sign their names to an agreement to abide by such assesment.

10th. That these resolutions be inserted once in the Reading and Winchester Papers.

On behalf of the Meeting, signed,

FALMOUTH, Chairman.

The Earl of Falmouth having left the Chair, it was unanimously resolved,—That the cordial thanks of this Meeting be given to his Lordship for accepting the Chair, and his exertions in forwarding the views of this Meeting.

A Committee of five Noblemen and Gentlemen were then appointed, when the Meeting was dissolved. [1705

The ALLIANCE British and Foreign Life

↑ The Times, 1 February 1821.

↑ Looking south along Church Road at its junction with Church Brook. The canal would have crossed the road (west-east) near the bridge in the foreground, on its way to Pamber Forest and Basingstoke.

Tadley had, therefore, to continue to rely on the Kennet and Avon Canal wharf at Aldermaston to transport its goods until 1847, when the railway came to West Berkshire and the GWR constructed a line from Reading to Hungerford which stopped at Theale, Aldermaston and Woolhampton.

Impact on Tadley

Although the effects of a canal link through Tadley can only be conjecture, the establishment of a main arterial link to the outside world could have been highly beneficial to local industry.

The need for a wharf is vital if an area is to become a centre for growth and industrial activity. It would have provided the warehousing, loading and unloading facilities as well as landside support such as horse drawn transport and commercial activities. A successful wharf at Tadley would have enabled associated trades to flourish as well as allowing local industries to gain direct access to markets in distant towns and cities.

Tadley's woodland crafts (e.g. besoms, baskets, hurdles) were already successful trades by this time but might have developed further had there been easier access to bulk transportation. The production and use of the birch brooms was at its peak in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Brick making, carried out at Tadley and Ramsdell, is another example of local industry that could have benefited from closer access to a canal; bricks would have been more easily transported by canal barge than horse and cart! Bramley munitions depot (opened in 1917) might also have made use of it via the Bramley Road or a spur to the main canal at Pamber End.

And what of the 21st century? With the growth of the modern leisure industry, a ready-made barge tie-up wharf that could cater for the holiday trade might have meant 'The Fighting Cocks', so close to the canal, would now be a thriving hospitality venue instead of closing and becoming domestic housing.

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