



Appledore Archive

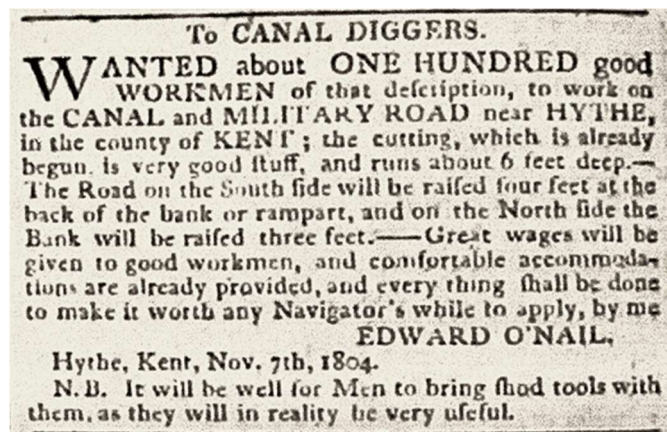
Memories and Milestones from Appledore's Past

The Royal Military Canal

In 1803 Napoleon Bonaparte was quoted as saying that “The Channel is but a ditch and anyone can cross it that has the courage. Let us be masters of the straits for 6 hours and we can be masters of the world”.

Britain feared that French forces might land on the wide, flat beaches of Romney Marsh. Once ashore, the marshland provided a relatively direct route inland towards London. Earlier plans had suggested flooding the marsh in an emergency, but this would have depended on multiple high tides, and risked serious disruption in the event of a false alarm. Instead, the government adopted a proposal by John Brown of the Royal Staff Corps to create a permanent defensive obstacle: a canal running along the northern edge of the marsh.

Construction began in 1804, at the height of the invasion scare. Thousands of labourers, alongside soldiers and contractors, worked along the marsh edge to dig the channel. Using only shovels and picks, they cut a trench through heavy clay and marsh soils, carrying the soil away in wheelbarrows. Persistent flooding of the trenches proved a constant challenge, leading to the replacement of hand pumps with steam-driven machinery. A distinctive zigzag was incorporated every 600 yards, to allow the completed canal to be



defended by crossfire from field guns. Once dug, the canal was lined with clay.

The excavated earth was piled up on the northern side to form a high embankment. This formed a parapet and banquettes which allowed soldiers to step up to fire their muskets over the top of the bank.

Behind the bank ran a military road that allowed soldiers and artillery to move quickly along the line of defence. On the opposite side of the canal a towpath and wharves were built, enabling supplies and equipment to be moved by boat along the waterway. Only one lock, at Iden, connected the canal to the River Rother, helping regulate water levels along the route.

Although Napoleon's invasion never came, the 28 mile long Royal Military Canal remains an impressive example of wartime engineering. It transformed the landscape of Romney Marsh and stands today as a reminder of the scale of Britain's preparations during the Napoleonic Wars.