



Alvingham Mill — It's "power" supply is being ensured. Photo: LSG (Lo).

The silt of centuries

by Mike Kinnaird

FOR the first time in living memory, the Syphon at Alvingham Lock is being cleaned out.

Its a curious sight for those who might just be passing by. A picturesque English country setting — the humpback bridge, a gentle river trickling by, an old tree bends wearily as its branches dip into the icy cold March waters.

Somehow, three men dressed in black rubber suits and hard hats don't seem to fit in.

But it is they who have the unenviable task of standing up to their knees in thick black silt.

The Syphon under the canal must be cleaned out if water to the Alvingham Mill is to be maintained this summer.

The Mill, is of course, opened as a museum during holiday periods, and that precarious water supply was always a worry to the mill's owner, Mr Phil Davis.

Never certain

"When we were busy we never really felt sure that the water would last all day. It usually did, but we could never be certain," he said.

Bryan Utteridge is the Northern Area Manager for Rivers at Anglian Water Authority. He is the man responsible for overseeing the cleaning project.

He explained that it had taken around three years of organising and talking to Mr Davis before things could get under way.

The AWA had contracted the work out and originally thought that it would take no

longer than five days. Now that the divers have been down, it is expected to take 10 days at least.

The whole Syphon is blocked up; the main problem appears to be timber that has floated down the River Lud and jammed itself underneath the canal.

However, that's not all that's down there. Mr Utteridge pointed out a small collection of treasures that have already been found — mostly bottles, some possibly ink, and one had Birketts of Louth on the front.

One of the divers felt sure he had found an old powder flask. More definite though was the Sherlock Holmes-like discovery of a few bones — hopefully not human, and a clay pipe found in an enamel bowl.

Either way, all the bits and pieces will be cleaned up and an expert will be asked to take a look.

The Syphon itself is simply a tunnel that passes right underneath the River Lud. There has never been any form of power used to push the water back up the other side, the flow is quite sufficient.

The idea for a Syphon dates back to the time when Louth was fast becoming a thriving port.

John Grundy was the engineer responsible for producing a scheme for the canal in 1756. Then, in 1760, the Louth Navigation Act made it possible for work to begin.

That Act stipulated that any water the canal crossed should be culverted. John Grundy decided that the most obvious place was near to the present Alvingham Mill. Unfortunately for him, others disagreed.

A second opinion was sought from a former engineer John Smeeton, whose solution was the present position. The canal was six feet 10 inches above the tunnel when it was at its full operational height.

A canal was clearly needed. Louth was bustling with trade. At that point there were 13 mills around the Lud and Louth itself was becoming a centre for warehousing.

Once the Louth Navigation Company built the canal in the 1770's, traffic was fairly constant. Large boats sailed down from Tetney and into the sea, probably the Humber.

Britain's trade was increasing steadily at that time with many other countries. Our thirst for exotic living was probably reflected in the type of products being sailed down to Louth.

There were regular shipments of figs, plums, mollasses, grain, and the more

mundane coal, timber, and bricks.

The canal continued to be profitable until 1848, when it was bought by the North Lincolnshire and Sheffield Railway Company.

Railways were to be the transport of the future, and the last thing a company like that wanted was to have canal competition. So they bought the canal and left it to collapse hoping that it would gradually go out of business.

Swing bridges

That did not actually happen until 1924 when the Government issued a closing order. At that time there were several wooden swing bridges and these became unsafe, so there was no alternative but to close.

The Anglian Water Authority is responsible for the canal at the moment, but that responsibility has been passed down through various bodies from the Lincolnshire Commission of Sewers who took over when that closure order was passed.

The long overdue cleaning of the Syphon should now enable the Alvingham Mill to carry on without problems. It will mean that there will continue to be an example of an original mill working on the Lud.

