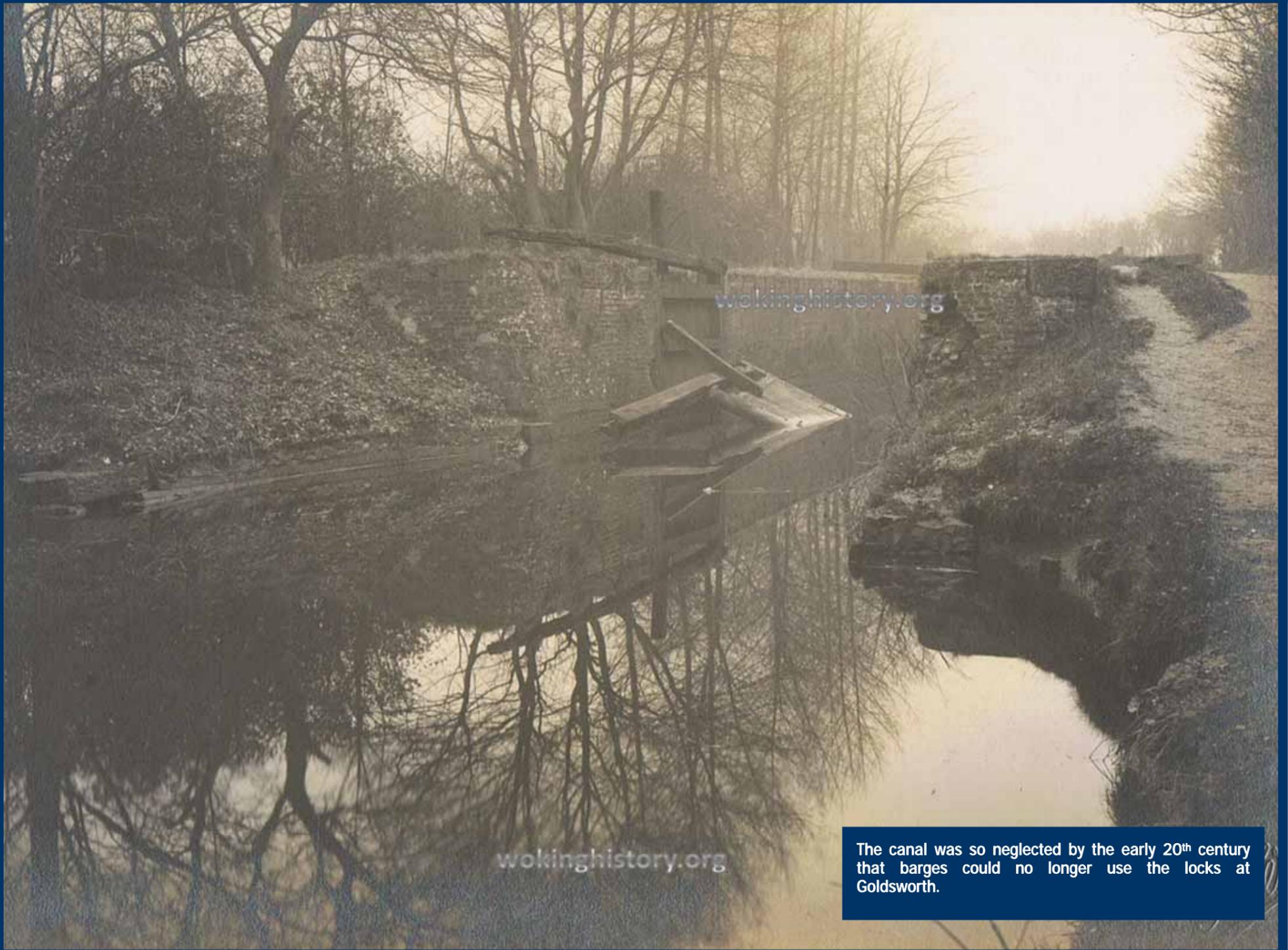


THE BASINGSTOKE CANAL & THE BOTTOMLEY SCANDAL.

Iain Wakeford 2015



The canal was so neglected by the early 20th century that barges could no longer use the locks at Goldsworth.

Horatio Bottomley was a journalist and ultimately a politician, but as a 'financier' he was really a fraudster who would eventually get his comeuppance.

In the 1880's he was involved in promoting a number of publishing companies which ended in bankruptcy and eventually, in 1893, in allegations of fraud. But with the accounts in disarray and a number of vital books missing, nothing could be proved.

He then went on to promote a series of mining companies, most of which were very short-lived. For one reason or another each company went into liquidation with the shareholders told that the only chance of them recovering their investment was to put more money into a new improved company. If the shareholder refused they were simply told that their capital had been lost, but some fell for it and re-invested in the new venture only to see that one fail too.

Eventually, when too many people had caught on perhaps, he abandoned the mining scheme scams (having become a millionaire in the process) and decided to go back to publishing

again – this time taking over a failing London evening paper called 'The Sun' in 1902 followed in 1906 by the launch of his popular paper 'John Bull'.

Through the pages of his publications he promoted not just more money making schemes but perhaps more importantly himself and in 1906 he was elected to represent the voters of South Hackney where he was seen as a 'working-class hero' and the 'tribune of the people'.

It was about this time that together with a gentleman called Ernest Hooley, he floated the 'London & South Western Canal Company' – or the Basingstoke Canal as we know it. The name was carefully chosen to suggest a link with the more prosperous railway line that ran alongside the now almost defunct canal. Once again investors found their new shares worthless as the canal was in decline and eventually bankrupt.

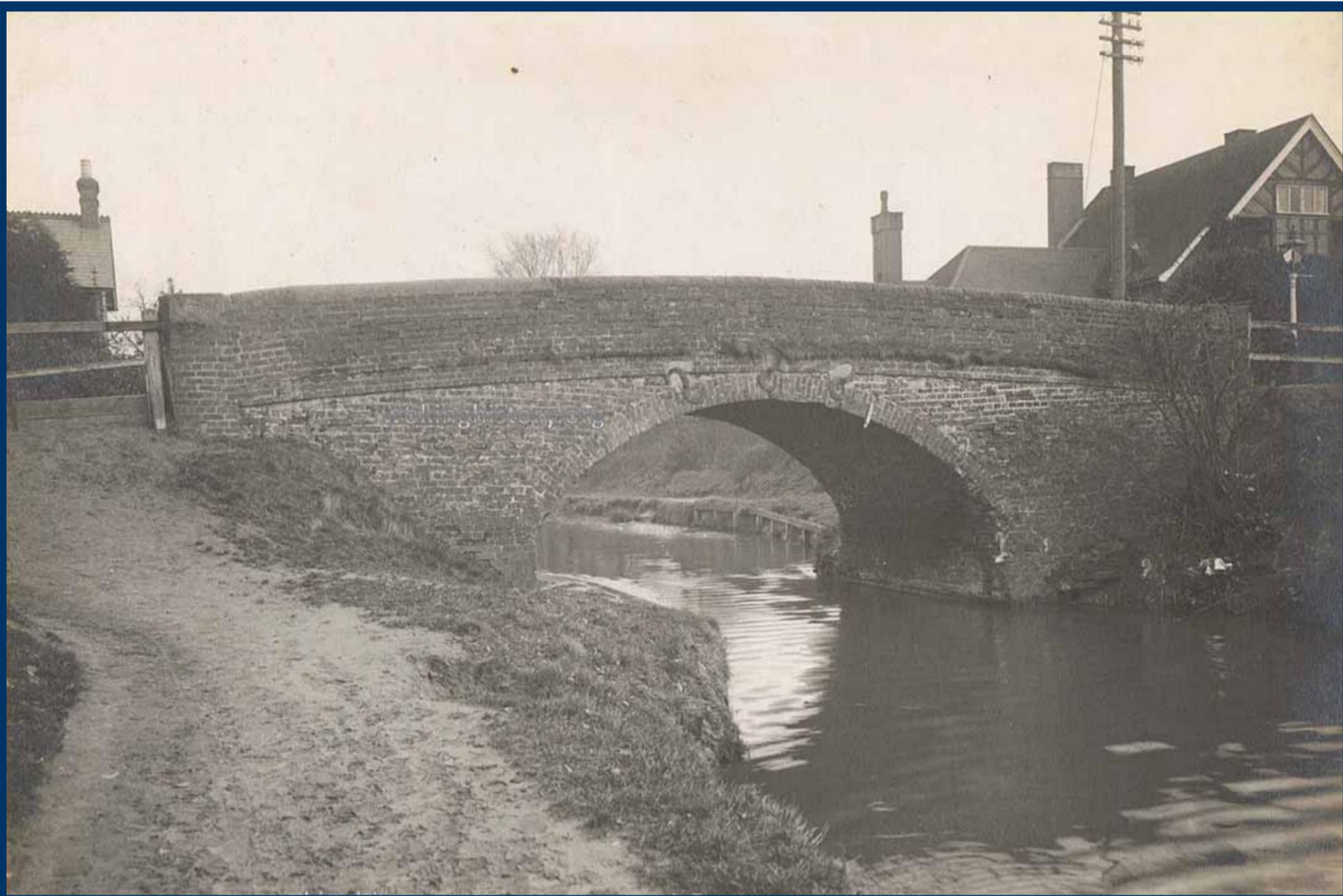
This was to have serious consequences in Woking where many of the bridges over the canal were in a serious state of decay.

The canal was built in the 1780's and 90's when the only traffic using the bridges were horses and carts or pedestrians. By the early 20th century motor cars, and more importantly traction engines, were using them and the old brick-arched bridges simply couldn't cope.

By 1906 weight restrictions had to be imposed on several bridges in the Woking area, making it almost impossible for heavy loads to go from one side of the canal to the other. Only one bridge had been strengthened to cope – Kiln Bridge at St Johns, where in 1899 the War Office, together with the Council and the owners of the canal agreed to rebuild the old bridge so that it could handle heavy loads (and marching troops) on their way to Inkerman Barracks from Woking Station.

But with the canal company now in liquidation Woking Council decided that all they could do was to start replacing the old canal bridges themselves, and then take the owners to court to recover their costs.

As for Horatio Bottomley, his fraud over the canal went largely unpunished (although he



There was a weight restriction on Wheatshaf Bridge as the old brick arch could not cope with the increased traffic of the early 20th century.

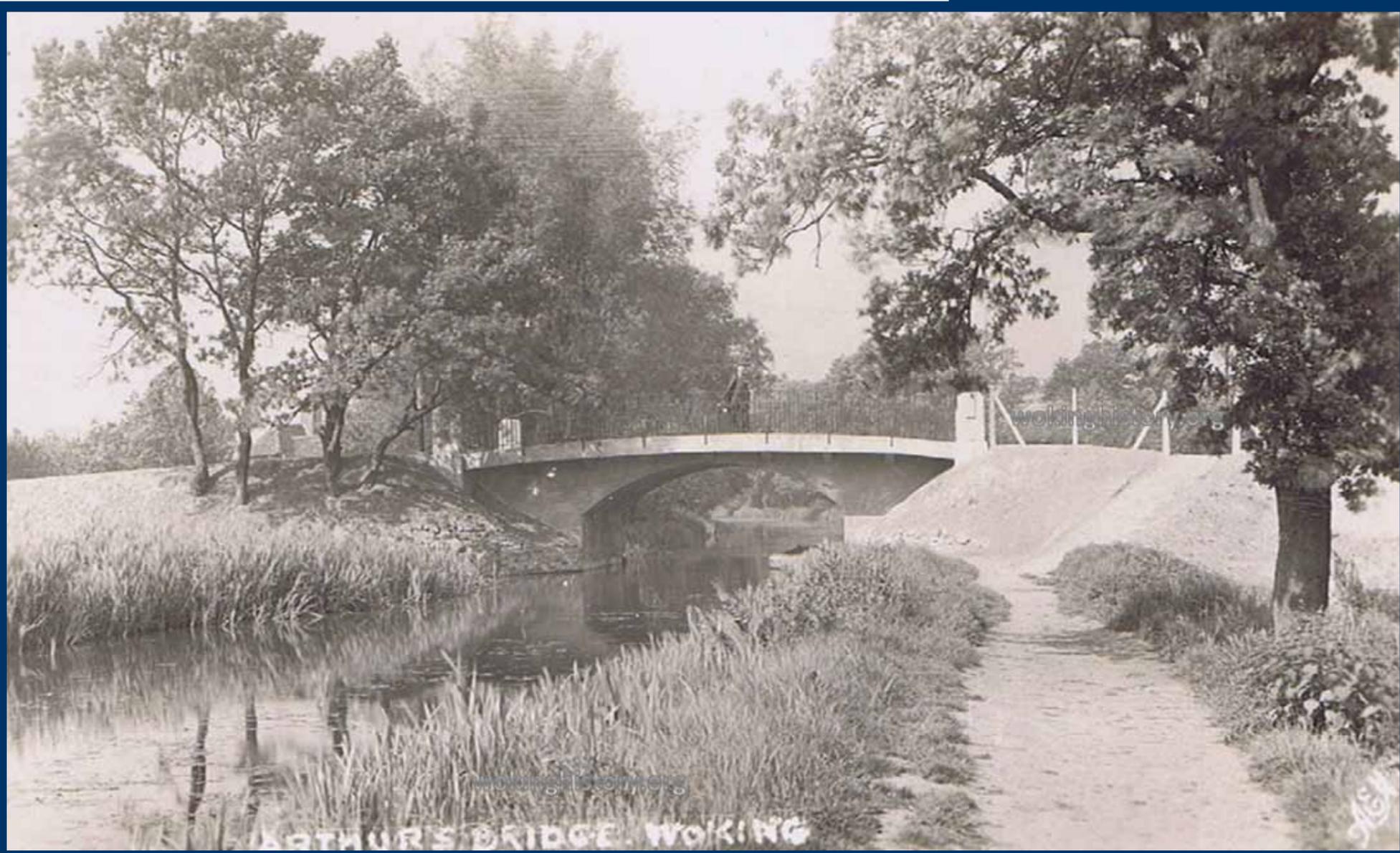
many friends and despite the popularity of 'John Bull' during the Great War, his promotion of the Government's Victory War Bonds (through his Victory Bond Club) was eventually his downfall. A one-time colleague accused him of embezzlement, but when Bottomley tried to sue him for libel he was unable to prove his case and eventually ended up sentenced to

'seven years penal servitude' for fraud.

Woking Council in the meantime won their case against the canal, but never recovered their costs!

was forced settled out of court with some shareholders to help keep them quiet), but his money-making schemes were not making him

Arthurs Bridge had to be temporarily strengthened with concrete and the old brick parapet removed.



THE TROUBLE WITH TRAVELLING AT 20mph



In 1906 the state of Chertsey Road Bridge was so bad that the council had no option but to replace it with a temporary wooden bridge. One of the problems was that Chertsey Road was at about a 30° angle to the canal, but the old bridge crossed the canal at right angles. That was not a problem when the fastest thing

on the road was a horse and cart, but in the early days of motoring, when a car could travel at anything up to a massive 20mph, some of the cars could not quite manage the two tight bends on either side of the bridge and smashed through the parapet – almost ending up in the canal.

Chertsey Road was not the only bridge to suffer at this time as Arthurs Bridge and Wheatsheaf Bridges were also partially closed, so that anyone going from Woking to Horsell had a long route around via St John's or Bunker Bridge (Monument Bridge).



THE TROUBLE OF TRACTION ENGINES & TEMPORARY BRIDGES

In 1904 a traction engine pulling a cart-load of potatoes for Inkerman Barracks fell through the old Hermitage Bridge. In April the Council wrote to the War Department and the Royal Engineers at Aldershot asking them to contribute a substantial sum to the £1,350 estimated to rebuild the bridge 'as they broke the bridge and use it most'. But it appears on this occasion that the War

Department declined the council's 'offer'. In the meantime a temporary wooden bridge was constructed to allow pedestrians and light carts to use the crossing.

In October 1910 the Council's Highways Committee inspected the temporary wooden bridge and noted 'the whole structure shook whilst the committee were there upon an

ordinary farm cart with some earth in it passing over the same'. Some Councillors were so wary of the structure that they declined the ride on the cart and walked across instead.

It was not until 1922-24 that the 'temporary' bridge was replaced by the bridge that is there today.

