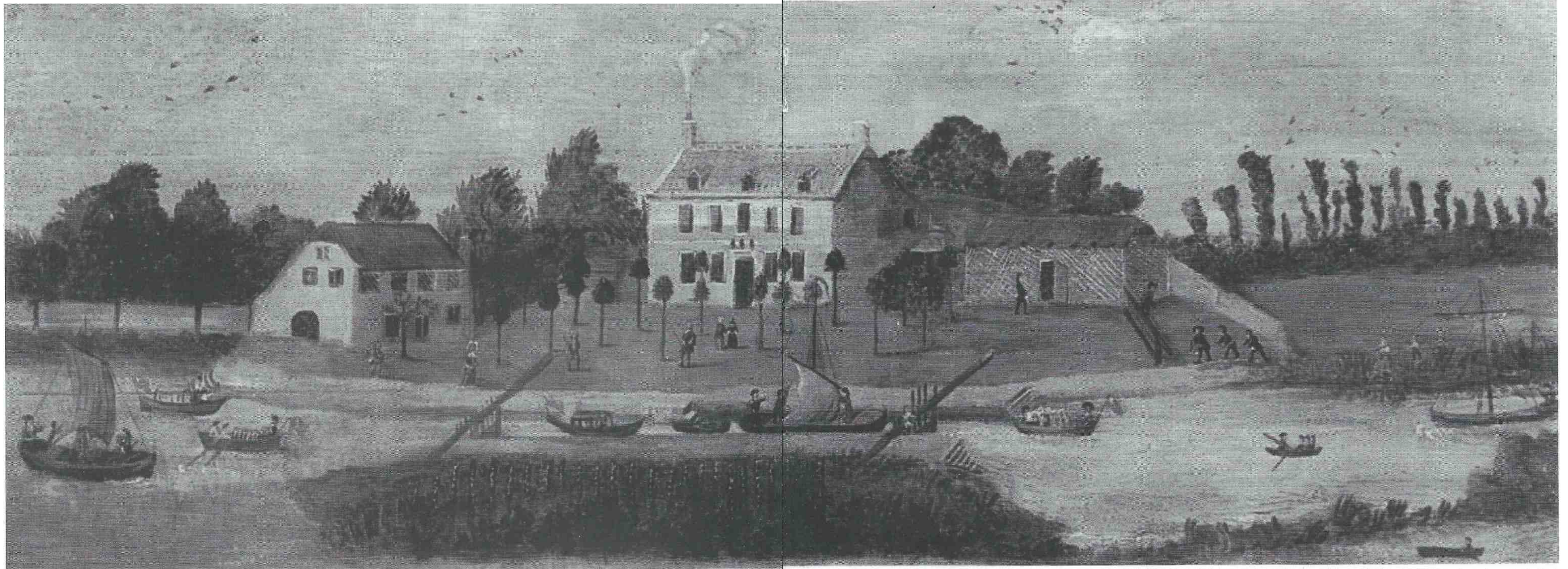


'A View of the Jolly Sailor at Saltford Weir and Lock, near Bristol'

Brenda Buchanan

English Provincial School, c1726. Oil on Panel, 77 $\frac{1}{2}$ in by 36 $\frac{3}{4}$ in. (courtesy A. Csáky)

This familiar painting was in the news in April of 1993 when it left its home of probably more than 260 years at the 'Jolly Sailor' inn at Saltford Weir to be sold at auction. As a work of art it has a simple and naive charm. As an historical document portraying the River Avon Navigation in its earliest days it has an intrinsic worth which will persist whatever the changing fashions and values of the art world.

Saltford was only one of several places along the River Avon between Bristol and Bath where over the years the movement of boats had come to be obstructed by weirs, built across the river so that the flow of water could be penned up to provide mills with power and fishermen with easy prey. The earliest of these barriers, perhaps providing power for fulling mills, were in place by at least the mid-fourteenth century for their removal was first ordered in 1372. Nothing came of that or subsequent orders and, by the later seventeenth century, traders had become very frustrated. Then in December 1724 a body of subscribers was set up in Bath and, under powers granted twelve years earlier, these '*Proprietors of the Navigation*' began the task of improving the river between Bath and Hanham Mills.

In the spring of 1725 John Hoare of Newbury was appointed chief manager of the works. He was much in demand elsewhere, so when the general plan had been drawn up the practical work was put in the hands of local men such as the Bristol engineer John Padmore. His tasks included the lock at Saltford, for which he was paid in October 1727. By then the Navigation was nearing completion and in December of that year the first barge went all the way to Bath. The venture proved a great success, for the link with the port of Bristol meant that Bath stone could be marketed more widely whilst materials needed for building in Bath, such as timber, slate, paint and iron, could be brought up-river from the port.

What does the painting tell us of those momentous days? A dignified house holds centre stage, suggesting that the miller may have commissioned the painting. References by the Proprietors in February 1726 (new style calendar) to a Mr Faux of Saltford Paper Mills give us his name. It is the miller's house which later became the 'Jolly Sailor'. To the left is a building with an aperture on its end wall through which it may be possible to see a water wheel. Above are drying rooms with flimsy shutters. The lightly woven walls of a drying house to

the right would also have allowed air to circulate freely. The lock lies between the sloping lawns of the house and the artificial island in the foreground secured by stakes, but its outlines are obscured by the difficulties of perspective and the failure to allow for changes of water level. The artist's lack of familiarity with these devices is also seen in the angle of the long beams that mark a brave attempt to represent the gates sealing the lock. In each case only the far one can be seen. A lock keeper is working the downstream gates. The hatches may have been used to regulate fishing, for eels were trapped here until the turn of the present century. Steps up from the river can be seen at the right end of the lock walls.

The level of activity on the river suggests that the painting dates from at least 1728 when it was fully navigable, rather than from the earlier, expert attribution. The vessel hauled by men on the right was probably being lined up for the lock, its sail furled. But such use of manpower would have been a familiar sight along the whole length of the Navigation, for a horse towpath was not authorised until 1807. The barge to the left of the picture has the advantage of the wind and the flow of the river, removing the need for manual effort. Red flags (not

discernible in our black-and-white reproduction), with their various emblems, perhaps identified the different firms which operated regularly. The two boats within the lock are representative of this traffic on the river. The cargo-carrying barge is dragging a smaller one, perhaps bearing blocks of stone. A passenger boat with its cabin lies aft. In May 1728 both this form of transport and the Avon Navigation itself received Royal patronage when Princess Amelia, daughter of George II, chose to travel from Bath to Bristol by river.

This painting conveys a great sense of the prosperity of the Bristol-Bath region in the eighteenth century, sustained to a very considerable degree by the activity of the mills along the River Avon, and the bustling traffic using the Navigation.