

Isle of Wight - Brading Haven

**The temporarily reclaimed land by Sir Hugh Myddelton
1620.**

**From a set of books entitled The Lives of The Engineers
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L I F E

OF

SIR HUGH MYDDELTON.



VIEW OF BRADING HAVEN, TEMPORARILY RECLAIMED BY SIR HUGH MYDDELTON,
AS SEEN FROM THE VILLAGE OF BRADING.

[By Percival Skelton, after his original Drawing.]

CHAPTER V.

SIR HUGH MYDDELTON'S EMBANKMENT OF BRADING HAVEN.

No sooner had the New River Company been formed and its operations organized, than we find Sir Hugh Myddelton engaged in the new and bold enterprise of enclosing a large tract of drowned land from the sea. The scene of his operations on this occasion was the eastern extremity of the Isle of Wight, at a place now marked on the maps as Brading Harbour. This harbour or haven consists of a tract of about eight hundred acres in extent.¹ At low water it lies a wide mud flat, through the middle of which a small stream, called the Yar, winds its way from near the village of Brading, at the head of the haven, to the sea at its eastern extremity;² whilst at high tide it forms a beautiful and apparently inland lake, embayed between hills of moderate elevation covered with trees, in many places down to the water's edge. At its seaward margin Bembridge Point stretches out as if to meet the promontory on the opposite shore, where stands the old tower of St. Helen's Church, now used as a sea-mark; and, as seen from most points, the bay seems to be completely land-locked.

The reclamation of so large a tract of land, apparently so conveniently situated for the purpose, had long been matter of speculation. It is not improbable that at some early period neither swamp nor lake existed at Brading Haven, but a green and fertile valley; for

¹ The extent of land reclaimed by Myddelton at Brading Haven has, with the inaccuracy that characterises almost everything heretofore published relating to him, been stated at 2000

acres. Sir Richard Worsley, in his 'History of the Isle of Wight,' gives the whole area of the haven as only 856 acres.

² See the engraving at p. 84.

AND DESPERATELIE SURROUNDED WITHIN OUR KINGDOME OF ENGLAND AND DOMINION OF WALES,' and is now in very great hope to bringe the same to good effect, the same not being heretofore knowne, experimented, or vsed within our said realme or dominion, whereby much benefitt, which as yet is lost, will certenly be brought both to vs in particular and to our comon wealth in generall, and hath offered to publish and practise his skill amongst our loving subiect^e. KNOWE YEE, that wee, tendring the weale of this our kingdom and the benefitt of our subiect^e, and out of our princely care to nourish all art^e, invencions, and studdies whereof there may be any necessary or pfitable vse within our dominions, and out of our desire to cherish and encourage the industries and paynes of all other our loving subiect^e in the like laudable indeavors, and to recompence the labors and expences of the said Hugh Middleton disbursed and to be susteyned as aforesaid, and for the good opinion wee have conceived of the said Hugh Middleton, for that worthy worke of his in bringing the New River to our cittie of London, and his care and industrie in busines of like nature tending to the publicke good doe give and graunt full, free, and absolute licence, libertie, power, and authoritie vnto the said Hughe Middleton, his deputies," &c. to use and practise the same during the terme of fowerteene years next ensuing the date hereof.

No description is given of the particular method adopted by Sir Hugh in forming his embankments; but it would appear that he proceeded by driving piles into the bottom of the Haven near Bembridge Point where it is about the narrowest, and thus formed a strong embankment at its junction with the sea, but, as would afterwards appear, without making adequate provision for the egress of the inland waters.

A curious contemporary manuscript by Sir John Oglander is still extant, preserved amongst the archives of the Oglander family, who have held the adjoining lands from a period antecedent to the date of the Conquest, which we cannot do better than quote, as giving the most authentic account extant of the circumstances connected with the innning of Brading Haven by Sir Hugh Myddelton. This manuscript says :—

"Brading Haven was begged first of all of King James by one Mr. John Gibb, being a groom of his bedchamber, and the man that King James trusted to carry the reprieve to Winchester for my Lord George Cobham and Sir Walter Rawleigh, when some of them were on the scaffold to be executed. This man was put on to beg it of King James by one Sir Bevis Thelwall, who was then one of the pages of the bedchamber. After he had begged it, Sir Bevis would give him nothing for it until the haven were cleared; for the gentlemen of the island whose lands joined to the haven challenged it as belonging unto them. King James was wonderful earnest in the business, both because it concerned his old servant, and also because it would be a leading case for the fens in Lincolnshire. After the verdict went in the Chequer against the gentlemen, then Sir Bevis Thelwall would give nothing for it till he could see that it was feasible to be inned from the sea; whereupon one Sir Hugh Myddelton was called in to assist and undertake the work, and Dutchmen were brought out of the Low Countries, and they began to inn the haven about the 20th of December, 1620. Then, when it was taken in, King James compelled Thelwall and Myddelton to give John Gibb (who the King called 'Father') 2000*l*.¹ Afterwards Sir Hugh Myddelton, like a crafty fox and subtle citizen, put it off wholly to Sir Bevis Thelwall, betwixt whom afterwards there was a great suit in the Chancery; but Sir Bevis did enjoy it some eight years, and bestowed much money in building of a barn-house, mill, fencing of it, and in many other necessary works.

"But now let me tell you somewhat of Sir Bevis Thelwall and Sir Hugh Myddelton, and of the nature of the ground after it was inned, and the cause of the last breach. Sir Bevis was a gentleman's son in Wales, bound apprentice to a mercer in Cheapside, and afterwards executed that trade till King James came into England: then he gave up, and purchased to be one of the pages of the bedchamber, where, being an understanding man, and knowing how to handle the Scots, did in that infancy gain a fair estate by getting the Scots to beg for themselves that which he first found out for them, and then himself buying of them with ready money under half the value. He was a very bold fellow, and one that King James very

¹ On the 30th June, 1622, the haven was granted by the King (the original grant to Gibb having been cancelled) to Hugh Myddelton, Esquire, Robert Bateman, Citizen and Skynner, of London, and Richard Middleton, Citizen and Grocer, in consideration of

2000*l*. paid to the King by Hugh Myddelton, viz., 1000*l*. down, and the remaining 1000*l*. by two half-yearly payments at Lady-day and Michaelmas, 1622; the King passing the 1000*l*. and the bonds for the two sums of 500*l*. to John Gibb.

well affected. Sir Hugh Myddelton was a goldsmith in London. This and other famous works brought him into the world, viz., his London waterwork, Brading Haven, and his mine in Wales.

"The nature of the ground, after it was inned, was not answerable to what was expected, for almost the moiety of it next to the sea was a light running sand, and of little worth. The best of it was down at the farther end next to Brading, my Marsh, and Knight's Tenement, in Bembridge. I account that there was 200 acres that might be worth 6s. 8d. the acre, and all the rest 2s. 6d. the acre. The total of the haven was 706 acres. Sir Hugh Myddelton, before he sold, tried all experiments in it: he sowed wheat, barley, oats, cabbage seed, and last of all rape seed, which proved best; but all the others came to nothing. The only inconvenience was in it that the sea brought in so much sand and ooze and seaweed that choked up the passage of the water to go out, insomuch as I am of opinion that if the sea had not broke in Sir Bevis could hardly have kept it, for there would have been no current for the water to go out; for the eastern tide brought so much sand as the water was not of force to drive it away, so that in time it would have laid to the sea, or else the sea would have drowned the whole country. Therefore, in my opinion, it is not good meddling with a haven so near the main ocean.

"The country (I mean the common people) was very much against the inming of it, as out of their slender capacity thinking by a little fishing and fowling there would accrue more benefit than by pasturage; but this I am sure of, it caused, after the first three years, a great deal of more health in these parts than was ever before; and another thing is remarkable, that whereas we thought it would have improved our marshes, certainly they were the worse for it, and rotted sheep which before fattened there.

"The cause of the last breach was by reason of a wet time when the haven was full of water, and then a high spring tide, when both the waters met underneath in the loose sand. On the 8th of March, 1630, one Andrew Ripley that was put in earnest to look to Brading Haven by Sir Bevis Thelwall, came in post to my house in Newport to inform me that the sea had made a breach in the said haven near the easternmost end. I demanded of him what the charge might be to stop it out; he told me he thought 40s., whereupon I bid him go thither and get workmen against the next day morning, and some carts, and I would pay them their wages; but the sea the next day came so forcibly in that there was no meddling of it, for Ripley went up presently to London to Sir Bevis Thelwall himself,

to have him come down and take some further course; but within four days after the sea had won so much on the haven, and made the breach so wide and deep, that on the 15th of March when I came thither to see it I knew not well what to judge of it, for whereas at the first 5l. would have stopped it out, now I think 200l. will not do it, and what will be the event of it time will tell. Sir Bevis on news of this breach came into the island on the 17th of March, 1630, and brought with him a letter from my Lord Conway to me and Sir Edward Dennies, desiring us to cause my Lady Worsley, on behalf of her son, to make up the breach which happened in her ground through their neglect. She returned us an answer that she



ENTRANCE TO BRADING HARBOUR, FROM ST. HELEN'S OLD TOWER.¹

[By R. P. Leitch, after a Sketch by the Author.]

¹ The above view represents the present state of the entrance to Brading Haven. A wide ridge of drifted sand lies across it, in front of the old bank raised by Sir Hugh, which extended from a point below the hill under "Mrs. Grant's house," a little to the westward of the village of Bembridge (seen on the opposite shore) to what are now called "The Boat Houses," situated towards the northern side of the haven, and behind the sand-ridge extending across the view. The black piles driven into the bottom of the haven in the process of embankment are still to be seen sticking up at low-water; and

only a few years since the old gates which served for a sluice were dug up near the Boat Houses. At the extremity of the sand-ridge there is a ferry across to the village of Bembridge, in front of which is the narrow entrance into the haven. There have been serious encroachments of the sea on that side of late years, and the channel has become much impeded; so much so that it has been feared that the navigation would be lost. The old church-tower of St. Helen's, faced with brick and whitewashed, on the right of the view, is still used as a sea-mark.

thought that the law would not compel her unto it, and therefore desired to be excused, which answer we returned to my lord. What the event will be I know not, but it seemeth to me not reasonable that she should suffer for not complying with his request. If he had not inned the haven this accident could never have happened; therefore he giving the cause, that she should apply the cure I understand not. But this I am sure, that Sir Bevis thinketh to recover of her and her son all his charges, which he now sweareth every way to be 2000*l*. For my part, I would wish no friend of mine to have any hand in the second inning of it. Truly all the better sort of the island were very sorry for Sir Bevis Thelwall, and the commoner sort were as glad as to say truly of Sir Bevis that he did the country many good offices, and was ready at all times to do his best for the public and for everyone.

“Sir Hugh Myddelton took it first in, and it was proper for none but him, because he had a mine of silver in Wales to maintain it. It cost at the first taking of it in 4000*l*., then they gave 2000*l*. to Mr. John Gibb for it, who had begged it of King James; afterwards, in building the barn and dwelling-house, and water-mill, with the ditching and quick-setting, and making all the partitions, it could not have cost less than 200*l*. more: so in the total it stood them, from the time they began to take it in, until the 8th of March, a loss of 7000*l*.”

It will thus be observed that the loss of this undertaking fell upon Thelwall, and not upon Myddelton; Sir Hugh having sold out of the adventure long before the sea burst through his embankment. The date of his conveyance to Sir Bevis Thelwall was the 4th September, 1624, nearly six years before the final ruin of the work. He had, therefore, got his capital out of the adventure, most probably with his profit as contractor, and was thus free to embark in the important mining enterprise in Wales, on which we find him next engaged.