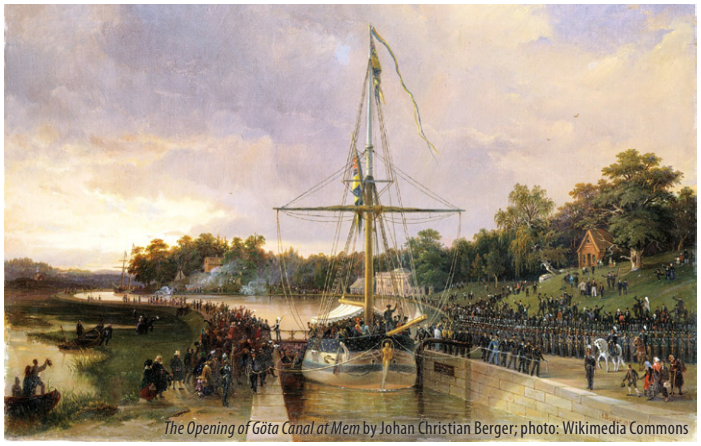
Celebrating the 190th birthday of the 190 km long canal

by Przemysław Myszka

At the beginning of the 16th century, Hans Brask, the bishop of Linköping, put forward the idea of bypassing the Sound Dues, a toll on the use of the Øresund, by directly connecting the Baltic and North seas with a canal running through Sweden. The concept had to wait over three centuries to become a reality, taken up by count Baltzar von Platen (who sadly didn't witness the completion of the entirety of his opus magnum). Although in 2000 it was chosen as the Swedish Construction of the Millennium, the Göta Canal never fulfilled Brask and von Platen's intentions. It, however, yielded other fruits, most notably in developing the country's industry and tourism.



Photos: Wikimedia Commons



The Opening of Göta Canal at Mem by Johan Christian Berger; photo: Wikimedia Commons

In 1806, born on the island of Rügen von Platen, a naval officer and governmental minister in Sweden produced a treatise on canals. King Charles XIII was favourable to digging a Baltic-North Sea canal, seeing it as an opportunity to level up the country through industrial development. On 11 April 1810, his royal highness gave the go-ahead for von Platen's company set up for building the canal to start the construction works, granting labour, land, and forests for the project. Von Platen was more than eager to oblige since he, with the invaluable help of Thomas Telford (designer of the Caledonian Canal in Scotland), had already charted the canal lay-up in 1808.

The first spade hit the ground in May 1810, with the excavation works beginning in Motala. Over the next 22 years, some 60 thousand men (mostly soldiers, but the group also comprised some 200 Russian deserters) worked for seven million man-days (each counting 12 hours), digging 87.3 kilometres, blasting away 200 thousand cubic metres of rock, and carting eight million cubic metres of soil. Because Sweden was completely unsavvy in such infrastructural projects, foremen were imported from Great Britain, along with a dredger, levelling instruments, and even the most rudimentary equipment like pickaxes, iron-shod wooden spades and wheelbarrows. To ward off cold creeping into the workers' hands and feet, every weekly ration included 14 measures of schnapps ('merry' workers are still part of the lay of the construction land well into the 21st century, to the detriment of occupational safety and health, sadly; conversely, the canal's troops were more than disciplined). Von Platen understood that domestic manufacturing and know-how would be pivotal in completing the Göta Canal. Therefore, he founded the Motala Verkstad (nowadays considered the cradle of Swedish industry, especially iron casting, even those parts that turned out to be the nail in the canal's coffin).

The western section was inaugurated in 1822, for which von Platen was honoured with the Order of the Seraphim by Charles XIV John. Ten years later, and three after the count's passing (while governing Norway), the whole canal was commissioned during a grand ceremony involving the royal family. All soldiers that partook in its construction were presented with a silver medal. The 190 km long, 7-14 metres wide, and three metres deep Göta Canal stretches from Mem on the east coast to Sjötorp on Lake Vänern. The infrastructure totals 58 locks (today hydraulic, apart from two all automated). It also comprises a system of side ditches and stone-lined culverts beneath the canal (some of them the height of a man) that carry the water to other channels. There are also regulating gates, serving two purposes. In an unfortunate collapse event, such as the high bank burst at Venneberga in 1847, the gates automatically close in response to water suction so that only a short stretch is emptied. Second, it facilitates spot emptying for repairs.

Through lakes and rivers, the Göta Canal reaches Gothenburg. Yet, André Oscar Wallenberg's Company for Swedish Canal Steamboat Transit Traffic carried out only two shipments in 1851 from England (Hull) to Russia (St. Petersburg) over the canal before the Crimean War halted trade between the two nations. Shortly afterwards, the Copenhagen Convention of 1857 abolished the Sound Dues, turning all Danish straits into international waterways free to all commercial shipping. Two years earlier, the innovation of railways started making its way to Sweden. Trains were faster and enabled year-round passenger and freight transport, unlike the Göta Canal, which was shut close for about five months a year. Specific non-time-sensitive trades, such as forest products, coal and iron ore, continued to use the canal, but even those perished after the 1870s.











Photos: Göta kanal

The Motala Verkstad quickly shifted its focus (in 1878) to producing locomotives and rolling stock (200 years old, it is still up & running as part of the MVG Motala Verkstad Group).

Though the Göta Canal didn't revolutionise Baltic Sea shipping, it wasn't an utter bust – at least from today's perspective. Each year, around two million people visit it as a tourist destination as well as use it for recreational purposes. Somewhat ironically, the canal got nicknamed "divorce ditch" for the trouble it causes to amateur couples that try to navigate through its narrownesses and locks. Count Baltzar von Platen oversees the traffic from his resting place near the canal in Motala.

Interestingly, it is believed that the Göta Canal gave birth to another significant Swedish infrastructure. Following the loss of Finland in 1809, the Karlsborg Fortress was erected (1820-1909) to better protect Stockholm, as the capital now found itself lying directly on the eastern flank. It was designed as a point of egress and was supposed to shelter the royal family, the government, and the treasury – transported via the Göta Canal – should a war break out. It never did, apart from storing Sweden's gold reserve during WWII. Whereas the Karlsborg Fortress nowadays still houses military units, its grounds also host numerous civilian establishments, making it another destination for tourists. Maybe botched modern container terminal investments will similarly find their second life? ■