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Tonbridge Town Lock

I recently visited Tonbridge in Kent and took a walk along the river path to see Town Lock on the River Medway. As there had been a lot of rain, I expected to see the river at high level and flowing vigorously through the weirs. The weir gate was partially open to release the water. It is a counterbalanced curved shutter that can be raised or lowered as required. On the upriver side, the water swirled towards the shutter and although the surface of the water was flat, you could clearly see that it was sucking down towards the gap on the river bed. On the other side it was an entirely different story. The water surged out from under the gate with enormous force, boiling and turning over and back on itself. As the waves rode up over each other, some parts were flowing backwards, smashing together with the next surge before being swept further down the narrow concrete channel. Within about ten metres, the surface flattened once again, as the foam unfolded itself, looking like a very holey lace tablecloth spread out over the river and hiding the dangerous currents below.

Next to the weir gate is a canoe and fish pass where a much smaller amount of water is allowed to race down a narrow shallow channel. Within the water are rows of fish brushes, flexible bristles that slow the current and reduce turbulence, with the canoes able to ride over the top. This is far less dramatic but is not without its dangers, as even this lesser flow would be impossible to resist. On the far side where a tributary joins, there is a wide unobstructed open weir consisting of shallow steps with the water flowing peacefully over. In front of all these structures is a long boom of floating orange cylinders, to prevent boats from approaching. On the near side is the lock for the passage of boats, with the wooden gates shut and only a slight trickle of water escaping through the tiny gaps.

I was able to view the drama of the central weir from the safety of the concrete island that supports the structures. The burst of energy produced within the short length of channel below the weir shutter is the result of force meeting constriction. Being a shorthand student, you will immediately recognise the fury of the water as a visual metaphor of how one feels during a high speed attempt in shorthand writing. You start off calm, then there is the sudden surge of activity, the unstoppable rush of words and sounds, the scrabbling to deal with everything at once, and finally the relief when it is over and you realise that you have survived the encounter. In shorthand there is no threat to safety, and the discomfiture is only what you have chosen to put yourself through. In real life drowning would be an almost certain outcome for anyone falling into those churning waters and indeed the treacherous unseen currents below weirs, twisting about beneath the surface of the outflow, can keep a person under indefinitely.

The three other structures on the river at this location are also a perfect example of different types of shorthand experience. The closed lock gate is the times of controlled practising. The water flows into its allotted space, carefully and slowly so as not to rock the boat. It is then released with equal slowness and control from the second gate resulting in a smooth and successful journey along the river. The canoe pass is the dictations you take in order to stretch your speed, preferably passages that you have prepared and practised. They are still flowing with purposeful rapidity but they are not going to suck you under and you merely get ejected at the other end, exhausted and bedraggled but still alive. You might even sometimes feel like a fish battling upstream against the flow!

Tonbridge Town Lock

The wide steps are like writing very easy words for the level you are at, with well-known simple material for the beginner or maybe slightly more difficult matter taken at a low comfortable speed, for the purpose of improving the accuracy and neatness of your outlines. I do not think any other visitors would view the weirs as an example of shorthand experiences, but the main central weir with its furious and lethal tangled currents does seem to be an apt representation of any situation where force and energy are concentrated, resulting in an eruption of chaos and turmoil upon release.

In shorthand, you cannot reduce the force of the torrent of words, as the speaker, the speed and the subject matter are not within your control. All you can do is to reduce the constriction as much as possible, by constant improvement of your shorthand ability. Vocabulary extension is essential, but of equal or maybe greater importance is complete familiarity with outlines for the most common words. If you hesitate over these, that will be a large percentage of the text, and so your difficulties will be multiplied in proportion to the frequency of their occurrence. There will always be encounters with new words, and knowing the commonest ones to perfection will put time in your pocket, as it were, to deal immediately and successfully with the unknown or unusual words. "Dealing with" during dictation means getting something readable on

paper, even if it is not correct. "Dealing with" afterwards means correcting and drilling that outline, so that you never trip up on it again. In this way the hesitations are slowly but surely reduced over time.

Later on we walked through Tonbridge Castle sports ground and found the football field covered in lake-sized puddles. The braids of the river had overflowed in the previous days and the excess was rapidly draining away and the green grass emerging again. The seagulls were standing around in the shallow water, where they felt safe from predators, and no doubt were taking advantage of the glut of worms driven to the surface. If you were unaware of the terrain, you would not venture into the water, but the young man in the photo knows that it is all entirely flat and only inches deep, and is walking his dog along his usual path, unconcerned by shoes full of muddy water.

The river level is controlled all along its length and such flooding is allowed in order to prevent a worse scenario in other areas along the course of the river Medway. When flooding is more severe, the full extent of it can be seen by climbing the motte (the artificial mound next to the castle building). In winter when the leaves do not obscure the view you can see fields adjacent to the river streaked with long expanses of white and grey. (1134 words)