

If it's the *Chesterfield Canal*, what's it doing in *Clarborough*?

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The recent announcement by the Government of the proposed route for the HS2 railway through the East Midlands made me think of the situation in days gone by.

Our local canal is The Chesterfield Canal, it flows through the parish from the area of The Hop Pole, on the outskirts of Retford via The Gate Inn and on through Hayton.

The canal was opened to traffic in 1777. As originally planned it would have come no where near Clarborough and Welham but would have gone from Chesterfield via Kiveton Park then almost straight to Bawtry. At that time, Bawtry was a thriving river port on the River Idle. Chesterfield was a growing town and exported coal, lead and manufactured goods but with only wagons or pack-horses, transport was slow, expensive and often, in winter, impossible.

The business-men of Chesterfield had seen the success of the Bridgewater Canal in Cheshire and wanted one of these new-fangled canals to transport their heavy goods. Initially they were of a mind that Bawtry, their traditional destination should be the terminus of their new canal and commissioned James Brindley to survey a route and prepare an estimate of the construction cost. The river Idle was navigable from Bawtry as far as West Stockwith, where cargoes of the river boats were transferred onto sea-going sailing ships on the Trent. This made the choice of Bawtry as the canal's terminus perfectly logical.

However the good citizens of Retford (both East and West in those days) wanted to expand their trade too; so, unlike modern protesters, who refuse to accept new transport routes "in their back yard" the Retford citizens actively campaigned to have the canal routed through Retford in anticipation of the additional trade that would follow.

Worksop also saw the potential of this new water highway and as a result of petitions and the promise of extra cash, as this was to be built by private funding, not the tax-payer, the promoters of the original route agreed to the change to bring the canal close (250 years ago both communities were much smaller) to both Worksop and Retford.

The new route raised a complication however, between Retford and the river Trent there runs a ridge of high ground (which we know as Clarborough Hill). To cross this would have required dozens of locks to raise the waterway from Retford then lower it to the level of the river Trent. The alternative and less expensive option was to follow the ridge north, the canal remaining in the valley of the River Idle, passing through Clarborough en route, as far as Drakeholes, where by the construction of a tunnel, only 159 yards in length, the canal could break through into the Trent's flood plain and then progress, through Misterton to West Stockwith.

This was a major success. Not only would the canal now carry extra traffic; that from and to both Worksop and Retford; but the canal boats could remain loaded as far as West Stockwith where cargo would be transhipped only once, into the sea-going craft that traded from there.

Thus all the stone quarried in Anston for the construction of the Palace of Westminster passed through Clarborough and Welham on its way to London!

The Chesterfield Canal was built as a commercial adventure by private capital. Certainly major land-owners bought shares, but so too did local individuals, all driven, of course, by the desire to make money. Opened throughout in 1777, it had been planned without proper maps, surveying equipment, computers or mobile 'phones. It had been dug BY HAND, there being no mechanised equipment, so pick, shovel, and wheel barrow were the Navvies tools. Even money, coins and notes, were in short supply there being no national banks, so paying wages became a challenge, and notes of promise were issued to suppliers who would accept these, trusting that they had some value when handed in to the

one branch of the local bank.

Once opened the canal did bring trade to the area, farmers were able to harvest crops and load canal boats with up to 20 tons at a time. The collieries could now send coal to many destinations and people who had been forced to search for firewood could now rely on deliveries of fuel.

Before the coming of the canal, transport was by pack-horse or horse-drawn cart, but with roads being almost as natural, as today's country footpaths, they were rock hard in the frost and a quagmire in winter and times of heavy rain. It was not unusual for horses to sink up to their stomachs in the mire, a mixture of mud and manure! Sometimes depositing the load or the rider as they fell into this unpleasant soup. Thus taking one tonne of wheat grown in Claborough to Worksop, for example would require twenty horses, at least two men, and over-night accommodation for all, in Worksop, before the return trip with possibly a tonne of coal. The new canal allowed one horse and one man to do this trip in less time, but with twenty tonnes in the boat and, other than frost, when the canal would freeze over, no hindrance from the weather!

Business on the canal flourished, and local traders prospered. Farm produce could reach the customer more quickly and in better condition. As farms prospered more jobs on the land were created. Where the canal builders had exposed clay, brick-works sprang up, beds of rock were quarried, and coal mines expanded to satisfy the increasing demand for fuel.

Local mills expanded, Worksop still retains a canal-side flour mill, that until the second world war received foreign wheat, imported via Gainsborough along the canal through Claborough and Retford.

A return load, most unpopular with the boat crews was of course manure. With human foot or the horse as the only forms of transport, the horse ass and donkey population in urban areas was vast, and of course "traffic pollution" was very visible and odorous. Manure was, however, sought after by farmers and provided

a lucrative return load for the boats. Each town or village would have entrepreneurs who would collect the horse deposits until there was sufficient to load a boat (some 20 tonnes) This would then be hand-forked into the boat, and at the customer's field hand-forked out into hand carts to be spread on the crops.

With this in mind remember that in these times, the poorer people may get one Sunday a year away, and a boat trip (bearing in mind the cargo referred to above) from say the centre of Retford as far as Claborough, Hayton or possibly Drakeholes and back was their annual holiday!

Indeed passenger transport developed on the canal and Packet Boats would run to Retford market taking eager seller of eggs or butter to market whence they would return with a stock of thread or buttons for example.

The Chesterfield Canal was built as a commercial investment by private capital. It served the investors and the local community well for more than a century, but it could not last for ever. In the mid 1800s, the railways came. At first this was good for the canal, as heavy materials were carried by water to the railway construction sites. But trains were faster, cheaper and of course "modern". Trade on the Chesterfield Canal began to fall away. Its *swan song* was certainly the The Palace of Westminster. This was re-built following a major fire in 1840-1845 and stone from Anston (between Worksop and Sheffield) was selected for the reconstruction. So every time you see a television "political pundit" with the Houses of Parliament as a back-drop, just remember that all the stone used in its construction passed, from the quarries at Anston, on canal boats, right through the parish of Claborough and Welham on its way to London..

By 1908 the mile-and-three-quarter long, Norwood Tunnel, had collapsed through mining subsidence. It was never re-opened. Traffic dwindled and just after the second world-war, trade ceased altogether, and the canal slumbered slowly into decay. It became a ribbon of neglect, just a rural home for, reeds, coots, swallows and in the towns, of course, a

home for rubbish!

The canal would have faded into the landscape as it silted up and became overgrown but for a small band of enthusiasts who, in 1962, formed the Retford and Worksop Boat Club. Local people such as Les Baines and George Stokes of Clarborough and Harry Spencer of Retford (and your author) were some of the small band that set about reversing the pattern of neglect and decline.

The canal had been Nationalised in 1947 along with 3,000 miles of the Nation's other waterways and almost the whole railway network. So it already, in a sense, belonged to all of us. The Boat Club had great difficulty in the beginning with "the authorities". As always bureaucracy was much happier doing nothing. These awkward boating people actually wanted the canal; "their canal!" repaired, dredged, even the locks re-opened.

Whilst waiting for British Waterways to agree to begin major repairs, club members organised their own work parties. Unofficially, locks were drained and the mud and debris of years was cleared away. Vast garden rakes were made from television aerials and used to rake out the weed. Happily energy and enthusiasm won the day, eventually the authorities took over and gradually the canal shook off its slumber. Locks were repaired, mud was dredged, and water levels restored. This encouraged a wider variety of flora and fauna to the waterway corridor. Fishing improved and the water became clear. Brightly painted boats made their way between Worksop, the river Trent and on to York, London, Bristol or Stratford-upon-Avon. Canal-side cottages became sought-after, and closed-down pubs re-opened.

As early as 1964 the Boat Club had purchased a converted wooden narrow boat called "Nelson" to use as a canal-based Headquarters. Its journey from near Daventry, by water, all the way to Worksop attracted huge newspaper and even television coverage, and this finally confirmed that the canal as far as Worksop would be kept open and maintained for the enjoyment of local people for the foreseeable future. The Boat Club still campaigns to keep the local waterway in good

condition for the benefit of us all.

But what of the rest of the canal? Was the length from Worksop to Chesterfield to be lost for ever?

A year ago, in this Journal, I looked at how attitude of local people to the coming of The Chesterfield Canal in 1770; compared to the reception given to Government plans for the proposed HS2 railway in 2012. In subsequent editions we looked at how the canal increased business in the area and benefited people in Retford, Clarborough and Welham and other communities, by dramatically reducing transport costs for food and fuel. We saw that as the railways and later the roads developed, how the canal fell into disuse.

Later we read of the efforts by the Retford and Worksop Boat Club in the 1960s (still very active and based in Clayworth) to save the canal from abandonment between West Stockwith where it links with the River Trent and Worksop. Worksop was perceived then, to be a sensible place to accept that the canal would be, for ever truncated. The twenty mile length from Worksop to Chesterfield had after all, been derelict for more than a century.

However in the mid 1970s a small group of enthusiasts (including your writer) refused to accept what seemed obvious to others and formed the Chesterfield Canal Society. To these enthusiasts the remaining canal was not yet clinically "dead". We did accept that "terminally ill" was, possibly, an appropriate description. After all road bridges had been lowered, locks destroyed, parts of the canal filled in, in Killamarsh houses had been built directly over the canal bed and some lengths of waterway sold off. The canal was a stinking mess. Even the mighty Norwood Tunnel seemed like a lost cause, as it had been filled with concrete to allow the M1 motorway to be built over it.

The Queen's Jubilee in 1977 had seen a huge rally of boats in Worksop, all having, on the way, passed through Clayworth of course. People from far and wide came to see the spectacle, and questions were asked about the canal beyond Worksop. Subsequently following

many years of patient petitioning and public pressure through the CCS, local authorities came to the rescue. Rotherham undertook, in partnership with British Waterways the restoration, to original standards, of the canal from Worksop to the eastern portal of Norwood Tunnel. Unbelievably, internal inspection of the tunnel indicated that the concrete infill had never actually happened. The tunnel had seemingly supported the M1 for 40 years with no difficulty.

In North-east Derbyshire, again with local authority support, work to restore the canal began in Chesterfield itself and this has now reached as far east as Staveley.

The Chesterfield Canal Society launched in 1975 morphed into the Chesterfield Canal Trust and is now, in partnership with local and national government departments, working to gradually rebuild the canal. CCT volunteers drive diggers, lay bricks, raise funds, give talks, maintain boats. As a result Staveley has a new canal basin in which each year a water festival is held. Such is the enthusiasm for the waterway in north-east Derbyshire that realistic plans for a brand-new canal to link Chesterfield and Rotherham are being seriously considered by local authorities.

The Chesterfield Canal Trust exists to promote the complete restoration, maintenance and full use of the Chesterfield Canal. It has pioneered "The Cuckoo Way", the restored tow-path, open now all the way from Chesterfield, through Clarborough to West Stockwith. The Trust owns and operates (crewed by volunteers) three public trip boats. One, the Seth Ellis (named after Seth Ellis Stephenson of Retford, a keen promoter of the canal in 1770) is locally based at the Hop Pole pub (A620 towards Clarborough). It also owns an historic original, Midlands-built, working boat, Python and is currently building (using hand tools only) a full-size replica of a Cuckoo, the horse-drawn Chesterfield working boats.

New members are always welcome, so next time you "walk the dog" along the canal please remember those optimists 250 years ago who built it, and those more recent optimists who saved it for our enjoyment today. Those folk

were people like you, who wanted more than the *status quo* and who did something about it. If you have an interest in your local waterway you can visit the Trust's website at www.chesterfield-canal-trust.org.uk to find out more of its history, its future and even to become a member too.

To learn more about the origins of our local waterway you could read the book "The Waterways Revolution" by Christine Richardson ISBN1 85421 161 7 published by S.P.A. Ltd.

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