

The Shropshire Canal of 1788 was the first Public Enterprise of its kind

Well-known Shropshire names were in the original list of Shareholders

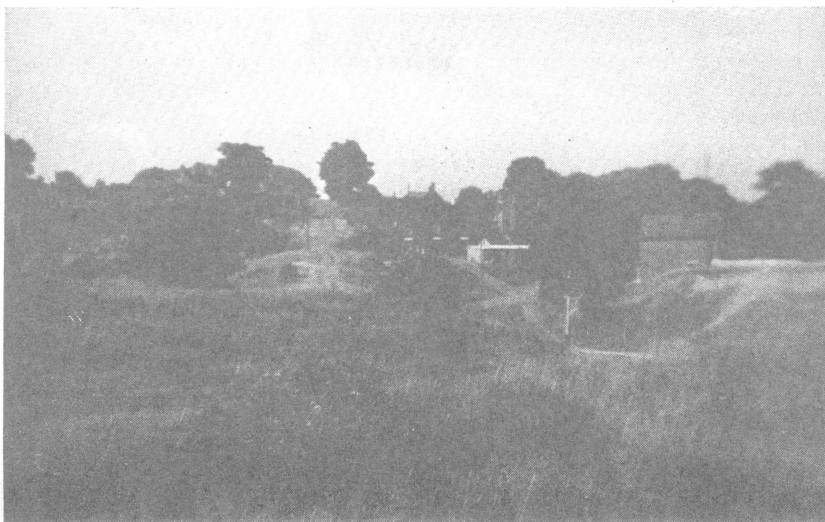
by W. HOWARD WILLIAMS

The canals dealt with in the previous article were private undertakings. The Shropshire Canal, which was a much more venturesome enterprise, was financed by public subscription. It was a venturesome project because the contours of the countryside through which it was to be cut varied so greatly that no fewer than three large inclined planes had to be constructed, together with two long tunnels and one short one and a small aqueduct.

It is not at all surprising that the man who conceived the idea of making the canal, who surveyed it and did so much to bring the task to a successful conclusion was none other than William Reynolds, of Ketley. In a letter to his brother-in-law, dated January, 1788, he mentioned that he was making a canal from Oakengates to Ketley and had another in contemplation from Donnington Wood to the Severn.

In "A Dynasty of Ironfounders", Rastrick claims that this canal was a Coalbrookdale Company undertaking. A study of the "Shropshire Canal Act", 1788, Telford's article in Plymley's "Shropshire" and other authoritative works of reference, make it difficult to reconcile this claim.

Pictures : below, left, remains of the bridge which carried the mineral railway from Shawfield Colliery to Blist's Hill brickworks ; right, the Aqueduct which carried the branch canal to Dawley.



Site of the Wrockwardine Wood inclined plane as it appears today

In 1788, a subscription was entered into, and an Act of Parliament was obtained for the purpose of "making and maintaining of a navigable canal from Donnington Wood, to, or near a place called Southill Bank, and then by two several branches to communicate with the River Severn; one near Coalbrookdale and the other at Coalport".

There were to be 500 shares each of £125. The Act, which is a lengthy document, lists the owners of lands through which the

canal would be cut, and gives the names of the 58 subscribers who formed the "Company of Proprietors of the Shropshire Canal Navigation". These include:— The Marquis of Stafford, The Earl of Shrewsbury, Lord Berwick, *Sir* Wm. Jerningham, Isaac Hawkins Browne, Robert Burton, William Cludde, Samuel Darby, Thomas Eyton, Thomas Gilbert, William Hallen, Egerton Leeke, William Pulteney, Richard and William Reynolds, Joseph, Elizabeth and Hannah Mary Rathbone, Hannah Rose, Cornelius Reynolds and John Wilkinson.

Course of the Canal

The canal began in a junction with the Donnington Wood canal, and almost immediately came the inclined plane 320 yards long, with a perpendicular rise of 120 feet. The canal then proceeded through the Cockshutt, along the ridge of high ground above Wrockwardine Wood and Oakengates. After passing beneath the road between Oakengates and St. Georges, the canal passed through Snedshill Tunnel, 279 yards long. Thence it passed through Snedshill Ironworks, near which it was joined by the Ketley



Canal. South of this junction, it passed under what is now the London — Holyhead Road, near to the Greyhound Inn by means of a short tunnel. About 300 yards south it passed near to Hollinswood Ironworks. Further south were the Dark Lane Furnaces of the Botfields on the west bank, while a little further on was Randlay Pool, one of the canal reservoirs. Nearby were the Stirchley Ironworks, also a Botfield Works. The Jerry Furnaces were on the opposite side of the canal, while about half-mile distant were Bishton's Langley Furnaces, which were served by a light railway. Nearer to Stirchley was another reservoir. The canal passed through the 281 yard long Stirchley Tunnel before it divided.

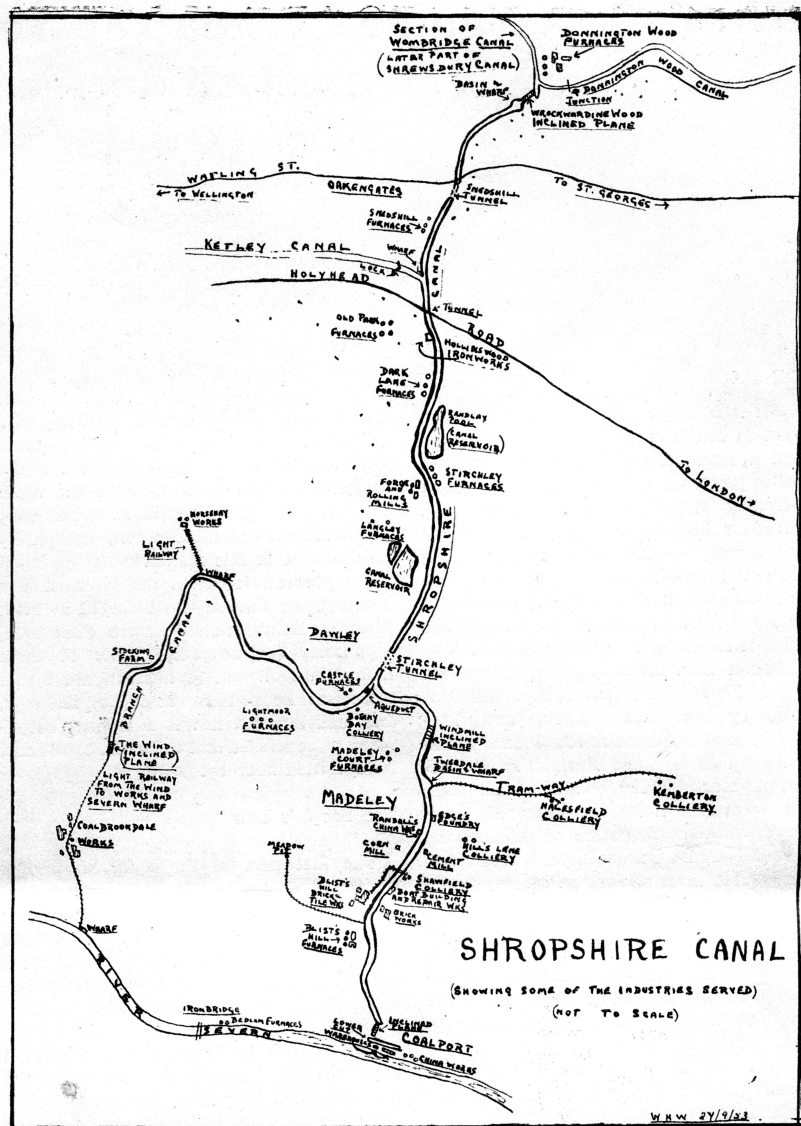
On emerging from the tunnel, the main line of the canal struck off across the meadows to Windmill Farm. Here a long incline, 600 yards long, was constructed. At the top of the incline were the boat-repair sheds. After passing the Windmill Incline, the canal passed under the road and into the Tweedale basin. From here light railways served the Madeley Court Furnaces, and the Halesfield and Kemberton Collieries. Water was brought to the canal here from those collieries.

Blist's Hill

The canal proceeded east of Madeley. Near the Queen Street Bridge, Messrs. Edge and Co., Chainmakers, once had a foundry, whilst Martin Randall's China Works once occupied a site near Hill's Lane Bridge. A light railway served Hill's Lane Colliery nearby. Further south, one can still see the gaunt remains of a bridge by which pit spoil was taken by a light railway from Shawfield Colliery to Blist's Hill Brickworks.

Boat-building and repair sheds were situated at Blist's Hill. Here also were brick-and-tile works on opposite sides of the canal. The Blist's Hill Furnaces of the Madeley Wood Company, close by, were the last cold-blast furnaces to operate in the county. Randall records that, at a time of industrial strife in the middle of the last century, a body of strikers from other works in the district threatened to divert the canal into the works here, if the men did not stop work in sympathy with them.

Coal was brought to a wharf at Blist's Hill from the Meadow Pit, south of Madeley, by way of Baguley's Wind and the High Bridge over the Coalport Road.



Coalport Incline

The canal continued to the Hay, where the steepest of the inclined planes connected with a lower pound, 3/4 of a mile long, cut parallel with the River Severn, but above flood level, at Coalport. Between this pound and the river were erected warehouses, which were constructed so that goods could be conveniently transferred from canal boats to river craft and vice versa.

It has been estimated that goods including coal and iron, in excess of 100,000 tons passed through these warehouses annually in the peak of local industrial prosperity. It is an ironic thought that today Coalport is a forgotten inland port.

The branch canal, after leaving the main line, passed over a small stone aqueduct at a point where the Dawley—Madeley road passed through the small village now called Aqueduct. It then wound its way towards Dawley, passing

and serving Dawley Castle Furnaces and Botany Bay Colliery, and several smaller collieries en route. Then on through Little Dawley to a point near to where Doseley church now stands. From here a light railway served Horsehay Furnaces. The canal then doubled back, horse-shoe fashion, crossing beneath Holywell Lane and Green Lane to end at the top of the "Wind" at what was then known as Brierley Hill. The original plan was to take the canal over Lincoln Hill, near to the Rotunda, and to connect with the river near Styches Weir by means of an inclined plane, but this part of the plan was abandoned.

Connection with Coalbrookdale

At the "Wind," a connection with the nearby Coalbrookdale Works was effected by twin shafts, 120 feet deep, sunk to a tunnel into which a light railway was run. The "Wind" operated on the same principle as a similar device at Lilleshall on the Donnington Wood

Canal. This railway served the Dale Works and went on to the Loadcroft Wharf on the river near Dale End.

The canal and branch were completed in 1792.

In 1794, the Coalbrook dale Company abandoned the tunnel and shafts and constructed an inclined plane.

A map of Dawley Parva Manor, dated 1825, describes the section of the canal from the apex of the "horse-shoe" at Doseley to the top of the "Wind" as "dry canal". It had evidently been substituted by a light railway which is shown as running from the canal near Giggle Lane, through Lightmoor to Coalbrookdale.

In 1854 the canal was leased to the

London and North-Western Railway, who planned to replace it with a railway. The necessary Act of Parliament to authorise this was obtained in 1857, and the Deed of Transfer is dated February, 1858. The Act authorised the closing of the section of the canal from the bottom of the Windmill, incline to and including the Wrockwardine Wood incline, and the branch canal. The Coalport branch railway was opened in 1861.

The section of the canal from Tweedale basin to the river remained active until 1902 when the section from Blist's Hill Furnaces to the river was abandoned. The remaining section continued in use for the Supply of fuel to Blist's Hill Furnaces from Kemberton

and Halesfield Collieries, and shortly after the furnaces were blown out in 1912 the last part of this once very active waterway was abandoned.

The boats used were the square-ended tub boats carrying 5 tons, and they passed the incline at the rate of six up and six down per hour.

The actual cost of the Shropshire Canal and branch, which was about 10½ miles long, was £47,500.

According to "Fenn's Funds" (a primitive Stock Exchange Year Book) for 1837, the dividend paid on a £125 share was £8.