East Shropshire Canals – IV

The Waterway which was made to bring cheap coal from Donnington Wood to Shrewsbury

by W. HOWARD WILLIAMS

The year 1792 saw not only the completion of the Shropshire Canal but also the formation of the Shrewsbury Canal Company. The object of the Company was to make a canal from Shrewsbury to the coalfield in the Donnington Wood area, with the view to providing Shrewsbury and district with a cheaper and more reliable supply of coal. In a previous article we noted that the London road between Oakengates and Shrewsbury was hazardous at all times, owing to the effect of many coal-carts on its poorly metalled surface. Infrequent supplies, due to bad weather, and frequent accidents were reflected in the high prices charged for coal in and around the county town.

The new Company engaged George Young, a Worcester surveyor, to survey the proposed canal. His plan, which is preserved in the County Record Office, was presented to Parliament the following year, when the necessary Act of Parliament was sought and obtained. The plan was certified and signed by the Speaker of the House, Henry Addington.

The Act which sanctioned the canal authorised the Company to raise amongst themselves £50,000 and a further £20,000, if necessary. The transport charges authorised were the same as on the Shropshire Canal, i.e., 2d. per ton per mile for all goods, except that, " until such times as the new canal shall pay an 8 per cent dividend, a charge of 1d. per ton for every boat to pass the inclined plane." After that the charge was to cease. Manure was exempt from these charges.

Work began in 1793 with Clew as engineer and William Reynolds acting in a consultative capacity. The following year Clew died and Telford was appointed engineer.

For something over 11 miles out of the Shrewsbury basin, the canal was cut on a dead level, although it had to be carried over three short valleys by means of aqueducts, and through a 970-yard-long tunnel. From Long Lane to Trench Wharf, a distance of 4½ miles, the canal was lifted 139 feet by means of 11 locks. An inclined plane, 223 yards long, rising 73½ feet, was constructed from the Trench Wharf to the Wombridge Canal. The section of this latter canal from the top of the Trench Incline to its junction with the Donnington Wood and Shropshire Canals —1 mile and 88 yards — was purchased from William Reynolds for £820, half its original cost, and incorporated in the Shrewsbury Canal Navigation.

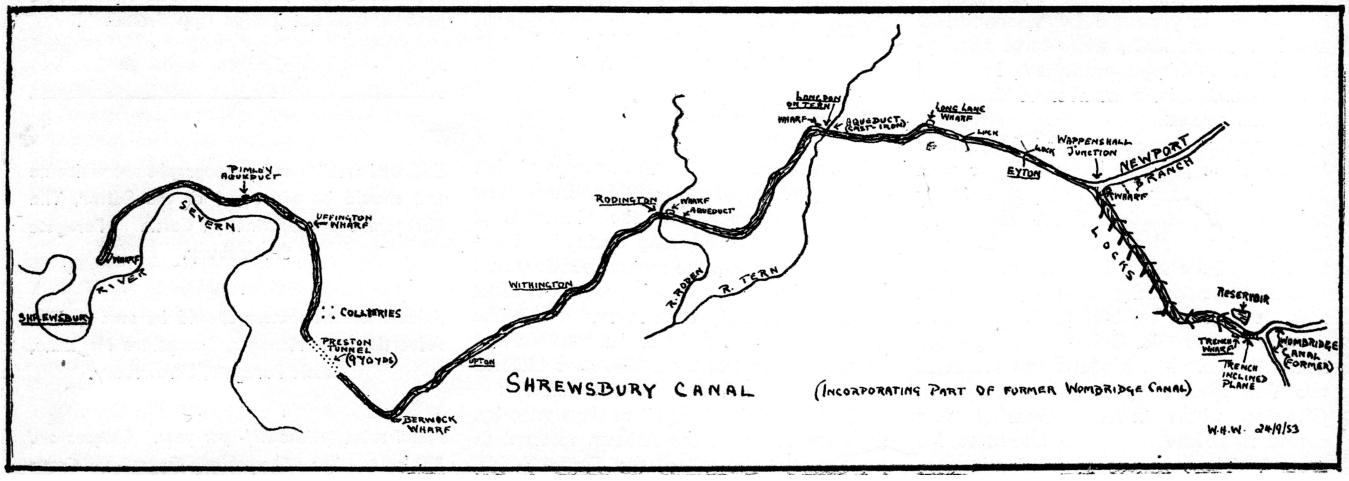
Canal in Iron Trough

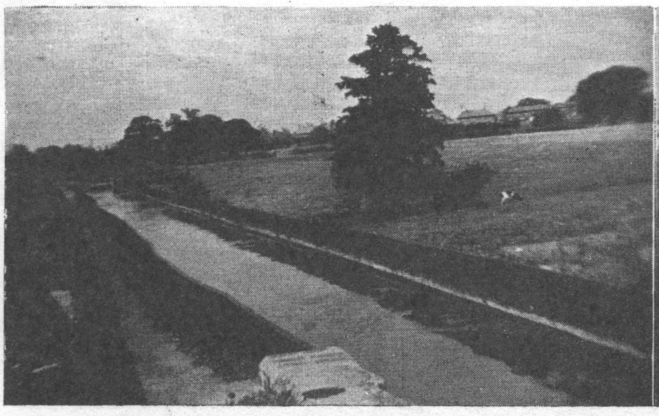
The canal was notable for several novel innovations. The aqueduct which still carries the canal over the River Tern at Longdon, was the first cast-iron one ever to be constructed. At the instigation of Thomas Eyton, the canal company's chairman, the task of making the trough was given to William Reynolds, who carried out the work at his Ketley iron-works. The trough was made in 1795 and is still in excellent condition. It is 62 yards long and traverses the valley at a height of 16 feet above the meadows.

Another unique feature is that the locks, which are the smallest of any in use on canals in the country, are only 81 feet long and 6 feet 4 inches wide. They are so constructed that they could pass from one to four of the 20-foot-long tub-boats at once.

The bottom gates on these locks were also unusual. Instead of being opened and closed in the usual manner, they were raised and lowered by special winding gear and referred to as " guillotine " gates.

Though more than a dozen wharves were at one time to be found along its banks, not more than three or four wharf buildings can now be seen. The chief items distributed from these wharves were coal and lime. During the last few decades of the canal's active history, the Lilleshall Company were the chief users of several of these wharves, although even before 1900 they made little use of that part of the canal above Wappenshall Junction. They quite naturally made the fullest use of their mineral line from Muxton Bridge and Donnington to the Humber Arm of the Newport branch canal, thus saving the time that





The iron trough in which the canal was carried over the Tern at Longden.

Britain Lock on the old Shrewsbury Canal. These locks, 51 feet long and 6 feet 4 inches wide, were the smallest in England.

would have been lost by boats having to negotiate the Trench Inclined Plane and the nine locks below.

When the Newport branch canal was opened, narrow boats called fly-boats, specially constructed to enable them to negotiate the narrow locks, operated on the whole length of the canal, to the bottom of the Trench Incline. Fly-boats were fast, narrow boats, crewed by three men and two horses, and operated from Ellesmere Port, the terminus of the Birmingham-Liverpool Junction Canal. Four of these fly-boats came regularly to the Trench Wharf, each making one-and-a-half trips weekly. One fly-boat made a weekly trip to Shrewsbury. Owing to there being no " winding" place or turn-about above Wappenshall Junction, fly-boats had to be towed stern first when plying to wharves at the Trench, as it would be easier to negotiate the locks on the return journey, when they were invariably more heavily laden.

Industrial undertakings using the Shrewsbury Canal in Shrewsbury would be the Gasworks, established in 1820, and probably the Maltings. At its eastern end would be the artificial fertiliser manufactory at the Trench Wharf; The Shropshire Iron Company, nearby ; and the various occupiers of the site of the present Hadley Castle Works at Hadley. This site was first developed by Nettlefold and Chamberlain as the " Castle Ironworks' in the 1870's,

In 1846 the Shrewsbury Canal was one of the navigations which joined together to form the Shropshire Union Railway and Canal Company, and although in 1847 this new merger came into the hands of the London and North Western Railway, the system never lost its identity, and is still referred to as the Shropshire Union Canal.

By the end of World War I, it was becoming increasingly evident that the active life of the old Shrewsbury Canal was coming to a close. The only traffic passing the Trench Incline was for the Donnington Wood Flour Mill. Except for that and an occasional boat of slack for Sankey's Hadley Castle Works, the canal above Wappenshall was dead.

The Shropshire Union Canal, although railway owned, was maintained as a going concern, with its own fleet of craft, for over seventy years, chiefly because it operated through a rival's territory. When the "Big Four" railway companies amalgamated in 1921, the Shropshire Union Carrying Company was dissolved and the fleet dispersed. So far as the Shrewsbury Canal was concerned this was the death blow. The Trench Inclined Plane was abandoned, having been in use for 124 years.

Until this date, tar-boats made regular weekly trips between Oldbury (Worcs.) and Shrewsbury Gasworks. Tales are still told of " Harry the Tar " with his wife as crew, and other well-known canal "characters," whose comings and goings added their own touch of colour to the canal. Undoubtedly the last commercial traffic to operate on the Shrewsbury Canal were the acid-boats of Messrs. Fellows, Morton & Clayton, which brought sulphuric acid to Shrewsbury Gasworks from Messrs. Chance & Hunt's of Oldbury until about 1930 or 1931.

The Newport Branch

The last canal to be made in East Shropshire was the 10½-mile-long Newport branch of the Birmingahm*[sic]* and Liverpool Junction Canal. It was surveyed in 1826, and completed in 1833 at a cost of over £80,000. Telford was the engineer and W. A. Provis the contractor.

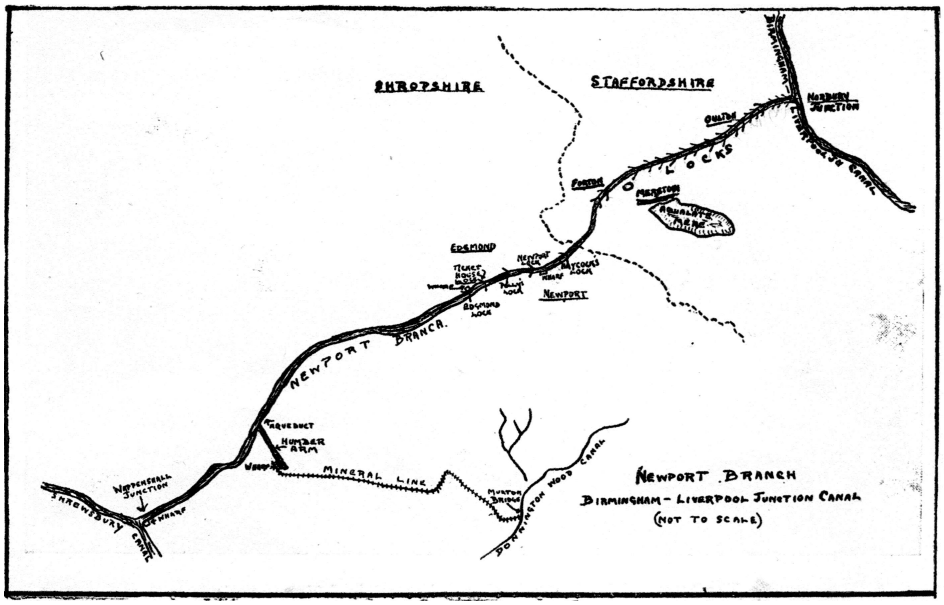
Leaving the main canal at Norbury Junction, the Newport branch falls 139 feet through 23 locks, passing through Newport, to join the Shrewsbury Canal at Wappenshall Junction. About 7½ miles of this navigation are in Shropshire.

An arm of the canal planned to be made from the Buttery to join the Donnington Wood Canal at Limekiln Bridge, Lilleshall, did not materialise. In its place the Humber Arm was made from the same place to Lubstree, near Donnington, and the Lilleshall Company constructed a mineral line from the canal at Muxton Bridge to the wharf at Lubstree.

Although no industrial undertakings were on its banks, this canal was a most important adjunct to the local system, as it afforded local industries an outlet by water to the whole of the Midlands, the industrial North, and North and Central Wales.

The Newport branch was wider and deeper than the other local canals, thus allowing the larger craft of the Birmingham and Liverpool Junction Canal to operate thereon.

In 1846 this branch, with its parent



canal, became part of the Shropshire Union. When this company ceased to be canal carriers in 1921, the traffic coming off the main canal on to the Newport branch and the Shrewsbury Canal was reduced to a mere trickle, ending altogether by about 1931.

The question is often posed : "Why were these local canals allowed to fall out of use?" The reply can only be : "Changed Conditions!"

These local canals were constructed to serve local industries and to suit existing conditions. .They had to be made on a smaller scale with smaller than usual craft. Even had the local canals been wider and deeper, it is doubtful if they would have survived into the New Elizabethan Age, as the industries for which they were intended to serve are most of them gone. The road and rail services are today organised to such a pitch as to preclude even the remotest hope of seeing a resumption of activity on any of the remaining stretches of local canals.