

Declining Traffics on the Shrewsbury & Newport Canals

In an article by Joseph Boughey in the Spring 2002 edition of Waterways Journal, published by The Boat Museum Society, he describes the last traffics on the branches of the Shropshire Union Canal. With the kind permission of The Boat Museum Society this has been used to tell the story as it relates to the Shrewsbury & Newport Canals.

The Shropshire Union Railways & Canal Company (SURCCo) controlled both a complex series of waterways and a freight carrying system which was unusual amongst railway-dominated waterways owners. The London & North Western Railway Co (LNWR) owned most of the capital, but left the SURCCo to run the canal in a semi-independent fashion, even competing modestly with the LNWR lines itself.

The SURCCo developed freight carrying using its own boats, which it extended onto the whole of its system from 1849. As trade developed, especially to and from the Midlands, it developed its fleet and facilities further, almost doubling the number of narrow boats between 1870 and 1889. By 1898 its fleet had reached its height, making it the largest narrow boat fleet in Britain at the time. The branches then remained reasonably busy, but less prosperous, parts of a thriving system.

This coverage is divided into three periods. The first attempts to portray the position in the late 1890s and the 1900s, when the system was reasonably trafficked; the second attempts to consider the position until 1921, when the Shropshire Union ceased carrying; while the last section discusses the final decline of toll-carrying traffic.

1. Relative Prosperity:

From the 1890s to 1910 Returns of traffic carried indicate a steady increase in traffic on the Shropshire Union at this time. However, local traffic was a small proportion of the total, and this was largely carried by bye-traders, paying tolls, whereas Company boats carried the majority of through traffic.

When the Company was the carrier, overall charges for wharfage and carrying were quoted to customers, whereas bye-traders had to arrange tolls, craft, and labour and incur wharfage, storage and collection and delivery charges. It is not entirely clear how much more efficient was the integrated service provided to customers, but there would be complaints that the system discriminated against bye-traders on the main line and through traffic, leaving the bye-traders to handle less remunerative local traffics. Numerous small traders handled traffics with which the Shropshire Union did not deal, but larger national carriers, like Fellows Morton & Clayton, claimed that high tolls deterred them from carrying on the Canal.

Patterns of carrying are hard to discern and quantify, but some details for 1905 are available. Traffics to branch 'stations' on the Shrewsbury & Newport Canals were:

	Newport	Shrewsbury	Trench
Bye-Traders			
L/D	17	813	9,069
L/ND	68	1438	-
Company Boats			
L/D	73	136	1,578
L/ND	277	47	4,969

Total	435	2,434	15,616
	L/D = Loaded and discharged on the canal (local traffic)		
	L/ND = Loaded on, but not discharged on the canal		

This equates to just 3% of Shropshire Union traffics being carried on the Shrewsbury lines. The 'stations' represent traffics at several points, and the statistics may indicate merely the places at which freight and tolls were recorded.

Although the SURCCo was marginally profitable overall, high maintenance costs against limited revenue prompted them to consider the closure of several sections, including Trench incline in 1881 and the line between Longdon and Shrewsbury in 1899.

The most important source of trade was the Trench area. Coal traffic was generated by the Lilleshall mines above the Trench incline and carried, either down the incline, or by the private Lilleshall railway to the Humber Arm, for distribution to a series of wharves on the lines to Shrewsbury and Newport, and onto the main line as far as Market Drayton. The Lilleshall Company had wharves at Edgmond, Long Lane and Berwick Wharf, but also wharves at railway stations, including that at Newport, where it would later develop canal facilities.

Most of the Shrewsbury wharves (including much of the canal basin itself) had been taken over by the railway, but one canal trader, still there and at Sundorne (near Pimley) in 1905, was Frederic Chubb, who also had railway wharves at Yorton, Wem, Dorrington, Baschurch and in Shrewsbury itself.

Some indications of traffic in the Trench area were provided by William Owen, who worked at the Trench incline from 1890 to 1921. During his time, only coal was carried down the incline, and grain upwards; about 50-60 boats passed over the incline daily at its height. The grain traffic, from Ellesmere Port, was transhipped at Trench Wharf between 'Trench' narrow boats (the canal from Wappenshall to the bottom of the incline required a special narrow boat built only 6 feet 2 inches wide to pass the narrow locks to Trench Wharf. The SURCCo maintained a small fleet of boats built to this gauge. They were always brought up the locks stern first, as the return loads were heavier) and tub boats, and to Bullocks' Donnington Wood Mill Co. on the former Wombridge Canal; the wharf at the latter was lengthened in 1893. In 1905 2,788 tons of coal were loaded on the Duke of Sutherland's Canal (the only traffic on this canal, disused shortly after) and taken down the incline. This may have come from Muxton Bridge Colliery, which worked until 1912.

Along the top two pounds of Trench Locks were manufacturers which had partly developed there after the adjacent railway opened in 1849. These included the Trench Ironworks and Shropshire Iron Company, wire manufacturers, and the Castle Iron Works. The latter had been opened in 1871 by Nettlefolds, but this was sold in 1886, re-opening as the Castle Car Works in 1900, and later Joseph Sankey; it had its own basin above the second lock. Raw materials, like copper ingots for the Shropshire Iron Co., came from Ellesmere Port, some being transhipped at Wappenshall. Return cargoes included hoop iron for cotton binders, and wire and wire billets for export. One load, from the Shropshire Iron Company for Argentina, took over two years to complete. All of these traffics used freight vessels.

Owen also recalled a chemical works, just below the incline; this was recorded in 1891 as the Trench (Salop) Phosphates Co, artificial manure manufacturers, served by basic slag brought from local furnaces by canal; a whole floor of the wharf building at Wappenshall was used to store this. By 1894, when a new wharf was being constructed here, this firm was named J & F Albert. Later, the slag traffic was transferred to the

Humber Arm.

Grain was carried to Shrewsbury, Newport and Edgmond, much of it imported through



The horse drawn small tar boat 'Medina' at Newport. She was built narrow to go up Trench locks but mainly traded to Shrewsbury gasworks carrying waste acid to the Midlands.

Ellesmere Port and encouraged by developments at the Port, like the new grain warehouse of 1898; much of the latter would pass by rail or road to smaller mills. Some traffics later came from Manchester after the opening of the Ship Canal and the development of grain terminals there after 1898. The Humber Arm was mainly used by the Lilleshall Co, which was served by its own railway from the Lubstree terminal, carrying iron ore and coal. The accommodation at Lubstree was enlarged in 1893.

The line from Wappenshall to Shrewsbury included brickworks and pipeworks west of Long Lane, where the Lilleshall Co had a coal basin, whose towpath bridge was so low that only tub boats could enter. Near Longdon Wharf there was a further brick and pipe works, and Shropshire Union freight warehouses and wharves there and at Rodington, Withington and Berwick Wharf. At the small Uffington Wharf, corn was unloaded in 1906 for a local mill, and a coal wharf at Sundorne, east of Pimley Aqueduct; while bricks from a brickyard north of the railway bridge at Berwick were unloaded at Pimley in 1906. Into Shrewsbury, there was a wharf at Ditherington Flax Mill, and then Shrewsbury Gas Works, from which waste acid passed to the Midlands by canal. Beyond here were W L Browne's Flour Mills. The wharf at Shrewsbury had been largely taken over for railway sidings, but some wharfage, known as Castlefields, remained.

On the Newport section, the main wharves were at Newport, where there were two sets of wharves and a warehouse; there was also a warehouse and wharf at Edgmond, operated by the Lilleshall company.

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2. The Shropshire Union in Decline 1910-1921

While the Royal Commission of 1906-10 envisaged the enlargement of the Shropshire Union main line, there was no question of this for the branches.

Some traffics continued on the Shrewsbury line. A corrugated iron shed was erected at Rodington in 1906, competing with the GWR at Crudgington. In 1913 a 5 cwt crane was ordered at Uffington to enable boatmen to discharge boats. The 16 S&News – August 2003

coal wharf at Newport was operated by the Lilleshall Company; its lease expired in 1915, and it closed its coal business at Long Lane Wharf in 1917. The same company also had the commission agency at Edgmond in 1918, when it raised rates there and at Berwick Wharf. The closure of the Shrewsbury Basin was mooted in 1920; traffic was apparently continuing, as leakage then affected the SURCCo boat *Bute*, carrying barley for Shrewsbury. In 1914 rates were agreed for the unloading of iron and copper billets at the Shropshire Iron Co., carted to and from the canal.

The SURCCo's position worsened after 1911, and under wartime control massive losses were recorded, but covered by the government. The future must have appeared limited, and on 13 June 1917 the Company decided not to build any new boats. The land upon which the Humber Arm wharf had been built was owned by the Duke of Sutherland, and when a 14 year lease expired in 1919, the SUC sought to renew this on an annual tenancy only.

3. Final Decline 1921-1944

The collapse of Shropshire Union freight carrying was really based on mounting losses, subsidised by government wartime guarantees, the consequences of whose expiry were the subject of national policy in 1919. The controls and subsidies ended in 1921; at this time the viability of owner-carriers was doubtful due to increases in costs, particularly wages, the introduction of an 8-hour day in the railway industry, the refusal of many staff to work through Sundays, bank holidays and evenings without overtime, the consequent difficulty in recruiting and retaining the workforce, and the inability to pass on costs in freight (or toll) charges during a period of economic chaos. The SURCCo had been subject to massive losses on both canal-owning and canal-carrying, and sought to reduce these by ceasing to carry. It was spurred on by legal advice that freight facilities could be withdrawn without the formal procedures required to extinguish navigation.

Shortly after September 1921, when the Company began to operate as toll-takers only; it was absorbed into the LNWR, itself soon amalgamated into the London Midland & Scottish Railway Company. An early casualty was the Trench incline, and then Shrewsbury Basin in 1922, but toll traffic continued to pass over most of the system, including some parts which had relied entirely upon freight. The latter probably excluded the Humber Arm after the terminal wharf closed. Oral evidence indicates that its last traffics included coal going out, with cheese from Cheshire inward.

The Shrewsbury lines were lightly trafficked, but remaining trades were slow to disappear. The Trench incline and the canal above formally closed in 1921, but it is not clear when movements ended along the rest of the branch; these depended upon special Trench boats, and unless carriers took over these craft, they may have ended entirely in 1921. In November 1935 this was one of four disused lengths singled out for closure by the Shropshire County Surveyor. One former major customer, the Trench Iron Works, closed in 1931, and traffic to Joseph Sankey & Co. (formerly the Castle works) may well have ended before 1927, when Sankey sought to fill in the basin there and remove the bridge.

Traffics along the line to Shrewsbury were confined to the Gas Works, from which traffics to the Midlands, for Thomas Clayton (Oldbury) and Chance and Hunt, ended in 1927 and 1931 respectively. By November 1935 there was no traffic on the section west of Withington Wharf.

Coal and corn continued to pass to Edgmond. Local merchants, Burton Woodward & Co, took a lease of the wharf in January 1924, and coal was being carried there in July 1927. However, its office was removed in 1927, and the firm went into liquidation. There is further reference to coal at Edgmond in 1929. The warehouse was let to CM & M Stubbs & Co., which had been located in Station Road, Newport, in June 1924, but this was vacated by 1929. A CLLWCo traffic in offals passed around January 1929, and the same company brought grain from Manchester to Newport in 1928.

Detailed movements were recorded for the first 7 months of 1935. Coal traffics passed from Autherley (almost certainly Littleton colliery on the Staffordshire & Worcestershire), to Withington and Longdon. The former, serving William Owen, involved nine boats carrying 167 tons; the latter, serving John Arnold & Son, involved 25 boats carrying 603 tons. The other traffic was in tar, from Newport Gas Works, carried by Thomas Clayton to the Midlands, involving four boats carrying 80 tons. These generated a total of £66 in tolls.

The last traffic to pass beyond Newport was 480 tons of coal to Longdon in 1939.

The carrier here was J. Howard of Shebdon, who owned *Ash*. In 1924 the Longdon warehouse and stable had been let to John Henry Jones of the Old Wharf at Market Drayton. These were corn and cake merchants. Traffic was passing in 1926, but their lease ended in December 1934.

The wharves at Newport became the final focus of traffics. In early 1930 Arthur Owen, a local coal merchant, vacated the wharf. Attempts to find a replacement proved difficult; one local candidate, proved to be in a poor financial position.

The final loads of tar to Oldbury passed in 1944, and the canal became unusable shortly afterwards.

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