

The Canal Comes to Whitchurch

Peter Brown

Early proposals

The earliest mentions of a canal to Whitchurch are in the context of linking the river Severn and the Mersey. James Brindley recorded in his diary in April 1762 that he ‘set out for Cheshire and Shropshire survey or raconitoring’; he specifically mentioned visiting Whitchurch. This was before the lines of the Trent & Mersey and Staffordshire & Worcestershire Canals were established.

In May 1768 Richard Whitworth published a pamphlet which suggested a canal from the river Dee via Whitchurch and Market Drayton to join his proposed Shrewsbury–Stafford canal near his home at Batchacre Grange (east of Newport).

The Chester Canal was conceived as a canal from the river Dee at Chester to Middlewich, with a branch to Nantwich. It was opened to Nantwich (12 miles from Whitchurch) in 1779; the link to Middlewich was not built until 1833, nor that to Wolverhampton until 1835.

The creation of the Ellesmere Canal

In January 1791 the *Shrewsbury Chronicle* published extracts from a pamphlet written by ‘A Friend of Inland Navigation’ which extolled the suitability of the area between the Severn and the Dee for canals. Amongst the advantages would be the improvement of land through manuring, and the easier transport of the produce to market, thus making farming more profitable and increasing the value of land; also lime, coal, slate, ironstone and lead could be brought from the mines and quarries to where they were needed.

At that time the country was buzzing with proposals for new canals. On 31 August 1791 ‘a respectable number of gentlemen’ met at the Royal Oak, Ellesmere, to consider a proposal by John Duncombe of Oswestry for a canal from Shrewsbury to Chester and on to Stanlow, to uniting the rivers Severn and Dee and the Mersey estuary. This was to run to the west of the Dee; at this stage the exact route had not been settled, and a pamphlet approved at the meeting referred to the possibility of a branch to Whitchurch.

Joseph Turner, a Chester architect, put forward an alternative scheme routed to the east of the Dee, with Whitchurch being served by a heavily-locked branch about 10 miles long, up the Wych Valley from a junction near Threapwood.

The country’s leading waterways engineer, William Jessop, was employed to consider the two schemes and advise. He was assisted by Duncombe and William Turner of Whitchurch, Joseph’s cousin. Although in engineering terms the ‘Eastern Canal’ was easier, Jessop preferred the western route, as it better served Wrexham, Ruabon, the Denbighshire coalfield, the associated ironworks, and the limestone quarries at Llanymynech. This survey formed the basis of the application to Parliament in 1792, modified in various ways, including the

addition of a long branch from Frankton to Whitchurch, then up three locks to Prees Heath.

A public meeting was held at Ellesmere on 10 September 1792 to take subscriptions for this scheme; on the same day in the same town, subscriptions were taken for the rival 'Eastern Canal'. As a defensive measure, the Western Committee added a further branch (surveyed by William Turner) from Fens Hall, some three miles west of Whitchurch, to the Chester Canal near Tattenhall. The two groups formally merged in February 1793.

Alterations to the line

Construction began with the Chester–Stanlow and Llanymynech–Froncyssyllte sections as these were relatively easy to engineer and would give immediate financial returns; next came the start of the Shrewsbury line (which eventually only reached Weston Lullingfields) and the great aqueduct over the Dee.

In 1795 John Duncombe resurveyed the Whitchurch branch to reduce the earthworks required. His proposal followed the present line of the canal from Frankton Junction to Whixall Moss, then curved south on what became the Prees branch, before going east to Quina Brook and ending at Prees Heath, on the Whitchurch–Newport road. This was not acceptable to the Whitchurch interests, so a branch was agreed from Whixall Moss to Sherryman's Bridge, at the edge of the town. These changes were incorporated in a deviation Act of 1796.

This Act also deleted the Fens Hall to Tattenhall line, replacing it with a requirement for the Ellesmere and Chester Canal Companies to agree on the best route and for the Ellesmere Canal to apply for Parliamentary powers within three years. Their engineers agreed on the line through Wrenbury, substantially as subsequently built, though nothing further was done for several years because of pressures elsewhere. However, in 1800 the committee decided to abandon the 'western line', which had previously been intended as the main line, and for the outlet to be past Ellesmere and Whitchurch to Hurleston Junction, north of Nantwich.

The contract for the first part of the Whitchurch branch, from Frankton Junction to Ellesmere, was let in 1797 and work proceeded slowly. Hampton Bank was reached in 1800 and Tilstock Park (three miles short of Whitchurch) in 1804. The through route from Tilstock Park to the Chester Canal at Hurleston Junction opened on 25 March 1805.

Wharves and warehouses for the Whitchurch trade were constructed at Grindley Brook, two miles from the centre of the town. It was considered that this distance added about 2s.6d a ton to the cost of coal, and there were fears that Grindley Brook might supplant Whitchurch as the general market for the area.

The Whitchurch arm

Meanwhile, in 1800, the committee had decided to save money by not building the three quarter mile long section from New Mills to Sherryman's Bridge. According to the Ellesmere Canal Company minutes, this economy was suggested by 'several gentlemen of considerable property in Whitchurch', which seems surprising, particularly in view of subsequent developments. John Knight, a Whitchurch solicitor, was a committee member and attended this particular meeting.

In July 1805 a group of Whitchurch businessmen, led by William Turner (who occupied one

of the warehouses at Grindley Brook), asked the committee for permission to build a branch canal from New Mills to Sherryman's Bridge (as authorised in the Company's Acts) then a further quarter of a mile on to Castle Well. The latter terminus would be closer to the town centre and be much more convenient — from Sherryman's Hill the road rose 38 feet with a maximum gradient of 1 in 7, whereas the rise from Castle Well was only five feet. Because of the Canal Company's financial difficulties, the committee readily agreed in principle, subject to them being able to take over the branch any time within ten years of its completion. Again, John Knight was present. However, at a subsequent meeting the committee concluded they did not have the authority to delegate the powers in their Acts.

The following summer an alternative proposal was made which had the same effect. The Canal Company was to contract with a consortium led by Samuel Turner (William's brother, and a Whitchurch builder) to build the canal from New Mills to Castle Well for the sum of £2,000, which the consortium would lend to the Canal Company for four years 'with lawful interest' (later agreed as 5% per annum). The Company would apply to Parliament for powers for the extension from Sherryman's Hill to Castle Well. Despite realising that they had no powers for the extension, they instructed that construction should start at Castle Well; the next meeting of the committee gave permission to start at New Mills instead. The arm opened to Sherryman's Bridge on 6 July 1808. A temporary wharf was established there, but as there was no winding hole, boats had to be drawn back rudder-first to New Mills after unloading.

The Canal Company seems to have done nothing about obtaining the Act for the extension until 1809. John Knight referred to 'blunders and neglect' by Messrs Potts & Leeke, the Canal Company's solicitors, presumably concerning this delay. The pamphlet published to influence public opinion in favour of the further extension of the branch stated that no extra tolls would be charged; however, the Act clearly gave the right to charge the same tonnage rate as elsewhere.

It had been thought that all the landowners affected had agreed not to oppose the Bill; now two of them, William Trevor and Mr Taylor registered their opposition and gathered signatures for a petition against it. Taylor owned the wharf land on the west bank at Sherryman's Hill (the east side was swampy and unsuitable for a wharf), and Trevor owned the property most affected at the site of the proposed basin at Castle Well. Telford's plan would have given Trevor control of the land for the wharfs, so William Turner drew up an alternative plan whereby five people (including Trevor and himself) would have been able to make wharfs, and it was this alternative plan which was submitted to Parliament. Knight's assessment was blunt: 'Trevor's sole object is monopoly.' Knight organised a petition in favour of the Bill; and either the Trevor and Taylor saw the futility of their opposition or some informal agreement was made, because they withdrew their objections. William Turner assisted Messrs Potts & Leeke in preparing the case, and John Turner (who was either William's or, less likely, Samuel's son) gave evidence to Parliament; and the Act was passed.

This was not the end of the arguments with Mr Trevor and Mr Taylor. There was a difference of opinion about the amount of land to be taken for the canal, so a high-powered subcommittee, including the Earl of Bridgewater and Sir John Hill, was deputed to meet them and settle the differences. An independent surveyor was asked to make the measurements. Even that did not conclude the matter. The following year, William Trevor alleged that John Kynaston Powell (the previous Chairman of the Canal Company) had promised him that a footbridge would be erected over the Whitchurch arm; a subcommittee investigated and, without admitting liability, offered to pay Trevor £60 in lieu.

The Whitchurch arm opened in 1811. The various plans show a rectangular basin, but what was actually built was a narrow triangle (as at Ellesmere).

The effect of the canal on Whitchurch

No doubt coal from the north Shropshire coalfield became much cheaper and agricultural and other produce became more freely traded, though the author has no direct evidence of this. The surviving warehouse at the basin shows the date 1828.

New industries came to be established by the canal. A four-storey steam-powered corn mill was constructed at the canal terminus in 1826. Also in the 1820s, at Sherryman's Hill, Whitfield & Sergeant built a canalside silk mill, 144 feet long and 35 feet wide, providing working space for 200 people. It was two storeys high, but designed so that three further storeys could be added. Power was provided by a 10hp steam engine by Galloway of Manchester for four 104-bobbin doubling frames, a hard silk engine with 100 swifts, and four 100-bobbin drawing frames. It was offered for sale in 1831, and by 1851 had been converted to a warehouse by Thomas Burgess, a cheese factor and corn merchant. The gas works was established at Sherryman's Bridge, as was another corn mill.

The canal was never important for the carriage of people. In 1808 Samuel Turner and his copartners were given permission to put on a boat to convey passengers from Whitchurch to Chester and from Whitchurch to Ellesmere and Oswestry, but it is not known whether the experiment was tried — and if it was, it was certainly not successful.

The increase in population during the 'canal era' indicates the significance of the canal. The total population of Whitchurch and Dodington townships increased from 3,251 in 1811 to 4,413 in 1841, an increase of 36%. The increase at Dodington, where the terminus of the canal was situated, was 52%, perhaps indicating a shift in the 'centre of gravity' of the town towards the canal. These figures may be compared with an increase of only 17% at Drayton, where the canal did not open until 1835.

By Peter Brown March 2003