THE WYRLEY & ESSINGTON CANAL
By C.J. Gibson

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THE WYRLEY & ESSINGTON CANAL

By C.J. Gilson

The Wyrley & Essington Canal, which now forms part of the Birmingham Canal Navigations, has a history which illustrates the course of the history of water transport in Great Britain. It is to be regretted that so many historians have in the past devoted themselves to the study of Roman and Medieval Britain only, while neglecting the canals and other evidences of more recent history of the country. Fortunately there is a considerable revival of interest in canals, which, though it comes too late to prevent the closure of some waterways, may yet save many canals for holiday traffic, and research and quite a number as commercial transport routes.

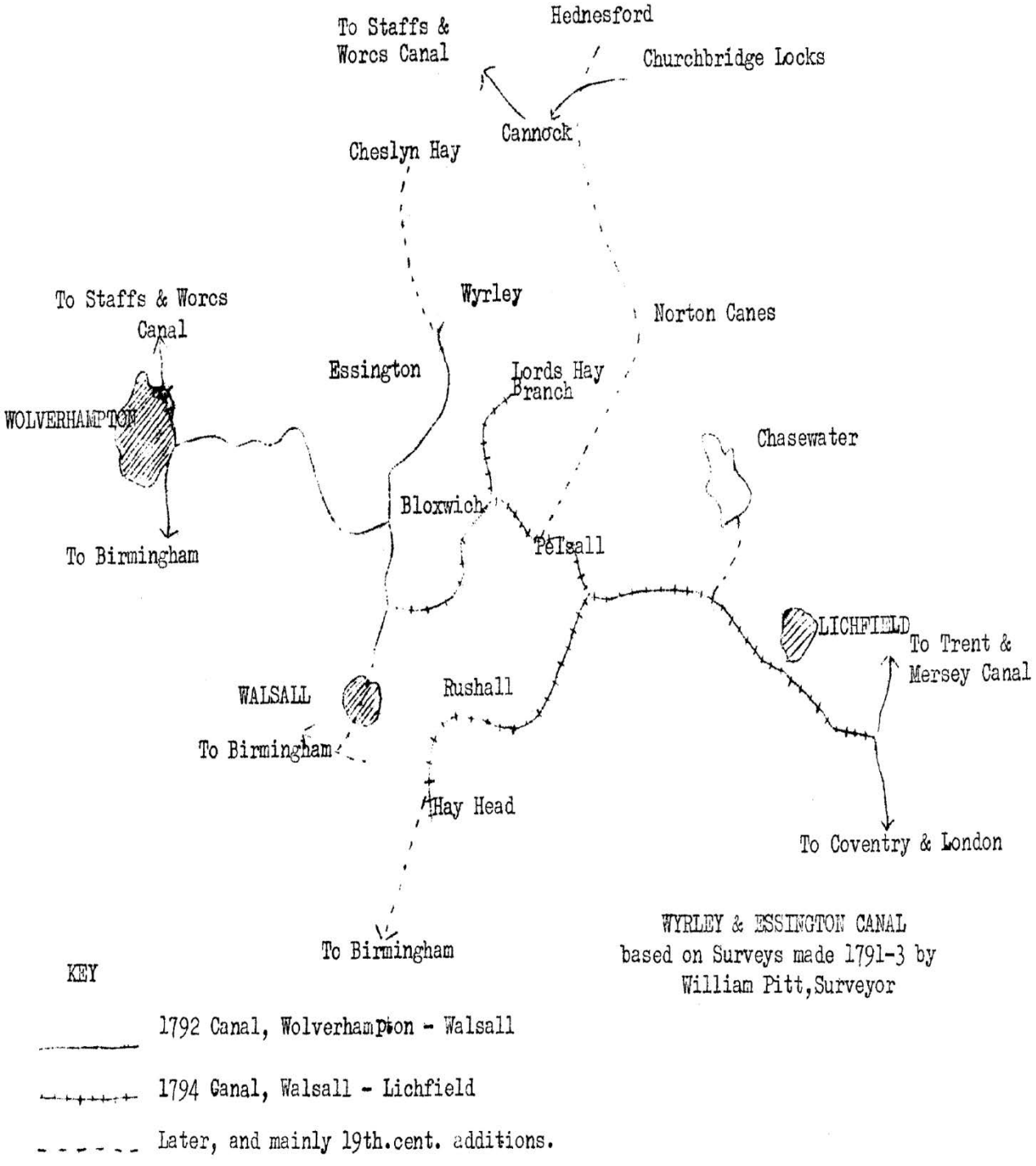
From early times rivers have been important for transport of coal and people and the early settlement of most countries follows closely the lines of navigable rivers but it seems probable that the first man-made canals were constructed more with a view to drainage than for navigation. Thus the Fossdyke was dredged by the Romans primarily for drainage and was doubtless used secondarily for transport. An early canal was the Exeter Canal, built in 1563-6, but the main impetus of canal building, sometimes called the Canal Era, was in the Eighteenth Century, and started with the construction of the Bridgewater Canal, 1759-61. This was authorized under :-

> "An Act to enable the Most Noble Francis, Duke of Bridgewater, to make a navigable Cut or Canal from a certain Place in the Township of Salford, to or near Worsley Mill and Middlewood, in the Manor of Worsley, and to or near a Place called Hollin Ferry, in the County Palatine of Lancaster."

It received the Royal Assent on 23 March 1759.

This canal, completed in 1761, was designed and built under the direction of James Brindley, who, although not a trained civil engineer in the modern sense of the word, was a remarkable canal builder and one of the great men connected with canal history. The Bridgewater Canal, which caused a drastic reduction in the cost of coal in Manchester, was notable for its aqueduct across the River Irwell, considered by contemporaries to be one of the wonders of England.

The poor state of roads in England, frequently impassable to heavy traffic in bad weather, coupled with the difficulty and expense of navigating the winding and undredged rivers with currents making upstream traffic difficult, made the desirability of canals at once apparent, and the success of the Bridgewater Canal ushered in the canal era. Many of the canals built at this time survive to the present day, but many fell by the wayside through lack of sound technical and financial policy.



WYRLEY & ESSINGTON CANAL
based on Surveys made 1791-3 by
William Pitt, Surveyor

While many local speculators were concerned only with cheap transport of their own products, Brindley had the foresight to see the possibilities of an integrated national canal system. He envisaged a Canal Cross, with Birmingham at its centre. This would link Liverpool to London, and the Trent to the Severn. This would give the Black Country an importance as the crossroads which would immensely help its development. Birmingham is 20 miles from the Severn, 52 miles from the Weaver and 28 miles from the Trent. As road transport was lengthy and expensive - it cost £3 to take 3 tons of goods from Birmingham to Burton and took 3 days - canal transport was the solution and in the early days of canals freight charges were cut to about one-third of the road prices.

The earliest Black Country canal was the Birmingham Canal begun in 1766, which reached Wolverhampton in 1772 via Wednesbury and Bilston. The success of the early canals including those forming the Canal Cross: the Trent & Mersey Canal - 1766-77, the Staffordshire & Worcestershire Canal - 1766-72, the Coventry Canal - 1768-89 and the Thames & Severn Canal - 1783-9, led to a Canal Mania in the early 1790's. The number of Canal Acts passed to authorize canal works was as follows :-

Year	No. of Canal Acts
1760-1770	14
1771-1780	14
1781-1790	9
1791-1800	54
1801-1810	8

This Mania led to many unnecessary canals, some of which were never even completed others of which lasted only a few years.

The Wyrley & Essington Canal was originally projected as a local goods-carrying canal linking the mining centres of Wyrley and Essington with the towns they supplied, Wolverhampton and Walsall. It was never originally intended to come to Lichfield, and this section was a later addition. The first canal planned for Lichfield was a proposed extension from the Trent & Mersey Canal into Stowe Pool. The suggestion was put forward by Brinley in about 1760 and the proposed plans can be seen in Burton Museum, but this was never put into practice and once the Wyrley & Essington was built the advantages of extending it via Lichfield to the Coventry Canal were realized.

The normal pattern for a canal's construction was as follows: A group of men would have the idea, and would advertise a meeting to discuss the project. A committee would be set up and an engineer commissioned to survey the route and give an estimate of the probable cost. This report if approved, would be followed by a Petition to Parliament for leave to present a Bill. This was necessary as the Company would have to be a Joint Stock Company and under the Bubble Act of 1720, following the South Sea Bubble, all Joint Stock Companies required Parliamentary sanction, and this also gave them power to impose bye-laws.

The share would then be sold - normally only a part of the face value would be called in, more being demanded as the construction got under way. The first expenses of the company might well be the lawyers' fees for fighting or buying off opposition to the Bill before Parliament. A canal might be opposed on many grounds - perhaps for destroying the peace and quiet of a town. Lichfield was against a canal coming into the city - hence its path on the south side of the city and some distance from it. A canal might also be opposed because it cut an estate in two, or was liable to cause flooding of mines, it might compete with another canal or injure road transport by reducing the tolls on the turnpikes.

If all went well the Bill would eventually receive the Royal Assent and construction could begin. If the engineer had seriously underestimated costs however, a further act might be required to permit further borrowing. The first General Meeting would appoint a Secretary and Committee to supervise the building of the canal.

The work was carried out by unskilled workmen who were partly drawn from the local countryside, and partly from a wandering group known as navvies, not always welcome visitors to the countryside. There were also skilled craftsmen such as carpenters, bricklayers, etc. All these men were under the direction of the Engineer. It can really be said that the canal era gave rise to the profession of Civil Engineering. The men who undertook this work had no experience of their own or anyone else to go on and they undertook engineering works on a scale unprecedented since Roman times. There were therefore many blunders due to inexperienced and sometimes even dishonest engineers. Sincle little was known of the geology of the countryside (this was before the publication of the Ordnance Survey Maps) a canal might be easier or harder to construct than had been anticipated. At first, following Brindley's lead, canals tended to follow the contours, but this produced winding and unnecessarily long canals and when it was realized that soil from a cutting in one place could be used to make an embankment in another, straighter canals were built and many of the older canals were reconstructed and improved as new techniques of building were developed.

The land required for a canal was purchased with difficulty in many cases - when the company and the landowers disagreed the Canal Act would provide a body of commissioners to settle the dispute and the commissioners usually favoured their fellow landowners. Appeal could be made from the commissioners to a jury but this was rarely done. Most land was bought for thirty year's purchase.

The history of the Wyrley & Essington Canal can be traced by reference to the Minute Books of the British Transport Commission's Archives, which include those of the Wyrley & Essington Canal, and to the files of the Wolverhampton Chronicle and other papers, and the Hansard Reports of the Debates of the House of Commons and the House of Lords.

The first definite mention of the Wyrley & Essington Canal seems to be in August 1791, when an advertisement was inserted in the Wolverhampton Chronicle for 10,17,24 and 31 August. This was required by the Standing Orders of the House of Commons, which necessitated notice being given of the application to Parliament for a canal bill at Quarter Sessions in every county through which the canal passed, with a paper giving details to be posted outside the courtroom, and an advertisement printed in at least one county paper three times in the August or September before the session of Parliament in which the application was to be made. The advertisement was as follows :

"Notice is hereby given that application is intended to be made to Parliament the next session, for leave to bring in a bill, for making a navigable canal from or near Wyrley, in the County of Stafford, through the several parishes or townships of Wyrley, Bushbury, Bentley, Walsall and Wolverhampton, in the same county, to communicate with the present Birmingham Canal at or near the town of Wolverhampton. A subscription for defraying the expenses of the above undertaking is opened and left at the offices of Messrs. Chrees and Wightwick, Attorneys, where a plan and estimate of the expenses of the intended canal may be seen."

The purpose of the canal was to open up the extensive coalfields of the area around Wyrley and Essington. Priestley, in 1831, comments on the value of the canal, and its extension to Lichfield as providing a national market for Chase coal, since one could go from it to the Trent & Mersey, Oxford and other canals. Canals had taken so much coal away from Wolverhampton and area that new supplies were needed to keep prices down. In the early stages of the completed canal it must have been hoped that it would capture some through traffic between the Midlands and Hull, and even play a part in a Hull-Midlands-Bristol link, but this does not seem to have materialized. The Worcester & Birmingham canal link was not completed until 1815, and prior to that the route from the Severn to the Trent was either from Stourport to Dudley and Birmingham and down the Fazeley Canal, or to Wolverhampton and via the Wyrley & Essington to Fradley.

The extension of the Daw End branch opened up the lime works at Rushall and Daw End, a trade which continued on and off until after the 1939-45 war. This lime was of great value both as a flux in iron making, and for agricultural purposes as the soils of Cannock Chase are acid and unsuitable for farming unless lime is added. Efforts to develop the canal for more general usage than coal or lime traffic were made after the canal was built, but were unsuccessful.

The House of Commons Journals record, on 10 February 1792, a petition for leave to introduce the Bill into the Commons. This read as follows :

"A petition of several gentlemen and others" - implying a nice social distinction, but no names are mentioned - "presented and read, setting forth that it appears by levels and surveys lately made that a canal for the navigation of boats, barges, and other vessels may be conveniently made from or near a place called Wyrley Bank to or near a place called Green Lanes in the Parish of Walsall, and to and into a farm called Stow Heath in the Parish of Wolverhampton and two collateral cuts from Pool Hayes to Ashmore Farm, and from Lapley Hayes to another part of Ashmore Hayes - the canal will open a communication with several valuable mines of coal, limestone and other minerals, and will be of great public utility."

There was no objection to the Bill although the Conduit Lands Trust had to be bought off prior to the presentation of the Bill to Parliament. The Bill passed quickly through Parliament - as did many other canal Bills - its readings in the House of Commons were on 14 and 20 February and 28 March, when it was sent to the Lords, where it received its first reading on the same day, and its second reading on 29 March, and the Royal Assent was signified by a Commission on 30 April 1792.

The first general meeting of the company was now called to meet in Wolverhampton, at the Red Lion Inn, and the Act entitled "The Company of Proprietors of the Wyrley & Essington Navigation" empowered the proprietors to raise £25,000 in 200 shares of £125 each, with power to raise a further £20,000 either among themselves or by mortgages on the tolls and rates. A call of £10 per share was immediately made on the shareholders.

The company then elected a secretary, and a committee was also elected. An advertisement in the Wolverhampton Chronicle of 16 May 1792 invited applications from a person desirous of cutting all or part of the canal, and on 4 July 1792 an advertisement reports the appointment of five commissioners to meet at the New Angel Inn to settle and ascertain damages already sustained or likely to be sustained in the making of the canal. On 30 January 1793 the following advertisement appeared in the Wolverhampton Chronicle :

"Navigators. - wanted a number of cutters on the Wyrley & Essington Canal. Good encouragement will be given. The whole of the canal is level cutting. Also a brickmaker wanting, that can make 500,000 or a million bricks. A good price will be given. Apply to John Brown, Wolverhampton or John Hampson, on the line of the canal."

The construction of the canal had started some time in the late summer of 1792. It is not certain who was the engineer in charge, but it appears from Priestley's book that W. Pitt was the man. he seems to have been the W. Pitt noted as a Staffordshire County historian (1749-1823). However, the minute books refer to a Mr. John Brown, appointed engineer in 1799. His salary was reduced from £100 to £70 in 1801, and he died soon afterwards and was replaced by his son, who was dismissed in 1802.

The committee decided that it would be a good thing to extend the canal, and at the third General Meeting held on 10 May 1793, the committee was instructed to proceed to procure an Act of Parliament to extend the canal to Huddlesford, with a branch to Hayhead. The plans for the proposed canal were deposited on 9 November 1793, and may now be seen in the William Salt Library, Stafford.

A petition was received by the House of Commons requesting that permission be granted to add to the Bill the Catshill-Rushall branch which was omitted by mistake, and this was granted. Two petitions against the Bill were presented - one from Phineas Hussey of Little Wyrley, fearing injury to his mines on the route, and one from Joseph Bradley and Francis Edwards of Goscote, fearing a diversion of the water intended to drive their blast furnaces. These petitions were not successful, and the Bill was passed to the Lords on 17 March 1794, and received the Royal Assent on 28 March following.

At the half-yearly meeting on 16 May 1794, 600 new shares were issued to finanace the extension. 200 of these were to be given to the Proprietors of the original canal in proportion to their holdings. The 1794 Act authorized the raising of £75,000 and a further £40,000 if necessary. 400 shares were available for the general public. They were to be sold at £125 face value, with an immediate call of £10 per share.

The canal is described in Inland Navigation - or Select Plans of the several Navigable canals throughout Great Britain, accompanied by abstracts of the different Acts of Parliament relating to them, by John Cary, published in November 1795. This tells us that the canal was 28 feet wide at top water and 16 feet wide at the bottom, and 4½ feet deep - the sloping sides being intended to prevent erosion. The Act permitted the canal company to buy land up to 26 yards wide on which to construct the canal, allowing for towpaths, embankments, sides of cuttings, etc. Cary states that the principal articles of carriage on the canal were coals, lime, ironstone and iron.

The intent of the canal - to convey the coal (now most unproductive) at a cheap rate to the manufactories of Wolverhampton, and also by its junction at Huddlesford to Oxfordshire and the Metropolis - was to make possible the exchange of large quantities of coal and other articles for grain. The Returns of barges and their Owners of 1795, now in the William Salt Library, shows one barge owner running barges from Norton Colliery to Oxford - 162 miles and carrying 24 tons. John Cary also praises the possibilities of carriage of other commodities on the canal and adds, "The agricultural interest of this country is likely to be very much benefitted by the introduction of lime to a variety of lands heretofore inaccessible from the bad state of the roads. The canal opens an immediate communication with the ports of London, Bristol, Liverpool and Hull." However, the idea of the canal playing an important part in the "cross" Hull - Bristol, which seems to have been one of the ideas behind the 1794 Act, did not materialize, as goods went by the Coventry and Fazeley canals to Birmingham, and trade on the cross did not anyway develop as expected, though even today, were it open, the canal would link Walsall with Hull!

At the Company meeting of 11 May 1795 the Company rules were drawn up as follows :

Byelaws of the Wyrley & Essington Canal Company

1. All boats going to Wolverhampton are to keep to the towpath side of the canal, and boats going to Lichfield, loaded or unloaded, are to give way to boats going to Wolverhampton. Penalty 5/-.
2. Speed - 2-3 m.p.h. no more, no less, and no overtaking. P.20/-.
3. After loading, a boat must move off within the hour. P.20/-.
4. Horse-drawn boats must be steered. P.10/-.
5. Tow rope must be 4 feet above the side of the boat - on a mast. P.5/-.
6. Unless used for towing, no horse or ass to be on the towpath. P.5/-.
7. For breaking fences. P. 10/- to 40/-.
8. For boatmen leaving open gates on the towpath. P.10/-.
9. Anyone bathing themselves, or swimming a dog in the canal. P.5/-.
10. All moored beats to be moored at both ends. P. 10/- to 30/-.
11. No-one to search the canal for coal except the owner of coal carried on the canal. P. 20/- to 40/-.
12. No-one to navigate two boats tied together without a steerer in each. P. 20/- to 40/-.
13. In locks a boatman shall examine paddles and water levels before opening the gates and shall guide a boat gently in the lock and be prepared to stop the boat ramming the end of the lock. He shall not use an iron-tipped staff to force the boat out of the lock, nor attempt to flush it out with the paddles nor let the boat out until the lower valves are lowered, and he must shut the lower gates when out of the lock. P. 40/- to £5.
14. No-one to draw more water than necessary to fill a lock, for the convenient carriage of his boat, nor drain water from one lock into another to improve navigation without consent, nor leave paddles and valves up and waste water. P. 40/- to £5.
15. No boatman to bang into a swivel bridge violently, nor leave them open on the side of the canal. P. 20/-.
16. No boat to be drawn by more than one horse, mare, or gelding. Horses not to eat the hedges planted along the side of the canal. P. 20/-.
17. Boats not to be loaded or unloaded on aqueducts or in a lock. P. 10/- to 40/-.
18. Unloading to be at wharfs, as wharfingers direct. P. 40/-.
19. Any boat with no cargo, or less than 20 tons to pay rate as if carrying 20 tons (unless returning after emptying cargo).
20. No timber to be floated on the canal, or cargo dropped in, nor anything to be thrown into the canal. P. not exceeding £5.
21. Any malicious damage to canal banks, works, etc. - a felony to be tried by the courts.
22. Mooring ropes and chains not to obstruct the towpath. P. 10/- to 30/-.

These were to be printed and posted up along the line of the canal.

The company proceeded over the next few years to draw in the payments on the shares - with much difficulty in some cases - in 1796 the committee decided that the shares in arrears should pay interest on the arrears and that refusal to pay should lead the company to sell the shares - and also that the company should borrow £5,000.

The opening of the canal is advertised - in Felix Farley's Bristol Journal of 20 May 1797, stressing the link provided between Hull and Bristol, Wolverhampton, Walsall, Lichfield, Coventry, and Oxford. The Hull Advertiser also reports that the canal is now fully navigable on 15 June 1799. No record is available in Coventry papers, destroyed in the war, nor in the Wolverhampton Chronicle.

The first recorded dividend was paid to the two hundred shareholders on 10 May 1798 - £7 a share. However the canal company was still short of money and the committee was empowered to borrow £5,000 to finish the Hayhead and Lord Hayes Branch.

The company soon encountered another and more serious difficulty. Henry Vernon of Hilton Park, owner of the coal mines on the canal branch to Essington seems to have quarrelled with the canal company, for unspecified reasons, and in December 1798 he petitioned Parliament for leave to build a railway from his mines to the Staffordshire & Worcester Canal and thus deprive the Wyrley & Essington of much revenue. His petition was answered by counter petitions - the Staffs. & Worcs. canal company opposed the idea; landowners on the route of the proposed railway opposed; the proprietors of the Wyrley & Essington Canal opposed it, stating that Mr. Vernon was bankrupt in 1789 and had handed his lands over to Mr. Hordern, the Company chairman and a banker, and the canal was built on Mr. Vernon's assurance that his coal should be carried on the canal.

The Bailiffs and citizens of the city of Lichfield petitioned against the Bill in February 1799 - pointing out that they had provided a free wharf to enable cheap coal to be available in Lichfield, and if Mr. Vernon sold his coal away from the canal, coal prices in Lichfield would rise.

The Bill was ordered to be put off for six months, on 12 February 1799, and nothing more was heard of it. However, the Wyrley & Essington had spent a considerable amount of money on opposing the Bill - up to £3,000 had been voted by the committee. Trouble with

Mr. Vernon continued - as late as 1812 the committee had to take him to arbitration to settle outstanding debts. He seems to have been a headstrong man - when a barge sank in the branch to his collieries in 1799 he asked permission to drain the canal in order to raise the boat, and when this was refused, had his servants cut a breach in the bank of the canal - a felony! Part of the problem may have been over the difficulty of filling his part of the canal with water - it had no supply except that which came out of his pits. The Secretary reported in 1799 the difficulty of making Mr. Vernon pay for the cost of building this branch whose opening was to be advertised by handbills in July 1798, to carry boats of 15 tons, and which was presumably therefore, a private one. It was closed by 1829 and traces of its have now almost completely disappeared under a coal tip.

The finances of the Company seem always to have been shaky. The May 1799 Committee meeting reports confiscation of four shares, which were resold at £85 each - cheap for £125 shares. In May 1800 a shareholder refused to take up shares bought earlier - presumably doubting their worth and was released from any obligation to do so. In July 1800 a special meeting was called by some of the leading shareholders to enquire into the fact that the proprietors owed the Company over £3,000 and they asked for a balance sheet - but were out-voted. The minute book is always recording the borrowing of money - many canal companies seriously underestimated the costs of construction and overestimated possible revenues - the tremendous success of some canal companies paying 75% or more on their shares, being partly responsible for this.

The Secretary noted - in rough notes in April 1798 that it would be impossible to complete the Hayhead Branch until there was sufficient money in the Treasurer's hands - also the money had to be given for compensation for land taken by the canal and for damages done by the canal. In 1800, £24 was paid to Messrs. Langfords for damage done to their limeworks by floods in August of the previous year, and in the same year £100 was sent to the County Treasurer for damage done to a bridge - and there were many other expenditures which kept up costs.

The cost of a six-foot lock near Sneyd Junction in 1798 was recorded at £136.1.0.: the canal had 30 locks in the Ogley Flight and ten on the Sneyd Branch, the total cost then, if they were all the same price - £5,442.

By 1800 the main part of the canal was complete, but not the branches. The Lord Hayes branch was ordered to be begun in September 1799 and the branch to Birchills ordered to be completed as soon as possible though there seems to be some doubt as to whether Brown or Pitt was then the Engineer-in-Charge. There is a reference to a survey made by Thomas Telford - to be asked for in January 1799 and noted in May 1799. Messrs. Boulton and Watt were consulted in 1799 as to the cost of a pumping engine to raise water into the canal at Goscote where the canal cut through a colliery.

The price of barges is quoted in 1800, "new boat compleat with high cabins, elm bottom and oak sides - 3" plank £76. The same with low cabin - £73.10.0., with one month's delivery."

The canal company did not itself provide barges to be used on the canal - this was not made legal till 1845, when it was too late. They obtained their income solely from tolls on other people's barges which the canal companies were less interested in providing through long-distance facilities than if they had had their own fleets of barges. The canal was not in 1800 the canal we see to-day, capable of carrying 25 tons of cargo per barge - and it would carry more if dredged - it was narrower, without such neat brick edges - and remains of that early canal may be seen to-day in the cut off section at Pipe Hill. In July 1801 it was reported that barges carrying only 18 tons could navigate only with difficulty, and owing to lack of water 2 boats took 2 days to go from Lichfield to Walsall. This may have been due to a dry summer.

A list of rates chargeable was contained in the original Act. These were supposed to be maximum rates, but by 1800 they had been raised quite considerably. Bricks now cost 2d. per ton per mile, pig iron 1/- per ton, for the whole length of the canal and cast iron 1½d. per ton per mile or 2/6d. for the whole length of the canal.

The list of tolls drawn up by the company was always being changed - the Acts for constructing the tolls gave maximum tolls, and as the state of trade fluctuated, so did the tolls go up and down.

The 1792 Act authorized - for corn, grain, timber, etc., 2d. per ton per mile.
- for coal, coke, etc. 9d. per ton per mile.

The 1794 Act authorized - for all coal (except slack or coal used for burning limestone or bricks), iron 9d. per ton per mile.
- for all goods having paid the 9d. and going down Ogley locks - 1/3d. per ton.
- for all goods originating between Catshill and Huddlesford - 2/- per ton.
- for inferior coal, not passing a lock 6d.
- for inferior coal, passing a lock - 9d.

This illustrates the pre-occupation with water which must characterize a canal - a lockful of water must be replaced, at expense by building a reservoir or pumping engine and maintaining it.

The company also had toll rates for other commodities, and reduced tolls on wheat and flour to nothing in November 1800 because of the high price of provisions. In 1803 the committee was thanked for its work in attending to the prosperity of the canal, then considerable. However, this happy state did not last. A list of debts revealed at a meeting at the Swan Inn, Lichfield on 10 November 1803 showed the companying as owing £5,500, and in November 1804 a dividend was to be paid only if the company could afford it. In 1807 the rates of carriage went up to 1/9d. per ton per mile on coal and limestone.

Soon the company ran into the problem of individual traders seeking special terms, and had to decide how far they could be granted without detriment to the revenue - in 1799 the committee agreed to 3d. per ton toll on lime taken from Linley Lime Works to Aldridge Wharf. In 1800, Mr. Wilkinson wanted an abatement to enable him to navigate the canal, and the Secretary commented in his rough notes "would it be prudent to make him any and what abatement if any can be made and should it not be general?".

The tolls fluctuated with the state of trade, and the depression of the post war years did not help the canal company - by the 1820s they were already thinking of amalgamation with the Birmingham Canal Navigations.

There are few figures of receipts on the canal. The files show that from 1 April to 11 November 1799 revenue was £1,344.14.7½d. which must imply a tonnage of over 20,000 tons in the seven months. The records of the half-yearly committee meetings from 1808 to 1824 are very brief - recording only the re-election of the committee. Many of these members served for a very long time. Additional byelaws were drawn up in 1811 and 1812.

Bylaws 11 November 1811

23. No-one to navigate a boat on the canal with limestone loaded or placed higher than the gunnel or sides of the boat. Penalty 40/- to £5.
24. No lock to be opened before 6 a.m. or after 8 p.m. from 1 March to 10 October, nor before 6 a.m. or after 6 p.m. from 10 October to 1 March. If so done without permission, penalty £5.
25. Unless owners of sunken vessels raise them immediately the company can do so and keep them until payment be made for the work.
Ordered that to prevent the great injuries which the traders upon this canal receive from persons fraudulently purchasing from boatmen the property entrusted to their care £5 reward for anyone reporting selling or buying of such property.

Byelaws 11 May 1812

26. That watchmen keep an account of loading or discharging of coal, marl, dung, or merchandise where it is not done at the wharf. 10/- fine if such actions be not reported.
27. £5 Reward for anyone informing on fisherman using nets.
28. Every boatman coming from the Birmingham Canal to have a strap 10 yards long fixed to the stem of the boat and round a strap post to be provided to prevent the boat striking the lock gates.
29. 5 guineas and expenses for information about persons damaging the Bridges, locks, banks, posts, rails, Quicksets, and other works of the Company.

In 1818 a request for reduced tolls was refused, and in 1822 a sub-committee was appointed to enquire into "the causes of the present decline in tonnage, and inquire what new avenues of trade may be opened, and what are the best ways of using our surplus water". The company sold some water to Dudley Canal and some to the Shropshire Union Canal - in 1834 they purchased 4,000 locks full of water. Cannock Reservoir is still one of the main reservoirs for the whole Birmingham Canal Navigation system. The sub-committee was also to discuss the possibilities of links with other canals - since there was no connexion in Walsall between the Birmingham Canal Navigations and the Wyrley & Essington there was a possible link here to be considered.

In 1824 a letter was received from the chairman of the B.C.N. containing the information that a petition was to be presented to Parliament to seek a Bill to link Birmingham with Liverpool by rail. The Wyrley & Essington was asked to join in opposition to the Bill, to which the committee agreed. This stimulated the company to write to an engineer to survey the line of the canal and recommend improvements and extensions. This showed that railway competition was to be feared. The

first suggestion of a link with the B.C.N. at Walsall was made in 1825, but petitioners to the committee were told to await the results of the survey, and the petition was introduced again in 1829. In the same year there were some petitions for the reduction of tolls but these were rejected and the lime-masters of Daw End were told that the tolls on lime were already so low "that the committee cannot feel justified in making any reduction."

The last ten years of the independent life of the canal were full of talk of union with the B.N.C. and of a junction canal in Walsall. The B.N.C. Minute book for 4 June 1830 records that a letter had been received from the Wyrley & Essington suggesting union and that the B.N.C. were agreeable but as they had suggested such a union in 1820 and it was turned down, they wanted the Wyrley & Essington to draw up proposals. Relations between the companies were not good, one ground for disagreement being the carelessness of the Wyrley & Essington about supplying water to the B.C.N. at Wolverhampton as they were required to do by the 1792 Act.

In 1835 the B.C.N. was seeking Parliamentary approval for new works and it was suggested that the Walsall Junction be included. This they would not do, but by 1837, when a deputation from Walsall Borough Council attended a B.C.N. committee meeting, they agreed to support the idea, on the assurance that the Wyrley & Essington would supply the water. Since there were 8 locks in the Junction Canal that would be an important item!

While the two committees were discussing the matter a group of Walsall businessmen set about appealing for permission to build an independent Junction Canal, so that they would then be able to hold the other two companies to ransom. This hastened the agreement between the two companies and the Junction Canal was built in 1840-1841, but it was obscured by the amalgamation of the companies in 1840.

The amalgamation of the two companies was suggested in 1838 by the Wyrley & Essington, and the B.C.N. was attracted by the idea, but unable to agree to the Wyrley & Essington's terms, and discussions were bedevilled by quarrels over the supply of water from the Wyrley &Essington to the B.C.N. The terms proposed by the Wyrley & Essington were as follows :

Wyrley & Essington shares be guaranteed dividends - 1838 - £6; 1839 - £7; 1840 - £8; 1841 - £9 and then profits to be divided equally among the shareholders, one Wyrley & Essington share being equal to one B.C.N. share. These terms were not acceptable to the B.C.N.

In January 1839 the B.C.N. offered £70 per share for Wyrley & Essington shares, and later a £60 allocation to be made on each Wyrley & Essington share and one Wyrley & Essington share to be equal to one B.C.N. share. The Wyrley & Essington proposed a payment of £44 on each share - declined by B.C.N. which does however agree to make the Walsall Junction Canal.

Terms of Union were drawn up on 15 February 1839, and submitted to the Wyrley & Essington shareholders on 2 March 1839. The terms were :

The companies to be consolidated from 9 February 1839.
Each Wyrley & Essington share to pay £49 in the same way as the B.C.N. had paid £71 per share (paid up). The interest on this money if unpaid by the shareholder, was to be 4%, deducted out of dividends.
All properties, debts, etc., of each company become those of the new company.
The B.C.N. at its next dividend to pay no more than 5% and the Wyrley & Essington to declare a 5% dividend on the same day.

The Wyrley & Essington committee reported on 10 May 1839 that the Bill had not been presented to Parliament, due to the notice given being too short, and the Standing Orders of the House were therefore not complied with. The Petition was presented again on 24 January 1840 and the first reading was on 7 February. In committee the Bill faced opposition, from the Trent & Mersey Canal, the Coventry Canal, and the Warwick & Birmingham Canal - due to the proposals for a Walsall Link, which might reduce their trade, and also to proposals concerning the reduction of tolls which might lead to demands for their tolls to be reduced. A counter-petition in favour of the Bill was presented from Wolverhampton and Walsall Coalmasters and Limemasters and others in the neighbourhood of the Wyrley & Essington Navigation praying that the Bill might pass.

The Bill went on to the Lords, and received the Royal Assent on 14 April 1840. The Wyrley & Essington was now merged into the B.C.N. after an independent life of 46 years, although the name is still used for the canal as a section of the B.C.N. It still is used for the same reasons as in 1840, for its supply of water from Chasewater into the Midland canal system, and as a means of transporting coal which yields tolls all over the canal network.

The B.C.N. committee reported in October 1841 "that trade on the Wyrley lines is proceeding favourably and the advantages of the Walsall communication are developing daily." The canal is reported to have been well cleaned and trade on the canal picked up, indeed some traffic was going down Ogley locks to the Thames and the Trent, thus avoiding the congestion on the Birmingham & Fazeley Canal.

The B.C.N. proceeded to rebuild most, if not all of the locks in the Ogley flight - the dates may be seen on the locks, and also on the map. In 1841 the committee reported that the canal had been scoured from Wolverhampton to the locks at Ogley, widened and deepened and was probably in a better state than ever before. In December 1841 the committee also reported, rather surprisingly, that efforts were being made to supply Walsall and Lichfield with canal-borne coal. The discovery of more limestone at Daw End is also reported. Drawbacks, or further reductions in tolls, are also reported at this meeting.

In March 1842 the report reads "Efforts are to be made to supply Lichfield and Walsall with coal - for some years both places have been almost entirely supplied by land - but from steps now being taken, it is hoped that canal will supersede road transport."

The dredging of the canal seems to have helped in this, as a later report of July 1842 records improvement of the coal trade to Lichfield, and an improvement in the lime trade of the Daw End Branch, partly due to the enclosure and therefore the farming of Cannock Chase.

Meanwhile the B.C.N. amalgamated with the Dudley Canal (established in 1776), in 1846, and in the same year came to terms with a proposed railway to link Birmingham and Wolverhampton - whereby the canal put up one quarter of the cost of the railway and was to receive in return 4% on the capital - a good arrangement since the railway was stimulated to work with the canal and not against it as was usually the case - indeed there is a railway and canal wharf at Brownhills and another at Wolverhampton - both are now disused, but are symbols of a co-operation now lacking between the two forms of transport.

The canal company retained its own committee and the railway treated it as a separate financial unit. The railways in the area were actually the means of financing further canal development, as they had to pay to cross canals, and use wayleaves and canal land etc. and the committee reports in 1847 that it had some £51,800 coming to it from the railways which it was intended to use in extending the canal.

In 1848 the railway between Lichfield and Walsall, opened in 1849, was asking if the canal could be closed to permit cutting off a corner of the canal at Pipe Hill and a bridge at Brownhills. The closure at Brownhills was to cost the railway £25 per day.

In 1853 Sir George Nicholls, the Chairman of the Midland Railway, wrote to the chairman of the B.C.N. asking him to extend the canal branches and he recommended an extension from Pelsall to Cannock - costing £30,000, and one to Wyrley Bank for £20,000. These works could not be undertaken without the consent of the railway company - no work costing more than £500 could be.

The plans for these extensions are to be seen at the William Salt Library and they show the new concept of level canals - by cuttings and embankments - quite high near Norton Canes, straight and wide canals. The extension of the canal to Hednesford was originally intended to go right across the Chase towards Brereton but did not get beyond Hednesford.

The Act of 1854 authorized these extensions to the canal and the one to Hednesford reached its destination about 1860, and that to Wyrley Bank by 1859. At the same time the feeder linking Cannock reservoir to the canal was cut out into a canal entering at the top of the Ogley Locks, and the Anglesey Wharf tapped new coal mines being sunk by the Marquess of Anglesey - who had been asking for this since 1849. The Freeth Bridge on the A.5. over this branch is named after the engineer responsible for it.

Having constructed the canal to Hednesford the B.C.N. fell foul of the Staffordshire & Worcester Canal, who regarded it as an intervention in their province - the parochial outlook which caused the downfall of so many canals.

However the B.C.N. and the Staffordshire & Worcester did come to an agreement and the Churchbridge Locks were built to link the two canals - the last major piece of canal building in the United Kingdom. They are now destroyed by open cast coal mining. In its 5 furlongs it dropped 13 locks, some 78 feet.

To-day parts of the canal lie dry, or damp, and disused, but the main function of the canal still exists and coal is transported from Short Heath, Hednesford and the Anglesey Wharf to Walsall Power Station, coal merchants' wharves, gas works, and factories in the Black Country and even beyond to London - a 4½ day drip from Anglesey Wharf. Very little, if any, other commodity is carried by the canal, but it still serves a useful purpose, as its coal reaches Walsall more speedily from Anglesey Wharf than does rail-borne coal - some 4 hours against 2-3 days!

There are several repair and boat-building yards on the canal - two at Bloxwich, and British Railways have their Walsall depot near the Sneyd Junction. There are gangs of men employed in constant maintenance - but there are no locks on the canal as it is now used, though there are flights at Walsall and Daw End to link it with the B.C.N.

The Old Essington Locks were abandoned at some time early in the nineteenth century, and the remainder of the canal continued open, even if little used until 1954, when the British Transport Commission Act closed the Sneyd and Wyrley Bank branches and the Hayhead Branch, the Lord Hays Branch and the Ogley Locks - the stretch from Ogley to Huddlesford, all authorized in the 1792 or 1794 Acts. Lichfield folk report that no barges other than maintenance boats came down the Ogley Locks for many years prior to 1954. The canal is still clearly visible and may be walked along throughout its length. Permission is needed from the British Transport Commission, but is readily granted. A section near Lichfield has now been filled in below Lock No.20.

The future of the canal is linked very closely with the prosperity of the Cannock Chase coal mines, and when they are all closed the canal will face complete closure unless the B.C.N. still need it to carry water to their network, a task which keeps the Llangollen Canal open, supplying water from the Dee to Chester. The closure of the Ogley Locks prevents any direct link between the Wyrley & Essington and the Trent & Mersey.

However, the main part of the canal is still fairly well used, and some of the boats retain their traditional markings, and boatmens paintings. The majority of them are wooden boats, though a few steel ones are to be seen.

Although the Wyrley & Essington is only a small canal relative to the mileage of English canals, in their heyday, its history illustrates very well the history of all British canals - it was built with enthusiasm and an anticipation not fully realized, much harmed by railway competition, and now partly derelict and partly used, though much below capacity.

(Concluded)

