The Industrial and Maritime History of the Market Weighton Canal

During the second half of the eighteenth-century Britain embarked on the path of rapid industrialisation. This process, sometimes described as the industrial revolution, transformed the country's economy and society. Previously, towns were small, and most people lived in villages, making their living from agriculture. By 1851 most of the country's rapidly growing population resided in towns and cities and earned wages working in industry, commerce, and associated activities. Industrial and agricultural output expanded dramatically, trade in raw materials and manufactured goods grew exponentially. In response to the ever-increasing demands for foodstuffs and raw materials, rural landscapes and farming practices were often transformed or, in the language of the day, were improved.

Britain was the first country in the world to industrialise and so many other nations have followed in its wake. Unlike other countries, the upturn in the pace of industrialisation in Britain commenced in the pre-railway era so coastal shipping and inland waterways were at first the crucial channels for conveying raw materials, foodstuffs and manufactured goods to and from the growing urban centres of population. By the mid-eighteenth century, piecemeal programmes of dredging, widening and embanking had already upgraded navigation on many of the country's natural rivers but important waterborne transport initiatives after 1760 often involved the creation of numerous artificial waterways known as canals. Indeed, this early industrial epoch has also been dubbed the Canal Age and by the first few decades of the nineteenth century much of England was criss-crossed by a series of canals which provided a crucial network for carrying the materials of this first industrial revolution.

It was during the early decades of the new industrial economic epoch that the Market Weighton Drainage and Navigation was created. What made this venture somewhat different from many other contemporary navigation initiatives was that it was an attempt to satisfy two demands of the new age. This venture was promoted as not only providing a means of conveying bulky goods by water from an area beset by poor overland communications but was also intended to be at the centre of a complex conduit expected to drain - and thus improve the agricultural potential of - whole swathes of the neighbouring countryside. And it is the story of subsequent attempts to satisfy and maintain support for these rather differing aims that underpins so much of the history of the Market Weighton Navigation.

From the perspective of many leading agricultural commentators of the day, much of the land lying between Market Weighton, Holme on Spalding Moor and the Humber estuary was considered to be in dire need of improvement. Vast tracts of unenclosed low-lying marsh and carr, specifically the great common of Wallingfen, gave way as you approached the Humber estuary to substantial salt marshes. Much of the common land in the area was, in the eyes of larger local landowners, such as Sir Lewyns Boldero of South Cave, ripe for enclosure but to carry through such agricultural improvements effectively they needed to address its drainage problems. Though dikes and ditches had been erected and excavated across these lands in earlier epochs and had probably increased the number of months in the year during which they could be grazed by livestock, waterlogging remained an endemic issue; there were also substantial stretches of shallow standing waters or meres. In the northern parts there was still no effective outlet for the all too abundant fresh water flowing there from a myriad of springs found along the western edge of the nearby Wolds, whilst the more southerly saltmarshes bordering the estuary were still sometimes subject to tidal inundations. Though turf cutting, fishing, fowling and the gathering of reeds and gorse contributed to the rural economies of surrounding

parishes, many larger landowners were convinced that the area could become more productive if drainage was improved and then further enclosure of the open commons was carried out.

At the same time the wider region was blighted by poor communications. Even though there was a growing demand in nearby West Riding centres of population for the cereal products already being cultivated on better quality agricultural East Riding land in the wider district, the transport of such bulky goods from the area, and indeed from much of the Vale of York, was both difficult and expensive. Despite the abundance of water lying on the lands to their south there were then no navigable links between the Humber's tributaries and inland settlements such as Holme on Spalding Moor, Market Weighton and Pocklington.

Considerable debate amongst local large landowners and business interests about the best means of draining the area and improving communications led eventually to the commissioning of John Smeaton - sometimes called the father of civil engineering and certainly one of the most eminent engineers of the eighteenth-century - to examine the possibility of combining these aims. His report, produced in November 1765, concluded that not only could water levels – and thus waterlogging in the area - be considerably reduced but that allowing navigation here was in 'no ways incompatible with drainage' providing the cuts were made at an appropriate depth. He concluded that such undertakings could be completed at a reasonable cost and suggested a canal cut could also be extended, if required, onwards to Pocklington.

After lengthy discussion and debate amongst local landowners, the Act of Parliament, finally secured in May 1772, created a means of addressing the drainage, navigation, and related agricultural enclosure issues. Under its terms, five commissioners were appointed to carry through the drainage and navigation

priorities as well as to oversee proprietorial claims for adjacent lands on Wallingfen Common. Once their work was discharged, the commissioners were to hand their responsibilities over to the trustees, mainly local landowners, who were also named in the Act and who from the beginning steered the project. Much of the day-to-day administration for both the Trustees and the Commissioners was henceforward handled by Robert Spofforth, a solicitor in Howden, who, like his successors, combined the posts of Clerk and Treasurer.

From the onset it was intended that the drainage and navigation accounts would be kept separately. The initial levy, known as an acre tax and intended to fund the creation of the proposed drainage infrastructure, was set at £2 an acre which was later reduced to five shillings and henceforward used to cover maintenance costs. This tax was payable by the owners of what were called 'low lands' that is lands which, in the commissioners' judgement, were deemed to benefit from the drainage system. This led to disputes with a few landowners who described some of their holdings as 'high land', that is terrain unlikely to either need or gain from the drainage undertakings. At the same time, the separate expenses required for creating the actual navigation were to be financed through subscriptions from investors, known as subscribers, and tolls on vessels using the completed canal were subsequently drawn up in order to finance its long-term maintenance and provide a profitable return for investors.

John Smith, a civil engineer, was initially appointed to construct the canal and in July 1772 he was instructed to stake out the route from the proposed lock at the outfall clough to the site of a second lock along the lines of a plan he had already drawn up. Although there was a desire in some quarters to have his work overseen by a consultant of the stature of John Smeaton or John Grundy, a meeting of commissioners unanimously resolved that the expense of employing either of these individuals would be too great. John and James Pinkerton, who came from the

Barnsley area, were awarded the excavation contracts and initially undertook to dig out the sluice pit and reservoir at four pence three farthing per cubic yard and thereafter carry out excavations at a rate of three and a half pence per cubic yard.

Within months, the commissioners had second thoughts about Smith and his overall direction of the project and, finally eschewing the additional expense, called in Grundy who produced an alternative survey and plans which included a different location for the Humber outfall and lock. Smith was subsequently discharged and Grundy appointed to oversee the project whilst one of his protégés, Samuel Allam, was appointed surveyor and ordered to stake out another route for the canal, this time in line with Grundy's plans.

Grundy (1719 - 1783) was born in Congerstone, Leicestershire but later based in Spalding and had an impressive civil engineering background, having worked previously on a range of substantial projects including the Louth Navigation and the River Witham improvements. He had also drawn up the plans, and been engineer in charge for a time, of the Holderness Drainage during the 1760s and 1770s whilst the work carried out on the Driffield Navigation between 1767 and 1770 followed his design and direction and enabled laden keels to navigate the waters between Canal Head Driffield and the River Hull. Soon after his commission for the Market Weighton Canal, Grundy was also to work with Henry Berry of Liverpool on the plans for Hull's first dock which was built between 1775 and 1778 and is now the site of the city's Queen's Gardens.

The Humber Lock and Outfall were most impressive pieces of civil engineering. Grundy's plans included a sluice with a thirty-foot waterway and two arches whilst the lock had a clear width of fifteen feet and there was a length of seventy feet between two main gates. A great pit for the foundations was dug and the whole assemblage stood on a timber grillage. After the structure was completed, new river

banks were made, curving back to the side walls and sluice. Later a fixed bridge over the entrance was also constructed.

The works did not proceed without controversy. Complaints had to be dealt with on a number of issues, not least about damage caused by the construction works on Wallingfen Common in 1774 which led to the payment of substantial compensation and, as the years passed, there was increasing concern about the time being taken to complete the project, though in fairness this was no easy task, being much more than just the canal and mother drain; more than forty miles of dikes and ditches had also to be excavated across the surrounding lands as part of the associated drainage works. Eventually, the Pinkertons were threatened with legal action because of their slow rate of progress. Moreover, though the original intention had been to extend the canal right into Market Weighton, in practice the cost of constructing a substantial number of locks over the rising ground on the town's approaches, proved prohibitive and so a decision was taken to terminate the waterway at River Head on Weighton Horse Common, some two miles to the south.

But even this truncated target proved difficult to attain. By 1778 the navigation channel had only been dug out as far as the approaches to Sod-House, still more than three miles short of River Head, and both finance and patience were by then almost exhausted. A second subscription of £2900 was proposed in 1778 and finally raised in 1781. A last input from James Pinkerton – his brother was by then deceased - making navigable the stretch of the canal approaching Sod House was agreed in July 1780 and subsequently completed.

In March 1781, with their coffers now reinforced by the new subscription, the Trustees proposed that the existing commissioners, who had carried forward the construction of the navigation and drains for nearly nine years, should resign their powers to a new committee. Luke Holt (1723 – 1804) was placed in charge of the

final stages of construction. Holt, an experienced engineer from Thornhill near Dewsbury, had worked on a number of West Riding waterway projects, not least the Calder and Hebble Navigation and the Huddersfield Broad Canal. He was also closely associated with Grundy and Smeaton and in 1775 had been appointed resident engineer of the Hull Dock works, later also carrying out remedial work on the nearby North Bridge. Holt drew up new plans for the commissioners and in May 1781 Messrs Battle, Occleshaw and Button were charged with the task of overseeing the construction of the Sod-House Lock and the upper reaches of the canal, the first agreed stage of which was to Cliffe Carr. The works continued: the Mill Lock and Holme Ings locks were subsequently built along this stretch, the latter being a third of a mile from the terminus at Canal Head. In 1783 a dwelling was also erected at Sod-House for the keeper there who was to have responsibility for all the upper locks.

The canal, when finished, covered nine and a half miles between Humber Lock and Canal Head. Much of its waters came from Weighton Beck and the much-altered River Foulness, which joined the waterway around a mile below Sod House Lock, and was set up so that the water level could always be kept at least three feet below than the natural surface of the land though still at a depth which allowed the passage of loaded vessels drawing up to four feet. So-called landings were created at several points along the canal, some of these were intended to serve new farmsteads created after enclosure, where goods could be loaded and unloaded and during the next few years a number of improvements were made including at River Head, where the waterway was widened to allow three vessels to berth there at the same time and a crane was also erected which could hired for the fee of one penny per ton. Several swing bridges were constructed along the route and a fixed bridge was built where the Cave Causeway crossed the Navigation.

The lower stretches of the canal began earning income from 1776 and toll revenues gradually increased as more sections of the navigation were opened up. Though servicing the commercial needs of places such as Market Weighton and Holme on Spalding Moor and providing a means for agricultural interests to bring in manure, lime and coal whilst shipping out cereals, potatoes, timber and the like, the navigation soon nurtured associated industrial developments, in the form of brick and tile works, built close to its banks. The district possessed considerable deposits of good brickmaking clay and the waterway provided a means of not only bringing in coal from the West Riding pits to fire the kilns but also offered the cheapest means then available of despatching bricks – a classic high bulk low value industrial commodity - to the rapidly expanding port of Hull, and also several burgeoning West Riding industrial towns. The majority of the brickyards were clustered along the lower reaches where a settlement, eventually known as Newport, soon grew up along the banks of the canal, providing homes and services for the brickworks' employees and their families; and this was arguably the East Riding's only industrial age village. There was even at one time a boatyard on the banks. By 1823 there were already seven brick and tile works in the vicinity of the new township and annual output was then about 1,700,000 tiles and 2,000,000 bricks. Further up the navigation, another significant, brickyard was opened in the vicinity of the Land of Nod which was run at one time by Joseph Holmes of Holme on Spalding Moor and was certainly operational in the 1850s and 1860s; its associated brick ponds can still be seen to the west of the canal, as can many others at different places along the route. The revenue the canal derived from the brick and tile yard traffic was to prove crucial throughout the navigation's commercial life.

Attempts to extend the canal closer to Market Weighton were not totally abandoned for some time, at least by some of the Trustees. The final attempt to get the Trustees to agree plans to this effect were made at a special meeting held in

July 1834 when a proposal of applying to parliament for a new Act to extend the canal to Market Weighton was rejected. Sir Henry Vavasour, who attended the meeting, was probably one of the main proponents of the proposal and it was possibly about this time that the private offshoot, which became known as Vavasour's Canal, was excavated from a point just above the Holme Ings lock and on towards the Holme Road.

Humber keels and sloops were the typical vessels used on the navigation. They were ideal for carrying the high bulk low value cargoes that made up so many of the consignments conveyed. These vessels carried commodities to and from the West Riding and also to Hull. Indeed, there was for many years in the pre-railway age a regular market boat from the canal to Hull which carried passengers as well as provisions and the like. On the navigation the keels used their sails when this proved possible but otherwise they were hauled by horse or human, male and female, along the towpaths. An important aspect of the surrounding environment was the provision of pubs which not only provided for those working nearby but were also welcome places of refreshment for the keel crews. The public house at Canal Head was the Devonshire Arms Inn, whilst that at the head of the Vavasour extension by the Holme Road was the Star Inn. Another important canal pub was the Anchor at the Land of Nod whilst there were also several others in the vicinity of the waterway in Newport and formerly one at Humber Lock. Such establishments often provided stabling for horses used to pull keels.

Thanks no doubt to the low costs of construction and long-term maintenance, as well as the growing traffic from the brick and tile manufactories, the canal made a modest profit in many years from the early 1790s. Four or five per cent and sometimes even higher dividends per annum were not unusual returns – the peak years in terms of dividends were in the first half of the 1820s and the later 1840s. These were better returns than proved usual for many rural canals, not least the

Pocklington Canal. Though there were a few years where no dividend was paid, this was usually because of the cost of some major outlay on essential repairs. Overall, the canal made a regular return for its original subscribers and for those who inherited or acquired their holdings throughout the pre-railway decades.

In 1840 the Hull to Selby Railway, which had been under construction in the vicinity of the canal for some years, finally opened and in 1847 Market Weighton was also linked to York by rail. An Act of 1847 gave the York and North Midland Railway the power to purchase the canal along with other East Yorkshire waterways and although the dividends paid by the Market Weighton Navigation during the later 1840s were as high as they had ever been, concerns about the likely long term damage to profitability caused by railway competition was probably an important factor in the unanimous decision taken by the subscribers to sell their navigation holdings to the York and North Midland Railway in 1851. The actual nature of purchase was perhaps somewhat ambiguous, for the railway company was later to argue that it had only acquired the rights to the navigation's profits whilst the Trustees always retained their full control of the drainage affairs.

The position of the navigation looked uncertain immediately after this purchase by the railway company. A plan for using the canal as a warping drain – i.e . flooding some 5000 acres of nearby land with muddy river water and then allowing the silt to settle – was considered by the Trustees; a couple of months later, a proposal to build a railway line along the general route of the canal was also contemplated. Fortunately for the navigation, the railway plan came to nothing and the warping plan was rejected because of its potential effects on navigation. With the waterway profits now going to the railway company, who essentially saw canals as competing with their primary investments, the Trustees no longer had a direct monetary incentive to put as much energy into maintaining the canal as an actual canal, especially as the water levels required for navigation seem definitely to have

reduced its efficiency as the mother drain of the area. Even so, in a less direct manner, many of the local landowners and thus trustees still appreciated the benefits the canal gave their holdings in terms of access to the wider world and, of course, the interests of the brick and tile trade, which were increasingly important to the local economy, had also to be considered.

Despite the apparently uncertain environment, the canal continued to make modest profits for almost forty further years. In 1854 the York and North Midland Railway became part of the North Eastern Railway and the most prosperous years for the Navigation, if judged in terms of the profits from the tolls forwarded to the railway company, were probably the 1860s but even so relatively decent returns were regularly made until the later 1880s. However, though the North Eastern Railway was induced to fund some of the most pressing and major repairs during these years - for example financing the provision of a coffer dam and repairs to Weighton Lock in 1854/5 - in general, the standards of maintenance seem to have fallen over time and as a result all major stakeholders became increasingly dissatisfied with its condition.

In terms of gradual deterioration, the higher reaches of the canal experienced the most problems. In 1878, one of the trustees stated to a House of Lords Select Committee that whilst keels could carry sixty tons half way up the canal they had then to reduce the load to twenty tons for the final stretch up to River Head. Although in that same year a proposal was put forward to build a new goods warehouse, install a weighing machine and improve facilities for coal storage at River Head by that time the impact of the railway lines through Market Weighton – the section to Beverley having opened in 1865 - was probably reducing much of the trade above Sod Houses Lock. Further down the canal there were also changes to the still prosperous brick and tile trade which had an effect on the focus of the commercial traffic. In the last couple of decades of the nineteenth century the firm

of Henry Williamsons became a force to be reckoned with. Though the original company had suffered acute financial problems in the later 1870s, once it came under the full direction of Henry Williamson, who was also a cloth merchant from Leeds, it went from strength to strength. The company not only gradually acquired many of the neighbouring brickworks and consolidated production at its modern manufactory on the canal banks near Newport, it also developed substantial building materials and construction interests in Hull, Goole and elsewhere, playing major parts in the urban expansion of both places. In Hull, the company's headquarters were sited on the north side of Queen's Dock and by the later 1890s the firm had at least six of its own vessels sailing to and from the brickworks. In 1897 they brought the canal's first steamer into service; this was the *Newport* which had been built by Scarr's of Beverley and designed for carrying bricks in coastal waters. Williamsons became a Limited Liability Company in 1901 with a capital of £30,000 and the bricks they produced and forwarded sometimes went much further than the Humber estuary and the UK coastal trade. Indeed, in 1907, for example, a large consignment of the machine kiln bricks from Broomfleet were loaded in Hull's Alexandra Dock onto the steamer SS *Cromarty* bound for Rio de Janeiro. Williamsons retained their headquarters on Queen's Dock and later vigorously opposed its eventual closure in 1930.

By the time of this consignment, however, commercial activity on the canal had been legislatively truncated. Though its toll receipts seem to have benefitted from transporting materials during the construction of the Hull and Barnsley Railway line just to the north of Newport in the early 1880s, soon afterwards they entered a relentless decline. This decade also witnessed the tightening of a national agricultural depression that would last down to the First World War and further appeals from the Trustees for a financial injection from the North Eastern Railway, who owned the tolls, now met with little in the way of a positive response. By the

1890s the navigation was in deficit and because the accounts had always been legislatively separated it was not possible to cover the navigation's financial shortfalls from drainage income. For much of this decade the way forward was fraught with indecision. The then secretary/treasurer parted company, perhaps somewhat abruptly, with the Trustees in 1892 and a further suggestion to construct a railway across the area served by the canal was also considered by parliament. There was no obvious income stream available to cover the now regular deficits and by then both the drainage trustees and the North Eastern Railway Company were denying responsibility for the upkeep of navigation. Meantime, the condition of the canal, and the ever-crucial Weighton Lock by the Humber, continued to deteriorate. The lock was patched up again in 1897 but the Trustees had had enough and finally embarked on legislative plans to close the waterway to navigation.

But this move met with considerable opposition from some of the remaining carriers and users, most notably Henry Williamsons who were by then a force to be reckoned with. They offered to guarantee making up toll revenues on the lower reaches to a minimum of £200 for twenty years and the Act finally passed by Parliament in 1900 left the lower reaches open to navigation but allowed the section above Sod-House Lock to be abandoned.

During the following years the toll receipts never really recovered but Williamsons continued to make considerable use of the lower stretches of the canal down to the start of the Great War. However, the course of the war, particularly after the onset of the German Unlimited U-boat Campaign in February 1917, caused great national food shortages. In response the government created the Agricultural War Committee and endowed it with considerable powers to increase agricultural output; in November 1917 its regional sub-committee, despite stringent opposition from Williamsons, took the decision to let the navigation level waters out of the canal, thus reducing its status to little more than the mother drain, in the hope that

this would allow further neighbouring lands to be converted from pasture to arable. In terms of raising yields from the surrounding lands this move reportedly met with little more than mixed success and in the early 1920s the navigation was again resumed.

But commercial traffic along the lower reaches of the navigation continued to decline, particularly as local road access improved and motor traffic emerged as a new competitor – bricks were increasingly shipped out by lorry. There was also very little canal traffic above Newport during the interwar years. Indeed, over the winter of 1939/40 the last ever cargoes – sugar beet destined for a factory at Brigg - were said to have been loaded onto three keels in the approaches to Sod-House Lock; they were believed to be the first consignments shipped from that far north on the navigation for twenty-five years and their passage was fraught with difficulty. To enable the keels to reach so far up the canal once again, the water levels were temporarily raised. With no mechanical help available, the keels were loaded by hand barrow but this took so long that the vessels had to leave part of the load behind and edge back down the cut to where the Foulness joined the waterway to take an additional load from there. Shortly afterwards, a second and final trip up to Sod House seems to have been made to load the remainder of the beet but this voyage also proved difficult and resulted in a loss for the factory.

In the later 1950s commercial traffic on the lower stretches of the navigation ended after Williamsons informed the drainage Trustees that trials using lorries to bring coal from the West Riding pits to their brickworks had proved successful; the last lock keeper at Humber Lock was withdrawn in 1971. The lock, although closed, was, of course, later renovated and during the same decade the Market Weighton Canal Society was created with the aim of preserving and restoring the waterway and remained active for a number of years during which those involved carried out several projects including reclaiming of some of the waterway in the upper section.

Throughout its long history the canal provided employment and challenges for all sorts of people, be them civil engineers, tradesman, labourers, lawyers and landowners. Some individuals, like David Towse, keeper at Sod Houses Lock, occupied their posts for decades, although they were reappointed on a yearly basis; after the closure of the upper locks, Towse concentrated his efforts on keeping the lower waterway clear. There were probably around twelve different lock keepers at Weighton Lock from its opening in 1776 until the position was finally abolished in 2011. Many other people found occasional employment at different times, clearing the banks or dredging the watercourse. There was a similar longevity about the post of Secretary/Treasurer, with only eight clerks serving between 1772 and 1900. Robert Spofforth, the first person to hold the post, was possibly in office for a staggering fifty-one years; he retired in December 1823 and oversaw everything from the initial construction of the navigation and drainage infrastructure onwards through several decades of its mature commercial operations. Spofforth was an attorney, at one time clerk to Bishop Darrington of Durham, and came from an eminent Howden family. Incidentally Robert's great-grandson, Fred Spofforth, was an Australian international cricketer: known as the 'Demon Bowler', whose stunning performance at the Oval in August 1882 is said to have led to the creation of the Ashes series and he has been immortalised by a statue outside of the Sydney Cricket ground. There is a further cricketing link with the area which goes back to the time of Robert Spofforth, the initial clerk and treasurer. On the 13 August 1778, whilst the canal was still under construction, the first recorded cricket match in East Yorkshire was played on Wallingfen between teams from Howden and Beverley and the former is said to have won the prize of fifty guineas.

Many local families of landowners and business people acted as Trustees over the decades. A very active Trustee in the early years of the project was Philip Langdale who inherited Houghton Hall in 1778. Another active Trustee during the formative

period was William Battle of Welton Hall – he had helped oversee the construction of the upper section of the canal and on his death in 1790 his large estates in the vicinity of Market Weighton passed to his daughter Rebecca who was married to Jeremy Lister. Lister in turn also became a trustee and chaired their annual meeting on at least one occasion. Jeremy Lister is perhaps best known today as the father of Anne Lister, his role being played in the TV series *Gentleman Jack* by the actor Timothy West, himself a great enthusiast of canals. The Trustees had annual meetings, usually every May, often in public houses and hotels in Market Weighton, to transact and oversee the direction of both drainage and navigation but they also sometimes met at other times of the year when business and events required this. Finally, a number of the original navvies and others, who were drawn by labouring opportunities when the canal and associated drains were being excavated, seem to have remained in the area. Three Scottish brothers, for example, George, James and William McTurk, sons of a small farmer in Cunnock, came to work on the excavations. George became a tenant farmer in Newport and also went into the wool trade, whilst Thomas who changed the spelling of the surname to MacTurk, built the substantial residence of Ryeland Hill in South Cave. His son, George Gladstone MacTurk, also became one of the Navigation and Drainage Trustees.

Life for those working on and around the canal was rigorous by any standards. Dealing with the estuary's tides meant that the keel and sloop crews were on call any time of day or night. Late arrivals in the vicinity of the Broomfleet Lock might have to wait for the next tide and delays cost all involved money as profits from the freight were split between the keel owner, skipper and mate. On fine windy days the vessels could sail up the canal and on other occasions a horse would be sent down from the brick and tile works to haul the vessel up. Loading bricks and tiles was done with barrows and was a painstaking business, there were over a thousand bricks to every three tons and typically, in the later years, three men were hired to

fill the hold. Afterwards, the vessel had to be turned, a tricky business during which the mast was lowered and the boat dragged round. The keeper and his wife at Humber Lock also had their work cut out, supplementing their income by lighting the navigation beacons for some miles along the estuary's banks. Indeed, lock keeper's wives always played an important role in keeping traffic on the canal moving and often covered duties for substantial periods should their husbands prove incapacitated, as seems to have been the case with Drucilla Whitworth at Humber Lock in 1825.

Like other waterways, public houses were an important part of canal life, offering refreshment for all those working nearby as well as stabling for horses and one of the most significant of these, the Anchor Inn at the Land of Nod, finally closed to customers in 1911, some years after the neighbouring stretch of the canal was abandoned and is now a private dwelling, standing a discrete distance from the line of the old canal.

Today, although nature and agriculture has claimed so much of the upper reaches of the canal, the landscape looks far different from what it was like before the agricultural improvements that came in the wake of the waterway's construction were completed. Although some sections of the upper navigation have been filled in and even put back under the plough, other water laden and now sometimes wooded stretches remain, the haunt of wildfowl and riverbank creatures, ironically now actually harbouring vestiges of the ancient pre-canal landscape of common and carr. Even here in this seemingly rural backdrop of flat open fields, occasional woods and the far distant line of the Yorkshire Wolds to the east, some signs of former maritime commerce can also still be defined, be it the warehouse amongst the trees at Canal Head or the stark remains of old stone lock pits and former landings, all hints of the waterborne traffic of old which once traded here from across Yorkshire by way of the tributaries and canals of the Humber.

South of Sod House Lock, which long ago lost its keeper's house and great wooden gates, the canal retains both its water and definition, increasing in both depth and width southwards of its confluence with the River Foulness. After passing under the M62 motorway bridge, then by houses in the village of Newport and beneath the main Hull to Selby Railway line, the waterway, here, which has been a popular resort of anglers since at least the later nineteenth century, continues to head southwards, bending slightly on its way through the flat, open countryside on the final stretch before reaching the outfall into the estuary by way of Humber Lock and sluice which, despite repair and renovation over many decades, still remain in many ways much as they were completed in the eighteenth century.

Today you can walk along the entire length of the Market Weighton Canal even though the banks have been raised above the towpath on many parts of the route. Be in no doubt, this is a wonderful route to walk. A landscape of huge flat fields, interspersed with occasional stands of trees and isolated farmsteads, all lying beneath great open skies and, apart from when passing through the village of Newport and under the ever-busy M62 motorway, it proves a quiet reflective passage for the walker, its all pervading silence broken only by the occasional busy rumble of a distant tractor at work in the fields, the steady drone of a light aircraft above or the startled cry of wildfowl bursting into flight from the waterway's rush laden undergrowth as you pass by. This is very much a walk, not only through the English countryside but, as it passes below railway and motorway alike, a journey across a rich tapestry of travel and transport from both past and present.

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