

WEST OF WIGAN - AND A LOST CANAL ?

Andy Screen takes a walk around Wigan

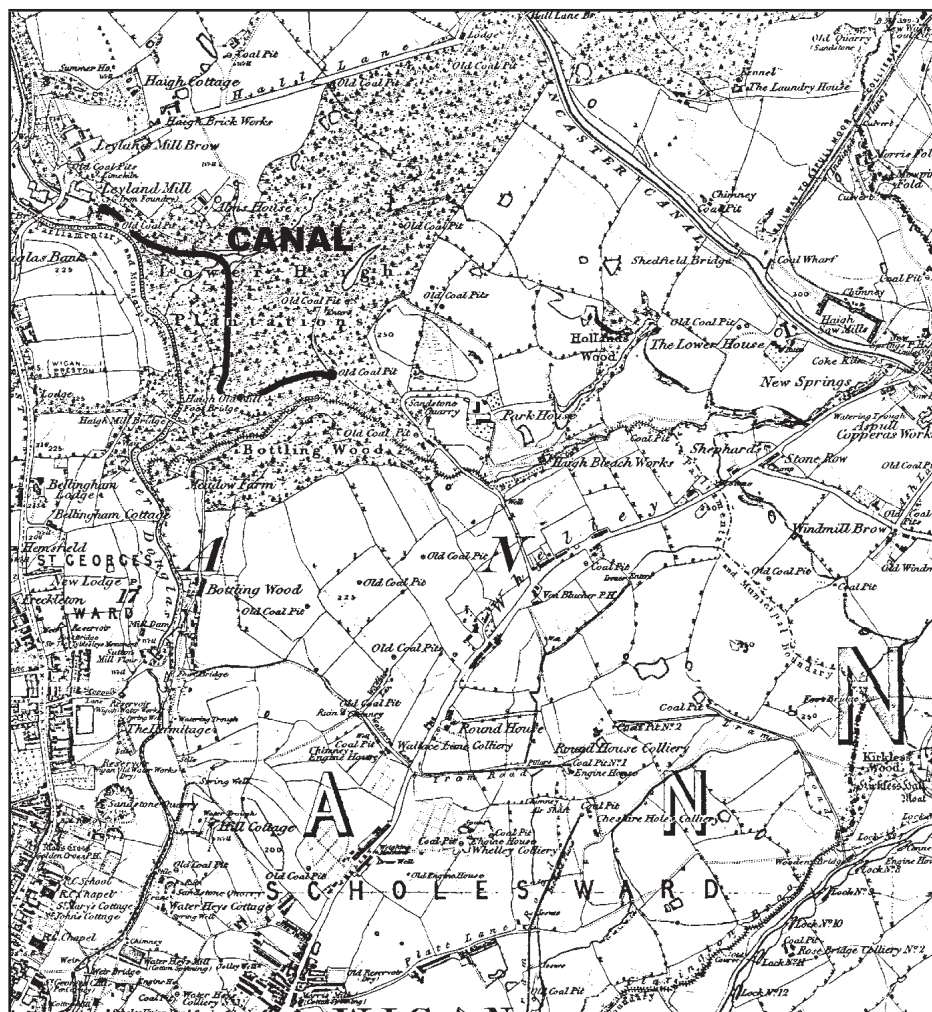
After many months of procrastination, Dave Smallshaw and yours truly met up in June to discover a lost canal west of Wigan. It is not mentioned in any of the main canal 'bibles', and even L&L expert Mike Clarke had few words to say about it in his book, *Around and About the L&L Canal - 'The remains of a short isolated canal can still be found in Bottling Wood'*. The only book we have found that has more than a few words to say on the subject is the Sellers title listed at the end. The comprehensive Anderson & France tome makes no mention at all, though it does mention an underground canal under Haigh church, and a number of un-navigable soughs. ***This is a plea for more information if anyone has it.***

Walking through the town, we join the Douglas river path at Wigan Little Theatre at the junction of River Way and School Lane. The path passes the new Quality Hotel to come out on Central Park Way. Crossing at the traffic lights at the busy junction the walk resumes on the left hand side of river, but it is best to cross at the first footbridge, back to the right hand side. The route takes you past the former Central Park rugby stadium (shortly to be a new Tescos) and keeps on a tarmac path.

Gradually, the sounds of Wigan disappear and things become more rural. The formal path diverts slightly away from the river, and as you climb up the hill, you are in the area of the site - supposedly - of the Battle of Wigan Lane in 1651.

The path surface changes just before entering Bottling Wood, and you will note a yellow Wigan Way marker on your left. Going straight across at a criss-cross of paths, the route takes you down a flight of steps to cross the ochrous Yellow Brook on a wooden bridge. Up on the other side, the path joins a metalled road and turning left, passes a substantial bridge over the river - this was the original drive into the Haigh Lower Plantation. After a few hundred yards, the tree-lined roadway then climbs and turns almost 180 degrees and then bears left, climbing further up the hill. Yards after turning left, you will note that there are two short flights of steps either side of you. Ahead is a boulder inscribed Devils Canyon and behind it to the left is the site of a former pithead and then beyond that, the Receptacle quarry.

Taking the flight of steps to the left, you quickly pick up the apparent line of a canal as it follows the edge of the hill for about 200 yards to what appears to



The 'mystery' canal is shown as a thick black line on this copy of the c1850 6 inch OS map. It was built to carry coal from Bottling Wood Colliery to the ironworks at Leyland Mill. Half-way along there is a small pool which is illustrated in the top photo opposite. The canal may have been superseded by a tramway, and the line of this can also be traced on the ground.



Two views of the old canal in the Haigh Lower Plantation. A short section, seen on the left, still contains water, while the channel can be identified below. A tramway seems to have replaced the canal at some time, and the bed now forms part of the footpath system



be a terminus above some old foundry buildings, now a private residence. You will also note a small hole in the wall to the left of the building, which may have been a run-off from the canal into river below. The foundry and ironworks, built by Earl Alexander, were probably operating from around 1790 and the canal is thought to date back to about 1798, though how long it lasted is anybody's guess.

Walk back to road, and then up the steps on the other side. The path immediately crosses the bed of the canal and then follows it round for about 150 yards to a large pool by the adit to the Four Foot coal seam. This adit can just about be made out by the dressed stonework on the left-hand side as you look up the small gorge down which a stream passes, presumably a feed for the canal originally. Although the water level in the pool was not far below the level of the path, it was apparent that any lower, and the output from the mine adit could not have easily used the canal - and without much doubt, the canal was built almost entirely to service the mine. It appears therefore that the water level had to be kept as high as possible, which explains the remains, near the weir, of stonework building the bank up. Crossing over the weir and another channel appears to head away from the pool. The channel seems to run out where a path crosses and climbs up the hill, but if you drop down onto the wider path below, you will be able to make out the channel again until it comes to a triangle of grass and mud, by a gap in the hillside. Possibly there was a cart-track through the gap to a roadway on the other side, near Bottling Wood

and Yellow Brook. The length of canal from the adit to here is about 280 yards, so overall the canal seems to have been around 600 to 650 yards long. (see Editor's Note at the end of this article)

We returned to the steps and walked up the hill, passing the Receptacle quarry on the left. The road bends round a lightly wooded clearing at the top and if you walk to the far side of the clearing you can see the pool below with the feeder stream coming in. You will also notice what seems to be the deliberately collapsed mine entrance. Very careful clambering down will get you to the stone entrance. Back on the road, the route carries on round to where it crosses over the feeder on an embankment at the head of the gorge, where again you can see the pool at the end. The roadway crosses the former railway (the old Whelley loop line), and makes its way past back of Hall Lane Lodge to Haigh Park Bridge, bridge 60 on the L&L. Turning left you quickly come across a strange little basin. The towpath bridge affords very little headroom (*Ed.: possibly due to subsidence*), making it initially unclear what the basin was used for. The bridge is probably a red herring, as Wigan Rowing Club took over the basin in 1872 (canoes and skiffs don't need much headroom) and this was therefore probably not the original bridge. Prior to 1872, the basin was used by Lords Crawford and Balcarres, to tranship coal onto Hall Lane beyond, which used to be a tramway to serve the foundry and Leyland Mill.

Backtracking under the bridge, we headed along the canal towards Wigan passing under Withington Lane,

bridge 59A, which provides access to the Colliers Arms. Former sawmills occupied the wasteland on the right, where pit-props were made and the wharf is still evident. (Ed.: *It was also the Wigan Coal & Iron Co's boatyard*) Opposite, on the towpath side, we noted the large cobbled area between the canal and the Crown Hotel, where there must have been other wharf/stabling facilities. Straight ahead is the bridge that marks the end of the original Lancaster canal venture to Westhoughton.

There is not room for a history of the L&L here, but briefly, the section from Johnsons Hillock to here was originally the Lancaster Canal. The L&L was planned to go round the north of Wigan and cross the Lancaster near Walton Summit, but ultimately, it took a southerly route, making connections with the Douglas Navigation (using Leigh's Cut) and the Bridgewater Canal, and then up a long flight of locks to where you now stand, at Kirkless (or Kirkleys). The Lancaster company, having failed to make a waterway crossing of the Ribble below Preston abandoned any hope of completing the line to Westhoughton as envisaged and the South End of their canal merely served as a connection between the two parts of the L&L - they eventually gave the L&L a lease on it in 1864.

Turning right down the Wigan flight, the first lock is Aspull Lock. The Kirkless Hall pub is on the right, and is followed shortly after by the Commercial Inn, whose days appear to be numbered. The new 'promenade' section follows shortly after, well-laid brick paving that continues right down to the bottom of the flight. Peel Hall on the right is part 14th century, the oldest building in Ince and one of the oldest in the whole Wigan area. Over Rose Bridge, carrying Manchester Road, you pass Whalley's basin which marks the start of the former Ince Hall colliery branch, and then cross Britannia Bridge (carrying Warrington Lane). The boarded up Shepherds Arms is another sad sight - in its heyday, there would have been pubs by the bucket-load alongside the locks, yet now there barely seems to be business for one.

Beyond the railway bridge, Girobank now occupies the former Westwood power station site with its long wharf. Just after the Leigh branch heads off to meet the Bridgewater, is the penultimate lock, Henhurst, then you need to cross over Chapel Lane. Wigan Investment Centre nears completion on the off-side, then you are through Bottom Lock, past the boatyard and alongside the 1907 Trencherfield Mill - you should not that the information centre and shop has moved here from its original site opposite the Pier. It is a short walk to Pottery Changeline bridge, through which the Wigan Pier experience awaits you. Here you need to climb up to the road and follow the canal stub to No 1 Wigan Pier with its twin boatholes.

(Ed.: *built c1830*) Then straight on up Wallgate to both Wallgate and North Western stations.

References:

The Douglas Valley Way (Gladys Sellers - Cicerone Press)

The Wigan Way (WMBC leaflet)

A History of Haigh Hall (WMBC leaflet)

Wigan Coal and Iron (Anderson & France)

Editor's Note: The best source of information which I have found is 'Geographical Change and Industrial Revolution' by John Langton. Published in 1979 (ISBN 0 521 22490 X), this is a history of coal mining in South West Lancashire from 1590 to 1799, and it suggests that the coal mines and ironworks mentioned in this article were part of the Chadwick family's empire, a footnote to page 178 stating: 'The colliery was linked to the ironworks by a short canal. Haigh MSS/Canals Box/Articles of Agreement, Lewis v. Haliburton, June 22, 1795.' When researching the L&LC, I looked at this agreement which was: ...between John Lewis of Pool in Montgomery, canal cutter, and Alexander Haliburton for Earl Balcarres on June 22, 1795, to build a navigable canal from the steam engine at the iron works at Haigh thro' Haigh Park to Marsdens Farm where Robert Marsden lives and a pit has been sunk for an intended steam engine.

Length of canal 860 yards, depth of water 5 feet, width of canal at bottom 6 feet, slopes 3 horizontal to 2 vertical, width of water surface 21 feet. Embankments and towing paths 10 feet wide at the top (1 foot above water level). Puddling where required to be 6 - 8 inches above water level. Cost £315.

Is this the same canal, or was there another one built for Earl Balcarres? He had certainly suggested a canal tunnel from the canal basin at Wigan into his coal mines at Haigh a few years earlier. This tunnel would be able to provide both coal and water for the L&LC, and it was noted that the canal was short of water and that Earl Balcarres had substantial reserves of coal. More research is needed into canal developments at Wigan, including not just those mentioned here, but also the canal tunnel at Crooke.

The agreement itself is of interest as it shows how canals were specified at the time. Details were usually kept down to a minimum, with just overall dimensions being given. A look at stone overbridges on a section of canal sometimes shows how, although similar, the identity of the stone mason involved with each bridge can be identified from the slight variations in such things as the size and finish of the stones.

The Haigh MSS were kept at John Rylands Library in Manchester until recently, but they have now been returned to Scotland where they are kept with the rest of the Balcarres family papers.