

## **By canal to Sheffield by Roger Milnes**

As early as 1697 a Bill was introduced into the House of Commons to secure powers to make the River Don navigable as far as Sheffield, but this and another presented by Doncaster Corporation met with no success. The biggest objectors being the local landowners who feared that the lock operation would flood their lands. In 1721 the Company of Cutlers in Hallamshire, supported by the Town Trustees attempted to revive the project, but when the Bill was put forward after a meeting at Rotherham the following year, the objectors won the day. The Cutlers Company persisted in their efforts and on writing safeguards for the landowners into a new Bill their opposition diminished and a new petition was presented to Parliament in 1726, making the "Undertakers" or caretakers of the canal the Masters, Wardens, Searchers, Assistants and Commonalty of the Company of Cutlers in Hallamshire in the County of York. On 24<sup>th</sup> April 1727 the newly opened section of canal between Holmstile, near Doncaster, and Wilsick House, Barnby Dun, was transferred to the care of the Mayor, Aldermen and Burgesses of the Borough of Doncaster, but a further Act of 21<sup>st</sup> March 1732 reunited the concern as "The Company of Proprietors of the Navigation of the River Don".

By 1740, the river was navigable as far as Rotherham and eleven years later craft could reach Tinsley, where the canal company built a private wharf, five limekilns and full stabling facilities. Traffic was conveyed from here to the city centre along the Canal Company's own roadway.

Many Sheffield businessmen would have liked to see the canal extended to the city centre, but although public meetings were held the various schemes never got off the ground until 1815. From a meeting held in the Cutlers' Hall on 4<sup>th</sup> July 1792 came the nearest attempt to get the canal into the city. At this meeting £8,450 was subscribed and it was decided at a further meeting on August 9<sup>th</sup> to go ahead with the plan. The new project began at a public meeting held on January 15<sup>th</sup> 1793, but although full surveys were carried out on both the north and south banks of the River Don, the project lay dormant until 1801, when William Jessop, in a letter to the Navigation Company, suggested that the "Sheffield Extension" be made part of the Don improvement Bill.

The Navigation Company were not happy at the intrusions into their field and when the final details of the scheme became known they were ready to oppose them and ask for relief of maintenance and compensation for their road from Tinsley to Sheffield. No offer was made as it was felt that the Navigation Company would benefit, not lose, from the Sheffield Canal. The Navigation put forward a strong opposition and at a meeting in the Cutlers' Hall in the following July the scheme was wound up.

Many schemes were suggested in the following years. William Jessop was asked to look at the possibilities of a railway along the Don Valley (1804). Richard Gresley proposed that Sheffield should be included in links with other canals that edged the Peak District - the Chesterfield Canal, Cromford Canal and the proposed High Peak Junction Canal. In 1813, a meeting held at the instigation of the Cutlers' Company considered a plan for a canal from Rotherham to Sheffield, with the possibilities of branches to Eckington and to the Peak Forest Canal. The route along the north bank of the Don was preferred as it was both cheaper and shorter than the south bank route, but "tram-roads" were favoured for the extensions.

In November 1813, the Navigation Company warned the promoters of the Sheffield scheme that compensation would be required, as well as freedom from all road repair liabilities. This matter was eventually settled for £11,000. A public meeting in the Cutlers' Hall on July 15<sup>th</sup> 1814 recommended the route to the south of the River Don, as this could serve Handsworth Colliery. A branch to

Darnall was also proposed with tramway connections to Tinsley Park Colliery.

The Act of Parliament was passed on June 7<sup>th</sup> 1815, with 182 subscribers of which the Duke of Norfolk (£2,000) and the Earl Fitzwilliam (£1,000) were the main ones. The foundation stone of the canal basin was laid by Hugh Parker of Woodthorpe Hall on June 16<sup>th</sup> 1816, and all was ready for opening by 1819. The planned 100 yard tunnel at Attercliffe was replaced by a cutting.

The canal, 3¾ miles long as built, with twelve locks designed to take barges 61ft 6in long by 15ft 3in wide by 6ft draught, was opened on February 22<sup>nd</sup> 1819, when the barge *Industry* with band aboard, led a flotilla of ten barges into the canal wharf. Included in the flotilla was a barge loaded with coal from Handsworth Colliery brought along the ½ mile branch from Darnall, opened the same day. When the flotilla arrived at the canal basin it was reported that 60,000 people were there to view the proceedings. Afterwards celebrations continued in the taverns in the town, the gentry gathering at the Tontine Inn in the Haymarket. The canal was the final link in the waterway from Sheffield to the sea. Tramroads were built from Manor Pits and Manor Laithe Colliery to the City canal basin.

In 1840 Sheffield could boast a canal goods service second to none, the basin being a continual hive of activity. A service from Sheffield connected at Greasborough with a twice-weekly "fly-boat" in connection with the Hull and London steamers. Sloops of the London and Sheffield Union Company operated a service "without transshipment" to London while Richard Preston and Company's "fly-boats" operated twice-weekly to Thorne for onward transshipment. Also in this period were fortnightly services to Gainsborough and once every three weeks to Leeds. The first major change took place only five years later when William Cobby, previously agent with the Humber Union, was offering water transport from London to Hull and Selby with forwarding to Sheffield by rail.

In August 1846 there was a move by the Sheffield, Rotherham, Barnsley, Wakefield, Hull and Goole Railway to acquire the Sheffield Canal Company and provide itself with a terminus in the city. The proprietors of the Sheffield and Lincolnshire Junction Railway heard of this scheme and quickly stepped in and took over the canal company. The canal was vested in the Manchester, Sheffield & Lincolnshire Railway on July 22<sup>nd</sup> 1848, and transferred to the River Dun Navigation Company by Act of July 28<sup>th</sup> 1849.

The new canal consortium consisted of the River Dun Navigation, The Keadby Canal, the Dearne & Dove Canal and the Sheffield Canal, and after the fusion with the South Yorkshire, Doncaster and Goole Railway became known as the South Yorkshire Railway & River Dun Navigation Company. In early 1860 the South Yorkshire Railway advertised for tenders for a line from near Meadow Hall to a terminus at the coal wharf of the Sheffield Canal in the city centre. As things turned out this city centre terminus was not to be, the South Yorkshire Railway, which had been running into the Midland Railway's Wicker terminus since 1855, moved into the MS&L Victoria station, following completion of the lease negotiations with that company and on completion of the connection between the two railways at Woodburn Junction. The South Yorkshire passed to the MS&L and its canal interests with it. The Sheffield Canal was again in the hands of the MS&L. The companies of proprietors of the so-called "Western Canals" together with those of the Sheffield Canal were dissolved under the MS&LR (Additional Powers) Act of August 2<sup>nd</sup> 1883.

Under MS&L ownership at this period the canal held its own but lack of modernisation was beginning to tell. The cost of pumping the water for the canal 69 feet from the River Don was also becoming a burden costing 5s. 10d. (29p) a lock full or 11s. 8d. for a single loaded journey, returning empty. Some of the water for the

upper section was pumped from the workings of the nearby Nunnery Colliery. It was during this period also that the Greenland Arm at Darnall was sold off.

During 1888 a committee was set up, consisting of local manufacturers and businessmen to look at the possibilities of improvements to the Sheffield Canal. On the 20<sup>th</sup> August they met at the Royal Victoria Hotel and concluded: "That the construction of an independent new canal for the purpose of placing Sheffield, Rotherham, Doncaster and the South Yorkshire Coalfields and the Don Valley in more direct communication with the sea is of utmost importance for the pressure of heavy trade carried to those places and districts and the future development thereof and for the profitable working of the said coalfield". The committee commissioned T. & C. Hawkeley to report whether a navigable canal to accept seagoing vessels of moderate size can be constructed between Sheffield and the Ouse, Trent or Humber and if so the best route and the probable cost. The engineers reported in October as follows: "The existing waterway from Sheffield to Keadby was an excellent one apart from the fact that the locks were altogether inadequate and that the engineers considered that new locks be made side by side with the existing locks without interfering with traffic.....that the waterway would then be available for vessels of from 300 to 500 tons capacity". A week later they estimated the cost of the new locks and also a new canal from Tinsley to Sheffield with a new basin at £1 million, apart from the cost of buying the canal from the MS&LR. From this committee the Sheffield and South Yorkshire Navigation Company Limited was formed and incorporated by Act of 26<sup>th</sup> August 1889. The Act empowered the new Company to acquire all the South Yorkshire Canals by agreement, or after nine months compulsorily, improve them or make new canals and to be inland carriers.

The MS&L were not happy at the prospect of losing their canal interests and put every obstruction in the way of the newly-formed company. The Sheffield & South Yorkshire Navigation Co. took their case to the Court of Railway and Canal Commission and won. It was a further two years before the MS&L provided plans and particulars of their canals and not until 1894, after an appeal to the Courts, that terms could finally be agreed. The figure for the Navigations, certain lands, mineral rights, plant and machinery with compensation for severance was £1,140,000 with £600,000 to be paid in cash. The balance the MS&LR were willing to take in shares, which could be bought back by the canal company at a future date. As long as the MS&L owned shares it was to be represented on the Board and in the end the MS&L nominated five of the ten directors of the Company, although the Chairman was usually chosen from one of the independent members. The facilities at Sheffield were modernised and extended, when in 1896 a new warehouse was opened straddling the basin.

In response to a Royal Commission on Canals, the West Riding County Council reported in 1907 that from 300 replies they had received the Sheffield & South Yorkshire Navigation was an antiquated system, insufficiently dredged, inadequately provided with wharves and cranes and suffering from its virtual control by the Great Central Railway. During the First World War the Government had control of the canals and many barges were commandeered and sent overseas. There was no maintenance in this period and as its centenary approached the canal was beginning to show its age. At a meeting of the Sheffield City Council on 16<sup>th</sup> October 1918, with representatives of local manufacturing trades and other Local Authorities present, the canal was discussed and with all parties in favour of urgent improvement, they were in principal willing to contribute to the navigation to free it from "Railway Interference".

The Sheffield Canal reached its centenary in 1919 when a writer in the *Sheffield Daily Telegraph* wrote: "Looking back into the vista of 100 years and noticing with what pride and hope the canal came to Sheffield, one cannot help feeling that the

promoters of the original scheme would be exceedingly disappointed if they could see the meagre results of 100 years work. The vision then seen of huge vessels coming into Sheffield from foreign ports has not materialised. The need for an efficient waterway to the sea is more urgent today even than it was 100 years ago". "Perhaps", said the writer, "when transport was eventually nationalised the canal would fare better".

On 18<sup>th</sup> March 1920, the Transport Committee of the City Council received several plans for the canal and from these they made their choice. If the plans had come into fruition the history of the canals of South Yorkshire would have been a totally different story. The accepted plan was to deepen the whole of the South Yorkshire Navigation to 8ft., widen the channel and straighten out the "elbows". The locks were to be replaced by new ones 270ft by 22ft with multiple gates to take four 110 ton craft or one of up to 300 tons. A new basin was to be constructed adjacent to Tinsley station to serve the Eastern side of Sheffield, and the Sheffield Canal retained and improved to serve the more general and lighter trades of the City Centre.

The Government of the day had too much on its hands at this time and unlike other cities, Sheffield council would not go ahead without the backing of the Government. 1925 saw a little private enterprise in the canal basin with the erection of a new grain silo by a group of local millers.

The Sheffield Canal was badly damaged by enemy action during World War II, particularly the canal basin and Tinsley Locks. After the War, oil traffic increased on the canal and replaced some of the more traditional goods. A new service was introduced in 1946 in conjunction with local road carriers whereby they would collect goods from local companies to be carried by canal to Hull or Goole for transshipment, this part of the journey being supervised by the Navigation Company.

The Sheffield writer of 1919 got his way in 1948 when the canals were nationalised but this did not result in the much hoped for improvements. Rumours of closure of the waterway above Doncaster persisted throughout the 1950s and in 1960 the British Waterways Board informed Sheffield City Council that they intended to make Thrybergh the new waterhead. At this time the site alongside the canal was being redeveloped by British Steel Corporation as a Steel Bar Mill, now one of the most productive in Europe. The canal offices were moved from Sheffield to Rotherham, the Sheffield Canal Basin becoming a one-man operation. In 1961 the British Waterways Board opened their new warehouse at Rotherham making this the waterhead. Our Sheffield writer would have been hopeful at his golden jubilee when a new £3 million scheme was put forward that would allow 500 ton vessels to use the facilities at Rotherham. The then Minister of Transport, Richard Marsh, turned down the scheme saying it was nonsense to improve the canal when there was already a highly developed road and rail system in the area.

The 150th anniversary of the canal was celebrated in a small way when the barge *Victory* with local industrialists, councillors and canal enthusiasts aboard sailed from Eastwood (Rotherham) to Sheffield.

In 1972 further plans were put forward, this time to enable 400 ton barges to use the Rotherham facilities and 700 ton barges to reach Mexborough. At the time, although received enthusiastically, the scheme was not followed up. It was to reappear again in 1979 when, after a lot of local campaigning for canal improvements, a scheme for 700 ton barges to Doncaster and 500 ton barges to Rotherham got underway. The £10 million improvement scheme, the first major British canal scheme for 50 years, got underway with the Secretary of State for the Environment, Peter Shore, pushing a button to start a pile driving operation at Mexborough. It is hoped that the work will be completed in the Summer of 1982. While this is going on at the lower reaches, activity has been taking place nearer

the city when the Sheffield Canal received its first commercial cargo for over ten years in the first week of July 1980.

The sadly neglected Sheffield Canal Basin is also planned for improvements, but at the present time two rival schemes, one from the City Council and one from the British Waterways Board, are competing for the attentions of the Environment Minister. A decision is eagerly awaited by all concerned.

Leisure services are operated on the canal on summer Sundays between Sheffield Canal Basin and Tinsley and on both Saturdays and Sundays between Doncaster and Mexborough, offering a opportunity to travel through two contrasting environments of South Yorkshire by boat.

In conclusion I should like to thank our President, Leslie Franks, for his help with the historical notes and the writers of the *Sheffield Morning Telegraph* who have kept the people of South Yorkshire fully informed on the latest developments in the campaign to improve the waterways of the County.



*Sheffield canal basin in 1870.*



*Leisure craft at Victoria Quays, the modern development on the site of the Sheffield canal basin opened in 1994.*