

Going nowhere: Early proposals

There were several unsuccessful proposals for a 'canal to Pocklington' before the construction of the canal that we see today. Overseas conflicts meant that money was short and the building of a new canal had to wait.



The 18th century

1765, 1767 and 1771 saw proposals for a branched canal linking Pocklington and Market Weighton to the Ouse, but these failed to gain the support of local landowners. One of these was the young George O'Brien Wyndham, 3rd Earl of Egremont (1751–1837), despite becoming an enthusiastic supporter of canals later in life. Egremont was something of a maverick, who went on to have at least 15 mistresses and 40 illegitimate children!

The Market Weighton canal went ahead on its own in 1772. The large areas of clay discovered during construction led to a major brick and pot industry around Newport. This still thrived in the late 19th century, with many products brought up along the Pocklington Canal for use in the expanding town.

In 1777, a new plan for a Pocklington canal joining the Derwent was proposed and backed by the Derwent Navigation's owner, Charles Wentworth-Woodhouse, 2nd Marquess Rockingham (1730–82). However, the American and French Revolutionary Wars had plunged the country into economic recession and the scheme never went ahead.

The 1801 proposal

A preliminary peace treaty between England and France on 1st October 1801 led to a return in optimism. Just four days later, a public meeting was called at the 'Black Bull' in Pocklington. Many influential landowners were on board, including Sir Henry Vavasour of Melbourne and Robert Denison snr of Kilnwick Percy. A committee was formed and a meeting was called on 16th November which resolved 'That a NAVIGABLE CANAL towards the Town of POCKLINGTON would be of great public Utility'.

Those present subscribed 87 guineas (£91 7s) towards surveying. The talented Whitby-born William Chapman (1749–1832) was appointed. As early as 1787, Chapman developed the theory of building oblique arch ('skew') bridges at an angle to the crossing, widely adopted in canal and railway construction. Walbut Bridge on the Pocklington Canal is an early example, presumably designed by George Leather using Chapman's ideas.

Chapman considered three routes, firstly an 8-mile route joining the Derwent near East Cottingwith, a 9½-mile route joining further south at Bubwith and a 13½-mile route which avoided the Derwent altogether by joining the Ouse at Howdendyke.

Chapman also recommended in his 1802 report that the canal was completed to Pocklington rather than stopping short at an arbitrary terminus 'notwithstanding the increased expence may be considerably more than proportional to its Distance.'

Chapman preferred the Ouse route, which would reconnect the former inland port of Howden to the river and avoid paying tolls to Lord Fitzwilliam, the Derwent Navigation's owner. This was clearly a risk, as Fitzwilliam naturally wanted to generate extra traffic and income for his river. In the end, it may have been covert opposition from Fitzwilliam and other interested parties which led to Chapman's proposals being quietly shelved. It was also becoming clear that a resumed war with France was likely. Optimism was already waning well before this actually came to pass in May 1803. Pocklington would have to wait a bit longer for its canal.

