

# Last orders: the end of the working canal

The last commercial use of the Pocklington Canal was in 1932. Some of the people who remembered the canal in use were interviewed in 1970 which gives us an insight into the canal's past.

## Struggling on: 1900-32

By 1906, the upper reaches were reportedly impassible and traffic appears to have gone no further than Bielby. The facilities at Canal Head were either derelict or used for non-canal purposes, although the Lock House was still occupied by the lock keeper. Pro-navigation witnesses to a 1909 Royal Commission on the Inland Waterways reported unfavourably on the condition of the NER canal estate. Arthur Soulby of the Malton, Norton & District Traders Association, for instance, suggested transferring the canal and Derwent to the Aire & Calder Navigation to take them 'out of the hands of the railway company.' In response to severe criticism, the NER's outspoken and clearly irritated General Manager, A.K. Butterworth calculated an average loss of £288 a year over the 22 years prior to 1908 on the Pocklington alone. The company had also recently spent £1,000 replacing the hull of their steam grab dredger, which had to be taken from railway profits. When asked whether he would be sorry to part with the company's navigations, Butterworth replied: 'No, you can have ours—in fact we have offered them, but they will not take them; they say: "You shall be obliged to keep them and lose money over them but nobody else shall do it"'. On annual toll income: 'Our receipts from the Pocklington have been £58, £72, £67, £61, £62 and sums like that. You could not keep a pond going for the money.' The NER attitude to their canal estate could not be any clearer!

In the tidal section at the canal mouth, where generations of watermen had run aground, J.W. Brown recalled in 1970:

'The bit of canal between the Derwent and the first lock was called the 'cut', and it had to be dredged out because of the beck bringing silt in. When you got stuck in that cut you could claim demurrage, which was about 30/- a day, and I've been stuck in that cut 30 odd days... below Cottingwith Lock. When you got stuck anyway, you'd report it; there used to be a canal walker, Richardson, and before him Hutchinson, well we reported it to him and he reported it to the railway company. They used to store two flats at Cottingwith—carried about 15–20 tons each, and the railway sent up to twelve men to lighten the boat; they'd wait until high tide and then get a rope out to the lock, and pull it in. They used to break the rope though an' I've had a few claims. It'd take 'em a few days to get up and if they came across a pub they wouldn't mind spending a few hours there.'

The 'flats' were simple rectangular boxes with a triangular bow; in 1988 an eye-witness recalled lock keeper William Hutchinson using a horse to pull them. The last lock keeper's son, Henry Richardson, recollected in 1982 that the locks remained workable for a time after canal traffic ended in 1932 and the flats were still used by his father to collect hay from the towpaths mown by LNER workers using scythes. The flats were eventually abandoned and remained in the canal until 1970, one below Walbut Lock and the second near Canal Head.



Abandoned 'flat' at Silburn Lock, 1970s. Richard Walton

The railway company occasionally provided a dredger which was mainly used elsewhere on their canal estate. In the early 1920s, lock keeper John Richardson helped to operate the NER steam grab dredger Derwent II before taking up his post at Pocklington. This was probably the same vessel mentioned in the 1909 Royal Commission report on the inland navigations as recently having £1,000 spent on a new hull.

The last keel owner John Brown remembered Derwent II: 'It was very rare when they took the dredger in the canal, and then it never went beyond Melbourne or Bielby Arms. It was a steel boat, with a steam-powered grab and crane. When they used to dredge it'd really lean over. Muck was put on flats, and they'd take it down river and drop it in a deep place. They shovelled it out, and they didn't go fast either.'

Brown finally carried his last load in 1932. Unsurprisingly, once Brown was offered money by the LNER, he took it, ending over a century of trading: 'I was fed up, so I sold the keel, and had to buy a lorry.' With no trade taking place on the canal, all but essential works to prevent flooding, maintain bridges and access ceased.



The Derwent II pulling a vehicle from the Ripon Canal c 1936. Sheila Nix MBE

ACCOUNT OF VESSELS PASSING BARMBY CHAIN, WITH THE DUES PAYABLE THEREON, &c.

Month ending August 1932

No. of Note	Date	Name of Vessel	Name of Owner	Name of Master	Weight T. C.	Cargo	From	To	Rate	£	s.	d.
Aug 31/32		"Ebenezer"	J.W. Brown	Same	640	Case Ash	Huntingley	Cottingwith	14s	1	1	0

The above is an extract copy of the items for the last barge load of traffic to pass up the River Derwent in 1932 when the Canal rights were held by the old North Eastern Railway. Subsequently the N.E.R. applied to the House of Lords for authority to close the River Derwent as a Canal & this was done in 1932/33.

Railway Goods Office  
BIELBY, N.E.R.  
13 JUN 1950

1950 LNER copy of the historic last entry of Ebenezer passing Barmby Chain, 1932. Sheila Nix MBE