

The wilderness years: the uncertain future of the canal

The canal's story could have been very different. A proposal to infill the canal in 1959 could have seen the canal lost forever.

The last boats on the canal

In 1932, the pleasure craft Onaway from the newly-formed Ripon Motor Boat Club visited the Derwent, encountering J.W Brown and Ebenezer moored above Cottingwith Lock. Brown assured the crew that the canal was passable, but heavy weed round the propeller almost immediately forced Onaway's crew to bow-haul it to Melbourne. At Easter 1933, before the weed had made its seasonal appearance, Onaway and five other boats from the club made a return visit to the Melbourne Arm. A further weed-encumbered visit in the summer by Onaway and another of the club's boats, Vagabond, saw both bow-hauled to Melbourne. From there they continued to Sandhill Lock, where the boats retreated hastily after noticing 'an ominous bulge' in the bottom gate beams. An attempt by John Carr-Ellison of Hedgley Hall, Northumberland, to enter the canal in his steam launch Thetis was abandoned in July 1934 owing to silt and a low tide below Cottingwith Lock, and there are no further records of boats attempting to enter the canal.

The canal under threat

In 1959, Sheffield Corporation Waterworks tabled a proposal to use the canal as a tip for 'inoffensive sludge' from their water treatment plant at Elvington. This would be dumped in a series of 300-yard spits over a period of 30-40 years, and would allegedly dry to form an innocuous chalky powder.

Whilst the Second World War saw some canals pressed into service to carry freight, the Pocklington Canal was of no strategic transport value and it continued to decline along with many other minor branches. The creation of the campaigning Inland Waterways Association (IWA) in 1946, however, reflected a growing post-war public interest in the network of canals and navigable rivers. The Pocklington Canal was never formally abandoned and with the nationalisation of the railways in 1948, ownership of all inland waterways passed to the new British Transport Commission (BTC).

Unconvinced, local residents, together with the York Angling Association, the IWA and a breakaway campaigning group, the Inland Waterways Protection Society (IWPS), campaigned vigorously against the Sheffield Corporation scheme, in the hope that the canal could eventually be restored for navigation, also improving the fishery. The IWA and National Federation of Anglers made a joint bid to set up a Trust to keep the channel open and operate the canal on a low cost basis, although this was not accepted. In the meantime, Sheffield Corporation devised a five-year plan to store the sludge at Elvington before dumping it into suitable disused coal mines as they became available, but did not rule out using the canal in the future.

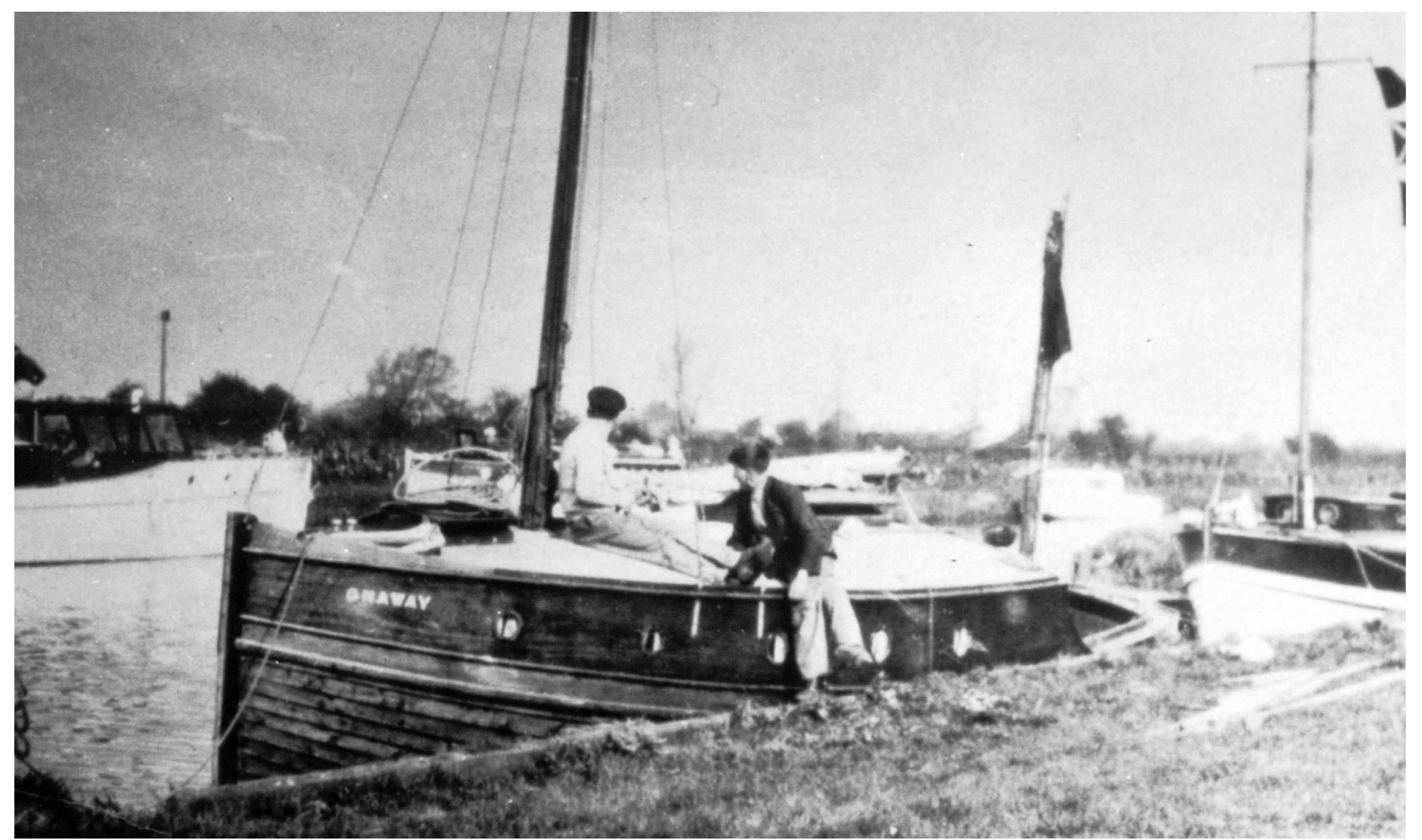
Fortunately for the canal, the internal uncertainty within BTC and protracted negotiations with the various possible interested parties led to delays in decision-making. Significantly, the Inland Waterways Redevelopment Advisory Committee (IWRAC), finally set up by the Government in 1961 to make recommendations on the future of canals like the Pocklington, referred to the idea of filling with sludge as 'repulsive'. This was not entirely surprising: IWRAC contained some strong supporters of restoration including Tom Rolt, the co-founder of IWA, and two active IWA members.

With the demise of BTC in 1962, its canal-related functions were transferred to a new British Waterways Board (BWB). On the face of it, the BWB brought no immediate change in policy. On the Pocklington Canal, the Interim Report of the new board The Future of the Waterways stated: 'we are doubtful whether, on the facts as we see them at present, continued expenditure on it can be justified', but still no decision was reached. In 1964, BWB continued to spend £1,076 on basic maintenance, with an overall deficit of £1,536.

In a surprising apparent about-face in its final 1965 report The Facts about the Waterways, however, BWB noted that it would cost around £3,300 a year to 'eliminate' the canal and 'This is therefore a case where elimination would prove more costly than continuing maintenance at the present "existence" standard.' They also noted that IWRAC 'took the view that "existence" was in any case preferred.'

In the end, institutional inertia helped to keep the canal in being until the political climate changed. In 1968, the Transport Minister, Barbara Castle, announced that the government recognised the growing popularity of leisure boating. Her Ministry increased the mileage of the network which BWB were to retain as cruiseways. This had little immediate effect on canals such as the Pocklington, which by this time was in a state of advanced decay. The 1968 Transport Act simply reclassified 'the remainder' (canals for which no potential commercial or leisure use could be seen), leading to them being referred to ever since as 'remainder waterways'. BWB was simply obliged to deal with them in the most economical manner possible 'consistent with the requirements of public health and the preservation of amenity and safety.'

The door was open, however, for private restoration initiatives which cost BWB nothing. The Canal was about to begin a new chapter in its history.



Onaway and other boats of Ripon Motor Boat Club at Melbourne, 1933. Sheila Nix MBE



A derelict Thornton Lock, 1969, symbolic of the condition of the entire canal prior to restoration. The lock was reopened in 2017. Roger Bellingham