

The railway years: the lock keepers

The railway company had a legal obligation to maintain the canal and continued to employ lock keepers. This role changed to that of a 'lengthsman' once traffic on the canal ceased.

Robert Turner (1851–70)

In 1851, the new railway company owners appointed Robert Turner of Bubwith (1803–70) as lock keeper. His predecessor Mark Swann's widow and family still occupied the Lock House and they may have continued there for some years. Instead, Turner lived in Melbourne with his wife and sons, Thomas and Robert, and appears to have remained there for the duration of his appointment.

During his time, Turner had to deal with the railway company's policy of minimal maintenance. In 1859 he reported that he had been reduced to caulking lock gates in an attempt to prevent pounds from draining. There were repeated accounts of boats running aground and fields being flooded as a result of NER neglect, with a frustrated Turner taking the side of the local traders in one piece of surviving correspondence. Such complaints had been quickly dealt with by the old Canal Company, but it was sometimes years before the NER were reluctantly forced to take action, often after legal threats, by which time matters were often worse through being left. Turner continued in post until his death at the age of 66.

John Wilkinson (1871–92/93)

Turner's successor was John Wilkinson (1831–96), the son of a farmer from Great Givendale. Working for his father before becoming a shepherd, his appointment as lock keeper was quite a change of direction. Wilkinson's period of office saw the steepest decline in traffic, with very few traders still operating by the time of his retirement. Unlike Turner, Wilkinson moved into the Lock House where he was still living in the 1891 although described as 'retired', suggesting that he may have remained as acting lock keeper for a time until his successor was appointed. He then moved across the road to run the Wellington Oak Inn until his death, appearing posthumously there in Kelly's 1897 trade directory.

William Hutchinson (1893–26) and Samuel Wooltorton

In 1893, William Hutchinson (1854–1936) took over. A former platelayer for the NER from Holme upon Spalding Moor, Hutchinson also lived at the lock keeper's house, although by 1906, the upper reaches of the canal were barely navigable. He remained there until 1923 although his son, Walter, recalled that he was still lock keeper in 1926. Samuel Wooltorton (1893–1966) from Denton, Norfolk is, however, recorded as lock-keeper in 1925, having two children during his short stay in Pocklington. It is possible he simply decided the job of running a semi-derelict canal was too much for him and Hutchinson stayed on!

Hutchinson provided drinking water for boat crews reaching Canal Head. One of Hutchinson's daughters, Alice Gray, remembered: 'They got water from lock-house, our house, in a pail. My Mother used to wash their blankets, and my Father got a shilling a month for every barge that came up, just for writing it down. Father had 14/9 a week.' If this is an accurate recollection of the lock keeper's salary, it was considerably less than Mark Swann, the first lock keeper, was receiving in the canal's heyday—washing was presumably a way to augment the family income!

John Richardson (1926–61)

The last lock keeper was John Richardson (1891–1974), who started on LNER's waterways in 1924 on the local dredger, Derwent II, taking over as lock keeper in 1926. In 1970, John Richardson recalled: 'I'd been on the dredger most of two years, dredging up and down. I was just an ordinary canal labourer at the beginning and then this job became vacant, maintenance, this house became vacant, the old man that had it he retired and I was offered the job and I took it, that was in 1926.' Richardson saw the last canal traffic, afterwards remaining as lengthsman, which included organizing mowing of the towpath and maintenance of the crumbling infrastructure, although there were complaints of flooding from local farmers in the 1950s. For several years after 1959, the canal was under threat of being infilled with sludge from new waterworks at Elvington, but this was beginning to recede by the time of his retirement in 1961.

Richardson was followed as lengthsman by his son Henry, who worked on into the 1980s and assisted PCAS with their early restoration work. The family continued to live in the former lock keeper's cottage at Canal Head until around 1978, but after a period of semi-dereliction it was eventually restored as a private home.



Earliest photograph of the lock-keeper's house showing William Hutchinson in his front garden with his daughter Alice and wife Harriett, c 1908/9. Sheila Nix MBE



Daily Mail photograph of John Richardson next to the lower gates at Top Lock in 1959. Sheila Nix MBE



Henry Richardson on retirement, with PCAS founder members Sheila Nix MBE and Raymond O'Kelly. Sheila Nix MBE

FAREWELL TO CANAL MAN HENRY

