

Grand designs: A new canal for Pocklington

The Pocklington Canal that we know today was proposed in 1812. Several routes were surveyed before the newly formed Pocklington Canal Company settled on its present route between Canal Head (today alongside the A1079) and the confluence (junction) with the River Derwent near East Cottingwith.

The 1812 Overture

Earl Fitzwilliam, who owned the Derwent Navigation, was undoubtedly keen to prevent any rival schemes which missed the Derwent and avoided paying his river toll. He commissioned engineer George Leather jnr (1786–1870) to survey a line from Pocklington that would join the Derwent north of Sutton Lock.

Initial surveys

Leather preferred a 9¼-mile route from East Cottingwith to the York–Hull turnpike (modern A1079). Leather initially estimated that a canal with eight locks, three public road bridges and twelve occupation (for use of farm vehicles) bridges would be £43,630 8s. A further £8,256 12s would complete the final ¾ mile to Pocklington, requiring two further locks, a turnpike bridge and two more occupation bridges. Leather's total estimate of £51,887 was set against a calculated annual income for the canal of £1246 10s.

George Beal, a farmer and former Pocklington miller assisted Leather with detailed surveys between 1813 and 1814. Much of the engineer's correspondence with Fitzwilliam's agent still survives. The entrance opposite the Ferry House (later the 'Ferry Boat Inn') would briefly follow 'The Cut' (an old arm or truncated former course of the Derwent), before skirting slightly higher ground from Storwood to Melbourne.

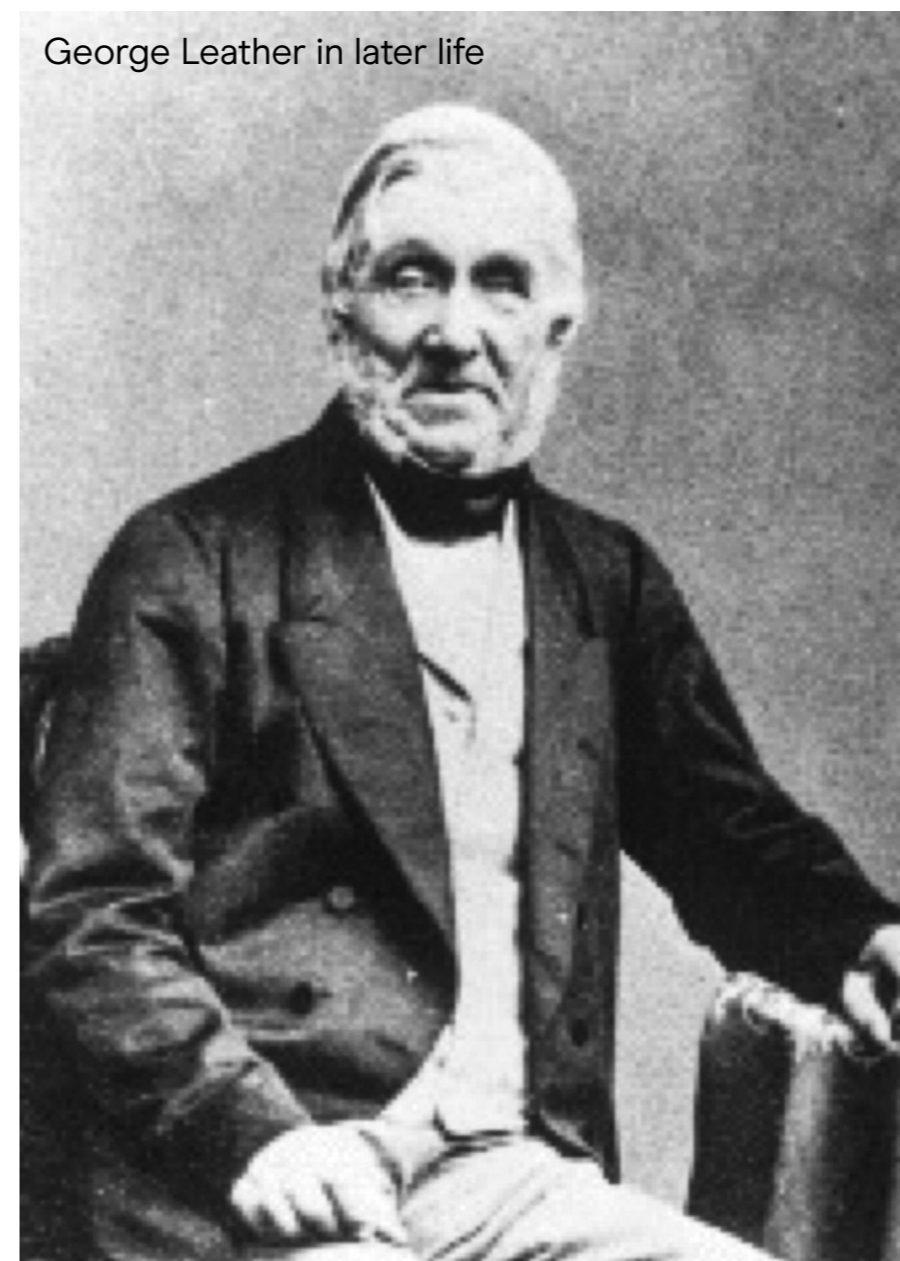
Following this survey, Leather reduced the estimated cost significantly, by using local bricks rather than stone for locks and bridges. He reduced the number of occupation bridges by providing a broad turfed occupation road instead of a narrow towpath, allowing landowners easy access to their fields. The remaining nine occupation bridges were to be made of wood rather than stone. Leather reduced the estimated cost to £32,031 12s (of which £4140 was for land purchase).

With the country at peace, the Pocklington Canal Company was formed. Many of the 1801 scheme supporters attended public meetings discussing Leather's proposals. At an August meeting held at the 'Feathers Hotel', 65 people subscribed £20,500 towards the canal, reaching £29,000 by October, just £3031 12s 0d short of Leather's estimated cost.

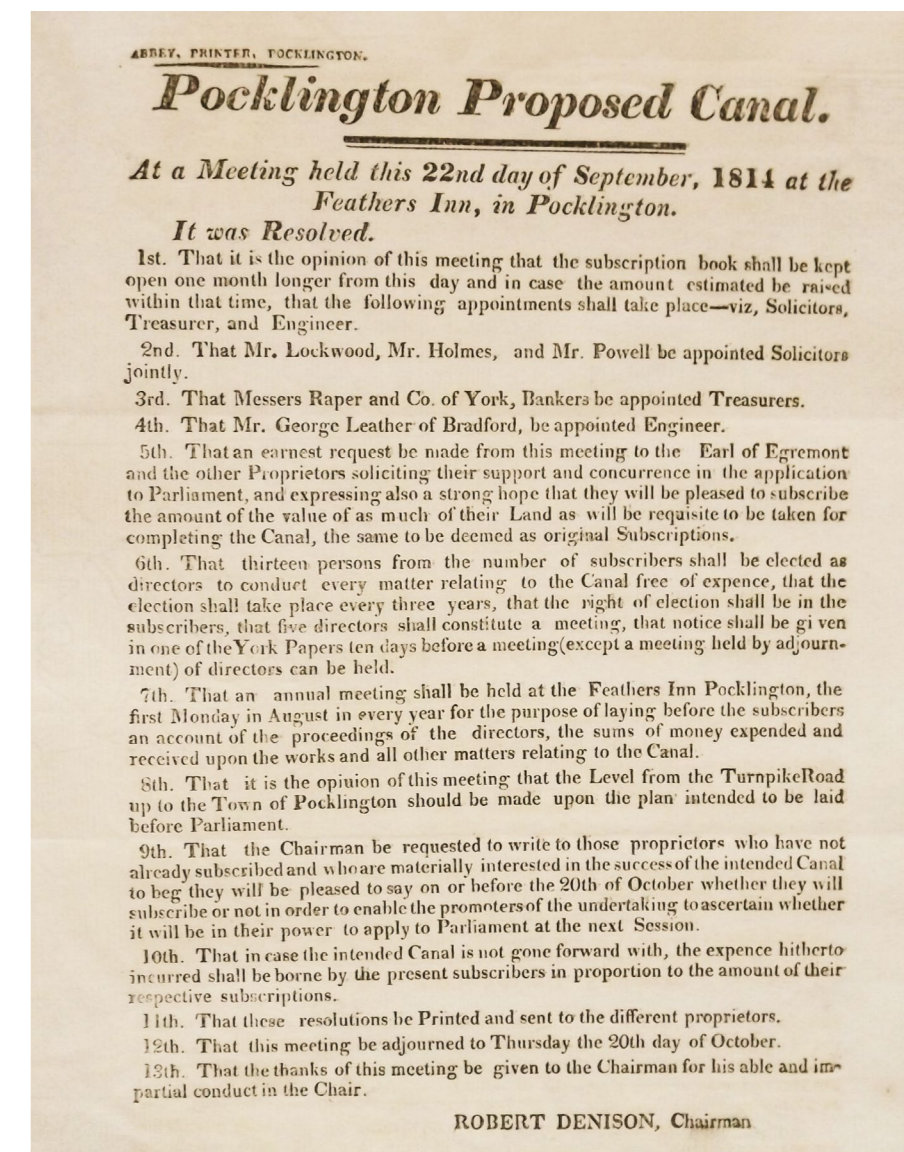
The plan sent to Parliament included the extension into Pocklington showing the land which would need to be purchased and the position of five locks (Leather's original survey had only called for two). However, with an initial shortfall in funding, this extension was dropped and was not included in the final Act of Parliament. The enabling Act was passed on 5th May 1815.

There were more changes to the original scheme. Local landowners' concerns about flooding meant that a ninth lock was added to the canal scheme. An extra road bridge (Church Bridge) was added to carry the 'Foot Road' between Melbourne and Thornton (now Church Road).

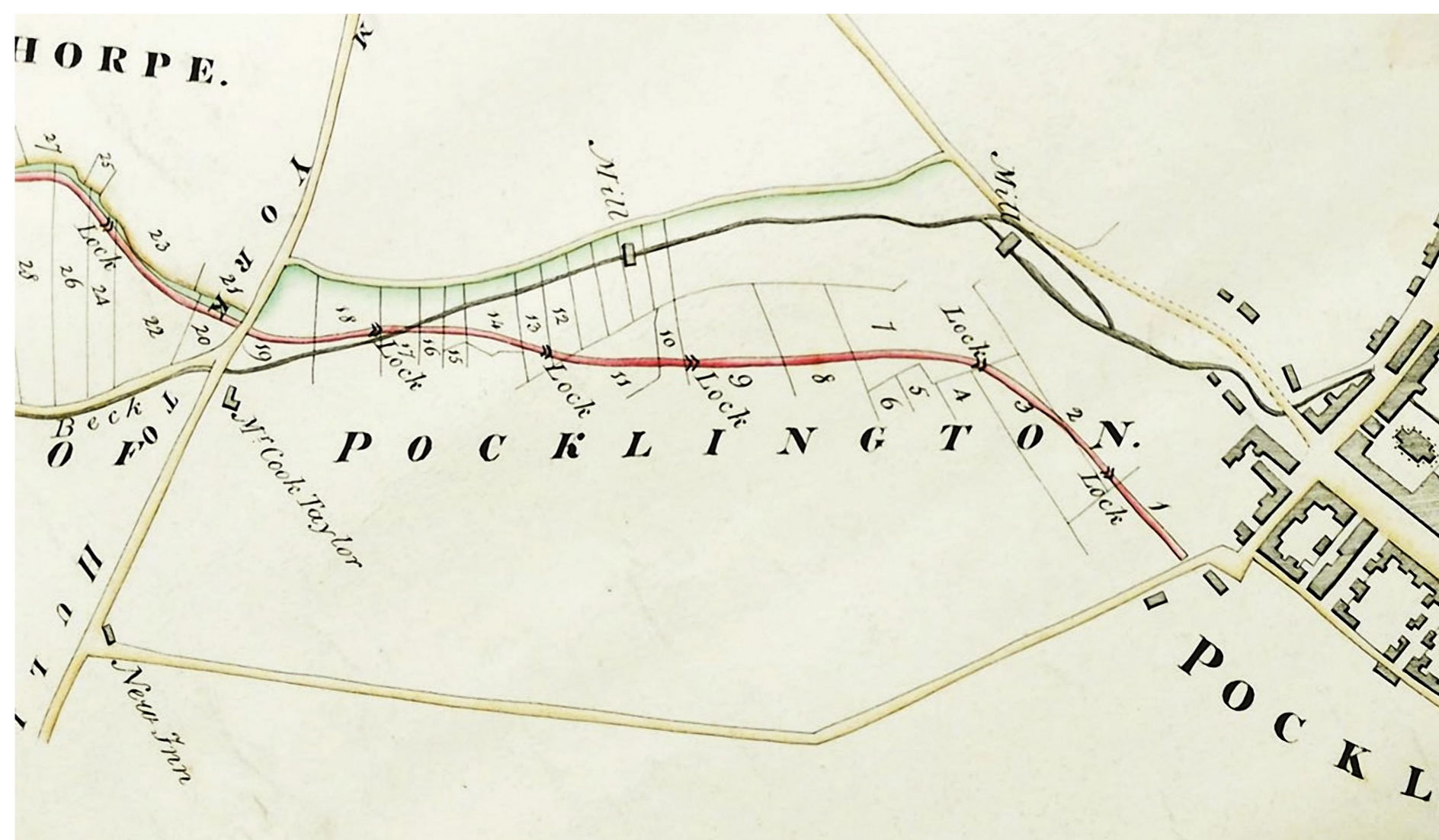
The Melbourne and Bielby arms were added, with basins at the end just large enough to turn a boat. The Canal Company would foot the bill for the Melbourne arm, but Bielby Arm was paid for by locals, with a landing close to Bielby Mill. The arms had the advantage of acting as reservoirs for a canal which often suffered from a shortage of water.



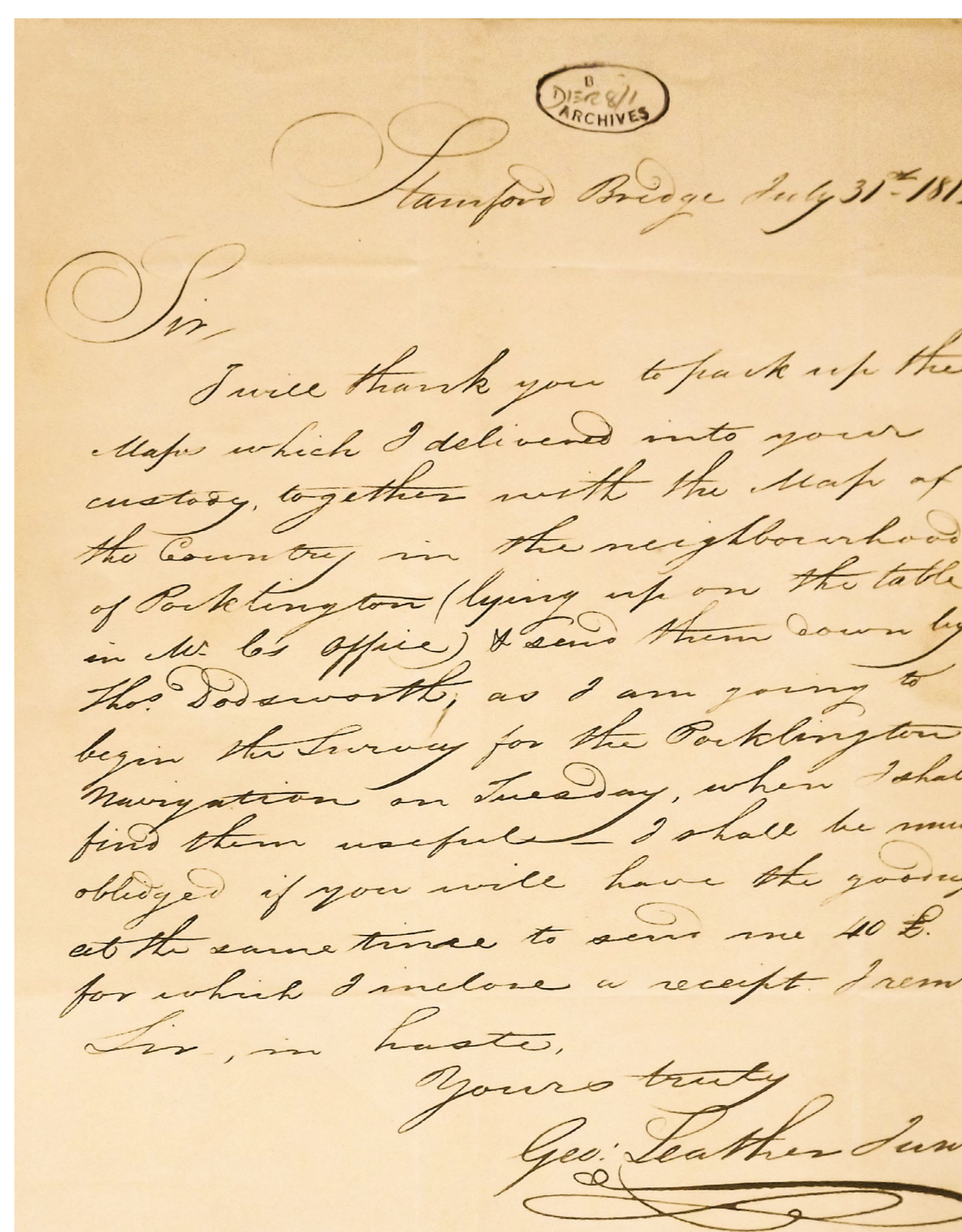
George Leather in later life



Published minutes of the Canal Company meeting in September 1814. National Archives



Plan of the upper section of the proposed canal showing the suggested route to Pocklington. CRT Archives



This letter is one of several mentioning solicitor Richard Smithson jnr of Malton, whose family office was famously Dickens' inspiration for Scrooge's counting house! National Archives