

# Going off the rails: the canal in railway ownership

Railway companies were not generally interested in operating waterways, especially where they competed with their own lines. Tolls were quickly raised and as little as possible was spent on maintenance, despite a legal obligation to keep the canal open and in good repair.

## The first years under the Y&NMR and NER: The 1850s–1860s

In 1858, several claims for demurrage (compensation) were made following boats becoming grounded. One of these claims by Cain Walsh was supported by lock keeper Robert Turner, who in a strongly-worded letter to his employers, noted the 'the Lock Gates are in such a leaky state that they will not retain the Water... then there is so much mud and weed that the Vessels can scarcely get through with half their cargo'. Turner also recorded that 'The other parties trading to the Canal Head have had the same thing to do as C. Walsh these last five months'.

Walsh took the NER to court and later was awarded £19 19s for loss of earnings. Not only had the locks themselves been 'permitted to be out of Repair', there was an 'increasing accumulation of Sand, Mud &c. in different parts of the Canal.' The court found that the NER had failed to keep the canal in a navigable condition, which it was contractually obliged to do. This was an important case, establishing a precedent for the payment of compensation which the last trader, J.W. Brown, was still able to claim as late as 1932.

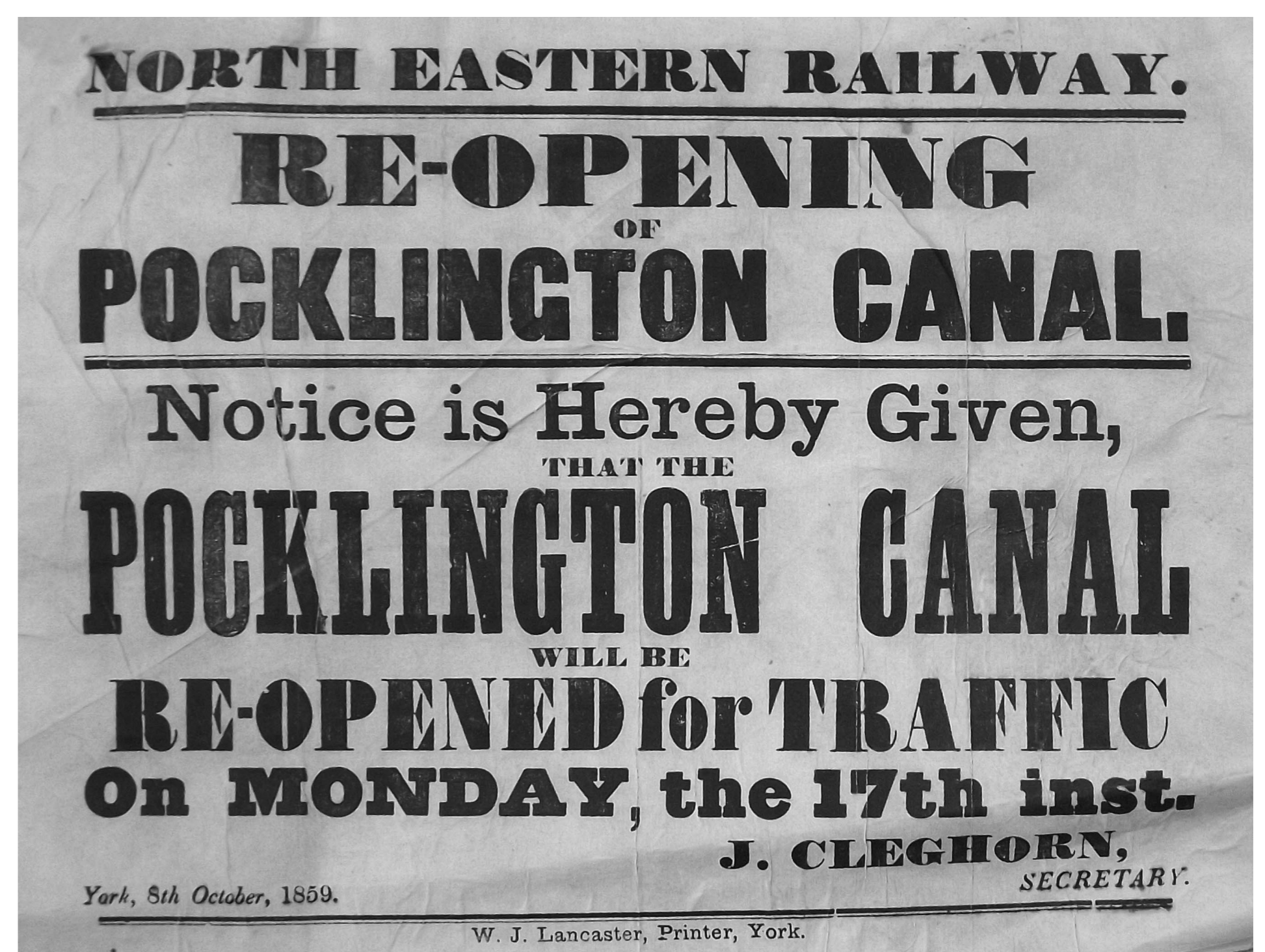
Some maintenance work did take place. In October 12th, NER engineer Thomas Cabrey reported that the canal had been thoroughly cleaned and all structures repaired. The locks were fortunately in better condition than expected. An acerbic memo from Henry Tennant, later General Manager of the NER, inquired 'whether the Company were aware that the Canal receipts for at least 10 years would be required to pay the cost of repairs to Mr Cabrey's estimate.' The canal finally reopened on 17th October.

In 1862, the NER was forced to dredge some areas again but within a short time, Cain Walsh was claiming further compensation for a vessel stuck below Cottingwith Lock. The company decided to review Walsh's lease of the Canal Head coal wharf he had rented for some years, at an annual payment of £2. 'If Notice were given him to quit, it might be the means of making him more manageable.' Payment was taken out of the hands of sympathetic lock keeper Turner, although it does not appear that Walsh was evicted and he continued to be a thorn in the NER's side in later years.

## Carrying on: The 1870s–1900

Weed had been controlled whilst the canal was in full use, but in the later 19th century it was a problem, reported on by anglers who sometimes were forced to clear sections themselves. At the turn of the century weeds were cut by a small boat propelled by a sculling oar and operated by the lock keeper. It had a large iron rake about 20ft (6.1m) long mounted on the bow which was operated by ropes attached to prongs on either side attached to a winch. When weeding, the boat was pulled by two men walking along the banks and cutting the weeds with large butcher's knives, with a fourth man in the boat, presumably operating the rake. Lock keeper William Hutchinson's daughter, Alice Gray, recalled that her father spent about six weeks raking during the summer. Boatman John Brown also suggested that chains were pulled from both banks to cut water lily stems.

Casual workers seem to have been used to cope with the shortage of NER staff. Austin Chaplin of Bielby, whose grandfather had one of the original £100 shares in the canal, remembered taking several jobs around the turn of the century: 'I was pumping water out of the lock near Walbut Bridge when they were repairing it, I stood on the side of the lock and pumped it out by hand. I got £5. We used to help weeding at one time. Four on pulleys, two raking out, eight of us altogether. I used to help shovel cinders into baskets, five or six shillings a day. It were good money. We could do sixty tons a day, two of us, started about half past seven, finished about five or half past four. I shovelled every time a vessel came up for five years, and I was four years on clearing the canal out.' Workers may have had the use of a lighter photographed above Cottingwith Lock c 1910.



Printed notice of canal reopening, October 1859. National Archives



Photograph of a 'lighter' above Cottingwith Lock, c 1910. Sydney Harold Smith