

Work begins: The canal's construction

The canal was built in three phases, starting in 1815 at the River Derwent end which allowed the newly created sections to be filled with water as work progressed in order to carry materials for construction upstream.

Building the canal

The plans for the canal consisted of a 6ft deep channel, lined with puddled clay. In contrast, the dredging that took place in 2017 was to a depth of 4ft (suitable for today's use).

The canal was built in three phases. As today, large construction jobs involved the use of multiple contractors, all appointed for their specific expertise. Progress would be supervised by the engineer, George Leather jnr, although with other projects on his books, day-to-day supervision was assigned to appointed 'onlookers'.

The contractors tasked with the creation of the canal's channel would have hired gangs of labourers to excavate by hand using 'fly tools', simple wooden spades with iron shoes and slightly curved shafts designed for cutting clay into small blocks which could then be hurled into wheelbarrows. A practised 'navvy' was reputed to be able to work fast enough to have two or more blocks in the air at the same time.

Negotiating purchase prices with landowners along the canal began at the time of the canal's construction. To ensure work proceeded smoothly, calls for stage payments were made on the shareholders as rapidly as the Act allowed, causing several to default, most notably the Rev Thomas Shield, an early committee member. Shield, a controversial figure as headmaster of Pocklington School, was to cause the company much legal difficulty until his shares were eventually confiscated.

Delayed construction

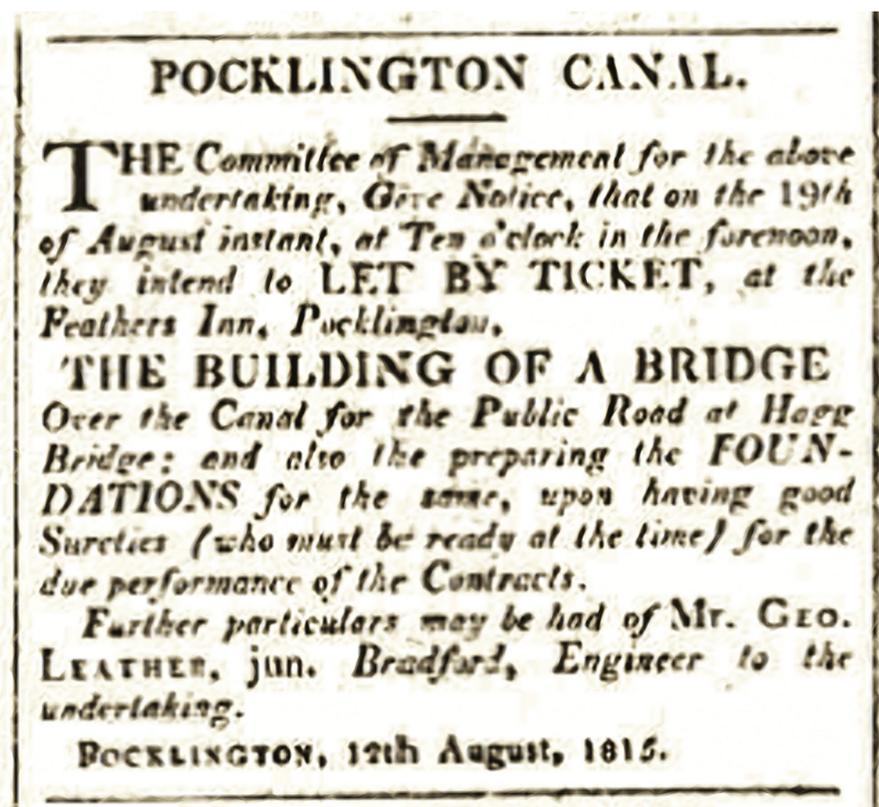
Completion was expected in 1817 but was delayed due in part to the poor weather: 1816 was the infamous 'year without a summer' following the eruption of Mount Tambora, Indonesia, in April 1815. Brick production was dramatically affected since the weather greatly delayed the drying process. The 2016 repair of Thornton Lock revealed that some of the waterlogged bricks behind the facings had reverted to dark sticky clay, although the original lower walls and invert of the lock chamber were in good condition. The builders had probably hidden underfired bricks ('samels') at the back of the walls where they would normally never be seen!

To make up for lost time, from December 1816 onwards management of the last section between Walbut Lock and Canal Head was awarded to the experienced West Riding engineering and construction partnership of Hiram Craven, Samuel Whitaker and Joseph Nowell.

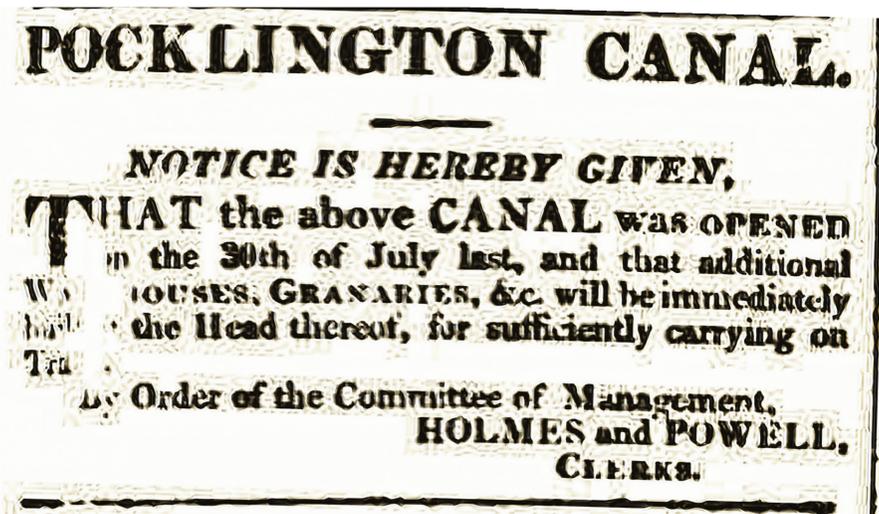
Final opening

The final cost was less than the original estimate despite the addition of two arms and a ninth lock, a great achievement not often matched on other canals. Understandably, George Leather received the congratulations of the Company. Notices of the opening of the canal, on 30th July 1818, were short and to the point, but there at least seems to have been an official opening ceremony, since Pocklington watchmaker Reuben Miller was paid £3 8s cash 'for Music', while the 'Captain and Sailors of Lord Fitzwilliam's vessel' were paid £1 10s between them. It is likely, therefore, that his Lordship was invited to officially open the new venture, but sadly there are no records of any lavish refreshments being provided!

A rare surviving fly tool from Kent. Guildhall Museum Rochester



Advert in the Hull Packet, 15th August 1815. British Newspaper Archive



Notice from the York Herald, August 1818. British Newspaper Archive