

Ellesmere's canal

Why was the canal called the 'Ellesmere Canal'? The answer now seems obvious: Ellesmere is the biggest town on the main line from Hurlleston Junction to Llangollen, and the company's headquarters were there, as was the main maintenance depot. But no, back in 1793 when the Act was passed creating the company and formally naming it, the main line was to be from Shrewsbury to Chester and on to the Mersey — and neither the surveyed western route (via the Wrexham area) nor the eastern route (wholly to the east of the Dee) passed through Ellesmere. Indeed, it wasn't until 1795 that the decision was made to have a branch passing very close to the town.¹ More obvious names would have been the 'Severn & Mersey Canal' or the 'Shrewsbury & Chester Canal'.

Perhaps it was what we would now call a marketing ploy. The aristocrat most closely associated in the public's mind with successful canal investment was the third Duke of Bridgewater; he was also the principal landowner in and about the town. (He never actually seems to have been a shareholder.) More likely it was chosen because the embryo company had its public meetings there, at the 'Royal Oak'.² So why were the meetings held at Ellesmere? It was roughly half way between the two county towns, it had reasonable north–south and east–west road communications, it wasn't associated with either of the competing lines for the canal, and it had an inn with a room big enough to hold a large public meeting.

The canal network

The Act for the branch to Ellesmere and on to Prees Heath and to Whitchurch was passed in 1796. Construction was slow, the section from Frankton Junction to Ellesmere opening in late 1798 or early 1799.³ This enabled coal from the Oswestry and Chirk areas and limestone from the Llanymynech and Froncysyllte areas to reach the town by water. The 'main line' to Shrewsbury had reached Weston Lullingfields, eleven miles short of its intended destination when construction ceased because of a financial crisis. Thus at this time the canal system was small, X-shaped, and isolated from all other waterways.

The link to the Chester Canal opened at the end of 1805 but it was not until 1833 that the Middlewich Branch was completed, allowing boats to travel to Manchester. The more convenient link to the south from Nantwich to Wolverhampton via the Birmingham & Liverpool Junction Canal

opened two years later.⁴

Pigot's 1821–2 Directory stated that the canal 'forms a communication between the Severn at Shrewsbury and the Dee at Chester, and by collateral branches to all parts of the kingdom'. However, the connection to the Mersey (for Liverpool) was more important than that to the Dee; the connection to the Severn was never made; and the links to the rest of the kingdom did not come for another dozen years. This statement, or a variant on it, was repeated in subsequent directories produced by other publishers⁵ — Kelly's Directory of 1941 was still reporting a connection to the Severn although most of the Weston Lullingfields Branch had ceased to be useable in 1917.⁶

The canal company

A significant canal-related employer at Ellesmere was the canal company itself. The canal office (later known as Beech House) was built in 1805–6 as the administrative headquarters of the Ellesmere Canal Company, the committee room being in the semi-circular wing at the end of the building. There were rooms for the accounting records and for the plans, and apartments for the General Accountant and the Resident Engineer.⁷ Following the merger with the Chester Canal Company in 1813 the administrative headquarters remained at Ellesmere. As a result of the creation of the Shropshire Union Railways & Canal Company in 1846, the head office was formally located in Westminster and a principal administrative office was opened in Wolverhampton, the Ellesmere office losing most of its importance. However, following the lease of the new company to the London & North Western Railway, the administration was moved from Wolverhampton to Chester in 1849 and the Westminster office was closed in 1851.⁸

Adjacent to the offices, and constructed a year later, was the Ellesmere Canal's maintenance depot, comprising workshops for the carpenters, store rooms and dry dock (principally for weighing boats).⁹ Remarkably little changed since opening, this continues in operation today, though on a much diminished scale now that the regional maintenance depot is at Northwich. Nevertheless, as late as 1948 thirty men were employed there.¹⁰

The 7th Earl of Bridgewater

The 'Canal Duke', the 3rd Duke of Bridgewater, died in 1803. He had no sons — indeed he disliked women and never married — so the dukedom died

with him. He was also the 6th Earl of Bridgewater, and the earldom passed to his nearest male relative, John William Egerton (1753–1823), his uncle's grandson. The new 7th Earl, though non-resident at Ellesmere, soon became involved in canal affairs. He rapidly acquired a holding of 50 shares in the company, was elected to the committee and chaired those meetings at which he was present. When in 1806 the company needed £15,000 to pay creditors and complete the works, the Earl of Bridgewater offered a temporary loan.¹¹

He also set about developing the town, laying out wharfs and erecting warehouses around the canal basin.¹² The Bridgewater Estate's timber yard was in the square at the end of the canal arm; the Earl's agent had his offices here too. In addition, the Estate also had a wharf on the east side of the canal arm, between the coal wharf and the boat-building yard.¹³

In 1806 the town's principal inn, the 'Royal Oak', where the canal company had held all its meetings until its own committee room had been completed, was renamed the 'Bridgewater Arms'.¹⁴

The trades of Ellesmere

The principal trades of Ellesmere in the 1820s were described as tanning and malting, and the butter and cheese produced in that part of the county was said to be 'of the finest description'.¹⁵ As in most of the Shropshire market towns, tanning had virtually ceased by the middle of the 19th century and malting by the end of the century.¹⁶ The canal appears to have been able to do nothing to extend the life of these industries, though certainly malt was sent to Lancashire by fly-boat. Improved transport facilities may actually have hastened their demise. The canal did help the trade in dairy products, particularly after the opening of the route to Manchester, fly boats being introduced specifically for these.¹⁷

A number of businesses were located to take advantage of the canal:¹⁸

- John Tilston, and later Richard Tilston, were timber and building materials merchants, with wharfs on both sides of the canal basin. They were also respected boat builders, their premises being on the east side of the arm into the town, just to the north of the entrance bridge.
- On the same side of the canal but closer to the town there was a coal wharf; directories state that this was operated by Ann Edwards in the 1820s, by Elizabeth Edwards in the 1830s, and by John Jones from the 1840s, the latter diversifying into lime and timber.
- A gas works was built on the west side of the canal in 1832¹⁹, a relatively early date for a small town works. This used the canal both to receive fuel

and to dispatch the tar byproducts.

- The most significant of the canalside industries was William Clay's Bridgewater Foundry making iron and brass products, mainly for the agricultural industry but also the castings required by the canal company. The foundry was established in the first half of the 1850s, becoming a major employer in the town, and survived until the First World War. Amongst other things, it used to make. After its demise its site was taken over by Great Western & Metropolitan Dairies (later United Dairies), the attraction being the ready availability of water for cooling purposes.²⁰
- Surprisingly, the first directory to mention a 'retailer of beer' at the canal wharf was as late as 1835 — one's impression is that a public house is usually second only to a coal yard for the speed of being established at a town wharf — ten years later the building has become the more imposing sounding 'Canal Tavern'.
- For at least two decades Edward Davies had a building firm somewhere in the canal wharf area, but in 1856 someone of that name is noted as being licensee of the 'Canal Tavern'.
- Various other small industrial premises appear to have come and gone quickly: a blacksmith and a stonemason, for example.

The only building at the canal wharf which does not seem to be canal-related was the National School. This had been established by 1828 and by 1861 was for boys only. Presumably this was on land which had been given by the Bridgewater Estate.

The canal age at Ellesmere

Ellesmere's first canal age ended when the first part of the Oswestry, Ellesmere & Whitchurch Railway opened from Whitchurch to Ellesmere in 1863. (The extension to Oswestry opened the following year, two days after the route had become part of the Cambrian Railways.)²¹ Not that the canal ceased to be commercial — the Shropshire Union continued to trade actively until the First World War — but the canal was no longer the prime means of medium and long distance transport.

A basic measure of the effect of the coming of the canal would be by how much the population increased. However, in the case of Ellesmere this is difficult to assess because the civil parish of Ellesmere contained many of the surrounding villages as well as the town itself. The census for 1841 showed a population of 6,602 for the whole parish but only 2,326 for the town. Not until 1881 was the town population shown separately again, and by then it had reduced to 1,875. (It then remained virtually unchanged through to 1931.)

Considering the civil parish as a whole, the population increased by about 100 between 1801 (just after the canal opened) to 1811, by about 500 in the next ten years to 1821, and by about a further 500 to 1831. The totals for 1841 and 1851 were virtually unchanged, but that for 1861 was some 500 lower, the reducing trend continuing until 1881. It therefore seems that during the first three decades of the canal, the population increased significantly; thereafter the economy was steady for a couple of decades before declining for a similar period. (The coming of the railway did nothing to improve matters.)²²

The canal had only a minor effect on the physical development of the town. Wharf Road was the only new road. Virtually all the new building in the wharf area was directly canal-related — there was minimal relocation of other industries or suppliers and (apart from the houses lining one side of Wharf Road) no new dwellings anywhere near the wharf. Nor was there any new development near the canal office and depot or elsewhere along the ‘main line’ of the canal.

‘The second canal age’

The Ellesmere Canal, now generally known as the ‘Llangollen Canal’, has become the most popular waterway in the country, with 18,000 boat movements a year.²³ However, its future was not always assured. The last commercial use of the canal was in 1937²⁴, and the potential of the waterways for leisure purposes was not generally appreciated by the decision-makers until the second half of the 1950s.

The public’s right of navigation on the canal was removed by the London Midland & Scottish

Railway (Canals) Act 1944 but a second Act the same year enabled the canal to stay open as a water supply channel until 1954. The United Dairies works at Ellesmere was one of the three industrial premises taking the most water from the canal, and the second Act was intended to enable it and the other users have plenty of time to make alternative arrangements. In fact, because of other developments, a further act in 1954 made the supply permanent and assured the retention of the canal for navigation.²⁵

A large marina was constructed in the 1990s to the east of Birch Road; it is now the base for a hire fleet. There are rumoured to be plans to extend the marina, but no planning application has been made as yet.

The gas works closed about 1960 when the town’s supply became connected to the national grid. The dairy closed in the early 1990s and the former canal company warehouse is now derelict after having been used by a youth organisation for several years. Although there has been some landscaping around the old crane, the wharf area looks badly run down. Redevelopment proposals incorporating a large (or large for Ellesmere) retail store and much new housing was turned down by the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister after they had been approved by the North Shropshire District Council — the reasons have never been clear but it seems to have been related to the scale of the development — and a revised proposal is awaited.

Ellesmere is now a regular overnight stop for boaters, bringing much trade into the town. Improvements to the canalscape in the wharf area could only increase the town’s popularity to holiday-makers.

Notes and references

1. Richard Dean, ‘The Metamorphosis of the Ellesmere Canal’, *Journal of the Railway & Canal Historical Society*, November 1985, 228–247
2. *Shrewsbury Chronicle*, 5 August 1791, 14 September 1792 etc
3. Richard Dean, ‘The Metamorphosis of the Ellesmere Canal’, *Journal of the Railway & Canal Historical Society*, November 1985, 243
4. Charles Hadfield, *The Canals of the West Midlands*, 2nd edition 1969, 181
5. For example: *Tibnam* 1828, *Slater* 1856, *Harrod* 1861, *Post Office* 1863, *Kelly* 1941
6. Charles Hadfield, *The Canals of the West Midlands*, 2nd edition 1969, 250–1
7. Report to the General Assembly of the Proprietors of the Ellesmere Canal, 27 November 1805: Public Record Office (PRO), RAIL 827/7
8. Bob Yate, *The Shropshire Union Railway*, 2003, 26; Gordon Emery, *The Old Chester Canal*, 2005, 72; minute 828 of the Executive Committee of the Shropshire Union Railways & Canal Company, November 1851: PRO, RAIL 623/10
9. Report of Thomas Telford to the Sub-Committee of the Ellesmere Canal Company, 5 February 1806: PRO, 826/7
10. Edward Wilson, *The Ellesmere and Llangollen Canal*, 1975, 49
11. Minutes of the General committee of the Ellesmere Canal Company, 11 May 1806: PRO, RAIL 827/3
12. Report to the General Assembly of the Proprietors of the Ellesmere Canal, 27 November 1805: PRO, RAIL 827/7
13. Deposited plan for conversion of the canal into a railway and schedule of owners and occupiers, 1845: Shropshire Archives, DP329.
14. The minutes of the Ellesmere Canal Committee meeting on 9 July 1806 are the first to refer to the ‘Bridgewater Arms’. J W Nankivell, in *Chapters from the History of Ellesmere* (page 27), states that the name of the ‘Royal Oak’ was changed after the ‘Canal Duke’ had stayed there, but

- the date of the change makes this reason implausible.
15. *Pigot's Directory*, 1828–9
 16. Harold Peake, *Historical Guide to Ellesmere*, 1897, 10
 17. Edward Wilson, *The Ellesmere and Llangollen Canal*, 1975, 59–60
 18. Directories: *Pigot* 1821–2, 1829–30, 1835 and 1849; *Tibnam* 1828; *Slater* 1856; *Harrod* 1861; *Post Office* 1863. Deposited plan for conversion of the canal into a railway and schedule of owners and occupiers, 1845: Shropshire Archives, DP329.
 19. Edward Wilson, *The Ellesmere and Llangollen Canal*, 1975, 58
 20. D Pratt, *Pictorial History of Ellesmere and District 1790–1950*, 1983, 14; Edward Wilson, *The Ellesmere and Llangollen Canal*, 1975, 58, 60
 21. Peter Baughan, *A Regional History of the Railways of Great Britain: North and Mid Wales*, 1980, 154–5
 22. *Victoria County History of Shropshire*, Vol 2, 1973, 222
 23. Information from British Waterways, 2005.
 24. Ashton Davies, evidence to Parliament on behalf of the London Midland & Scottish Railway, 3 May 1944
 25. Peter Brown, *How the Llangollen Canal was Saved*, unpublished, 2005

Ellesmere wharf and canal buildings 1845 : map

The map opposite and its accompanying schedule of owners and occupiers were prepared in conjunction with the proposal to convert the canal into a railway. (Shropshire Archives, DP239) The information has been supplemented with data from Pigot's Directory of 1849.

The occupiers of the various properties were:

<i>Ref</i>	<i>Description</i>	<i>Occupier</i>
A	gas works	Gas works
268	timber yard	Richard Tilston
269/270	stackyard and field	George McDonald
273	garden	Charles Easter Cooley
B	timber yard, paint shop, workshops etc	Bridgewater Estate
C	Canal Tavern	Martha Davies
265	warehouse and wharves	Richard Tilston
264	warehouse and wharf	unoccupied
262	house, office, stable, shed, yard and wharf	John Jones
260/1	wharf, warehouse and yard	Bridgewater Estate
255/7	graving dock, wharf, sheds and wood-yard	Richard Tilston
126	canal offices	Ellesmere & Chester Canal
122/3/5/7/8	houses, gardens	various private occupiers
120/1	workshops, sawing-pits, sheds, wood-yard, weighing dock, warehouse, stable, gig-house and wharf	Ellesmere & Chester Canal

Notes:

- 267, 272, 264 and 124 are roadways; 266 is the canal itself.
- 268, 269 and 273 are the site of the Bridgewater Foundry.

