

# The Ffrwd Branch

## History of the Ffrwd branch canal

The Ellesmere Canal's 1793 Act authorised a main line from Shrewsbury to Chirk, Ruabon, Wrexham, Chester and on to what became Ellesmere Port, with various branches. The summit level of the section north of the crossing of the Dee was to be the same as that south of the Dee, that is, 310 feet above sea level, but this necessitated a tunnel over two miles long at Ruabon. Within a year the proposals were refined: instead of a tunnel, the canal would rise to a level of 386 feet above sea level; this would take it further away from Wrexham but past Bersham ironworks. At the northern end of the new summit level there would be a branch to coal mines, iron works and other industries at Ffrwd and Ffrith in the Cegidog Valley, at the top of which a reservoir would be built. Slightly amended, this was approved in the 1796 Act.

A contract was let promptly in May 1796 for construction of the level section between the village of Ffrwd and the intended junction with the main line just south of Gwersyllt. However, the Ellesmere Canal encountered financial difficulties, and work on the Ffrwd branch was abandoned in June 1798 after just 2 miles had been built at a cost of £9,135.

## Does this painting prove that boats used the Ffrwd Branch?

The hand coloured aquatint reproduced below, painted by Edward Pugh and published in 1815 in *Cambria Depicta*, a volume of illustrations of North Wales, implies that it was used by at least one boat. But how accurate was this picture?

The canalside colliery owned by Richard Kirk was at Ordnance Survey map reference SJ305550. This location is consistent with the angle between the line of the canal and the sight line to Caergwrle Castle. The mine buildings depicted are certainly not fanciful, though they appear to be a compilation of elements rather than an accurate representation.

Caergwrle Castle, the subject of the painting according to its title, would indeed have been just visible between the slopes of the hills

on either side. This is confirmed by constructing a profile: the canal is 118 metres above sea level, the castle 135m and the shoulder of the hill roughly half way between the two is about 115m. It is not now possible to take a photograph from exactly the same place which shows the castle because trees have grown up, both in the foreground and on the shoulder of the hill between the viewer and the castle.

However, the scene is nothing like as dramatic as depicted — it is extremely exaggerated in vertical scale and much altered in basic appearance. The slope in the foreground is nowhere near as steep. Indeed this is a side valley, not the valley of the Cegidog (which certainly is steep). The valley should curve round to the right much sooner than is shown, and there should be a ridge running across the centre, rising to the left, over which the castle can just be seen. There are no cliffs on the left hand hill; indeed there are no crags like that on any hill nearby. The right hand hill is actually the wooded flank of Windy Hill, round which the canal ran. Only the top of the castle hill can be seen, and actually there should be another hill immediately to its right.

Assuming the boat is meant to be taking coal from the mine to the coal yard by the Moss-Gwersyllt road at the south end of the canal, it is going in the wrong direction.

My conclusion is that Pugh made some sketches at the location, then did the actual painting in his studio. Realism was not a publisher's requirement. Romanticism was fashionable and it was not then possible to travel on the Continent, so North Wales



was made to appear as dramatic and exotic as possible. Heights were exaggerated, valleys were deepened. Artistic impact and compositional balance were far more important than accuracy — here the eye is guided towards the castle in a way which is contrary to the true lie of the land. The mine is included purely for foreground interest. Similarly, the horse and the boat strengthen the composition.

So much of the picture is 'artistic licence' that in my opinion it does not provide evidence that boats ever used the canal, or even that it was in water here. The verdict remains 'not proven'.

### Documentary evidence

There are a couple of later references to the Ffrwd Branch in the minutes of the Ellesmere Canal Company:

- 7 September 1808: 'Ordered that a quantity of Bricks belonging to the Company on the Ffrwd Branch of the Canal be disposed of by the Company in Lots; and that Mr Stanton do arrange with the Committee of that Branch of the Canal in what manner the same may be most advantageously sold.'
- 1 March 1809: 'Ordered that the Weighing Machine on the Ffrwd Branch be sold for such a Price or Sum of Money as Mr Kirk and Mr Stanton shall think a reasonable and fair value for it.'

These imply that there had been activity on that branch. If it had been abandoned in 1798 (or thereabouts), why should there still be a committee for the branch a decade later? The weighing machine, which was probably at the coal yard at the south end of the canal, would surely not have been bought until the branch was about to be operational; and if it had never been used it would have been transferred to Pontcysyllte instead of a new one being bought for there in 1802. I believe that Richard Kirk used the canal for a period to take coal for landsale at Gwersyllt, but as no money was spent on maintaining the canal, it eventually became unusable.

### The remains

Some of the southern part of the canal has disappeared under housing though part survives as a footpath. The best surviving section gives a pleasant and interesting half mile walk — but have good footwear. Cars can conveniently be left where the Sydallt–Ffrwd does a sharp left hand bend. (Map reference SJ310554)

Here there used to be a bridge over the Wrexham, Mold & Connah's Quay Railway's branch to Ffrwd and Brynmally. This was opened in 1866, and its

construction destroyed some parts of the old canal, as we shall see. (The railway finished up in the London & North Eastern Railway's empire. It closed in 1930, the track being lifted five years later.) Just west of the former railway, a stile leads into a field. Climb over this, then follow the right hand hedge. With some imagination, a slight depression can be seen in the field, intercepting the hedge at a narrow angle. Here the cutting of the railway totally destroyed the remains of the canal which used to continue along the 386' contour then make a sharp left hand turn.

At the end of the hedge is another stile; climb over this, then continue along the edge of the field, keeping the hedge on your left. Shortly you come to another stile — and the remains of the canal in front of you are very clear. This is a typical narrow canal, with a flat bottom to the channel, sides sloping at about 1:2, and the towpath on the downhill side. The towpath can be walked for about a quarter of a mile. Towards the end we found much of the line of the canal still in water, though the railway in a cutting to our right was (relatively) dry. This shows how effectively the canal was puddled.

The remains of the Ffrwd iron and coal works can be seen to the right; this pre-dated the canal and survived until 1904. Having thrown out a siding to the works, the railway begins to climb steeply at 1 in 35. The cutting soon becomes an embankment, and that starts to cover the line of the canal. Here the footpath has to change from being on the towpath to on the track-bed. Eventually all sign of the canal's existence disappears; shortly afterwards the footpath goes up some steps to the road above. (The return journey to the car is most conveniently done using this road over the edge of Windy Hill.)

The other place where the canal's remains can be examined is at the hamlet of Ffrwd. Cars may be safely parked near the road junction (SJ 300547). Opposite the junction a footpath crosses a stile. A few yards further on is an abandoned colliery shaft — from there, if you look over to your left you will see what looks like a pond. This was the terminal basin of the canal. Alongside it, a moss-covered pile of stones, bricks and tiles reveals the site of a small building, possibly canal-related.

It is surprising how much is still visible, two hundred years after abandonment.

### Further reading

- Richard Dean, 'The Metamorphosis of the Ellesmere Canal', *RCHS Journal*, November 1985, 238–241
- James I C Boyd, *The Wrexham, Mold & Connah's Quay Railway*, 1991, 262–4



*The profile of the canal, with a flat bottom to the channel, sides sloping at about 1:2, and a towpath on the downhill side. The method of construction whereby the left hand side of the channel is dug into the hillside and the material used to build up the towpath on the right as an embankment can be seen clearly.  
(SJ308555)*



*Despite being unused for over 200 years, some of the length of the canal was still in water.  
(SJ306551)*



*The terminal basin of the canal at Ffrwd. In the foreground are the remains of a building. At the back, towards the right, the line of the canal may be seen.  
(SJ302546)*

*[Photographed in  
January 2005]*