

The Canals that Almost Came to Neston

*An account of the many proposed canals, often involving well-known engineers,
which never quite made it to the Neston area*

- Anthony Annakin-Smith -

The opening of the first major industrial concern in west Cheshire, Ness Colliery near Neston, coincided with the dawning of an important era in the history of British transport – the canal age. The desire to create new waterways came from the need to move heavy, bulky materials such as coal, as well as manufactured goods, around the country. Over the course of several decades, a number of schemes were put forward that would have linked west Wirral, including Neston's early collieries, with Chester and even Manchester. Indeed, it seems that one of the country's very first canals may have been under consideration at Neston.

The evidence comes from the notebooks of James Brindley, the great canal engineer (*Figure 1*), who visited the colliery area in 1761 and 1762.¹ Brindley was the consulting engineer on the Bridgewater Canal, often cited as the Britain's first true canal, the initial stretch of which was opened in 1761. Not all of Brindley's notebooks survive and those that do are often poorly written and lacking in detail, so they cannot give a complete picture of his activities or motives. However, he records visiting 'Par[k]Gat' in November 1761, 'Par[k]Gat Coollery' (colliery) in early April 1762, 'Parr or Neaston' (Parkgate or Neston) later in April and 'Neaston' again in July, each visit lasting one day ('ParGat



Figure 1: James Brindley

Coollery', refers to the only local mine, Ness Colliery; throughout its life, it was not unusual for it to be described in connection with nearby Parkgate which was a nationally-known location).²

Brindley went to Chester before or after each visit to the Neston area and it appears, based on his notes and other records, that he was investigating a possible canal connection between Chester and Shropshire. Later that decade he arranged the survey preceding the first, unsuccessful, petition to parliament to build a canal eastward from the city. Brindley's main contact in Chester appears to have been the entrepreneurial Chester silversmith, lead-mine owner and former mayor, Richard Richardson, who also led the early coal-mining development at Neston.³ The Bridgewater Canal had been commissioned by the Duke of Bridgewater, keen to

¹ Victoria Owens, *James Brindley's Notebooks* (Gloucester: Choir Press, 2013a), pp. 76, 83–4, 92.

² 'Parkgate' was used as the name for the colliery, or in its address, quite frequently. The colliery's own employees did this (e.g. Joshua Small, the manager at Ness Colliery, wrote to Boulton & Watt in Birmingham from 'Ness Colliery near Parkgate' in 1786. As late as 1819 one of four letters from engineer George Stephenson to Joseph Cabry working at the colliery was addressed to 'Ness Colliery, Nr. Parkgate, Cheshire' (IME, STE/1/5/2/6). John Aikin, who mapped Cheshire in 1790 (CALs, 111835), showed Parkgate as the sole location on the Wirral; as a major port it was the area's best-known location to outsiders.

³ CALs, Z/TAV/2/55, 'Vouchers for Chester Canal'; A. Annakin-Smith, *The Neston Collieries, An Industrial Revolution in Rural Cheshire* (Chester: University of Chester Press, 2019), p. 19.

improve the efficiency of transporting coal from his colliery at Worsley to Manchester. Brindley became much in demand for his canal engineering skills and it seems likely that, as well as considering a canal south from Chester, Richardson had tasked him with investigating the feasibility of building one to take coals and other goods from Ness to the city, and potentially beyond. Like the Duke of Bridgewater, Richardson may have wanted to improve the efficiency of the colliery's coal transport, especially given the difficulties with navigating the tidal Dee. Brindley's deliberations might explain why Richardson was in no rush to progress a request he made in 1759 to the Chester Assembly to develop Neston's dilapidated former shipping quay, the Old Key (as it was then known), for coal shipments.⁴ As well as wanting to know whether the nascent Neston mining venture would make it worth the cost of building a canal, Richardson may have wanted to see how the Worsley project turned out. He may also have been waiting for the new inland canal from Chester – but this didn't materialise in his lifetime.

Clearly, Brindley's visits did not result in a canal from Neston but there are hints in the papers of the Mostyn family (who owned Great Neston) of the possibility of a new local canal in the 1770s – apparently they were also keen to join in the national enthusiasm for these waterways.⁵ This may have been linked to a proposed new dock at Parkgate but, again, nothing resulted.⁶ However, the Chester Canal, from the city to Huxley near Beeston, opened in 1775 (*Figure 2*) and it was the creation the following year of the link between the canal and the Dee which offered the possibility of inland carriage of coastally-mined coal.⁷ In recognition of the potential for trade between river and canal the Chester Canal Company commissioned a number of 'flats', modelled on boats built by the Duke of Bridgewater for his canal.⁸ These were versatile craft that were able to carry goods both to



Figure 2: The canal at Chester, probably painted in the early nineteenth century

⁴ CALS, Z AB/4/182v, 30 November 1759.

⁵ With thanks to Susan Chambers for bringing the relevant Mostyn papers – reference unavailable – to my attention.

⁶ CALS, DHL 50/3, 'Proposals (unexecuted) for an application to Parliament for an Act to make a Dock at Parkgate'.

⁷ Charles Hadfield, *The Canals of the West Midlands* (Newton Abbott, David and Charles, 1985), p. 44

⁸ Gordon Emery, *The Old Chester Canal* (Chester: Chester Canal Heritage Trust, 2005), p. 135.

the mainland ports on the Irish Sea and inland, using the shallower waters of the developing canal network.

The first Chester Canal Company flat was launched in 1776 and the *Chester Chronicle* of 13 December reported,

‘For the first time one of the Canal barges, of the burden of about 60 tons, navigated out of the canal, thro’ the five-fold lock lately compleated [sic] at this city, into the River Dee, to proceed on her voyage to the colliery, to load coals for the use of the interior parts of the country.’

Sadly, the report did not state which colliery the barge was heading for. It could have been Ness although the Welsh collieries near to the River Dee Navigation were closer and so, perhaps, more likely candidates.

The construction of canals certainly presented opportunities to the Neston collieries but they also created threats from competitors. For example, when the section of canal from the Mersey to Chester opened in 1796 the first commodity to be brought to the city was Lancashire coal which, as the local newspaper put it, ‘cannot fail to be of considerable advantage to this city’.⁹ It is ironic that in the following decades Sir Thomas Stanley, then co-owner of Ness Colliery, often found it more appropriate to import Lancashire coal, brought via the canal network to Eastham for use on his estates fronting the Mersey, than to cart it across the Wirral from Ness.¹⁰

In the 1820s, although speculative ‘canal mania’ had largely died down, there was a possibility that a canal might actually run past Parkgate and the Neston collieries connecting to Manchester. The first attempt came from the Manchester Ship Canal Co., formed in early 1825 and chaired by a businessman in the city, Matthew Hedley.¹¹ The 45-mile route, starting at Dawpool near the mouth of the Dee Estuary (on the coast at Thurstaston today), was intended to accommodate vessels of at least 400 tons and would require company capital of £1 million. However, an 1825 Bill to allow its construction was rejected by parliament due to lack of detail.¹² Interest nevertheless continued and later that year, North-East engineer William Chapman put forward proposals for the Manchester and Dee Ship Canal which, like its predecessor, was intended to allow sea-borne goods to be carried directly to Manchester, avoiding Liverpool where heavy local duties were levied.¹³ Dawpool was again the starting place of the 51-mile scheme where there would have been an enormous set of docks. The route then ran along the coast to Parkgate and Neston before swinging across the Wirral

⁹ *Chester Courant*, 16 February 1796.

¹⁰ A. Annakin-Smith, *The Neston Collieries 1759-1855: An Industrial Revolution in Rural Cheshire* (Chester: Chester University Press, 2019), p.135

¹¹ *Manchester Guardian*, 29 January 1825; *Manchester Mercury*, 1 March 1825.

¹² Bosdin Leech, *History of the Manchester Ship Canal* (Manchester and London: Sherratt & Hughes, 1907), p.56.

¹³ William Chapman, *Manchester and Dee Ship Canal, Report of William Chapman, Esq. Civil Engineer* (Manchester: T. Sowler, 1825).

peninsula to Backford (to meet the Wirral Canal), on to Frodsham and eventually Manchester; fifteen locks were required.

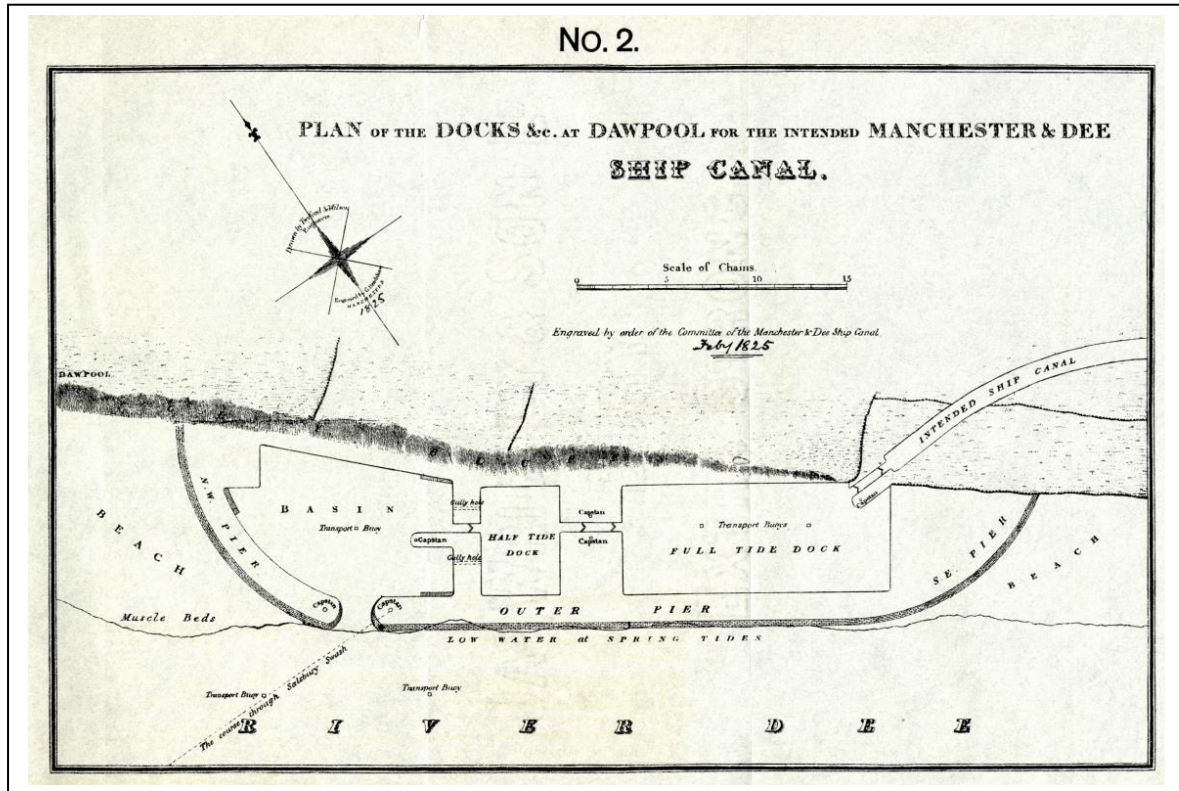


Figure 3: William Chapman’s extensive dock system at Dawpool (Thurstaston) proposed in 1825

Engineers Thomas Telford and John Rennie also advised on the plan but it failed to gain traction.¹⁴ There was no doubt disappointment that the scheme was designed for vessels of only 250 tons, requiring goods from large vessels to be transferred to smaller ones at Dawpool. Moreover, the estimated cost of over £1.5m, the bulk of which was required to build the docks at each end, was a cause of scepticism; there was some expectation that costs would rise beyond that.¹⁵ The case would not have been helped by the proposal coinciding with a national financial crisis.¹⁶

Although the 1825 schemes failed as business ventures there was considerable popular enthusiasm for them, as well as anti-Liverpool sentiment – poems, and even a song called ‘The Manchester Ship Canal’, were written. As the song said,

‘Instead of lazy Old Quay flats, that crawl three miles an hour, sir,

¹⁴ E. L. Williams, ‘The Manchester Ship Canal’, *Minutes of the Proceedings of the Institution of Civil Engineers*, 131 (1898) (pp.14-30), p. 15.

¹⁵ *Chester Chronicle*, 23 September 1825.

¹⁶ L. Neal, ‘The Financial Crisis of 1825 and the Restructuring of the British Financial System’, *Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis Review*, 80 (1998), 3, pp. 53–76.

We'd fine (*sic*) three-masted steamships, some of ninety horses power, sir'.¹⁷

It may have been these proposals, and the prospect of direct access to the enormous industrial market of Manchester, that led the owners at Ness Colliery to undertake new borings in early 1826, hoping to find new, large and sustainable supplies of coal.¹⁸ However, little came of these.

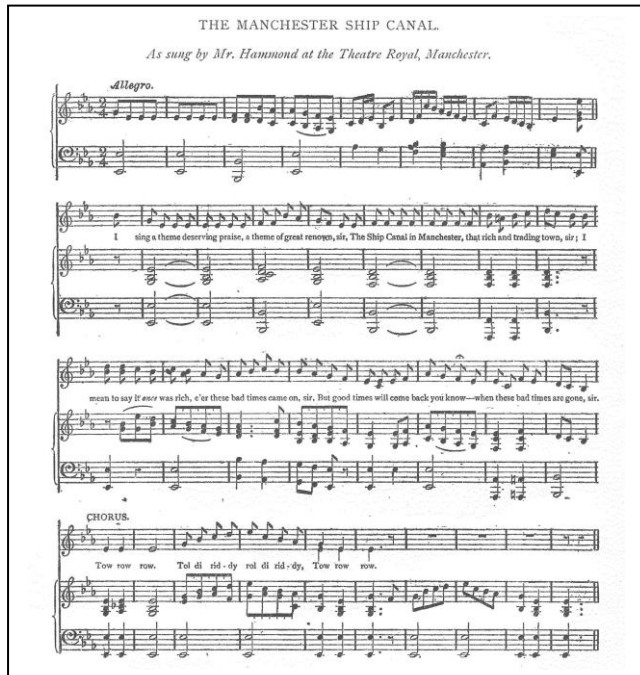


Figure 4: Part of 'The Manchester Ship Canal', sung at music halls in Manchester in 1825.

Irrespective of the demise of the Manchester schemes, proximity to the existing canal network continued to be put forward as an advantage for the collieries at Neston. Pigot's 1834 *Commercial Directory* and Slater's *Royal National Commercial Directory* of 1848 both said:

'There are some productive coal mines worked within [Neston] parish; and the canal between the Mersey and the Dee, which passes near the town, affords the means of distributing their produce.'

A further scheme for a canal was proposed in 1837, again from Dawpool, running for twelve miles, past Parkgate and Neston to a proposed new Chester harbour.¹⁹ The scheme was devised by renowned civil engineer Sir John Rennie (who had also advised on Chapman's 1825 proposal). The new design would have accommodated vessels, including steamships, drawing fifteen to twenty feet of water and weighing 600-700 tons. But the scheme, costed by Rennie at £560,000, met fierce opposition from those who suspected it would actually cost nearer £1m and thus did not proceed.²⁰

¹⁷ Leech, pp. 56-60. The Old Quay reference is to vessels operated by the 'Old Quay Company', as it was known, which owned the Mersey and Irwell Navigation (C. Hadfield & G. Biddle, *The Canals of North West England* (Newton Abbott: David and Charles, 1970).

¹⁸ NEIMME ZA/12236-7.

¹⁹ CALS, Z CCF/6/1 & 2 'The Report of Sir John Rennie on the Improvement of the River Dee & Port and Harbour of Chester', 27 July 1837.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

The idea was revived in 1844 by Chester foundry owner and builder Thomas Lunt and developed the following year as part of a proposal to link a Heswall-to-Chester canal with a new 'Chester and Manchester Direct Railway'.²¹ Tellingly, Rennie made no mention of the Neston collieries when putting forward the economic benefits of his 1837 proposals and there was no apparent reference to them in the later schemes – perhaps an indication of the collieries' limited output at that time.

The Industrial Revolution was, for those with the means, skills or intellect, an era of opportunity and excitement. The collieries at Neston, with were literally and figuratively ground-breaking and were highly successful for a few decades, were a product of this. Canals, too, were a wonderful idea, new to contemporary Britain and which, like other advances of the time, presented opportunities to make money or save costs. It is little wonder, then, that the Neston area became swept up in the excitement. However, like many ideas of the time, economic realities won out and, for one reason or another, the schemes which might have linked the Neston area to the country's burgeoning canal network never materialised. Road and river had to suffice.

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²¹ *Manchester Times*, 16 November 1844 and 28 June 1845.