

STONE ON THE COTSWOLD CANALS

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The surviving records for the Stroudwater and Thames & Severn Canals are some of the most extensive and complete for any of the canal companies in England. This is not only a boon for would be historians and researchers but can also on occasion be even slightly off putting. The sheer volume of documents, account books, letters etc. can make even a simple enquiry sometimes a long and perhaps daunting task. When asked to write this short paper I was surprised to find I have been researching the records for well over ten years. The import and export books for Brimscombe Port are a delight to examine and one has to constantly guard against being side tracked. A three hour session is enough to leave you with your mind reeling and eyes sore. Perhaps that's why I still have many years work left to do. Large and heavy dusty volumes of accounts mean you always leave the Record Office with grubby hands.

On the other hand, the wealth of information to be gleaned never fails to arouse interest. It brings the personalities associated with the canals alive, their failures and successes, from managers to masons and builders to bargees, and the people supplying or ordering goods. The canal business can be explored in great detail and these people can become like old friends. The amazing variety of goods transported never ceases to amaze and it is only too easy to become sidetracked.

My own research project is into the use of building stone on the canals, both for the initial building phase and later the export of local stone into the surrounding counties that were served by the canal network. Building stones of various types were needed in great quantities for locks and bridges, warehouse etc., and limestone was required for burning and converting into lime mortar. The proprietors of the canal made searching inquiries regarding cost, durability and availability and consequently imported many of these stones from outside Gloucestershire. They opened their own quarries, leased others and bought direct from various quarrymen. For the Stroudwater there are some fabulous note and minute books recording in great detail stone from Shropshire, the Forest of Dean, Chepstow and Tintern, Hanham and St Vincent Rocks in the Avon Gorge at Bristol. The company opened or leased ragstone quarries on Rodborough Common for which an incline may have been constructed, although there is no actual documentary evidence for this. The Thames & Severn Company had its own quarries at Quarhouse, which supplied weatherstone for lock building, and general-purpose building stone for Stroud and Gloucester. Some of these stones can be related to specific building projects and can sometimes be seen today, in the same place they were laid over 200 years ago. The meticulous records mean that the stone types and the quarries from whence they came can be identified.

As soon as the canals were in operation the top quality creamy white oolitic Jurassic limestone from the Stroud valleys were exported to where ever the canal system could take them. In this case it was mostly Painswick stone; although more Painswick stone came from the underground quarries around Brimscombe and Nailsworth than ever did from Painswick itself. This stone gained an enviable reputation for carving and decorated work of all kinds. It was used for church altars and pulpits, for fireplaces, staircases and landings and in greater quantities for plain paving, sometimes to be laid in small squares with black marble insets. The stone was exported in huge blocks up to six tons in weight for which heavy duty cranes were especially ordered, the weight and size carefully noted not only in the accounts but on

the stones themselves. Vast quantities of paving of various thicknesses were stacked on the wharfs and manhandled into the waiting trows and barges.

As well as its local use in the buildings in the Stroud valleys, for the mills and mansions of the clothiers, these building stones were consigned to the towns and villages on the far reaches of the Thames & Severn on the Cotswolds, as far as Oxford and then down the River Thames to London. It went down the River Severn to Newport, Cardiff, Bristol and Bath and up river to Gloucester, Hereford, Worcester and Birmingham.

At first the canal company promoted the sale of the Painswick stone in London. Arranging for an agent to sell block stone at a wharf on the Thames, they even printed advertising leaflets to hand out to prospective customers.

On some occasions important building projects can be identified, such as the Painswick paving sent to Windsor Castle for St Georges Chapel in 1820. Due to the accounts we now know that it was Walls Quarry at Brimscombe that supplied this stone. Stone sent for the rebuilding of the Houses of Parliament was consigned in the early 1840's. Local tradition, and this time correct, says the stone came from the famous underground quarries at Balls Green near Minchinhampton. Again it was used internally for steps and landings. The contract seems to have been later lost as the canal was overwhelmed with traffic for the building of the railway from Swindon to Gloucester. Despite the stone being rerouted by trow down the Severn and along the Kennet and Avon it was replaced with Caen stone from France.

Occasionally, cargoes of Minchinhampton weatherstone or Bisley roofing tile can be identified. Also noted are barge loads of other building stones passing along the canal; troughs, steps, curbs, paving, grindstones and grave ledgers from the purple, grey and green sandstones of the Forest of Dean. Bath Stone in great quantities was sent northwards and even had a hand in the decline of the local Gloucestershire stone industry. White and multi coloured figured marbles were consigned as expensive cargoes for monumental masons.

The railway obviously had an impact on the tonnages for all merchandise carried by the canal and it seems that stone traffic was directed onto the railway, particularly when the short branch line to Nailsworth was built in the 1860s. However it appears that stone was still taken by barge for local destinations, repairs to the canal network and roadstone to be off loaded at suitable places, the last recorded barge to use the Sapperton tunnel is supposed to have been a consignment of roadstone.