

THE OXENHALL BRANCH OF THE HEREFORDSHIRE AND GLOUCESTERSHIRE CANAL

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In view of its length, the Hereford-Gloucester canal was remarkable in having only one branch. It began at Oxenhall, about ten miles from Gloucester, and was projected to serve part of the tiny Newent coalfield, a mile to the west.(1)

There have been doubts as to the extent of its use, or even completion, but a scrutiny of the company minute books does suggest at least a few years of sporadic activity, as is shown later.

Coal pits existed in the area before 1775 (2) and provided important stimulus to the promoters of the canal, the Act for which was obtained in 1791. After a slow start, construction got underway in 1793 and at the end of the year the company began to consider mining for its own purposes; permission to bore was sought and there was talk of 'fire engines' for pumping.

Success was first reported in April 1794 on the land of Mrs. Phillips at Lower House, where pits had been 'working with good profit' a year or two before. (3) Sinking a shaft took five months but the coal 'not promising from its general appearance to be fit for any other purpose than lime-burning and the like', it was determined to sink another pit.

Soon afterwards, terms of one seventh royalty were agreed with Mrs. Phillips on the value of coal at the surface, the small coal being worth only about three shillings a ton. In January 1795, ten wagon loads went to the poor at Newent, at the Rev. Foley's expense. (The Foleys were big local landowners).

At this time a seam over 6ft. thick had been reached and a 'railroad or small collateral cut' was discussed to

carry the coal to the main canal, with a possible extension westwards to limestone quarries at Gorsley, about a mile away. However the new seam proved disappointing and in May, 1795 a further pit was sunk on the land of a Mr Wood at Hill House. This became known as Hill House Colliery and carried on in a small and intermittent fashion for many years.

Meanwhile the Lower House pits were still working and in June 1795 an agreement was drawn up with one Robert Miles to haul 200 tons of coal to the canal head at Newent, though only a portion of the waterway to Gloucester then appears to have been completed.

By November, 1795 the Canal proprietor's mining speculations had lost a net £515 and an opportunity was quickly taken to hand over to Richard Perkins of Oakhill, Somerset; as an inducement it was decided to build the already discussed branch. Perkins agreed to supply the company with up to 4,000 tons of small coal annually for brick making and lime-burning, to pay 2d per ton for coal over the branch, also to guarantee 70 tons per day if it could be raised and sold. His first action was to dismiss all the colliers including the foreman, who had come from Nailsea in Somerset. He was allowed four guineas expenses to carry his family home.

In June 1796, John Chadwick agreed to construct the branch by the following Michaelmas. The branch was to run above and parallel to a 17th century channel constructed to bring water from pools at Gorsley to an iron blast furnace at Newent, (4) via a large storage pond which was alongside the canal at Oxenhall. The channel and furnace fell out of use well before the canal period, though the pond still retains its sheet of water. As a further point of interest, there were three more storage ponds at Gorsley, the dams of which can still be seen. The most northerly is the biggest, and the earth wall is supported by masonry and step-like buttresses known locally as 'Goon's Ladders'.

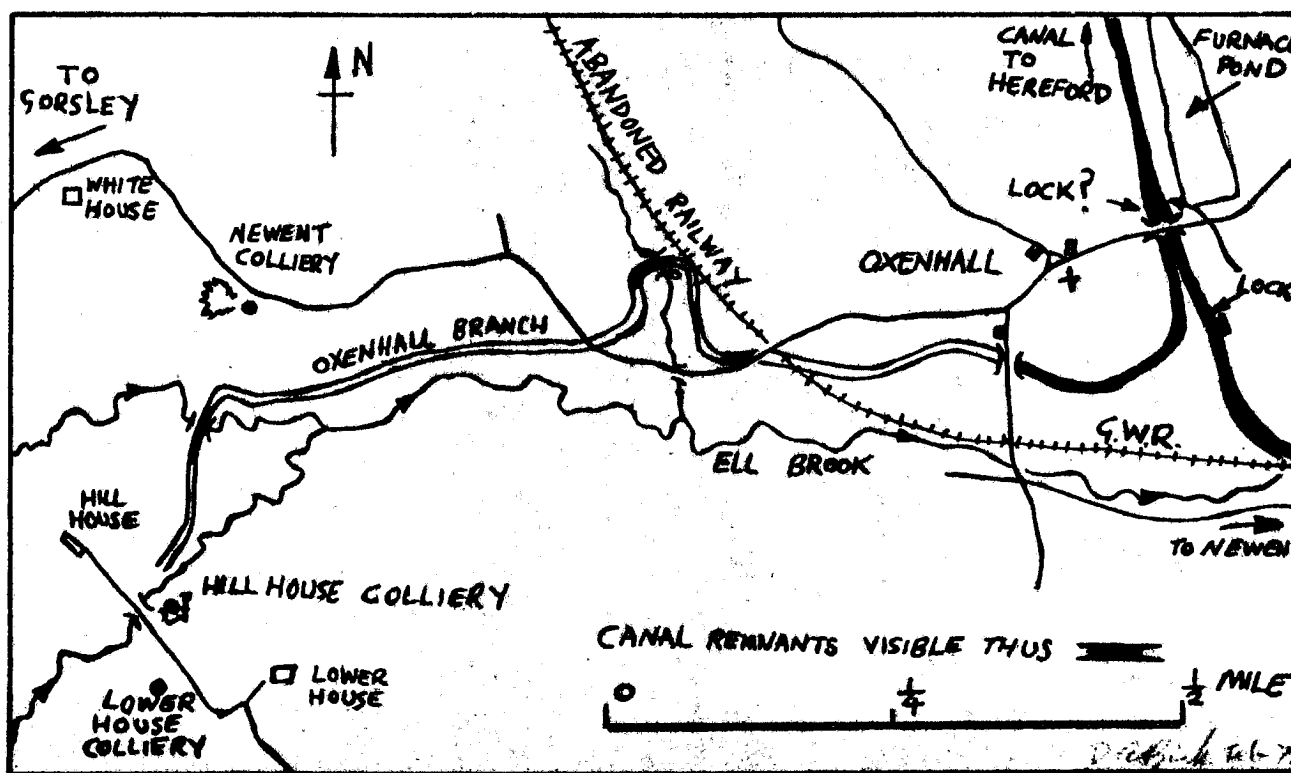
A few months later the committee suspected that Perkins was dragging his feet, and wrote that the branch would soon be ready, adding darkly 'get on with sinking your new shafts.....as a disappointment in this instance will be big with consequences the most disagreeable to yourself and the Company'.

A swivel bridge was ordered where the branch was to run under a road at Oxenhall and by November 1796, £1400 had been spent. Perkins was now erecting a steam engine and expecting to raise coal before Christmas. There were 'hopes of great pecuniary advantages' to the Company.

Coal of a sort was available from the existing pits, but the company refused it, having already been obliged to buy from elsewhere. Worse followed, for in February, 1797 a mortifying request was received in the form of an application from a trader for a boat to bring 'foreign' coal to Newent from the Severn at Gloucester - opening this section, instead of stimulating the local collieries, had rather the reverse effect.

Nevertheless, the branch seems eventually to have been completed early in 1797 (apparently without an Act) and in August of that year plans were considered for a feeder from the Brockmorehead brook west of the pits. This however was not ordered to be carried out until December 1800, perhaps as a means of supplementing water supply to the summit level.

About the end of 1797, Perkins became involved with Moggridge of Boyce Court near Dymock; schemes came forth for erecting limekilns and exploring a coal seam discovered in Oxenhall Tunnel. This latter idea however, was refused by the canal company who were concerned by the fact that although considerable tonnages of coal were now being raised, only part was going over the branch. Letters of complaint apparently received no attention and in May 1800 the clerk reported that the colliery at Oxenhall



is 'entirely enveloped in mystery and little appears to be doing'. But a month later it was thought important to keep the branch open, and towards the end of the year Moggridge junior requested a reduction on tonnage for coal from the colliery (presumably Hill House) which was destined for clothiers on the Stroud-water Canal.

From 1801 to 1812 there is a regrettable lack of entries in the minutes, but in August 1817 the committee became more active. It began by inspecting the canal from Ledbury to Gloucester and recommended, inter alia, 'The land cut, to make the branch to Colliery'. I am not sure what this meant, because a week later (30th August) it was resolved to apply to the proprietors adjoining the branch and ascertain if they would repurchase the land.

Minutes are again sparse from this period until 1828 when Stephen Ballard had taken over the clerk's duties. The question of land occupied by 'the colliery arm' cropped up several times in the next decade and about 1832 it was stated that the branch had 'for many years been abandoned'. In 1838 or 9, Hill House Colliery started again but on August 27th 1839, the committee resolved to offer the land to Miss Foley 'as soon as it is ascertained that the Colliery now in work near Oxenhall to which the branch leads, is not likely to produce a sufficient quantity' to warrant its retention.

Nevertheless there was a strong reluctance to abandon this first and last hope of indigenous mineral traffic, for a year later the committee would only reconvey the land provided the Foleys guaranteed to allow a reopening, or to lay a 'Railroad', should good coal be found within seven years.

In the event, half a century of hope finally evaporated before the stipulated span. The committee agreed to transfer the land in November 1846, so bringing the Oxenhall branch to an ultimate end.

There was however a mining revival in the 1870's when Newent Colliery was sunk, and equipped with modern plant about 400 yards north of the old Hill House pit. According to a local man in 1957, the first load of coal went to the George Hotel at Newent, where the committee held its meetings in the formative years. The new colliery might have revived interest in the branch, though in view of past experiences the company was hardly likely to make the first move. The venture did in fact run into difficulties - sulphurous coal, heavy pumping

expenses and a trade recession - and was wound up in 1880, being the last serious attempt at exploiting Gloucestershire's smallest coalfield.(5)

After the passage of well over a century, exploration can still reveal distinct traces of the Oxenhall branch. The junction is heavily obscured by foliage except in winter, but remains of the summit lock can be discerned. Above it was a wide basin into which the branch must have communicated.

A dumpy level survey just carried out, indicated that the branch towpath was 2 or 3 feet above the summit level towpath, from which I conclude a lock, though there seems to be no documentary evidence in this respect. There is however, a note in the canal committee minutes 22nd March 1797 referring to damages paid to owners for cutting the 'Branch of the canal to the colliery Branch'. The question is therefore perhaps best left open.

The route of the branch for the first quarter mile is clearly visible as far as the road to Newent. Beyond, to the old Gloucester-Ledbury railway the course has been ploughed up, though it is revealed by shadows in the evening sun. (The railway was largely built in the early 1880's on the canal route, though not in this immediate area).

Much the best remnant is on the western side of the line, being a substantial embankment showing the canal's section, with a large brick culvert underneath. Within the railway boundary fence the route is quite obliterated. The tight curves in this vicinity as revealed by old maps, suggest that the branch was not navigable to Long Boats. (6)

From this point there are virtually no traces until near the old Newent Colliery. (the tips remain as a landmark). Here the route turned sharply south, crossing the Brockmorehead brook which passed below in another brick culvert, still extant. The final hundred or two yards to Hill House colliery is practically levelled, and was not shown on the 1841 Pauntley Tythe Map which includes this section.

The layout at the colliery is not clear; there are no signs of a basin though the pit itself is marked by bramble-grown mounds and hollows. Neither are there any definite signs of the Brockmorehead feeder; it was perhaps never constructed. One query is the need for such a feeder; the canal at the colliery was alongside the Ell brook which could have been diverted into it.

Roderick Murchison the geologist, writing in 1838, (7)

believe that these futile coal workings pointed to more valuable deposits to the east and advised a search away from the line of disturbance. Had this been done, the unfortunate Herefordshire and Gloucestershire canal might have justified its promoters' dreams at last.

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Note: I am now living at Pound House, Market Square, Newent - within a mile of the branch - and will be pleased to show members and friends over the route.



REFERENCES

1. D.E.Bick The Newent Coalfield Historical Studies
1971, Gloucester Record Office.
2. Foley Estate Map 1775. Gloucester Record Office.
3. Bigland Gloucestershire 1792.
4. R.A.Stiles Elmbridge Furnace Historical Studies
1971, Gloucester Record Office.
5. Gloucester Journal 22nd Oct. 1880.
6. Oxenhall Tythe map 1843. Large scale plan of
Newent (in author's possession).
7. R.I.Murchison The Silurian System 1839

Note: References to H & G Canal minutes
are omitted, being sufficiently
evident from the text.