

COAL PEN AT RYEFORD STONEHOUSE, GLOUCESTERSHIRE.

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The coal pen beside the Stroudwater Canal at Ryeford is located in the Stroud Industrial Heritage Conservation Area, and once formed part of the estate of the Marling family, who owned Stanley Mill and Ebley Mill. Adjacent buildings which are also listed Grade II include Ryeford Canal Bridge, Ryeford House and warehouse, and the former Anchor Inn (now Tankard House) all of which go to form the Ryeford Wharf complex, of which the coal pen forms part.

The canal was built by the Company of Proprietors of the Stroudwater Navigation and opened in 1779. The main reason for its construction was to provide cheaper coal to the mills which were close to it in the Frome valley, and for domestic use in Stroud. As prosperity increased in the 19th century, the Company gained the greater part of its income from the carriage and sale of coal. The business was conducted by the Company itself, from its own coal wharves at Ryeford (on the north side of the canal, west of the bridge), Dudbridge and Wallbridge, and agents were appointed to safeguard their interests.

Some of the more prosperous mill owners were able to store their own coal near to their own premises. The Stonehouse Tithe map of 1842 shows a substantial coal yard adjoining Ryeford Mill, just to the east of Ryeford canal bridge, and behind the present site of Spring Cottages. The coal yard was owned by the Company and leased to Messrs Marling & Co. from whence they supplied their Stanley Mill which must have needed a large amount of coal. The mill had been lit by gas, generated on site since at least 1833, besides steam engines and two high pressure boilers. In 1863 Ryeford Mill was occupied by Messrs. Ford Bros. flour millers and mealmen. They also held Millbottom Mill (Ruskin Mill) in Nailsworth. Their business was expanding, they even had a fleet of trows, including a steam vessel 'Queen Esther', which at that time were bringing wheat from Lechlade and Newport and carrying back flour to Newport and Bristol. Other trows, among them 'George' and 'Florence' delivered coal from Lydney and Newport. In fact Messrs. Ford was the Canal Company's main customer, and more space was needed. They asked the Company if Marlings would vacate their coal pen,¹ but Mr. Marling refused.

The next year Messrs. Ford renewed the application made to the Company to be allowed to take over the lease of the coal yard from the Marlings because they wanted to build a warehouse on the site.² The Company set up a sub-committee to deal with the matter and Mr. S. S. Marling was summoned to a meeting on February 24th 1864. Mr. Marling agreed to give up the lease on condition that the Canal Company would erect for him another coal pen on his own land below the bridge and making it accessible by a good road and diverting the present road into his land beyond that point. It was resolved that Messrs. Ford's request be acceded to and a sixty years lease be granted at a nominal rent of 10/- on condition they put in a dock wall in continuation of the present one up to the bridge. Also they were to pay a moiety of making the new pen and road for Mr. Marling.

The Fords agreed to the arrangements with provisos:- they would pay half of the cost of building the coal pen if they could have rebate from the Company if their own annual account exceeded £600 or they would build the pen and road themselves. The Company affixed their seal to the agreement with the first of the propositions, and it was arranged for Messrs. Marling to do the work.

When the pen was completed in September 1864 the Company resolved that 'Marling & Co be allowed the right of road for horses carts and carriages at all reasonable times over the towing path from the turnpike road (Ryeford Lane) to the new pen situate on the west side of the bridge over the canal and to a piece of land on the west side of the pen at the east corner thereof, paying annually to the Company rent of 1/- and keeping the said path in good repair. Such right of road nevertheless to cease when and so soon as the new coal pen shall not be used as a place of deposit or landing for coal or merchandise carried on the canal.'¹³ This resolution was enclosed in a letter to Marling & Co. 21st September 1864.

The treasurer J. C. Hallewell paid a cheque to Messrs. Marling for £158.11s.4d. on 30th November 1864. The Ford's half, £79.5s.8d. had been paid in cash on October 1st to the Company.⁴ This was the total cost of making the pen which amounted to £143.11s.5d. as per estimate, plus the cost of making the road and the floor of the pen.⁵

The pen is enclosed by a very fine limestone wall, mostly coursed and dressed work and some ashlar and is in good condition. It was built by Marling and Co. to a high standard, probably using stone from their own quarry on Selsley Common nearby. A consignment of 26 tons of stone was brought to Ryeford pen on 24th June 1864⁶ from Chalford, free of conveyance charge and this was probably used for the flooring of the pen. The height is approximately 6 feet (1.8 m), 65 ft along tow path, 65 ft x 60 ft (19.8 m x 18.3 m) (see map). The corners are curved to allow for easy access for carts, and two chutes in the wall alongside the towpath once had hinged timber boards which let down to allow planks to be put across to the ledge. Wheelbarrows were wheeled along the planks, and the coal then tipped over into the pen. The chamfered gateway is set at an angle, with an iron gate, possibly not the original one. This coal pen is the only survivor on the Stroudwater Canal, although some others have survived in the West Midlands, but 'they are all brick built, lacking the distinctive appearance of these ashlar walls and associated gates, and do not have the direct historical associations and context of this example'.

Can we count the fact that 'somebody else was paying' has meant that this minor building survives today? It awaits a survey. Shall we discover if the floor is intact?

References

These all refer to the Company's archives in Gloucestershire Record Office.

- 1 D1180/1/5 Minute Book 5 p 367. Letter Book D1180/9/2 17 June 1863.
- 2 D1180/1/5 Minute Book 5 p 370a. 24 Feb 1864.
- 3 D1180/1/5 Minute Book 5 p 382b. 20 Sept. 1864.
- 4 D1180/2/48 Journal pp 1, 4 - 5 Oct./Nov. 1864.
- 5 D1180/1/5 Minute Book 5 p 373 26 Mar. 1864.
- 6 D1180/4/29 Tonnage Book 1864.

Postscript

On May 15th 2002, the Secretary of State for the Department for Culture, Media and Sport authorised the listing of the coal pen (Grid Ref: SO 813046) beside the Stroudwater Canal at Ryeford as of special historical or architectural interest, Grade II.



Figure 1 View of the Coal Pen Looking West Taken by Harry Townley in 1966



Figure 2 View of the Entrance to the Coal Pen in 2002, Looking South-west. (Author)

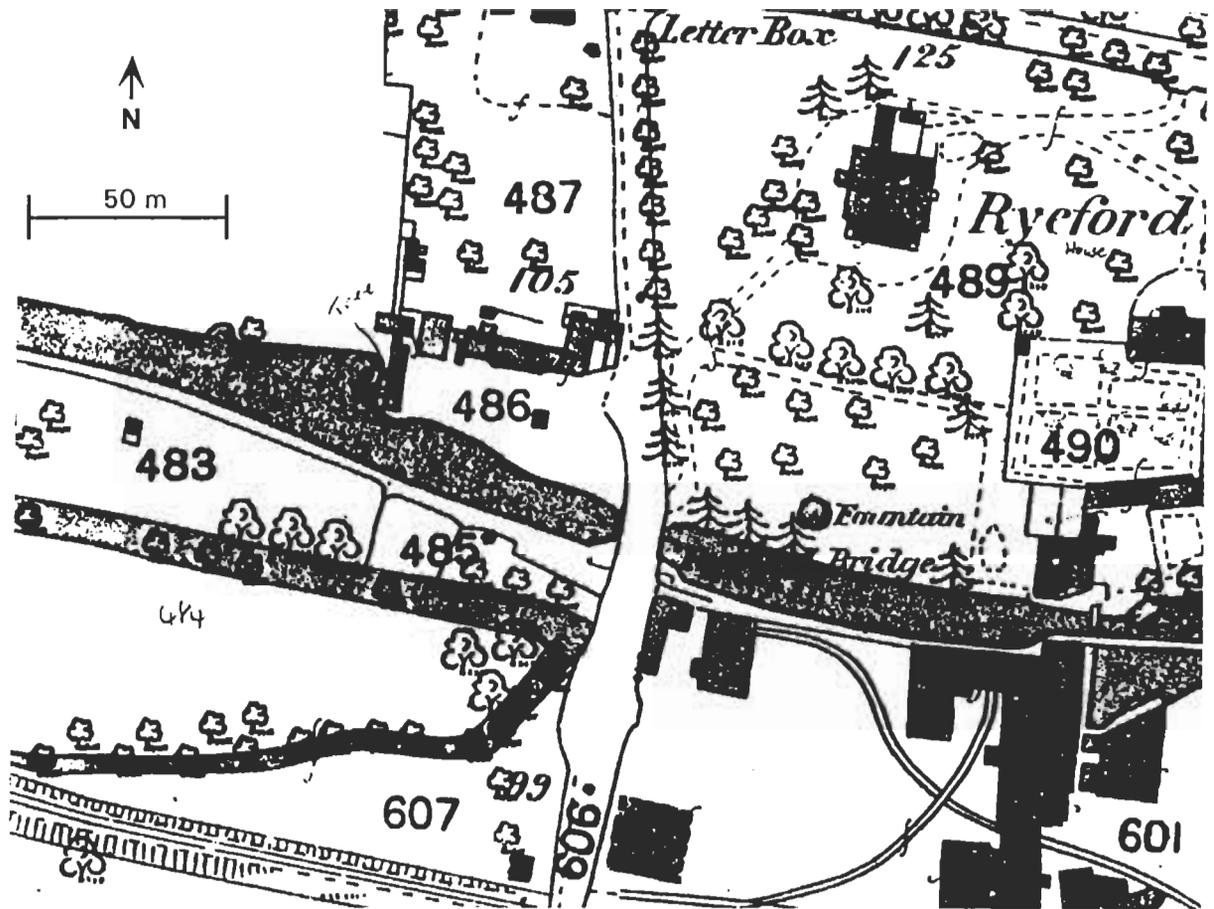


Figure 3 1st edition OS, 25 inch Map, 1884, Coal Pen is Parcel 485

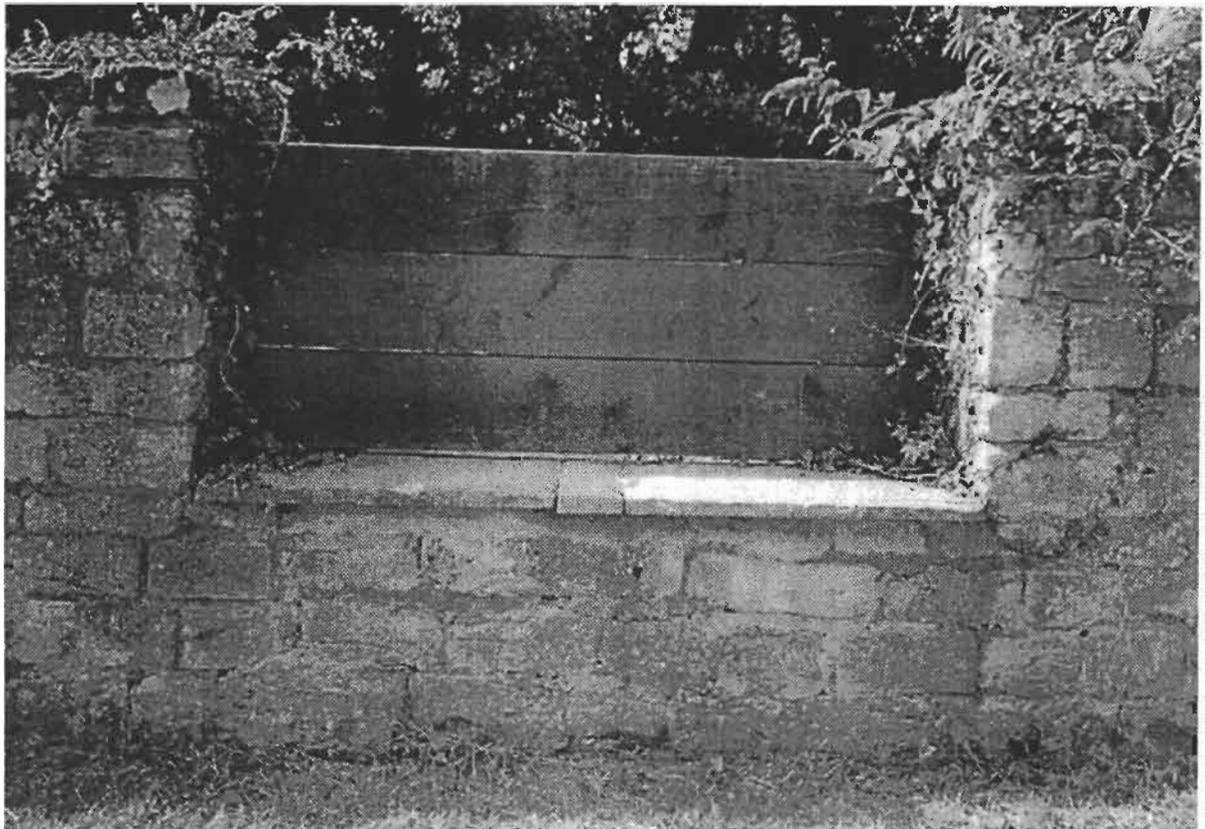


Figure 4 One of the Two Loading Chutes Fitted with Replacement Boards (Author)