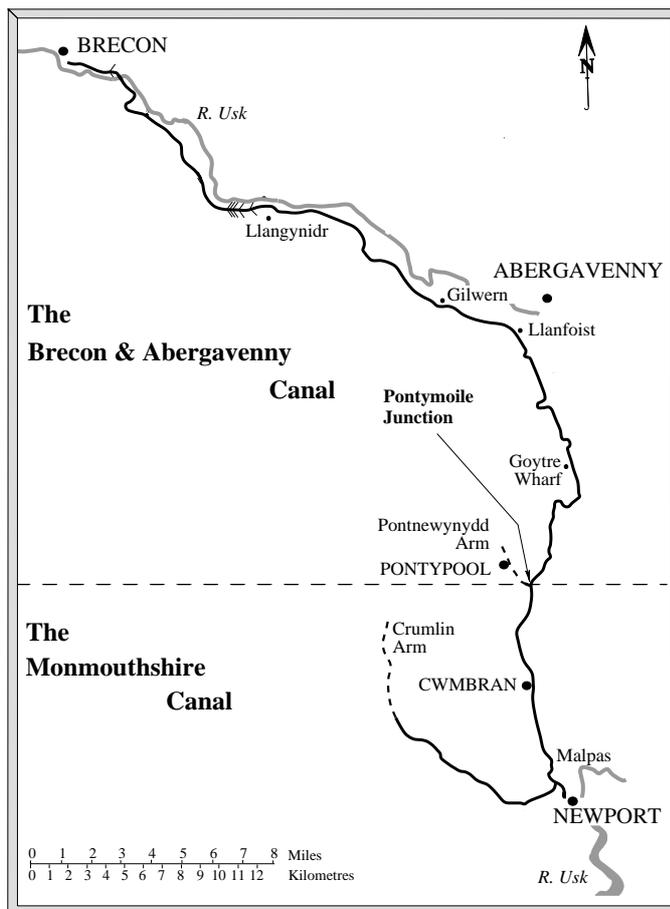


Pontymoile Junction and water from the B&A

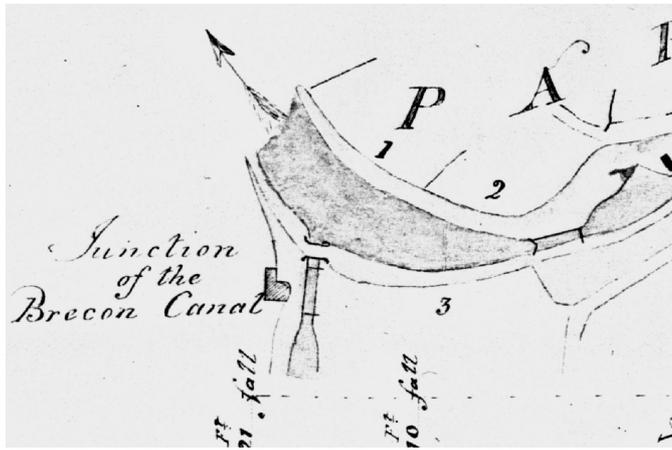


In February 1812 the Brecon and Abergavenny Canal at last joined the Monmouthshire Canal at Pontymoile, sixteen long years after cutting started in 1796. There has at various times been speculation and surmise about the exact arrangements for water control at Pontymoile junction, complicated by the fact that from the 1840s the Monmouthshire company, by then the Monmouthshire Railway and Canal Company, were supplying the Newport Dock with water, some of which at least had flowed down the Brecon and Abergavenny Canal. This article attempts to describe the situation as it started and evolved. It owes much to the help and advice of Monmouthshire, Brecon & Abergavenny Canals Trust archivist Ray Haydon, to whom I am enormously grateful for hours of mutual questioning and rumination.

Provision of Stop Gates at the Junction

Once the Brecon & Abergavenny Canal [B&A] had joined the Monmouthshire Canal [MC] it was inevitable that water flow at the junction would be a matter for consideration so it is no surprise to find a Brecon & Abergavenny Canal Company [B&ACCo] committee minute of 13 December 1810, while the final section of the B&A was under construction, ordering “that a Stop Gate be set up at or near the Junction at Pontymoile”. Such a stop gate would be able both to isolate the B&A from the MC for maintenance and to prevent water from the MC flowing into the B&A in the event of a breach in the B&A. This was presumably its intended purpose. However, it could not prevent flow of water from the B&A into the MC in the event of a breach in the latter. For this an additional gate would be required.

No B&ACCo or Monmouthshire Canal Co. [MCCo] minute ordering a second gate has been found but there can be no doubt that at some stage a second gate was added. William Wells’ 1825 map of the MC very clearly shows two single gates on the B&A, at the ends of an apparent lock chamber just above the final bridge at the junction. Confirmation is provided by references in reports of annual inspections in the 1820s, viz. “The Stop Gates at Pontymoile to be immediately repaired” (24 April 1822), “Ordered that no Boat or other Vessel be suffered or allowed to pass at Night through the Lock Gates of this Company at the Junction with the Monmouthshire Canal at Pontymoile” (25 April 1822), “The Stop Gates at the Junction House to be repaired.” (16 & 17 June 1824), and “The ... Stop Gates at the Junction to be repaired” (27 & 28 June 1825).



part of Wells' map of 1825

So by the early 1820s, if not long before, there were two stop gates at the junction. In fact it is almost certain that there were two gates from the creation of the junction, as the report in B&ACCo minutes of the celebratory opening cruise on 7th February 1812 refers to “proceeding to, and through, the Stop Lock at the Junction into the Monmouthshire Canal”. The reference to ‘Stop Lock’ leaves little doubt that there were gates at the ends of a chamber, giving the overall general appearance of a lock. This is supported by a later minute (25 April 1822) noting that Boatmen were “very irregular in passing the Lock at Pontymoile”.

See Footnote 1.

Stop Gates normally open

It would seem likely that the gates were normally left open, presumably loosely fixed so that they could be released when required. There is no evidence that the gates had paddles and without paddles there would always have been the risk of being unable to open a gate if it had swung to and a head of water had built up on one side.

Supporting evidence for open gates is provided by the water level problem that arose at or soon after the joining of the two canals. The B&ACCo minute of 13 December 1810 ordering a stop gate at or near the junction stipulated: “The bottom sill of such Gate to be set upon the same level with the bottom level of the Monmouthshire Canal as specified by the act of parliament” but on 22 June 1812 the MC committee wrote to the B&ACCo informing them that “... the Brecknock & Abergavenny Canal is on too low a Level ... the Proprietors of the Monmouthshire Canal as well as the Traders experience great Inconvenience and apprehend great Loss, from the manner in which the Junction has been made...”. The problem that was occurring – of water from the MC feeding into the B&A reducing the level in the MC – would not have occurred if the Stop Gates were normally shut.

(The water level problem was temporary. A joint site meeting of B&A and MC subcommittees on 1st August 1812 concluded that “the Waste Weirs on the new part of the Brecknock and Abergavenny Canal were Three Inches lower than the Waste Wear at the Head of the 12th Lock on the Pontypool line of the Monmouthshire Canal, which was partly accounted for by the Waste Weirs of the new part of the Brecknock and Abergavenny Canal not being raised to the height of the Weirs made on the old part of that Concern – The Banks of the new part being now settled, the Brecknock and Abergavenny Canal Company are raising those Weirs to the same height as the Wear on the old part of the Line ...”)

Change in the 1840s and 50s

From the 1840s the situation became progressively more complicated. There were two main reasons for this, not wholly unconnected. The first was the opening of the Newport Dock in 1842, following the passing of

The Newport Dock Act of 1835. The second was the decision of the MCCo to diversify into railways, using powers granted to them in the Newport and Pontypool Railway Act of 1845. (The provisions of the Newport and Pontypool Railway Amendment Act of 1848 including the renaming of the canal company as “The Monmouthshire Railway and Canal Company” [MRCCo]).

To suit the first, the MRCCo wanted to supply water from the canal to the new Dock. To suit the second, they wanted to close their canal arm from Pontymoile to Pontnewynydd and replace it by railway, thereby cutting off the supply of water from their feeder reservoir in the Glyn valley and making them more reliant on the B&ACCo for water supply, both for boat traffic still travelling along the B&A and on the main line of the MC and for supplying the new Dock. There was no provision in the B&ACCo or MCCo Acts of Parliament for the water extracted from local sources, such as the River Usk at Brecon, to be used for purposes other than navigation but neither was it expressly forbidden. The Acts merely required that source supplies to other users such as Mills should not be prejudiced. The Dock Act had given the Dock Company power to construct a watercourse from the River Ebbw to supply the dock with water but it is clear the company were also using water from the canal as on 25 July 1844 the B&ACCo committee resolved that legal opinion should be taken whether the B&A could “claim compensation from the Monmouthshire Canal Undertaking by reason of the drainage occasioned by New Dock at Newport”.

1845 MRCCo proposal to close the canal in Newport

Water supply to the Dock wasn't the only matter of concern to the B&ACCo. In January 1845 the MC committee had resolved to include in the company's Bill to Parliament powers “to shut up the canal from Crumlin to the junction with the Pontypool line and to make arrangements with the Brecon and Abergavenny Canal Company to shut up the Canal from Pontypool to Newport.” This resolution doesn't indicate that much objection was expected from the B&ACCo but the latter were certainly concerned and on 25 March resolved to petition the House of Commons that if legislation were sought to allow the Monmouthshire Canal Navigation to make a railway from Newport to Pontypool “it should not interfere with the interests and rights of this Company”. In April the B&A committee “Resolved that it be recommended to the General Assembly that strenuous opposition be made to the following clauses contained in the Newport and Pontypool Rail-Way bill ... 105, 120 & 121 ...”. These clauses presumably related to closure of the canal between Pontypool and Newport. The General Assembly, meeting on the same day (24 April), agreed to pay the expenses of committee members “watching the Newport and Pontypool Rail Way Bill before the House of Commons” and “Resolved that a petition against the Newport and Pontypool Rail Way Bill be presented to the House of Commons by Colonel Wood the member for this County”. In the event B&A concerns prevailed and the Act as passed contained no clause for closing the canal from Pontypool to Newport.

1851: B&ACCo's renewed concern over the use of 'their' water.

The canal below Pontypool remained open and complete for a time. However, by 1851 the B&ACCo were again concerned and on 31 July the B&A's committee decided that the company's Solicitor would request the Monmouthshire Canal Company to “discontinue the practice of the Monmouthshire Canal Company allowing the Newport Dock Company to take their supply of water from the Canal to the detriment of the Navigation of the Brecon and Abergavenny Canal”. It is not entirely clear why the B&ACCo were getting agitated at this stage. The apparent implication of the B&A committee's decision is that the new Dock was taking too much water from the canal, lowering the level and hindering navigation. Perhaps this was indeed the B&A's only cause for concern as the main line of the Monmouthshire was intact and now had the advantage of a branch into the new Dock offering canal boats the opportunity to enter the dock and load and unload cargoes directly to and from ships, instead of transshipping goods across the narrow strip of land between the canal and the riverside wharfs on the Usk.

1852: MRCCo plans for temporary closure to facilitate railway works

Any feelings of relief that the MC main line from Pontypool to Newport would remain open were short-lived. On 29th January 1852 the B&A committee considered “Notice given by the Monmouthshire Rail-Way & Canal Co of their intention to apply to the next Session of Parliament for power amongst other things to stop divert or alter their or any other Canal”. The committee resolved that “the Solicitor be instructed to apply to the Monmouthshire Canal Company to obtain an explanation of such Notice and generally to watch the progress of their application to Parliament”. A special meeting of the B&A committee on 11th February studied the MRCCo bill, took exception to the preamble, clauses 30 & 31, the “prescribed mode of computation” and “other aspects” and resolved to petition Parliament to oppose the bill. The following day, 12 February, the committee visited Newport and “viewed the mode in which the Newport Dock Company take their supply of water chiefly during the Nep (sic) Tides from the Monmouthshire Canal”. They reported that the water was taken in two ways: first through a Lock from the Canal to the Dock and Secondly by a Weir with a Grating ... discharging the Water of the Canal into a Culvert leading to the Dock” but added “your Committee cannot at present report whether more water is taken from your Canal than is necessary for the due navigation of the Monmouthshire Canal until it can be ascertained by careful survey during the summer or dry period of the Year ... ”.

The B&ACCo fears were to some extent allayed and at a committee on 19 February 1852 their Solicitor was instructed to withdraw the petition against the Monmouthshire Railway & Canal Company Bill “on being satisfied that the present rights of this Company as to tonnage are preserved, that the Monmouthshire Company have no plans to stop their Canal below its junction with this Canal without the Consent of this Company and that any power of the Monmouthshire Comp^y. to take the water of this Company other than that they now legally enjoy will not be sanctioned.”

B&ACCo concerns about interruption of navigation and loss of income

It is clear from the minutes of a special committee meeting of the MRCCo held on 31st March, attended by B&A committee member William Williams, that the B&ACCo were not too concerned by the proposal to close the Pontnewynydd arm of the MC but considered the clauses empowering the stopping up of the main line of the Canal in Newport for six, or even four, weeks “very objectionable”. Subsequently, on 16 April 1852, a B&A deputation comprising Joseph Bailey Esq, B&A chairman John Lloyd Esq and Mr. Powell met the committee of the Monmouthshire Company “to arrange terms by which the Petition of this Company against the Monmouthshire Rail-Way and Canal Co Bill might be withdrawn.” Mr Bailey on behalf of Messrs Bailey and Mr Powell on behalf of the Clydach Iron Company stressed “that the traffic of the Freighters on the Brecon and Abergavenny Canal should not be impeded by the letting off the water in the Newport & Pontypool Canal for the purpose of constructing the proposed new works through the Borough of Newport”. The Monmouthshire Company agreed to minimise delays and make good any deficiency in the income of the B&ACCo “on that part of their Trade which is also carried on the Monmouthshire Canal during the period that the Water may be let off from the Newport and Pontypool Canal ... during new [railway construction] Works through the Borough of Newport” and the B&A deputation agreed to withdraw opposition. Later, a MRCCo sub committee meeting on 22nd September “Resolved that a siding be formed at Coed y gric to the Canal for the purpose of transferring traffic to and from the Brecon Canal on the stoppage of the Canal in Newport.”

Late 1852: another threat of canal closure

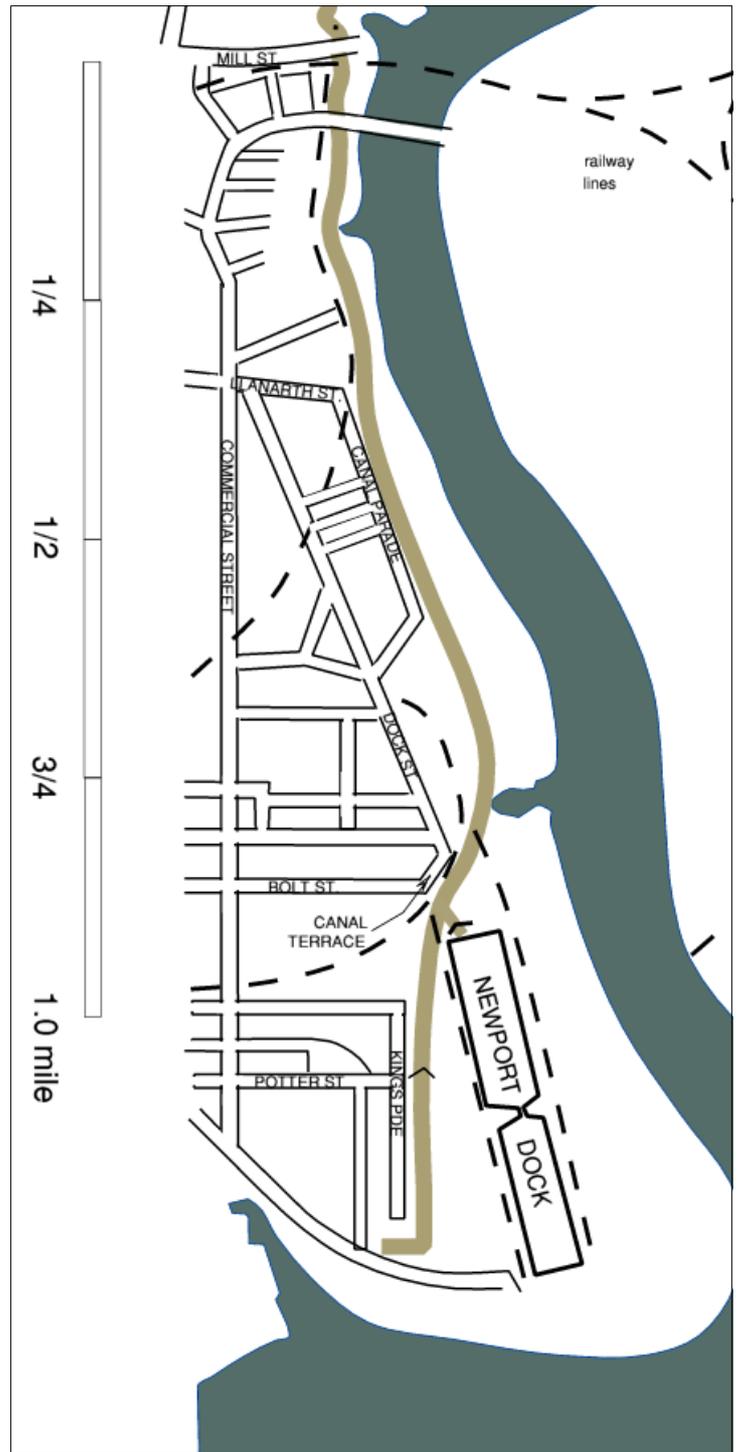
Once again, the B&ACCo’s sense of relief was to be short-lived. A meeting of an MC subcommittee on 27th September 1852 reviewed the MRCCo’s financial position and “agreed to recommend that application be made to Parliament in the ensuing Session for the following purposes, viz:

...

- 3rd Power to stop up the Canal between the Newport Mill Pond and the Potter Street Lock
- 4th Power to make traffic arrangements with the Newport Dock Company and otherwise connect their business with that of this Company either by amalgamation of Capital by Lease or by Purchase”

The MRCCo’s Chief Clerk was instructed to endeavour to arrange a conference between their Sub Committee and the Committee of the Brecon & Abergavenny Canal Company on the subject of permanently closing the Canal in Newport. (The Chief Clerk had in July been ordered to ascertain “whether the Committee of the Brecon Canal Company contemplate an extension of the Railway system to Brecon as an early decision on that point will effect very materially the description and cost of the Works proposed to be made in Newport and render unnecessary the continuance of the Canal in Newport.”)

The conference between the two committees took place on 21st October 1852. The MC sub committee “stated that it was the intention of the MR&CCoy to apply to Parliament for powers to permanently close the Canal within the Borough of Newport, as it was considered that great accommodation would be afforded to the Freighters and trade of the district by all the Wharfs in Newport having an unbroken connection with the Western Valleys, the Pontypool and Hereford Railways, whilst at the same time arrangements might be made for transshipping and conveying commodities passing to or from the Brecon Canal and Newport without the owner’s incurring extra expense or inconvenience. The Brecon and Abergavenny Canal Company stated that they could not discuss the subject of arrangements for Freighters as they sat as a Canal Committee only, and must oppose by all means in their power the proposed application to Parliament, but were ready to entertain any proposition for a purchase of their property and intimated that they could only consider the subject of closing the Canal favourably if an offer were made to guarantee the present income arising from traffic with Newport. The Deputation having replied that they had no such proposition to make then withdrew.”



The final mile of canal in Newport

The BA&CCo’s General Assembly meeting on the same day, 21st October, resolved that the Monmouthshire Canal and Rail Way Company’s proposal “to shut up a portion of their Canal would be highly prejudicial” and resolved “that this Company would oppose by every means in their power any attempt of the Monmouthshire Company to effect their object”. The following January the company’s Solicitor was instructed to oppose the clause in the MRCCo bill that provided for the stoppage of a portion of the Monmouthshire Canal in the Borough of Newport and this resolve was confirmed at the General Assembly in April 1853 where, Sir Joseph Bailey having called attention to a proposed clause providing for

a supply of water to the docks, it was “Resolved that the bill be opposed in every possible way And this the other proposed additions and alterations do not at all remove the objections of this company to the Bill”. Clearly, concern was no longer just directed at temporary hindrance during railway works but at plans to close part of the MC permanently and to legalise the supply of water taken from the B&A to the Dock.

The MRCCo sub committee meeting on 13th May 1853 reported a meeting in London between the Chief Clerk and Sir Joseph Bailey and others, at which Sir Joseph had “wholly objected” to the bill and suggested that the opposition of the B&ACCo should be overcome by the MRCCo purchasing the company, naming £85 per £100 Share as terms which he thought to be fair and acceptable to the Brecon Canal Co. The sub committee met again on 31st May. “The opposition of the Brecon Canal Co to this Co’s Bill in Parliament was reconsidered but it appeared that no arrangement could be made by which the same might be overcome.”

A further attempt at agreement took place on 14th June, at which “a Deputation from the Committee of the Brecon Canal Co declined the proposal for this Committee to charge on the Pontypool Railway for traffic passing between Newport and the Brecon Canal only half the tolls now charged on the Pontypool Canal on condition that the Brecon Canal Co assented to the closing of the Canal in the Borough of Newport.”

1854: The planned temporary closure of the canal in Newport takes place.

Despite the B&ACCo’s objections the Parliamentary Bill was passed on 15 Aug 1853 but with no specific powers to close any part of the Monmouthshire Canal in Newport. In April 1854 the MC gave the B&A notice that work would commence on 22nd May for a period not exceeding three months. There were periodic exchanges between April and July 1854 between the two companies about the length and inconvenience of the stoppage in Newport, which temporarily cut B&A canal trade off from its transhipment routes to the riverside wharfs.

On the completion of the works navigation was restored at least as far south as the junction between the canal and the Newport Dock. There can be no doubt about this as the closure of this section was one of the purposes of the Act of 1879, over twenty years later.

The short section of canal southwards from the canal/dock junction at the South end of Dock Street to Potter Street Lock also apparently remained in water for a time – the MRCCo contracted with William Fleetwood to excavate and remove the mud from the Canal between the Dock Feeder and Potter Street Lock and to construct a culvert from Potter Street Lock to the River Usk in 1854. However, on 24 July 1867 the MC committee “Resolved that the Seal of the Company be affixed to the agreement with the Tredegar Wharf Company for the stopping up of the Canal in Newport between the South end of Dock Street and Potter Street Lock and for other Works”. This led to the closure of the ¼ mile section from the canal/dock junction to Potter Street Lock (owned by the MRCCo) and the ¼ mile length from there to the end, owned by the Tredegar Wharf Co.

Peace for a time

Following completion of the 1854 works there was apparently a brief respite from confrontation until an MC committee meeting on 20 May 1856, at which representatives of the Dock Company stressed that it would “be important to the Dock Company that the flow of water from the Canal should not be interrupted during the progress of their [dock extension] Works, by the stoppage of the Canal for repairs ...” The B&ACCo were well aware that, while the water from the Usk at Brecon was not actually theirs, they were providing and maintaining at their own expense the channel by which the water reached the Monmouthshire canal and the Newport Dock. On 6 August 1857 the B&ACCo’s solicitors were requested to take Counsel’s opinion on the rights of the Monmouthshire Canal Co to take water from the Brecon Canal “having reference to the increased current in the canal & the supply of water to the Newport Docks”. On 28th

January, 1858, Counsel's opinion having been obtained, the B&A Clerk was "instructed to allow no more water to pass than absolutely necessary for the navigation until satisfactory terms are arranged". The committee further agreed "That this Company is prepared to treat with the Dock Co. for the supply of water at an annual sum of not less than seven hundred pounds"

1859: Conversion of the lock at Pontymoile junction to a Stop Lock

The Dock Company were apparently not prepared to pay for Usk/B&A water they had previously received for nothing, courtesy of the MRCCo, and on 29th April 1858 the B&A committee "Resolved that a level lock be put up at the junction & no more water allowed to pass than necessary for the navigation of the traffic passing on the Brecon Canal."

The Dock Company were not the only affected parties and on 1 March 1859 petitions from the Monmouthshire Canal & Rail Way Co., the Newport Dock Company and Thomas Brown of Newport Mill, claiming the right to a supply of water to their respective Works, were presented to a special meeting of the B&A committee. The committee would have none of it and "Resolved that this Committee on the part of this Canal expressly deny any such rights beyond that of the first mentioned Company to such supply of Water for the purpose of the traffic to their Canal from the Canal of this Company". They followed this on 4 August 1859 by rescinding the previous offer of water at a fixed price and resolving that the resolution for "putting into erection a level lock at the junction ... be carried into effect when the water of this Canal is let out for repairs on the 20th. instant"

Previously the 'lock' at Pontymoile had comprised a chamber with two normally open stop gates, one gate to control flow of water from one direction and one gate to control water from the other. Now there was to be a 'level stop lock' – two gates, presumably with paddles, to control the flow of water downstream. Fortunately there was no byewash so when there was no boat movement surplus water would flow over the weir into the Afon Llywd, upstream of the junction. It would not pass downstream to the Newport Dock.

There is little to confirm this on site today. There are no gate remains but the lock chamber has what appear to be the remains of gate recesses at the ends with curved walls opposite to accommodate the ends of swinging gates.

See Footnote 2

Response by the MRCCo.

Approaches from the MRCCo followed at intervals. In September 1859 they resolved to "give formal notice to the Brecon and Abergavenny Canal Company not to restrict the flow of water from their Canal, they having lately erected a Stop Gate at Pontymoile and by means of it prevented the free flow of the sufficiency of water for the Navigation of this Company's Canal". In October it was decided, following correspondence with the B&ACCo, "that there is no necessity for an interview on the subject with the directors of the Brecon Canal as proposed by them". The MRCCo evidently knew when they were on shaky ground and five years later, on 20 September 1864, the committee rather gently instructed Mr Harrison "to write and inquire whether it is the intention of the Brecon Canal Company to continue to obstruct the flow of water as heretofore"

Securing the supply of water was no doubt one of the principal factors that just a month later, in October 1864, influenced the MRCCo to agree terms for purchasing the B&ACCo.

Footnote 1.

Interestingly, the Wells map show the gate beams on the offside of the chamber. The steep slope of the offside bank immediately upstream of the bridge is not a reason to doubt this. Old photographs show the ground to have been much more nearly level at the waterside than it is now.

It is at first sight surprising that the B&ACCo Plans Book of 1822, containing plans drawn up by David Davies, shows neither gates nor lock chamber at Pontymoile, merely a tapering of the channel immediately above the final bridge. David Davies had been the trusted surveyor and land agent employed by the company throughout the construction period of the canal and its tramroads. However his plans had been drawn up during land purchase and construction, much earlier than their compilation into the Plans Book, and there is some evidence that final updating did not always occur. For example, no gates are shown on the bottom lock at Llangynidr, while at Pontymoile not only is the lock not shown but the acquisition of the land for Junction Cottage (built in 1813) is also not shown.

Another slight puzzle is presented by the inspection committee's report in June 1826 "Four new Stop Gates wanted at the Junction Pontymoile the present ones being decayed and unfit for use". The reference to four gates must surely be an error – perhaps by a scribe writing a report from scribbled notes at the end of a long day in the field – as no other reference to four gates at the junction has been found in any B&ACCo source.

Footnote 2

Following closure of the MC's Glyn Valley reservoir, substantial loss of MC water into the B&A was no longer a possibility and this may explain the apparent stop gate loss and neglect implied by the item in John Kirk's report of January 1857: "Junction Stop Gate Not in working order" and the fact that only one gate (at the top end) is shown on the 1840s tithe map.