

The Grand Canal Celebrations of 1812

to mark the connecting of the Brecon & Abergavenny Canal
to the Monmouthshire Canal

In February 1812 the Brecon & Abergavenny Canal was at last linked with the Monmouthshire Canal, nearly twenty years after the passing of the Act of March 1793 authorising the B&A. The exact date isn't known with certainty but it was undoubtedly early in February as, in his report of 30 April 1812 to the Annual Meeting, Benjamin Griffiths the Agent (i.e. general manager) referred to "the two months that the canal has been open" and William Crosley the Engineer for the construction of the extension referred to the trade that had been carried "in the ten weeks ... from the opening in February last"

The date usually quoted for the link is 7th February, as on that date the canal committee met at the Angel Inn, Abergavenny, and the minutes of their deliberations start with the following report:-

[The Committee set out to view the Canal towards Pontymoile and at Mr. Waddington's Boat House in Lanover, met him, and embarked there on board his Boat, and proceeded in the same all the way from thence to, and through, the Stop Lock at the Junction into the Monmouthshire Canal - being the first entrance from this Canal into that - Amidst the acclamation of a very numerous body of the inhabitants as a token of their Joy at an Event so very beneficial to this Country - And the Committee have in their progress the satisfaction to find the whole of the Canal in such a state as now to be throughout perfectly Navigable having Three feet and a half of Water, And the Banks, Bridges and Towing Path requiring no very inconsiderable additions to render them compleat —]

The minute book records that the committee meeting was held by adjournment at "at Ten O Clock in the Forenoon" of 7th February, continuing a meeting started the previous day. The account of the voyage precedes the report of the business on 7th February suggesting that the voyage took place before the adjourned meeting. However, this would have been difficult given sunrise at 6.30 a.m., a boat trip of 7½ miles from the boathouse (by bridge 81) that could hardly have taken less than two hours there and two hours back, followed by a four mile journey to Abergavenny, taking another hour or so, i.e. a total of about five hours, to be fitted in before the meeting at 10 a.m. And that's without making any allowance for celebratory speeches, comfort stops, hearty breakfasts, etc. A possible interpretation of the order of events in the minute book is that the boat trip actually took place on the previous day, 6th February, after the adjournment of the meeting. However, a recently discovered letter to *The Cambrian* leaves little doubt that the trip did indeed take place on the 7th February, presumably after the conclusion of the committee meeting that morning.

Published in *The Cambrian* on 12 February 1812, the letter begins:-

"Mr. Editor,
It will, doubtless, be a considerable gratification to many of your readers, to be informed that the long expected

junction of the Brecon and Abergavenny canal with that of Monmouthshire, has been at length compleated, so that an uninterrupted communication by water from the town of Brecon to Newport, and the great estuary of the Severn, is now opened.

The Committee, attended by their engineer, Mr. Crossley, made their first passage along the lower part of the line on Friday, (Feb 7th) [sic] from Llanover to the point of junction at Pontymoile, where they were greeted with the loudest acclamations of joy and congratulation by the numerous inhabitants of Pontypool and its vicinity, who were assembled on the banks awaiting their arrival.”

There seems little doubt that from the style and the reference to “acclamations of joy” etc. that the letter is from the same hand as the report of the voyage in the minute book. The letter refers at some length to the usefulness of the canal from a commercial point of view but also goes on very farsightedly to recognise the canal’s appeal to visitors.

“To every description of spectators it will present an interest. The traveller will be attracted by the pleasant level of its banks — the merchant, the manufacturers, and the agriculturist, will acknowledge the utility of its waters, whereby they are enabled to extend their speculations, and increase their trade; whilst the enamoured painter will be lost in admiration of the rich and varied scenery, which, at every changing point, is presented to his view. — Canals, it is true, from their ditch-like appearance, and dull uniformity of line, are seldom regarded as objects of picturesque beauty, but in the one before us, we have an exception, in which art may, with perfect truth, be stiled the Handmaid of Nature — for she contributes to display her loveliness to the best advantage, winding round steep acclivities, cutting through precipices, and crossing with gigantic strides profound ravines; she has revealed to light those close recesses, which hitherto had been impervious to the human step, and disclosed a thousand fascinating charms, which must otherwise have remained unnoticed, and unknown.”

Why had it taken so long to complete the link? Because the money had run out!

The 1793 Act provided for £100,000 to be raised in one thousand £100 shares, with provision for this to be increased by making further calls on the existing shares to a maximum of £150,000, i.e. £150 per share. The original estimate of Thomas Dadford Jnr., the Engineer for the canal, does not survive but Hugh Henshall’s independent estimate made in 1794 does and the £150,000 authorised by the Act looks a generous provision when compared with Henshall’s £85,632-10-0. However, also to be paid for were the company’s first tramroads, including the Clydach Rail Road, constructed as a quick means of getting income from the coal trade; and the interest payments the company made in accordance with the Act on share ‘Calls’ (purchase payments made in instalments) in the years before trade enabled the company to pay dividends.

By 1800 £30k had been spent on the tram roads and £10k on interest payments. But the bigger problem was the cost of canal construction. Costs were running well ahead of estimates, helped by such unintended

misfortunes as the collapse of much of the Ashford Tunnel during construction. Thoughts turned to completing the canal to Pontymoile by rail road instead of canal and Benjamin Outram was called in to report. Apart from favouring his own design of tramroad, with plain wheels and flanged rails, instead of the existing edge rails and flanged wheels favoured by the Dadfords, he dwelt at length on the relative merits of continuing by rail or canal. Tramroad would be cheaper to construct but haulage slightly more expensive and if constructed initially as a tramroad there would be extra costs for later conversion to canal.

The company decided to continue by canal but by 1804 the canal was complete only from Brecon to Govilon, twelve miles short of the intended junction at Pontymoile. A total of nearly £163,000 had been spent including £141k raised under the Act (the £150,000 authorised less £9k in defaults and arrears) and £3000 provided by the Monmouthshire as part of the agreement for the B&A to join the Monmouthshire, the rest coming from loans and from money set set aside from tolls and tonnages.

And there construction stopped. A further act of Parliament, passed in 1804 and authorising the raising of a further £80,000 “by optional loans or by creating new Shares or both” was largely a failure. A subscription list to raise the money by optional loan was opened in November 1805 but the rush to lend money, even with Interest at 5%, was notably underwhelming. Less than £20,000 had been subscribed by May 1807, when the General Assembly resolved that as soon as that sum had been subscribed the “Committee be authorised to the Execution thereof, beginning at the Junction with the Monmouthshire Canal at Pontymoile, and finishing in the first instance the Canal from Pontymoile to Mamhilad.”

Renewed pressure from the Monmouthshire Canal Company followed in October 1807 but all the B&A Canal Company could do was resolve “to compete the Canal as soon as circumstances will admit ... ”

At last in 1809 Richard Crawshay came to the rescue, offering to lend £30,000 towards the estimated £50,000 cost of completion. Others then followed, notably Lady Eleanor Fenn who loaned £8,100, and late in that year cutting started. Other loans were also made in the years up to completion, the total money on loan standing at £54k in 1813. These loans were secured on promissory notes (debentures) for which the lenders received a guaranteed return, equivalent to prevailing interest rates, but Crawshay was probably more concerned with completing a route for iron from Nantyglo Ironworks to Newport via the B&A and the Monmouthshire, rather than via the Monmouthshire alone. Lady Fenn’s nephew Edward Frere just wanted a good transport route to Newport for iron from the Clydach Ironworks but Crawshay himself may well have had competition in mind, foreseeing that the clause in the Act requiring the Monmouthshire to accept B&A tolls for goods passing through offered the prospect of playing one company off against the other. Certainly in the years that followed successive competitive tonnage reductions by the two canal companies took much of the profit from the iron trade.

It is by no means clear to me that the B&A actually gained by completing the link. It is possible that the company might have been more profitable by saving the costs of the extension and sticking with the existing trade, mainly coal and lime. I hope to have an answer by the time I finish my intended History of the Canal.

The short term result is clear enough. The ironmasters achieved the link they wanted and the debenture holders received a secure income, but the ordinary shareholders faced a complete loss of dividends as the income from tolls and tonnages was set aside to meet the rest of the extension costs. It was to be seven long years before dividend payments resumed and fifteen years before increasing dividend levels restored shareholders to the position they would have been in had the extension not been built.

And the Grand Celebrations of February 1812?

In short, and perhaps unsurprisingly, it seems there were almost none.

The event passed unrecorded in the Gloster and Hereford Journals (often used by the canal company for notices), despite the fact that the Hereford Journal in particular recorded B&A events. There is no definite record that church bells were rung, even though bells were sometimes rung to mark civic occasions. It would have also gone unrecorded in *The Cambrian* had it not been for the letter in the edition of 12th February mentioned above.

So what are we to make of the voyage and celebrations recorded in the minutes of 7 February 1812? I am very doubtful about the veracity of the words “amidst the acclamation of a very numerous body of the inhabitants as a token of their Joy at an Event so very beneficial to this Country” in the minute book and “they were greeted with the loudest acclamations of joy and congratulation by the numerous inhabitants of Pontypool and its vicinity” in the letter to *The Cambrian*. The boat was small (the boat house is small), the committee were few in number, and there could have been little or no provision for free goodies to mark the event – coal for the poor etc. It is, I believe, the only occasion where the word Joy appears in the B&A minutes. The B&A just didn’t do Joy – there was never much to be truly joyful about!

It’s my suspicion that a member of the committee thought that the importance of the event warranted a triumphal record and wrote suitable accounts for inclusion in the minutes and publication in *The Cambrian*. It’s not difficult to find a candidate. The Revd. Henry Thomas Payne, a member of the committee, was given to ‘waxing lyrical’ on occasion. For example, in his unpublished history of the early years of the canal he says of the initial enthusiasm in 1792/3 “general delirium seized the public mind ... spread with the rapidity of lightning (sic) ... elated beyond measure as their golden dreams”. Perhaps most tellingly Payne also used the words “apparently so beneficial to their interests” – shades of “so very beneficial to this country” in the account of the boat trip.

It is my belief that the entry of the boat into the Monmouthshire was witnessed by no more than a small number of local people and workmen but Mr. Payne said to his fellow committee members “this event is important and wants recording for posterity. Here’s a few words I’ve jotted down.”

But whatever the financial benefits or otherwise to the shareholders of the time, we who use the canal today benefit hugely from their unintended legacy to us.

So let’s celebrate – and not let history get in the way of a good story!

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