

# John Ward and the Kennet and Avon Canal: Part 2

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*Part one of this paper outlined the role of John Ward up to the granting of the Act of Parliament which authorised the construction of the Kennet and Avon Canal. In this part the events are described, as recorded by Ward, during the construction and in first years of operation of the Canal*

The Canal Company, now authorised to cut a Canal from Newbury to Bath, required a seal to put to its official documents and Ward, ever anxious to see that such administrative matters were properly seen to, had his brother make a drawing, 'which will show London on the one side, Bristol on the other with a canal and aqueduct and a boat to show the connexion the canal forms'.

The Earl of Ailesbury was requested to approach his son-in-law, the Earl of Moira, to obtain a specimen of the Ashby Canal seal as a guide. On 28 May 1794 Ward wrote:

I thank you for the specimen of the seal of the Ashby Canal, and enclose my brother's drawing. We have shown it to a working engraver, Walter Jones, no 6 Hannover Court, Near Aldgate Church, who says he will engrave it for 14 Gns and I'm more for a label at the bottom for which we shall want a clever motto.

It will take seven weeks to engrave, perhaps Mr Partell can tell if that is a fair price. I shall be glad of this drawing again - I think the Ashby one is too large, it will use a great quantity of wax. I should also be obliged to your Lordship for the Ashby Drawing again to mow to our next meeting and to know what the engraving will cost.

A suitable motto was a matter for some considerable thought, on the 17 July Ward wrote again:

The committee desired me to return their thanks to Your Lordship and Dr Warton for the trouble you have both so obligingly taken about a motto for their seal. Several of those mentioned were extremely applicable, but some of our committee wishing for an English motto, Mr Price and Mr Greenwood are deputed to search the Bible, and Mr Wither the English books for one, which if they succeed in a motto in our language will probably be adopted,

Ward did not always have his way with the committee, and evidently there was some degree of dissension over this matter; nothing more is heard of the subject until the last day of 1794, when Ward wrote in disgust:

The seal adopted at last by the committee is a very paltry one with no device, nothing but the name of the Company in print,

Indeed it is true the seal is poor when set against the ornate examples of other canal companies, and we can but wonder why a body which was to build one of the most pleasing of canals should have adopted such an insignificant means of formalising its documents .

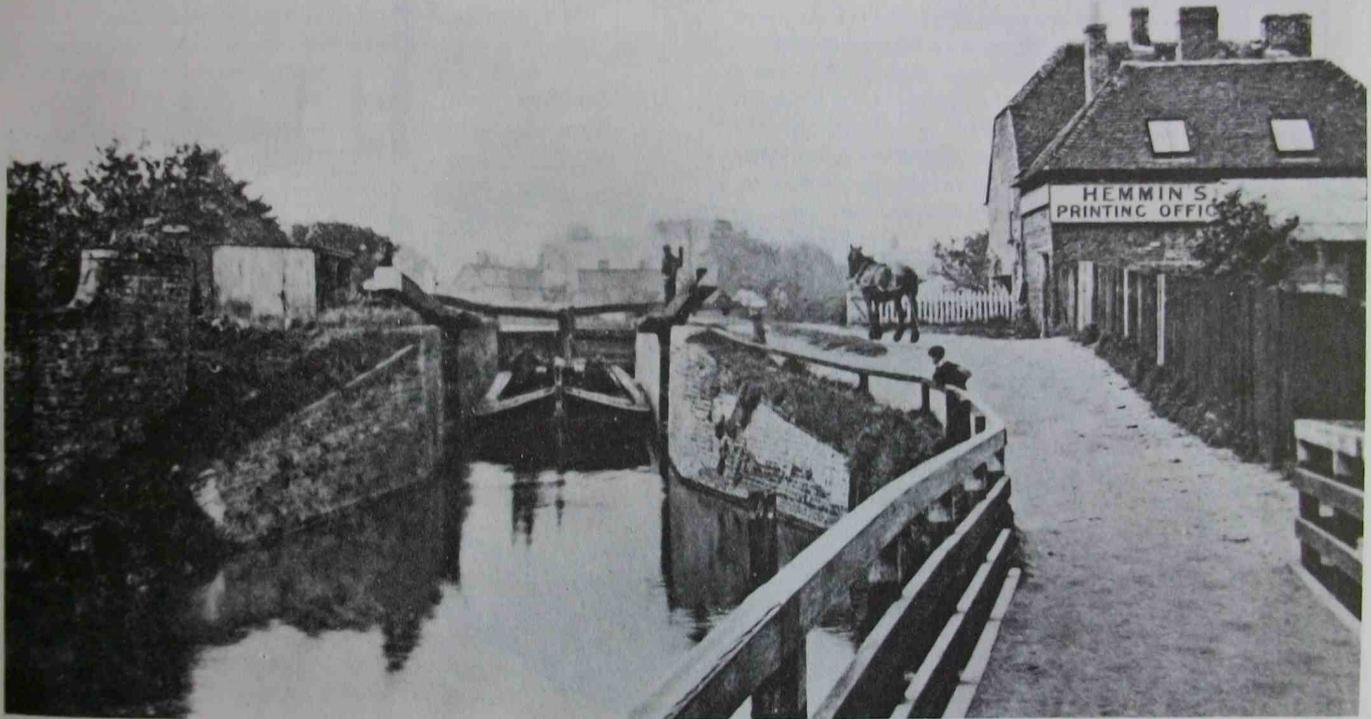
Another matter which required urgent agreement was the size of the Canal, At the time, it was limited to either a narrow

canal with locks able to take boats of 70 feet length and 7 feet beam, or a broad canal with locks of 14 feet width and the same length. There was strong support for a narrow canal from Francis Page of Newbury, who imagined increased cargoes for his fleet of barges, and from Mr Poore who thought there would be a more regular serving, Ward wrote on 19 June 1794:

I must request your lordship to suspend your opinion about large or small canal till you have the best information which we hope to obtain from Mr (Penine), Mr Jessop, the Duke of Bridgewater and others. The conveyance of goods from London to Bristol without shifting from boat to boat is the grand object of a large canal - I have advised with the solicitor for the Grand Junction who advises a large one and says they are in treaty with the Coventry and other canal companies to enlarge their small ones. The not shifting the cargoes is one of the circumstances which must give us superiority over the Thames and Severn Canal, which can carry cheaper than any. I cannot see how Mr Page is interested so much in a large as a small canal, as the goods in a small boat must be taken out at Newbury and put on board his barges to go on to London, whereas a 50 ton barge would go without his help. Mr Poole thinks small boats would set off more regularly and return sooner, if that is so, there will be small barges as well as large for the same purposes, but he forgets that small boats can navigate on a large canal. The water used by a large canal is much less than by a small one, which is in favour of a larger, and of the landowners. . . . The 50 ton boats require no more attendants than the 25 ton and are navigated nearly as cheap.

To further investigate the pros and cons of wide and narrow canals Ward was either sent, or went of his own accord. to visit his friends in Staffordshire. Four days later he wrote from Cheadle:

I am sorry Mr Poore did not thoroughly understand me about a wide canal - so far from being of an opinion in its favour at that time - I had almost persuaded myself to think a narrow one preferable but from everything that I can learn in this part of the country a wide canal is so much superior that the difference of expense (especially if we do without a tunnel) ought not to be regarded. My uncle John Bill is one of the committee of the Trent and Mersey Canal and says that they have been considering of widening theirs but though they have not determined upon what would amount to almost the expence of a new canal, he has no doubt but when a new one is beginning which may be made wide or narrow ,a wide one should be preferred, especially on a line where the extent of the trade cannot be computed and where goods carried on a narrow canal must be reladen on coming with the Thames - he gave me an old newspaper in which is a letter on this subject addressed to the Birmingham and Worcester Canal Company. which I send in another cover, and thank Your Lordship, if you will be so good to forward by the post to Mr Dundas. The reason a wide canal takes less water than a narrow one is this. it takes but little more water (I mean that the quantity is not double) to pass a boat of 50 tons through a lock than a boat of 25 tons, and a wide canal forms a reservoir which collects water enough in wet seasons to last a long while of itself. I might observe in answer to Mr Poores saying that he thought a narrow canal would be more advantageous and take less of your land than a wide one, a wide one could be more



*Newbury Lock . The commodious barge shows the advantage of a broad over a narrow canal.*

*Photo Michael Ware*

ornamental and that if my wishes were guided by what would be most pleasing at Tottenham park I should wish for a wide one.

As the year wore on further evidence in favour of wide canals accumulated ,and on 26 October Ward wrote, 'Mr Wilkes is the Leicester Gentleman . . . He informes me that the Ashby Company have determined on a canal for large boats of the same dimensions as ours . . .'

The protagonists in favour of n narrow canal continued to argue their cause, and on 22 February 1795 Ward wrote in some agitation:

What Mr Dundee said to your Lordship determines me upon going instead of sanding Merriman to the sub committee meeting. I do not consider my attendance on subcommittee meetings as expected, but this is on a particular occassion, I do not know that any attempt will be made in favour of narrow canals. I mentioned to Mr Dundas some arguments on that side the question for his private consideration, the most important of which is in the article of the water of which it is said vastly more will be used by a wide than a narrow canal. Billingsley is principally interested in the Coal Canal which is to be narrow and that leads Mr Dundas to suppose he wishes ours to be of the same width as a convenience to theirs. I do not however agree with him in that - they have determined on making theirs large enough for boats I think of 8 tons only - the smallest size ever talked on for ours was 25 tons boats. The Wilts and Berks Canal did not pretend at first to rival us in carriage. They only talked of being carriers of the internal trade of the country through which they passed, but now they talk of their carrying between Bristol and London and of carrying coal on the Thames which must be in opposition to ours and therefore extra news.

Evidently, Ward's arguments in favour of a broad canal were accepted. There is no further correspondence on the matter, and as we know the canal was so built.

Another matter concerning the engineering of the canal was to be a matter of much correspondence. In June 1794 Ward wrote from Leeds:

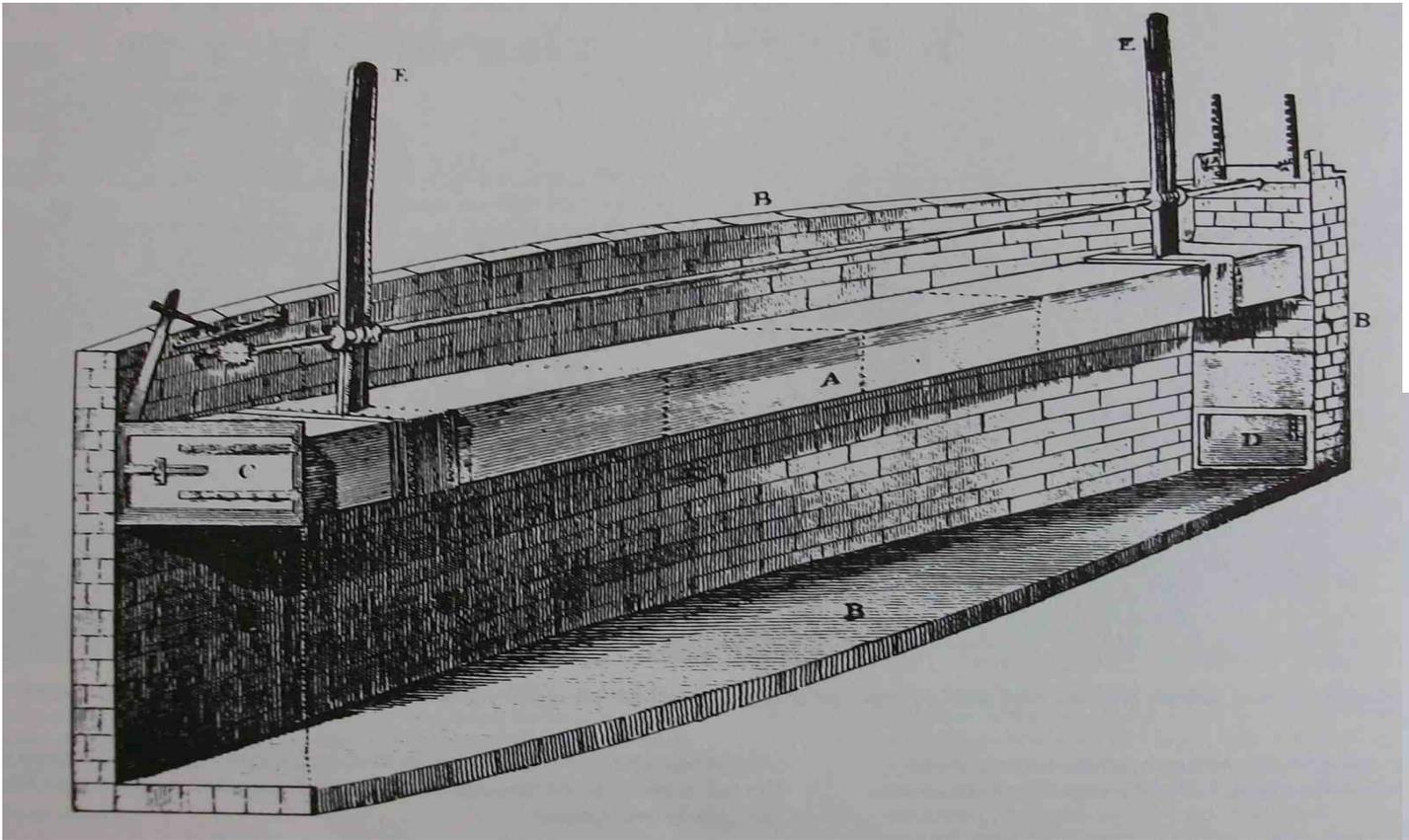
I saw Mr Gilbert at Cotton on Tuesday night. He was very earnest in recommending it to our committee to send Rennie into Shropshire to see a cassoon which is calculated to raise and sink boats from one level to another without waste of water. Weldon is the patentee and the cassoon is at Rockwardine near Lilleshall in Shropshire. If would save a tunnel and a steam engine at Crofton or Wolfhall I should be very glad for I do not know but a steam engine which will be necessary if a tunnel is not adopted) will be a greater nuisance than a tunnel and deep cutting on account of the smoke it will send up.

Mr Gilbert was the agent of the Duke of Bridgewater, and thought by some to have played a considerable part in the construction of the underground canal system in the Duke's mines at Worsley and of the Bridgewater canal. His advice was evidently acted upon, for there is a mention in a letter of January 1795 that Weldon was in Devizes, and was being taken by Merriman, Ward's clerk to the head level; a week later he was said to have seen Mr Dundas,, and that Ward was endeavouring to give him all the encouragement he could.

Following Weldon's visit Ward began to express some concern about the proposal to use the caisson , in February he wrote:

Waldons cassoon is tor boats at only 8 tons - besides it is so great a concern that it will be highly proper for us to see a large one or two erected and used where it can be changed tor locks, if not answering as between Crofton and Wootton Rivers, before we trust to having a whole sat made at Devizes. which in case of failure would stop our trade tor several years.

Further doubts were expressed the following month:



A DESCRIPTION OF  
ROBERT WELDON'S

**HYDROSTATICK or CAISSON-LOCK**

Which is now building and nearly completed

On the SOMERSET COAL-CANAL near COOME-HAY,

ABOUT THREE MILES FROM BATH.

AS many impediments arise in the progress of Canals; First, From a want of water to supply locks in dry seasons and elevated situations;

2dly. In crossing valleys by expensive aqueducts;

3dly. Tunneling through hills and high grounds;

And 4thly, The great delay occasioned by passing many locks where the unevenness of the country renders it unavailing for canals;

R. Weldon, after having devoted many years study and indefatigable labour to avoid these difficulties, and to accomplish this great object, now offers to the publick a description of his Hydrostatick or Caisson Lock.

The drawing annexed presents a perspective view of the machine or contrivance by which the conveyance it to be effected, end of the inside of a lock, or pound, in which it is immerfed.

A. consists of a trunk or caisson made of wood, and of dimensions equal to the reception of a commercial vessel of twenty-five or thirty tons burthen, at each end thereof is a door way, which the boat, &c. is to be floated through into or out of the caisson, and being received therein, and the door then shut, with a given quantity of water to float the boat, and counterpoise the caisson, so as to make it the same

specifick gravity with the water in which it is immerfed; it may then be easily raised or lowered at pleasure, either by destroying the equilibrium, by admitting a small quantity of water into the caisson through a valve constructed for that purpose, or by discharging a similar quantity through another valve, or by chains and rollers, as in the drawing annexed, from one level to another, and the boat be floated from the caisson into the canal; the water in the caisson and that in the canal having both the same level whilst the conveyance is effected.

B. is one side the bottom, and one end of the lock or cistern in which the caisson is immerfed, which is built of free-stone, and of the following dimensions, viz. from the foundation to the top of the wall sixty-six feet, length from out to out eighty-eight feet, width in the middle twenty feet, ditto at each end eleven feet and half, and the perpendicular height from the surface of the lower canal to that of the upper canal forty-six feet.

C. The door at each end of the caisson, which shuts into a rabbet, the frame projecting about three inches beyond the door when shut.

D. An aperture at each end of the cistern or lock, communicating with the upper and lower canal, with a sliding door or gate, which are counterpoised like a common fall, and wound up by wheel and pinion, to receive the end of the caisson, to which it is closely fitted at the time the boat is received or delivered.

R. WELDON, having devoted the whole of his time to the superintendance of this great work since the commencement of it, he hopes will be a sufficient excuse for not having the whole history of it ready for the press, but flatters himself to have it complete to lay before the publick (with engravings and references to every part distinct, and carefully copied from the original drawings after which the present machine is constructed) in a few months.

I send my letter to Mr Gilbert on the subject of Weldon's cassoon, which he warmly interests himself about, for Your Lordships perusal, if you choose it, the patent was offered to Rennie and rejected, which makes me a little doubtful of his encouraging it unless on the most self evident superiority to locks which if it can be made safe it certainly will have.

Weldon was evidently enthusiastic in his efforts to interest a major concern in his invention and came to Marlborough to try to persuade the committee to use it on the canal. Ward described the meeting in a letter of 31 March 1793;

Mr Weldon had much attention paid him and is to exhibit a model of his invention at Marlborough at the next quarterly meeting which is to be on the 8th of June.

Also enclosed in the letter was another describing the caisson :

Weldon is the patentee of the cassoon, the principle of it is this, it receives the Barge into its cavity from the summit level, the mouth is then closed and the cassoon with the boat in it sunk to the bottom of the well or lock between the summit and the next level and then the boat is got out of a door at the other end of the cassoon into the next level, and Mr Gilbert said the cassoon is so nicely balanced in the water that he could push it down with his cane and it would rise up again.

On the 3rd of June Weldon arrived in Marlborough with his model:

Mr Weldon has brought his cassoon model to the Castle Inn where he is setting it up, and it may be a matter of amusement to Lady Ailesbury and Your Lordship to see it worked when he has got it in order prior to the 8th.

Following the meeting there was the usual long letter, however with only the terse statement that, 'Mr Weldon's cassoon the committee seem afraid to venture to adopt on account of the danger of its getting out of order and the difficulty of putting it to rights again.

Despite their hesitation to use the caisson on their canal, the committee was not averse to contributing to the cost of erecting one on the Somerset Coal Canal, this was installed by 1798, and Dudley Clarke, the resident engineer was sent to see its inauguration, On 11 February, he wrote to Rennie:

I heard the cassoon was to be tried on Friday last, and went there where a great number of gentlemen and ladies were assembled, the cassoon was then level with the surface of the water, in the chamber, and a few feet below the level of the cill of the upper pond door, they let in some water both from the canal (which might have about 2 feet of water) and also from the reservoir. The water some time after it was let in to the chamber became level nearly with that in the canal or upper pond. The cassoon meantime did not rise so much which I expected it would have done, but was 2 or 3 feet under water, but more so to my eye in one end nor the other, that is to say when I observed it, it seemed to me highest at the upper end next the canal. At the same time the water was stopt [sic] from the reservoir and I observed to Mr Morton who was with me, that it was long in coming to a level in the chamber as there was a visible current coming over the cill of the door into the chamber and that it did not fill but rather seemed to me to lower and when they were about adjusting a horizontal rod, in order to adjust the parallel movements. All of a sudden the great joint of the cast metal and the large bolt in it, that corrected the parallel

motion on the upper end next the canal gave way, by which means the whole of the parallel movement was put into disorder. The end of the cassoon next the tunnel sunk to the bottom the other rose and jammed its lower end next the canal upon the building, so that the upper part of the end there, is nearly upon a level with the upper door cill. so that the cassoon lies obliquely in the chamber in the angle of 40 inches perpendicular to 6 feet horizontal or thereabouts. They began to let off the water from the chamber, when I observed to Mr Stevens was certainly wrong, until some plan was fixed upon what was to be done, it was imagined by many that it was broke, but I was not of that opinion, and by sounding at every 6 feet horizontal it was found to be a regular hope.

My opinion is that the cassoon had sprung a leak and by one end being a little lower than the other gave the water within the cassoon an opportunity of getting to that end, and consequently created the weight to make the cassoon descend in the above manner to the great surprise of all present. It will be a great expense and loss of time before it can be tried again if ever, There is about 120 tons of ballast, had the water been all let off it would have strained the whole of the cassoon and I think by removing the ballast always as they let off the water by degrees will be the safest way.

While these matters were being attended to, the sub-committees for each of the three districts were letting lengths of canal, or lots, to the various contractors who would be responsible for its construction. A resident engineer and a superintendent of masonry had been appointed, and the length of the canal had been divided into about five sections each with an engineer in charge. The actual job of cutting the canal and building the bridges and locks was let out to local builders who were expected to provide their own labour force and tools. Materials were supplied by the company.

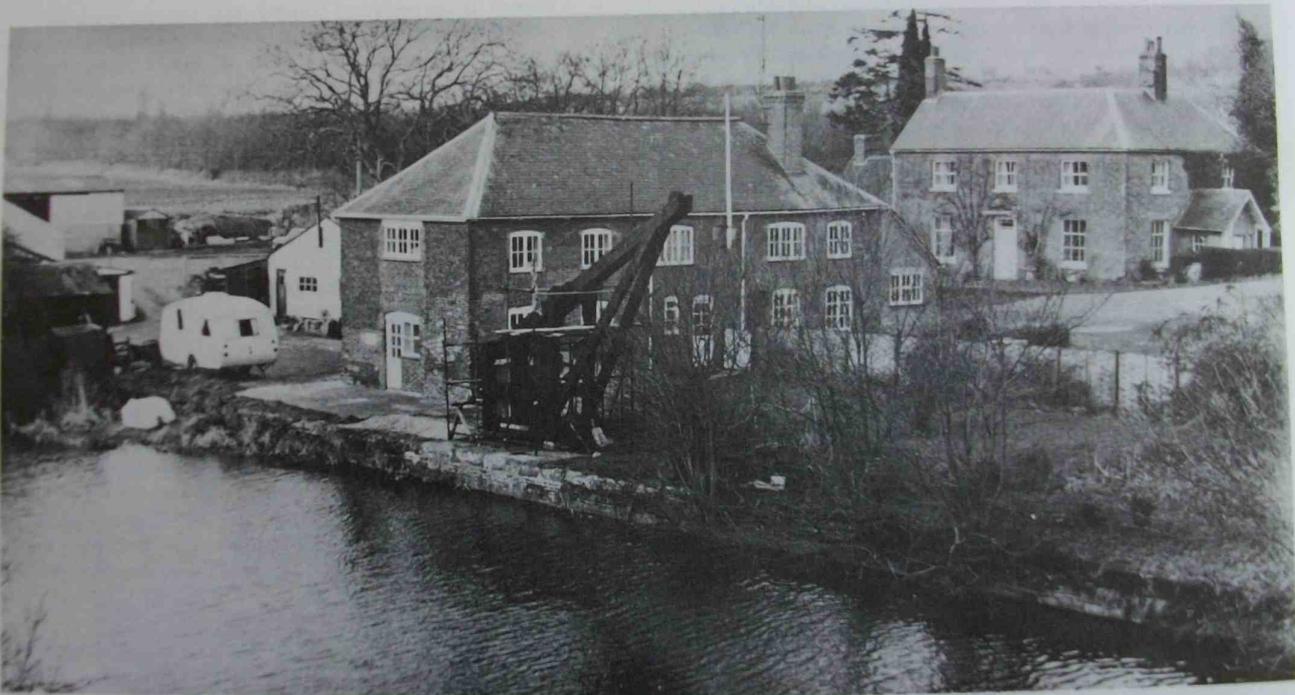
It was commonly the case that the contractors took on more work than they were capable of carrying out. John Thomas, a member of the Committee of Management and later the Company's Superintendent of Works, warned Rennie on two occasions that he should only let the cutting in small lots, saying that he had been advised by the Committee of the Worcester [& Birmingham] Canal that he should not let lots of more than ½ mile at a time.

On 23 February Ward attended a sub-committee meeting at Bradford to hear the response to an advertisement for bridges, locks and aqueducts, writing after the meeting from Bath, Ward told the Earl that 'As the aqueduct at Avoncliff [sic] Mill could not be let last night, we adjourned to Bath and have agreed with Green (one of the Canal contractors) on terms which Mr Rennie thinks advantageous'.

On 29 March, Ward was able to report that the cutting as far as Oakhill had been let on 'very good terms' and two days later that Rennie was to set out the line as far as Crofton. Now alert to the Earl's interest Ward wrote:

I will make a particular point of attending him and have no doubt from the sense which both he and every member of the Committee have expressed of your Lordship's disinterestedness and readiness to accommodate the company but that they will be equally ready to do everything fair and handsome by your Lordship in passing your property in view at Tottenham Park .

Due to an indisposition Ward was not able to go to meet Rennie himself, but sent his Clerk, Thomas Merriman, with



*Burbage Wharf. The wharf was constructed by the Earl of Ailesbury, and has recently been restored. The crane was restored by volunteers led by Wiltshire industrial archaeologists. Photo M Corfield*

full instructions and Ward's ideas for passing from Little Bedwyn to New Bridge. He was able to report that the line had been laid out exactly as he desired.

Two particular alterations were made to the canal to make it more pleasing to the Earl. In a postscript to the above letter of 5 April 1795 Ward wrote:

If it is any object to Your Lordship where locks are placed between Little Bedwyn and Newbridge I apprehend that they might be varied. Mr Rennie will be at his house, no 27 Stamford Street, Blackfriars Road in a day or two and can inform your Lordship where he proposes to place the locks. He generally chooses to place them where a bridge is necessary, I dare say he will propose one at Brook Street, one at the road at Bedwyn Mill and one at Newbridge, as a lock and a bridge are built more conveniently and at less expense together than separate, but I should prefer having only a lock at or rather below Newbridge and to build Newbridge higher up where the Grand Avenue if ever it is opened will cross the Canal.

This postscript refers to the Grand Avenue in Savernake Forest, which it was intended should link with a similar avenue in Wilton Brail. This would have been a popular ride for visitors to the Earl's seat at Tottenham Park, and evidently Ward was concerned that boatmen using the lock should not lessen the enjoyment of those using the bridge. The bridge can be seen on the canal today though with no obvious function it is in a poor state of repair: standing on the bridge one can see the exact alignment with the Avenue in the Forest. The second alteration made to suit the Earl concerned the cutting through which the summit of the canal was to pass following the abandonment of the 2½ mile long tunnel at Savernake. Ward wrote to Rennie that Lord Ailesbury would want a short tunnel which would be less of a nuisance than a 50 foot cutting that would be in sight

of the Pleasure Grounds [of Tottenham Park].

As the Company began to take on its engineers and Superintendents Ward wrote to Rennie, 'The committee wishes every officer's salary to be fixed, and that no one should gain advantage from another'. In the same letter dated 24 July 1794, Ward asked Rennie what should be done to forward the commencement of the works, but it was not until 18 November 1794 that he was able to write, again to Rennie that 'Barley informs me that work has begun at Bradford, three hearty cheers were given'. With the start of work the search began for suitable materials for the canal. Ward did everything he could to ensure that suitable clay, both for puddling and for brickmaking, was available. In the letter of 18 November he said that he had sent Gale (one of the Earl's employees) to make borings between Wootton Rivers and Devizes, excluding Wilcot, which was still the subject of dispute between the Company and the landowner there (see Part I). Good clay was found adjacent to Wilcot, at Stanton, All Cannings, Bishops Cannings and Horton. None was found East of Woodborough, but he had heard of some at New Mill. He would advertise for someone to make ½ a million bricks at each of these places as well as 5 million below Devizes on land the Company would procure.

At the beginning of December he wrote again to Rennie that Martin of Rowde had seen him and would make large bricks at Dunkirk Kiln. These large bricks referred to the fact that a tax was imposed on each brick made, but the tax was immaterial of the size of the brick, therefore if larger bricks were made less tax would be paid. The Dunkirk Kiln was on the Dunkirk Hill, the road from Devizes to Rowde, and the site is now occupied by the Lakeside Camping site.

The urgent need for clay even had Ward searching his master's estate. On 21st November he wrote:

I doubt the Great Park clay will do as Thomas Gale says there are flints in it which will burst the bricks. He has tried the neighbourhood all around, if it should be necessary to resort to that spot near Lyehill would it be very disagreeable to you if the Company were to fence in a handsome circuit and plant round it?

Two days later he was able to write, with some relief:

Gale has found some good clay in the Great Meadow belonging to Brimslade adjoining the Turnpike Road at Ram Ally Gate where the Canal will pass and which I think will be least exceptional to Your Lordship and most convenient to the undertaking, there is also some clay below Brimslade House, but I hope that may be done without.

More clay was found at New Mill. Brimslade and Wolfhall, Ward hoped that Gale would be responsible for undertaking the kilns in the estate as that would be under the estate's control. The work of the brickmaker was set out in a letter of 20 May 1795:

Mr Ronnie, who saw Hutchins bricks on Sunday se'e night said they were by far the best and hardest he had seen in this country and those burnt at Lyehill have certainly not bean nearly as good but I do not know if the fault lay in the brickmakers or the clay, or, which is more probable than either, in his not always being well supplied with good dry fuel. £0-10-6 a thousand for common bricks and 11s for large ones were the price the contractors offered to make and burn them for the company some time ago, but the Eastern district committee have found a contractor who has engaged to make and burn two million at 6/6d the common size and 8/6d the large size, the Company find the clay, sand, kilns, firing, barrows, planks and all other implements except spades. I have received no proposal from Hutchins yet.

As construction progressed the demand for bricks grew and the meagre supplies which were being utilised were insufficient Ward was forced to approach the Earl once again, writing in October 1807:

I am very sorry to inform Your Lordship that the clay found in the ground enclosed at Lyehill seems so short and deficient that the superintendent is under the necessity of applying to Your Lordship and Lady Ailsbury for permission to take in an addition of about 3 acres on the east side of the present inclosure. I am aware how very tender a subject is to both your Lordships and am distressed at being obliged to mention it. I can only say that Mr Thomas's directions have been and are that the ground shall be levelled as fast as as clay is got and every care taken to leave the place as handsomlv as possible. The heaver is the contractor and if you are pleased to permit will show you the additional ground that is warned to be taken in when you will be pleased to appoint.

The following year, in September he was having to make yet more demands on his master. He wrote to Lord Bruce:

I called at Savernake Lodge this morning to have mentioned a request from the Canal Committee for a very short extension of the time fixed on for the conclusion of the brickworks at Lyehill - the late rain spoiled a great many thousands of bricks and there will not be enough to complete the tunnel unless the Company are permitted to use one or two of the Kilns during the coming winter - the rest of the ground might be enclosing and planting or levelling and laid down to grass if preferred, and the whole nuisance removed and cleared away before Lord Ailesbury and Your Lordship return into the country next summer. Bricks to complete the tunnel must be had from

some place and they can be made and conveyed with so much greater convenience and less detriment where kilns and every-thing is ready, and a railroad laid down, than in any other situation, that is hoped Your Lordship will not object to granting this indulgence. I have mentioned the matter to Lord Ailesbury who thinks that after having given up so much it is not worth while to stand for trifles at the conclusion, but desired me to communicate the application to you.

The other commodity most earnestly sought, particularly in the Savernake area was wood. The Earl of Ailesbury had been dissatisfied with sales of timber from his Yorkshire estates and was very sensitive on the subject. Ward was therefore ' hesitant about his approach, on the 5th April 1795 he wrote:

Mr Rennie begged so hard for oak timber that I have desired Wilson, Aniss and Eaton will look around the neighbourhood for such oaks as it will be pretty good policy to cut down and mark them with chalk high up, and I will then ride round and see them and .if Your Lordship consents to a sale you may be assured that it will not be a Yorkshire one. A hundred trees may be found I am sure which may be cut without being at all missed and which instead of improving are getting worse, in which case there is a loss of £5 in every 100 pounds worth of timber in interest annually, besides the decrease in the value of the timber. This observation I beg leave to confine to timber not ornamental. I shall not think of touching a tree in the forest without special orders from Your Lordship.

A month later, on 3rd May he wrote once again:

The plan I propose about timber is not to sell the trees, but to cut the timber out at your own sawpits into the pieces wanted by the Company and sell them on the same terms as Bailey has agreed to do, which I believe are fair terms. This will leave Your Lordship's common users all the slabs and other relics and avoid any impositions in the measuring and the necessity of having a timber valuer, which on the Yorkshire timber sale came to a very serious sum. Bailey is to have 3s a cube foot which is a very good price, more I believe than timber sells for in London.

The following day Ward wrote that the committee were grateful to the Earl for accommodating them, and that although he had said he hoped Bailey would be able to supply all that was needed, it was explained that without the Savernake timber there would not be sufficient. The next day terms were agreed which gave the Earl not only three shillings a cubic foot for oak, but also for elm.

As the cutting of the canal progressed there were the usual complaints about the navigators (navvies) although, by and large, these seem to have been limited, and on occasions, exaggerated. There are, in fact, only four references to trouble in the letters which would seem to belie the reputation of the navvies. The first reference was on 7 June 1795:

Mr Seymour's son mentions the first complaint I have had of the navigation, I hope that it will not be general and that the different officers will keep them in order as much as possible, though it cannot always be misused, especially in these licentious times, and that whatever trespasses are committed by the navigators will be exaggerated by the country labourers as was the case I believe with respect to the Irish Dragoons.

On 23 June 1795, there was minor trouble at Newbury:

A large party of canal men went to Newbury market this day and shewed a very uncivil disposition about the price of the market. This was the act which Mr Dumas made them sensible was most improper and induced them to bag pardon for it,

On 8 December 1808 there seems to have been an incident on the Ailesbury Estate:

The two navigators declared they were tired of the neighbourhood and would go to Bristol as soon as they got out of prison. It has always been the direction of the committee that whenever there was a complaint from Your Lordship of any of the labour, he would be discharged, and which has been done in several instances.

The most serious occurrence seems to have taken place on the site of the locks at Devizes in the final months of construction. On 7 June 1810 there was a passing reference to a fracas at Devizes for which the troops were called out, and in the course of which Colonel Awdry was knocked down. Ward wrote: The magistrates are apprehensive of the vast numbers of canal men employed in the Devizes Locks<sup>1</sup>. This reference would seem to call into question one of the apocryphal tales about the construction of the Devizes locks being built by French prisoners of War. This is said to be the reason for the refinement of the name Cane Hill to Caen Hill. If however there were prisoners in any number on the locks, then presumably they would be guarded, and thus it would not be necessary to call out the troops to quell the disturbance. In none of the letters is there any reference to French prisoners being used in the construction of the canal.

There are surprisingly few references in the letters to the actual construction of the canal. Presumably the Earl was kept informed in other ways, Not unnaturally Ward does write about progress through the estates. On 27 June 1799 he mentions the first barge to Bedwyn:

Bakers peat ashes are of an excellent quality and the price I believe not unreasonable, they are very useful sown upon turnips. Our Canal clerk is also desirous of having an order from Snowball for 5 or 6 chaldrons of Newcastle coals out of the first barge which I think he said would bring loading up to Bedwyn on Tuesday - peat ashes to sow have long been wanting, and the canal not being completed prevented it being proposed to you.

Three days later there is a brief mention,

... I suppose Mr Potter will be **in all his glory** when the first barge arrives. . .

Potter was the Mayor of Great Bedwyn and is distinguished in having a lock, Potter's, named after him.

On 12 September 1806, the committee made a tour of inspection to the works. Ward reported to the Earl:

Today the weather has been delightful and the committee have been highly pleased with their voyage - they came by water from Bath to Devizes yesterday and dined in their barge. Today they came from Devizes to Wilcot, 11 miles, the first time that length has been navigated. Miss Wroughton and Mrs Montgue were on the bridge of Wilcot as we passed, and after breaking at Pewsey Inn we proceeded along the line to Bedwyn; great progress has been made in Wooton Rivers and between Ram Alley and Crofton . . . We did not get to Bedwyn til 2 o'clock, but was there was little business to do and it

was nearly concluded by 4 when we sat down to the good things Your Lordship had provided, and your health was the 1st drink after dinner with grateful acknowledgement for your uniform attention and support.

Three years later, in 1808, the Canal Committee embarked at Newbridge, and proceeded to Crofton where they heard a complaint against one of the pump attendants which had been brought by John Blackwell, the resident engineer. The man was dismissed. Later, the committee continued their journey through the summit:

We had cold dinner as we passed through Wolfhall, and in the centre of Bruce Tunnel we drank Your Lordship's health standing with three times three hearty cheers, in some of Col Stead's champagne . . . Lord Ernest would have been much entertained and surprised in passing the tunnel which had the complete effect of representing the coming in of night and a complete darkness in the centre and the dawning of day as you approach the west end, and all in the course of 10 or 15 minutes.

As the completion of the construction neared, thought was given to a wharf to serve the Savernake estates and the surrounding region. On 7 May Ward met with one of the canal contractors at Burbage:

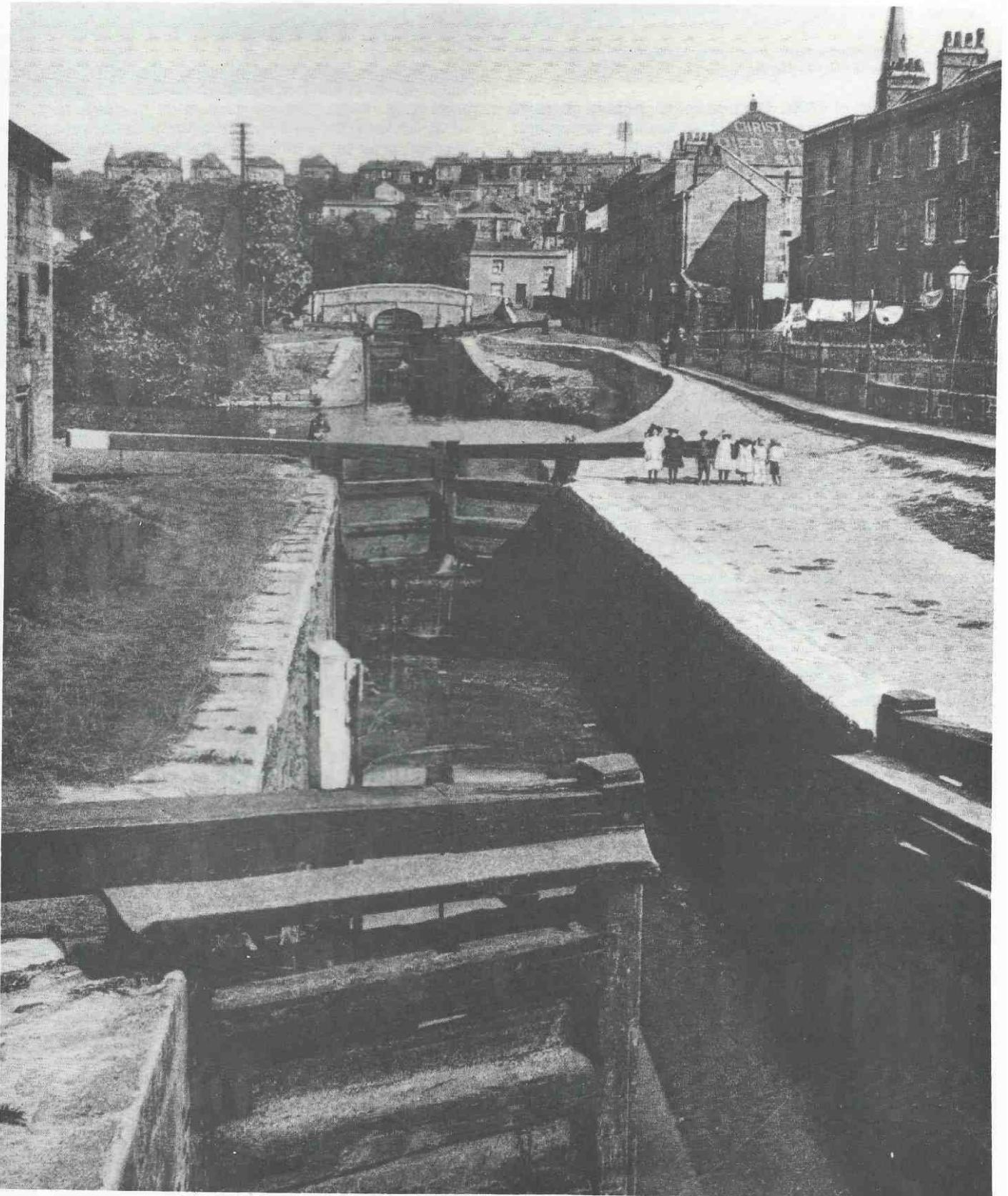
I met Collins and a canal contractor at the wharf today to consider about the most convenient place for a house and warehouse, which I meant to be on a frugal plan, but as everyone says there will be great trade and the work will be finished off very handsomely I think you will rather have the building rather above that of a cottage, and we shall have water carriage (with a railroad at Devizes Hill) by the end of September I think it will answer best to cover the building with slate.

This wharf came to be the principal one between Hungerford and Devizes, quite eclipsing the Company's wharves at Great Bedwyn and Pewsey. The first of Piggott's Trade Directories, for 1830 advertises a market boat leaving for Devizes every Wednesday, as well as several traders based on the Wharf. In the same, and subsequent directories, there is no mention of trade or boats from the Bedwyn Wharf.

Soon after the Canal was finished Ward advised the Earl that he had asked the Company to landscape the canal through the immediate vicinity of Tottenham Park, he wrote to Lord Bruce on 30 September 1813:

I applied to the committee today on the subject of the banks of the canal on each side of the deep cutting in Wolfhall and Burbage and they have agreed to ornament them by planting and have desired me to undertake the doing of it by Lord Ailesbury's people and from his nurseries if agreeable and to charge it to the Company's expense. I shall also get the bridge at Wolfhall which is called Seymour's Bridge stuccoed - it will be easy to make a ride from the Octagon summer house down Gale's Grounds to the north side of the canal between Seymour's Bridge and the Bruce inscription (that part of the canal being a beautiful serpentine with the plantation opposite in a flourishing state). It might proceed along the north side of the canal, cross the head of the tunnel and along the course of the tunnel to the west end, then cross the west end and along the north side towards Burbage Wharf. Turn up the grounds into the Drove and so to Love Walk or the Forest - it would be a very beautiful and interesting ride.

Despite the early enthusiasm that there was for investing in the canal, it was to the company's great misfortune that in 1795 England was again at war with the French, and as a result



*Widcombe Locks, Bath. These were not finished until 1810 due to the insistence of the Committee that stone should be used in their construction.*

*Photo Michael Ware*

money became very short ,and the costs of construction soared. On the 27 January 1795 Ward wrote:

I am glad to find the spirit of canalling not wholly extinguished at Bristol by the unfortunate situation of public affairs.

Again, in March of 1795 , The first deposit of canal money is so inconsiderable being only £3500 among 6 banks that no caution need be used at present'. The problems were fully set out in a letter of August 1812.

When the canal was first set on foot as a matter of great public interest Your Lordship promoted it by a liberal subscription for shares - upon the 1st subscription being expended and more money being wanting to complete the canal you lent your aid a second time and again a third time by subscribing for further shares making the number 300 in the whole.

In the process of time still more money was necessary to be raised, but the shares in the concern had by that time become more a matter of speculation. No gentleman was solicited on that occasion to contribute further sums - it was left to the free choice of everyone to subscribe or not as he pleased. Those who thought they should lay out the money advantageously subscribed for the new shares and they who did not wish to speculate further declined subscribing without the smallest reflection being made on them. On the present occasion every gentleman is equally at liberty to exercise his free and un-influenced option of subscribing or not. Your Lordship has a right as a proprietor of 300 shares to take 75 more at £24 a share the whole payment on which would amount to £1,800 and being payable by installments in about 4 years it would easily be made at about 450 a year. The share will be on an equal footing with the old ones, as you would receive as much dividend on each new as on each old share. Should the subscriptions fill whereby the Company will be able to repay their debts, consider purchasing the Kennet Navigation, the folly of a canal which are at present employed in discharging our engagements would be immediately set apart and from time to time be divided among the shareholders. I feel a delicacy in advising Your Lordship either to subscribe or not - all I can say is that I myself shall subscribe considering it my interest to do so. I do not at present know how the subscription books lying at the different bankers have filled but the committee men when at Marlborough subscribed for their respective proportions.

Evidently His Lordship did not choose to subscribe, in 1819 Ward wrote to inform him that his dividend at 20 shillings a share was £300.

In the period after the canal was completed the correspondence becomes less and less, there are only 6 references to the canal, none about its success. The last was on 30 August 1825 , four years before Ward's death:

It is perhaps a matter of indifference whether you go to Bristol by Devizes or Chippenham. I would go by Devizes and change at the Bear Inn. Observe the Kennet and Avon Canal going in and leaving Devizes, and [at] the new House of Correction, an immense string of locks carry the barges down the hill from Devizes parallel to the road, but assuming you were to get out of the carriage where you cross below Devizes and walk one or two hundred yards, you do not see much of them though they are worth seeing, having a piece of water between each lock and a plantation in the side - on the side of Melksham.

As the restoration of the canal proceeds ,this is good advice today, the canal below Prison Bridge is a splendid sight with the newly planted grass and trees.

John Ward served the Canal Company diligently and it is much thanks to him that the canal was built. From the first meeting in 1788, to the formation of the Company in 1794 following the granting of the Act, he steered the project through, probably writing the pamphlet proposing the canal, and then resolving the differences of the various rival factions. He personally dealt with the negotiations with landowners along the line, and prepared the Bill to go to Parliament. From 1794 he was principal clerk to the Company until the Canal was completed. In 1810 he went into partnership with his clerk Thomas Merriman and they became jointly Principal Clerks. About 1820 Merriman succeeded Ward in his own right as Clerk, thus maintaining the interest of the firm in the Company. In the last ten years of the Canal Company, before it was taken over by the Great Western Railway, Ward's son Thomas Rawdon Ward served on the committee of the company, chairing many of the annual meetings of proprietors.

Some notes in the Savernake Collection in the Wiltshire Record Office summarise Ward's life: 'John Ward of Stramshill Co. Stafford settled at Marlborough as attorney and banker. He was also steward to the Late Earl of Ailesbury, to the 1st Marquis of Ailesbury, to the Earl of St Germans, to the Trustees of the Somerset Hospital and others. He was a member of the Old Corporation of Marlborough and elected Mayor of the Borough on several occasions. Born at Cheadle Co Staffs 30 June 1756, baptised there 17 August, died 13 April 1829. Buried in a vault lying in the NE corner of St Mary's churchyard Marlborough and in the church on the North wall a marble tablet is erected to his memory. He married at St Peter's Church on 14 January 1784 Hannah, Daughter of Samuel Hawkes of Marlborough and Ogbourne St Andrews'.

The discovery of these letters has given me the opportunity of resurrecting one of the people behind the Kennet and Avon Canal. All too often it is forgotten that it was people who created the monuments of our industrial past and, while the principals may be well known, there were many who have slipped into the shadows. It is through careful studies of archives that we may bring them out to their proper place in history.

A final note of caution needs to be added. Through this correspondence we get a very partial and one-sided view of the Canal; it is important to put this sort of information into its context and to combine such personal details with official records.

#### **Acknowledgements:**

To the thanks that I gave in part I, I must add the name of Joan Day, who not only offered to publish these articles in the Journal, but also waited with great patience while a very overworked writer struggled to meet her deadline.



*Devizes Flight of Locks. The magnificent flight by which the canal level drops to the Avon valley is surely one of the great achievements of the men who built the canal.*

*Photo OPC/BR*