

THE CANAL WATCH HOUSE AT BASWICH

by

David Jones

Introduction

While researching the Stafford Branch Canal Lock House in the 1881 Census, I noticed there was a building called the “Canal Watch House” on the enumerator’s schedule for the area.

The Lock House was entry 105 in the Census and the Watch House was entry 108. This suggested both buildings might be quite close together. However, looking at ordnance survey maps of the time, it was clear there were no other buildings in the vicinity of the Lock House nor along the route of the Branch Canal. So, the Watch House must have been situated somewhere along the Staffordshire & Worcestershire Canal and the most likely place was about a mile from the junction with the Stafford Branch, next to Stoneford Bridge (no.103); this corresponds to plot 246 on the 1836/1845 Tithe Map for Baswich.

Although J.Ian Langford did not mention the “Canal Watch House” by name in his 1974 Towpath Guide to the Staffordshire & Worcestershire Canal, he wrote that: “Next to the bridge are the foundations of a remote cottage that belonged to the Canal Company. This was the home of a lengthsman whose job it was to look after the exposed section along the Sow valley.”

Background

The main line of the Staffordshire & Worcestershire Canal was authorised by an Act of Parliament on 14 May 1766 and took six years to build; 46 $\frac{1}{8}$ miles long, it runs from the junction with the Trent & Mersey Canal (then called the Grand Trunk Canal) at Great Haywood to the River Severn at Stourport (then called Lower Mitton).

Soon after the Bill was passed, work started near Compton (now a suburb of Wolverhampton) which was about midway along the route. By November 1770 the southern section of the canal, from Compton to Stourport, was open for business, and the whole canal was open by 28 May 1772.

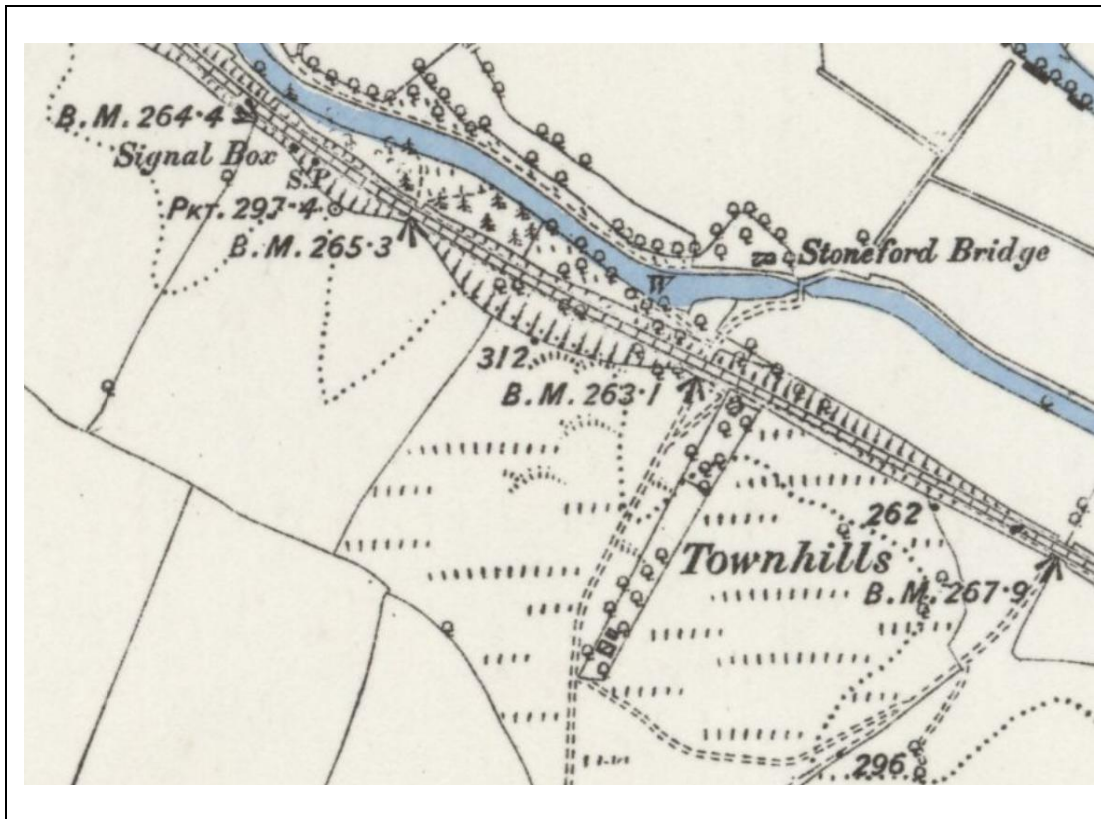
Four months later, on 21 September 1772, a connection was also made with the Birmingham Canal at Aldersley Junction, giving immediate access to the rapidly developing West Midlands industrial conurbation.

Wharves and warehouses were built at various points along the Staffs & Worcs Canal. The infrastructure of this new transport system was fast developing and the Canal Company needed to monitor and regulate what was happening to ensure the smooth running of the business, so it was important to have company employees close by to keep watch on what was happening.

Between 1772 and 1773 the Canal Company authorised the building of sixteen Watch Houses between Stourport and Great Haywood, together with a Navigation Office at Aldersley Junction (by Bridge 64). Table 1 lists these.

Table 1: List of Watch Houses from Stourport to Great Haywood

	Where built: at or near	Comment
(1)	Pratt's Wharf (<i>Prats Wharf</i>)	Langford mentions there were originally two houses at the junction with the Stour Branch, probably one was for a lock keeper (Pratt's Wharf Lock locked down onto the River Stour) and the other one for a wharf clerk.
(2)	Falling Sands (below the Lock)	Lock 4
(3)	Wolverley Court Lock	Lock 7
(4)	Debdale Lock (<i>Dibdale</i> Lock)	Lock 9
(5)	Caunsall Common	
(6)	Kinver Lock (<i>Kinfare</i> Lock)	Lock 11
(*)	Gothersley	Possibly the Roundhouse; Langford mentions a clerk in charge of the wharf lived in the Roundhouse. Built about 1804/1805.
(7)	Greensforge	Lock 16
(8)	Botteram	Locks 21 to 20
(9)	The Bratch	Locks 25 to 23
(10)	Aldersley Junction	At the Junction with the Birmingham Canal by Bridge 64. A Navigation Office was also authorised to be built there.
(11)	Cross Green (<i>Crofs</i> Green)	Bridge 71 on the Summit Level.
(12)	Gailey Lock (<i>Gayley Hay</i> Lock, also known as <i>Streetway</i> after Watling Street, the Roman Road.	Lock 32. Possibly the Roundhouse; Langford says the Roundhouse was built about 1804/1805.
(13)	Penkridge	Lock 38
(14)	Acton Bridge (<i>Acton Further Bridge</i>)	Bridge 93
(15)	Parkgate	
(16)	Milford	Bridge 103. The Watch House which was to be built "at or near Milford" was built next to Stoneford Bridge, Baswich (see Map 1 below).



Map 1. The ‘Milford’ Watch House is located next to Stoneford Bridge, Baswich. (Ordnance Survey, Staffordshire sheet XXXVII SE (surveyed 1880)). (Reproduced with permission of the National Library of Scotland).

Watch Houses were built at key locations, such as near locks, bridges and junctions. These houses were for Canal Company employees, known as **Watchmen**, who had specific duties along a length of the canal.

These duties were set out in the Company’s Bye-Laws for “Clerks, Wharfingers, Watchmen, Servants and Boatmen.”

Role of the Watchmen

This account is based on the 1800 printed version of these Bye-Laws. The Roman numerals refer to the relevant Bye-Law.

The day-to-day management of the Navigation fell to the Head Clerk, or Master Wharfinger, whose responsibilities included “delivering and enforcing obedience by the Company’s respective Clerks, Wharfingers, Watchmen, and others,” and reporting on their general “behaviour.” He also ensured that their weekly wages were paid. (I)

The working hours of the Wharfingers and Watchmen were from 5.00am to 8.00pm between 10 April and 10 October, and from 7.00am to 6.00pm for the remainder of the year. At all other times the Navigation was locked up, and only boats carrying goods to Stourport and onward to the River Severn on the Spring Tides were permitted to

pass. Any person or boatman who broke open the locks or used violence against the Navigation at any hour was liable to a fine of 40 shillings for each offence. **(XXXI)**

Every three days each Watchman was required to inspect the Canal and Navigation Works throughout the whole length of his watch, and to submit a written Report to the Master Wharfinger identifying any sections within his watch that were “out of condition.” This included the Navigation, towing path, bridges, locks, wharfs, aqueducts, culverts, banks, weirs, floodgates, soughs, and fences. He was also to state in that Report what assistance, if any, was needed to complete the necessary repairs. A Report on the state of the Canal’s works was to be made to the Master Wharfinger **every fourteen days**, for him to pass on to the Master Carpenter so that repairs in their respective departments could proceed without delay. Any Watchman failing in these duties was liable to a penalty of 10 shillings. **(XXVI)**

Also, **every three days** each Watchman was required to measure the depth of water in feet and inches on the upper sill of each lock within his Watch, and **every fourteen days** submit a written report of these measurements to the Master Wharfinger, under a penalty of 10 shillings for each omission. **(XI)**

Every Watchman was required to keep an Account of the loading or discharging of all coal, marl, dung, or merchandize, taken on Board or discharged from any Boat in the District of his Watch, and **every fourteen days** submit a Report to the Master Wharfinger, under a penalty of 10 shillings for each default. **(XXVII)**

Wharfingers and Watchmen had the authority to stop any boat and detain the Master if found to be “in liquor” until they were sober; the fine was 10 shillings for each offence. **(XLII)**

A Memorandum Book was kept at every Wharf, and by each Watchman, of the necessary Reports to be made to the Master Wharfinger **every fourteen days**, of the business doing on the Navigation, the behaviour of Boatmen, and also of the state and repair of the Navigation. **(IX)**

Copies of the Tables of the Rates of Houseage, use of the cranes, and weighing of goods, together with the abstract of the Bye Laws had to be displayed in every Warehouse and Watch House, and in every Counting House and every other conspicuous place in the Line of the Canal. **(XVII)**

Gauging instruments, with copies of the Register, were kept at every Wharf and any other specified place, to check for fraud in changing boat indexes. Every Clerk, Wharfinger, Watchman or Servant were instructed to use these instruments carefully when checking a suspected boat. **(XXIII)**

The Watch House at Baswich

The earliest record I found of the Watch House was a baptism in 1821 and the last record was in the Spring Electoral Register.

Between these dates the house was occupied by several families, including that of Joseph Malpas, several generations of the Marshall family, Robert Mayhew and Thomas Jones. **We will learn about them next time in Part 2 of this Article.**

Acknowledgements

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References

A Towpath Guide to the Staffordshire and Worcestershire Canal by J.Ian Langford
(Cambridge: Goose, 1974).

Committee Order Book for 5 November 1772.

Minute Book of the General Assemblies of Proprietors for 16 March 1773.

Staffordshire and Worcestershire Canal Company Bye-laws; copy minutes of Meetings of Proprietors containing orders for bye-laws, 1771-1800. (SRO: D3186/1/3/1).

*Bye-laws for Clerks, Wharfingers, **Watchmen**, Servants and Boatmen either employed by the Proprietors of the Staffordshire and Worcestershire Canal Navigation or using the Navigation* (Wolverhampton, 1800). (SRO: D590/303/2).

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“Valuation Books (Domesday Books) Under Finance Act 1910: Stafford Division: ActonTrussell and Bednall, Berkswich and Brocton (Cuttlestone Page 17 Parish of Berkswich: “No 162: Marshall, Richard. S & W Canal Co. House & Garden. The Watch House.” (SRO: D3573/2/2: Parcel no 8)

Electoral Registers for Baswich 1881-1925 (SRO).

Various Parish Registers for Baptism, Marriage and Burial Records. (SRO).

Census 1841-1921; 1939 Register. (Findmypast & Ancestry Websites).

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To be continued in PART 2
