

STAFFORD BRANCH CANAL / SOW NAVIGATION

The following extracts have been taken from:

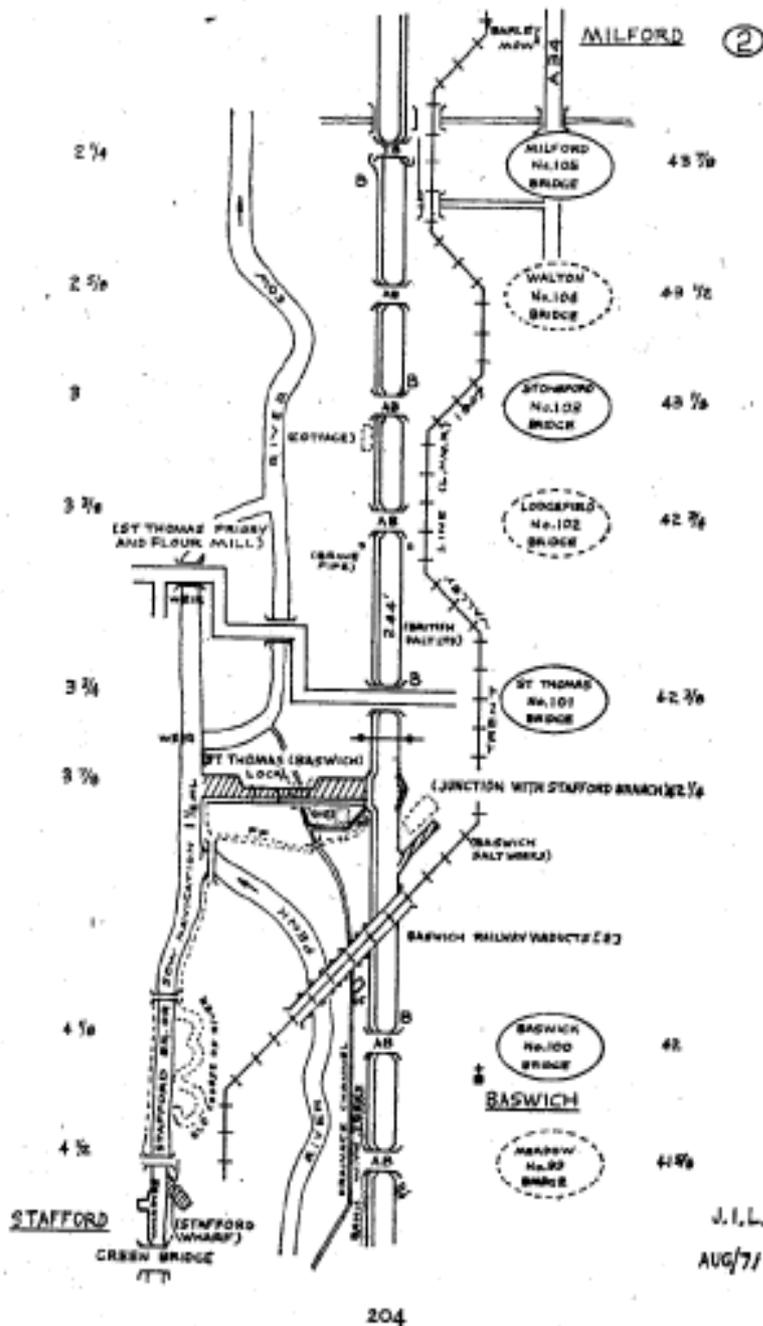
Staffordshire and Worcestershire Canal: J. Ian Langford ISBN 0 900404 22 1 1974: (Goose & Sons Publishers Ltd., Cambridge).

Sow Navigation (Stafford Branch, 1½ miles): pages 41-43

Unlike all neighbouring county towns, Stafford had no navigable link with the sea throughout the Middle Ages and did not get one until some years after the building of the Staffs & Worcs Canal. The Sow passed by the town walls, but it is only a small river and the Trent itself was not navigable beyond Burton. With the coming of the canal, a wharf was built at Radford for the benefit of the town and the 1½ mile branch to Stafford was not completed until 19th February 1816. Proposals for the branch were made in 1798, with aqueducts across the Sow and Penk, but this costly scheme was dropped in favour of a tramway from Radford. This evidently was not a success and in 1810 a plan emerged for making both rivers navigable, with a connecting lock at Radford. Eventually the Sow Navigation locked down to the river near St Thomas and missed the Penk altogether. It was owned by Lord Stafford, but the S&WCCo. acquired the lease in 1838 and then carried out various improvements. Coal was carried on the branch during the early years of this century and Ernie Thomas, proprietor of Calf Heath Marina until he died in 1973, took a load of swedes and mangels to the town just before the First World War. Stafford mill was a short distance upstream from the town's wharves and Ernie related how it had to be shut down before boats could turn. Trade on the Sow Navigation had fallen off to such an extent by the 1920s that the Canal Company did not renew the lease when it expired on 25th March 1927 and the branch became derelict. It is a great pity that the branch has been allowed to deteriorate. Familiar towns seem totally different when visited by boat and there is a unique fascination in mooring 'at the end of the line' in the heart of towns like Ellesmere, Coventry and Loughborough. Navigation could be restored to the Sow Arm without too much difficulty or expense and perhaps Stafford will one day be added to the list. In the meantime, it is an interesting town that well justifies the 1½ mile walk along the towing path from St Thomas. at the junction of the Sow Navigation and the main line has been demolished and its site is now occupied by an overflow weir. There is a short, drained pound with sandstone walls beyond the junction and next to it are the foundations of a cottage whose occupants probably collected tolls from traffic on the branch. The pound led to a small aqueduct across a drainage channel and then straight into Baswich or St Thomas lock. The drainage leat carries water from land drains along the low-lying Penk valley and takes any surplus from the canal. It starts near Deptmore lock and runs close to the Staffs & Worcs for almost 2 miles before entering the Sow near St Thomas. The channel was in existence before the end of the 18th century and may have been constructed by the Canal Company to drain the canal bank and get rid of flood water.

The brickwork of Baswich lock was intact in 1971, but has since been swept away during the recent spate of improvements to drainage along the Sow valley. It was

built to the same dimensions as locks on the main line and had a nominal fall of 6ft 6in., the exact amount depending on the level of the river.



The branch entered the Sow just beyond the tail of the lock and not far from the mouth of the river Penk. The remainder of the branch was along the Sow, which probably required little deepening, as the water had previously been impounded by the Augustinians for their mill at St Thomas. However, substantial realignment was necessary. The river between Baswich and Stafford meanders across the flood plain in a series of tight curves and about 1½ mile of new channel was constructed. A series of swampy 'oxbow lakes' were left to the south of the new course and the towpath crossed to the north of the navigation to avoid them. The branch terminated at Green Bridge near the centre of Stafford (Plate 11), near a coal basin that was infilled during the 1930s and now serves as a car park. However, at one time the Sow may have been navigable as far as Stafford mill beyond the bridge. The wheels, foundations and

machinery of this ancient mill have been preserved and the pond is incorporated in an attractive park.

Baswich (Baswich) Bridge (No.100) pages 43-44.

The basin of the earlier salt works at Baswich was between the junction with the Sow Navigation and the railway viaducts. Coal was delivered at the wharf here and salt was taken away in substantial quantities. Brine was not obtained at Baswich, but was pumped along a pipeline that followed the towpath of the Sow Navigation to a point where rail and canal transport were available. The site of the salt works is now occupied by a factory where concrete posts are made.

Radford Wharf & Bridge (No.98) pages 45-46.

The Staffs & Worcs tries hard to reach Stafford, but does not quite succeed. Radford, about 1½ miles from the town centre, is as near as it gets and a wharf was constructed here when the canal was built, goods being carried to the town in carts. This was not very satisfactory and an elaborate scheme for a branch canal was put forward. This was shelved in favour of a horse tramway built by the Stafford Railway Coal & Lime Company. Opened on 1st November 1805, this was Stafford's first railway and it may well have been the canal's first tramway connection. The tramway started at a basin behind the wharf and then crossed a field to the bridge across the Penk. This very fine bridge had been rebuilt in 1804 with an additional arch across the drainage channel that runs alongside the canal, indicating that the meadows along the river were drained before the end of the 18th century. The tramway ran alongside the Lichfield Road, crossed over it near the town centre, and terminated at the Railway 'Wharf', near Green Bridge. In these days railways were usually associated with canals.

Evidently the tramway was not a success, for a branch canal was again proposed in 1810 and the Sow Navigation materialised in 1814. (St Thomas or Baswich lock, connecting the Sow Navigation with the Staffs & Worcs, was not completed until February 1816). After less than 9 years of operation, the Stafford Railway was up for sale. Among the items auctioned on 15th July 1814 were flanged rails, sills (sleepers), trucks of between 20 and 30 cwt capacity, a weighing machine at the Stafford wharf and a mobile crane. The basin at Radford may have been used for a while afterwards, since Bradshaw shows it on his map of 1830, but 50 years later it had been drained. All that now remains are a few blocks of sandstone around the site of the entrance. The line of the tramway can be traced here and there along the Lichfield Road where older houses are set back to make room for it, and the only tangible evidence of Stafford's first railway emerged when workmen found a quantity of wooden sleepers under the road in 1880.

The wharffhouse and warehouses at Radford survived until 1972, when the old buildings were demolished to allow expansion of the neighbouring boatyard. These included the Radford Bank stores where boatmen could obtain provisions and other necessities. There was also a warehouse with double doors at street level and access from the canal bank, so that goods could be loaded directly into carts. The interchange of goods between canals and railways was common practice during the second half of the 19th century, but Radford wharf was an early example of a combined canal-rail and canal-road transshipment point. The wharf is now used by Radford Marine who build and hire boats and provide the usual services for boaters.

Keuper Marl, Salt & Stafford: pages 39-40.

There is a small brick building on each side of the canal at Lodgefield bridge (No.102). Until recently these housed the pumps for a brine pipeline that crossed the canal at this point.

Between Baswich and Haywood, the rocks underneath the Staffs & Worcs are sandstones of the lower division of the Trias formation, but most of central Staffordshire and indeed much of Cheshire, Worcestershire and Warwickshire, is covered by the colourful Keuper Marl of the upper Trias. The landscape of the marl country is usually fairly featureless and is mainly pastoral, though occasional beds of sandstone produce some relief. The marls are often suitable for brick making, and here and there are signs of marl holes and old brickworks, but their main economic value is in the vast deposits of rock salt that occur in layers throughout the formation. Besides being an indispensable household commodity, salt is the basis of the alkali industry and countless other industries are dependent upon it. Saline springs have been known around Stafford since ancient times. There was one across the Sow, not far from St Thomas's Priory, and Baswich no doubt obtained its name from another, since 'wich' is always associated with salt. However, deposits of salt were 'discovered' by accident in 1881, when Stafford Corporation were boring for a water supply on Stafford Common to the north of the town. Two main beds of salt were found and the extraction of brine started in 1893. The Corporation pumped brine to the baths in Stafford and by 1920 three firms were extracting the mineral from under the Common. One of these pumped brine to a works 2 miles away at Baswich for processing. A second works was built just before the last war near Lodgefield bridge, sandwiched between the canal and railway, and this refined brine until 1971. Modern methods usually ensure that brine extraction is carefully controlled, leaving pillars of salt to support the rock above, but industry around the Common had been affected by subsidence for many years. After a long legal battle, the case went against the mining companies, all pumping of brine ceased in the Stafford area and the works at Baswich was dismantled.

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