

The Making of the Bridgewater Canal

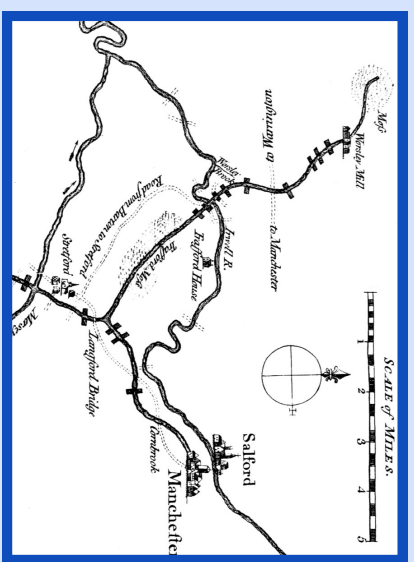


Three problems solved by a single brilliant solution

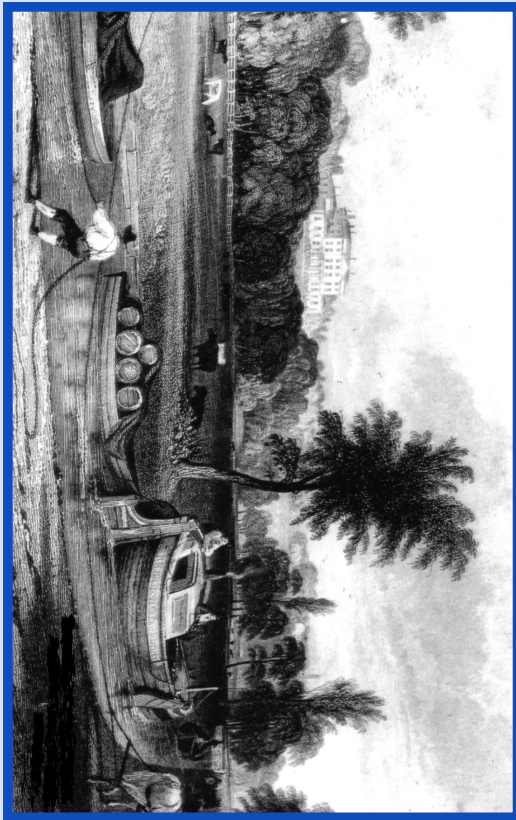
In 1758 Francis Reynolds of Strangeways wrote that 'The Duke of Bridgewater's come into the country to visit his estate of Worsley, ... his Grace has found so large a Mine of Coal, for which he has so small a consumption, that he is inclinable to make a water road from Worsley Mill to Salford, at his own expense, by which means he will be able to supply Manchester at a much cheaper rate'. The traditional outlet for Worsley coal lay south-westwards around Lynn, where the Egertons sold most of their output, but their really rich markets lay in the Salford and Manchester area, with their combined population of about 40,000. At Worsley pithead, coal cost 10d a horseload, but by the time it reached Manchester the cost was almost double. In 1760 Josiah Wedgwood said that he was paying nearly as much for carriage as for coal.

John Gilbert had the inspiration to solve three problems with a single brilliant but very costly idea. A canal needs a summit water supply; the mines at Worsley needed to be drained; the coal had to be got out of the mine. Gilbert's solution was to drill a tunnel large enough to carry boats into the mines from the Delph until it met the coal seams; barges could carry the coal, and the flooded coal mines would be drained by a deep rock sough. 'The tunnel', wrote a scholar of accuracy and repulse, 'was entirely executed as well as planned by Mr Gilbert.'

On 25 November 1758 'A Petition of the Most Noble Francis Duke of Bridgewater' was presented to the House of Commons to build a canal to link Salford with Worsley and on to Hollin Ferry near Warrington. A proposed lock near Ordsall Hall would connect the canal to the Mersey and Inwell Navigation and give access to the markets in Manchester. On 23 March 1759 the Salford Canal Act received Royal Assent and became law.



Part of a map from Arthur Young's Journey through Britain, 1770



The big dig

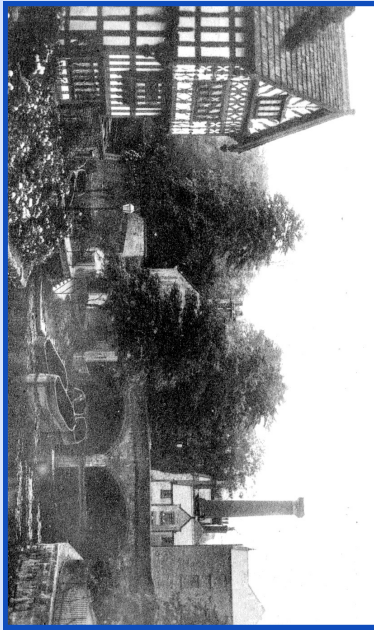
Work on the underground canal had already begun — now work could begin on the surface canal. An army of workers poured into Worsley to dig the canal, which began to wind away from Worsley in three different directions: down towards the Inwell at Barton, along the line of the underground tunnel or sough, and westwards to Chat Moss, where waste could be dumped to firm up the morass.

But then in January 1760 came a dramatic change of plans. Francis and his advisers had made up their minds not to run the canal to Salford parallel with the competing Mersey and Inwell after all, but to build a barge aqueduct at Barton, carry the cut high across the river, and make a bid for both the coal market of Cheshire and Manchester, and for the Liverpool carrying trade. This second act became law in March 1760.

The duke used the river navigation to bring timber, stone, bricks, lime and other heavy goods to Barton, where, by June 1760, the aqueduct was rising above the Inwell. The canal was sealed at the aqueduct workings, and a gig crane installed on the parapet to lower the twig baskets on to the duke's river barges, which had already brought up the heavy goods, so that Salford and Manchester could be fed immediately with Worsley coal. By July the duke must have been pleased with progress, as he ordered 'Ale to the workmen at the Bridge a quart apiece, followed by more free issues of drink to the boatbuilders at a launching ceremony.'

On 17 July 1761, the aqueduct at Barton was opened and the canal continued its progress towards Castletield in Manchester.

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A selection of old photographs kindly lent by S Gill

