



200 years of the Northampton Arm

This important connecting branch of the Grand Union Canal opened in May 1815. **David Blagrove** charts its difficult birth and changing fortunes

From the earliest days of the Grand Junction Canal (today's Grand Union main line), the town of Northampton showed a great desire to be connected with the canal system. The opening of the upper River Nene to navigation in 1761 had benefited the town's traders and when, three decades later, a trunk canal was first mooted, Northampton's landowners and businessmen were unsurprisingly eager.

On 30th April 1793 the Grand Junction Canal received its Enabling Act, which authorised the building of a branch to Northampton.

However, it would take another 18 years for this to become a reality.

Between 1796 and 1800 the Grand Junction Company concentrated its efforts on completing the main line and the Paddington Arm. In the meantime, the planned canal to Northampton from the north had run into difficulties, largely as the result of wartime inflation. Construction had stalled at Debdale Wharf, north of Foxton, and no work had been done further south since April 1797. Northampton continued to rely on only one water route, via the Nene and the Wash, to London and the north. Otherwise its industries were dependent upon turnpike roads. William Jessop proposed several solutions involving horse railways but, unfortunately for the town, nobody was prepared to finance them.

THE CANAL-RAILWAY

In 1802 the Grand Junction

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Top left: Far Cotton Wharf was still busy in 1959. Photo: Jim Payler collection.

Top right: Willow Wren's *Hawkesbury* lying above Northampton Bottom Lock No17 prior to passing down to Whitworths Mill at Wellingborough, 1967. © Alan Faulkner

Company was forced to seek an Act of Parliament to raise more money to complete its line – notably Blisworth Tunnel and the Wolverton embankment. The Corporation of Northampton, seeing an opportunity, opposed the Bill. The Grand Junction Company again offered a horse railway and agreement was reached in February 1803 to build a part-canal, part-railway, which eventually became a very short arm out of the mainline on the Gayton/Blisworth boundary, and a long length of railway from there to Far Cotton, where an interchange wharf was built beside the river. Work commenced in late 1804 and was completed on 7th October 1805 at a final cost of £12,000.

The railway served Northampton for nearly ten years, but its shortcomings were obvious from the start. Pilfering and breakages were common problems, while the small wagons were unsuited to carrying certain commodities like timber. Furthermore, transhipment costs meant that Northampton traders were at a disadvantage compared with those who had direct access to a canal.

THE PUSH FOR A CANAL

When, in 1809, a canal was promoted to link the unfinished Northamptonshire Union Canal at Foxton with the Grand Junction at Norton, Northampton once again played a political card by opposing the Bill. At this, the Grand Junction reluctantly agreed to build a canal to the town, but with narrow locks

(as at Watford and Foxton) to conserve water. A clause inserted in the Bill stipulated that, should the Foxton and Watford ones be widened, so would the Northampton Arm locks. This clause has never been repealed, creating an interesting legal point even today.

CONSTRUCTION AND OPENING

Work on the Northampton Arm began at last in summer 1812. The following year Benjamin Bevan was appointed engineer to oversee the project and, in August, reported that the foundations of Lock 17 (the lock joining the canal to the Nene) were almost complete and that the canal as far as the next lock had been cut and puddled.

Finally, on 1st May 1815 a huge crowd gathered at Far Cotton to see the first boats arrive, of which 20 “were carrying coals and the rest divers merchandise from all parts of the Kingdom”. That the Grand Junction Company anticipated a heavy traffic is evidenced by the relatively lavish provision of lock houses. There were originally four of these, all with typical Regency hipped roofs, of which only the one at Top Lock now survives. The final length of the Arm from the main line to the Nene was a little over 5 miles.

MIXED TRAFFIC

In spite of the Nene Navigation, Northampton had stagnated for decades. Its population in 1811 was 5,432 – probably less than it had been in 1400. From 1815, however, it began

to grow, and by 1831 it had nearly tripled to 15,351. Industries sprang up around the waterside. Breweries, foundries, gasworks, timber yards and storage wharves appeared in what became known as 'South Quarter' and as far upstream as West Bridge.

Almost immediately the Arm began carrying a large volume of merchandise and a considerable quantity passed onto the Nene for points downstream as far as Peterborough. One unusual traffic, mentioned in the Parliamentary Inquiry into the London & Birmingham Railway Bill in 1834, was livestock. It was stated that beasts bought on a Saturday morning at Northampton market would be driven to Far Cotton, loaded onto fast boats and delivered to Smithfield in London for Monday morning via City Road Basin.

THE RAILWAY AGE

The advent of the railway after 1844 does not seem to have greatly affected the fortunes of the Northampton Arm, although traffic to the lower part of the Nene Valley fell away due to the difficulties of navigating the river, which remained in its original physical condition with several staunches in place of locks.

The growth of the town continued, with a huge spurt taking the population to 87,021 in 1901. This more than compensated for any traffic lost to railway competition, particularly as so much industry was concentrated near the waterside.

After Pickfords ceased regular

long-distance canal trading in 1841, much of its work was taken over by the Grand Junction Canal Carrying Company, and an 1840s engraving shows a pair of Grand Junction boats lying stern on to Bridge Street in a long-vanished arm on what is now the site of Carlsberg's Brewery. A newspaper account of 1913 mentions that the Grand Junction's successor, Fellows, Morton & Clayton Ltd, was operating a regular motor-boat service to and from London. This would have been in the course of that firm's regular service of express, or 'fly', boats.

In 1929 the Grand Junction Canal was taken over by the Regent's Canal Company, along with other associated canals, and the new augmented concern was renamed the Grand Union Canal. The company looked to increase the traffic carried over the whole system and acquired a small carrying concern, Associated Canal Carriers Ltd of Northampton, and set about increasing the fleet. This grew considerably during the 1930s and was renamed the Grand Union Canal Carrying Co (GUCCC). It is not an exaggeration to state that of all the intermediate points between London, Birmingham and Nottingham, Northampton and its Arm provided the canal with the most traffic.

SAVING THE ARM

With the nationalisation of the canals from January 1948, a steady decline set in. The gas tar trade ended in 1953 and other commodities gradually ceased as road competition strengthened. The last regular coal trade, to the Rousselot



Above: British Transport Waterways provided a horse to assist with downhill loaded boats. Here a steel 'bluetop' butty is being worked through Lock 2 in 1960.

Gelatine Works on the Nene east of Northampton, ceased around 1959. The traffic in wheat to Wellingborough finally ended in April 1969.

By 1968 it was evident that the survival of the Arm was in doubt. There was very little pleasure traffic using it, one reason being that the River Nene authorities demanded an extra licence for passing beyond Lock 17, even if craft were only going as far as the first river lock at Becketts Park.

In a bid to save the Arm, a group of local enthusiasts formed the Northampton Branch of the Inland Waterways Association at a meeting at the Plough Hotel, Northampton, in September 1968. It was successful in persuading the powers-that-were to retain the Arm in navigable condition. Rallies were organised to publicise the fact the Arm formed a link between the Fenland waterways and the main system, culminating in the hugely successful National Rally of 1971, attended by over 600 boats, the majority of which made the passage down the canal branch.

As the leisure use of waterways increased during the 1970s and '80s, so the demand for secure off-line moorings rose. In 1980 a piece of land that lay between the one-time clay pit north of Bridge 2 and the oil depot was excavated to form a marina. Originally called Freshwater Marine, it is now known as Gayton Marine.

TODAY

Following the formation of the Canal & River Trust in 2012, the Northampton Branch of IWA decided to form a volunteer group to assist with the maintenance of the Arm. Working parties have been regularly held since 2013 and it is intended to celebrate the bicentennial of the Arm at the Northampton Festival of Water, to be held at the waterfront of Becketts Park on 29th-31st August 2015.



Left: Working boat *Balham* passing under the bridge being constructed for the M1 motorway in 1958.