

THE ORIGINS OF GLOUCESTER'S CANAL

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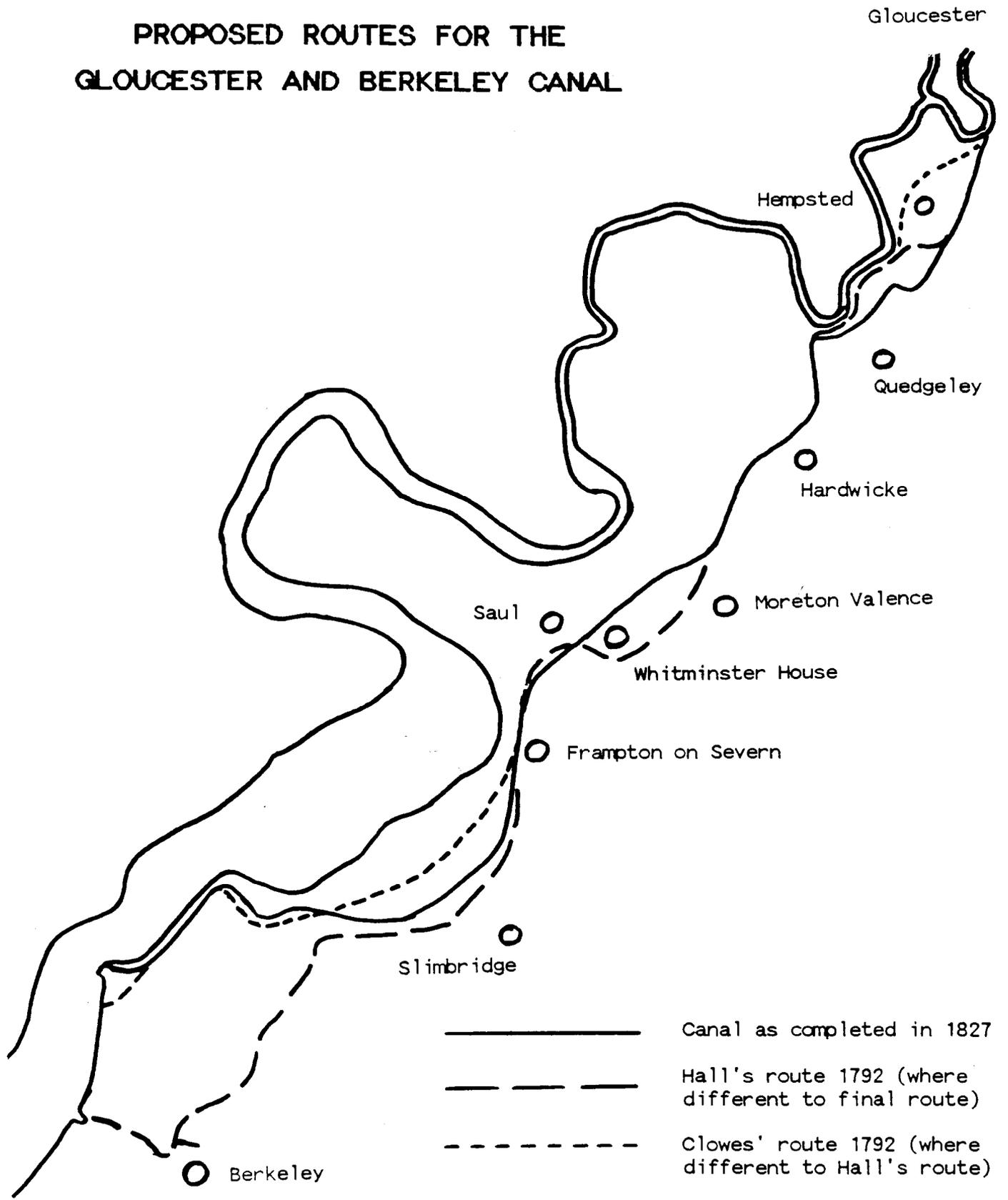
It is just two hundred years since plans were made to authorise a ship canal to link Gloucester with the Severn estuary near Berkeley. This article considers the events and the issues arising between the first public meeting on 6 November 1792 and the authorising Act of Parliament which received the Royal Assent less than five months later.

The canal was needed to bypass the winding stretch of the River Severn to the south of Gloucester. The Severn had become an important highway for trade between the Midlands and the great port of Bristol, but this local stretch was a bottleneck. With its strong tides and hazardous sandbanks, navigation was only possible for shallow draught vessels and then only for a few days each month around the times of the spring tides. The canal would not only provide a safe means for local trows and barges to bypass the bottleneck but it would also allow the passage of larger sea-going ships and so enable Gloucester to challenge Bristol as a primary port. There was no precedent for such an ambitious project, but it was clear that its success would have far-reaching consequences for both Gloucester and the Midlands.

The meeting on 6 November at the old Bell Hotel in Southgate Street had not been publicly advertised, but word got around the business community and there was no shortage of potential subscribers. Publicity for such meetings was often kept deliberately to a minimum because promoters wanted to keep a good thing to themselves and their friends. This was the period of the "canal mania" when speculators were rushing to buy shares in any canal scheme in the belief that they could soon sell at a profit. When a Somerset paper announced that a meeting would be held at Wells to promote a canal from Bristol to Taunton, the promoters tried to keep it secret by buying up all the newspapers containing the advertisement.

Before any work could start on the canal, it was necessary to obtain an Act of Parliament, and the meeting on 6 November agreed to submit a bill as soon as possible in the ensuing session. To cover the expenses involved in this, those present were asked to pay an initial deposit of one pound for each hundred pound share they wished to take up, on the understanding that the balance would be paid in stages once the real work of constructing the canal got under way. To prevent improper speculation, it was agreed that no share could be transferred until fifteen pounds had been paid thereon. The task of preparing the bill was given to solicitors Thomas Commeline of Gloucester and Francis Welles of Upton upon Severn.

PROPOSED ROUTES FOR THE GLOUCESTER AND BERKELEY CANAL



- Canal as completed in 1827
- - - - - Hall's route 1792 (where different to final route)
- - - - - Clowes' route 1792 (where different to Hall's route)

The prime movers in promoting the canal were business and professional men in Gloucester and in parts of the West Midlands which relied on the Severn navigation. The local activists included wine merchant Edmund Stock, who already brought imports up the Severn to Gloucester in his own vessels, pinmaker Thomas Weaver, who as Mayor of Gloucester chaired the initial meeting, wool-stapler Richard Chandler, barrister and banker William Fendall and surgeons Richard Brown Cheston and Charles Brandon Tyre. The largest individual subscribers came from further afield and included banker Samuel Skey from Bewdley and ironmasters William Reynolds and John Wilkinson from Shropshire. Other substantial subscribers came from Birmingham, Stourport, Worcester and Upton upon Severn.

The promoters had arranged for an initial survey of the route to be carried out by Josiah Clowes, the Principal Engineer of the Herefordshire and Gloucestershire Canal. He proposed a canal 16 miles long, 72 feet wide and 15 feet deep crossing the Stroudwater Canal near Whitminster and with an entrance from the Severn estuary about a mile above an inlet known as Berkeley Pill. The route was through low ground, quite near to the river in places, and the estimated cost was £102,108. A second survey was carried out by Richard Hall, a local land surveyor, who proposed a slightly longer canal following a more inland route with an entrance at Berkeley Pill and a short branch into Berkeley village.

A respected estuary pilot advised that Berkeley Pill was the only fit place for an entrance, and so the promoters opted for Hall's route even though it required deeper cutting and it passed through higher value agricultural land. Another factor against Clowes' route was that Dr Lysons of Hempstead strongly objected to it passing to the west of Hempstead Hill.

The promoters now had to move quickly to meet the parliamentary timetable and particularly to forestall a proposal from Bristol interests for a barge canal all the way from Bristol to Gloucester. This had been supported so enthusiastically in Bristol that those attending the promotion meeting had struggled violently with each other in their rush to the subscription book! This canal would suit the barges and trows of up to 60 tons burthen able to navigate the river above Gloucester, but would undermine Gloucester's aspirations to rival Bristol as a transshipment port for sea-going ships.

The case for the **ship** canal was set out in a letter to the Gloucester Journal (1) written by "A Subscriber". He emphasised the inconveniences experienced in the navigation of the River Severn below Gloucester - particularly the circuitousness of the passage and the hazard to which the lives of the navigators and the property of the traders were exposed. He pointed out that the worst shoals and windings were above Berkeley Pill, and the proposed ship canal would avoid these inconveniences and shorten the distance from 23 to 16 miles. He claimed (with

slight exaggeration) that ships of 500 tons burthen could navigate at all times with ease and safety to Berkeley Pill, and the canal would allow such vessels to reach Gloucester. This would open a new and more convenient market for all places in the vicinity of Gloucester or connected with the upper parts of the River Severn and would give an opportunity to traders in these areas to share in a foreign trade. Very similar arguments were later set down in a leaflet distributed by the promoters.

The large size of the canal, however, was causing concern amongst some of the landowners affected and strong opposition was expressed by Richard Owen Cambridge who owned land on the chosen route near Whitminster. Cambridge was a supporter of canals and had been involved in an early attempt to make the River Frome navigable, but he emphasised the rashness of the present proposal for a large and deep canal with no precedent, and he supported the smaller barge canal from Bristol instead. He maintained that the culverts under the large canal (needed to carry streams like the Frome when in torrent) could not be made strong enough to withstand the pressure from the great depth of water in the canal. He had witnessed the terrible damage caused when a burst canal near Wolverhampton had completely filled a coal mine. (Amazingly one man had survived, floating on the water as it filled the shaft!)

Cambridge also claimed that it would not be possible to make such a big canal watertight, and water oozing out (as occurred from the Stroudwater Canal) would ruin the adjoining land which already suffered from difficult drainage. He pointed out that bridges over a wide canal would be expensive to build and maintain, and he expressed concern that the bridges might not be built leaving local farmers cut off from their fields.

Cambridge also argued that the proposed canal would ruin the undertakers as very few vessels would pay the toll to use it when most could navigate the river for six days every fortnight without payment. He claimed that the dangers of the river had been exaggerated and that the few accidents that had occurred were due to drunkenness: "I don't like to have my old favourite the Severn calumniated from that cause which has overset more mail coaches in one month than the boats on the Severn in ten years." He did not seem to appreciate that this objection applied equally to the barge canal from Bristol which he supported!

Lord Berkeley, the most influential landowner, also had reservations, but he was prepared to support the ship canal (and oppose the Bristol canal) provided his interests were protected by appropriate clauses in the bill. To address these concerns, the promoters called a meeting of landowners on 31 December 1792 at the Red Lion in Newport on the main road to Bristol. Desperate to secure the landowners' support in Parliament, the promoters agreed to terms that were to cause considerable difficulties later. They agreed that the purchase

price of land needed for the canal would be not less than 38 years rental, which was about 11 years over the going rate. Also they agreed that one fifth of the shares should be reserved for landowners, although the options did not have to be taken up immediately as with normal shares. And to provide for possible compensation to landowners, it was agreed that £5000 would be invested in the name of Trustees - effectively freezing part of the precious capital.

The promoters also held meetings with the proprietors of the Stroudwater Canal and agreed to include clauses in the bill that would protect their rights. These covered arrangements on tolls, the erection of stop-gates to prevent water loss and compensation for any disruption while the junction was being constructed.

As a final preparation before consideration by Parliament, the promoters arranged for the route hurriedly to be re-surveyed by Robert Mylne, an eminent architect and bridge-builder who also became involved in canal schemes during the mania period. In late January and early February, Mylne went over Hall's route and he estimated the cost as £137,238. Based on this, the bill made provision for raising £140,000 with power to raise a further £60,000 if needed.

The survey had to be hurried because the bill was starting its passage through Parliament. Supported by petitions from the City of Gloucester and from merchants and civic authorities from many towns in the Midlands, the bill was given its second reading in the House of Commons on 26 February. A month later in the Lords, two petitions from Bristol asked for amendments to facilitate a future junction with their canal, but events had moved so fast that the Town Clerk of Bristol was not prepared with specific proposals and so no changes were made. Mylne gave evidence that the project was practicable, and the bill was given the Royal Assent on 28 March, having been rushed through all its stages in a little over one month.

The speed with which all the arrangements were made was a tribute to the spirit and enterprise of those involved, but it was not achieved without penalty. Agreements made in the enthusiasm of the "canal mania" were soon being regretted by the shareholders of the new Gloucester and Berkeley Canal Company. The commitment already noted to pay so highly for the land was a significant burden, particularly when Mylne found he needed more land than he expected in order to dispose of the spoil. The agreement to allocate one fifth of the shares to the landowners also turned sour because there was a commercial crisis in 1793, the share price plummeted, and many landowners failed to exercise their option. Ordinary shareholders had an obligation to pay calls on their shares, but some were forced to default because of the crisis and this further limited the capital that could be raised. To encourage shareholders to pay up, it was agreed to pay interest on money subscribed by the

prescribed deadlines, but as time went by this became a significant drain on the capital. More problems were caused by the need to pay administration costs not included in the original hurried estimates. But the worst feature of the project was the choice of Berkeley Pill for an entrance after minimal consultation. It was only realised later that there was limited depth of water in the Pill at low tide and there was nowhere for vessels to shelter while waiting for the tide.

How these problems were eventually overcome is another story. Suffice it to say that the original shareholders gained no benefit from their investment, but their efforts should be remembered as their dreams did become of great value to later generations.

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