

AN EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY PROPOSAL FOR THE NAVIGATION OF THE ROTHER

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Between 1660 and 1750 several hundred miles of river navigation were created in England and Wales, most commonly by bodies of undertakers established by Act of Parliament. One such scheme of particular importance to north Derbyshire, south Yorkshire and the adjacent parts of Nottinghamshire and Lincolnshire was that to make the Don navigable from its mouth to Tinsley, within a few miles of Sheffield. In 1726 Parliament empowered the Company of Cutlers of Hallamshire to undertake the navigation from Doncaster to Tinsley and the following year gave similar powers to Doncaster corporation for the lower part of the river. In 1732 the two bodies were united by a third Act and in 1751 the navigation was opened throughout, with boats of twenty tons burden now able to reach Tinsley. The Don navigation's engineer was William Palmer, who in October 1731, as work on the river was still in progress, was asked by the undertakers to survey and map the river Rother, which joined the Don at Rotherham and rose some twenty miles away to the south beyond Chesterfield.¹ As far as one can judge from the company's minutes, nothing more was done about an extension of the navigation up the Rother, but a document preserved among the muniments of the Lincolnshire landowner Lord Monson relates either to this proposal or to a similar scheme at another date.² It has apparently not been noticed in print before and is presumably the only record of a long-forgotten plan to make the Rother navigable into Derbyshire, thus anticipating the building of the Chesterfield Canal by perhaps half a century.

The document printed below is undated and the handwriting could belong to anywhere in the first half of the eighteenth century. Since it refers to George I as the 'late King' it must post-date his death in June 1727; the reference to the Cutlers and Doncaster corporation similarly implies that it was written after the second Don Act of 1727. The appearance of the Duke of Kingston, who would be interested in the project as lord of the manor of Beighton, is not otherwise helpful, since the first duke died in 1726 and his son lived until 1773. The paper sets out the case for making the Rother navigable as an adjunct of the Don, mainly as a means of improving transport from Chesterfield to Hull for lead, millstones and other heavy goods which at this date would have been carried by land to Bawtry and then down the Idle and Trent. One of the hopes of the Don Navigation undertakers was that Sheffield would capture some of Chesterfield's trade when the river was open to Tinsley; presumably the Duke of Kingston hoped that Beighton might alternatively become a river-head port for north-east Derbyshire. The author of the scheme saw few difficulties in making the four miles of the Rother from Rotherham to Beighton navigable: there were only four mills on this stretch and the fall was sufficiently slight not to need the construction of dams, weirs or, presumably, any locks. Road transport interests were to be protected on the same lines as for the Don, as were those of the landowners. Tolls would be set as a proportion of those in the Don Act. Finally, if the scheme were authorised by parliament and the proposed undertakers failed to do the work, Kingston might execute it himself.

If this paper is not William Palmer's report of 1731 it presumably belongs to some other date in the first half of the eighteenth century. At all events, nothing came of the

plan and after 1750 interest in river navigation waned as deadwater canals were accepted as a practicable proposition. The scheme to build a canal from Chesterfield to the Trent was among the earliest large-scale projects of this kind, authorised in 1771 and completed six years later, replacing the land-carriage route to Bawtry and the Idle from there to Stockwith.³ The Chesterfield Canal followed the Rother valley from its western end as far as Eckington, then swung eastwards to pierce the magnesian limestone ridge into Nottinghamshire by a tunnel over 3,000 yards long whose collapse at the beginning of this century finally sealed the fate of the upper section of the canal. It is interesting to speculate on what might have been the rather different history of canal navigation to Chesterfield had a canalisation of the Rother throughout its length been adopted in the 1770s instead of the route to Stockwith, since today the South Yorkshire Navigation remains one of Britain's few commercially useful inland waterways and one which might have had a branch from Rotherham to Chesterfield. As it was, later projects to build a canal from Chesterfield to Sheffield never came near to execution.

REFERENCES

- 1 T.S. Willan, *River navigation in England 1600-1750* (new ed. 1964) remains the standard general account; for the Don see his other work, *The early history of the Don Navigation* (Manchester, 1965).
- 2 I am indebted to Lady Monson for permission to publish this item and to Mr Nicholas Bennett, Lincolnshire Archives Service, for providing a copy. The single sheet was folded and sealed for posting, with the address endorsed 'To the Rt. Honble. the Lord Monson in Arlington Street St James's London', stamped 'Rotherham' and postmarked 2 April (no year). The paper is watermarked 'GR' with the royal arms but no date.
- 3 For the Chesterfield Canal and schemes to extend it see C. Hadfield, *The canals of the East Midlands (including part of London)* (Newton Abbot, 2nd ed. 1970).

Lincoln Archives Office, Monson 28B 12/3/9

Observacions for the making the River Rother Navigable

- [1] The Rother runs from Beighton Mills in the County of Derby and falls into the River Dunn at Rotherham in the County of York four Long Miles Distant by Land, and is very Capable of being made Navigable and would be Convenient for the Carriage of the several Particulars mencioned in the Act of the 12th of the late King, for making the Dunn Navigable, and Especially for Millstones and Lead out of that part of Derbyshire which lyes near Chesterfield, And Lime and Merchandizes into Derbyshire
- [2] Beighton is six miles from Chesterfield, And the Rother when Navigable would be Capable of Conveying Vessells of 10 or 15 Tun Burthen or more to and from the Dunn which wou'd be very Comodious and a great Advantage to the Proprietors of that River
- [3] The Company of Cutlers &c in Hallamshire and the Corporacion of Doncaster may be Impowered to make this Navigation. With the like Powers as in the Dunn Act. And the same Commissioners with an Addicion of the Duke of Kingston or such as may be thought proper
- [4] The Sheffield Navigation from the utmost Extent of Tinsley westward to Holme Style in Doncaster is by Land ten Long miles
- [5] The Dutyes may be Setled for this Navigcion in Proportion as four is to Ten

- [6] There are about 4 Mills upon this River, And the like Provision may be as to keeping the Wears upp and in Repair as in the Dunn act And for Satisfaccion and Conveniency to the Land Owners
- [7] This River has but Little fall betwixt Beighton and Rotheram So no New Damm or Wear must be made Cross or in the Channel of the River
- [8] If the undertakers will agree to it there may be the like Clauses for Repairing the Roads Betwixt Beighton and Eccinton [and Beighton & Birley Common].* As in the Dunn act for those Betwixt Tinsley and Ladybridge in Sheffield
- [9] Provisoe that if the undertakers shall not in Seven years time Perfect this Navigacion, that it shall be in the Power of the Landlord of the Manour of Beighton for the time being to do it upon the same Terms

The Navigation should come to the Bridge called Fleet bridge near Beighton Mill in Com. Derby.†

* Interlined in another hand.

† Added in another hand.