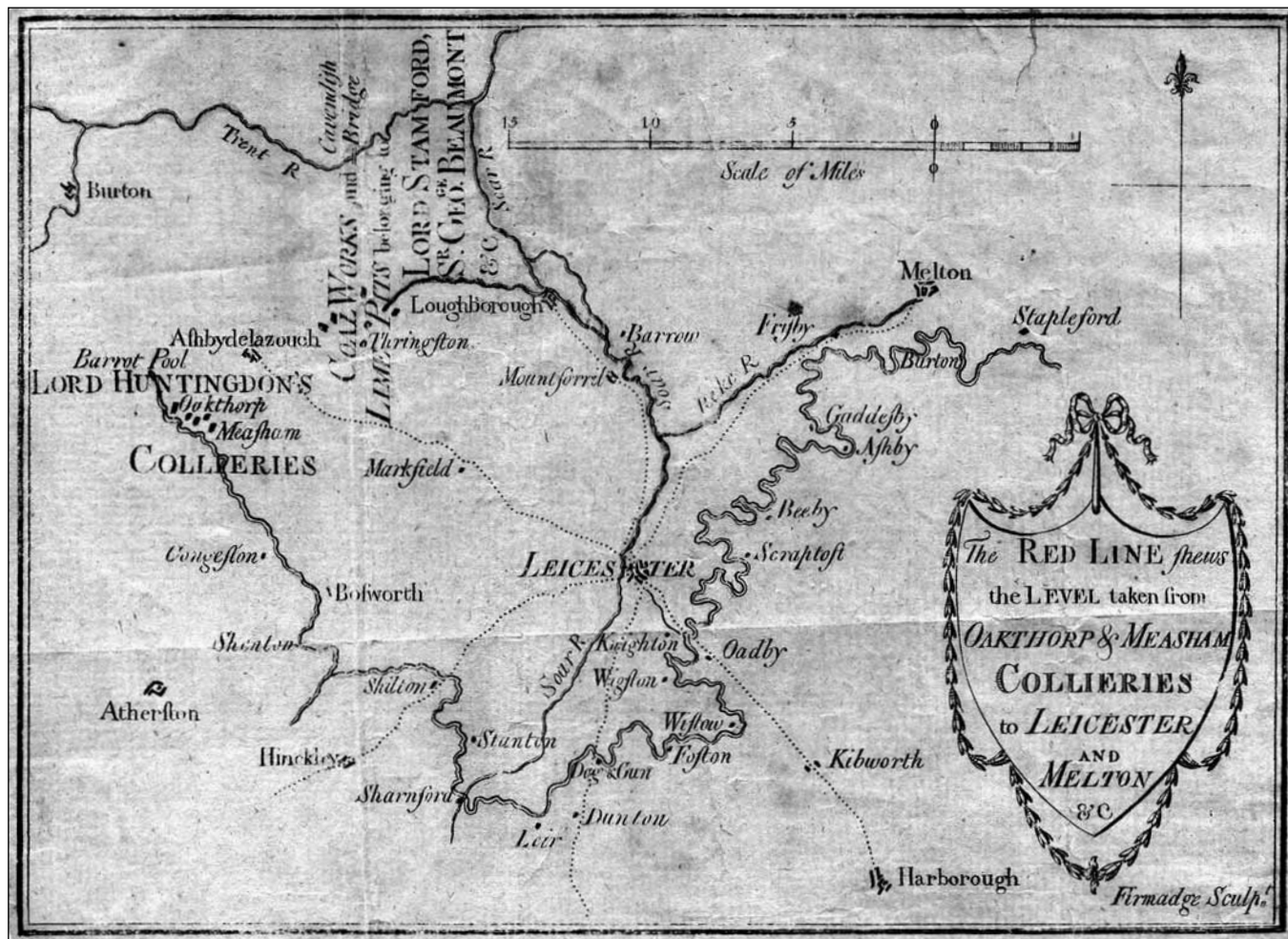


Leicestershire Canal Wars of 1785 – Some Further Information

Derek Deadman



The 1786 broadsheet, upper section. (Image credit: Colin Brooks.)

Temple Patterson (1) and Philip A. Stevens (2) respectively have already provided detailed accounts of the development of the canal system in Leicestershire in general, and of the Leicester and Melton Navigations in particular. Although the history has been well explored, a broadsheet in the author's possession suggests that the topic be revisited as it appears to fill a gap in the story that was acknowledged by Temple Patterson.

In order to study the broadsheet that is illustrated here, it seems useful to remind ourselves of some of the details provided by Temple Patterson, and in particular, to consider the especially contentious issue of the proposed extension to the 'Soar Navigation' (completed in 1778). The Soar Navigation made the River Soar navigable by horse-drawn barges from the Trent to Loughborough. The extension discussed concerned 'The Leicester Navigation' that would

extend the navigable waterway through to Leicester. This extension would have permitted the direct transportation of coal from Derbyshire to Leicester, substantially reducing the cost of coal in Leicester. This would have been deeply damaging to the mining interests (coal and limestone) in the west of the county around Ashby from where much of Leicester's coal had been delivered by packhorse. The Soar Navigation had already depressed delivered coal prices in Leicester by 1780, and popular pressure mounted to reduce these even more.

In 1785, subscriptions were opened in Leicester to promote the development of the Soar to make it navigable from Loughborough to Leicester, and moves were also made to make the Wreak navigable, thus opening up a route to Melton, and from there by a new canal to Oakham. The organisers of the Leicester Navigation expected – and

received – strong opposition from the Leicestershire coal-owners and proprietors of lime-works in the west of the county, as well as from large landholders of estates and water mills on the rivers Soar and Wreak. The leader of the opposition was Lord Rawdon, son and heir of the Earl of Moira, who thus had a family interest in the collieries in the west of the county. He was joined by Earl Ferrers who owned mines near Staunton Harold and was lord of the manors of Ratcliffe, Thrussington and Sibleby, and by the Earls of Huntingdon and Stamford and Sir John Danvers of Swithland. Together they formed a powerful group who could oppose any Bill presented to the Commons or Lords.

To try to placate this opposition, the organisers of the Leicester Navigation altered their proposals to include a canal from the Soar near Loughborough to Coleorton Collieries together with a short stretch of railway (horse-drawn) if needed from the canal to the pits. This canal – The Charnwood Forest Canal – would run from Thringston or Thringston(e) Bridge (near Coleorton and Swannington pits), follow the Gracedieu Brook and pass north of Shepshed, Garendon Park and Loughborough, and join the Soar between Quorn and Barrow. A plan of the proposals dated 1785 was drawn up which is illustrated (Map IV) in the article by Temple Patterson and of which two original copies exist at the Record Office for Leicestershire, Leicester and Rutland. (3) This route may also be seen on the map on the broadsheet illustrated here from Leicester to Thringstone via Loughborough. (This route is described as the 'Blue line' on the broadsheet. It was not though the route actually traced by the Charnwood Forest line when it was constructed later).

Unfortunately, the proposed canal was of little use to Lord Huntingdon's collieries at Moira and Oakthorpe which lay further to the west, and Lord Rawdon and his followers were not satisfied. This is where this broadsheet, not previously illustrated or recorded as far as it is known, may be of some interest.

Lord Rawdon came up with an alternative to the Leicester Navigation. According to Temple Patterson 'He brought forward a plan for a canal from Oakthorpe, passing by a circuitous route near all or almost all of the principal collieries, coming (apparently) close enough to Market Harborough to offer it advantages which the rival did not, and going by Leicester to Melton.' Temple Patterson also notes that 'The precise details of the proposed route are apparently lost' and that 'A paper war of pamphlets and petitions followed, in which the opposition put out a broadsheet proclaiming that the Leicester Navigation would 'overwhelm and destroy' the whole county through which it passed.'

Three of these pamphlets of the paper war are held at ROLLR. The earliest chronologically is entitled

Considerations upon the Scheme for a Navigation to the Town of Leicester. (4) As it makes no mention of the proposed Charnwood Forest Canal or the plan of Lord Rawdon, it probably relates to the earliest proposal for the Leicester Navigation. The pamphlet concludes that 'Upon the whole, this line of Navigation seems to have no chance to be of any Public Utility whatsoever, or even to be beneficial to the Town of Leicester. It will be attended with great injury to private property; it will prejudice extremely the owners of the many valuable collieries in Leicestershire, by transferring the principal part of their sale to the collieries in another county; without furnishing us with better coals, or on more reasonable terms; and it will establish a company of coal carriers, to the utter ruin of many hundred industrious men, and their families, and other parts of the county ...'. There were clearly other such publications produced by the opposition to the Leicester Navigation as a second (later) pamphlet (5) entitled *An answer to the different statements of objections to the plans of Navigation, now proposed to be undertaken in Leicestershire* addresses claims from at least two other similar publications that 'seem to have been written with little regard to facts'. The third pamphlet has a small scale map showing Leicestershire and all adjoining counties entitled *A Plan of the Intended Navigation from Thringston to Loughborough and from thence to Leicester and Melton shewing their communications with other Inland Canals ...*. (6) With an associated account of the purported benefits of the Leicester Navigation, it was intended for members of the Lords and Commons, presumably at the time of the presentation of the Bill in 1786. It concludes that the plan is 'infinitely more practicable and useful than any other that has been proposed ... and has been recommended for execution by a majority of the Gentlemen of the county'.

The broadsheet of 1786 reproduced here touches on many of the points outlined above, including the naming of several of the protagonists involved and the routes of the two rival plans. It was clearly another of the pamphlets issued in the 'paper war' of 1785/86 that Temple Patterson mentions. If the line on the broadsheet (described as the 'Red line' in the document) representing Lord Rawdon's route from Oakthorpe and Measham is an accurate representation of his proposed route (a point which we will return to later), it would seem to fill in the details thought by Temple Patterson to have been lost. It would appear to have been issued by supporters of the Leicester Navigation plan in retaliation to claims put out by supporters of Lord Rawdon. The broadsheet stresses the length of Lord Rawdon's suggested canals (70 miles to Leicester or 112 miles to Melton) at a cost of £170,000, figures well in excess of those claimed for the Leicester Navigation (e.g. a total of only 22 miles and 4 furlongs from Thringston Bridge to Leicester at a cost of £42,000). The simple, relatively short and straight Leicester Navigation construction appears to compare very favourably

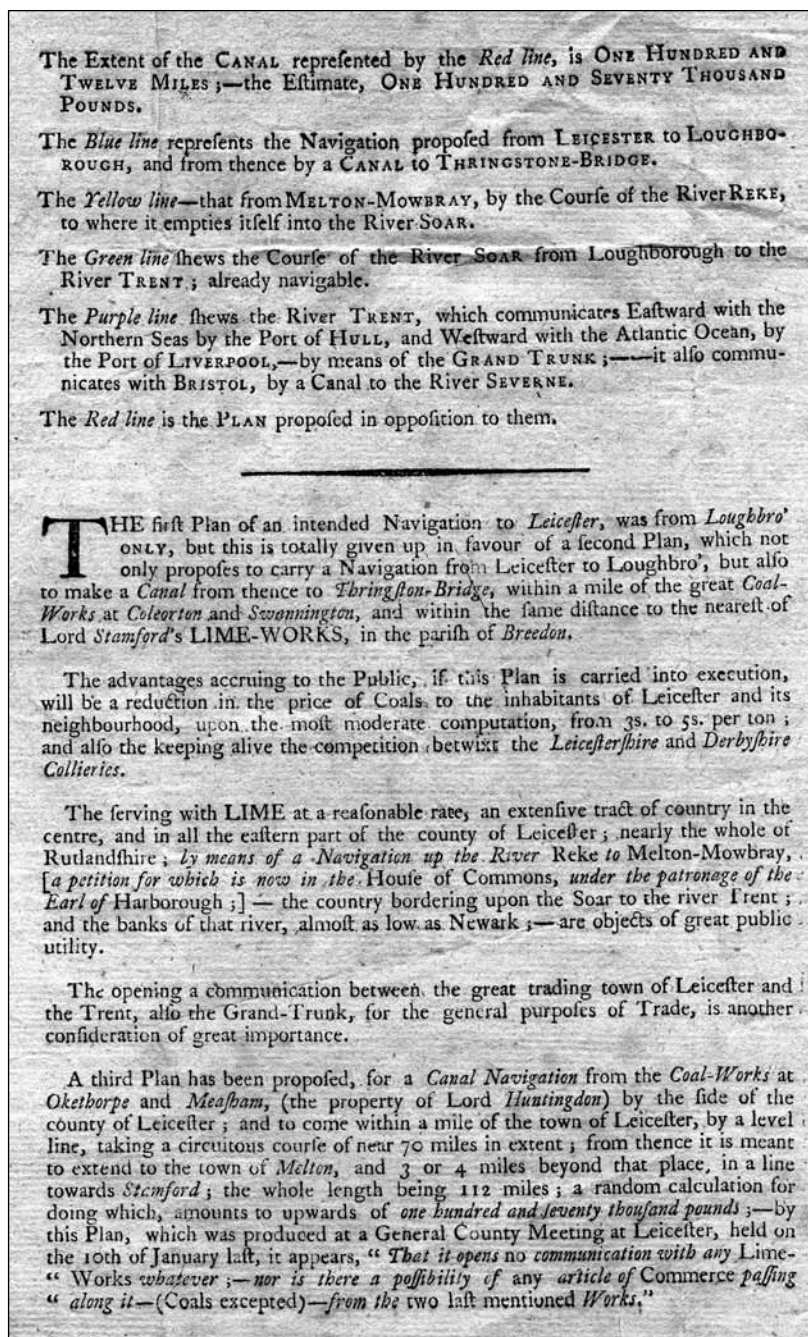
to the incredibly long and winding route proposed by Lord Rawdon which apparently followed contour lines to avoid the construction of tunnels or locks. The broadsheet was clearly designed to show the latter in a bad light. At a county meeting in January 1786 (the broadsheet states the 10th), Lord Rawdon presented his plan but it did not receive the support that he required. The Bill in the Commons for the Leicester Navigation in the form proposed including The Charnwood Forest Canal was considered in May 1786 but was defeated by 51 votes to 42. Not until after Lord Rawdon and most of his group changed their minds in 1790 did a Leicester Navigation plan get the approval it needed.

The map on the broadsheet illustrated here appears to be more than a simple outline sketch. It has a scale (15 miles = 2.5 inches) and carries the name of the engraver, William Firmage. Bennett refers to Firmage as a slater, engraver, plasterer, painter, joiner, builder, stone mason, architect and surveyor. (7) He became Mayor of Leicester in 1805. Interestingly, according to Bennett he was the surveyor of the map (*A plan of the intended Canal and River Navigation from Thringston Bridge to Leicester ... surveyed in 1785*) reproduced in Temple Patterson's article of 1951, so that he would have been an obvious choice to produce the map on the broadsheet. He also engraved the map (scale 40 miles = 3.4 inches) that accompanied the pamphlet that was 'intended for the members of the houses of Lords and Commons' in 1786. (8) It also suggests that as it was prepared by a professional surveyor, the route shown on the broadsheet as that proposed by Lord Rawdon can probably be treated as trustworthy.

Thanks are given to John Bennett for his helpful comments, to Keith Ovenden at The Record Office for Leicestershire, Leicester and Rutland for his assistance in locating material relevant in the preparation of this article, and to Colin Brooks for the photography.

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4. ROLLR: 14D49/14.



The 1786 broadsheet, lower section. (Image credit: Colin Brooks.)

5. ROLLR: 14D49/15.
6. ROLLR: DE3214/8251.
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