

The North Walsham – Dilham Canal

The NW-D Canal runs from Antingham, northwest of North Walsham to Wayford Bridge, West of Stalham. It was built by 100 navvies from Bedford and took one year opening in 1826. It is nine miles long and is Norfolk's only locked wherry sailing canal.

Here are some of the main events in its history

‘Two centuries ago the North Walsham district was self-sufficient in everyday commodities, Coal and other heavy goods came to Cromer and Mundesley by sea and were horse drawn by tumbrils to nearby villages over unmade roads. The carriers carts provided the wealthy with expensive goods such as wine, silks and tableware and all other goods and farm materials were brought on small carts.

The leisurely pace of the carts was somewhat improved in 1797 when local gentry raised £211. 7s 9d to pay for an act of parliament which created a toll road between Magdalen Gate in Norwich and the Kings Arms Inn in North Walsham. This however was extremely expensive - 8d to 1s 2d per ton per mile for coal doubling its cost. A farm worker would have to pay his weeks wages to travel by coach from North

WalshamW to Norwich. A cheaper, regular and speedier transport system was needed . In 1824 it was decided to widen and straighten the River Ant between Antingham and Dilham, and on to Great Yarmouth, to create a canal for the transport of goods. This was also seen as an opportunity to boost the profits of the mills along its route.

Here are a few key dates from its complicated history

1812 Construction was approved by Act of Parliament

1824 Cost agreed at £ 32,000

1826 The first laden wherry arrived at Ebridge Mill from Yarmouth

The official opening was attended by all the gentlemen of the area such as Lord Suffield and they all sailed along the canal in a flotilla of boats with thousands watching from the banks. There were bands playing, food and drink and North Walsham itself was bedecked with flags.

The products carried by the wherries included wheat, bones, oil cakes, fertilisers, fish guts, timber, coal. salt. Ironmongery, groceries and wine. Items which left the area included flour, oak for fish smoking and sugar.

Tolls varied from 21/2d per ton per mile for items such as dung to 5d per ton per mile for wines and spirits.

All seemed to work well until the coming of the railways and from about 1890 customers were being lost. Bradshaws Canal Guide of 1904 said that there was not much trade

1912 Seven inches of rain fell in 24 hours causing dreadful flooding which broke the canal bank.

It was all downhill from now on with different ownership, discharges of effluent from the North Walsham Sewage works, poor maintenance, damage to the locks and bridges etc.

A couple of years ago some members of the Local History Group went for a trip along the canal on a very dodgy boat and saw the efforts being made by the Canal Trust to attract local people and tourists with amenities including fishing, kayaking and swimming and generally enjoy the walks and wildlife.