

**NINETEENTH AND TWENTIETH CENTURY GAZETTEERS
OF THE INLAND WATERWAYS OF BRITAIN: 1816-1975**

With particular reference to the Stafford Branch Canal / River Sow Navigation

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Introduction

It should be possible to find out what the Stafford Branch Canal (River Sow Navigation) was like in the 19th and early 20th centuries by consulting relevant waterways handbooks published at the time.

This article looks at several gazetteers/handbooks of the Inland Waterways to discover what information they contain about the Stafford Branch Canal, not only while it was open (1816 to the 1920s) but also after closure until about 1975.

A *gazetteer* is a compendium of information about a particular geographical topic. The essential information is normally presented alphabetically and the amount of detail can vary.

It seems that there are several gazetteers published between 1816 and 1975: Priestley's (1831), those of de Salis (1897, including Bradshaw's 1904, 1918 and 1928), the Imray Publications (1939, 1947, 1950 and 1962 – there are later editions) and the Shell Guides (1975 and 1981).

As will be seen, some of the gazetteers are more useful than others, but each makes its own contribution to our understanding of the Stafford Branch (and how it was perceived) over the years.

It seems that the first gazetteer of Britain's inland waterways was written by the surveyor John Phillips at the height of "canal mania" at the end of the eighteenth century. It was called: *A General History of Inland Navigation, Foreign and Domestic; Containing a Complete Account of the Canals Already Executed in England with Considerations on Those Proposed*. It was first published in 1792 and there were five editions. It was a mammoth undertaking, detailed and one can sense the enthusiastic, confident vibrancy throughout its pages as the industrial revolution unfolds – in the days before the advent of the railways.

Unfortunately the last edition appeared in 1805, eleven years before the Stafford Branch opened. Unsurprisingly, Phillips made no mention of the Stafford Branch although "Baswick" is mentioned in the discussion about the construction of the Staffordshire & Worcestershire Canal.

The 1805 edition was reprinted in 1970 by David & Charles and was called *Phillips' Inland Navigation 1805*. Charles Hadfield wrote the introduction to the 634 page reprint.

HISTORICAL ACCOUNT OF THE NAVIGABLE RIVERS, CANALS, AND RAILWAYS, OF GREAT BRITAIN (1831)

The first gazetteer of Britain's inland waterways published after the Stafford Branch Canal opened in 1816 appears to have been the *Historical Account of the Navigable Rivers, Canals, and Railways, of Great Britain*¹. It was meticulously researched and compiled by Joseph Priestley (1767-1852) of the Aire and Calder Navigation and published in 1831. Over 700 pages long, it covered all canals and railways that had been authorised by relevant Acts of Parliament up to 1830 and listed them alphabetically. The railway age had begun and one can sense a foreboding that canal transport would be hard pressed to compete with the emerging challenge, even with some express boats (packet boats and fly boats) carrying passengers.

As Charles Hadfield noted in his introduction to the 1969 David and Charles reprint of the original edition, Priestley had written this in the days before the penny post, the telephone or the typewriter and had compiled an almost complete list of canal and railway acts and used them to write a short account of each line, identifying the Act and usually including information such as the promoter, engineer, opening date, route, distances, locks, tunnels, aqueducts, bridges, reservoirs, tolls and goods carried, mostly without error or omission. It was essential reading for anyone with an interest in the waterways – canal companies, carriers, local businesses, investors and Members of Parliament – but was not a “tourist guide”. The canals described were *as authorised* and do not take into account that some of the canals were altered or not built. What a potential source of information about the Stafford Branch?

Unfortunately however, there was no mention of the Stafford Branch / Sow Navigation even though it had opened on 19 February 1816 because, unlike most canals, **an Act of Parliament** had **not** been needed as all the land was owned by Lord Stafford. Priestley was aware of Baswich, as it is mentioned in the section which describes the route of Staffordshire and Worcestershire Canal, from the River Severn (at Stourport) to the Trent and Mersey Canal (near Haywood).

A CHRONOLOGY OF INLAND NAVIGATION IN GREAT BRITAIN (1897)

There doesn't appear to have been another compendium about Britain's inland waterways until *A Chronology of Inland Navigation in Great Britain* was published in 1897.

The author, Count Henry Rodolph de Salis, came from a well-connected family. He was born in 1866 and educated at Eton College. The De Salis family had been associated with the Grand Junction Canal and he became a director of the canal carriers *Fellows, Morton and Clayton*, and at one time was its Chairman. In 1906 he was a witness to the *Royal Commission on Canals and Waterways*, and from 1911 to 1916 was on the Thames Conservancy Board.

Between 1887 and 1896 de Salis had travelled the waterways network, mostly in his own steam launches (Dragon Fly I, II and III), and covered around 14,000 miles.

The book was a “record of the dates of the principal works and events connected with Inland Navigation” up to that time. The appendix gave the mileage travelled by de Salis – for each navigation he recorded the number of miles, locks, tunnels and lifts; and whether he used his own steam launches or other vessels or walked. He also mentioned the principal places visited.

For example, under “Staffordshire and Worcestershire Canal”, he records: “in own steam launches covered 55½ miles, 51 locks, 1 tunnel; in other vessels 10 miles, 2 locks, 0 tunnels; total 65½ miles, 53 locks, 1 tunnel, principal places visited Great Haywood, Penkridge, Atherley, Kidderminster, Stourport, Churchbridge.”

Another source of information about the Stafford Branch perhaps?

However, at no time did he mention either the Stafford Branch Canal or River Sow Navigation. The Waterway had opened in 1816 but the only entry for 1816 recorded the opening of the Leeds and Liverpool Canal when the last section of main line from Wigan to Blackburn was completed.

Why was the Stafford Branch omitted? Perhaps de Salis had not ventured into Stafford? Perhaps he had inadvertently forgotten to include it? Or perhaps he simply did not notice it was there as he passed by? It was probably nothing to do with it not requiring an Act of Parliament to construct, because an entry for 1843 noted that the Hatherton Branch (Staffordshire and Worcestershire Canal) was constructed without an Act of Parliament. But whatever the reason, it was omitted.

Nevertheless, the book is a concise, well-written book, which clearly shows how the ascendancy of the railways had affected canal and river transport between 1830 and 1897.

BRADSHAW’S CANALS AND NAVIGABLE RIVERS OF ENGLAND AND WALES

(1904, 1918 & 1928)

Bradshaw’s Canals and Navigable Rivers of England and Wales first appeared in 1904. It gives an insight into the inland waterways as they were, on the eve of the First World War and the Stafford Branch is listed in the section dealing with the Staffordshire and Worcestershire Canal.

This book was also written by Henry Rodolph de Salis and had its origins in *A Chronology of Inland Navigation in Great Britain* published seven years earlier.

Although written by de Salis, the book was called *Bradshaw’s* because it was published by Henry Blacklock & Co Ltd., the publishers of the *Bradshaw’s Railway Guides*².

However, unlike the *Railway Guides* which are tourist guide books, *Bradshaw’s Canals and Navigable Rivers* is basically a *working manual* containing essential information about the waterways, more useful to canal companies and carriers than tourists, with nothing about the history and places of interest to visit along the way. It

seems that by 1904 the railways were considered as having a dual purpose, serving both industry and the travelling public (including tourism), while canals were perceived only as part of the *working* fabric of the country.

The first 30 pages of the book gives excellent general information about canal and river navigations, and described different forms of haulage, locks, weirs, lifts, tunnels, bridges, aqueducts, tides and types of vessels used. There were also tables of principal through routes between towns and cities.

The main part of the work (nearly 430 pages) was devoted to listing all the navigable waterways in alphabetical order. For each waterway, the following information was given:

- a short description of the waterway, including branches
- proprietors, officers and office address
- a table of distances of places on the waterway (miles and furlongs)
- locks
- maximum size of craft able to use the waterway (feet and inches)
- tunnels
- towing path
- tidal information
- type of craft using the waterway

In addition there was a list of principal places and towns connected to the waterway system by river or canal, and also a useful glossary of canal terms.

The Stafford Branch

According to the *1904 Bradshaw's Canals and Navigable Rivers of England and Wales*, the Stafford Branch was operated by the Staffordshire and Worcestershire Canal Company.

Their Head Office was at 87 Darlington Street, Wolverhampton. Mr J.Neve was the Company Clerk and Mr A.G.Butler was the Traffic Manager. The Canal Company leased part of the River Sow which formed the Stafford Branch from Lord Stafford.

The Stafford Branch left the main line of the Staffordshire and Worcestershire Canal near Baswich at a point 42 miles and 0 furlongs from Stourport. It descended through Baswich Lock to the River Sow, the course of which it followed to Stafford Wharf, 1 mile and 0 furlongs away. There were no tunnels.

The vessels using the Branch were narrowboats, most likely hauled by horses – the system usually used on inland waterways in 1904. The maximum size of narrowboats using the Branch was:

Length: 72 feet 0 inches,

Width: 6 feet 9 inches,

Draught: varied from 3 feet 10 inches up to 5 feet 0 inches, depending on the amount of water in the River Sow, and

Headroom: 8 feet 8 inches.

Although there was a towing-path for the whole of the route, *Bradshaw's* says nothing specific about its condition but generally points out that "canal towing-paths vary considerably, from the well-appointed and well-metalled way to the neglected track – often in winter nothing but a slough of mire, and bounded by a hedge so overgrown as seriously to curtail the width necessary for the passage of a horse".

Bradshaw's reminds us that traffic on river navigations is more likely to be interrupted by floods and drought than on canals. "When the banks of a river overflow, although there is plenty of water in the channel, the surrounding country being submerged, it becomes a trackless waste, where risk of the navigator losing his way is great, and headroom under bridges is much diminished". It is well-known that the River Sow floods periodically and this would affect the movement of boats. The depth of water is also affected by weeds and this varies according to the season.

However, *Bradshaw's* also points out that traffic on river navigations is not stopped by frost as soon as it is on canals, since running water freezes less quickly than still water.

Revised editions of *Bradshaw's* appeared in 1918 and 1928.

The 1918 edition essentially contains the same information as the 1904 edition but the Canal Company Clerk was now Mr E.B.Thorneycroft. The text states that:

"The Stafford Branch, which leaves the main line near Baswich, and passing through Baswich Lock, descends to the River Sow, the course of which it follows to Stafford."
"The portion of the River Sow forming the Stafford Branch is leased from Lord Stafford by the Staffordshire and Worcestershire Canal Company."

By the time the 1928 edition was published, the Branch Canal had closed. There was just one brief comment:

"The portion of the River Sow forming the Stafford Branch leased from Lord Stafford has now been relinquished by the Staffordshire and Worcestershire Canal Company as, owing to land drainage schemes, the river is not now navigable."

There was not to be another edition of *Bradshaw's Canals and Navigable Rivers of England and Wales*. Henry Rodolph de Salis was found shot dead at home in his bedroom at Acton Lodge (Leamington Spa, Warwickshire) on 25 February 1936. A revolver was found close to his body.

Bradshaw's 1904 Edition was reprinted in 1969 by David & Charles and more recently in 2012 by Old House (Shire Publications Ltd.) (ISBN 9781908402141).

INLAND WATERWAYS OF GREAT BRITAIN (1939 & 1947)

In 1939 a new publication appeared, greatly reduced in size – just 178 pages – and included only some of the information contained in the 1928 *Bradshaw's*. This was *Inland Waterways of Great Britain* compiled by W Eric Wilson DSO and published by

Imray, Laurie, Norie & Wilson. However, neither the 1939 first edition nor the 1947 second edition made any reference to the Stafford Branch Canal – no acknowledgement that it had ever existed – even information on the Staffordshire & Worcestershire Canal has been condensed to a single page. In his ‘Introduction’ Wilson states that waterways of little importance were omitted.

INLAND WATERWAYS OF GREAT BRITAIN AND NORTHERN IRELAND (1950)

and

INLAND WATERWAYS OF GREAT BRITAIN AND IRELAND (1962)

The Waterways were nationalised in 1948 and another publication appeared in 1950 which reflected the changes. This was *Inland Waterways of Great Britain and Northern Ireland* which was compiled by Lewis Arthur (Teddy) Edwards – he was the Honorary Secretary of the Inland Waterways Association (IWA) from 1950 to 1958. The Publisher was again Imray, Laurie, Norie & Wilson.

The book was an updated version of the 1928 and 1947 gazetteers. It is clear that the target audience of the book had changed, and that the waterways had a different role – perhaps they could be used for leisure activities? There was a forward by Robert Aickman, Chairman of the IWA, a list of canals and rivers, and a list of the nationalised waterways with the names and addresses of Regional Offices of the newly created *Docks and Inland Waterways Executive*. The gazetteer proper came next – nearly 400 pages long. There was also a section on “Navigation Hints for Pleasure Craft” and a note for ‘walkers, cyclists and fishermen’ using the towing path.

Both the 1950 and 1962 editions (with a revised title), contain a brief mention of the Stafford Branch in the section dealing with the Staffordshire & Worcestershire Canal, under *General Remarks*:

“Stafford Branch formed by River Sow Navigation is now converted into a drain and no navigation is now possible”.

THE SHELL BOOK OF INLAND WATERWAYS (1975 & 1981)

A different type of gazetteer appeared in 1975. This was *The Shell Book of Inland Waterways*, written by Hugh McKnight and published by David & Charles. The editorial adviser was Charles Hadfield. It was illustrated and its style reflected the changed use of the waterways – commercial traffic had been largely replaced by pleasure craft, and canals and rivers were now the focus of leisure activities. It was written for “the long distance canal enthusiast, the day tripper, towpath walker, or the motorist intent on discovering some new and peaceful aspect of the British countryside”.

Some historical background was included, and there were chapters on Water Supply, Locks and Lifts, Bridges, Aqueducts, Buildings and Design, Public Houses,

Towns and Villages, Operation and Maintenance, Working Boats, Commercial Carriers, Pleasure Cruising, Boatyards and Marinas, Waterways Museums, and Associations and Boat Clubs. Then came the Gazetteer, over 250 pages, covering England & Wales, Scotland and Ireland, and including all the waterways that were then open and some that were in various stages of restoration such as the Kennet and Avon Canal. For each navigation, an introductory paragraph was followed by a list of places on route including a brief description of various features of interest. Some abandoned waterways were mentioned but many were omitted such as the Andover Canal.

In the section dealing with the Staffordshire & Worcestershire Canal, reference is made to the former navigation into Stafford: "(Stafford) was formerly connected with the main line of the S & W by a mile-long branch entered via Baswich Lock near Weeping Cross Bridge (no.101). This branch consisted of a canalised section of the River Sow and became derelict during the early 1920s."

A second edition appeared in 1981 which included an additional chapter on Animal and Plant Life written by Carolyn Barber.

Conclusion

It is perhaps surprising, but not entirely unexpected, to find that there appears to be no gazetteer of the waterways which acknowledges the existence of the Stafford Branch during its first 88 years of existence. The *Bradshaw* publications of 1904 and 1918 give most information about the Stafford Branch, after which the Branch is either not mentioned or is dismissed in a sentence or two.

Even a book such as *Lost Canals of England* by Ronald Russell and published by David & Charles in 1971 does not mention the Stafford Branch or River Sow Navigation. It would seem that the Stafford Branch was well and truly lost.

Notes

(1) Priestley's book was intended to be used in conjunction with a *Map of the Inland Navigations, Canals and Rail Roads, with the Situations of the various Mineral productions, throughout Great Britain, based on the Ordnance Survey* by John Walker of Wakefield. Although Walker's map had good points, it had disadvantages – the scale was too small, and the canal and railway routes were shown as originally authorised by Parliament rather than what was actually constructed.

(2) George Bradshaw was a cartographer, printer and publisher. He was born in 1801 in Pendleton (Salford). By 1830 he had produced a series of maps: *Map of the Canals, Navigable Rivers, Rail Roads &c* "situated in the counties of Lancaster, York, Derby & Chester"; "in Southern England"; and "in the Midland Counties of England". These showed actual routes (including locks, tunnels and wharves) and were superior to the Walker map mentioned in the previous footnote above. A copy of Bradshaw's book that accompanies these three maps, *Lengths and Levels to Bradshaw's Maps of the Canals, Navigable Rivers and Railways in the Principal Part of England*, is available on-line at:

<https://archive.org/details/lengthsandlevel00bradgoog> .

In 1839 Bradshaw produced the first compendium of railway timetables. Over the years these railway publications were extended to include maps and described various features of interest about the history and places to visit along the routes – the modern age of tourism had begun!

George Bradshaw died of cholera in 1853 at Christiania (now Oslo) while visiting Norway-Sweden. His name and publications lived on, and more recently the “Bradshaw” brand is closely linked to the railway journeys of Michael Portillo produced for television.

References and Sources of Information

- (1) *A General History of Inland Navigation, Foreign and Domestic; Containing a Complete Account of the Canals Already Executed in England with Considerations on Those Proposed* by John Phillips, 1792.

A copy of the 1803 fourth edition is available on-line at:
<https://archive.org/details/generalhistoryi00philgoog> .

- (2) *Historical Account of the Navigable Rivers, Canals and Railways, of Great Britain* by Joseph Priestley, 1831.

A copy of this book is available on-line at:
https://archive.org/stream/Rivers_Canals_Railways_of_Great_Britain .

- * (3) *A Chronology of Inland Navigation in Great Britain* by Henry Rodolph de Salis, E & F.N Spon Ltd., 1897.

A copy of this book is available on-line at:
<https://www.archive.org/stream/achronologyinla00saligoog> .

- (4) *Bradshaw's Canals and Navigable Rivers of England and Wales* by Henry Rodolph de Salis; Publisher: Henry Blacklock & Co.Ltd., 1904 edition.

- * (5) *Bradshaw's Canals and Navigable Rivers of England and Wales* by Henry Rodolph de Salis; Publisher: Henry Blacklock & Co.Ltd., 1918 edition.

- * (6) *Bradshaw's Canals and Navigable Rivers of England and Wales* by Henry Rodolph de Salis; Publisher: Henry Blacklock & Co.Ltd., 1928 edition.

- * (7) *Inland Waterways of Great Britain* compiled by William Eric Wilson; Publisher: Imray, Laurie, Norie & Wilson, 1939 edition.

(8) *Inland Waterways of Great Britain* compiled by William Eric Wilson; Publisher: Imray, Laurie, Norie & Wilson, 1947 edition.

(9) *Inland Waterways of Great Britain and Northern Ireland* compiled by Lewis Arthur Edwards; Publisher: Imray, Laurie, Norie & Wilson, 1950 edition.

A copy of this book is available on-line at:

<https://archive.org/stream/inlandwaterwayso032039mbp> .

*(10) *Inland Waterways of Great Britain and Ireland* compiled by Lewis Arthur Edwards; Publisher: Imray, Laurie, Norie & Wilson, 1962 edition.

(11) *The Shell Book of Inland Waterways* by Hugh McKnight; Publisher: David & Charles, 1975 and 1981 editions.

* These books were consulted by the author at the *British Library* (London) on 5 February 2014.

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