

IN the late 18th century the turnpike roads of Britain were so badly neglected that building canals became an essential part of the industrial development of the country. Many of the major navigable waterways were constructed in the north of England and, as the system spread southwards with the more ambitious junction canals, a scheme was envisaged in 1811 of widening the river Ant and constructing a canal to North Walsham to carry wheat and barley down the river to Yarmouth for export. The Ant at this time was only navigable as far as Dilham and it was proposed to deepen the river and build a canal some seven miles in length.

At a meeting held at the King's Arms Hotel at North Walsham, it was agreed to ask Parliament for a Bill to construct the canal from Wayford Bridge to Lyngate Common, North Walsham. The Bill was granted the following year but certain local opposition and political difficulties delayed the con-



Ebridge Lock, North Walsham Canal

struction for 12 years and it was not until 1824 that the enthusiasts of the scheme met again to agree to give effect to the 1812 Bill. An engineer, Mr. J. Millington, was engaged and finally on 5 April 1825 work was begun on the £32,000 project. To build the canal, navvies or 'bankers' were engaged from many adjoining counties and for the next 16 months the work progressed, the builders lining the deepened channel with clay and raising the banks in some places 10 feet above the level of the land.

The North Walsham and Dilham Canal

BY GEOFFREY GOREHAM

The new waterway was built with a width of 30 feet with a 4 ft. 6 in. depth of water, the difference in levels at the canal locks providing water-power for four mills. By June 1826, the first laden Norfolk wherries were able to move from Wayford Bridge. These craft, with their great brown sails, were each capable of 20 tons of cargo and it was a dramatic sight to see them sailing with ponderous dignity across the flat landscape. When the wind was against them the straining wherry-men would bow-haul them from the banks. Two fleets of wherries sailed from North Walsham along the canal taking grain and flour to Yarmouth, bringing back materials needed by the local farmers or coal needed by the townspeople of North Walsham. Navigating the canal was a skilled business as there was no room to tack and judgment was all important.

The opening day of the North Walsham and

Dilham Canal on 29 August 1826 was a gay and lively affair, characteristic of the Georgian era. '... At an early hour the bells of North Walsham were ringing a merry peal. On the Market Cross and principal Inns the national colours were displayed. The procession was led by a fine vessel under the command of Captain Wenn, in which the Lieutenant of the County and Lord Suffield with the Committees, and many Gentlemen of the neighbourhood, embarked at 11 o'clock followed by a small boat called the *Gazetter*, commanded by Captain Green with a band of music on board... At this time upwards of a thousand persons were afloat, and the road from North Walsham to Witton, and the banks of the canal, thronged with thousands of spectators, amongst them was all the fashion and beauty of the neighbourhood, highly delighted with the novelty of the scene...'

The long delay, however, in building the canal had proved fatal. Although the average receipts received by the Canal Company between 1826-1844 were about £360, the development of the railways was to provide keen competition and the general improvement of the roads at a later date made transport less costly than before. Even by 1845, coal

Illustrated by courtesy of East Anglian Waterways Association

and goods were being brought by land transport direct from the coast near Mundesley and Bacton, and merchants were finding the tonnage and lock dues for their wherries on the canal becoming very expensive.

In 1886, on the dissolution of the old canal company, the waterway was sold to Mr. Edward Press, a North Walsham miller, for £600 and, to supplement the declining trade on the canal, Mr. Press and other far-seeing boat builders began to build and hire craft for pleasure, beginning an industry which was to revolutionise the Norfolk Broads. By the end of the century, the stretch of canal between Swafeld and Antingham had fallen into disuse and was badly overgrown and the fate of the canal was in the balance when it came up for auction in London in 1907.

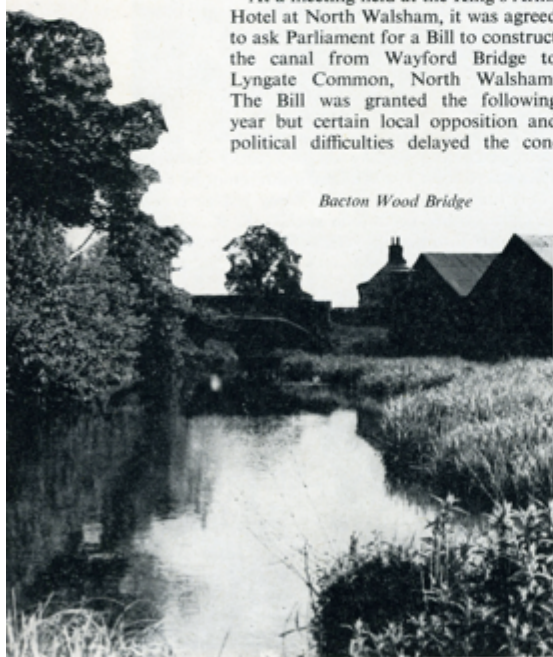
At this time it was estimated that the trade income of the canal was about £400 yearly but it was significant to see from the sale notice that the canal was auctioned mainly as a private river or waterway with particular reference to the needs of pleasure-craft owners. The canal was bought for £2,550 by the General Estates Company Ltd, of London. Little was done to improve the waterway, however, and further damage to the overgrown banks was caused by the 1912 floods when parts of the west bank collapsed just above Bacton Wood lock.

A further change of ownership in 1921 was followed by extensive dredging above Wayford Bridge but trade continued to decline. Competition both from rail and road had made the transport of goods on the canal uneconomic and, in 1935, navigation officially ceased, although a number of craft still negotiated the stretch above Wayford Bridge, the widest part of the channel.

Since the war, the authorities responsible for the canal, the Smallburgh Internal Drainage Board and the East Suffolk and Norfolk Rivers Board, have made uninspired efforts to dredge parts of the canal but it is obvious that they are anxious to rid themselves of this liability. Suggestions that parts of the canal should be reclaimed for agricultural use were put forward in 1960 and two years later the proposal to extinguish navigational rights on the canal was discussed by the North Walsham Urban District Council.

This scheme is opposed by the East Anglian Waterways Association who are anxious to preserve and restore the canal to relieve the present overcrowding on the Broads. The idea is attractive although cost of dredging and lock restoration may well prove too costly. In the meanwhile the old canal, opened with such pomp and ceremony 136 years ago, remains quiet and lonely, the haunt of wild birds and fishermen.

Dredging the Canal above Ebridge in 1957



Bacton Wood Bridge