

WALKABOUT TO MILLBANK LOCK, THORNHILL

Myself, Alan Howe and Steve Wilson met at Alan's stables at 10.00am on Sunday 20th June 2010, with the intention of having a closer look at the historical features still evident at Millbank lock, Thornhill. A quarry here existed in the past, and there are features which may be part of this quarrying, or may be connected with the Combs Pit nearby.

We noticed while passing through the site of Healey Old Mill that part of the stone retaining wall had been taken down, exposing the quarry face behind. This is quite probably a wall which may have existed since the mill was built in the late 1700s.

On crossing the river footbridge we looked at the back of what was Gartside's dyeworks, and compared how it looks now with what we have seen in an old engraving which Alan copied from the John Goodchild collection. This engraving dates to the 1880s, and was taken from the area where the footbridge now crosses, even though this was not in existence until after the turn of the 20th century.



We then moved on to the Figure Of Three locks, and had a look at the area in comparison with the 1893 and 1905 maps. Quite a bit of change has happened here since these maps were printed. There was an old dock on the 1893 map which had disappeared from the 1905 map. It appeared to be possibly connected with the old cottage which once stood in the field there, demolished in the 1980s. We observed that the canal was quite wide here, and may have been to allow boats to turn in to the lock which would be used to gain access to the river Calder, before the "New Cut" was created in 1838. Up to then, the boats would travel down to the Figure Of Three lock, and then have to continue their journey via the Calder. It is Steve's theory that the Figure Of Three lock got its name from the shape of the river nearby, which was in the shape of a figure 3. This may be a name for the area which could be much older than the canal. The original Figure Of Three lock is still there, but now serves as an overflow for the Calder & Hebble "old cut". The stones which make up the walls are huge pieces, and would have taken a lot of effort to put into position. It is my theory that the Millbank quarry was used to supply the stone for this stretch of the canal. It is certainly an old quarry, being in existence since at least the early 1800s.

The house which stood by this lock originally was the ferryman's house, and a ferry existed here between Ossett and Thornhill, in the Victorian period. I believe that it is possible travellers across the valley may have used the old drover's road from Thornhill, crossing the river at the ford. When the Manchester & Leeds Railway Company built their line through the valley, opening in 1840, travellers may have begun to use a new route, which included the ferry crossing. This would have meant they passed under the western arch of the bridge which now lies hidden behind Gartside's old dyeworks, later Calder Vale Mills. A

conveyance deed dated 1862 mentions right of way under the western arch of this bridge. Alternatively it is possible that the ferry existed since the canal was first opened in 1769, but I can see no reason why travellers would take such a detour, therefore I prefer the first theory.

Continuing on along the canal we passed Lady Bridge, now named as Lady Anne Bridge. I believe this will probably refer to Lady Anne Savile, who's family would probably have owned the land when the canal was built. We walked on, passing under the bridge of the Midland Railway line from Royston, which opened in 1905. This closed down in the 1950's.



Arriving at Millbank Lock we looked across at the old structures at the canal side, which include two waterside arches, and a stone tower resembling a chimney. There is also an arched outlet for some kind of underground stream here. We believe this is connected with the Combs Pit. John Goodchild talks of an underground canal here, connected with this pit, and we hoped to maybe find this one day. He says it is covered by a wooden door, however looking at the maps we had it seemed that this canal was represented by a line on the map which is in an area now landscaped by the National Coal Board in the 1970s. This would mean it is probably lost for now, maybe to be rediscovered by future historians?

We examined the lock in close detail, and I was quite surprised to see the wear on an old iron mooring post, which has possibly been there since the lock was first built in the 1760s. Years and years of ropes being tied to it and twisting around it have diminished the lower part quite considerably.

Other features are evident of past workings at the lock, showing that the method of working the lock has changed since it was first used. We were curious to see how the lock worked, but did not have to wait long before a boat came.

There are two ways it seems of letting the water into the lock, one by a winch on the gates which opens an inlet, and another which operates a similar mechanism on the lock side. This uses a piece of wood, known as a "spike". This second method lets the water in at a much faster rate. The lock was full when we first arrived, and needed to be emptied for the boat to continue its journey towards Thornhill Double lock. When the water was let out of the lock, the gates at the other end closed with the movement of the water. We were surprised at how quickly the lock emptied. The boat entered and in what seemed like no time it was on its way again, making room for the next boat to enter, which was travelling in the opposite direction. Alan commented on the peacefulness of the whole scene, that we should really not tell too many people about what was down here. I quite agreed with him.

This scene has changed much over the years. The overflow for the lock was replaced in the 1980s with a more efficient overflow, the original is still there in the trees behind it, now much overgrown. There were houses in the vicinity (see map at end), and it was the existence of these to which we now turned our attention. We went towards the old quarry, and the first thing we noticed were a pair of old gateposts.

These appeared to have a cross carved upon them on the facing sides. The cross has a circle around it, and the lower leg stretched to the floor. We were not entirely sure why these were carved as such, and I made a mental note to maybe contact someone at the local history society "Dewsbury Matters", who may have someone with an answer.

It is very likely that the gates are "in situ", i.e. they were used in the positions they now occupy. There is a gate hinge on one of them, indicating their purpose. Close by to these gates is the remainder of a stone cobbled "causey", or causeway. This appears to go upwards in the direction of the present footpath, but moving downwards it seems to miss the gateway mentioned. According to the 1893 map there was a number of cottages here, but by 1905 two or three had disappeared. These were up against the face of the quarry, which was disused by the time of the 1893 map. There were also a few cottages up against the edge of the canal, but they have now disappeared underneath the landscaped spoil heap of the Combs pit.

We moved on to look at the "chimney" type structure, and came to the conclusion that it was probably somewhat taller when being used, and we decided it was hollow too. We did not rule out it actually being used as a chimney, but this needs to be investigated during the winter when most of the vegetation has died back. On this note we decided to walk back along the route of the old mineral line towards Lady Anne Bridge. We believe this mineral line came down from the New Delight Colliery at the Thornhill end of Hostingley Lane, and followed the line of the canal, passing Millbank lock and then crossing the canal some way further up, and joining on to the Lancashire & Yorkshire line. The bridge by which it crosses the canal is quite a sturdy bridge, and projects halfway into the canal, indicating its purpose of carrying a great weight.

We made our way back to Ossett, and this concluded our walk.