



CHESTERFIELD & DISTRICT LOCAL HISTORY SOCIETY HISTORY BITES

Chesterfield and District Local History Society's 'History Bites' are an occasional series of website published articles about Chesterfield and district's history.

Stone for the Houses of Parliament

Christine Richardson

The Houses of Parliament is one of the world's most famous buildings, and the Chesterfield Canal played an important part in its creation.

In 1834 the new Victorian age was blighted by a tremendous fire that ruined the old Houses of Parliament, the next day only the ancient Westminster Hall stood amongst the ashes. With true Victorian confidence it was decided that the opportunity must be taken to create a worthy home for the Government of the world's most powerful nation. The architect was Charles Barry and his first concern was the selection of the stone to be used.

By March 1839 Barry and his men had checked 103 quarries throughout the country; Scotland, South Wales, Devon, Bath, and all points in between. They had tested 2" stone cubes from each location for water absorption, grain disintegration, reaction to heat. They also considered the transport situation and had noted the possible use of several waterways - Grantham, Kennet and Avon, Aire and Calder, Cromford, the Union Canal to Edinburgh, the Don Navigation, Trent and Mersey, Forth and Clyde, and the Grand Union Canal.

But most favoured stone was from Bolsover Moor, eight miles from Worksop and the Chesterfield Canal. It was then discovered that the same stone with a more uniform colour and thick beds, plus easier working was available at a quarry in North Anston in Yorkshire. The quarry was even nearer to the Chesterfield Canal, only two miles away and mostly downhill.

Full sized trial blocks were sent by canal from Anston to Westminster during the summer of 1839 so that builders could try the stone to be worked. Full scale deliveries started in early 1840 but the bulk of the stone was moved along the Chesterfield Canal in 1841-44. The scale of the boat transport required during those years was an average of 400 tons per month, 4800 tons or 200,000 cubic feet per annum. Extreme care had to be taken in handling the blocks; this was not stone to be broken up for roads, this was to build, embellish and grace the world's greatest seat of Government. At the quarry the blocks deemed satisfactory were loaded onto "drugs"; low wooden platforms, the sturdy wheels of which were 18ins in diameter and 9 ins wide. Each was pulled by eight horses the two miles to Dog Kennels wharf, on the canal's summit pound at Kiveton Park. Here the stone was sawn into accurate blocks before being loaded on to the narrowboats.

Unfortunately the Canal Company records for that period have not survived and the number of boats used is not known but it's likely that the volume of work would necessitate some

being built especially for the task. From Dog Kennels wharf the narrowboats carried the valuable stone more than 30 miles, through Worksop and Retford to West Stockwith on the tidal section of the river Trent. Here, in the canal basin, the cargo was transhipped into Trent sloops for the journey to Westminster. Going down the Humber and the coast to the Thames was not unusual for Trent sloops. They could work well to windward and their rig was efficient enough for them to make coastal passages.

Throughout the five years of this traffic the average time from the stone leaving the quarry in Yorkshire to reaching the building site at Westminster was two weeks. A fine advertisement for 19th century water transport.

The construction work at Westminster was very rapid considering the complexity of the building we know today. Unfortunately, in spite of the care taken with selection, as early as 1861 a Parliamentary Committee was investigating the decay of the new building's stonework, a second committee looked at the same problem in 1926. From the evidence given on those occasions it seems that the problem was mainly with the ornate nature of the carved stone used to embellish the exterior. Excessive workmanship and carving had made some parts of the stonework so delicate that they were "quite unfit and dangerous particularly in the acid-polluted atmosphere of a modern city". Also some stone, especially that used around the windows had been laid with the natural vents vertical and as a result the weather had eroded it quite easily.

When looking at the Houses of Parliament today it is impossible to know which stone was carried along the Chesterfield Canal and which is a later replacement, even the Parliamentary Works Directorate responsible for maintaining the building cannot answer that question. Nevertheless, the majority of the newly-cleaned stone at Westminster was probably brought to the site by water transport.

Today the quarry at North Anston is a public park; and on the Chesterfield Canal the area of the wharf at Kiveton Park is still known as dog kennels, but there is no evidence of the historic cargo once loaded there.

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