

Swafield on the North Walsham and Dilham Canal

Swafield is generally the least discussed of the villages along the Canal, but it is the only one that celebrates its links by displaying a Wherry on its Jubilee village sign, commemorating the “Last Wherryman”, Jack Gedge, skipper of the *Gleaner*. He died at the age of 100 in 1986 and is buried in the churchyard at Swafield.

The North Walsham & Dilham Canal was opened in 1826, stretching 8¾ miles from its junction with the Smallburgh River at Wayford Bridge to the Antingham Ponds. It was engineered by John Millington of Hammersmith, and cut, in the course of only 18 months, by contractor Thomas Hughes. The Canal had six locks, and was designed for small, 20-ton wherries. Although originally planned to transport coal as its main cargo, this traffic never really materialised. Instead, corn, flour timber, cattle cake and animal feeding stuffs became the principal trades, additionally phosphates were carried to the Antingham Bone Mills. However, the building of the East Norfolk Railway in 1874-7 led to the mills changing their mode of

transport, and by 1893 the Canal had been abandoned above Swafield Locks, resulting in Swafield Staithe becoming the terminus of the Canal. During 1927, the top reach was de-watered and returned to farmland. In 1934, the motor wherry *Ella* was the last to trade from Bacton Wood, and, from that time the Canal became dormant, except for the occasional canoeist. In the 1960's, the stretch of Canal from Bacton Wood Mill to just above Royston Bridge was de-watered, possibly to aid the lowering and strengthening of Royston Bridge, to cater for the heavy traffic resulting from the building of the Bacton Gas Terminal. As such the Swafield section became isolated from the remainder of the watered Canal.



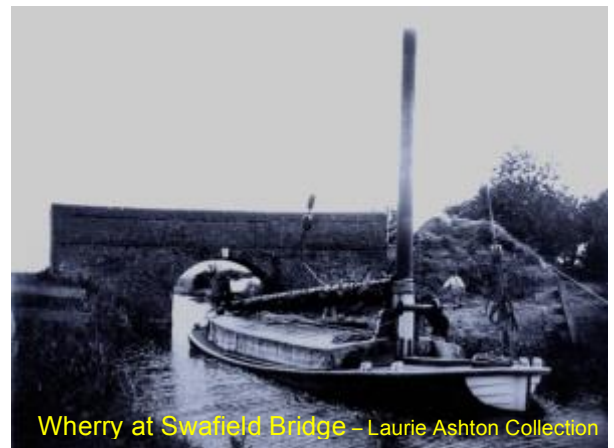
Swafield Staithe 1910 — Mike Ling Collection

In 1982, the stretch of Canal from Swafield Bridge to the top of the upper lock was sold to a local resident, Michael Starling, and, in 2009, the stretch below the bridge was purchased by the Old Canal Company of Bacton Wood Mill. In both instances the conveyances include the “locks banks towpaths back socks (*sic*) and easements...” Thus the Canal at Swafield now has two owners.

Restoration of the whole Canal was first mooted by one of the North Walsham Canal Company's Directors, Arthur Walker, in 1953. In the 1970's, work was undertaken on the lower Canal by the Inland Waterways Association and Broadland Canal Group. The East Anglian Waterways Association took the helm of restoration during the early 1990's, and their first decade was one of investigative paperwork, ecological and structural surveys and meeting the Canal and adjacent landowners, leading to work parties starting in 2001. One of the first was at Bacton Wood Lock, where vegetation and tree growth then damaging the lock structure was removed. Similar work was undertaken at Ebridge, Briggate and Honing locks. As well as maintaining the lock structures, work parties, over the next few years focused on specific areas in conjunction with the Canal owners, the North Walsham Canal Co. and Old Canal Company. For example the clearing of Honing Staithe Cut and creating a circular “Canal Walk” linked to Weavers Way, which was presented with a NNDC Environment Award in 2009. Other work carried out included channel clearing at Honing, to enable easier canoe portages and turning below the lock; the clearing of Briggate Mill Pond, to establish a water based nature; the discovery and clearing of the

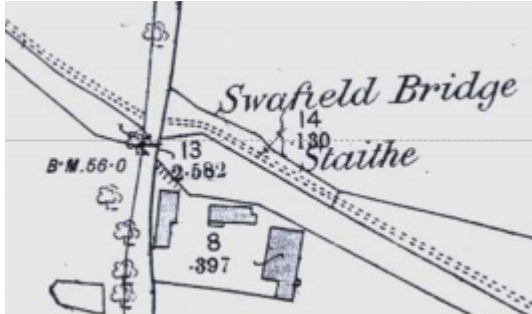


Swafield Locks 1923 - Norfolk Mills Website



Wherry at Swafield Bridge - Laurie Ashton Collection

overspills on the Ebridge and Royston reaches; and the rebuilding of the quay heading at the old Wherry Inn. The OCC has worked on the Ebridge Reach, re-establishing the water level to its 2005 height and de-reeding the millpond. Bacton Wood Lock has been rebuilt and the OCC has installed new top gates, and the channel above has been cleared of brash. The Environment Agency has also worked on the top reaches, undertaking some dredging to overcome flooding problems, and de-reeding the reach past Pigney's Wood in 2011. In 2008, the North Walsham & Dilham Canal Trust was set up by the EAWA, to give a greater local emphasis and input for their Canal.



At Swafield, the old watermill, demolished in 1947, pre-dated the Canal and was powered by the waters of the River Ant. Whether the river was made navigable from above the Upper Lock to the Mill dam is uncertain, but, more likely than not Swafield Staithe was used for the mill's purposes. Here, there were three buildings around a courtyard: the two storey granary building on the quay heading has now been

converted into a house; the former single-storeyed coal shed is also standing, last being supplied by wherry in 1921; however, the two storeyed third building nearer the road, once a scout hut, no longer exists.

Swafield Bridge is unique for this waterway, in that it is a skew bridge, i.e. not built at right angles to the canal. As well as the fine crafted brickwork, seen from underneath, one can also spot the gashes in the north east abutment, where the wherries scraped the bridge as they negotiated the corner.



The present Canal owners at Swafield Locks have recently been clearing the area, allowing a greater diversity of wildlife, and revealing the original structures, whilst invasive vegetation has been removed with the help of voluntary workparties, so as to prevent further deterioration. Plans are underway to repair the brickwork and de-reed the water course. This lock was once used by the Paston



Grammar School boys as a swimming pool, and ropes hanging from the trees show that some of today's youngsters still play and paddle there. The Upper Lock is notorious in that the local miller, Mr Benjamin Postle Woollsey, was "taken with giddiness of the head" when crossing the lock, falling into the water and drowning. He had been cautioned "by his medical man against crossing this dangerous place, which few other persons but himself ventured to do" (*Norfolk News* 6/10/1860). Today, the lock holds no water, as the flow has been diverted around the outside of the lock, with the infill placed into the chamber. However, this may mean that part of the original top lock gate and ironwork still exist, some 150 years after they were last used. The owners are hoping that the Norfolk Industrial Archaeological Society and NW&DCT may be interested in

excavating the site, as well as that of the former spillway between the locks.

Although the Canal environ is private land, the owners are hoping to open the area so that more can be seen, with the Canal becoming central to Swafield again. The OCC has cleared the towpath on the south of the Canal from Royston Bridge to Paston Way, and this is becoming a popular walk for visitors to Pigney's Wood Nature Reserve. There is a public footpath on the north bank from Royston Bridge to Pigney's Wood, and the OCC hopes to further open this former footpath towards Swafield as well. West of the Swafield Bridge, plans are afoot to remove willows from the Canal bed and undertake de-reeding, giving a clear water vista from both sides of the Bridge and of the skew itself. Future re-watering of the dry section of the Bacton Wood reach will also enhance the Canal through Swafield. The locks themselves are on private land and access must be requested.

Swafield is a village that was once centred around its mills and Canal. Little remains of the former, but, with the benevolent attitudes of the Canal owners, hopefully the Canal will once again become an asset to the Swafield community.

Ivan Cane October 2013