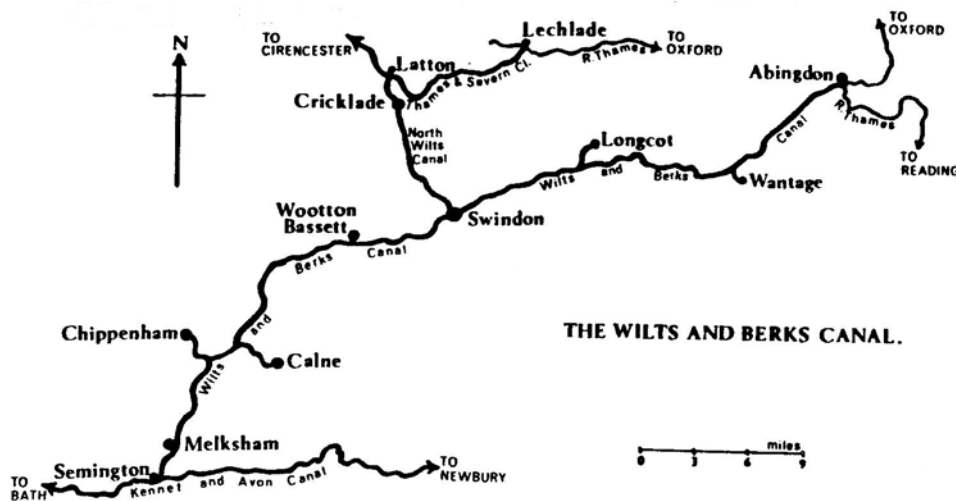


Trading on the Wilts and Berks Canal

Reg Wilkinson

Since the formation of the Wilts & Berks Canal Amenity Group in October 1977, attention has focused on the remains of the canal for the first time in years. When the waterway was completed it ran from Semington on the Kennet & Avon Canal to Abingdon on the River Thames, and it had branches to Chippenham, Calne, Longcot and Wantage.



The Wilts and Berks was built to carry coal along the Vale of White Horse. Initially the coal came from the Somerset Coalfield and reached the W & B by way of the Somerset Coal Canal and the K & A, but, as time passed, coal which originated from other coalfields began to reach the district. This arrived via the Thames, or by the North Wilts Canal, which opened in 1819 and joined the W & B to the Thames and Severn Canal.

The amounts of coal deposited on the wharfs of the W & B are mentioned in L J Dalby's book, 'The Wilts & Berks Canal', in order to give some indication of the relative importance of the wharfs. In 1838, for instance, the figures for those at the Berkshire end of the waterway were: Shrivenham 546 tons, Longcot 2,804 tons, Uffington 546 tons, Challow 1,668 tons, Wantage 1,885 tons and Abingdon 9,930 tons.

The Wantage branch left the main waterway just to the west of Grove Top lock. It ran for nearly a mile to a wharf at the bottom of Mill Street in Wantage and thus gave the town's inhabitants direct access to London via the Thames, to Bristol via the K & A canal and to the industrial areas of the Midlands and the North via the growing network of man-made waterways which were linked by navigable rivers.

Among the traders involved in moving coal along the canal were several members of the Hiskins family who had premises on wharfs in the Wantage area. The firm of G Hiskins & Son was in operation at Challow wharf in the 1930s and 1840s for instance and James Hiskins & Son operated from Wantage wharf during the late 19th century.

The latter dealt in coal from Somerset, Wales, Hawkesbury and the Forest of Dean, also in coke, salt, hay, straw, corn, 'celebrated manures' from the Avon Manure Company, and general merchandise. The firm's boats traded regularly between Bristol and Oxford, and it gave estimates for 'the Conveyance of Goods to any part of the Kingdom' - presumably those reached by canal or river.

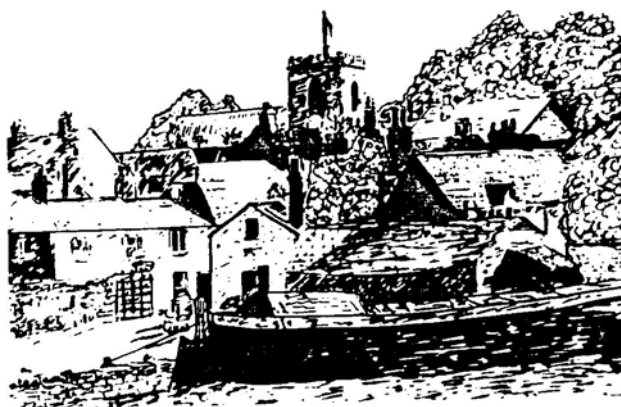
In addition to the commodities already mentioned, the Hiskins boats probably carried considerable quantities of building materials. During the late 1860s, for instance, Wantage invested in a brand new sewage system, numerous houses were built and the town reconstructed most of its roads. Bricks, tiles and stone for these ventures arrived regularly at Wantage wharf. The bricks and tiles were made in local brickworks along the line of the canal, similar to the one at Childrey, and the stone probably originated from quarries in the Cotswolds or the West Country.

The most profitable years for the canal were 1840 and 1841, when profits amounted to £9,000 in both years. This was due to the fact that boats were carrying large quantities of the materials used for the construction of the Great Western Railway, which followed the same route as the W & B through the Vale of White Horse. As soon as the railway opened tolls began to fall and a last dividend of £561 was paid in 1871.

Three years later a group of influential shareholders tried to get the canal closed. However, closure was averted when the waterway was taken over by new owners for about £13,500. One of those who put up the money was James Hiskins of Wantage, described in the North Wilts Herald of September 5, 1874, as the only trader active on the canal at that time.

On October 1, 1875, the Wantage Tramway was opened between Wantage Road Station on the GWR and a terminus in Wantage which was built in Mill Street not far from the wharf. The line was built to carry both passengers and goods. Traffic in the latter increased rapidly and within fifteen years of opening the tramway was carrying 500 tons per week in each direction.

Although traders on the main line of the canal suffered as a result of competition from the railway, there appears to have been plenty of trade in Wantage for James Hiskins and for the tramway company. A bill from Hiskins & Son, made out to the tramway company in 1882, has survived and it indicates that the two functioned in harmony. The items on the bill include 10 cwt of coal supplied by the canal trader for 9s 6d.



Wantage Wharf in the 1890's

By about 1895 the Somerset Coalfield was worked out and the main reason for the existence of the W & B was gone. In the Spring of 1897 the canal owners made application to the Board of Trade for a warrant authorising abandonment of the W & B 'on the grounds that the canal is unnecessary for the purposes of public navigation'. The company also asked for an order releasing it from all liability to maintain the canal if the warrant was issued.

An item in the 'Berkshire Times' of April 30, 1897, suggested that the proposed closure of the canal came as a great surprise to the inhabitants of Wantage and neighbourhood. The reporter thought that the closure would mean the loss of a very useful footpath from Grove to Challow. He also pointed out that it would present a good opportunity to purchase the land on which the wharf stood and then replace 'the present wretched entrance to Belmont by a good carriage road'.

However, the warrant of abandonment was not granted and the people who lived at Belmont, overlooking the rest of Wantage, had to do without their carriage road. By the turn of the century the W & B was in a sorry state and even Hiskins & Son had to call it a day. Although it was probably the last trading concern to use the waterway regularly the firm could not be expected to carry on when the locks were in ruins, the pounds silted up and the canal banks crumbling away.

In 1905 the tramway company took over part of the wharf site and converted it into a goods yard. Nine years later a bill which authorised abandonment of the W & B was pushed through Parliament by Swindon Corporation and the life of the canal ended officially on July 31, 1914.

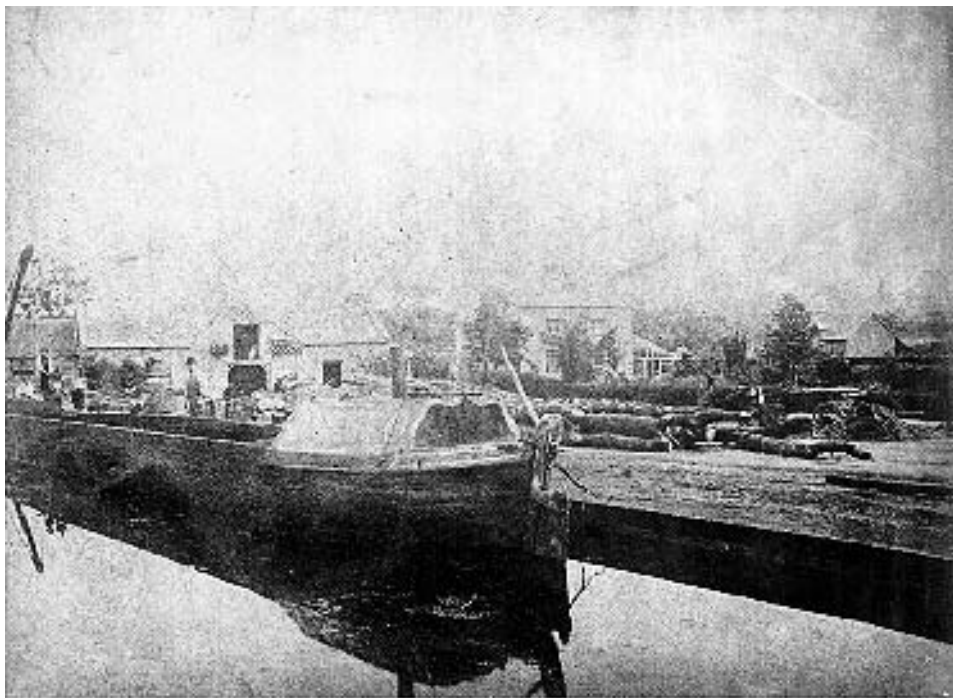
Although it was never a great financial success, the waterway did contribute to the development and prosperity of Wiltshire and Berkshire. In addition it provided James Hiskins and his fellow traders with a reasonable livelihood and unique way of earning a living.



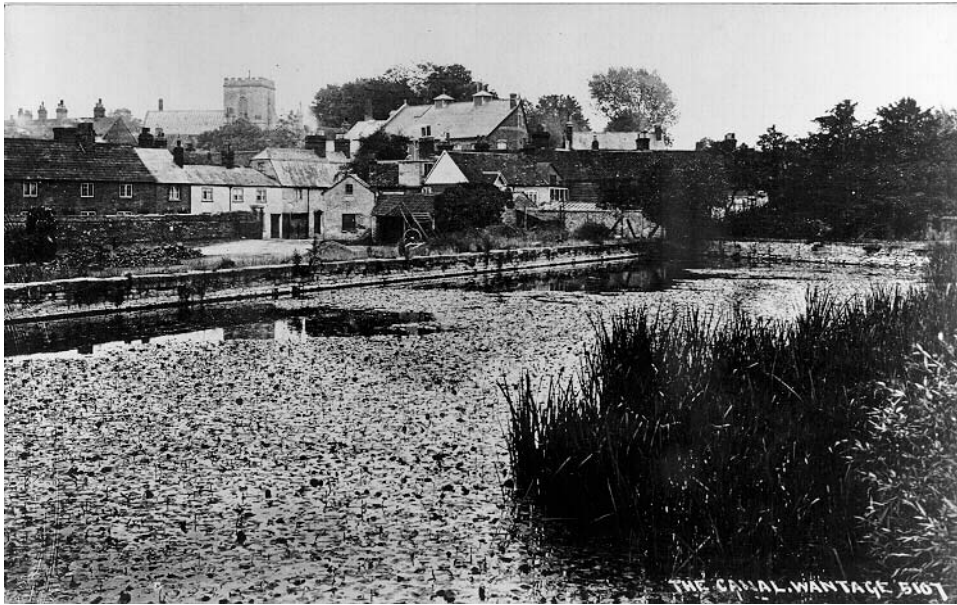
Wilts & Berks Canal - Wantage Wharf; view northwest from church tower over wharf; c1885 - convent; RDC office; cottage hospital; Belmont. (TR016)



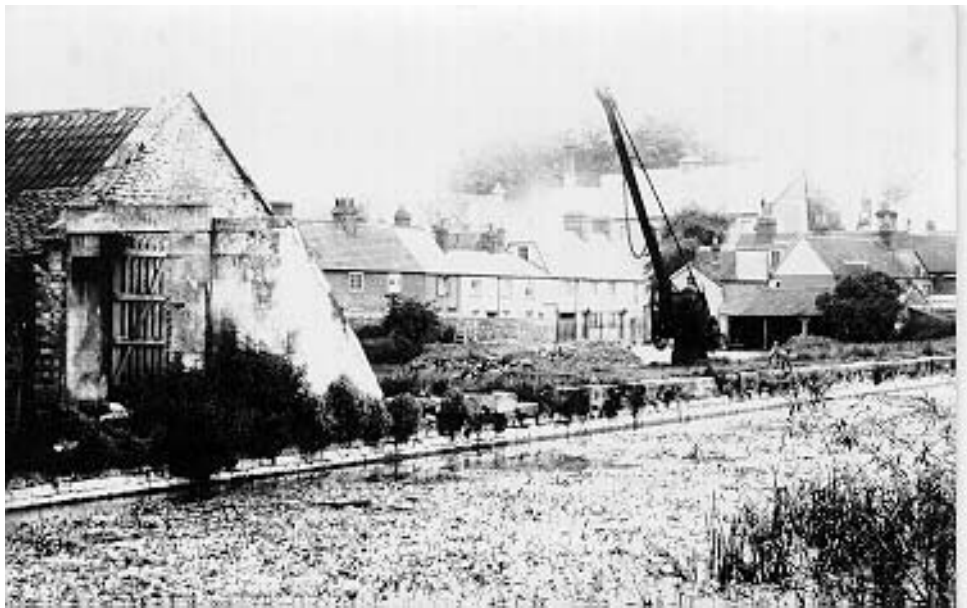
Wilts & Berks Canal - Wantage wharf; c1900 - barge; wharf cottages; church tower (TR017)



Wilts & Berks Canal - Wantage wharf; c1885 - barge; warehouse.(TR018)



Wilts & Berks Canal - Wantage wharf from Belmont; c1905 - wharf cottages; church tower (TR020)



Wilts & Berks Canal - Wantage wharf; looking southeast; 1899 - warehouse; wharf cottages (demolished 1960s); crane. (TR021)



Wilts & Berks Canal - view of Hunters (?) bridge; looking north; c1900 - with lady and dog in rowboat. (TR004)

PLEASE NOTE. The museum has a large number of other photographs of the Wilts & Berks canal.

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