

Traffic on the Louth Canal

A Broader Outlook: NarrowBoat, Autumn 2021

BY Christopher M Jones

Chris M. Jones explores the cargo-carrying boats that once plied this little-known Lincolnshire waterway



Tetney Lock was a popular spot for picture-postcard photographers. The commercial trading craft are both billyboys, with the one nearest the lock fitted with leeboards and a sloop rig. The one moored behind it was probably just used as a lighter on the canal and both are old clinker-built vessels. If the wind was favourable the craft could use sail power on the canal, otherwise they were towed by horse like the unpowered lighters.

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The Louth Canal was opened in May 1770, stretching 11¼ miles from Tetney Haven to its terminus at River Head, Louth. Eight locks lifted vessels up from the River Humber with dimensions no larger than 72ft long and 15ft 1in wide. The sea lock allowing entrance into the canal is at Tetney, which had two pairs of outer sea gates and two pairs of inner navigation gates. Access to the canal by laden craft was dependent on the tides, so a loaded vessel drawing the maximum draught of 5ft 6in could only enter Tetney Lock during a weeklong window around twice a month, when the spring tides were at high water. Craft intending to navigate the canal usually waited at Hull until the tides were high enough for the passage. The intention was to reach Tetney Lock at high water when the tide gave a depth of 23ft 6in above the cill of Albert Dock, Hull.

When leaving Tetney Lock and heading out into the Humber Estuary, vessels had to navigate a tidal channel little more than the width of the main canal until they reached Tetney Haven, which was the high water mark of ordinary tides. This was considered the end of the Louth Canal. From here, if navigating at low water, there is a 3½-mile meandering tidal channel through sandflats marked by beacons, as the flats were covered over at high water. The expanse of the River Humber was reached at the low water mark of ordinary tides directly opposite Spurn Head in the East Riding of Yorkshire. This meant vessels navigated from there towards Hull within the confines of the Humber Estuary and were not at sea, although it might have felt like that onboard with a stiff wind blowing waves against the ship.



Taken the same day as the previous photograph, this one shows the same craft from the opposite direction. It seems the navigation authority did not object to the use of pleasure-craft on its canal, quite unlike many other waterways in the Midlands.

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Vessels navigating the canal were mainly billyboy sloops as that particular sailing rig was more suitable for navigating the Humber against the Lincolnshire coast, although some keels did work on the canal.

Louth

River Head terminus basin at Louth was well served by open wharves with cranes, large warehouses, granaries and timber and coal yards, which stretch either side of the canal for most of the 440 yards between there and Louth Lock, the first one on the route. Included in this was a small shipyard and dry dock, with a wharf for the canal navigation and its workshops. The town had a number of manufactories making leather, paper and carpets and rugs. Near the canal there were a chemical manure works, oil mills and a gasworks opened in April 1826.

A number of the sloop owners were based at Louth with some owning several craft. Robert Norfolk & Sons was a firm of seed and bone crushers and manure merchants based at Thames Street, Louth, which ran parallel to the canal terminus basin at River Head. The business expanded with another premises at Great Grimsby. Following the death of their father on 15th April 1871, his sons Robert and John took over the business. Robert was based in Great Grimsby while John stayed in Louth, and the business expanded into animal feed manufacturing and dealing in artificial manures.

By 1880 they had four sloops *Robert & John*, *Endeavour*, *Oak* and *Times*. *Providence* was acquired in 1886 and *Unity* ten years later. During this period one was wrecked and two sold, leaving three still in commission. Robert and John dissolved their partnership in November 1898 leaving John the sole owner. He bought a secondhand vessel, *Venture*, in 1899, but the business ceased trading shortly after.

Also involved in local commerce and sloop ownership was the Nell family, with several members trading separately as merchants in Louth. Richard James Nell was a seed crusher and manufacturer of oil cake at the Great Northern Oil & Cake Mills there. William Nell was a seed crusher, oil cake manufacturer and merchant and sloop owner. During the 1890s, coal merchant Archibald McGuffie Nell was the last of the family in trade, eventually turning to the railway for transport in the 20th century.



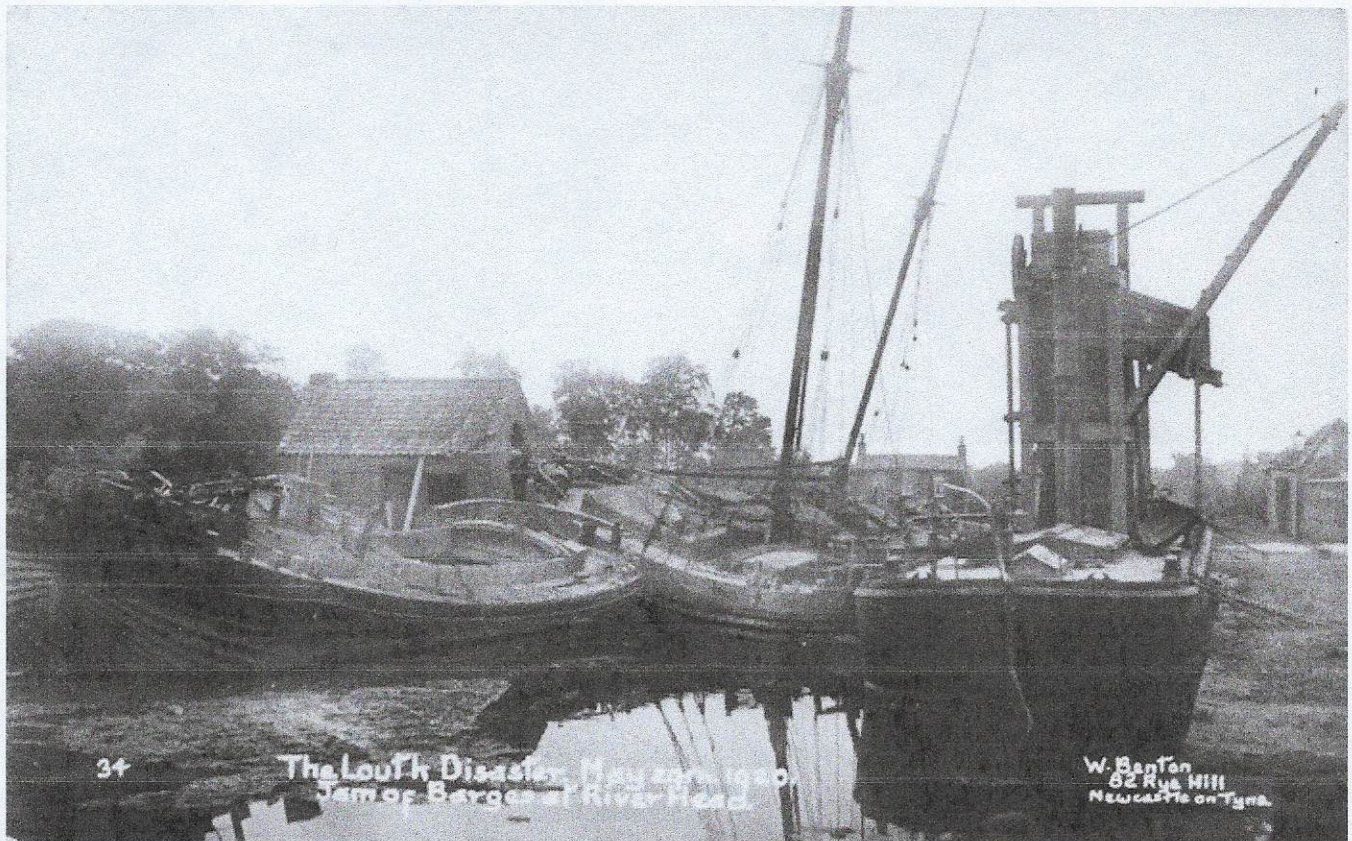
This image shows an empty *Reliance* moored above Tetney Lock waiting for its chance to continue through into the Humber Estuary. Notice the outer sea gates are closed as the lock was designed so it could be navigated, no matter if the water level of the Humber was above or below that of the canal.

Reliance is a type of craft known as a billyboy, built very similarly to a Humber keel but designed for the sea as a coaster and fitted with bulwarks. Early examples were clinker built like *Reliance*, which carried leeboards shown tied against the shrouds, and was sloop rigged.

Reliance was first registered under the Canal Boats Act in 1879 for William Nell who by then was a merchant in Louth. The vessel was later sold to seed crusher Richard James Nell by 1892, then in 1897 it was sold again to three joint owners: John Willows Barton & Son, Richard Chatterton and Archibald McGuffie Nell. Barton's was a firm of millers, corn merchants and bakers. This ownership lasted until 1898 when Richard Chatterton and Archibald McGuffie Nell took over as owners. The latter was a coal merchant and the brother of Richard James Nell.

Since the early 1870s Charles Cawkwell was the master of *Reliance* but after at least 30 years of service it was finally converted into a lighter in the early 20th century.

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The Louth Disaster, May 20th 1930.
Jam of Barges at River Head.

W. Barton
82 Rye Hill
Newcastle on Tyne.

Dr Roger M. Butler Collection

Louth Floods – barges carried on
to first lock gates of the Canal

1059



Dr Roger M. Butler Collection

Postcard producers, like contemporary newspapers, loved a good disaster and were quick to exploit the situation for their customers and to make a profit. These two cards capture the aftermath of a notable flood at Louth which caused loss of life and property damage on 29th May 1920.

The small River Lud became overwhelmed following a cloudburst during a severe thunderstorm over hills several miles away. The river ran just a few yards from the canal basin and quickly flooded the town, destroying bridges, walls and over a dozen houses within minutes, with water bursting through doors and windows while the occupants were having their tea and trapping them on the ground floors. Some of the deaths were four firemen who were swept away with their fire-engine.

Both views show the ship yard and dry dock on the opposite bank with the first lock obscured behind the craft. The flood has damaged the small dock building and vessels torn from their moorings have been swept towards the top lock. In the bottom image men aboard one of the cog boats, usually towed behind each craft as a lifeboat and tender, are attempting to raise the sunken billyboy on the left.

One of the most notable firms was the partnership of Richard Nell and Thomas Ellrington Smith trading as Nell & Smith, coal, corn, bone and guano merchants and artificial manure manufacturers until 1870, the former being superseded by James Nell until 1884. Thomas Ellrington Smith then set up business on his own as Nell & Smith until his death in September 1889, then his son William Henry Smith, who had been working as a clerk in the company, took over. The company changed name to T.E. Smith & Son, coal merchants and artificial manure manufacturers of Louth. Thomas Ellrington Smith had owned five sailing craft: *Vigilant*, *Amity*, *Harmony*, *Vesper* and *Active*. *Vesper* was later sold but all the others passed to his son William Henry Smith after his father's death. He continued running the company and also acted as toll collector for the Louth Navigation at River Head.

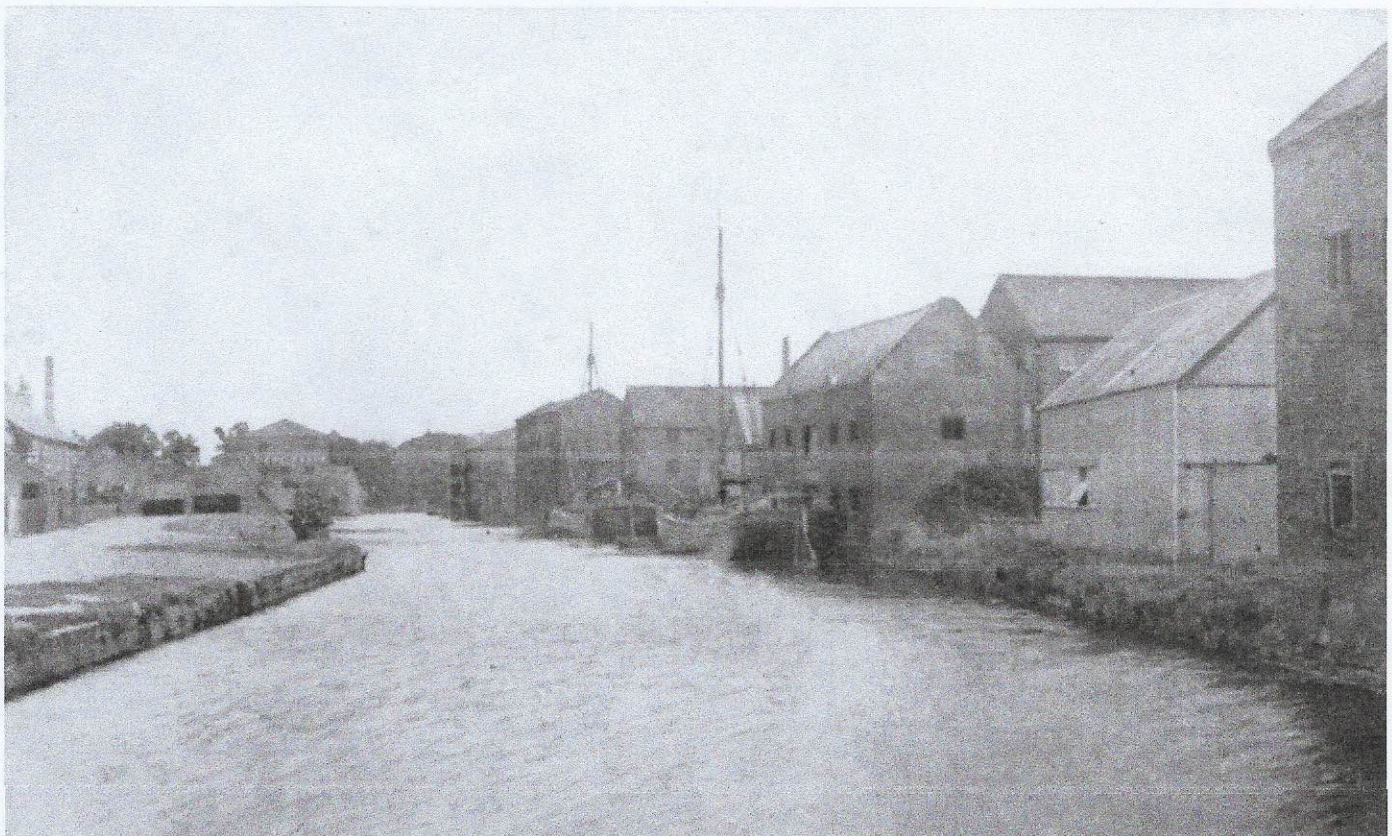
It was not only companies that operated sloops out of Louth; several smaller operators and owner captains had them. John Wilkinson was a master mariner and sloop owner who had *Thomas & Elizabeth* in the 1870s.

This was later steered by his son, John Walter Wilkinson, who was also to own and captain *Mystery*, bought in 1896 and said to be a steamer. This would not be the first steampowered vessel used on the canal. *Lindsey* was registered in 1887 for the Louth Steam Navigation Co Ltd, with John Wilkinson as its master. However, the company seemed to be in financial difficulties and *Lindsey* was sold off in 1889. Subsequently the business went into voluntary liquidation in August 1890. More rarely, Humber keels with their square rig did work to Louth and one captain based there owned one. George Wright of River Head bought the second-hand *Albatross* in 1912 and used it in the coal trade from the West Riding pits until the canal closed after the disastrous flood in 1920. It was sold to an owner in Hull shortly after.

Traffic

The main export traffic had traditionally been corn and wool, with imported traffics of timber, groceries and coal from Yorkshire pits, particularly from the Barnsley area and later the West Riding pits near the Sheffield & South Yorkshire Navigation. However, railway competition was having an impact and the canal's committee sought new traffics. In 1887 the committee negotiated with the Aire & Calder Navigation on improved grain rates which successfully increased traffic in wheat to Leeds and Wakefield.

Throughout the early 20th century, the canal's story was one of gradual decline, then from the start of World War I there was a rapid decline until 1916 when traffic virtually ceased. Following the 1920 flooding, which damaged the canal beyond the means to repair it, the canal was closed for navigation by the Ministry of Transport on 8th August 1924 and its assets subsequently sold in October.



Although not the most exciting view, this image gives a good idea of the terminus basin of the Louth Canal at River Head. It shows the open wharf on the north bank with a substantial crane with warehouses and granaries either side, and two sloop-rigged billyboys moored on the southern bank. In the distance beyond the bend in the canal were a shipyard and dry dock just above the first lock. Despite the closure of the canal, this view is still visible today from River Head Road with some of the warehouses still extant and the basin in water.

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