
The Father of Inland Navigation.

BY S. FLINT CLARKSON.

The granite column on Moneybury Hill, standing within a few yards of the boundary between Herts and Bucks, is well known to all travellers on the L. and N.W. Railway. Seen by them from the west, the column seems to overtop the trees. The hill, at times called Aldbury Hill, slopes sharply down to Aldbury village. It may be approached from the east along the top of the Ash-Ridge—under magnificent trees. There is an avenue on the top, with a length of nearly two miles, and about as majestic as such things are made. The column is about $1\frac{1}{2}$ miles to the north-west of the principal entrance of Ashridge House, the residence of Earl Brownlow.

On the base of the column, may be read, "In honour of Francis, third Duke of Bridgewater, 'Father of Inland Navigation,' 1832." He owned Ashridge, and the memorial was placed in the most prominent position that the estate affords. He was born in 1736, and as he died in 1803, the Grand Junction Canal, in the valley, is in effect another memorial of Francis Egerton. It was commenced in 1793, and opened in 1805, only two years after his death. It was a crowning work in English canalisation, as, by its means, inland inter-communication was obtained between London and Liverpool, Hull and Bristol. The great modern house at Ashridge, begun in 1808, inhabited in 1814, and completed about 1817, is also looked upon as a memorial of the Duke. There is also a neat memorial in the chancel aisle of Little Gaddesden Church, where the

Duke was buried, put there by John William, the seventh Earl of Bridgewater. Two lines at the foot of the inscription at Little Gaddesden, state that Francis Egerton made it possible for vessels to ride where ploughmen previously walked ("Men once walked where ships at anchor ride"). The paper prepared by our Honorary Secretary, the Rev. Henry Fowler, in order that it might be read before us in Little Gaddesden Church, amid the memorials of the Egertons, will deal fully with the interesting family history, and much besides.* It is not my duty to give, even briefly, what he must promise to give fully. I have only been asked to repeat before you the few words prepared for our Ashridge excursion. When the column came into sight, I was to explain the Duke's connection with inland navigation.

Mr. Clarkson then described the different kinds of canals now found in Britain, comparing them with foreign canals; (1) canalised rivers (the Ouse, etc.); (2) canals joining lakes (the Caledonian Canal, Suez); (3) canals formed at the sides of streams and fed from them (the Exeter Canal, the Sankey Canal, parts of the Thames and Severn Canal, Languedoc Canal); (4), canals which are purely artificial, being formed without regard to the course of natural streams. The Duke's Canal, having a total length of 28 miles between Longford Bridge near Manchester and Runcorn, was an early example on a good scale of these new rivers. The Sankey Canal, connecting St. Helen's with the Mersey, had led the way in 1755, and the Duke's Canal from Worsley to Manchester was in use in 1761. Necessarily a canal which pierces a watershed belongs to the same class, being a purely artificial river in the most remarkable portion of its course. It was a sense of conquest which stirred the nation in 1789, when boats which had gone up the Thames to Lechlade, found their way through Sapperton Tunnel and the Golden Valley into the Severn. Bristol could then be reached by water from London without passing through the English, and up the Bristol, Channel. This Thames and Severn Canal was opened in 1789, not quite thirty years after

* Owing to the death of Rev. H. Fowler, who did not live to complete this paper, it has been impossible to print it. Mr. Fowler's notes, however, on this subject, will be found among his MSS. at the Society's Library.

the Duke's Canal to Runcorn. It has been stated that in 1826, less than forty years after Sapperton had seemed so strange a wonder, there were over 3,000 miles of navigable watercourses in England alone. The Duke had set a most useful example to his country and the world at the opportune moment; but, if interpreted literally, the inscription on the base of the column exaggerates. In strictness, he ought not to be called "The Father of Inland Navigation" and looked upon as the first inventor who practised canal making, which is an ordinary interpretation of the phrase. Vessels went up navigable rivers, and there were improved rivers in very old days; and a canal of the artificial kind, on a very large scale—the Canal du Midi (Canal des deux Mers, Languedoc Canal)—had shown before 1670 that distance and difference of level were difficulties over which capable engineers were resolved to triumph. Louis XIV. sought and found glory in that ambitious enterprise for connecting by water the Atlantic and the Mediterranean. But the Languedoc Canal, although world-renowned, was possibly unknown both to the Duke and to James Brindley, his engineer, for Brindley did not travel far, and rarely read anything. He had, however, great natural powers, and knew how to use them. He often did at the right moment what might otherwise have long remained undone, and often rediscovered what others had found out before. Brindley and the Duke will always be remembered as having brought homes of trade nearer to each other. They promoted material welfare; and, as if accidentally, also promoted, in preparation for railways, the thorough fusion of people often separated by the nature of the country; but brought closer by skill and labour spent upon great highways—roadways, railways, canals, and seas. Perhaps the Duke's example was all the more telling in England because he and his helpers professed no lofty views. The inscription on the memorial at Little Gaddesden: "He will be ever memorable among those who were honoured in their generations, and were the glory of their times," would have surprised him, and Brindley also. They understood each other; and knew that neither was well fitted for being an idol of the populace. Cowper might well have intended this when he wrote in "Table Talk":—

“Not Brindley nor Bridgewater would essay
To turn the course of Helicon that way”;

Cowper really meant something very different; the poem, by the way, was first published in 1782, when Brindley had been dead ten years, and the Duke was 46.

Scroop Egerton, Earl of Bridgewater, became first Duke, and died in 1741. His son, John, was the second Duke, and died in 1748, aged 20. Francis, the fifth and youngest son of Scroop Egerton, who was born in 1736, and succeeded his brother John at the age of 12, was the third and last Duke of Bridgewater. In 1753, he started on the grand tour with Robert Wood (“Balbec and Palmyra” Wood, born 1716, died 1771). At the age of 23 (1759), the Duke was engaged to be married to Elizabeth, Duchess of Hamilton, who had been the youngest Miss Gunning, and had been a widow for a year (born 1734, died 1790). The marriage did not take place. He retired to his estate at Worsley, near Manchester. Being a coal owner, he realised the difficulty of transporting coals by road. He met James Brindley in 1759, the seven miles of canal between Worsley and Manchester were opened for traffic in 1761—one of the first navigable canals in England which was wholly the work of man. The canal from Worsley to Runcorn was opened for traffic in 1767—about five years from the passing of the Enabling Act. Thereafter, canals were often in progress. In 1777, the Grand Trunk (Trent and Mersey) Canal; in 1789, the Thames and Severn Canal, marked important stages in the work of covering England with a network of canals. The Grand Junction Canal, almost at our doors, at Boxmoor, Watford, and Rickmansworth, made others complete. The Duke is said to have expended £220,000 on the Duke’s Canal (Manchester to Runcorn). When death came in 1803, he was buried at Little Gaddesden, with the simplicity befitting his character and way of life, by his own special request.

Stated thus in outline, it seems a meagre record, but told at the fullest, there is in the Duke’s life not the story of a hero, either Carlylese or romantic, but that of a sane, strong, ordinary man, who made good use of his powers, and of those of others, for adding to his wealth, and thus served also his country and his time.