

The Wollaton Wagonway of 1604

A Waggonway Research Circle guide. (Screen version)



Why is the Wollaton Wagonway significant?

It is generally regarded as the first embryonic, overland, railway to have been built in England. As no earlier example is known elsewhere it is also recognised as the World's first overland railway. Significantly it is also proven by surviving documentation although that documentation does not contain full build details.

“along the passage now laide with railes, and with suche or the lyke Carriages as are now in use for the purpose”.

The above quote is from Sir Percival Willoughby's lease to Huntingdon Beaumont dated 1 October 1604. Sir Percival was Lord of the Manor of Wollaton and Huntingdon Beaumont was his business partner and the lessee of the Strelley coal pits.

What is known with certainty about the Wollaton Wagonway is set out below.

- 1 - The overland, railed, route was approximately two miles long.
- 2 - The rails, made of wood, ran from Strelley to Wollaton.
- 3 - The wagonway was built to carry coal from the Strelley Pits to a distribution point near Wollaton Lane (now Wollaton Road). A considerable % of the coal was also taken onwards from there by road to Trent Bridge and then on downstream by barge.
- 4 - The vehicles used to carry the coal on the rails were referred to as wagons or carriages.
- 5 - The wagons or carriages were drawn by horses.
- 6 - The Wagonway was built between October 1603 and October 1604.
- 7 - The Wagonway was built by Huntingdon Beaumont.
- 8 - The Wagonway cost approximately £166* to build, however, it is not clear exactly what that included.
- 9 - The cost of the Wagonway was shared 50:50 between Huntingdon Beaumont and Sir Percival Willoughby.
- 10 - The Wagonway is understood to have been used successfully for a number of years, until at least 1615. However records of a specific closure date have not survived.

The success of the Wollaton Wagonway led to Huntingdon Beaumont building other wagonways for his other mining leases in Northumberland. A continuous evolution of railways can be traced back to the Wollaton Wagonway.

Other less certain evidence.

The exact route and location of the Wollaton Wagonway is not known. However, indications of the

location of the coal pits in Strelley, the location of the coal distribution point near Wollaton Lane, now Wollaton Road, and possible evolved tracks between those locations suggest that the most probable route of the wagonway was down what was later known as the Old Coach Road, see the map on the reverse. Furthermore, the Old Coach Road has a fairly linear downhill slope over the two miles from Strelley to Wollaton Lane, which would have allowed gravity to assist the horses to convey the loaded coal wagons from Strelley to Wollaton.

In 1609 further articles of agreement were drawn up between Sir Percival Willoughby and the local coal factor Robert Fosbrooke authorising the building of a new coal stacking yard “at Wollerton Lane end at the new rayles end.” The site of this yard is as yet unproven. However if the coal transshipment point from wagonway to cart did take place at a location close to point D it not only fits the text of these articles but also makes operational sense in relation to other known facts and the highway layout. Furthermore the reference to the 2 mile run (1) is from a surviving source document dated 1615 (10). The total run from A through B to D is approximately 2 miles and therefore the extension from B to D can be inferred. Evidence of man-made earthworks, now built over, mapped on the OS First edition 25” sheet (Nott’s. 41.4, of 1881) also partially supports this inference.

Bibliography & Sources

(M = magazine : B = book : O = original papers)

(O) Middleton Collection in the Nottingham University Library

(M) Huntingdon Beaumont Adventurer in coal mines, (AVICM) Dr R S Smith (*Renaissance and Modern Studies II 1958*)

(M) England’s First Rails A reconsideration. (EFR) Dr R S Smith. (*Renaissance and Modern Studies IV 1960*)

(M) 400 years of English railways J New (*Backtrack Nov ‘04.*)

(B) Early coal mining around Nottingham. Dr R S Smith

(B) Early Wooden Railways. M J T Lewis

1 to 5, 7, 9 & 10 = EFR p123 : 6 = EFR p122 : *8 = AVICM p121. *EFR p121 incorrectly records half the cost as £86.

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