

Our Heritage Consultant, Clive Reed wrote this informative and comprehensive reply to a question about the relationship between the Great Western Railway and the Swansea Canal. He has kindly given permission for it to be published on our website.

I receive numerous queries on Swansea Canal history from colleagues around the UK, and this is my answer to the latest one. Clive.

Hi,

Sorry to be late in replying, but builders have delayed our Christmas. However, Stephen Hughes said to me years ago that the Swansea Canal, just like other canals in the GWR combine was Swindonised. He was shown a Swansea Canal lock number plate in the 1970's that had been recovered from the canal during its infilling in that period. The numbers ie. 27 were on the plate and were typical or standard GWR style numbers. He thought the number plates were manufactured at Swindon. I was later given that same plate.

I corresponded with British Waterways engineers at the Gloucester office during the early 1980s who were responsible for Swansea Canal maintenance, they had boundary plans of the Swansea Canal but nothing else. GWR records are very rare for the Swansea Canal. They did survey the entire canal in 1874 after they purchased the Swansea and those plans are very large scale and full of detail of industries that worked along the canal. The GWR also surveyed and made plans of the canal bridges, and all of the locks. Ian sent me copies of those over 30 years ago. Several iron bridges were placed over the Swansea Canal in the 1920's but their name plates were not GWR. Some were manufactured by Lysaghts of Newport. The GWR strengthened the underside of Ynysmeudwy Uchaf farm bridge in 1922 with pre-formed arches, bent railway lines, when the road became used by the Bryn Tinplate Works. That still exists at present.12/21/2020

Several bascule bridges were put on the canal from the 1870s onwards for colliery use and they had small iron fixtures such as angle iron etc. No records survive as to who manufactured them. Records I have of local collieries show that industries and firms in the Swansea Valley manufactured colliery equipment in that period. The cast iron diamond shape weight restriction plates that were placed on canal overbridges post 1890's were probably GWR manufacture, but none of the surviving plates carry any GWR markings or identification.

I found one small set of GWR records in the former Swansea City Archive in the early 1980s that were part of the Swansea Docks collection. They recorded the demolition of the Clydach-on-Tawe pump house and the disposal of the equipment installed in 1887, during GWR ownership. I wrote an article on that in 2001. It is enclosed with this note. The machinery was not built at Swindon.

I purchased a letter many years ago sent from the Swansea Canal engineers office with the GWR heading. The office was at Ystalyfera, at Fountains Hall. This is the only document to survive from this office that was closed down in 1912. I

interviewed descendants of the engineers who told me stories of wooden barge building on the Swansea Canal in the 1910/20s period. Barges were constructed along the Swansea Canal at Godre'r Graig and at Pontardawe until c1914-20, with the last barge constructed 1918 by the White family, the last engineers cum boat builders on the Swansea Canal. There were no metal boats used on the Swansea Canal.

Ian wrote to me years ago about maintenance punts on the Swansea Canal. He said that George Holloway the Pontardawe maintenance man complained to him in 1949 that the GWR did not send him any timber to repair his punt, an eight foot long workboat. I worked in the South Wales docks for over twenty years and saw many dock "flats" or small flat bottomed timber workboats in use. They were used for collecting rubbish and timber from out of the docks that could have fouled the operating of lock gates etc. I suspect the GWR could have supplied punts for use on the Swansea Canal from the large fleet of small craft in their dock portfolio. Two were recovered by the Swansea Canal Society in 1981 and 1983 and are now in museums at Swansea. A larger flat bottomed work boat was removed from the canal at Pontardawe c1983 that had angle-iron frames. They might possibly have been bent at Swindon? There are several photographs surviving of late Swansea Canal barges, c1910-40 that show barges with iron frames. One was excavated by the Swansea Canal Society at Ynysmeudwy in 1986/87. I took photographs of that. The iron frames could have been supplied from GWR workshops but that is my personal guess?

I was given a small iron anvil about 1984 that the person who donated it said was used by the Swansea Canal blacksmith for carrying out on-site repairs of lock gate furniture. Lock gate fittings were not sent to Swindon for repairs. There was a large sawmill at Godre'r Graig that remained in use into the 1920's and its main purpose was cutting tree trunks into plank form for the construction of lock gate timbers and for barge construction. The sawmill was constructed post 1875, possibly by the GWR, probably by the GWR, and was water powered. Ian photographed the water wheel in 1949. He said the bottle bolts that were used to tighten up the wheel were Swindon type.

I organized a project in 1983 to replace several of the canal mileposts between Pontardawe and Ynysmeudwy. A number of milepost uprights survived along the canal and I thought it would be something of interest to see along the canal if the mileposts were restored. The uprights were redundant Barlow rail cut into four and five foot lengths. I presume that they were GWR and that the company had replaced the original Swansea Canal mileposts when they Swindonised the Swansea engineering structures. I had found a complete rail milepost with its distance block intact at Tonmawr in the Afan Valley c1970s. I used that as a model for our project.

So to summarise for you, the GWR did Swindonise small canal items such as lock number plates, mileposts, and possibly barge frames, but nothing of any substantial size, and probably constructed the Swansea Canal sawmill. The only

boilers used on the Swansea Canal were those at the Clydach pumphouse and they do not carry any GWR identification.

Sorry I do not have any other information on GWR structures along the Swansea Canal, but will answer any other queries you have. PS. I have donated most of my Swansea Canal collection to the West Glamorgan Archive Office at Swansea and now have to rely on my memory for information.