



Merchants at The Riverhead in the 19th Century

There tended to be a group of around 8-10 dominant merchants who combined trade in a number of goods. They formed a series of fluctuating business partnerships with each other, to their mutual advantage. In addition to simple import and export they were also involved in the processing of goods that passed in and out of the canal. All of this trade related largely to the agricultural hinterland such as corn and corn milling, or drying kilns to produce malt from corn for the brewing trade. Other imports such as coal, wood and groceries related to the supply of necessities and luxuries to Louth and neighbouring areas. To this extent the canal was fulfilling the function for which it was originally built, that is to facilitate existing patterns of trade based around agriculture rather than to develop new ones. The export of corn and wool and the import of coal deals and groceries was already in existence at Saltfleet, Tetney and Grimsby prior to the building of the canal.

The stated purpose of the project was to make it easier to carry these to and from Louth by using water transport rather than land carriage. Although trade into and out of Louth using the canal saw considerable expansion it never really altered its character and the town itself was not industrialised. It remained a market town but one that used new methods of transport and processing.

Individual merchants formed overlapping business partnerships with others in order to process some of the goods they traded in. Thus Richard and later William Nell traded in bones but they linked up with Overton Chapman and Lawrence to form a business that crushed bones. The Nell empire also dealt in corn and formed a partnership with Overton to run a steam mill for corn. Meanwhile Overton and East combined together to trade in coal and corn. In a similar way Sharpley and Lawrence were corn and coal merchants, the former partner linking up with Edwards and Griffin to function as corn millers. There was a strong link between the businesses at the Riverhead and the brewing trade and associated wine and spirit trade within the town. For instance in 1849 William East is listed in a Directory as a brewer and maltster in Maiden Row and Walkergate. Thomas Overton who had a Riverhead partnership with in corn and coal the East's was listed in 1849 as a wine merchant in Eastgate. At the same time Overton and East were also spirit merchants in Eastgate.

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