



Bawtry Heritage Group
Preserving our Past for the Future
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BAWTRY WHARF

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Until 2016, signs on all the main roads at Bawtry's boundaries announced "Welcome to Bawtry - 12th century port". Frankly, these signs baffled visitors as there was no further information offered and there were no visible signs of a port. Most residents, however, did have some little knowledge that Bawtry was said to have been an important inland port in medieval times, although the obvious lack of access to a waterway still perplexed. The reality was that Bawtry had been an inland port before the River Idle, which had flowed through the edge of the town, was diverted to more than 300 metres away in 1857. The port accessed the North Sea via the rivers Idle, Trent and the Humber. (See Fig. 1)



Figure 1 - Bawtry & its access to the North Sea

The location of the wharf and its nature

Bawtry's wharf was on the River Idle, where the river looped to the west up to the edge of the town, just to the east of St Nicholas' church. Figure 2 shows this original course of the river.

The wharf was on the west bank of the river, at the end of Wharf Street, "butted upon the churchyard wall"¹. It seems the river widened into a pool at this point; the area opposite the site of the wharf remained very marshy until modern times when a small housing estate was built on it. There were actually two wharfs - the "burgesses' wharf" in the north, (subsequently

¹ D Hey – The Making of South Yorkshire - 1979

known as the "town wharf") and the "Lord's wharf" in the south. It would appear the latter evolved into a wharf for unloading coal into Bawtry, to fuel the gas works which were constructed in 1834. The area highlighted in brown in Figure 2 shows the likely area occupied by the wharf. Its northern



Figure 2 - Bawtry's wharf on the River Idle

extremity can be fixed exactly, being marked on Peck's map of 1813² (see Figure 3) and the Ordnance Survey map published in 1854 (see Figure 4). The southern extremity is more speculative, and may be exaggerated in Figure 2. The 1854 map does, however, show the gas works, which the wharf served - it cannot have been far away.

² W Peck – A Topographical History & Description of Bawtry & Thorne with Villages adjacent - 1813

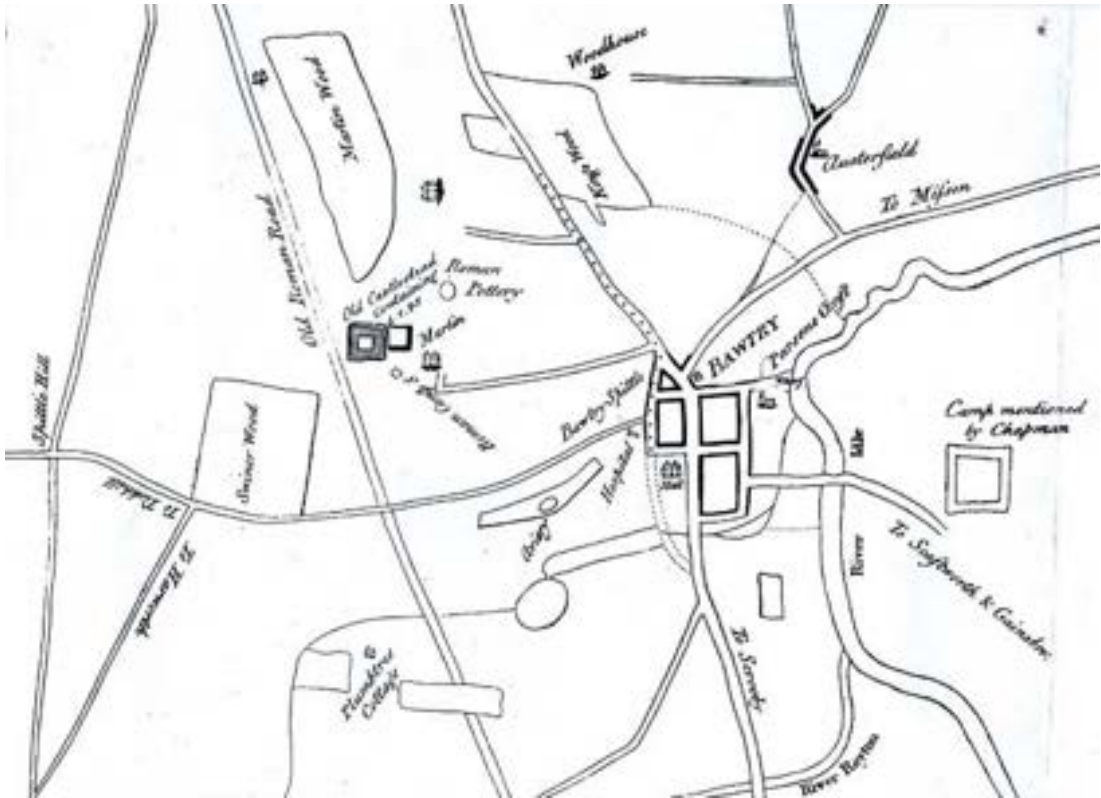


Figure 3 - Peck's map of 1813 showing the wharf



Figure 4 - OS map of 1854 showing the wharf

The wharf went out of use in 1857, but it was still visible in 1905. In his "Summer Excursion" of that year Robert Mellors said³

"The old wharf or quay adjoining the church may still be traced opposite the east end (of the church), but it is fast warping up."

The original course of the river, curving around what used to be the pool, but now densely packed with trees, can be discerned behind the church in the aerial photograph taken in 1925, presented at Figure 5.



Figure 5 - Aerial photograph of Bawtry in 1925

Figure 6 below shows the unmade lane immediately behind the eastern wall of St Nicholas'; the wharf must have ran along here.

³ Published in the Transcripts of the Thoroton Society



Figure 6 - Lane behind St Nicholas' - site of the wharf

In time, the original river course and the area the wharf occupied were built over; no trace of either is visible today, although the area remains very wet and prone to flooding. The area now hosts a late 20th century housing estate (Saint Nicholas Way) and some quite mature trees and shrub.

Part of the river landscape can still be seen. Most obvious is the new cut, a little over 300 metres from Bawtry now, running north-south in a clearly artificial channel. This can be seen through the arches of the railway viaduct a short distance from the course of the original channel, or, more easily, from the stone bridge over the Idle just outside Bawtry on the Gainsborough Road. The land immediately in front of the viaduct is very swampy, and flooded in wet weather - reminders of the proximity of the original river channel.

The warehouses which must have been associated with the wharf have disappeared - built over - but there is one possible survivor, which is the building pictured in Figures 7 and 8. Situated just north east of the end of Wharf Street, this brick building (now converted to domestic use) lies about 40 metres from the site of the wharf, so it must have been on the outer periphery of the commercial development there. It displays what appear to be "taking-in" doors at 1st floor level, one of them fitted with a steel beam adjacent to the top of the door for fitting a hoist - typical of a small

warehouse. The building appears to be of early 19th century date, which means it was probably built only a few decades before the wharf's demise.



Figures 7 & 8 - Possible warehouse near the wharf

The site of the wharf has never been subject to archaeological investigation. An Evaluation and Mitigation Report prepared by Wessex Archaeology in 2012, for the Bridge Lane housing development, to the south of St Nicholas church, caused three exploratory trenches to be opened. The northernmost of these trenches was probably only a few metres away from the likely southern extremity of the wharf.

The archaeological potential of the area must be quite high. Given its probable construction of massive timber baulks or stone at the river edge, there must be a high probability of survival of some elements of the wharf, although they may have been salvaged for use elsewhere. The footings of warehouses may also be present. In the bed of the river channel, adjacent to the wharf, artefacts lost during loading may be present. These may include quarried stone, millstones, lead "pigs"⁴ and metal works. Any archaeological investigation of the area would probably be difficult, but not impossible.

The history of the wharf

Although confidently believed to have existed in the 12th century, the earliest documentary reference to Bawtry as a port is in 1272, in the Hundred Rolls, which records the shipping of 40 sacks of wool from Bawtry to Hull. The wharf was located on the west bank of the River Idle, just to the east of St Nicholas' church.

⁴ Crudely cast ingots of lead, weighing between 60 and 120 pounds.

It is clear from documented history that Bawtry's growth and historical prosperity was closely bound up by its transport links – its location on the Great North Road, and at the navigable limit of the River Idle. These geographical characteristics obtained long before the new town of 1200 was laid out – did a settlement by the Idle, making its living from the river, exist long before the Normans?

The position of the church - and therefore the port - was some way to the east of the Norman "planted" town, which was laid out around 1200, probably indicating that the site of the church and the wharf were the location of a riverside settlement which pre-dated the planted town. Archaeological excavations in Church Street in 1990⁵ revealed that under 13th century buildings were earlier ones, whose orientation did not respect that of the grid layout of the c 1200 town – i.e. they must have been older.

One may speculate there was a wharf at what is now Bawtry even earlier. We know Bawtry was used for the export of lead from Derbyshire in medieval times – "pigs" of lead were carried to the town by packhorses and wagons. We also know the Romans mined lead in Derbyshire. There is plentiful evidence that the Romans were active in and around Bawtry. Did Bawtry originate as a port with them?

In medieval times Bawtry was a major inland port. Its fortunes varied over the centuries, dipping markedly between the 14th and early 16th centuries. This fall in prosperity may be related to the huge drop in population caused by the Black Death, from which England had a very slow recovery. In his "Itinerary" of 1538-1543, John Leland wrote

"Bawtre is very bare and poore, a poore market town standing yn Yorkshire, as the inhabitantes of it told me..."

Trade had improved by Elizabethan times and through the 17th century but then declined again when improvements to the River Don Navigation were made in the second quarter of the 18th century, and when construction of the Chesterfield Canal was completed in 1777. These developments gave industries in West Yorkshire, Hallamshire and North Nottinghamshire better access to the Trent and thence the Humber. They could thereby avoid the long overland trip to Bawtry first, which was expensive and, in winter, often difficult. The significance of these improvements can be readily seen in Figure 9 below.

⁵ Excavations at Church Street Bawtry – Cumberpatch & Dunkley - 1996

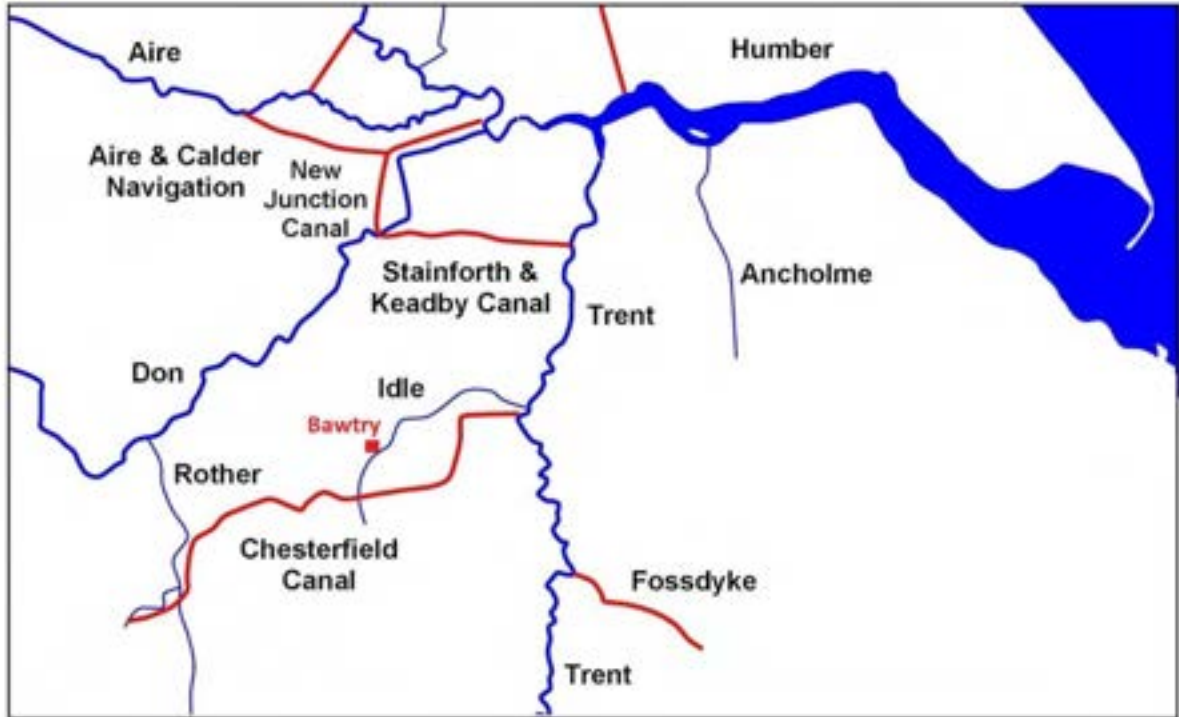


Figure 9 - Improvements in navigation

In 1848, the Great Northern Railway came to Bawtry. Trade through the port had already declined substantially, and the viaduct built by the railway company to carry their trains across the low lying eastern margins of Bawtry severely compromised its continued functioning.



The viaduct was built of timber though and the wharf did remain accessible as the river passed through the viaduct's trestles. The final death knell came just 9 years later - in 1857 the timber construction was replaced with a massively built stone and brick one; this appears in Figure 10.

Figure 10 - The stone & brick railway viaduct of 1857

The river was diverted into a new straight cut 300 metres to the east. (See Figure 2.) The original course of the river, with its very marshy area enclosed in the loop, did, however, remain a noteworthy feature until much later. They both feature in the OS map of 1899 (See Figure 11).

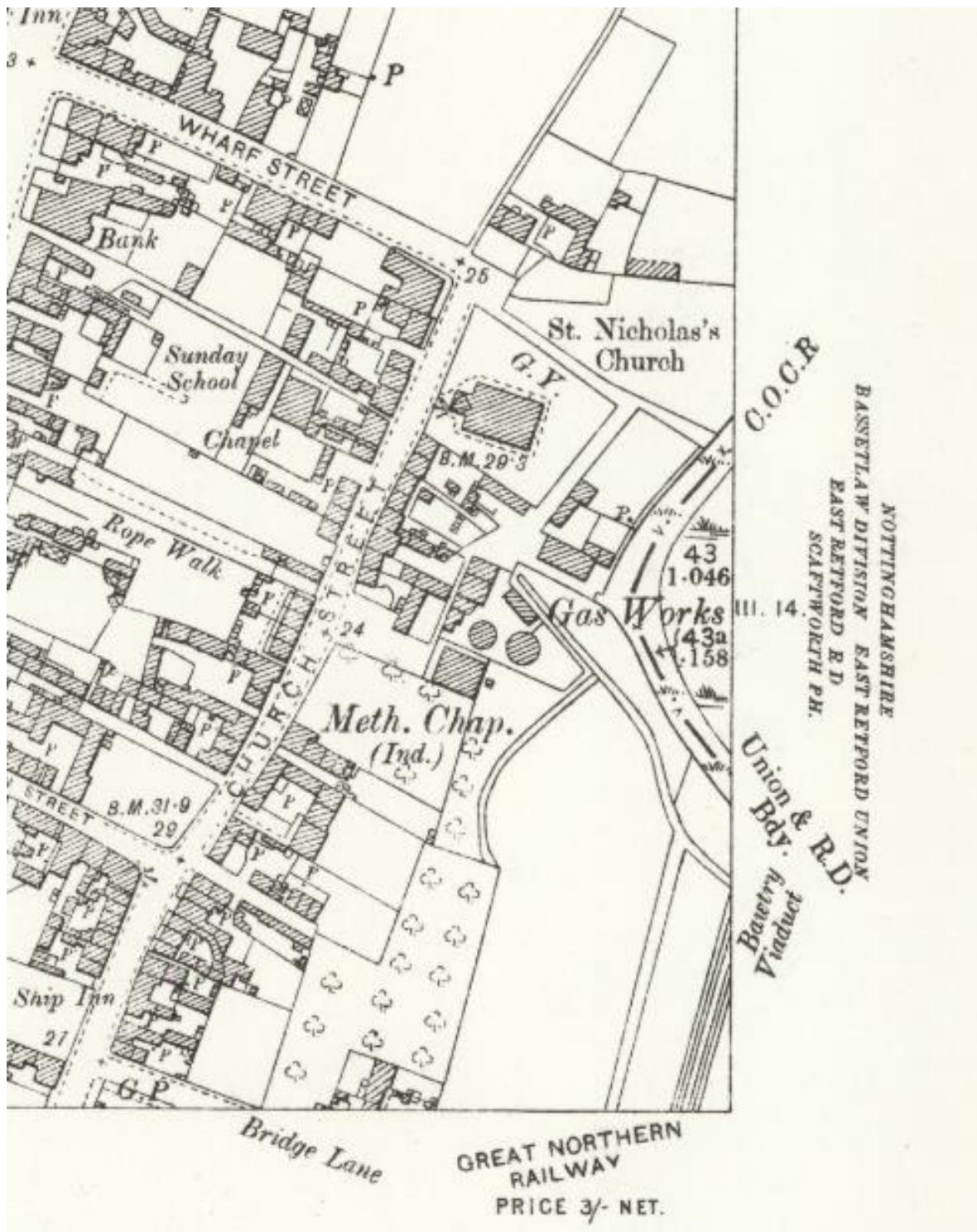


Figure 11 - OS map of 1899 showing original course of river

Trade conducted on the Idle from Bawtry

Heavy goods from Derbyshire, the West Riding of Yorkshire, and Nottingham were carried to Bawtry by packhorse or wagon, and loaded into sailing barges at Bawtry's wharf whence they were taken to the Humber and Hull via the Idle and Stockwith on the Trent. These goods included

lead, millstones, grindstones, cast and wrought iron from Derbyshire; coal, wrought iron and edged tools from Sheffield and Hallamshire; and wool and timber from Nottinghamshire. Mostly trans-shipped at Hull, these goods were destined for London and Northern Europe, including the Low Countries, Germany, Norway and Sweden. Goods imported included timber, iron ore, copper, tin, flax and hemp.

There exist detailed records of this trade. Some early examples from the Calendar of Patent Rolls and the Calendar of Close Rolls follow.

Consignments of wool were shipped from Bawtry between 1260 and 1270.

In 1267 the Sheriff of York was asked

".....to receive 60 fothers⁶ of lead to be delivered at Bautre by the Sheriff of Nottingham and Derby, and carry it by water to Westminster without delay and without fail."

In 1272 Reyner de Luke shipped 40 sacks of wool from Bawtry to Hull.

In 1298, eighty-six quarters⁷ of grain and twenty-nine quarters of malt were shipped from Bawtry to Hull and then on to Berwick.

Wool from Nottinghamshire and lead from Derbyshire were shipped from Bawtry in 1337 and again in 1341, and taken to Grimsby for transshipment to Dordrecht in Holland.

In 1380, Henry Marchant of Retford was granted a licence

".....to load one last⁸ of hides at each of the ports of Newcastle-upon-Tyne, Hartilpool, Whiteby and Scardeburgh and take them to Bautre...."

The importance of Bawtry as a port is evidenced by the fact that some goods even went direct from Bawtry to the North Sea. In 1596 Hull merchants complained that a weigh-house had been established at Bawtry by London lead traders so that their business could be transacted there and the lead shipped straight to London, bypassing the Hull merchants' businesses.⁹

During the Civil War, a cloth route from the West Riding which passed through Tickhill to Bawtry was subject to disruption due to civil disorder. A

⁶ An historical English measurement – a "cartload" – of around 1 ton.

⁷ An historical English measurement equating to about a quarter of 1 ton.

⁸ An historical Dutch/English measure of numerical quantity used in maritime trade – 1 last being 144 skins.

⁹ R Davis – The Trade and Shipping of Hull, 1500-1700 - 1964

complaint about this referred to trains of "20, 30, 40 horses at a time laden with cloth" en route to Bawtry.¹⁰

In the late 17th century Derbyshire and Nottinghamshire ironmasters were even sending their wares to Barbados via Bawtry.¹¹

The port of Bawtry was probably at its busiest in the early 18th century. In 1721 the weight of Hallamshire manufactures sent in the direction of the Humber was 13,000 tons; and the greater proportion of this quantity must have passed through the port of Bawtry and thence along the river Trent.¹²

In 1724 Daniel Defoe wrote (in his "Tour Through England and Wales") that the River Idle was

"a full and quick stream, with a deep channel which carries hoys, lighters, barges or flat-bottomed vessels, out of the channel into the Trent..."

making Bawtry

"the chief centre of exportation for this part of the country."

and

"This makes Bawtry wharf be famous all over the south part of the West Riding of Yorkshire, for it is the place whither all their heavy goods are carried, to be embarked and shipped off."

Vessels of quite considerable size were able to reach Bawtry. When possible routes for the Chesterfield Canal were being considered, canal engineer John Grundy was commissioned to examine the suitability of Bawtry and the Idle. In 1770 he said

"The medium size vessels now navigated upon the river (Idle) are 48 feet long and from 13 to 14 feet wide upon the beam; and, when loaded, draw from 27 to 30 inches of water, and carry from 12 to 24 tons." ¹³

An engraving of a Humber sailing barge similar to these dimensions is presented at Figure 12.

¹⁰ J Hunter – South Yorkshire: The History and Topography of the Deanery of Doncaster – Vol 1 - 1974

¹¹ T S Ashton – Iron and Steel in the Industrial Revolution - 1951

¹² E Pratt – A History of Inland Transport and Communications in England - 1912

¹³ J Gundy – The Report of John Grundy, Engineer, respecting the proposed Navigation from Chesterfield to the River Trent - 1770



Just before the end of its working life the wharf saw coal, corn, bricks, oak timber and limestone from Roche Abbey loaded onto the barges. They brought back to Bawtry steel, iron ore, copper and tin from Sweden, Germany and Spain, timber from Norway, and hides from London. Hemp, flax and foodstuffs

Figure 12 - A Humber sailing barge

were also imported. In the couple of decades before the demise of the port, coal was also imported, for the gas works built in Bawtry in 1834.

Pigot's Yorkshire Directory of 1834 references a Bawtry coal merchant and "wharfinger" (an owner or keeper of a wharf) Christopher Emblay, with premises on Wharf Street, as operating a weekly "packet boat" every Monday from Bawtry to Gainsborough. This conveyed passengers and groceries. Doubtless he also brought in coal for the new gas works. In the 1841 census, two "watermen" are recorded. Tellingly, the 1851 census records fifteen railways workers of various sorts, but only one "waterman".

The wharf's significance

Mention has already been made about the Great North Road and the River Idle being Bawtry's "raison d'être". One might speculate that, without its wharf on the Idle, the town would not have prospered – it may not even have existed. River trade made Bawtry and its merchants prosperous, reflected in some of the fine properties built in the town, such as Aquila Dawson's house on the Market Place, or the "Dutch House" near the church. Many of the handsome Georgian properties in the High Street were also built on the back of this trade. It remained crucial to Bawtry's development until the end of the 18th century, when coaching began to take over.

Notwithstanding the possibility that Bawtry's wharf existed prior to the 12th century, its survival to the middle of the 19th century means the wharf saw at least 700 years of activity - that must be very significant, and rare. Other inland ports did exist in South Yorkshire, but they were much smaller and did not operate over such a long time span. The site of the wharf at Doncaster has survived much better than Bawtry's, but it only became of importance at the end of the 18th century when the upper reaches of the Don were improved and even then it remained subservient to Bawtry

because it could only handle smaller vessels. Inland ports are not common; ones of the level of importance Bawtry had - certainly regional, but also national - are rare.

Ironically, the cause of the port's final demise - the diversion of the river - makes Bawtry's wharf even rarer in a sense. Not only is Bawtry an historical inland port which no longer has a wharf, but it is an historical inland port which no longer has a river!

Bawtry is well known now as a small market town. What makes it highly unusual, however, is that the core of its trade used not to be serving its immediate rural environs like most market towns but much further afield, because its primary trade was maritime, not land based. Its wharf served an enormous "market" - exporting goods from the counties of Derbyshire, Yorkshire and Nottinghamshire and importing goods from other parts of England, from the Netherlands, and from the Baltic and Northern Europe.

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