Bawtry Heritage Group

Preserving our Past for the Future

Registered Charity No. 1188945

SYDNEY BARTON'S DREAM

Bawtry's Genesis - Part One

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Preface

Most people accept that the origins of Bawtry date back to around 133 years after the Norman Conquest. Despite a number of historians in recent times hinting at there being an organised socio-economic environment earlier than that, they have displayed little investigative zeal to test or prove what remains an educated hunch.

As we move ever deeper into the 21st century CE there is a risk that any motivation, or sense of importance in achieving an understanding of how, why and when Bawtry really came to be, will diminish and eventually be lost.

Whilst I cannot say for certain that Bawtry's Sydney James Barton was a zealot in the search for Bawtry's origins, I do feel able to credit him with an understanding that the relevance of the past is important to the development of the future and that apathy towards that view cannot only stifle opportunity, but also result in us losing what we have, before realising it's importance.

The trigger for Sydney's preeminence in what became a hot topic in the realms of parish politics in the early 20th century began with an issue regarding the public's freedom to roam and grew into a passion to revive and celebrate what he considered to be at the heart of the town's genesis, the reason for its very existence.

The events in the tale of Sydney Barton's Dream took place around 90 years ago in the early part of the 1930's. The interactions presented in the story were accessible to the wider public through local newspaper outlets of the day and prompted strong feelings amongst those directly engaged, as well as opinions from locals.

Whilst the sources for the story are relatively sparse, they are emotive and impactful. The story suggests that the underlying sentiments and conclusions from back then rippled, if perhaps unwittingly, into the 21st century desires, actions, and decision making of those that followed Sydney and his colleagues 80 odd years later.

Given the history and context in which the 21st century debate took place, the decision made then could be considered as suppressing the core of Barton's vision for a second time; notwithstanding that those involved were likely to be unaware.

Of course, we have no way of knowing for certain the roots of Barton’s personal motivation; was he about enterprise, regeneration, preservation, enlightenment or a combination of all four? This piece is designed to prompt the suggestion that the pathway taken, over the last 90 plus years, has served to diminish any conscious endeavour to understand or pursue the story of our town’s origins; suggesting the value of triggering an energetic re-think of that position for the benefit of the town and its visitor.

What does consciously influence those making decisions about how our town is perceived and developed in today's environment? Are they considerations prompted by any level of knowledge and appreciation of the past, including the value of the foundations laid in antiquity that have led us to today? Or are things more superficial and based on a perception of the immediate needs? Will the next generation of Bawtry residents and visitors be even more starved of an opportunity to be aware of the town’s real historic roots, given an acute lack of proactive exposure? Does it really matter?

Nothing stays the same forever so any argument for the status quo is rarely relevant. Decision making about preserving and celebrating history and heritage that is based on an holistic overview might best ensure that what is considered real value is always appropriately taken into account and not dispelled lightly.

In closing this preface we might reflect on what the range of communities that make up Bawtry’s populace today would think if Barton had been successful in achieving his vision. It would be interesting to know.

To find out what Sydney’s Dream was you need to read on. This story for the modern day Bawtry Heritage Group (BHG) was central in 2026 in launching its Bawtry Genesis Project.


MR. S. J. BARTON.

In 1837 the last vestiges of commercial enterprise were being played out at the River Idle Wharf in Bawtry. Large scale water management projects in the latter half of the 18th century impacted greatly on Bawtry's importance as an inland port, these changes further reducing activity. Pigot's Trade Directory for 1837 reported, under the heading "Conveyance By Water", that Christopher Emblay's packet boat[1] leaves the wharf at Bawtry every Monday for Gainsborough. The construction of the railway viaduct necessitating the diversion of the natural course of the river in 1848 was the final blow.

Rail was followed, in the early stages of the 20th century, by motorised transport becoming all the rage. Emblay's packet boat and his role as Bawtry's "Wharfinger"[2] would cease to be relevant. Modernisation would diminish Bawtry's ancient waterfront ending its status as a commercially viable inland port; not to mention the beginning of a period when Bawtry as a port faded from the public consciousness.

On an unspecified day in the summer of 1933 a group of young boys seeking to access fun on the River Idle at Bawtry were prevented from doing so by the long arm of the law and warned about the offence of trespass.

It was around this time that Bawtry's Parish Council elected a new Chairman, Sydney James Barton. Born in 1875, he was a lifelong resident of the town. His appointment notice heralded him as a "popular councillor and tradesman", with a

[1] A vessel that ran on a regular, fixed schedule to carry domestic or international mail, freight, and passengers.
[2] Owner or person in charge of the Wharf.

well known passion for the preservation of rights of way, especially public access to the River Idle and its amenities.

The story of the youngsters being prevented from accessing the river by the police reached Barton and he raised the matter at the next Parish Council meeting. The context in which he raised it was not to place the main emphasis on the freedom of youths to access the river, but to raise a flag for the rights of all to use a long existing right of way to this location, with a significant history, on the town's doorstep. Perhaps somewhat surprisingly the reaction of fellow councillors was to accuse Barton of being "troublesome" and alleging that the boys had accessed the river from the Scaftworth side, with the landowner therefore having the right to demand that permissions be sought and if necessary, to prosecute trespassers. The Council meeting was summed up in a newspaper clipping describing councillor Barton's call to local officials as a call to do their duty on behalf of the town's folk, and protect legal rights; of which accessing the Idle river via the pathway near Wharf Farm was "definitely" legitimate. Barton said it would be "deplorable" if it was lost to them.

What is striking about all of this is the binary nature of the exchanges, Barton seems to be the only voice inviting the council to consider the access rights of people seriously. His call was not only for those they currently represent, but for the generations to follow. One is left with the feeling that there is more to this issue than youngsters seeking to moor and sail their boat.

These events coincided with matters reaching the Doncaster Rural District Council (RCD), which had origins dating back some 23 years to 1910. In that year the Doncaster Gazette had printed an article reporting the emergence of a plan to revive the old river front at Bawtry, which had become silted up. The plan included the idea to provide a promenade and recreation ground for residents and visitors. It would appear that very little had progressed since 1910 but a recent communication from the Rural District Council had brought it back into the consciousness of local political leaders. The drive behind this district intervention would seem to have been Sydney Barton, who reported to the press that he had raised the details of plans and discussions since 1910 with Mr W E Jones the local representative of the West Riding County Council and with representatives of the Doncaster Rural District Council. The issue was not only related to public access but was also about the big task of clearing out what had become a neglected space between the new river cut and the old wharf. This had been required for the construction of a viaduct carrying the London to Scotland Great Northern Railway line back in the mid 19th century. The old course of the river had meandered from its northern direction westward towards the town, turning northward again to run close to the town's eastern boundary immediately behind St Nicholas' church before turning eastward and northward once more. It was this body of water touching the very edge of Bawtry's eastern border that had marked the then county line and had allowed for the

establishment of a thriving wharf spanning at least seven centuries, perhaps more. Since the new man made landscape the area between the old wharf and the new river cut had become silted up and rarely tended to. The Rural District Council's clerk Mr H M Marshal, as a result of Barton's interventions, had been tasked to make inquiries with regard to who might be responsible for the cleaning of the river. He also forwarded a letter to Bawtry's Parish Council about their collective position with regard to this matter.

Mr Marshal's letter, it is fair to say, exploded like a bomb. The divisiveness of this topic hinted at in the discussion about the alleged trespassing surfaced for all to see. News reports presented this to the wider world in the form of verbatim commentaries, fuelled by the Parish Council's strange resolution to have nothing to do with the RDC's indicated interest; even though it was nothing more than an intent to progress a preliminary inquiry.

The Parish Council position seemed to be based on it being a fact that the exploration of public rights of way and the enhancement of the old wharf area into something beneficial for the development of the town and wellbeing of its residents was pointless. Pointless, because ultimately the costs would fall on the town's ratepayers inflating the cost already endured on matters relating to the river and water management. Barton's position was dismissive of the Parish Council's stance. He was certain that the railway company had not only a legal duty but a moral one to maintain the area properly. His view was that the RDC inquiry would provide further clarity on this point and provide a route by which reclamation could be progressed. The following extract from a Parish Council meeting during this period provides an insight into how polarised and divisive this issue was; making one wonder what, if any, other vested interests were at play?

Councillor Pinder - (talking to Barton). "You talk about us as though we were damned fools"

Councillor Barton - "I don't say you are damned fools, but I cannot make you understand this".

Councillor Cullen - "You talk as if you were the only intelligent man in the room. We have as much intelligence as you".

Councillor Barton - "Yes in a selfish way! You are not intelligent in this matter".

Councillor Cullen - "I am considering myself Mr Barton. And when I consider myself you can take it for granted I am considering other people".

Mr Cullen owned land adjacent to the river, could Barton's jibe at selfishness be a hint that Cullen may be conflicted? This issue was aired directly in another

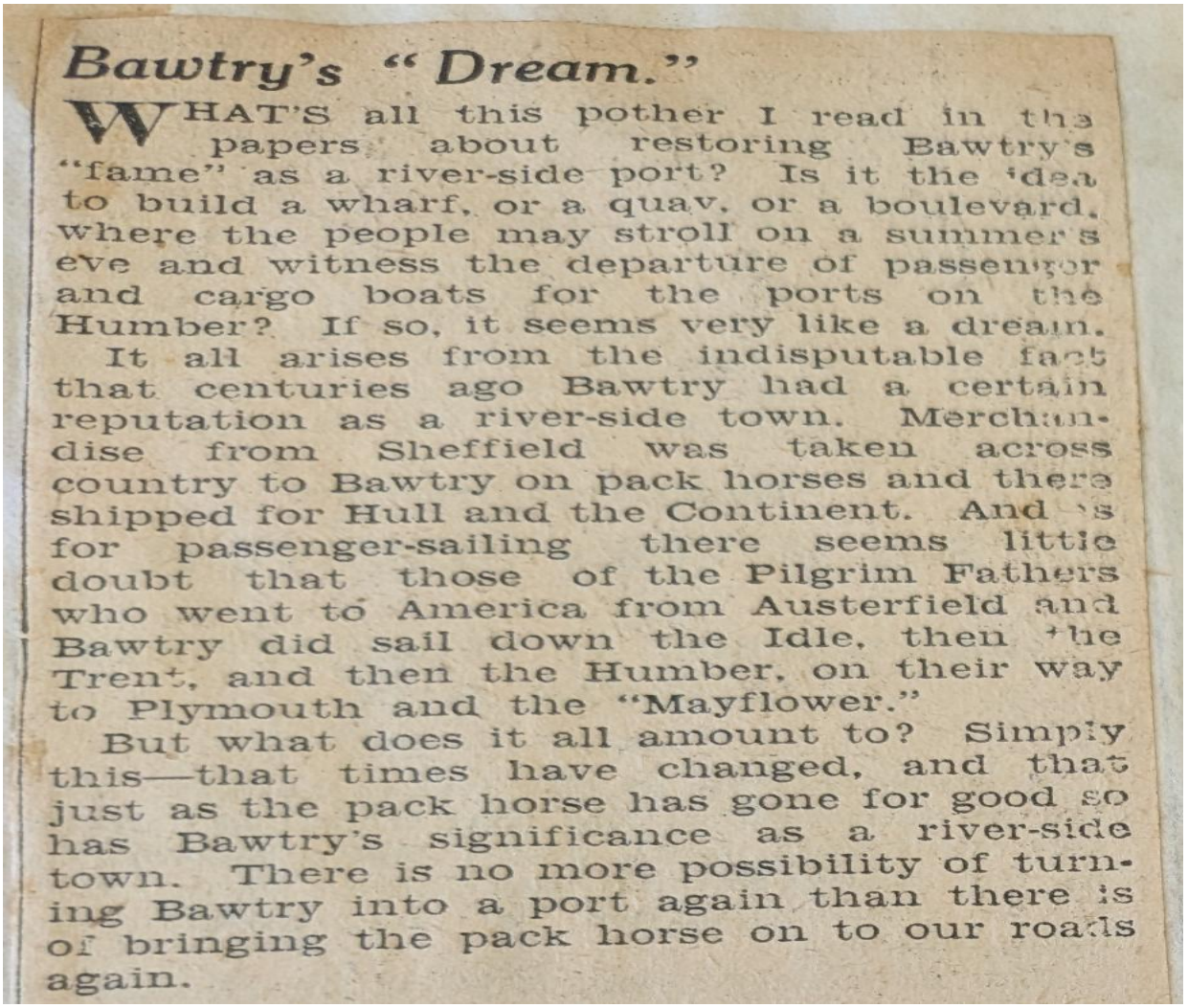
reported discussion when Cullen stated he would erect a fence to protect his land.

Councillor Barton - "Well, I shall break it down".

Councillor Cullen- "All right then you will have the opportunity to break it".

The main source for this tale is a scrapbook of newspaper clippings presenting the main issues facing Bawtry, and in particular its Parish Council during the 1930's. The person responsible for this compilation is anonymous and most likely lost in the mists of time.

There is no clipping that presents a definitive end to the issue regarding the rejuvenation of the wharf and the last comments are left to anonymous contributors to local newspapers, displayed in full below.

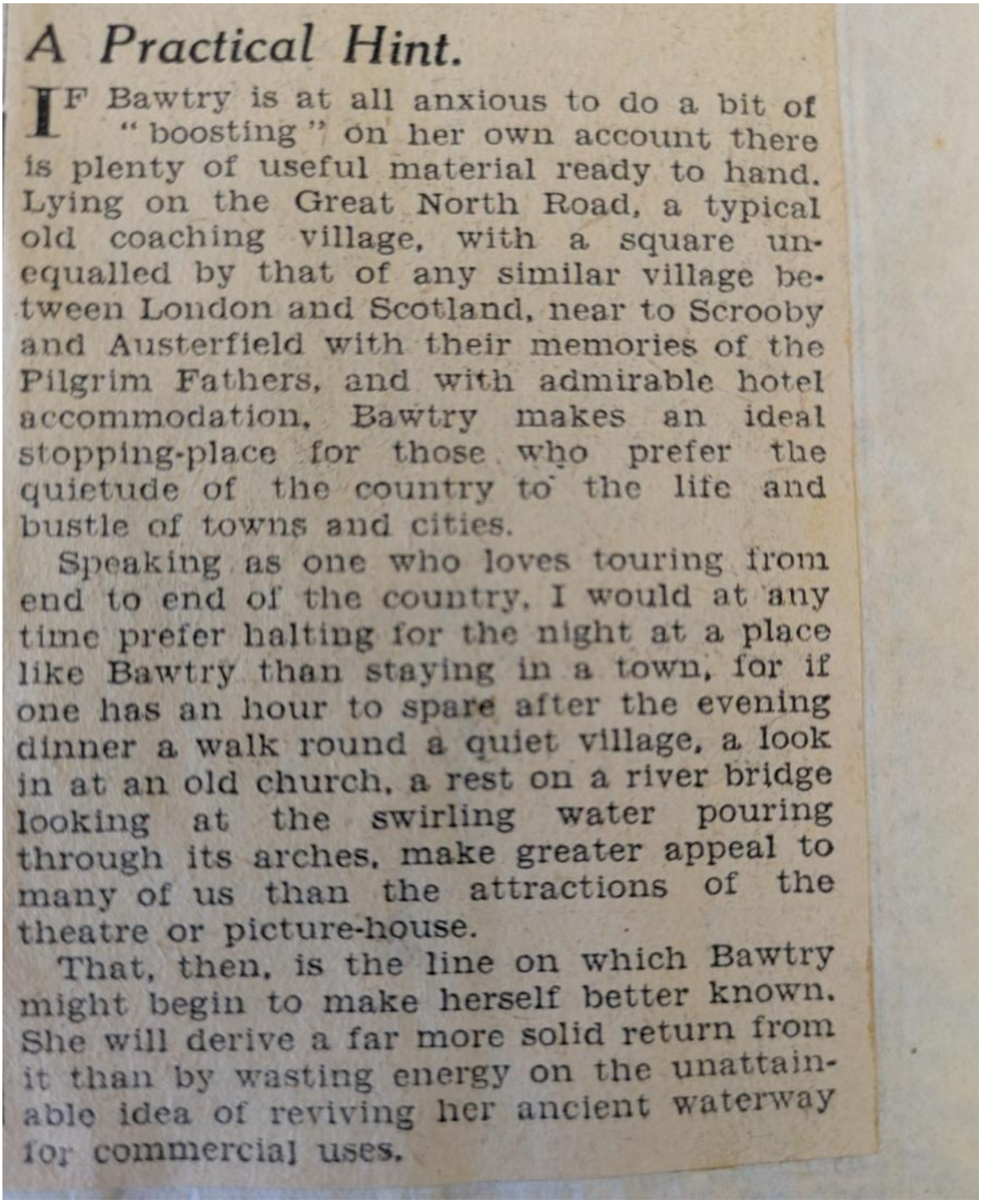


Bawtry's "Dream."

WHAT'S all this pother I read in the papers about restoring Bawtry's "fame" as a river-side port? Is it the idea to build a wharf, or a quay, or a boulevard, where the people may stroll on a summer's eve and witness the departure of passenger and cargo boats for the ports on the Humber? If so, it seems very like a dream.

It all arises from the indisputable fact that centuries ago Bawtry had a certain reputation as a river-side town. Merchandise from Sheffield was taken across country to Bawtry on pack horses and there shipped for Hull and the Continent. And as for passenger-sailing there seems little doubt that those of the Pilgrim Fathers who went to America from Austerfield and Bawtry did sail down the Idle, then the Trent, and then the Humber, on their way to Plymouth and the "Mayflower."

But what does it all amount to? Simply this—that times have changed, and that just as the pack horse has gone for good so has Bawtry's significance as a river-side town. There is no more possibility of turning Bawtry into a port again than there is of bringing the pack horse on to our roads again.



A Practical Hint.

IF Bawtry is at all anxious to do a bit of "boosting" on her own account there is plenty of useful material ready to hand. Lying on the Great North Road, a typical old coaching village, with a square unequalled by that of any similar village between London and Scotland, near to Scrooby and Austerfield with their memories of the Pilgrim Fathers, and with admirable hotel accommodation, Bawtry makes an ideal stopping-place for those who prefer the quietude of the country to the life and bustle of towns and cities.

Speaking as one who loves touring from end to end of the country, I would at any time prefer halting for the night at a place like Bawtry than staying in a town, for if one has an hour to spare after the evening dinner a walk round a quiet village, a look in at an old church, a rest on a river bridge looking at the swirling water pouring through its arches, make greater appeal to many of us than the attractions of the theatre or picture-house.

That, then, is the line on which Bawtry might begin to make herself better known. She will derive a far more solid return from it than by wasting energy on the unattainable idea of reviving her ancient waterway for commercial uses.

I suspect these contributions to be from different people; although they both present an opinion questioning the wisdom or need for any revival of the old wharf, they do so by presenting separate arguments. The first, claiming it is nothing more than an irrelevant and impractical dream and expressing the view that to waste energy on such a venture would be pointless. The second, that Bawtry needs to look no further than other easy and more accessible features within its townscape to celebrate and win reward as an attraction worthy of residence or visitors.

The motives of Sydney Barton are difficult to judge. Was he in pursuit of an enterprise which, at its heart, promised commercial gain, or was he seeking to revive a neglected area of the town for the general wellbeing of all? He could, of course, have been aiming to achieve both. The justification for his "dream" is never really aired in the scrapbook material, which portrays, from the start, an issue that polarised those with the power to truly test the viability of the idea. What is never presented in the motives for a wharf revival is the heritage significance of what was fast disappearing. One might claim, with some powerful justification, that Bawtry has many foundations that underpin its claim to having well established heritage roots; however, how many point to the genesis of the town's very existence? Might the existence of the River Idle be that ultimate foundation stone? How far back should the recognition of its value go? And is that worthy of civic recognition and a place in the consciousness of those influencing how Bawtry is viewed and developed in the future?

In the early years of the 21st century civic recognition of Bawtry, ever being renowned for its wharf and its standing as a commercially successful port was displayed for all to bear witness to as they entered the town by road from whatever direction. Whilst it fell well short of what Mr Barton had dreamed of all those years before, the recognition did catch the eye and led to bemused visitors and maybe some residents raising the questions of when, where and how? Disappointingly the town provided no other accessible point of reference when curiosity was aroused.

In 2003 Mike Summers, once Bawtry Mayor, announced in the Retford Times a renewed proposal to establish a marina at Bawtry. The article promoted it as a means of providing an additional tourist attraction and generating economic growth. Whilst acknowledging the town's ancient past as a large inland port, it is the modern benefits that seem to underpin the drive to rekindle the 70 year old dream of Sydney Barton rather than heritage preservation.

Writing this paper in the latter part of 2026 is evidence that like the 1930's endeavour this 21st century revival also failed to get beyond the imagination of a few. Inquiries with Bawtry Town Council in an effort to review the minutes relating to discussions that must have been held within that forum during the latter half of 2003 have been unsuccessful. Minutes from this period are not available for review, reported as lost.

Such a project would have been a very large undertaking at substantial cost.There are hints in generic internet searches that the idea ran into strong opposition on the grounds of it having disproportionately negative consequences for the general ambience of the town and its other historical attributes. Whatever access to the fine detail might have revealed the 2003 revival seems to have petered out; echoing that of its 20th century predecessor.



Bawtry marina idea floated

PLANS to attract tourism to Bawtry by developing a marina on the River Idle are being looked into by the town council.

Former town mayor Mike Summers is looking into how such a scheme could be developed to boost the local economy.

Back in the 12th century, Bawtry boasted the third largest inland port in England.

Flat bottomed sailing barges were able to travel up the river Idle from the Trent and Humber to trade.

The creation of the Chesterfield Canal and the advent of the railway, reduced Bawtry's status as a market town.

But now Mr Summers says he wants to put Bawtry back on the map.

"We want to establish a marina to help rebuild Bawtry as the gateway to Yorkshire," he said.

"I think a marina would provide another leisure facility and hopefully attract more tourism to the area."

He said Bawtry was already a popular stop off point for visitors to the area but hoped a development like this would attract even more people.

Work to build the marina would include ridding the River Idle of silt which has built up over the years.

Mr Summers said he hoped the marina would include riverside cafes and would act as a focal point for the town's visitors.

"There has been a marina in the past where people could hire rowing boats.

"The new marina could have a flat-bottomed mobile cafe. It would be an ideal place for people to stop off at during the weekends."

The Town Council is set to look at how funding for such a project could be found.

Mr Summers said the next step would be to look at lottery funding and freeing up money from Europe.

In 2025 the Bawtry Heritage Group marked the presence of the old wharf with the installation of a public information lectern close to what would have been its main access point. Previously the group had commissioned a painting of the wharf as imagined in the 18th century.[3] Unfortunately, these visible additions did not complement the border signage presented to travellers on arrival in Bawtry; announcing it as a "12th Century Port". In 2016 the signage strapline had been removed.[4]

During 2016 Bawtry's Town Council, as part of a project to upgrade the town's perimeter signage, commissioned three new designs which were presented to the public via social media. The feedback received presented a leaning towards a sign carrying a reference to Bawtry being a market town, instead of a reference to it being an ancient port. The feedback analysis concluded that no-one knew anything about Bawtry being a port and therefore it was "ridiculous" to reference the fact on the border signage, given the lack of any additional information on display elsewhere in the town. Decades earlier the press had labelled the lack of activity surrounding the 1910 initiative to revive the port area as, "Bawtry apathy". I am unable to comment as a contemporary on that judgement; but the antipathy shown by the Parish Council to Barton's plan 20 odd years later did not feel like apathy, but more like polarised vested interests coming into conflict. The result was Barton's dream losing out.

[3] On display in the Bawtry Heritage Centre.

[4] Reference is made within the Bawtry Neighbourhood Development Plan 2019 to Bawtry's maritime past between paragraphs 3.2.2 and 3.2.7. This recognition is available on line for anyone wishing to access it. It would be misleading to describe this as "visible public recognition" in the general sense of that phrase. The Bawtry Retail Association "Visit Bawtry" online site does repeat in a brief paragraph some detail regarding the wharf obviously sourced from this BNDP.

Regarding the 2016 decision it would be misleading to suggest that the stepping back from this simple civic recognition of the heritage significance attached to Bawtry's once primary economic mainstay was because of apathy. Reflecting on that decision a decade on reveals what I believe is a gap in understanding of the importance of the wharf in the history of Bawtry. The Bawtry Heritage Group research paper "The Wharf" presented in 2023, does an excellent job of describing the wharf and hints at the fact that it may go beyond being just a notable period in the last 800 years of the town's history and be central to the town's very existence. If that hypothesis proved to be true, current recognition of this heritage asset seems peripheral and too little.

Bawtry in 2026 is quite rightly proud to market its heritage positively when selling the attractiveness of the town. Whether that be its location as a prominent waystation on the Great North Road since the age of the stagecoach, the town's connection with the religious separatists and the emergence of the Pilgrim Fathers, or its stunning Market Hill and the plethora of prominent listed buildings gracing its boundary and surrounding streets. However, might it be suggested that all of this pales against the heritage value of the town's inland port being the catalyst of the town's birth?

As previously stated it is not clear if Barton's passion was energised by an informed recognition that the wharf may well be at the root of Bawtry emerging as a place on modern maps. However, if we consider this as an hypothesis, is there evidence to support it? Is the evidence worthy of being the catalyst for a plan to recognise and promote this position in a more prominent manner for the world to see? Strong enough to have even lit a spark under Barton's old Parish Council colleagues? Or, is it a pointless dream as was once said about Barton's vision?

Our attractive spot on the banks of the River Idle has to be worthy of further study. It is almost 190 years since Emblay's river service came to an end and Bawtry's relationship with the River Idle began to slip away, along with any understanding of the significance of its long history. The Bawtry Heritage Genesis Project is the vehicle designed to address that unfortunate trend.

The results of this major research will begin to emerge during 2027 and look to report in full during 2028.

Barton's failed endeavours in the earlier part of the 20th century and the BHG's ongoing quest to find Roman Bawtry during recent years have been the catalysts for launching this journey.

LET US SEE WHERE IT TAKES US!

Sources

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