

Andrew Yarranton

He has been called England's first canal engineer, as well as the father of English political economy. Here was a man who, in the years after the English Civil War, had a vision of the Industrial Revolution a century before it happened. Yet the name of Andrew Yarranton is rarely so much as whispered today.

Now, you might not want to spend the next ten minutes of your life in the company of a canal engineer and economist. So let me tempt you with a more dramatic profile. Andrew Yarranton was also a swashbuckling army officer, a fierce republican, a spy (allegedly) and a man as combative as they come.

Yarranton's sticky end, communicated by the gossipy John Audrey in his *Brief Lives*, seems to sum up the chap's life perfectly. "Captain Yarrington," reported Audrey in 1684, "died at London about March last. The cause of his death was a beating and throwne into a tub of water." For a pioneering canal engineer, could there be anything more poetic?

Andrew Yarranton was born at Astley, just south of Stourport-on-Severn in Worcestershire in 1619, the son of a yeoman farmer. An attempt to apprentice him to a linen-draper in Worcester was unsuccessful, and Yarranton scraped around for a few years, before being swept up in the Civil War, where he rose to the rank of captain.

Yarranton was a Parliamentarian, and was successful enough in the role to merit a bounty of £500 from Parliament for his part in capturing a group of Royalist conspirators in 1648.

With the war over, however, Yarranton began to pursue the two interests that would occupy much of the rest of his life: ironworks and navigable waterways. He was one of a group of speculators who set up forges at Shelsley and Astley, and at Sudeley in Gloucestershire. With men like Andrew Yarranton and Dud Dudley at the helm, the Midlands was at this time at the forefront of industrial development. The trouble was, Dudley was a Royalist and Yarranton a Cromwellian, and their lasting internecine rivalry undermined any chance of real progress. In 1673 both men lodged counter-claims over the other's patent for manufacturing tin plate, and the result was an unproductive stalemate.

The Restoration did nothing to forward Yarranton's commercial ambitions, of course. He was twice thrown into prison for "uttering treasonable words against the King and Government", but the direct evidence against him was slight. The plots he was said to be involved in were more likely plots by his enemies to get rid of him. So, at least, claimed Yarranton, and the jury believed him.

And so we move on to Yarranton's waterways schemes. "I made it my business," he wrote in later life, "to survey the three great rivers of England and some small ones; and made two navigable and a third almost completed."

All this we have to take with a pinch of salt. He did, indeed, make surveys of the Thames, the Severn and the Humber, but England was not yet dressed for the age of inland navigation, and most of the schemes either ran out of money, or were otherwise abandoned. Such was the case with the plan to connect Droitwich with the River Severn, and of connecting the River Stour to the Severn. Yarranton's plan was to carry Black Country coal by railway (then known as "foot-rails") as far as the Stour, and thence to the Severn.

The scheme to connect Oxford and London similarly failed. Only on the River Avon in Warwickshire could Yarranton be said to have been genuinely successful.

Yet in his vision of an England that used its improved waterways to carry goods back and forth, Yarranton could be said to be truly innovative. It was only when the capital was available to create that network as still-water canals, rather than as navigable rivers, that Yarranton's vision became a reality. A Droitwich and a Stourbridge Canal did in the end see the light of day, but only a century later.

Much of Yarranton's thinking was influenced by what he saw in Holland and Germany in the late 1660s, when he was sent to spy on the tinplating process, and he encapsulated it in a book which truly looked forward to an industrial age. He called it "England's Improvement by Land and Sea: How to Beat the Dutch without Fighting."

Published in 1677, Yarranton threw into his magnum opus all the wild ideas he could safely expect not to have to put into action. He was, by then, already in his late fifties. He explored methods of fire prevention, public granaries to feed the poor, and a new kind of bank to encourage and fund trade. Here, perhaps for the first time, was an Englishman who was prepared to argue that peace was better than war, that trade was preferable to plunder, and that the business of a good government was to secure prosperity at home. The title of the book says it all, but I'm not sure Whitehall has ever listened.

Finally there was yet another proposal, as radical as any he had cooked up, which took Yarranton back to his roots in the Midlands.

But for that you'll have to wait until next week.