

# The Dramway

THE construction of the Dramway between Coalpit Heath and Bristol straddled the period between horse-drawn transport and the newly invented steam engine.

As these coal-hungry monsters became commonplace, so the problem of transporting fuel became critical.

By the 1820s Bristol's coal requirement stood at an incredible 650 tons a day, roughly 130 horse-drawn wagons.

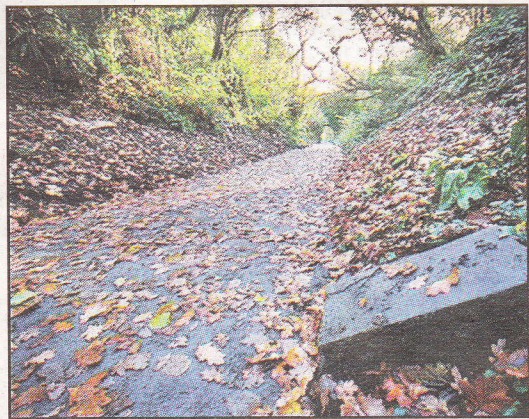
With bulk transport by road becoming impossible, it was decided to build a nine-mile horse-drawn track from Coalpit Heath to a wharf on the river Avon near Keynsham.

Fully loaded trucks, with flanged wheels, would trundle down a 400ft gradient by gravity – there was a “brake man” to control the descent – and then be pulled back, when empty, by horse power.

With a 4ft 8in-gauge cast iron track with passing places, held down on sunken limestone blocks, no conventional



**Taking the strain:** The Dramway in its heyday, left, used to transport coal to a wharf in Keynsham, and the route today, right, which can still be followed as a footpath



sleepers were needed. It proved a great success with nearly 3,000 tons of coal traversing the Dramway, as it was known, over a 12-month period.

The second oldest railway system in the West Country, the Dramway pre-dates Brunel's GWR by some 10 years.

The horses, stabled at Avonside Wharf, walked between the rails with a driver

beside the wagon operating the brakes.

On at least one occasion the driver failed to apply the brakes and the wagon over-ran the horse and killed it.

The coal was transferred to barges at the two wharfs or “backs” – Londonderry and Avonside – which then made their way down river to Bristol.

By 1835 another line branched

off at Mangotsfield and through a tunnel at Staple Hill to Bristol's Floating Harbour.

It became part of the Avon and Gloucestershire railway.

But by 1867, the owners of the line, the Great Western Railway, decided that the Dramway was no longer needed.

It finally closed down in 1904, but the track can still be followed as a footpath.