
4.0 HERITAGE AND CONSERVATION

4.1 Historical Summary

The St Helens Canal was authorised by Parliament as the Sankey Brook Navigation in 1755 but was constructed as a true canal, the first in England, and was the first canal designed to carry industrial cargoes as opposed to agricultural goods.

It was opened between collieries at Blackbrook, Haydock and Sankey Bridges, for access to the River Mersey, in 1757. To improve access to the Mersey Estuary for the coal traffic to Liverpool, an extension from Sankey Bridges to Fiddlers Ferry was opened in 1762.

By 1775 the canal had been extended into the centre of St Helens and all branches in the St Helens area, ie. Blackbrook, Boardmans Lane, Gerrards Bridge, Pocket Nook, Sutton and Ravenhead had all been completed.

The canal was later extended from Fiddlers Ferry to Widnes, again to improve access to the estuary, with this final section being opened in 1833.

In 1845 the canal company was amalgamated with the St Helens and Runcorn Gap Railway Company and subsequently, in 1864, the St Helens Canal and Railway Company was absorbed by the London and North Western Railway.

Increasing competition from railways led to a decline in traffic. The last boat to navigate the full length of the canal up to St Helens did so in 1919 and in 1931 the canal was officially abandoned above Earlestown.

The final cargo of sugar was carried to the Sankey Sugar Works at Earlestown in 1959 and the remainder of the canal was officially abandoned in 1963.

The canal was constructed to carry sailing vessels, such as Mersey Flats and other sailing barges, entering from the estuary. There were, therefore, no fixed bridges and the waterway width, draft and side clearances were determined by the need to allow the passage of sailing craft. Joseph Priestley, writing his "Historical Account of Navigable Rivers, Canals and Railways throughout Great Britain" published in 1831, records that there were eight single locks and two double locks in a distance of ten miles, excluding the extension to Widnes and that a total of eighteen swing bridges originally spanned the channel.

4.2 Industrial Heritage

Although only 60% of the canal track survives, and that is blocked in several places, a large number of features remain that predate the canals closure. These are:

- New Double Lock
- Old Double Lock (part demolished)
- Engine lock (buried, condition uncertain)
- Newton Common Lock (buried)
- Bradley Lock
- Bradley Swing Bridge
- Hey Lock
- Winwick Lock
- Winwick Dry Dock
- Hulme Lock
- Bewsey Lock
- Liverpool Road Relief Swing Bridge
- Meyers Swing Bridge
- Ferry Lock
- Carterhouse Bridge
- Spike Island Bridge
- Widnes Lock

In many sections the canal banks also survive in their original stonework, albeit often in need of some remedial repairs.

There are four areas that are particularly rich in heritage, either by virtue of the quality of the relics or their unusual nature. These are:

- St Helens to New Double Lock
- Blackbrook Branch including Old Double Lock
- Earlestown Viaduct area
- Area around Hulme Lock and Winwick Quay

Before considering individual structures, certain guiding principle should be established regarding the conservation of the serving features. As far as possible restoration should aim to preserve the existing features while making use of them in a restored canal. However, this may not always be practical and the aims of preservation and restoration do not always mix. Two obvious examples are Old

Double Lock, where restoration would damage the existing structure, and Hulme Lock where the old structure would be redundant in the restoration proposals due to changes since the closure of the canal.

There must also be some consideration as to the value of any given piece of heritage. For example, of the original twelve lock chambers on the canal, nine would be retained in operation under the restoration proposals and the structure of two more would be preserved. This compares with only four surviving swing bridges out of at least thirty three, although the abutments of several more are evident, and only Bradley Bridge will remain as an "Original St Helens Canal Swing Bridge".

It must also be remembered that heritage features fulfil two distinct but not totally separate roles. The first and most obvious being to provide a link to the canals past history and the second to provide an identity for the canal as a whole. While many historic features survive, whether they offer the flavour of a historic canal or a modern one depends very much on the restoration process. It is largely the basic stone structures that survive, while all the working equipment will have to be replaced. To provide a suitable context for the original structures and to recreate the historic feel of the canal, new fittings should visually resemble those originally used on the canal. This can be determined by reference to historic photographs and items such as the remains of the lock gates at Winwick.

In many ways this work will be fairly cosmetic and easily added onto designs without extra cost. In the case of locks, however, following the traditional styles will have further benefits. Solid timber gates have more buoyancy than lightweight gates of timber or steel, while multiple paddles on each gate allow rapid filling and emptying of locks while controlling turbulence.

Individual substantial structures will now be considered, followed by the four areas identified as being particularly rich in heritage.

New Double Locks

These have already been restored. In heritage terms the paddles in the gates do not match those originally provided, however, the gates themselves resemble the original wooden structures. Given the quantity of locks requiring new gates and paddles, there is little point in replacing the gates here assuming they are still serviceable when restoration is complete.

Old Double Lock

Due to proposed changes in the level above these locks they would be redundant in the restoration scheme. In any event, the partial demolition of the lower chamber would be very difficult to rectify without further damaging the lock in heritage terms.

Although the lock was rebuilt in 1885, it is still authentic in the unrefined manner of its stonework and slightly imprecise construction. As Britain's first staircase lock, it is the most significant single structure on the canal. However, a degree of interpretation will be required to avoid the locks becoming a derelict non-entity.

The proposals allow for modification of the chamber infill to use the chamber as a bywash. This is practical without affecting the structure as the proposed new top water level is above the former top cill level. At the detail design stage careful consideration of the bywash will be required to maximise the visual and ecological benefits.

Engine Lock

The lock is currently buried and its condition is unknown. While its retention would be desirable, it is basically identical to four other lock chambers that will be retained, and thus its replacement by a reinforced concrete chamber could be justified if the original stonework is unsound.

Newton Common Lock

As with Engine Lock, this was buried. However, recent excavations have demonstrated its existence and it is believed to be basically sound. The excavations also revealed the gates still in position which may reveal design details for reconstruction.

Newton Common Lock is also of immense heritage value by virtue of its location so close to the Sankey Viaduct and its appearance in a famous engraving of the canal. Elsewhere it is proposed that the length from Newton Common Lock to Bradley Lock should be restored fully to original condition. Repairs to Newton Common Lock should reflect this, with gates, paddles and other furniture matching, as closely as possible, those originally used on the navigation.

Bradley Lock

Bradley Lock marks the other end of the "heritage" section under the Sankey Viaduct and, like Newton Common Lock, should be restored in an authentic fashion. There are already interpretation boards along this length and with restoration greater opportunities for interpretation will be created.

Bradley Swing Bridge

This may be the only swing bridge that remains in the traditional hand operated style. The use of the redundant bridge from Liverpool Road is both innovative and entirely appropriate, as it preserves one of the former heavy duty hand operated bridges that were once typical of this canal.

Hey Lock

While this lock does not have the importance of location of Newton Common or Bradley Locks, it appears to be in sound condition, and is on a length already regarded as a local attraction. Sympathetic restoration of this lock will add to the amenity of this length.

Winwick Lock

If Winwick Lock is restored in its current location it will form another original feature of the navigation and should be restored as such. If it proves necessary to move the lock south of the M62, it would be desirable to route the channel through the chamber without demolishing it, to allow interpretation of the historic line of this canal. The principal problem with this approach is likely to be leakage from the chamber.

While it may seem odd to have a lock in the channel with no change of level, it is in fact a surprisingly common feature. Changing ground levels, water levels, navigational requirements, or new road crossings often result in locks becoming redundant. On the River Soar one lock stands wide open where ten years ago there was a change in level of over one metre and both the Kennet and Avon Canal and the Leeds and Liverpool Canal have two "level" locks. These add interest to cruising and are just as much relics of the canals past as the canal side artifacts.

Winwick Quay Dry Dock

This stands to one side of the navigation just south of the M62 crossing. While it is unlikely that the new canal operators would need a dry dock here, the old dock is largely intact and should be preserved. If suitable security can be arranged, a former sailing flat could be displayed here. Alternatively, with appropriate management, a variety of flora could colonise the dock.

Old Hulme Lock

This would be redundant and bypassed by the restored navigation. It should be preserved and enhanced as a heritage feature of the old navigation.

Dallam Sluices

These stand alone, some distance from the new line of the canal. Again, preservation and interpretation would make an interesting feature of the sluice remains.

Bewsey Lock

While this lock is extremely well preserved, its primary value as a heritage feature is its accessibility for large numbers of visitors. Ideally, it should be restored as a "show piece" lock with fittings as close to the original as possible. The old swing bridge over the chamber presents some problems, as it is very large for manual operation and most boats would require it swung to operate the lock. Because of this, a new footbridge is proposed over the tail of the lock. However, it may be appropriate for volunteers to construct a non-functioning swing bridge in the "open" position to complete the locks restoration.

Liverpool Road, Relief Bridge

It is proposed that this be moved to the site of Bradley Bridge. The abutments will remain to provide a reminder of the former crossing point.

Mayers Swing Bridge

This is temporary structure with little heritage value, although it does resemble an old timber swing bridge, it is not noteworthy and does not justify retention.

Carter House Swing Bridge

Superficially this resembles Meyers swing bridge. However, it is actually a timber swing bridge. The need for occasional vehicular crossings makes preservation difficult and the proposed lift bridge may well be more appropriate.

Spike Island Swing Bridge

Like Meyers and Carter House Swing Bridges this has the appearance of a timber swing bridge and probably is the original structure. While the proposals allow for a new lift bridge at this point, the bridge will only carry pedestrian traffic and it may be appropriate to allow volunteers to rebuild it, particularly as this would allow navigation to Carter House Bridge for small craft, such as a Canal Society trip boat to be achieved at an earlier date and with minimal expenditure.

Widnes Locks

One of these locks is currently in use and the other has been converted to a slipway. While the restoration proposals have no impact on these locks, it should be mentioned that the proposed twin lift bridges do impose on this and great care will be needed to protect one of the central features of the area.

4.3 Conservation and Restoration

Locks

Recommendations have already been made regarding the particular restoration of locks as heritage features. SCARS will have more information as to what constitutes authentic restoration and one of their roles will be to research and advise on appropriate equipment for locks.

The recommendations relate to historic lock structures. With new structures it is likely that they would be equipped in much the same way as experience suggests it will be cheaper to order paddle gearing to the same design for all locks plus spares. However, the proposed new locks would be constructed as reinforced concrete chambers, providing a distinction from the old locks, which is valuable in heritage terms as it focuses attention on the genuine article rather than diminishing the historic value of the canal with imitations.

Bridges

Many of the old canal swing bridges would not be replaced, as they carried railways that are now closed or farm tracks that no longer require access. However, where these abutments survive it would be appropriate and in many cases easier, to retain them to add interest. At particularly significant former crossings, interpretation may be appropriate, even if only in the form of a clearly visible name plate. Ideally this should be visible from a boat as well as from the towpath.

The existing swinging structure at Bradley Bridge will be redundant post-restoration. The possibility of moving it to a non-swinging location should be investigated. Possible locations include the bridge over Newton Common Lock, several locations in St Helens, Liverpool Road Relief Bridge or the top chamber of Old Double Locks.

Stone Walled Banks

As built, the canal was lined with stone walls on both sides. These walls have only survived in certain locations and would not necessarily be replaced on infilled sections when these are rebuilt. However, on the length from Bradley Lock to Newton Common Lock these banks would be reinstated to resemble, as far as practicable, their original appearance. Volume 2 of this Report containing structural appendices indicates other locations where these walls can readily be retained.

The lining of the canal banks is one case where heritage and ecology collide. By clearing all undergrowth back to the stone walls considerable environmental losses would result. The softer banks on the reinstated lengths from Bradley to Newton Brook allow the establishment of marginal and bankside vegetation which would not otherwise be possible. However, by preserving the wall where possible, particularly on the urban lengths through St Helens, sufficient should remain to preserve the original character of the canal.

4.4 Heritage Areas

These are sites that contain a number of features of heritage interest, and could be promoted as local heritage trails or similar. The four areas identified below:

- St Helens to New Double Lock

- Blackbrook Branch to Old Double Lock
- Newton Common Lock to Bradley Swing Bridge
- Old Hulme Lock and Dallam Sluices

A similar track is already promoted at Spike Island.

St Helens to New Double Lock

With the development of "the Hotties", the canalside in St Helens will become a significant visitor attraction as well as a prominent feature of the town centre. The length leading to New Double Lock is not only fairly well preserved in terms of the canal track (except for the infilled section near Parr Street) but contains a number of artifacts worthy of preservation and promotion. These are:

- former junction with Sutton Branch;
- remains of wooden loading jetty;
- anti-boom protective railings;
- St Helens and Runcorn railway swing bridge abutments;
- Sutton Alkali works basin entrance;
- Corporation Street bridge (including roller and numberplates);
- Wooden Bollard;
- Varleys Founding Wharf and swing bridge;
- British Crown Wharf;
- tramway sleeper blocks in tow path;
- LNER Bridge Abutments;
- New Double Lock.

These features all survive in the general canal environment in a distance of less than one mile.

Blackbrook Branch to Old Double Lock

This is already a popular area within the locality. The Sankey Valley Country Park visitors centre is located here and, with increased attractions, the possibilities of expanding this operation exists. Much of the heritage interest in this area lies buried, literally beneath the topsoil. However, careful excavation by volunteers would reveal much of interest. In addition, there is much of ecological interest in the branch.

The concept for the Blackbrook Branch is to lead boaters up the branch on foot, in lieu of actually restoring it, with the Old Double Lock being the start point for boaters and the visitors centre the starting point for other visitors.

The features of potential interest on this area are:

- Old Double Lock and New Junction Lock;
- former Colliery Wharf;
- remains of Blackbrook Swing Bridge;
- Stanley Basin;
- Old Slitting Mill;
- Slitting Mill Canal;
- Blackbrook Feeder;
- Laffac Colliery Wharf and remains of tramway;
- terminal basins;
- LNWR Canal boundary posts.

These are contained within three quarters of a mile of canal. In addition, there is scope for an extended trail to Carr Mill Dam.

Newton Common Lock to Bradley Swing Bridge

This short length of canal is of particular interest due to the crossing of the Liverpool to Manchester Railway, an historic crossing point that also shows the advances in engineering between the start of the canal age and the coming of the railways. This has featured in early engravings, and the aim here is to restore the canal to original condition and promote a "first railway over first canal" attraction.

This length of canal contains the following:

- Newton Common Lock;
- Sankey Viaduct (with roller and tow rope marks under one arch);
- Bradley Lock;
- Bradley Swing Bridge.

Old Hulme Lock Area

A group of structures left redundant by the restoration scheme interact with the new canal alignment to form a triangular area where heritage could be specifically promoted, the features are:

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- Dallam Sluices
 - Winwick Dry Dock
 - Old Hulme Lock
 - Hulme Aqueduct
 - New Hulme Lock

The provision of a towpath down both sides of the aqueduct and a crossing point at Winwick Quay, allows a circular route taking in all of these structures.

4.5 Summary

By the standards of many current restoration schemes the St Helens Canal has a wealth of heritage to display, making it an interesting waterway to explore by boat, on foot, by cycle or by car. Care will be needed to preserve the various artifacts as restoration continues but once achieved, then efficient promotion of the canals heritage will add significant benefits for the area as a whole.