

Blue Plaque honour for man behind town's canal

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From St Helens Star

Pioneering canal engineer Henry Berry is finally recognised with memorial close to his birthplace.

The inspirational civil engineer responsible for Britain's first industrial canal, the Sankey (St Helens) Canal, has been honoured with a prestigious Blue Plaque.

Organised by the Sankey Canal Restoration Society and sponsored by member Dr Barrie Pennington, the plaque, honouring Henry Berry, has been put in a prominent position on the wall of the World of Glass visitor attraction in St Helens alongside the canal.

Henry's exact date of birth is not recorded. His place of birth is believed to have been Parr and on his death in 1812, he was buried in the Dissenters' Chapel and later in St Helens Congregational Church cemetery.

Colin Greenall, chairman of Sankey Canal Restoration Society, said: "It is important that the contribution of this modest religious man is recognised in the town of his birth, not just for the economic benefits he brought to the region but for his well-deserved status as a pioneer and innovative civil engineer."

Believed to be a religious man who never married, Henry Berry's early career is noted in a limited number of local documents when he was both a highway surveyor and "overseer of the poor".

His education is not known but it is highly likely that, when working under the experienced civil engineer Thomas Speers in Liverpool, he will have learned his trade.

It was Henry's work in Liverpool that brought him to the attention of the proprietors of the Sankey River, all of whom were Liverpool councillors – and substantial financing for the canal was to come from Liverpool.

Granted two days a week to work on the canal by his employers on the Liverpool Docks, Henry can be given acclaim as the person responsible for the construction of the first canal of the Industrial Revolution some three years before the Bridgewater Canal.

Retiring in 1789, he lived in Liverpool until his death in 1812.

Jim Forkin, chairman of Inland Waterways Association, Chester and Merseyside Branch, said: "Increasingly, government and society are becoming aware of the value of the work of those pioneering civil engineers in creating these early canals and how they now have been adapted for new roles in present day society. The Sankey Valley offers clean open-air space for the wellbeing of all and this man really deserves that recognition in his home town".

A second Blue Plaque will be erected at the United Reform Church in the town centre, located near the main entrance on the wall above Henry Berry's gravestone.