



SANKEY MILESTONES



Issue 1 - Summer 2023

www.sankeycanal.co.uk



Sankey Canal Restoration Society

Founded 1985

Registered Charity Number 702571

www.sankeycanal.co.uk

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Issue 1 Summer 2023

Editor:
Jamie Highton

Note from the Editor

Welcome to the first issue of SCRS's new quarterly magazine. I hope you will enjoy the new look as well as the content from our correspondents.

Please note that this first issue will be the only print edition that will automatically be posted to members. Henceforth *Sankey Milestones* will be delivered digitally to you via email. If you don't believe that we have your up-to-date email address please contact editor@sankeycanal.co.uk so that you can be added to the mailing list.

If you still wish to receive a print copy of *Sankey Milestones* please also email editor@sankeycanal.co.uk

N.B. opting to receive a print copy will incur a small surcharge to your membership subscription when it next becomes due.



INLAND
WATERWAYS
ASSOCIATION

Chairman's Report

Welcome to our new society magazine "Sankey Milestones" in which we will bring you news of the society's activities and items of interest concerning the canal and its surrounding environment. With new members on the committee bringing innovative ideas of how to take the society forward, a new image was required and so as a first step the launch of this new magazine will undoubtedly give us all a boost and spur us on to pursue our aims.

I would like to thank our former magazine editor and founder member David Long for his dedication to the task of producing *Canal Cuttings* and I'm sure you will all agree that without his support we would not be where we are today.

As you delve deeper into the pages of this new publication, you will see that the society has had a busy few months with many achievements to report on, including our success in obtaining two grants from the St. Helens Borough of Culture Awards.

As the water supply issue at the southern end of the canal has not gone away (with Halton and Warrington Councils still trying to find a suitable solution to the problem), the society have asked canal restoration consultants Moss, Naylor, Young for advice on how we go about restoring sections of the canal.



Colin Greenall

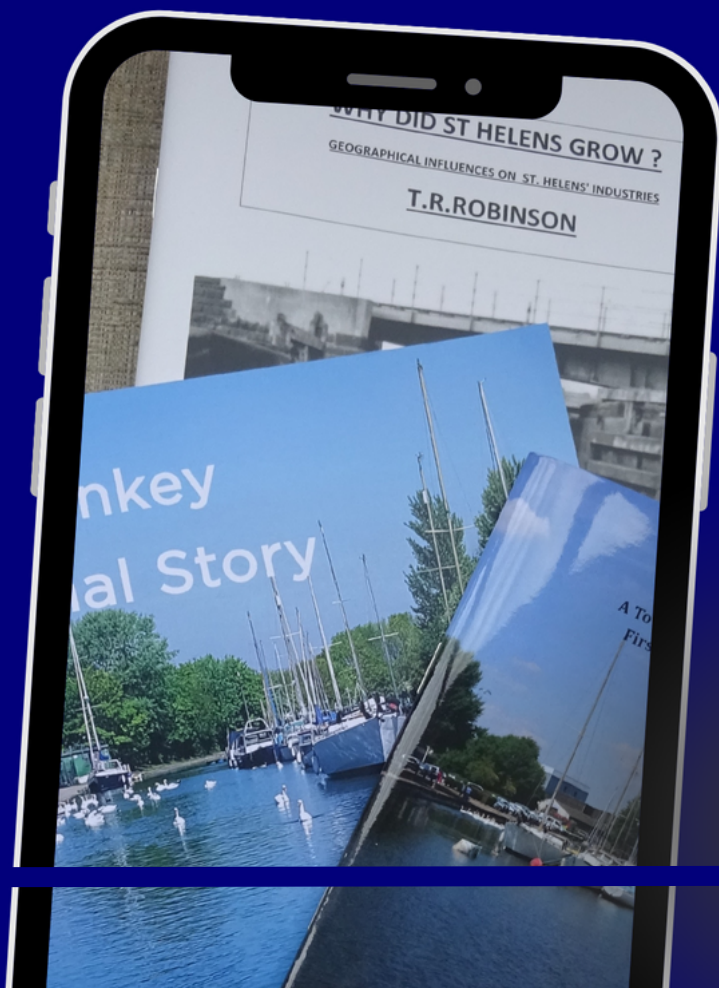
Our work party volunteers have been busy, especially at Spike Island, the events team has been out at various shows and carnivals around the area and there have been planning applications to which we have responded. Particularly of note is the Fiddlers Ferry Power Station Development and an article on this subject is included within the pages of this issue.

We are not alone in our concern when it comes to funding waterways projects. The government's latest financial package for the national waterways network is potentially being significantly cut back, meaning that the whole canal system is in danger of collapse through lack of maintenance.

It is important that we keep our canals alive for the benefit of everyone, and so I urge you all to write to your local MP and ask them for help to try and gain extra funding for our canals, that we all enjoy in so many different ways.

ONLINE *shop*

SCRS products will soon be available via
our new website





The canal at Spike Island

Steve Davies

Secretary's Report

We have discussed and agreed that our website has seen better days and have now engaged a consultancy firm to build a 21st century site for us. Over the next few months, we will be meeting with them to iron out exactly what we, and more importantly what you, expect from a professionally run interactive website. Please be patient as these things take a little time to get right.

As you know, our headquarters are currently based at our Chair's home address. In an effort to take some pressure off him (and his spare room), we have decided to look for a permanent home where we can hold all our 'live' paperwork, along with our publications and assorted merchandise. We wish to be able to invite other organisations to meet and hopefully hold social functions. To this end, we have approached St. Helens Council with a view to sharing the Blackbrook Visitor Centre with the ranger service. We already use it for some of our meetings and it is hoped that we will be able to develop it into a destination place for all things 'SCRS'. Just so our eggs aren't all in one basket, we do have other sites under consideration.

I'm sure you are all aware of the fact that anyone who volunteers to help out on

our very enjoyable working parties enjoys the insurance cover that the Society's policy gives them. We are presently in talks with our insurers to clarify exactly what we are able to do regarding the work carried out on these parties. Once clarified, we will let you know just how much we can expand on what we are able to carry out. If you do see one of our working parties, look out for the new signage in our new corporate blue! Are you all aware that St Helens is this years Borough of Culture for the Liverpool City Region? To help support celebrate the Borough's heritage, SCRS has applied for, and been successful in being awarded, two grants to develop learning and knowledge of our heritage. This is a very exciting time for the heritage groups of the Borough and we will keep you informed of our progress.

Spike Island! A name to rouse passion in the most placid of us! If you are a follower of Facebook, you will have seen numerous comments about the lack of water. I'm not going to add to them, but just to say that – yes , we do know about the problem, no, it's not an easy fix, and yes, we discuss it every meeting. Believe us, if it could have been sorted by now, it would have been . There are numerous people – including consultants employed by us – looking at solutions.

Lastly, our 2024 calendar is due to be printed very soon . It has been proof read (hopefully no errors) and passed to our printers. I will advise of price and where to purchase from in the next issue. Should you have any questions or comments about the above updates, please email:- secretary@sankeycanal.co.uk



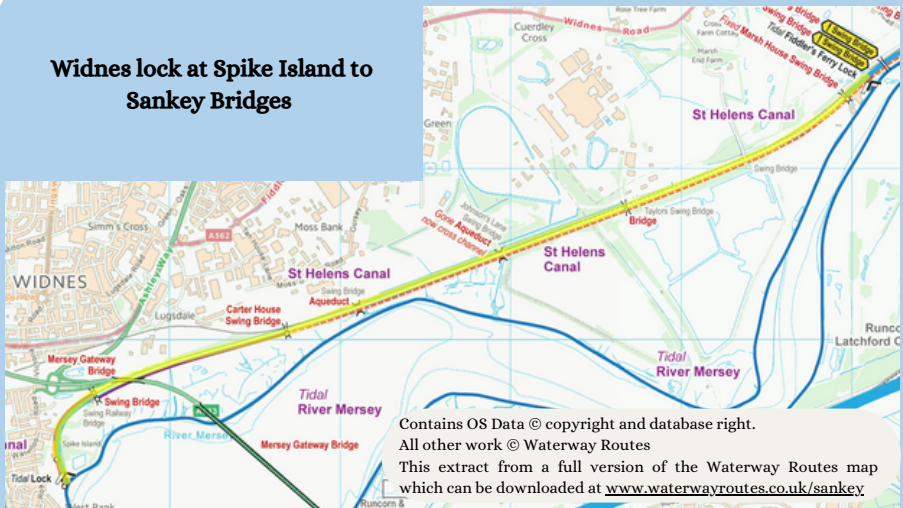
Restoration Proposals by Jamie Highton

Last year, it was recognised that SCRS had become fairly dormant in recent years with regards to restoration. Although many factors had led to this, the society hadn't really got going again after the pandemic restrictions and it was felt that new impetus was required. Thus the restoration subcommittee was founded with a brief to review the society's current position and plan for the future.

Over several meetings and a lot of discussion, it was felt that SCRS should focus on two lengths of the canal as priorities for restoration. The lengths identified are:

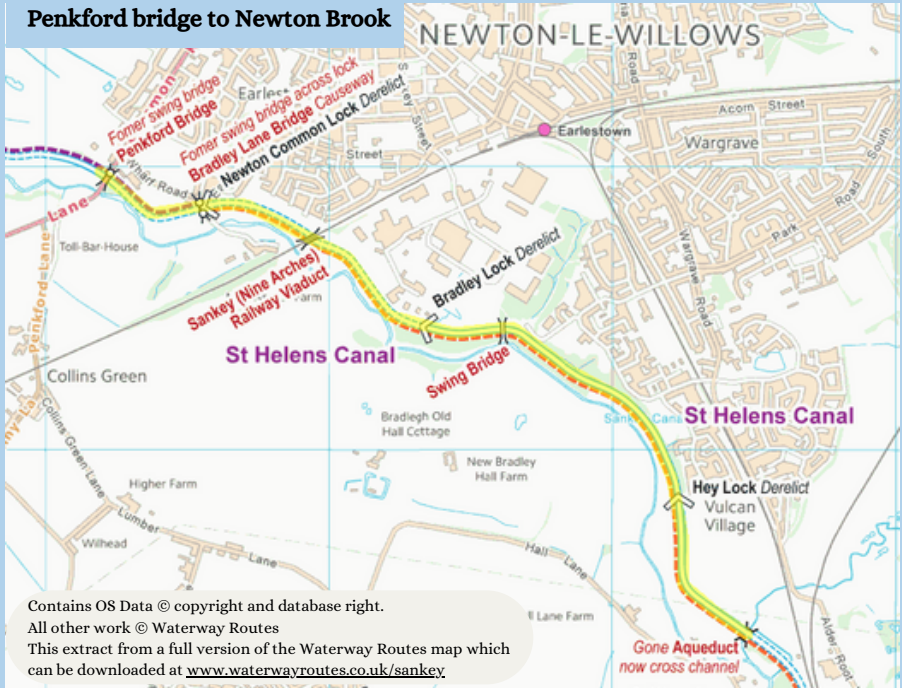
- From Widnes lock at Spike Island to Sankey Bridges
- From Penkford bridge to Newton Brook

Widnes lock at Spike Island to Sankey Bridges



The locks at Fiddlers Ferry and Spike Island are approximately five and a half kilometres apart and are connected by the canal: the connecting length is not navigable and is in various states of disrepair, although none of the issues are complex in engineering terms nor are they beyond those that have been resolved on other restorations. This is a genuine restoration scheme in scope and length and would benefit from a restoration study that looks at the means and costs of reinstating the canal and the benefits of doing so. Given the issues at Spike Island, any study for restoration will need to include this element as well, as it is likely that some of the issues including leakage and water supply will overlap. Any such study would have to make an assumption as to the inclusion (or otherwise) of the final length at Spike Island.

Penkford bridge to Newton Brook



This is the big one, both in terms of desirability but also in terms of complexity, although again there is nothing that hasn't already been dealt with on other restoration schemes. The canal passes under the Sankey Viaduct at Newton-le-Willows – there is a reasonable claim here for the first industrial canal to be crossed by the first passenger carrying railway. This site is currently the focus of a bid for UNESCO World Heritage Status and thus adds further to the desirability for restoration. However, whilst the Liverpool and Manchester Railway is open to traffic, the canal underneath the arches has been filled in. Currently a footpath follows the course, and the canal is in water a few yards away at Bradley Lock downstream and rather further distant above Newton Common Lock upstream. The location is very accessible, reasonably scenic, has a large catchment population adjacent and is already popular locally. Technically the key issues here are the scale of excavation (the canal is filled in from above Newton Common Lock to Bradley Lock) and there is no obvious water supply other than the Sankey Brook. The problem isn't lockage, which is relatively easy to recirculate, but leakage and evaporation, and thus a detailed water resources study is likely to form part of any investigations.

Once the two lengths of canal for high priority restoration had been identified, the next step was to determine our long term restoration goals for the canal:

Spike Island Lock to Fiddlers Ferry Lock to Sankey Bridges

- Short and long term water supply issue resolved to Spike Island Marina.
- Boat access to Spike Island Marina and Fiddlers Ferry Marina through the locks from the tidal River Mersey.
- Navigable waterway between the two locks (potentially as part of the new housing development by Peel NRE).
- Navigable waterway and turning area from Fiddlers Ferry Marina to a point near to Sankey Bridges (Railway Bridge) to demonstrate intent for the railway crossing as part of the canal's northern restoration.
- Water-based recreational activities e.g. canoes and angling.
- Attractive, landscaped Trans Pennine Trail corridor (multi-user trail).

Penkford Bridge to Newton Brook

- Full restoration of the canal from North of Penkford Bridge to Newton Brook (partially in water and partially infilled) including restoration of Newton Common Lock (subject to a solution to create sufficient air draught under Penkford Bridge), Bradley Lock and Hey Lock.
- Water supply obtained.
- Visitor / heritage centre / cafe (similar to Hollingwood Hub), potentially to be located on the site of disused Penkford School or at the rebuilt lock keeper's cottage, Newton Common Lock).
- Trip boat operating from the visitor centre under the Nine Arches viaduct and winding its way to Newton Brook.
- Reconstructed Mersey Flat moored at Newton Common lock.
- Water-based recreational activities e.g. canoes and angling.
- Attractive, landscaped Sankey Valley Trail corridor (multi-user trail) and potential cycle hire.

With such ambitions, it was soon realised that SCRS would require professional help. Fortunately, last October I attended a meeting of the Northern Canal Association hosted by the Chesterfield Canal Trust. One of the workshops was run by Patrick Moss, a consultant from Moss Naylor Young. Coincidentally, Patrick was one of the original authors of the Aktins feasibility study carried out on the Sankey Canal back in the early 1990s. Patrick outlined the issues facing restoration societies and identified the basic initial steps that groups could make to ensure the successful outcome of their aims. I immediately realised that Moss Naylor Young could be instrumental in assisting SCRS with its restoration of the Sankey Canal. Contact was made with Patrick and he agreed to visit the Sankey in May for a guided walk and to discuss our proposals.

Moss Naylor Young

Moss Naylor Young specialise in working on projects related to inland waterways, especially the regeneration of the waterway itself or the area and community around it. They offer advice on waterway heritage and have been retained by the Heritage Lottery Fund to advise on projects for them. In addition, they offer a bespoke service for canal trusts such as SCRS to make the most of limited funds in advancing their cause, working with their volunteers and staff to provide technical expertise and professional input where it can be most effective.

Moss Naylor Young are project mentors for the Heritage Lottery Fund, and are currently overseeing the renaissance of the Cotswold Canals in Stroud, a project being managed by Stroud District Council. Moss Naylor Young also mentored the successful restoration of the Droitwich Canals.

The Cotswold Canals project requires Moss Naylor Young to oversee the technical aspects of the restoration and ensure that they comply with the approved purposes, that work is compatible with heritage objectives and that due process is followed. The work has include advising on structures and operational equipment and has led to a bespoke design of paddle gear on the locks that reflects the historic design used during the canal's working life.
www.mossnayloryoung.com



L to R: Patrick Moss, Jamie Highton, Paul Romanko, Barrie Pennington

On 12th May, Colin Greenall, Paul Romanko and myself met Patrick Moss outside the Catalyst Museum at Spike Island. We inspected the lock and walked a short distance up the canal to view the state of the canal walls. We then moved on to Fiddlers Ferry marina to view the other end of the proposed section to be restored and to inspect the water supply at Fiddlers Ferry. Patrick constantly took notes and photos for his reference.

Having finished looking at this section, we drove to Newton Common lock and proceeded to walk past the site of the former school then down onto the canal at Penkford Bridge. Here we met Barrie Pennington, who accompanied us on the rest of the walk to Newton Lock. Throughout the walk we discussed obstacles to restoration and Patrick gave examples of how these had been overcome on other restoration projects.

As we departed, Patrick assured us that SCRS has made good first steps towards our restoration plans and informed us that he would write to us with his recommendations for our next steps. These have now been received and will be published in the next issue of *Sankey Milestones*.

St. Helens Borough of Culture



Dr David Harrison and Steve Davies

SCRS is delighted to have been successful with two of its applications for funding towards projects celebrating St. Helens being Borough of Culture 2024. Firstly, we are very grateful to the assessment panel for awarding us £3900 to produce an online education learning pack for primary school children, focused on the heritage of the Sankey Canal. In addition we have been awarded £1500 for a three minute animation entitled 'A Changing World', the story and imagery of which was first suggested to SCRS by Dr Barrie Pennington. The animation will be showcased at the World of Glass in September.

On the 12th of July, committee member and archivist Dr David Harrison, and our secretary Steve Davies, attended a photoshoot on the steps of St. Helens town hall, where all the groups that had been awarded grants symbolically accepted their money for their respective projects.

Online education learning pack - by Paul Romanko

There are around 60 primary schools with 15,000 pupils in the St. Helens Borough. A third of the schools are within half a mile of the Sankey Valley Country Park and a half of schools are within one mile of it. It is a superb, free sustainable resource on the doorstep where children can tread, see and touch where their ancestors lived and worked over the last 270 years.

We've appointed Muddy Publishing Ltd (MPL) to produce the colourful educational materials. We expect to have a draft version available to show in September. We will publish the finished pack on our SCRS website which is currently being updated. We have taken our inspiration from the material produced by MPL for the Canal & River Trust's 'Explorers'.



Sankey Canal animation – “A Changing World” - by David Harrison

The short story portrays a barge man drifting on his Mersey Flat down the canal. Suddenly the nine arches comes into view, which is still under construction. The bargeman realises profoundly that his life is about to change forever. The animation blends to another scene of a completed nine arches with Stephenson's *Rocket* moving across the viaduct. A final scene shows an angler casting his rod into the canal and in the foreground the M62 motorway is being constructed, the noise of the construction echoing in the background. Again, the angler realises his surroundings are undergoing a profound change, and the scene fades to the same section of the canal now infilled and turned into a mere pathway that winds through the linear parkland.

It is hoped that the animation will not only supply viewers with a short history of the canal, but will present how it changed within the industrial landscape. From its opening in 1757 to its closure in 1963, the first English industrial canal witnessed the first railway and the building of the magnificent nine arches, a monument to the industrial revolution. The railways thus played a significant role in the canal's history. The animation, which will be premiered at the World of Glass in September, will be used for screenings in schools and colleges, celebrating the canal's history and its vital role within the industrial revolution.



Unboxing the David Long Collection

by Dr David Harrison

The society has amassed a large archive collection since its formation in 1985, and I have been given the wonderful opportunity to assist in sorting through the collection for logging and filing the society's records for future study. The aim is to have a professionally logged archive, which will be available for researchers, and may lead to future publications by the society.

As one can imagine, the society's archives include many boxes of records, such as correspondence, old copies of our magazine 'Canal Cuttings', old photographs, engineering reports, teaching aids and maps. They also reveal certain projects that the society became involved in. One such early project was the Barmere project in the late 1980s. The Barmere was a dumb barge built in Northwich in 1948 for the Manchester Ship Canal Company, and carried grain from Manchester docks to the Kellogs Corn Flakes factory in Stretford. After a quarter of a century, the Barmere was decommissioned, and it was found by the society in a run-down condition at the end of the Leeds-Liverpool Canal.

The society drew up plans to place the repaired barge on a section of the canal as a focal point for their restoration activities. After active correspondence, research and



Barmere pictured in 2009

feasibility studies, this ambitious project was a success, despite spiralling costs and logistics, and the barge was transported and lifted by crane into the Spike Island section of the canal in 2005. However, there were concerns raised by other boat owners due to the size of the barge, and it became a target for vandals, so it was later moved to Fiddlers Ferry, where it was sold. Despite the barge being no longer owned by the society, it testifies to the pro-active ideas that the society had in their early days.

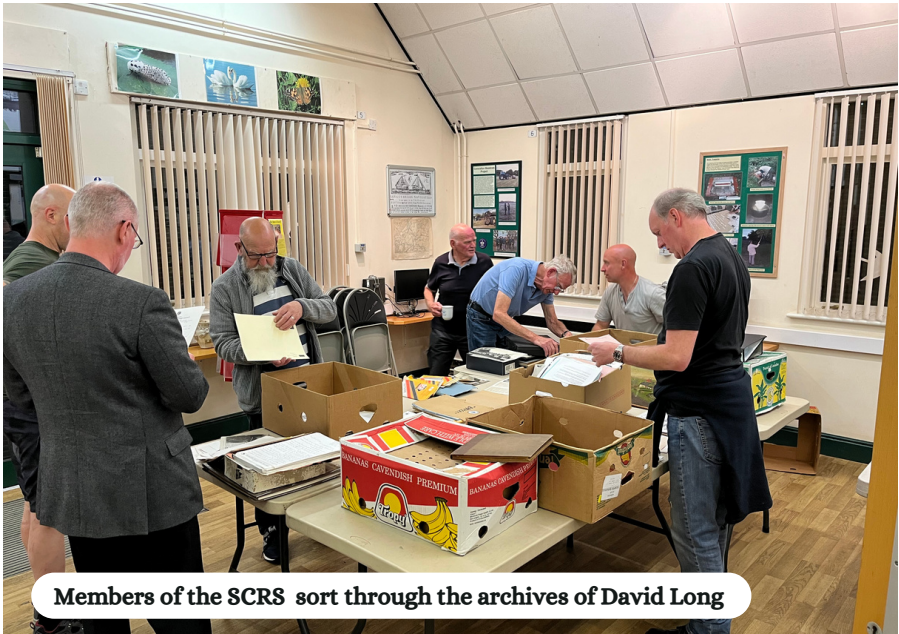
The first set of five boxes of archives, named after David Long, a founding member of the society, who had collected them together, will be deposited with St. Helens Archives. We will be working closely with members of St. Helens Borough Council archives team to work through our collection, taking on board advice of logging and filing. It is hoped they will be made available soon for researchers.



David Harrison sorts through the "Barmere Project"



Original editions of Cuttings



Members of the SCRS sort through the archives of David Long

Planning Application Round-Up

by Paul Romanko

Footbridge at Markfield Crescent, Merton Bank, St Helens

St Helens Borough Council is replacing the existing narrow pedestrian bridge. A new bridge is to be welcomed that will be suitable for 'all users' including cyclists and those with limited mobility. The canal has been narrowed here and Rainford Brook now runs along it. SCRS would prefer the new bridge to have sufficient air draught for navigation. SHBC has advised us that the bridge abutments are designed and constructed to allow the bridge deck to be raised in height in the future.



Atlas Street, St Helens

This brownfield site between Corporation Street and Standish Street is proposed to be redeveloped for modern housing. The site backs on to the Sankey Canal and while it's great to see new life in the town centre, it would be even better if the canal was at the heart of the development; new waterside properties typically front on to waterways. We have proposed that this section of the canal should be an attractive linear park for residents, green commuters and visitors to enjoy.



Fiddlers Ferry Power Station Phase 1 Redevelopment, Penketh, Warrington

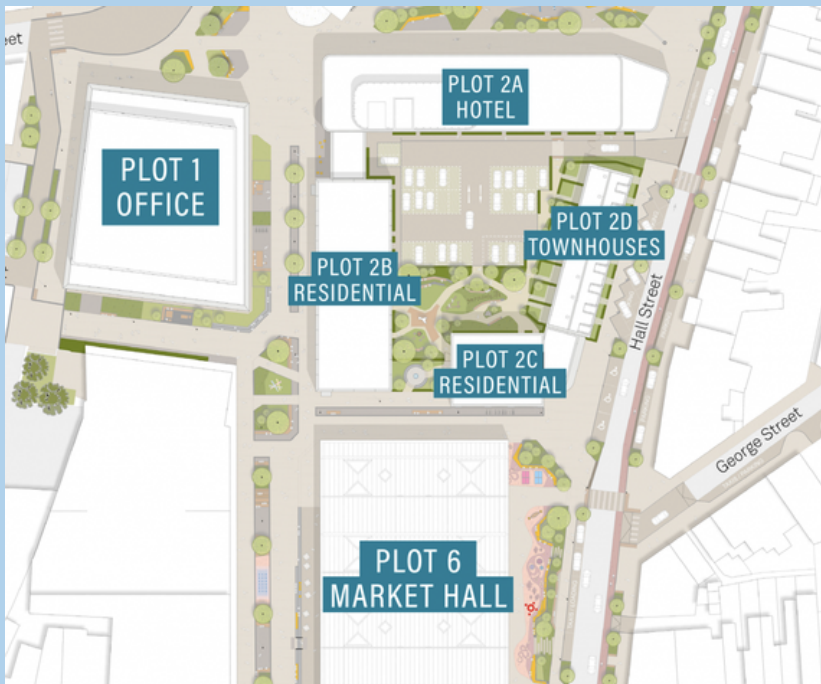
Peel Land & Energy has submitted a planning application for a phase 1 commercial development on part of the site. The application boundary is the railway boundary of the Arpley to Ditton freight line which runs parallel to the Sankey Canal. SCRS has commented on the application because we firmly believe the canal is a key asset that will make the Fiddlers Ferry development an attractive place to live and work. (See article on page 19)

HyNet North West Gas Network

This is a low carbon and hydrogen energy project to construct a gas pipeline network serving major industrial customers including those in St Helens, Warrington and Halton Boroughs. We have been liaising with HyNet to ensure that our concerns are addressed and to avoid a repeat of previous situations where utility services were allowed to be laid along or across the canal and are now a restoration constraint. Currently there is one proposed HyNet crossing under the canal, to the east of the former Fiddlers Ferry power station.

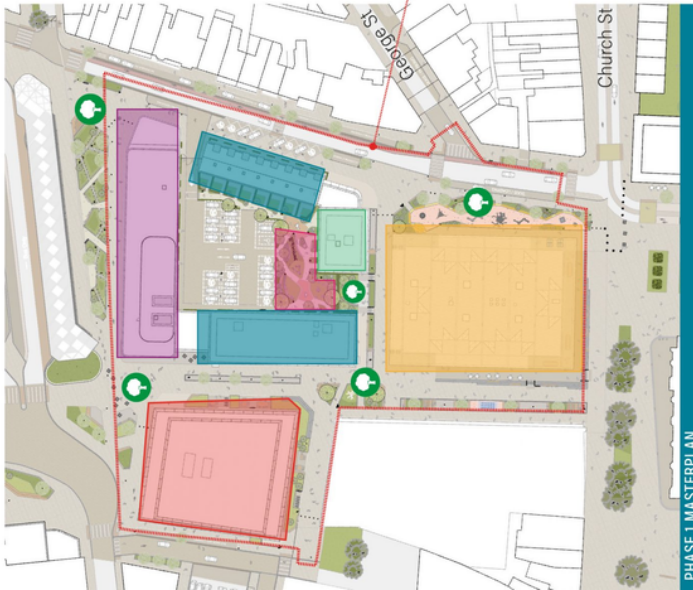
St Helens Town Centre Regeneration Phase 1

St. Helens council has consulted on Phase 1 of the St Helens town centre redevelopment which is focussed on the Hall Street area and doesn't include the Sankey Canal. SCRS is supportive of the regeneration of St Helens and Earlestown town centres and we have commented on St Helens Phase 1. There is no reason why the town can't learn from the likes of Stalybridge, Dudley and Worksop and create a thriving navigable canal with waterside developments and attractions that benefit businesses, residents and visitors.

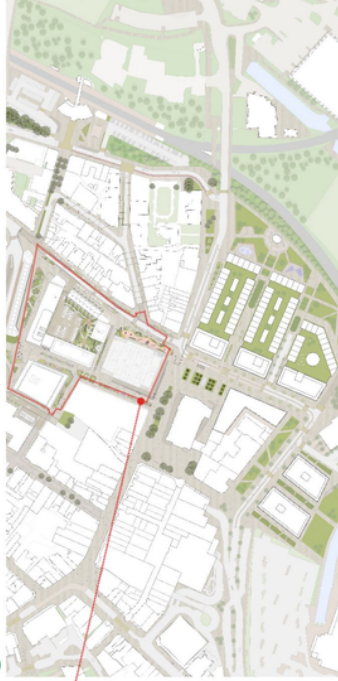


PHASE 1 OUTLINE:

- Grade A office space
- A 150 bed branded hotel
- Market hall
- New Ground Floor Retail Units. Ideal for independent and local businesses
- New homes
- Residential courtyard
- Extensive public realm linking the new development to the bus station and Church Square
- Pockets of green-space for relaxing and socialising



PHASE 1 MASTERPLAN



WIDER MASTERPLAN

Regeneration of Fiddlers Ferry Site by Peel NRE

Plans to regenerate Fiddlers Ferry and support over 2,100 jobs are submitted to Warrington Borough Council.

Following public consultation with the local community in late 2022, detailed plans have been submitted to Warrington Borough Council by Peel NRE, part of Peel L&P, to regenerate Fiddlers Ferry Power Station.

The proposals to build on the brownfield site are the first of three phases of the project, including plans to address the chronic shortage of modern employment space by providing four industrial buildings and service yards totaling 1.4 million sq. ft of floorspace.

These buildings, along with parking and landscaped green space, will provide opportunity to support over 2,100 jobs for local people, 845 of which will be created by the project, adding up to £89.2m to Warrington's vibrant and growing economy.

Later phases of the project will include a new neighbourhood to the east of the former power station which could include new family homes supported by space for a new primary school, shops, and a GP surgery. Plans for the further residential development will be submitted at a later time and will be guided by a Development Framework, including a wider masterplan for the site which will be shared with the public later this year.

Transport improvements are a key part of the proposals, with NRE committing to improvements of the existing Widnes Road (A562). A new dedicated pedestrian and cycle link to Widnes Road (A562) will also provide safe access to and from the development.

Located on the north bank of the River Mersey, Fiddlers Ferry has been a prominent landmark for half a century. Peel NRE's vision is to bring this site back into productive use and ensure that it can continue to contribute to the local economy through the creation of jobs and new homes.



The site has been identified by Warrington Borough Council as a space for modern employment within the Borough's Local Plan. As part of the wider local and environmental considerations, Peel NRE has committed to a 10% biodiversity net gain which means the environment will be improved overall by this scheme.

This submission comes ahead of the appointment of demolition contractors which is expected in the coming weeks. The former coal stockyard, office buildings and four northern cooling towers are expected to be demolished before the end of the year.

Kieran Tames, Development Director at Peel NRE commented:

“Following a detailed consultation with stakeholders across Warrington and Halton and members of the local community, we are delighted to submit the planning application for the Phase 1 redevelopment of Fiddler’s Ferry. Over 5,700 individuals engaged with our interactive consultation hosted by specialist digital agency Deetu as well as several in-person events in Warrington, Widnes and Penketh. The level of public support during the consultation was significant, with particular support for the redevelopment of brownfield land, job creation, and more sustainable and energy efficient buildings. However, we do understand the concerns of residents about pressure on local transport links so have taken necessary steps to provide sustainable alternative transport options and improve existing access to the site . We will continue our engagement with site neighbours and while the formal consultation period is now closed, residents can still access our plans online and contact the project team.”

Events Round-Up by Colin Greenall

Willow Park Coronation Parade



Organised by the Earlestown and Newton Community Group, the Coronation Parade took place along High Street in Newton-Le-Willow arriving at Willow Park where the main event was held. There were lots of stalls relating to various crafts and skills along with charity stalls of local organisations. The weather was perfectly dry, sunny, and warm and people really got into the spirit of the occasion with many people dressing in red, white, and blue.

We had assistance from Richard Corner who helped Cynthia and me to set up early morning before the procession arrived. Then, Steve and Carol Davies arrived to help out on the stall and with the packing away at the end of the day. Richard left us around 11.00am to go off to take part in the Fiddlers Ferry Regatta. It was a really good show and the takings were excellent. There was plenty of interest shown in what we are trying to achieve with two new members recruited.

St. Helens Heritage Day Event at St. Helens Town Hall

Colin Greenall accompanied Steve Davies on the stand at the St. Helens Heritage Open Day at St. Helens Town Hall with help from Ian Hornby in the morning and Paul Romanko in the afternoon. A good day was had by all the participating groups. Our takings were good and we made a lot of contact with the people attending. We also had time to network with other groups and friends from other organisations.



Lymm Historic Transport Day Rally at May Queen Park, Lymm, Warrington



Cynthia and Colin left home at 8.00.am and arrived on site at 8.45.am. We were shown to our plot where we met Robin Taylor who told us of all the arrangement etc. As we started to put up the gazebo, Ian Hornby arrived, and shortly after, Richard Corner appeared. Everything was ready by 10.30.am for the opening at 11.00.am. During the set up, we were approached by Mary from Warrington General Hospital Radio and asked if Richard and I would mind being interviewed for a broadcast which would be going out later in the day; this we did.

It soon got busy as people flocked in. Steve Davies arrived about 11.30am and steady business followed until about 2.00pm, when the first spots of rain appeared. This grew into a torrential downpour with thunder and lightning. As the rain eased off, Robin came round to tell us that the show had been abandoned and that we would be instructed about evacuating the field in due course. Meanwhile we had been packing up and eventually the rain stopped. We managed to get everything loaded back in the car. We then exited the field by the top gate and arrived home in lovely sunshine at 4.50.pm. A really good day apart from the final hour. Takings were good and plenty of interest shown in our society.

Penketh Carnival

Greystone Recreation Ground,

Penketh

The day started off dry and very warm, then some drizzle, later hot and sunny ending in a thunderstorm, with the event being officially abandoned at 4.15pm. We were not exactly overrun with punters; this was a family type of event run for the locals. We did however get the chance to meet and talk to Andy Carter, MP for Warrington South, and his office manager Stephen Taylor. The main topic of conversation



was the water supply issue and how the problem is being treated by both Halton and Warrington Councils. Andy said he would have a word with Conor McGinn next time he sees him and suggested we contact him to make him aware of the situation. Stephen Taylor took a picture of us in conversation and promised to send me a copy. A disappointing day really ending with a good soaking.

The visit of the film maker Roger Hill

Roger Hill recently contacted SCRS asking for a guided walk along the canal. This would enable him to research material for a 30-minute film he is making about the birth and growth of St. Helens. I met Roger at Newton Common Lock with Barrie Pennington and together we set off to walk to Netwon Brook.

About half way we met up with David Harrison who went with us to Newton Brook and then back to Bradley Swing Bridge where he had parked his car. The weather was kind to us after the thunderstorm of the previous evening, resulting in a pleasant walk with lots of conversation about the history of the canal and surrounding area. I gave Roger the notes I had prepared for the walk so that he could use them if he so wished.

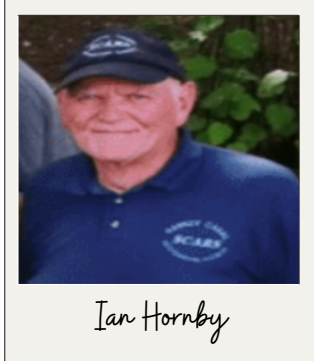


**Colin Greenall, David Harrison,
Barrie Pennington, & Roger Hill
on Bradley Swing Bridge**



**Colin Greenall with Roger Hill
beneath the two red Heritage
Transport Plaques under Sankey
Viaduct**

Work Parties Reports by Ian Hornby



17th June

A scrap pull was held at Spike Island consisting of 5 volunteers doing a total of 35 hours work. Due to the very low water levels, we were able to walk on the canal bed to reach the waste, despite the ground being a bit soft in places. We pulled out a shopping trolley and various items, including disposable gas canisters and a CO2 cylinder. In total, we collected two pickup loads that Halton Council moved the following week.



Rubbish collected during the Spike Island scrap pull

14th May

Five volunteers visited Blackbrook to cut back a big willow that had re-sprouted after being felled a few years earlier. Whilst on site, we cut the vegetation back to expose the canal bank. In total, 17 hours of voluntary work was carried out.



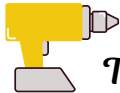
Before and After the vegetation removal at Blackbrook

4th June

Seven volunteers returned to Blackbrook again to cut willow out of the canal channel. The willow was reached from the opposite bank by using the a raft of branches on the silt to reach those in mid channel. 33 hours of voluntary work completed.



VOLUNTEERS NEEDED



To join our regular work parties



Do as much as you feel you
can. All help is valued.

Contact:

cgreenall@sankeycanal.co.uk

07506 936730



Spike Island Update by Neil Viggers



Neil Viggers

Due to the ongoing water supply issue, the Spike Island & Widnes Canal Restoration Group (with support from SCRS) have been busy both raising public awareness of the problem and taking our own practical steps. Firstly, the West Bank Boat Club have done further work attempting to make the lock gates into the Mersey more watertight. This has involved regularly sealing the gate joints with sawdust.

Halton Borough council has installed two dams across the canal made from a wall of sandbags and concrete. The dams are located beneath the Mersey Gateway bridge and at Carterhouse swingbridge. The idea here is that river water can enter the canal through the lock (on the level) on high spring tides and be impounded in the marina by the dam. This water will supplement the pumping operation being carried out by the boat club.

In June and July, SI&WCRG and SCRS installed 30 tonnes of clay against the dams of bags to help seal any leaks. Although this can only be a short term solution, SCRS supports the work.

Clay bund sealing the dam



The Story of the Alkali Industry in the Northwest by Bob Roach

Chapter 1 - Introduction:

What is an alkali? What is it used for?

Humans were using what we now recognise as chemicals well before there was any idea about manufacturing them. This applied in particular to **alkalis**, a word that means 'burnt ashes' and originates from Arabic languages - القلوي, or al-qaly.

Rather than being unreactive as some substances are, alkalis are chemicals that tend to react with other substances, so providing the opportunity of making something that is different from either of the two original materials - alkalis can make things happen! Being 'opposite' to acids, they turn litmus paper blue rather than red.

One such alkali is sodium carbonate, or more generally known as soda ash - its chemical formula is Na_2CO_3 . It is a fairly mild alkali in contrast to some others and is the main one to have featured in the local chemical industry.

Uses of Soda Ash

Soda ash has many uses:-

Soap making

Over 4,000 years ago, soap was made in the city of Babylon (where Iraq now is) by boiling ashes from plants with animal fats. Whilst the way of doing this has changed over the years, including the replacement of ashes from plants by manufactured chemicals, this remains the basis of modern-day soap making.

Cleaning Agent

Until some 50 years ago, soda crystals (a form of soda ash) were frequently used for household cleaning and washing purposes, e.g. the weekly wash of clothing, invariably on a Monday! You can buy soda crystals at supermarkets.



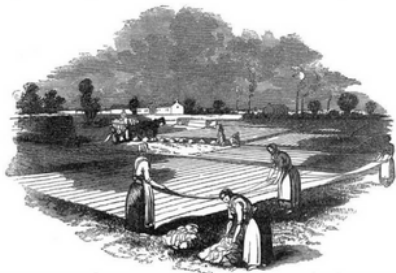
Textiles (i.e. a woven material, ready to be used for making a fabric of some type, e.g. clothing.)

Until around 1950, when textiles manufactured from petroleum began to appear in increasing amount, most were made from naturally occurring fibres such as wool, cotton and flax.

Wool from sheep was a staple fibre in Britain for centuries, with Yorkshire becoming a major centre for processing it into textiles.

The plant **flax** used to be widely grown in England, Scotland and Ireland and was converted to linen. However, with the increase in the production of cotton textiles from around 1800, its use faded. Although **cotton** has to be grown in warm climates, it needs to be processed in a damp atmosphere because the fibre is fragile. There was also a need for waterpower to run the mills. The area in and near Manchester provided both of these. When textiles were produced from any of these

natural sources, they were usually beige coloured and needed cleaning before they could be sold. One way of doing this was to leave the cloth spread out on 'bleachfields' for weeks to be whitened by the light from the sun.



Bleachfields in Paisley, Scotland
Permission to use from Paisley.org.uk

The introduction of new machinery to automate spinning and weaving hugely increased the potential output of the textile industry. However, the traditional bleaching process was a restriction on production. The availability of chemical bleaches such as bleaching powder was a response to this.

Water softening

All natural sources of water contain tiny amounts of dissolved chemicals taken up from the rocks that the rainwater passes through before collection. These chemicals can affect the taste and use of the water. Some sources of water are described as 'hard' because of the particular dissolved chemicals they contain. Such water reduces the effectiveness of soap and causes scale to build up inside kettles,

etc. Hard water affects around 65% of the UK, primarily the south and east of England. One way of 'softening' hard water is by the addition of alkali (sodium carbonate / soda ash in particular) at a treatment works to remove the chemicals causing the hardness.

Glass manufacture

Glass can be made by heating sand until it melts and then letting it cool, but that requires an extremely elevated temperature. However, if certain chemicals are added, such as soda ash, the mix melts at a temperature that, whilst still high, is significantly reduced. Such added chemicals, called 'fluxes', have long been the basis of commercial glass making, e.g. in St Helens. The nearby availability of sand and coal were major reasons for the industry being based there.



Natural Sources of Alkali

Natural sources of soda ash (and potash, a somewhat similar substance) had long been used by humans, as follows:-

Burning certain types of plant



**1813 image of barilla grass
by Adolphus Ypey.**

Until the 1820s, the British need for soda ash was produced by burning vegetation that contained a high level of soda ash, e.g. barilla grass from the Mediterranean or kelp, a seaweed that grows profusely in rocky coastal areas. Such areas are sometimes described as kelp forests. In the late 1700s and early 1800s, kelp was collected and prepared for use by large numbers of crofting people living on the west coast of Scotland and on the Scottish islands. It was an important part of their economy. As a result, when manufactured soda became available (as described below), the demand for kelp diminished and many of those crofters emigrated because of the lack of alternative work.



Collecting Kelp

Dried up Lake Beds

When shallow lakes containing dissolved chemicals dry up, deposits of those chemicals can be left behind - depending on the chemicals involved, this could be soda ash. Ancient Egyptians used what is called natron from such a source:-

- to make soap by heating it with animal fats,
- to make glass by heating it up with sand, producing impressive, coloured vases,
- because of its dehydrating properties, for preparing bodies for mummification.

As mentioned later, similar deposits in the United States are called trona - from the 1930s, this rather than manufacture has been the main source of soda ash.



Sample of Trona

Such drying up of shallow lakes containing dissolved chemicals was how the salt beds below ground in Mid-Cheshire were formed. More about that later.

Manufacturing Alkali

Natural Supplies Insufficient

By the late 1700s, the Industrial Revolution that originated in Britain (and significantly so in the Northwest of England) created a demand for alkali that exceeded what could be obtained from plant sources. The expanding textile industry that developed in and around Manchester was a major factor in this demand. As a result, the time was ripe for a source of supply that was cheaper, more dependable and of a more consistent quality.

Methods of Manufacture

Over the years, three processes for manufacturing soda were developed and introduced into the Northwest during the 1800s.

In the order of their introduction, they were:-

Leblanc

Ammonia Soda

Electrolysis

Each process required:-

- the supply of substantial amounts of raw materials, preferably from nearby locations.

- businesses, leaders, workers and factories to process the raw material into alkali,
- the means of transporting finished product to customers.

Next issue will continue the serialisation of Bob Roach's fascinating book about the alkali industry of the North West, attention turns to raw materials for manufacturing alkali and the issues about using them.



The alkali industry in the North West of England

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The Sankey Canal in 1972

(From the collection of Wilf Britch)



Looking north along the towpath towards Standish Street crossing with the buildings of Charles Nelson (Electrical Contractors) on the right and St. Helens Shaw Street Station Goods Yard (now St. Helens Central) on the left behind the fence. In the distance can be seen the railway swing bridge and beyond that the road swing bridge, joining Standish Street to Pocket Nook Street. Just before the railway crossing is the yard of Atlas Street Car Dismantlers and beyond that the buildings and tall chimney of Varley's Iron Foundry and in the background is one of the Gasometers of the North West Gas Company.



Looking south along the towpath towards Corporation Street Bridge with the buildings of Charles Nelson (Electrical Contractor) on the left and St. Helens Shaw Street (St. Helens Central) Goods Yard on the right, and the tall chimneys of Pilkington's Glass works in the background.

