



SANKEY MILESTONES



Issue 2 - Autumn 2023

www.sankeycanal.co.uk



Sankey Canal Restoration Society

Founded 1985

Registered Charity Number 702571

www.sankeycanal.co.uk

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Editor:
Jamie Highton

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Winwick Dry Dock



INLAND
WATERWAYS
ASSOCIATION

Chairman's Report

Welcome to the second edition of Sankey Milestones, I hope you found our last issue both different and entertaining. In this issue you will find a rundown of our activities over the summer months and a preview in to what lies ahead.

After an early heatwave, the summer sadly changed into one of sunshine and very heavy showers, to which our events team can vouch, being caught up in them during our outings at various shows. In fact three of them were abandoned mid-afternoon and at another one the rain was persistent all day, however we were there highlighting the work of the society.

The events have been one of my passions since the society's early days and has grown from a table and few items for sale, through to where it is today: two gazebos and exhibition display boards etc, not to mention years when we had a caravan to take us to far distant places promoting the society. However, the time has come for me to step down from this important side of our activities and unless someone comes forward this vital role will be a thing of the past. If there is someone out there willing to continue this sort of thing, then please get in touch.

The summer months have proved to be beneficial to the society: we gained two grants from the St. Helens Borough of Culture Awards, to

produce an online education resource for primary school children and an animated film about the canal that will be used along with it.

The water supply issue at Spike Island is still with us as well as Warrington Council's ambitious plans for pumping water into the canal from the River Mersey.

St. Helens Rotary are making progress with their Heritage trail around St. Helens Town Centre as well as having regular canoe sessions at Foundry Wharf.

The government cuts to CRT funding have not gone unnoticed by the Inland Waterways Association who have launched a campaign to "Fund our Waterways" highlighting the plight for funds to keep our canal and rivers functioning in a safe and proper manner.

I would now like to remind you all that it's time to renew your membership and to thank those who have already done so, and to thank all the membership for your support in helping to bring about the restoration of our canal.

Now I must come to something that I knew one day I would have to say, and that is that I will be retiring as chairman at the next AGM in March 2024. I now feel the time has come for someone else to take the reins of the society and lead them on into the future. We now have some new and eager

committee members who would like to see changes made to the way we do things and I see this as a good thing, but I personally feel that it's time for me to step aside. I would like to thank all the membership who have supported me and the committee through the years that I have held the chair, and I would personally like to thank the committee members I have had the pleasure of working with. I have been on the committee since 1986, serving as work party leader, event organiser and volunteer coordinator, as well as doing many other odd things that needed to be done. It will be a big wrench to leave it all behind, however I do intend to remain in the background to give advice if needed.

For now, I will leave you with the following message, our waterways are precious to our health and wellbeing so do give your support in whatever way you can to keep them open for future generations to enjoy and let's not forget that the Sankey Canal was the first Canal in England so let's get it restored to full navigation.

As there will not be another publication before Christmas, may I wish each and every one of you a Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year.

Best wishes,

Colin Greenall



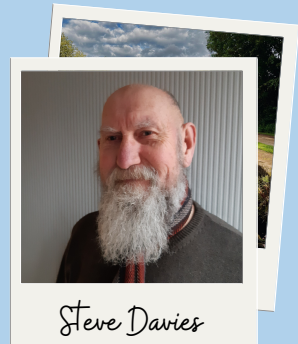
An exhibition revealing insight into Colin's life and work as a baker is currently running at St. Mary's Market in St. Helens, as part of the Reside Arts festival until Monday, 20th December 2023.

To mark his retirement and the interest shown in this exhibition, Colin was recently interviewed by the St. Helens Star. The article is reproduced on page 35.

Secretary's Report

Last issue you will have read that we are looking to progress our website, and probably also remember me saying that we have engaged a consultancy firm to develop it. As with all these things, our plans didn't progress quite how we hoped they would and we are now starting to look for another company that can help us. Please, if you have any skills in this area or know a website planner, contact me on my email address which is at the end of this article and hopefully we can discuss our requirements more in depth with you. Our search for a permanent home goes on. We are still in touch with St Helens Council about the Blackbrook Visitors Centre but again, if you know or can recommend somewhere that may be suitable, please let me know.

In October, the Committee held a special meeting to discuss the future direction of SCRS. Among many important topics we talked about, the basic charitable status was discussed. At present we are an incorporated charity. Since our establishment in 1985 several new types of charitable structures have been created, such as CIC and CIO - Community Interest Company and Charitable Incorporated Organisation. We have been exploring the pros and cons of both in regards to if or how it will benefit SCRS going forward.



A CIC is a special type of Company which exists to benefit the community and earns most of its income from trading. A CIO is an incorporated structure designed specifically for charities. This structure has benefits as the society would only deal with the Charity Commission. Should you want to learn more about each of the structures, please contact me.

No decision has been made and before any decision is made we will take advice from the relevant bodies. Any feedback from our members is welcome.

Should we decide to change our status, we will contact all our members to advise them and, of course, it will be subject to a majority in favour vote at our AGM.

Whilst I've mentioned our AGM can I ask you to add the date to your diaries.

It is on Saturday 23rd March 2024. Venue and time will be confirmed nearer the date. It goes without saying that we would like you all to attend.

On a rather sad note, we have learned that the Ship Inn in St Helens has closed.

This public house lies adjacent to the Blackbrook spur of the Sankey Canal and also at the end of the trail that starts at Carr Mill dam. Its history goes back to at least the beginning of the 19th Century and is interlinked with the Stanley Smelting Company established nearby.

Now back to the present - and talking of present(s), our 2024 calendar is now available. You can purchase it at the St Helens Bookstop on Bridge St. St Helens or we can post one (or more) out to you.



The price is £6.99 from the Bookstop and £6.99 plus P & P if you would like one mailed out to you.

If you have any questions, comments or would like to order a calendar please contact me at:
secretary@sankeycanal.co.uk.



ADVANCED NOTICE

Saturday 23rd March 2024

Time and Venue TBC in next issue of Milestones

Send AOB for inclusion to secretary@sankeycanal.co.uk

News from Around the Boroughs by Colin Greenall

Halton



Volunteers at work near Carterhouse Swing Bridge

Volunteers save Spike Island

The volunteers of the Save Spike Island & Widnes Canal Restoration Group have done a tremendous job in keeping the canal in water. At the point where the footbridge used to be, a clay dam has been built to retain salt water that enters the canal on high tides. It also stops it contaminating fresh water further up the canal towards Carterhouse Swing Bridge. Beyond this point the water that comes from the Warrington section is retained by a second dam here, thus helping to maintain a level of freshwater for the survival of wildlife.

Canal infrastructure repairs

Halton Council have announced that they now have a contractor in place to clear vegetation and repair the canal walls, and that work is due to start in the new year.

St Helens

New railings at New Double Locks

The new railings are now in place to act as a safety barrier around the area of the locks. Unfortunately they have not provided room for the operation of the lock gates but St Helens BC said this will be rectified when the canal is restored.



Markfield Bridge - report by Steve Davies

A bit delayed by logistical issues, we eventually got the bridge adjacent to Markfield Crescent, Merton Bank in St Helens upgraded.

The bridge spans the part of the Canal where it runs along the bed of the Rainford Brook, just down from the New Double locks.

The replacement, which is 2.5m wide, was completed within the planned 7 weeks despite a spate of high water level surges in the canal caused by heavy rain.

The Council consulted with SCRS on the design which enabled us to suggest that the foundations be structured so that when the canal becomes navigable again, the actual crossing can be elevated to allow clearance for water craft. I am happy to say that this was built into the design and we would like to thank St Helens Borough Council for allowing our input and amending the structure as we suggested.



New Bridge for Markfield Crescent

Repairs to Canal wall at Pocket Nook

Repairs to the canal wall between Standish Street and New Double lock was completed recently, but again two areas of wall movement appear to have been ignored.



The canal at Pocket Nook

St.Helens Rotary Club Canoeing sessions

During the summer months St.Helens Rotary Club have provided canoeing sessions for local children and parents who would otherwise have never been able to get out on the water. They have also held “try fishing” sessions, again for people who have never had the chance to try their hand at angling. All this has taken place in the centre of St. Helens, on the canal between Standish Street and Corporation Street. A lady who fishes on this stretch tells us that she feels safer now that the area has had more



people around looking after it and doing the canoeing. She loves watching the canoeing. Residents from Foundry Wharf tell us that they like seeing more people taking care of the area and enjoying themselves. They are using the towpath more often and confidently when more people are in the area. More families are enjoying watersports on a summer Sunday morning in our town centre on the first industrial canal in our country.

Repairs to Old Double Locks

During the recent heavy rain, recent repairs at the site of the locks at Blackbrook began to unravel, opening up a gaping hole once again by the side of the lock wall. This was reported by SCRS to Canal and River Trust who actually own this section of canal. CRT have made a temporary repair. This repair seems to be washing under and there are some stone sets missing. We suspect it will get worse over the winter and will be contacting the CRT to arrange further repairs.



Old Double Locks before the repairs



Damage continues after repairs

Warrington

Fiddlers Ferry Cooling tower demolition

A date of Sunday 3rd December 2023 has been fixed for the blowing down of the four northern cooling towers sometime between 8.00am and 12.00noon

Water supply issues

SCRS recently held talks with officials from Warrington Council about the water supply issues to the southern end of the canal. They assured us that they will continue to pump water into their section of canal when it is necessary to keep the canal full, they will not however supply water to the Halton section until all the leaks have been fixed. They told us that they have leased the power station pumping station and will be installing smaller pumps to supply the canal once all the connecting pipe work and electricity supplies have been finalised.

SCRS Archives Finds New Home by David Harrison

The SCRS archives have found a permanent home with the St Helens Archive collection, held at The Gamble Building in Victoria Square. Dr Barrie Pennington and myself met up with head archivist Victoria Brokenshire to discuss how the society's archives will be managed. It was agreed that each set of archives, donated by the founders and early members of the society, will be named after them, so there will be the David Long collection, which is the first to be deposited, the Colin Greenall collection, our current Chairman, the Peter Keen collection, and the David Smallshaw collection. This will not only create a legacy, recognising the contributions and the work done by the early members of the society, but the collections will reflect the personal projects

that each member worked on, such as the Barmere project championed by David Long and the research done by Peter Keen. These legacy collections will all be part of the larger SCRS archive and will be available for researchers. The St Helens Archives are a fine professional collection and are the perfect home for the SCRS archives. Image taken by Dr David Harrison of Dr Barrie Pennington and Head Archivist Victoria Brokenshire in the archives, located in the depths of the Gamble building.



Woolton Hall and its connection to the Sankey Canal by Dr David Harrison



Woolton Hall was originally built in 1704 for the Molyneux family. It was purchased by Nicholas Ashton in 1772, Ashton being a former High Sheriff of Lancashire, whose father was one of the main investors of the Sankey Canal in 1755, the canal being constructed to bring much needed coal from St. Helens to Liverpool.

Soon afterwards, Nicholas Ashton commissioned the renowned neoclassical architect Robert Adam to remodel and expand the Hall. Nicholas Ashton died in 1833 leaving the house to his son Joseph Ashton, who subsequently left it to his son Charles Ellis Ashton, who sold the house in 1865. After the Ashtons, a number of families resided at the Hall, until it became a hotel at the beginning of the twentieth century. It has since fallen into disrepair, its future being uncertain.



Ceramic miniature of Nicholas Ashton and commemorative plate depicting Woolton Hall

Bradley Hall by Dr David Harrison

There is a rich historical landscape surrounding the walkways of the Sankey Canal, with many old manor houses that can be reached via the pathways that branch off from the main Sankey Valley trail. One such manor house is Bradley Hall (also spelled Bradlegh), which can be accessed from a pathway near to Bradley Lock, from which the lock gets its name.



Bradley Hall

Bradley Old Hall is an excellent example of a late medieval moated site, situated near Burtonwood Village in Cheshire, not far from St. Helens and Warrington. The manor house, first built in the 15th century, then rebuilt in the late 1700s as a Georgian manor house, still retains a number of features from the original building such as the main door and the oak beams. The moat and the medieval gatehouse still survive and are in good condition.

Included in the house is the original Tudor style bed that Richard III supposedly slept in when he stayed at the Hall in 1482. There have also been many finds from the Civil War (Cromwell also supposedly stayed there) and there is an oak timber beam on which is inscribed a Catholic script, as the Leigh family who lived there were said to be secret Catholics after the Reformation.



Oak beam with inscription

In the book *A Burtonwood Story* by J.P. Fogarty, published in 1986, Bradley Old Hall is mentioned extensively displaying a number of black and white photos. A mention of the Hall by Peter Leigh in 1465 is printed, in which it says the Hall had: '...three new chambers and a fair dining room, with a new kitchen, bakehouse and brewhouse, and also with a new tower built of stone with turrets and a fair gateway, and above it a stone bastille well defended, with a fair chapel...also one ancient chamber called the Knyghtes Chamber...surrounded by a moat with a drawbridge...'

The two coats of arms displayed at the top of the stairs on the first floor are of Standish of Standish and Leigh of Lyme- both taken from the original Hall, along with a number of oak doors and beams, such as the one in the front attic room which displays the legend:

'...Here Master doth and Mistress both accorde with godly mindes and zealous hartes to serve the livinge Lorde. 1597 Henry Wesle'

This seems to suggest a continuation of the practise of Catholicism by the family.

The book by Fogarty also mentions that Peter Leigh supported the Duke of Gloucester (Richard III) with King Richard III granting Peter Leigh £10 per year for life in consideration for his loyal services. Fogarty mentions that the Duke of Gloucester was reputed to have stayed at the Hall in 1482 when the Duke was marching through Lancashire to repel the Scots. The Kings Bed - a late medieval oak bed - is still in the Hall, and the story of the Duke staying at the Hall seems to have originated from Lady Leigh's history of the Leigh family.



Tudor style bed that Richard III supposedly slept in

Other books that mention Bradley Old Hall include Warrington and the Mid-Mersey Valley by G.A. Carter, published in 1971, which also mentions Peter Leigh's 1485 description, and the Leigh family connection to the nearby Winwick Church, where a number of the family are buried. The Hall, according to Carter, was mentioned as 'lying waste' in 1666, which may be because of activity during the Civil War, where there was nearby the battle of Winwick in 1648. There has been a

canon ball and shot recovered from the moat which date to the Civil War period, and there are local stories of secret tunnels from the Hall to the nearby Winwick Church and that Oliver Cromwell himself stayed at the Hall.

The Hall and the Leigh family are also mentioned in a much celebrated local history book published in 1947 called Warrington Ancient and Modern by Austin Crowe, who had been Mayor of Warrington from 1933-35. In the book, the Leigh family are portrayed as a leading family of the area during the medieval period, and it describes The Leigh Manuscript of 1465 drawn up by Sir Peter Leigh which lists the agriculture, industry and life of Warrington of that time.

The Hall is still privately owned and can be seen from the many public pathways that run from the Sankey Canal towards Burtonwood.

All photographs by Dr David Harrison.

Planning Round-Up by Paul Romanko

Penkford School, Earlestown

The school has been relocated to a brand new facility at Red Bank, Newton Le Willows. St Helens Borough Council has submitted a planning application to demolish the old school buildings. The playing field will be retained and the hard standing area will become a car park for the football club and for visitors to the Sankey Valley Trail. This will replace the informal muddy parking area at Newton Common Lock. SHBC will provide access to the Trail.

This is a great opportunity to revitalise a somewhat tired and under-used section of the Trail from Penkford Bridge to Newton Common Lock.

We have submitted a proposal to SHBC to create a fitting 'gateway' to the Sankey Valley Trail and especially to the iconic Nine Arches Viaduct. This includes an improved trail and the thinning out of dense, overgrown vegetation. We want to clean out the neglected 'pond' immediately downstream of Penkford Bridge (to extend the existing fishing pound) and we have proposed to start removing the canal infill material.

We will be liaising with SHBC to see how these proposals can be progressed, ideally with the involvement of other community groups.



Northern Powerhouse Rail Update

The Government recently cancelled Phase 2a (Birmingham - Crewe) and Phase 2b (Crewe - Manchester) of the new High Speed 2 railway line.

Funding will instead be directed to other local transport projects and one potential scheme is Northern Powerhouse Rail. The route is from Liverpool - Manchester - Leeds and beyond. It will make use of the existing Ditton - Arpley freight line (proposed to be upgraded), which runs parallel to the Sankey Canal.

There are no detailed NPR plans available yet but we need to lobby hard and engage with stakeholders to address the fixed low bridge obstruction at Sankey Bridges so as not to jeopardise the restoration of the canal to navigable status.

Rainford Brook Pedestrian Bridge, Downstream of New Double Lock, St Helens

At the time of writing we have just been informed of another St Helens Borough Council ‘Active Travel’ project. This is to replace a narrow pedestrian bridge with a wider bridge that is accessible to all, including to disabled users and cyclists. This follows on from the recent replacement of a similar bridge nearby, downstream at Markfield Crescent.

SCRS is pleased that many more people will be able to access and enjoy the canal corridor, although when they cross Rainford Brook they might not realise that they are actually crossing over the canal! Rainford Brook used to run parallel to the canal and then cross underneath it but after the canal’s closure the brook was diverted in to the straight section of canal to reduce the risk of local flooding. The original width of the canal can still be identified despite the growth of vegetation along the banks.



Rainford Brook Pedestrian Bridge

The existing fixed bridge does not have much clearance. We have asked for the replacement fixed bridge to be future proofed so that it simplifies the future restoration of the canal to navigable status. The new bridge and abutments could be raised in height and / or the bridge deck could form a gentle hump to achieve the necessary clearance for boats. Removing this modest obstruction now would be a very welcome and symbolic step towards bringing this section of canal back to life.

Sutton Oak Railway Branch Feasibility Study, St Helens

St Helens Borough Council has appointed Mott MacDonald to carry out a feasibility study to for the disused railway line between St Helens Central and St Helens Junction stations. The options could include reopening it as a heavy railway line, a light rapid transit line, a cycle way and pedestrian path or a linear park.

SCRS is pleased that this useful urban corridor is being considered for a new lease of life. However there is an existing fixed low bridge over the canal behind the Matalan store (near Linkway East). This replaced an earlier swing bridge. The bridge prevents the use of the canal by canoes and it is a significant obstruction to the canal’s restoration to navigable status through the town centre.

We have recently asked SHBC for the bridge options to be included in the feasibility study scope. Possible solutions to create a navigable 2 metre air draught are to raise the height of the bridge, to install a thin bridge deck, to desilt the canal bed and to reduce the canal's top water level.

At the time of writing we are awaiting a response from SHBC and we will provide an update for you in a future edition.



Site of former swing bridge

Fiddlers Ferry Marina, Penketh

SCRS met with Warrington Borough Council in September to update each other on our canal activities and to discuss the progress at Fiddlers Ferry Marina.

WBC has carried out a steady programme of work to keep the Marina in water despite budget pressures and it has investigated options to resolve the loss of the water supply from Fiddlers Ferry power station, which also supplied Spike Island Marina.

A proposed solution is to install new pumps, an electricity supply and pipework at the disused FF pumping station upstream of the Ferry Inn. Water would be pumped in to FF Marina and it could then flow down the canal to Spike Island Marina. This would require reeds to be cleared and obstructions removed to create a channel for the water. WBC intends to arrange for an environmental survey and obtain a price for clearing the reeds that minimises the impact on wildlife. The solution is subject to a funding agreement between WBC and Halton Borough Council. HBC will need to calculate its water demand and minimise any losses, which is why the intended repairs to the Spike Island canal banks are so important. Opportunities to direct surface water flows in to the canal need to be maximised so that any pumping is kept to a minimum.

SCRS is keen to support WBC and HBC in finding a sustainable water supply solution and in making improvements to the canal corridor.

Merseyside's towpath to the past: a 20-mile walk along the Industrial Revolution's first canal

by Chris Moss (Article from *The Guardian* 15th November 2023)

I hadn't planned my walk along the Sankey Canal to coincide with the axing of HS2 but it happened like that. It was a sunny day. I had been promising myself a hike along the towpath for ages. I grew up in the area and it holds a special place in my affections. As I wandered it struck me that this under-explored waterway was arguably the UK's first significant development in infrastructure since the Romans built roads. It was built in two years.

The Sankey Canal connects St Helens with the River Mersey. It was opened in 1757 and subsequently extended to Widnes. Large sailing barges called Mersey flats moved coal from Lancashire to the Cheshire salt-brining towns and to Liverpool. The first canal of the Industrial Revolution built in Great Britain (Northern Ireland's Newry Canal was earlier), its construction was only permitted because engineer Henry Berry and financier John Ashton duped parliament and other investors into believing it was a "navigation" – a widening of the existing Sankey Brook. But it is a true cut, and prompted the Duke of Bridgewater – the "father of British inland navigation" – to build his own waterway.

Several spurs were built to reach local collieries. I started at one, at Blackbrook, just outside St Helens. There I met Colin Greenall, the chair of the Sankey Canal Restoration Society (SCRS), who gave me a handy historical walking guide. Colin, who is 79, remembers seeing cargo vessels on the canal when he was a boy.

"It must have been about 1956. I remember being out trainspotting at Winwick and seeing boats going up towards Earlestown with sugar. Then everything changed to road transport and the last boats stopped in 1959." SCRS is keen to recruit more volunteers and fundraises to support conservation work along the waterway. It hopes one day to create a fully working canal for leisure crafts.

Then, I was off on my walk; I had 15 miles at least in front of me, but it was going to be flat – the Sankey is not a "summit-level canal" linking valleys. I made a faltering start. From Blackbrook to Earlestown, it's only three or so miles, but I took a few wrong turns where tangled vegetation appeared to block the path, and ended up on the road. I don't mind pounding the pavements; I did a lot of roadside walking as a teenager. As it happened, this first section passed near the village of Burtonwood,

where I was born and raised. Memories came as fast and intrusively as vehicles. That field, that light, that spirit; the ineffable markers of place. It felt a bit like “beating the bounds”, though I claim no ownership and only a partial sense of belonging.

Things turned rural and totally car-free as I approached the Sankey Viaduct, known hereabouts as “Nine Arches”. Local campaigner Barrie Pennington is leading a bid to secure Unesco world heritage site for this imposing Grade I-listed structure. Built by George Stephenson in 1830 for his epoch-making Liverpool and Manchester railway, it was, as a red plaque reminded me, the “earliest major railway viaduct in the world”. Another red plaque honours the memory of Berry and the canal. They should add a third for the navvies, masons and carpenters who did the hard graft. Nearby is Earlestown railway station, the oldest in operation, close to the site of the world’s first steam railway junction. The St Helens area is full of candidates for world firsts.

Passing farmers and miners must have gaped in awe at the viaduct’s soaring arches as it was built in the late 1820s. They are particularly impressive seen from directly below on the towpath. When it was opened it became a tourist attraction in its own right.

The canal beyond the viaduct was at times quite beautiful, especially when the sun broke through and warmed the green-gold canopy. It was busy in a good way. I passed coarse fishers, cyclists, dog-walkers, four women on horseback. They were friendly, sometimes chatty; I like south Lancashire people. I suppose I feel at home among them and am biased, but they seem to me a healthy mix of urban and rustic, worldly and humble.

The chaotic, naturally rewilded canal has a lot of birdlife. I saw herons, shags and gulls, coots, hundreds of moorhens, grazing geese, adult swans accompanied by huge grey, moulting cygnets. Dense reed beds provide safety and nesting grounds. The brambles and holly bushes were alive with tits, wrens, robins, blackbirds.

Where the woods retreated, the towpath ran parallel to the west coast mainline – dead quiet due to an Aslef strike – before guiding me under the M62. I caught a glimpse of the Burtonwood logistics hub and its big blue Ikea – the UK’s first, opened in 1987. I also caught my first sight of Fiddlers Ferry power station, my ultimate destination, hazy in the distance.

I dipped into the SCRS guidebook. It pointed out geeky stuff – where locks, and bascule and swing bridges once stood, traces of old masonry,

hidden engineering – but also highlighted surviving historical sites; development has razed most of them. Just after the motorway I came to a cluster of ruinous old buildings, once a bustling maintenance yard, with a pub, lime-kiln and nearby dry dock. A handsome brick building is dated 1841.

As I progressed south the signage was neater, the trail more clearly marked, and littering greatly reduced. Warrington is better off than St Helens. The park areas around the mainly Jacobean Bewsey Old Hall – which can trace its foundations to just after the Norman conquest – had well-tended lawns and new play areas; on the downside, the builders never leave Cheshire’s biggest conurbation alone, and new housing pressed in on all sides. Other towns have greenbelts; Warrington has a redbrick belt.

The canal path and park have been open to the public since 1982. A large information board declares that it is “Part of Mersey Forest, the largest of 12 community forests” in England. About 9m trees have been planted across this large area. When I sat down at a picnic bench to eat lunch, I was bombed by conkers falling from horse chestnut trees. I was within wagging distance of my old secondary school, which is named after the area, Great Sankey. Weirdly, not a single teacher ever mentioned the story of the canal and its role in kickstarting the Industrial Revolution; I’m not sure they namechecked the canal at all.

After a cheese barm (a bread roll local to these parts), I set off again. Much of the next section of towpath was long and linear, but the broad view changed from mellow low-plains bosky to clashing post-industrial and stridently vertical. For, on the far horizon were the eight awesome cooling towers at decommissioned coal-fired Fiddlers Ferry, one of the great landmarks of the north-west. I’m a macro person; I like big things in my landscapes, including human-made ones. Give me a power station over a petal any day. The towers are scheduled for demolition, starting in early 2024. Flat places need drama; the power station will be missed.

With a few miles still to go, I decided not to have a pint at the inn. I continued walking, past the marina – dinghies, yachts, skiffs, but no barges – and was dreaming of the bus stop when, at a break in the woodland on my left, I was granted a sublime view of the Mersey, glinting at half-tide – with waders on the mudbanks and gulls offshore – and the two great bridges beyond: the old 1960s “Runcorn Bridge” (the Silver Jubilee Bridge) which I crossed en route to childhood holidays in north Wales; and the sweeping span of the Mersey Gateway, which has

deservedly scooped many prestigious awards.

At 15 miles into the walk I crossed the canal at Carter House Swing Bridge and entered Widnes by way of an industrial estate. Completists can do a circuit of Spike Island, famous for its chemical plants and a 1990 Stone Roses gig. But I was done. Until June 1951, I would have jumped aboard the Ditton Dodger on the St Helens and Runcorn Gap railway. But I had to make do with the no 17 bus, which was a milkround service; not tedious at all, as I skirted my mum's school, and the homes of my dad and late brother. As I said, beating the bounds – but of memory and life and love.

I was not done, though, in fact. From St Helens I walked the section of canal linking the town to Blackbrook. I clocked up 20 miles in the end – far too much for one day. If you want to see the canal, and enjoy it, and have the legs for a walk to a pub afterwards, Sankey Viaduct to Fiddlers Ferry is eight miles and a perfect day out.

But, actually, I wrote this not because I expect or even hope for a rush of psychogeography-minded tourists to the north-west and the canal I grew up near – but never knew about. I wrote it because I think everyone can, and perhaps should, take a short holiday where they come from or reside. Travel on the doorstep, at narrowboat speed – even when some of the water has gone – is the future, as well as the past.



Fiddlers Ferry marina. Photograph: Chris Moss/The Guardian

Events Round-Up by Colin Greenall

Winwick Carnival

Saturday 15th July

I arrived on site at 9.40 and was directed to our plot No. 8. Neil Viggers was already there waiting for me. As we set about putting up the gazebos Ian Hornby arrived, and we made good progress with everything ready by 10.45. A few spots of rain had us worried, but they passed over and the rest of the morning

was dry. The event officially opened at 12.00. noon, but it was quiet for a while, then it got going, but alas it was not to be a good event with regards people spending their money. Even so, a lot of interest was shown in what we are doing with a few knowing all about the problems of the water supply at Spike Island, one chap in particular had his boat there and wasn't too happy about the situation. Steve Davies arrived about 12.45 to help control the crowds!! And later David Harrison, his wife and daughter appeared, had a chat, and then went off to enjoy what was on offer. Neil went home and left us to it. Around 15.00 dark clouds began to gather and then the rain and wind came. The rain was very heavy and pretty soon everywhere was awash. It lasted for the best part of 30 minutes and things got wet and so once it eased off we began to pack up, which is not fun when everything needs wiping dry the best you can. David Harrison came back and helped Ian, Steve, and me to pack up, by which time the sun was shining again and so at 16.45 we all departed for home. The day ended with me disappointed and wet and the takings were poor, but the company as always was good.

Newton Town Show - Saturday 5th August

It rained, but the people of Newton turned out to support this annual event organised by the Newton and Earlestown Community Group. In spite of the weather, we were kept busy with people asking about the future of the canal and the water problems at Spike Island. Sales were surprisingly good considering the weather, and we met up with a few old friends. I met Paul Winstanley (St. Helens Rotary) and he asked if I was available on Saturday 16th to lead a short walk along the canal in St. Helens Town Centre. I readily agreed.





Steam tug "Daniel Adamson"

with the IWA gazebo alongside everything looked set for a good day. However, only a few people attended, and most of those were either keen waterway addicts or members of some of the societies which were at the event. At around 12.30, Steve and Carol Davies arrived with their dog and we spent most of the afternoon discussing committee matters. By this time, the wind was beginning to bend the tent and eventually we decided to call it a day as well as telling Jim Forkin that we would not be coming back the next day. I arrived home at 16:35, a little disappointed on an event that had promised something different.

St. Helens Gala, Sunday 27th August

On site waiting to be shown to our plot at 8.55. We did not move until 9.20 when they opened the gate to let us in. Then it was chaos as everyone was trying to put up gazebos and arrange their stands ready for the event, which officially started at 12.00 noon. Steve was there and along with Cynthia and me we managed to get ourselves organised. The event proved to be poor

regarding sales, and interest in what we are doing was almost zero. However, we did gain one new member, Terry Gregson, and late in the afternoon we had a visit from Barrie Pennington, who took the picture of Steve and me in our new SCRS sweatshirts.



IWA Restoration Showcase on the steam tug "Daniel Adamson" at Frodsham, Cheshire. Saturday and Sunday 29th & 30th July

I arrived on site at 10.00 and was met by Jim and Helen Forkin, IWA. I decided after having a word with Jim that we would put up our gazebo instead of being on the "Danny." Ian Hornby had arrived by this time and so we began to erect on tent when Jamie Highton arrived. Ian left us to go and help Neil Viggers with the work party at Spike Island.

So, we had everything ready and

So, we

Work Parties Reports by Ian Hornby

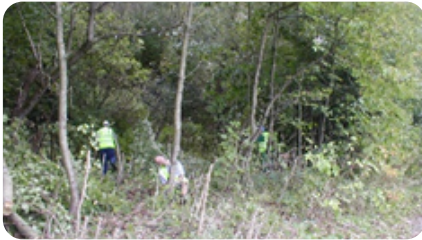


Ian Hornby

Saturday 30th September

Nine arches to Newton Common Lock

With six volunteers we made good work of repairing the fence around the lock, before moving on to clear saplings off the line of the canal. The aim here is to allow people to see the course of the canal, which is currently obscured by excessive vegetation and tree growth.



Work to clear saplings from the line of the canal north of the Nine Arches

14th October

On this Saturday, we had a group of 14 young volunteers from Business For Youth, led by councillor Terry Maguire. Their age range was about 6 to 15 years. Along with their adult leaders, they spent 2 hours cutting back willow regrowth and balsam bashing on the valley.



Volunteers from Business For Youth undertaking balsam bashing

The 'world's oldest viaduct' get a £3.8m facelift to celebrate its 200th Anniversary by Colin Greenall



Work is well on the way to improve train journeys between Manchester and Liverpool as Network Rail have invested £3.8 million into the iconic Sankey Viaduct. Maybe not as well known or as long as the Ribbleshead Viaduct in North Yorkshire, Sankey Viaduct is hugely significant in being the first major railway viaduct in the world as well as being the birth place of the modern railway.

Known locally as Nine Arches, it was designed by George Stephenson to bridge the gap over the Sankey Valley and constructed between 1828-1830.



A spokesman for Network Rail said it is a privilege to look after so many significant buildings and structures, but Sankey Viaduct has got to be one of the unsung heroes of Victorian civil engineering. “Its huge significance in the creation of the railway as we know it today is perhaps not so well known – but we’re hoping to change that.

This restoration will not only make sure it looks good to celebrate its 200th anniversary in 2030 but will also secure passenger and freight trains for the future too.”

Using drone scans to map out every inch of the viaduct, taken from above and below, they were able to highlight where it needed repairing. The teams have worked closely with St Helens and Warrington council planners to ensure all the work complies with heritage guidelines.

The Grade One Listed structure carries the Liverpool & Manchester Railway across the Sankey Valley. Constructed from yellow sandstone and red brick, the viaduct is of nine round-headed arches carried on piers that incline sharply from the base towards the top. Its form is similar to the traditional designs of canal aqueducts, each arch is 50ft. wide and 70ft. tall, originally to allow fully rigged Mersey Flats to pass beneath on the Sankey Canal. It carries a double track railway with up to five trains crossing every hour.



The project is now underway and is expected to be completed by the end of December 2023 or early January 2024. Over this time a team of engineers and scaffolding specialists will: erect scaffolding towers along the span for painstaking repairs to take place, repoint mortar using specialist heritage mixes to match the existing materials, carry out extensive brickwork repairs, paint historic metalwork in heritage colours, install strengthening anchors to secure any cracks, remove overgrown weeds and plants, clean graffiti from the top of the stonework, fit three new pairs of pattress plates – metalwork which secures the structure.

As you walk beneath this maze of scaffolding you hear the sounds of men at work; listen to them as they hammer, drill and scrape their trowels as they point and repair the brickwork, shout to one another, whistle and sing and all the time there is the hum of the generators which power the offices in the portacabins. It's exciting to think that two hundred years ago a similar scenario was taking place as the original builders of the viaduct were here constructing this magnificent piece of architecture, not realising that now it would be carrying trains many times heavier and carrying hundreds of passengers between Liverpool and Manchester.

Spike Island Update by Neil Viggers



Neil Viggers

The Spike Island team continue to do their thing, including litter picking, clay dam maintenance and construction, and weed pulling.

The new bailey bridge is currently under construction with HBC's preferred contractor. Also the investigation work for the foundations is underway. This is to determine how the foundations need to be constructed.

Water levels from Fiddlers Ferry power station to the Mersey Gateway Bridge dam are now roughly two thirds full with fresh water from rainfall only. This level is holding fine with no signs of leakage and is being allowed to trickle down to Spike Island to help the water levels down there. Spike Island water levels are roughly three quarters full.

This is due to a combination of opening the lock gate at high tide, boat club pumping of salt water into Spike Island, rain fall and the trickle of fresh water coming down from above the Mersey Gateway Bridge dam. Also the dock water level is continuing to rise when the canal is high enough to allow water to feed through.

The water levels haven't been this high for 2 years.

Halton Borough Council have now selected a contractor to bid for the canal walls. We are just waiting for contracts to be signed. I think we are looking at spring for work to commence, but that's not a firm date.



Clay dam successfully impounding the canal

St Helens Historical Society



All meeting will be held at the
Friends Meeting House,
Church Street, St. Helens
WA10 1AJ
Starting at 7.30pm

Monday 15th January

“Five decades of
exploration”

Victoria Brokenshire

Monday 19th February

“The original Saints”

Alex Service

Monday 18th March

“Ordinary folk -
Extraordinary people”

Sue Gerrard

Monday 15th April

“Mary O'Shaughnessy
Wigan's wartime heroine”

Barbara Hennessy

Monday 20th May

“Windleshaw Chantry”

Ted Forsyth

Widnes Historical Society



Thursday 8th February

“19th Century Tall Ship Voyage,
a First-Hand Account”

Ian Bellard

Thursday 14th March

“Hush Hush-Rhyclwmwyn-ICI’s
Secret Place”

Colin Barber

Thursday 18th April

“The Sinking of the Lusitania,
Murder or Misfortune”

Peter Elson

Thursday 9th May

“Florence Nightingale”

Frances Rafferty

Thursday 13th June

“The Story of the Alkali
Industry in the NW and why it
involved Widnes”

Bob Roach

Thursday 11th July

“A History of the Railways of
Widnes 1833- 1890”

Paul Wright

All meetings are held on the
second Thursday of the
month (subject to school
requirements)

Start time 7.30pm at;-
Farnworth C of E Primary
School. Pit Lane, Widnes, WA8
9HS

Visitors welcome (£3.00
entrance fee)

Light refreshments available
for a small charge.

Ample visitor car parking is
available on the playground
accessed from Pit Lane.

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

Chapter 2 - Raw Materials for Manufacturing Alkali and Issues About Using Them

A key factor in an area becoming a major manufacturer of alkali was the proximity of the required raw materials in the form of seams or layers of rock, namely:-

Limestone - a key ingredient in the Leblanc and ammonia-soda process.

Coal - used as a source of heat and (eventually) for the production of electricity; coal was also an ingredient in the Leblanc process.

Salt - to provide the 'sodium' aspect of alkali, e.g. as sodium carbonate (soda ash).

Generally, these layers of rock exist underground over vast areas but are only accessible for use (e.g. not too deep below the surface) in certain locations. The Northwest of England and North Wales are such locations.

These layers were formed at separate times many millions of years ago. This occurred when what is now Britain was much further south than its current location, but gradually moved north. This movement was due to plate tectonics, whereby continents move around, sometimes crashing onto each other causing earthquakes and mountain building.

The outline of what we now know as Britain has only existed in relatively recent times. The coming and going of Ice Ages has been a major influence on the coastline.

The above mentioned rocks have been used for other purposes as well as for the manufacture of alkali, e.g.

- limestone for cement manufacture and road construction.
- coal for heating and, until the advent of North Sea gas some 50 years ago, the production of supplies of household gas.
- salt for its culinary and life-sustaining properties, salting the roads in freezing weather.

Limestone

How Formed

The major component of limestone is the chemical calcium carbonate. These rocks were formed about 340 million years ago in warm, shallow tropical seas that were teeming with life.



Limestone containing fossils from sea creatures.

As the sea creatures died, their shells and skeletons (made of calcium carbonate) sank to the ocean floor.

With this going on for millions of years, a great depth of such deposits built up, crushing the lower layers into rock. The fossil remnants of the sea creatures are often visible in the rock.

Since being formed, the rock layer has often been raised above ground, e.g. in the Peak District, Yorkshire Dales and North Wales.



**Limestone cliff
above Clapham in Yorkshire Dales**

How Obtained

Limestone is usually obtained by quarrying, resulting in massive holes being formed in the ground.

Modern Consequences

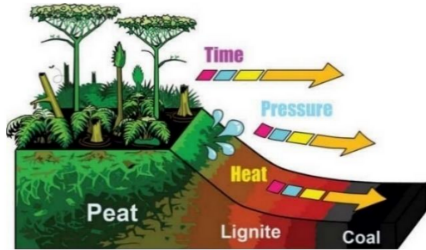
The limestone area in the Peak District is an example where such quarrying has occurred - some of the quarries are still being 'worked'. Whilst without the quarrying, this area would probably have been included, the boundary of the Peak District National Park excludes them.

Coal

How Formed

Coal was formed about 300 million years ago during an era of lush growth in low-lying wetland areas. As the vegetation died, it sank into the wet land, but didn't rot due to being submerged - instead, great depths of

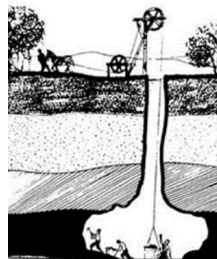
the vegetation gradually built up, with the lower layers becoming more compacted.



Subsequently, rocks of a different nature were deposited on top. This increased the pressure and heated up what had been vegetation, causing it to solidify into lignite (mediocre quality coal). With further heat and pressure, the lignite became coal.

How Obtained

As the considerable reserves of coal in the Lancashire Coalfield occur at various levels, early mining was near the surface. The bell pit style of mining was used, extracting coal from near the mine shaft.



Bell pit

As such 'near surface' reserves were used up, shafts were used to give access to coal deeper down. Following a seam of coal, miners went further and further away from the shaft to get coal.

In 1907 there 320 collieries operating in Lancashire, employing 94,300 men.

Mining was always a hazardous occupation and tragedies were not unusual. The worst was in 1910 when an underground explosion occurred at a mine in Westhoughton near Bolton, killing 344 men and boys.

Gradually, the number of pits reduced. Often, this was due to the access to coal seams having become difficult, e.g. due to faulting in the layers of coal or remaining coal being too far away from the pit shafts. The last colliery in the Lancashire Coalfield closed in 1993.

Whilst there was coal near the surface in parts of central St Helens, the coal seams dip down to the south. One reason why the Sutton Manor Colliery in south St Helens closed in 1991 was that, by then, the coal being mined a long way from the already 700m deep shaft. As a result, a sizable proportion of a miner's day was taken up with travelling to and from the coal face, by then probably well under Widnes.

Modern Consequences

Because it involves removing large quantities of rock, coal mining can cause subsidence of the ground above, a problem that can exist long after the mining has ceased.

The Coal Authority is the body responsible for overseeing the consequences of coal mining - 'One quarter of residential properties in the UK sit on the coalfields'.

Nowadays, when a house is being bought, a check is usually made with the Coal Authority about the risk of subsidence due to historic coal mining.

Salt

How Formed

Some 200 million years ago, the salt beds underneath Cheshire were formed in a similar setting as the modern day Trona deposits, i.e. a shallow salty sea that, in a warm climate, occasionally dries up, depositing a layer of salt crystals in the process.

This process of the drying up of a shallow sea was repeated many times over millions of years. Due to periods when there were different [sediments being deposited], layers of other rocks were laid down between layers of salt, e.g. sandstone.

As a result of this intermittent formation of salt, there are several levels under Cheshire containing salt - two such levels are each some 25 m thick. That is a vast amount of salt! One of those seams is now mined at the Winsford Rock Salt Mine.

But this wasn't just where Cheshire now is - such conditions prevailed across much of what is now northern Europe. Consequently, there are several other areas known to have workable salt reserves - but none as significant or accessible as those below the mid-Cheshire area.

How Obtained

Rock salt can be mined. In this form, it is usually coloured by other substances mixed in it. If you lick it, you can tell it is salt!

Rock salt is highly soluble in water. A natural underground flow of water through a salt bed will dissolve some of it, forming brine. When that flow emerges on the surface, is called a brine spring.

For centuries, such springs were used for producing the vital commodity of **dry white salt**. This was done by boiling off the water in the brine with heat - this had been done in lead pans since at least Roman times. The names of where such practices were carried out often included 'wych' or 'wich' - hence Nantwich, Middlewich and Northwich.

Consequences

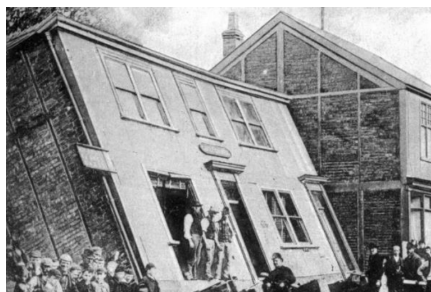
During the 1800s, the flow of brine springs was greatly increased by pumping the brine out. As a result, fresh supplies of water soaked into the salt layers, significantly increasing the amount of salt being dissolved. Particularly in Northwich, this led to the major undermining of buildings and the subsidence of the ground in open areas.

In response to the subsidence, many buildings in Northwich were built on wooden frames so that they could be jacked up if affected by subsidence.



Rock Salt

The Brine Pumping (Compensation for Subsidence) Act was passed in 1891 [more about that later] and, although since somewhat amended, continues to handle claims. Nowadays, it is also



Subsidence at Solicitors Office in Northwich

involved in considering planning applications to identify the location and nature of the development and in particular the proposed foundation design. More recently, the routes chosen for the M6 motorway and the planned HS2 railway have been affected by the risk of such subsidence.

Industrial use of Salt

As described later, it was only in the early 1800s that salt began to be used as a raw material for making alkali.

Dumping Alkali Factory Waste

Some of the areas of subsidence of the ground in open areas were used for dumping vast quantities of waste material from the Brunner, Mond works in Northwich [more about that business later]. However, in stark contrast to the long-term noxious galligu waste from Leblanc factories, this material was fairly innocuous, even though unnatural to the area where it was dumped. As a result, these areas, after reclamation, became part of Northwich Woodlands - a large, pleasant area for walking, etc.

Modern Day Brine Supplies

Eventually, uncontrolled brine pumping was prohibited. Nowadays, the industrial need for brine has been met by using controlled boreholes. Whilst this leaves underground voids, they are spaced out and of contoured shape to avoid subsidence problems. Such voids have potential use for storage.

Importance of Salt to Human Life

As salt is essential to life in several ways, we need a small regular intake to counter-balance the salt we lose each day through urine and sweat.

Also, salt has long been added to food, e.g. as:-

- a flavour enhancer - many recipes include a pinch of salt for this purpose.
- a food preservative - extending the period of the food being fit to eat. Prior to freezing and refrigeration, this was particularly important for being able to eat meat and fish in winter.

Salt Tax

Such was the importance attached to salt, it was taxed from 1693 until 1825 - the regulations were complicated and bureaucratic. Also, *Smuggling and other forms of tax evasion were common throughout the life of the Salt Tax and it is doubtful whether the revenue earned justified the enormous cost involved in its administration.*

(Salt Association website)

Next issue the story continues with why the chemical industry came to be based in the North West. To explore the history of salt more, why not visit the Lions Salt Museum in Northwich.

www.lionsaltworks.westcheshiremuseums.co.uk/



LION
SALT
WORKS

PART OF
WEST CHESHIRE
MUSEUMS

'Labour of love' exhibition opens about Greenalls bakery in St Helens



St Helens Star

Greenalls stood proud for 68 years on Duke Street (Image: Mark Peachey)

Beloved for its steak and meat and potato pies, as well as its tasty selection of tarts, slices, and cakes, E & C Greenalls became a staple of Duke Street and was one of the town's most loved businesses.

Launched by Elizabeth Greenall in 1954, the business was taken on by her son Colin in 1970 and stood proud for a impressive 68 years.

Following the huge response to the closure of the bakery last year, an exhibition in honour of Colin and the business is now on show as part of the Reside Arts festival.

The exhibition has been created by local resident Mark Peachey, who wanted to document the beloved bakery before it was too late.

Mark said: "I know a lot of small independent shops have closed along Duke Street over the years and sadly no-one really documented them.

"They were places that were the pillar of the local community [and] Colin himself has said many of his customers became friends over the years, and a lot of retail has since been replaced by self-service supermarkets and online shopping, so that personal contact is being lost.

"So I wanted to document the shop before it was too late, and I photographed Colin and the interior of the bakery, and also did an oral history interview with him, which is also part of the exhibition."

Alongside the information provided by Mark, there is also a book of photographs of Colin and the shop throughout the years, which includes when Duke Street celebrated the 1977 Silver Jubilee, and photos of various bread wheatsheafs Colin did to support Saints in Challenge Cup finals in the 1970s.

Throughout his time with the bakery owner and chairman of the Sankey Canal Restoration Society, Mark said that Colin was a friendly and humble man, who couldn't believe the interest in him and the shop.

As Greenalls and its pies were so highly thought of throughout the town, Mark hopes that Sintelliners can head down to St Mary's Market as part of the Reside Arts festival until Monday, December 20.

The Sankey Canal in 1972

(From the collection of Wilf Britch)



No. 17: Canal Bank West, site of Pocket Nook Railway Swing Bridge. This photograph has been taken just after the swing bridge was removed and the tracks lifted. To the left are the buildings of John Varley's Iron Foundry. The rail track leading to Bishop's Bridge is in the background, between the two gas holders. In the foreground are the remains of the railway swing bridge foundations and beyond them, the yard of St Helens Vehicle Dismantlers.



No. 18: Canal Bank West looking towards Pocket Nook Swing Bridge. A very grainy picture showing Pocket Nook Swing Bridge centre background . The tall building on the left is part of John Varley's Iron Foundry. On the right are the buildings of Foresters Glass Works.