



The Manchester Ship Canal a brief history..

men of vision and resolve....

On 1 January, 1894, the massive gates of Eastham locks on the Mersey estuary swung open for the first ships to sail the full 36 miles of the Ship Canal right through to Manchester. Later that year, on 21 May, amidst scenes of great jubilation



Aerial view of Barton swing bridge and the swing aqueduct, where the Bridgewater Canal crosses the Ship Canal.

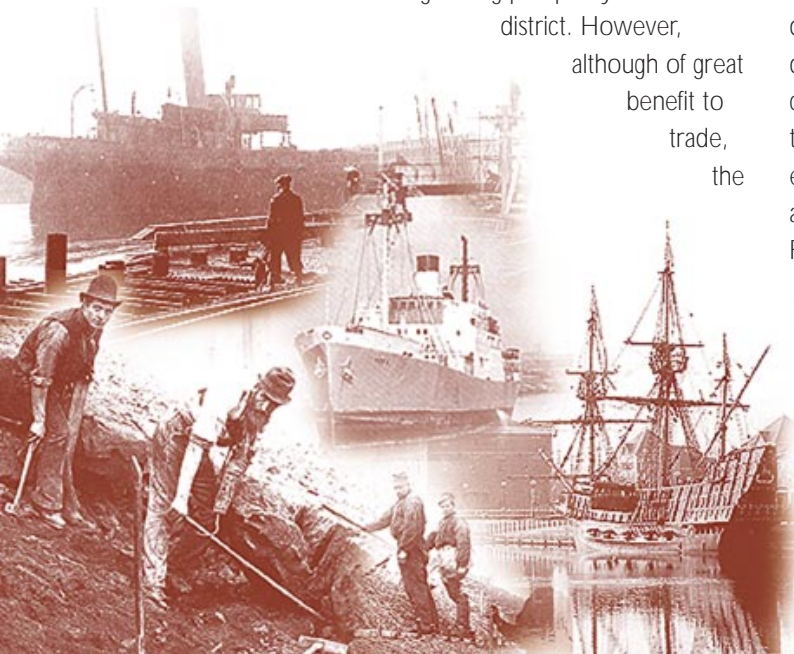
and with the world's press on hand to record the event, Queen Victoria came to Manchester to declare the Canal open formally.

As early as 1660 suggestions had been made that the Rivers Mersey and Irwell should be improved and dredged to make them more easily navigable. The estuary of the Mersey had been used by ships from early times, but never further than Warrington.

In the 1760's the Duke of Bridgewater built a barge canal from his collieries at Worsley to Manchester, which was later extended to Runcorn with access into the Mersey. This canal made engineering history; it was the first to be thrown across a river by aqueduct -

at Barton - and contributed greatly to the growing prosperity of the district. However,

although of great benefit to trade, the



size of the craft that could sail it was, of course, limited and, whilst none came to fruition, various proposals were made for a deep water passage, not least one made in 1825 for a 'ship canal' 45 miles long from the Dee estuary through to south Manchester by way of Lymm and Altrincham.

By the second half of the nineteenth century Manchester was a city in decline, with its trade and manufacturing throttled by the crippling transport charges exacted by the railway companies and the Liverpool Dock Board. No less than four-fifths of Manchester's overseas trade had to pass through Liverpool,



The Canal under construction near Latchford, Warrington, 1890

and the Board exploited its monopoly to the full. To revitalise trade, the proposal to bring in deep sea shipping directly to Manchester was revived, but the difficulties were daunting and there was much scepticism because as well as cost and the immensity of the engineering challenge there was the implacable opposition of Liverpool and the railways, and even in Manchester there were some who doubted that such a scheme could ever be successful.

For a time resolution wavered, but then Daniel Adamson, a Manchester manufacturer of vision and boldness, seized the reins with determined energy. In June, 1882, he called a meeting of prominent civic leaders and businessmen from the surrounding area and by the end of that year a bill was before Parliament seeking the necessary powers to proceed.



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victory and celebration...

Meanwhile, ship canal fever had spread throughout the region. Enthusiastic meetings were held and popular support for the notion grew rapidly. Liverpool and the railways fought the proposal bitterly and twice the bill was rejected. But in 1885, after a three year struggle, it was passed and on his return from London Daniel Adamson was met by a jubilant crowd which presented him with an address, took the horses from his carriage, and man-handled him home.



Navvies' village at Acton Grange - temporary shanty towns were established along the Canal as housing for the workforce.

Cannons were fired, church bells rang out, bands paraded the streets and up to 150,000 people attended the 'Victory Demonstration' at Belle Vue.

So far so good, but next the promoters had to raise £5 million as the first part of the construction costs. They were also required to buy the Bridgewater Canal, all within a two year deadline set by Parliament. The Promoters, after many difficulties, finally succeeded in raising the money - just - and on 11 November, 1887, the first sod was cut and the 'Big Ditch' as the Canal was affectionately known was underway.

Contractors were appointed and work began by building miles of temporary railway track for the distribution of materials and dispersal of the excavated rock and soil. A line of thirty six miles from Eastham to Manchester was completed very quickly and carried a supply train the full length each day.

Mechanical excavators were soon in use along the length of the workings, but could not entirely replace the spade and wheelbarrow. An army of navvies (16,000 at its peak) were

employed, together with stonemasons, carpenters, bricklayers and all the other crafts necessary for such an immense undertaking.



Diving team with pump at Thelwall, November 1890

Then came more difficulties: the contractor died suddenly; violent floods broke through the earthworks destroying months of toil and, in some places, submerging equipment to a depth of 40 feet; and in the winter of 1891



One-armed navy at work. It was inevitable that during the construction of the Canal, some workers would suffer serious accidents. A chain of first aid stations and three base hospitals (temporary buildings of timber) were strategically sited along the line of the Canal, and a Liverpool orthopaedic surgeon, Robert Jones, later to become Sir Robert Jones, was appointed to supervise what is thought to be the first organised accident service in the history of British surgery.

the Bridgewater Canal, at that time the fledgling company's only profit making asset, froze over and was impassable for months. Money ran desperately short, and the day was only saved when Manchester City Council stepped in with loans to keep the project alive.



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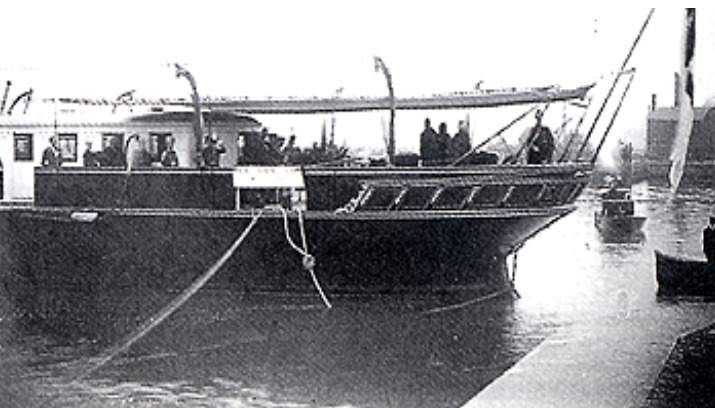
a grand opening...

By November, 1893, however, the canal was at last completely navigable, and on 7 December of that year the directors made the first full passage, setting the seal on the construction of miles of docks and quays, five sets of massive locks, seven swing road bridges, the famous swing aquaduct at Barton and five high-level railway viaducts. Then, on New Year's Day 1894, to mark the commercial opening, Samuel Platts' steam yacht *The Norseman* led a procession of 71 ships from Latchford to the terminal docks at Salford, with *The Pioneer*, a steamer owned by the Co-operative



Mr Samuel Platt's yacht, the *Norseman*, passing Barton swing aqueduct on 1st. January, 1894, the day the Canal opened commercially.

Wholesale Society, having the honour of unloading the first cargo. Later in 1894, on 21 May, Queen Victoria came to

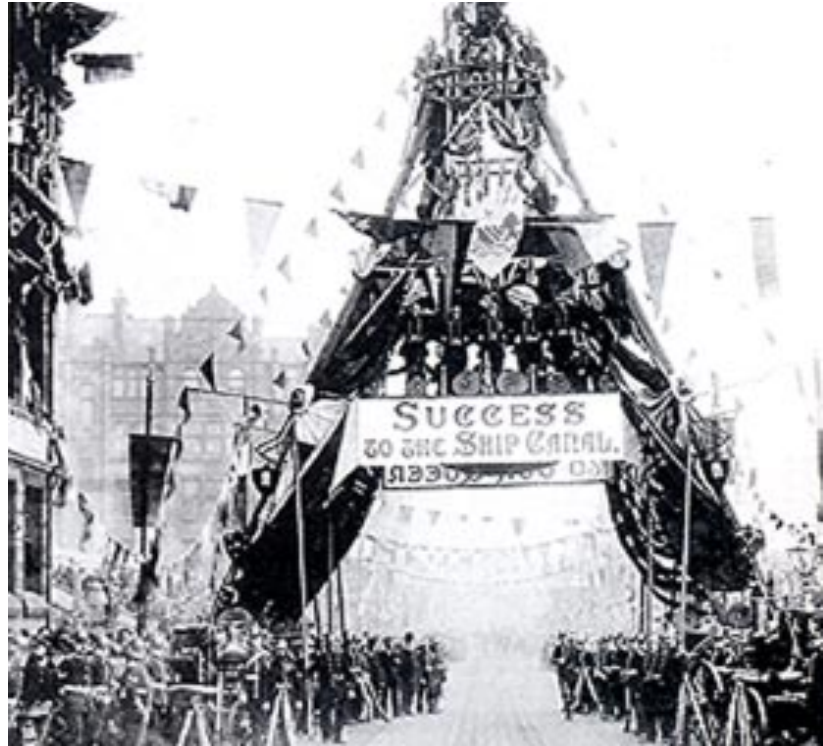


Queen Victoria performs the opening ceremony from on board the Royal yacht *Enchantress*, connected by electric cable to Mode Wheel Locks.

open the Canal formally from the Royal Yacht *Enchantress*. The weather was uncertain, but even so vast crowds gathered to greet Her Majesty and celebrate the occasion, for the Canal was indeed a momentous achievement. Contemporary accounts fittingly described it as 'One of the

greatest pieces of engineering known' and 'One of the greatest victories of the noblest sort'.

The rapid growth in the trade handled quickly justified the faith of the promoters and further, the Canal was the spur



The Fire Brigade erected a triumphal arch of fire escape ladders over Deansgate, 1894.

for the development of Trafford Park as the first purpose-built industrial estate in the country, with the attraction not only of direct deep water access but of a railway system connected both to the national main lines and also to the Ship Canal Company's own extensive network - which eventually grew to be the largest private railway in Britain. To accommodate the increase in shipping, a new dock, over half-a-mile long and formally opened by King Edward VII in 1905, was built on the site that once formed part of the old Manchester Racecourse. Then, in 1909, to cater for deeper draught vessels, the water level of the Canal was raised to give a new depth of 28 feet, with a deepening some 20 years later to 30 feet of the stretch between Eastham and Stanlow to allow the passage of oil tankers to purpose-built oil docks at Stanlow.

Another notable landmark was the opening of the Queen Elizabeth II Dock in 1954. Built alongside the estuary locks to the Mersey, it covers 19 acres and was built specifically to handle petroleum products, chemicals and edible oils in bulk.



renewed prosperity..

The construction of the Ship Canal was arguably the greatest engineering project of Victorian times; it succeeded in making Manchester one of the major ports of the world and contributed immeasurably to the renewed prosperity of the area.



Barton Bridge for Lancashire Circa 1960



MSC Victory, a class four, twin screw tug, with large load.

Nowadays, although there are still sizeable grain and oil and chemical traffics, and new quay facilities have been built at Irlam, the upper reaches of the Canal are less busy. In particular, as the private and public sectors have together made their contributions, Salford Quays has taken shape to bring new vitality and purpose to the former Manchester Docks as they fell into disuse with the switch to containers

and increasingly bigger ships.

But the significance of the Ship Canal was never just Manchester Docks alone, for it is, in fact, a thirty-six mile linear port stretching all the way from the estuary locks at Eastham. With cargo-handling facilities at many points along its course, notably at Queen Elizabeth 11 Dock, Stanlow, Ellesmere Port and Runcorn, the lower reaches still bustle



Trafford Wharfe today: Wharfeside Promenade.

with shipping from countries far and near, and as it enters its second century, the Canal continues as an important economic artery serving the industrial North West, North Wales and the Midlands.

Furthermore, with the Manchester Ship Canal Company now entirely under the wing of Peel Holdings plc, its property activities are additionally a major feature. Notable are its continuing contribution to the regeneration of the former dock estate and its 1m square foot regional shopping centre on 300 acres alongside the M60 at Dimplington.

Unquestionably the Manchester Ship Canal has played a leading part in the development of one of the world's greatest industrial regions. We can look forward to another 100 years of change, progress and development with pride, confident and determined that the heritage handed down through the generations from our Victorian forebears will continue to be honoured.