



THE RISE AND FALL OF THE SANKEY CANAL

The Sankey Canal Restoration Society celebrates its 40th anniversary this year. **Dr David Harrison** tells the story of the pioneering waterways and efforts to revive its fortunes

The Sankey, situated in the north west of England, was the country's first industrial canal. Opened in 1757, it originally ran from St Helens to the River Mersey at Sankey Bridges, just west of Warrington, but was later extended to Fiddlers Ferry (in 1762) and then to Widnes (1830). It was extremely successful during the heady period of the Industrial Revolution, though, as we shall see, its end was a culmination of abandonment and decay.

The early years

The opening of the canal was an investment opportunity for the likes of John Ashton, a Liverpool merchant and owner of a salt works in Hale, and Sarah Clayton, owner of the Parr Colliery and daughter of Liverpool merchant alderman William Clayton. Clayton and Ashton benefited extensively from the Sankey Canal, as coal could be supplied quickly and cheaply to the port of Liverpool. However, it wasn't long before other industries opened up along the banks of the route, with potteries, copper-smelting, glass-making and chemical



TOP: The Sankey Viaduct. ABOVE LEFT: The 1831 etching of the Sankey Viaduct, from the Newton Common Lock. ABOVE RIGHT: A map showing the Sankey Canal.



factories establishing themselves successfully and making full use of the new water transport.

Indeed, it was this progressive business acumen that was the drive in creating the canal. By the 1750s, the turnpike roads in the area, renowned for their poor quality, had seen a rise in tolls, so getting coal from the south Lancashire coalfield to Liverpool was tiresome and expensive. Water transportation from St Helens to Liverpool was considered in the early 1750s, and after Liverpool Dock engineer Henry Berry and William Taylor



Red Wheel heritage plaques on the Sankey Viaduct.



The Winwick Quay section, showing the maintenance yard in all its glory.



A scene of neglect the Winwick Quay section of the canal, slowly being filled with rubbish c1976.

had been commissioned to survey the possibility of making the Sankey Brook navigable, an act of Parliament was passed on 20th March 1755, and Berry was put to work. Being a local, Berry was aware of the problems with the Sankey Brook (which flowed from St Helens to the Mersey at Sankey, near Warrington) and opted to cut an entirely new waterway alongside, using the landscape of the Sankey Valley and utilising the water supply from Carr Mill Dam. Having the support of main shareholder John Ashton, Berry began work on the new canal on the 5th September 1755.

The canal became hugely profitable. As early as 1761, the Sankey Brook Navigation declared its first dividend and continued to pay an average annual dividend of 33½% until the emergence of the railways. The success of the canal can be seen in the increase from 17,600 tons transported in 1759 to 186,000 tons in 1820.

Advent of the railways

However, it was the railways that signalled the steady decline of the canal. In 1830 the Liverpool-Manchester Railway opened, crossing the canal by the monumental Sankey Viaduct at Newton-le-Willows, constructed by engineer George Stephenson. As local historian and vice chairman of the Sankey Canal Restoration Society, Dr Barrie Pennington, puts it, the viaduct became “a cathedral to the Industrial Revolution” and, at the time, the location became a focus for artists, the scene of the first canal drifting underneath the mighty nine arches being captured forever in a series of romantic views.

Despite this romanticism, the canal faced fierce competition; by 1845, an amalgamation with the canal and the St Helens & Runcorn Gap Railway created the St Helens Canal & Railway Company and, in 1864, this company was absorbed into the London & North Western Railway.



The same section of the canal in 1979, after the canal was infilled.

Despite the canal being effectively rebuilt during the 1860s, as it was suffering from erosion due to chemical pollution, its fortunes continued to decline as a result of the growing rail network. By 1931, the canal was closed north of the Sankey Sugar Works, which was situated on the banks of the canal just below the Sankey Viaduct. The sugar traffic on the canal finally ceased in 1959, and the canal officially closed in 1963.

The wilderness years

When the canal closed, the rot really set in. Certain sections became cut off as parts of the canal were infilled, the water became stagnant and the Winwick stretch became a dumping ground for domestic and industrial waste.

In 1973 the M62 motorway was built over the canal, effectively creating an isolated stretch. A little further downstream in Dallam, the canal bed was used for the flow of the Sankey Brook, and by the mid-1970s, the especially created Winwick Landfill Scheme allowed dumping for a fee in the dried canal bed north of the M62. It wasn't long before the dumping occurred in the section to the south of the motorway, where the historic Winwick Quay maintenance yard was and, as a result of this decay and neglect, the Winwick stretch was duly filled in. The same occurred at what was arguably the most historical and well-known section of the canal, where it ran under the mighty Sankey Viaduct at Newton-le-



ABOVE: The 'logo' for the St. Helens Canal and Railway Company, 1845.

Willows. The once-romantic setting for early 19th-century artists was now missing its canal.

The remaining empty lock cottages along the neglected canal were vandalised and, in the case of the cottages at Newton Common and Hulme, succumbed to arson and were demolished. By the end of the 1970s, a swathe of the once-glorious canal was either infilled or suffering from neglect. Local fishing organisations managed to save certain sections, like at Penkford Bridge and at Hey Lock in Newton-le-Willows, and though a

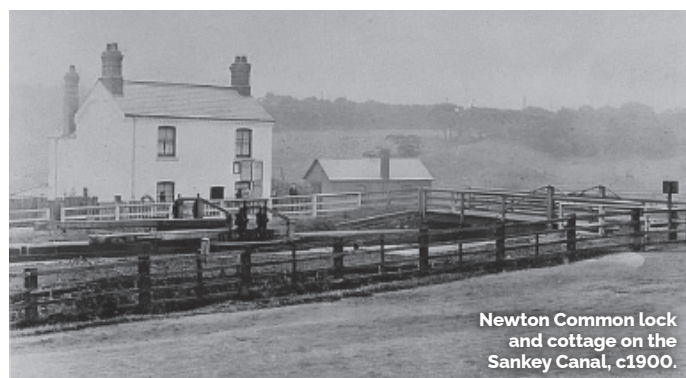


A sign showing the Winwick Landfill Scheme, c1975.

large stretch of the canal from Bewsey Lock to Spike Island at Widnes still remained in water, it was densely overgrown in parts and secure concrete road bridges had replaced the old swing-bridges, disabling the canal of any suggestion of leisure boat traffic.

A new dawn

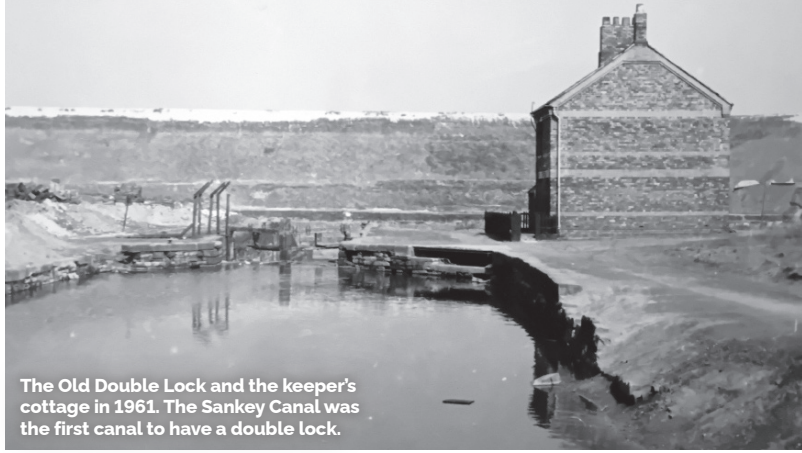
By the early 1980s, the Sankey Valley Linear Park had been founded, which stretched along the full length of the old canal, and two yacht havens were created in isolated sections at Fiddlers Ferry and Spike Island. In 1985, the Sankey Canal Restoration Society was founded, with the aims of restoring the canal, preserving the remaining stretches and educating local people on its historical importance.



Newton Common lock and cottage on the Sankey Canal, c1900.

LOOKING BACK

The recently excavated Newton Common cottage, a project by SCRS.



The Old Double Lock and the keeper's cottage in 1961. The Sankey Canal was the first canal to have a double lock.

Over the past four decades, projects by SCRS have included regular work parties, with the aim of managing and maintaining the remaining stretches of the canal and its historical features, and reporting on its work in its quarterly magazine, which goes out to all members.

One recent project included the excavation of Newton Common lock cottage, which revealed the foundations of the old building and resulted in a recent book that was funded by the Creative Underground Grant through St Helens Borough Council. A similar project in the 1990s witnessed the excavation of Hulme lock cottage, and the preservation of the foundations as an archaeological feature as part of the heritage trail along the linear park

Other work done by SCRS includes lobbying the three main local borough councils of St Helens, Warrington and Halton to ensure preservation and to promote restoration where possible. Education is also a central part of promoting the canal, and the society regularly gives talks to local societies and groups, and a school history pack and animation was recently produced through grants awarded by St Helens Borough Council, both specifically aimed at local schools.

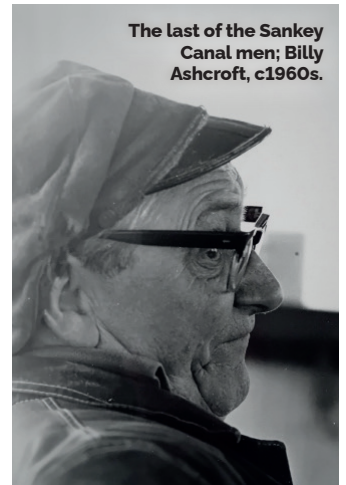
Rocket 200

Work continues to promote the canal and to restore it. It is hoped that the Rocket 200 venture can create interest in restoring the stretch of canal under the Sankey Viaduct at Newton-le-Willows, celebrating the first public railway over the first industrial canal, and recreating a unique visionary monument of the Industrial Revolution.

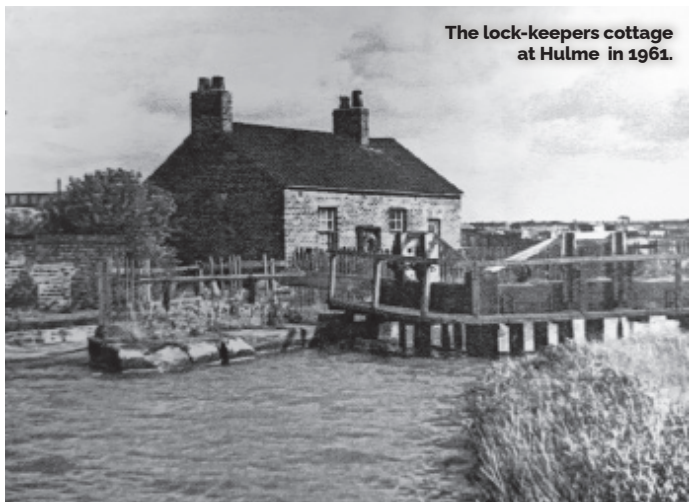


A.E. Burton passing through the railway swing-bridge at Sankey Bridges, c1950s. The bridge-keeper's house and the Sloop Hotel can be seen in the background.

In the words of Dr Barrie Pennington: "Two episodes of transport history commemoration should revive the canal's story and fortunes. The Rocket 200 project will celebrate the 200th anniversary of the Rainhill Trials in 2029 and the opening of the first inter-city railway in the world between Liverpool and Manchester in 2030. Without doubt, because of its location, there will be a focus of attention on the canal that spurred the canal revolution and accelerated an industrial movement that spanned the globe. SCRS wants to take advantage of the events planned for these celebrations, ensuring that the canal's contribution to that revolution is recorded and revered by a new generation. For under arch number three of the Sankey Viaduct is a place of great history. It is where the world took a new direction and took on a new dimension; where water and sail gave way to iron and steam; where engineering genius became manifest through muscle and sweat and where the human condition changed forever."



The last of the Sankey Canal men; Billy Ashcroft, c1960s.



The lock-keepers cottage at Hulme in 1961.



The remains of the abandoned Hulme keeper's cottage c1978, after vandalism. The canal is in a poor condition.

For information on the Sankey Canal Restoration Society, its work and becoming a member, visit sankeycanal.co.uk.