



MANCHESTER CRUISING ASSOCIATION

The Manchester Ship Canal

Ray Howells 21 September 2006

Ray joined the Manchester Ship Canal Company in 1973 and was Chief Engineer from 1986 until he retired in 2004.

He started with the canal's prehistory - many of us were surprised it had one. Small ships had always been able to reach Warrington up the Mersey so the first link from Manchester to the sea came when the Mersey and Irwell Navigation, linking it to Warrington, was opened in 1736. This, and the slightly later Bridgewater Canal, connected Manchester to the sea but they did not have the capacity that later became necessary.

The ship canal originated from a blunt appraisal of costs and some characteristic Mancunian entrepreneurial spirit. The costs of transporting goods by sea from the Manchester area to the other side of the work were dominated by the costs of getting them to Liverpool and the charges made to load them there. The solution was to give direct access to the sea for big ships and, in 1882, a group of local worthies selected a plan by the civil engineer Edward Leader Williams for a canal. The project needed an Act of Parliament and it took three years to get this (although a blink in modern terms, it would have been even quicker if it hadn't been bitterly opposed by Liverpool). The construction started two years later and the canal was opened on 1 January 1894 just about 11 years from its conception. As Ray said, it now takes that long to build a bypass round a middling village.

The scale of the construction work was astounding and there were plenty of ancient photographs showing the steam cranes and dredgers, some of the 173 steam locomotives running on 228 miles of temporary track and a few of the 17, 000 workers. It was one of the last feats of the enormous band of "navigators" who constructed our canals and, apart from sheer scale, it had some notable engineering firsts. Perhaps the best known one is the Barton Swing Aqueduct – the first one in the world.

Manchester became Britain's third busiest port – even though 40 miles from the sea. Oh and an engineer got some credit: Edward Leader Williams, who had seen the project through, was knighted by Queen Victoria at the canal's official opening.

The canal's catchment area extends over around 1000 square miles of the northwest and the managing the water and the sediment it brings with it continuing engineering challenges. The improvements drainage brought by the canal are sometimes forgotten: flooding was common along the Mersey until it was constructed. In November 1866, for example, much of Warrington was under water.

It's difficult to do justice to the quality of the presentation in print. It was altogether jollier than this reads. Perhaps one of Ray's stories from his days as Chief Engineer will give a flavour.

He was sent to an incident where a ship had clonked a part of his canal to investigate the damage – which would be expensive for the ship owners. He found the ship with a solitary and disconsolate Irishman on the deck.

“Are you the master?” he asked

Came the doleful reply from a man who had just made a career-threatening error:

“Yes sir. I am that for the moment. For the moment”

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