

Sandbach History Society
Report of the January 2023 meeting
Les Green and Bob Cannell: The History of the Manchester Ship Canal

The subject of the recent meeting of Sandbach History Society, via Zoom, was The History of the Manchester Ship Canal, and was given by two volunteers with the Daniel Adamson Preservation Society, Les Green and Bob Cannell.

Les Green was born within 100 yards of Latchford Locks in Warrington and, as a schoolboy, spent much of his time watching the passing ships and Bob Cannell was born at Old Trafford within sight and sound of Manchester Docks.

Mr Green explained how the damp climate of Lancashire, around Manchester, provided good conditions for the processing of cotton. But the raw material was imported, mainly from American cotton fields, and transport from Liverpool was the problem. Local rivers, like the Mersey and Irwell were made navigable in the 18th century and the Bridgewater canal was extended to reach the Mersey. But Manchester was expanding at such a rate that the vessels, usually small sailing “flats”, and the problems of tidal flow and silting, meant that the supply routes were totally inadequate. Also, charges imposed by the Port of Liverpool for handling goods were thought to be excessive by Manchester businesses.

The idea of linking Manchester with the sea by a navigable canal had been around for some time but it was in 1882 that Daniel Adamson, a Manchester manufacturer, championed the idea and brought together leaders of the business community, politicians and civil engineers to put a proposal to Parliament.

A campaign was organised to gain public support but it failed to do so and, with opposition from Liverpool shippers and MPs, the proposal was rejected by Parliament on two separate occasions, in 1883 and 1884. The bill was finally passed in 1885 and in 1887 that the first sod was cut by Lord Egerton of Tatton who had taken over the chairmanship of the Manchester Ship Canal Company from Daniel Adamson.

The construction was overseen by contracting engineer Thomas Walker who divided the 36-mile route into eight sections with one engineer responsible for each. Shanty towns were constructed and hospitals, churches and welfare services provided. Whilst 16,000 men were employed on the project, Mr Green explained that the motive power used in the construction was mainly steam power – steam-powered cranes, excavators and trains. Some of the men worked on donkey engines (a steam-powered winch) and they were supplied with special coats which became known as donkey jackets.

Mr Green pointed out that it was a massive civil engineering project and some innovative engineering solutions had to be worked out. Specialists were brought over from Holland to deal with problems of running sand and peat, for example. River courses were taken into the canal system – Mersey, Irwell, Bollin and Weaver – and rather than the canal

having to be lined, as was the custom to save water, the problem was more to do with disposing of excess water.

In 1891, the canal company exhausted its capital of £8 million when only half the construction work was completed. The company approached Manchester Corporation with an appeal for funds and the corporation decided to lend the necessary £3 million, and in 1892 a further £2 million. The canal opened to its first traffic on 1st January 1894 and Queen Victoria performed the official opening on 21st May. The final cost was near £15 million (equivalent to about £1.7 billion today).

Bob Cannell explained the operational aspects of the canal. Photographs of the entrance to the ship canal at Eastham showed the huge size of vessels which the canal could accept – there were apparently only five ships in the world at that time which couldn't pass through the canal. He also referred to the engineering challenges in getting railways and roads across the canal. Along its length the engineers designed 7 swing road bridges, 4 high-level road bridges, 5 high-level railway bridges and 5 sets of huge locks. At Barton, a stone bridge had carried the Bridgewater canal over the River Irwell but a solution was now required on a much bigger scale. The construction of a swing aqueduct was the answer and is still the only one in the world and is a listed building.

Existing ports on the Mersey like Runcorn and Ellesmere Port prospered when ships of 500 to 800 tons could be handled without the problems of high tides/low tides and three tugs were purchased to assist shipping in the docks and locks and through the canal.

Located 36 miles inland, Manchester had become the third biggest port in the UK and, in the 1930s, Trafford Park became the largest industrial estate in Europe. The canal handled a wide range of ships and cargoes, from coastal vessels to European and continental cargo liners. Manchester Liners, founded in 1898, pioneered the regular passage of ocean-going vessels along the canal. Cargoes with everything for commerce in the north west came via the canal – cotton, grain, tobacco, newsprint, timber, copper, frozen meat, etc., and similarly going out – textiles, cars, machinery, textiles, etc. The biggest ship to pass through the canal was MV Carchester. With a length of 512 feet and width of 63.5 feet, passing through the locks above Eastham with a length of 600 feet and width of 65 feet was a tight squeeze, commented Mr Cannell.

Photographs of Manchester Docks (although in Salford, Manchester had insisted upon having its own name after the injection of cash for the building of the canal) showed it to be a major employer – over 5,000 at one time including its own private police force and fire brigade. The canal was serviced by the longest private railway in Great Britain. With the canal embracing flowing rivers, silting was something which had to be kept under control. Dredging took place constantly and the dredged material was deposited near Thelwall which is now a Site of Special Scientific Interest and a habitat for many species of birds and other wildlife.

Inevitably, with all the traffic the canal was handling, there were accidents. In 1969 the MV Manchester Courage collided with the lock gates at Irlam and it was eight weeks before the damage could be repaired. Perhaps the saddest, said Mr Cannell, was at Bobs Lane Ferry, Cadishead, in 1970 when petrol, which was being loaded onto a ship, leaked into the canal and floated downstream to the point where the ferry was transporting men across the canal to go to work. The vapour was ignited – it was said, but not proved, that a passenger on the ferry lit a cigarette – and as a result five people died and others were injured.

With the growth of containerisation in the 1970s and 1980s, ships became bigger and the canal couldn't take them. In 1984 the Manchester Docks closed and in 1987 the Ship Canal Company was acquired by the Peel Group. Development in that area has been extensive with the building of Media City at Salford Quays, for example.

To make way for new developments buildings had to be demolished. One of the biggest was a 40,000 ton grain silo. It proved so difficult that four demolition companies went bankrupt in the process. Derek "Blaster" Bates of Sandbach was hired and, turning up on his motorbike with the sidecar full of dynamite and with detonators strapped around his waist, proceeded to demolish the building.

Ambitious plans for development are on-going. One small project is the installation of Archimedes' screws at the weirs and locks to generate hydroelectricity. The whole length of the canal is now a green eco- corridor with the return of wildlife.

Mr Cannell pointed out that whilst the upper reaches have become almost devoid of traffic the lower reaches are still busy and profitable with salt, petrochemicals and scrap metal, amongst other things, being loaded and unloaded.

A unique link with the history of the Manchester Ship Canal is "The Danny" (the *Daniel Adamson*), a tugboat built in 1903, abandoned in 1984 and saved in 2004. As the *Ralph Brocklebank* she was one of the three tugs purchased by the canal company in the early days. In 1936 she became the directors' launch and the interior was fitted out in the Art Deco style. The ship is now fully restored and is on the National Historic Ships Register. Volunteers operate it and it is available for guided tours, cruises and private hire – see www.thedanny.co.uk

The next meeting of Sandbach History Society, by Zoom, is on Tuesday 7th February when Graham Dodd will give an illustrated talk about the History of Crewe Hall. Further details see www.sandbachhistorysociety.org.uk

John Higgins