

Sandbach History Society: Report of the January 2025 meeting

Speaker: Anthony Annakin-Smith

At the online January meeting of Sandbach History Society, Dr Anthony Annakin-Smith gave a fascinating talk entitled "Parkgate, port and resort". He said that most people who visit Parkgate, which is situated on the west side of the Wirral facing across to Flintshire in Wales, now associate it with ice-creams, birdlife, and the beautiful sunsets across the Dee estuary. It is also known for its buildings such as the black and white Mostyn House School and the many public houses. However, in the past it was a major port for passengers travelling between England and Ireland as well as being a popular sea-bathing resort, fishing, and shipbuilding centre.

Dr Annakin-Smith used some old mariners' charts to show that in the seventeenth century the River Dee used to run along the English side of the estuary. Opposite where Parkgate is now situated, the water was unusually deep at eight fathoms (48 feet), so this was a favourite anchorage spot. Goods were loaded onto smaller vessels and landed on shore at a place called Beer House which is at the north end of the present village of Parkgate. The area where the village now stands was a deer park belonging to the Neston estate and there was a park gate which gave the village its name.

In the eighteenth century Parkgate was a village which was growing fast. It soon became the principal port for travel between England and Dublin. Ireland was then part of Britain and was dominated by Protestant landowners and its parliament supervised from London. Landowners and officials travelled back and forth from London to Dublin which was then the second largest English speaking city in the world. Ships would travel further afield to the Baltic or across the Atlantic, but most sailings were across the Irish Sea.

In 1737 the course of the River Dee was diverted and canalised on the Welsh side allowing better access from what is now Connah's Quay to the port of Chester along a straight eight mile channel. As a result, the river moved over to the Welsh side and land was reclaimed and enclosed on the English side using embankments. However downstream the river still flowed near Parkgate and Dr Annakin-Smith used two illustrated maps from 1771 and 1790 to show a very busy and bustling port. Shipbuilding was carried out at the southern end of the village and the 1790 map showed three vessels built at Parkgate: the Princess Royal, the Queen, and the King.

There were three kinds of vessels that used Parkgate in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Firstly, there were the Royal Yachts such as those that were built locally which were used not by the monarch but by his representatives, the Lord Lieutenant of Ireland and also senior politicians and clergy. There was continual back and forth between London and Dublin and these yachts sailed regularly.

Secondly there were the merchant ships which carried goods to and from Ireland and sailed when needed. Goods such as lead, cheese, coal and foodstuffs went on the ships to Dublin, and on their return the ships would carry linen and livestock as well as Catholic Irish labourers. The labourers were travelling to England to work at harvest time and returned to Ireland to bring in the harvest which was later there. Some ships went further afield and recently the owners of the Seven Steps House in Parkgate uncovered a mural showing a ship leaving the tropics. Dr Annakin-Smith's research has shown a ship's painter used to live at Seven Steps and this was probably his work.

Thirdly there were the packet ships which were introduced in the 1780s and provided a fast regular service across the Irish sea. These operated from Parkgate for about thirty years. At that time passengers travelling from London to Dublin would travel by stage coach to Chester and then had a choice of sailing from Parkgate or from Holyhead. For many the proximity of Parkgate to Chester was an advantage as the long road to Holyhead was not in good condition. However, the sea voyage from Parkgate along the north coast of Wales was dangerous due to the strong north-west winds.

In the early eighteenth century, many well-known passengers passed through Parkgate. In 1742 George Frederick Handel travelled to Dublin to give the first performance of the Messiah. He left from Holyhead but returned via Parkgate. The author Jonathan Swift, who was Dean of St Patrick's Cathedral in Dublin preferred to travel via Parkgate as English was spoken there unlike in Holyhead. The preacher John Wesley also travelled to and from Ireland via Parkgate a total of nine times in the mid-1700s.

Shipping continued through to the 19th century, but Parkgate was also becoming popular as a seaside resort. Immersion in seawater and also drinking it was seen as health enhancing and it was fashionable for the upper-class to travel to Parkgate for this purpose. There were bathing machines to take them to the sea and people called dippers led bathers into the water. Hoods were provided on the bathing machines to preserve their modesty as Dr Annakin-Smith said that most people bathed naked in the sea.

One visitor was Emma Hamilton, the future mistress of Lord Nelson. She was born nearby in Ness but moved to London, rose through society, and became well-known. She suffered from a skin complaint and in the 1780s was advised to come to Parkgate to take the waters and drink sea water.

In the early nineteenth century Parkgate became an increasingly fashionable seaside resort with a parade along the front for promenading. There were many inns and an entertainment centre at Balcony House with billiard rooms and assembly rooms for lectures and dances. In order to attract visitors, local publicans would sometimes send word to Chester that there was a ship at Parkgate ready to sail to Ireland. Passengers then rushed there only to find there was no boat, but they had to find accommodation and food which the publicans supplied.

Over time the road to Holyhead from Chester was improved and Parkgate's fortunes as a port declined. In the estuary, shifting sands and the diversion of the River Dee to the Welsh side, meant Parkgate became less accessible, and the last large vessels sailed in 1815. Liverpool took over as the main departure point for Ireland and in the 1830s New Brighton opened and became a major seaside resort which eclipsed Parkgate.

Dr Annakin-Smith said that there was a mini-revival in the village's fortunes when the railway arrived in 1860. This benefitted the local fishing industry as cockles and other shellfish could now be easily transported to market. Fishing continued until the end of the second World War and today the village continues as a place for people to visit for days out.

Over the years the estuary has continued to silt up and this was accelerated by the planting of common cord grass at Connah's Quay in the 1930s to stabilise the mudflats. The grass spread rapidly down the estuary causing further silting and created the marsh area next to Parkgate. Very occasionally the sea still comes in when there is an exceptional high tide and the right weather conditions. This acts as a reminder of Parkgate's past as a major port.