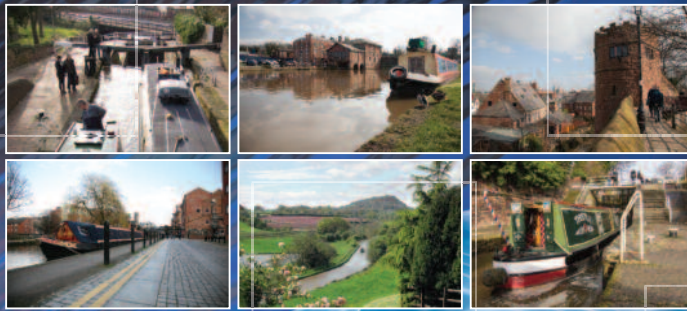


Cheshire West & Chester Council

The Chester Canal

Conservation Area



Front
cover



Cheshire West
and Chester

The Chester Canal

The canal in Chester is the earliest part of the Shropshire Union system, an amalgamation of various individual canals, each with different ambitions and strategic objectives. The Chester Canal itself was promoted by local interests keen to capitalise on the revival of the Port of Chester following the canalisation of the tidal Dee in the 1730s by constructing a barge canal suitable for local river craft to provide a direct connection to the Cheshire salt towns.

Surveyed and engineered by **Samuel Weston**, the canal proceeded apace during the 1770s. By 1776 the line was completed from the Dee only to grind to a halt at Beeston. The company, having exhausted its funds, not least on the ambitious engineering works involved in rising from the then tidal lower basin (only enclosed by the addition of a river lock in 1802) through Chester, including the Northgate cutting and eleven broad locks.



These locks incorporated an impressive five rise staircase which was at the time the greatest such construction in the kingdom. Construction later re-commenced up the Gowy valley by a further series of locks including double rise staircases at Beeston and Bunbury, beyond which the Cheshire

Plain was readily traversed to reach a terminal basin at Nantwich by 1779.

The Chester Canal Company's objective of reaching the growing salt towns of Middlewich, Sandbach and Winsford, to make a connection to Brindley's strategic "grand cross" of canals linking the Mersey, Trent, Severn and Thames. This was frustrated by the vigorous opposition of the Grand Trunk Company, seeking to protect their route to the Mersey and the emerging port of Liverpool. Denied access to its hinterland and plagued by the failure of the locks constructed on Beeston's notorious "running sands", the Chester Canal failed to generate a commercial return and within only two decades of construction lapsed into obscurity and decrepitude.

Salvation was in part delivered by the Ellesmere Canal Company, seeking to provide a connection from the Dee and Mersey to the Severn. The Wirral Line, engineered by Telford and linking Mersey and Dee through the Backford Gap, was the initial phase of this project. Completed in 1795, it made a connection with the Mersey through locks at Whitby, where the Shropshire town of Ellesmere's new port was to be established for onward transhipment to seagoing and estuarine vessels.

The canal's construction to a broad gauge provided a passage for wide barges from the Mersey to Nantwich and lifted the Chester Canal from its moribund state. However, the canal remained an essentially local waterway dead ending in a town now eclipsed by its rivals lower down the Weaver and in the Dane valley.

Having exhausted its capital on the engineering triumphs of the Welsh aqueducts, the Ellesmere Canal Company abandoned its ambitions as a national player. The company looked to find an outlet to its new port by a circuitous connection eastwards from its branch to Whitchurch to the Chester Canal at Hurleston, near Nantwich, completed in 1805. By this circuitous route, the future of the Chester Canal was secured, providing an outlet for the mineral wealth of North East Wales but only by narrow boat. The Ellesmere Canal having reverted to a narrow canal as a cost saving measure.

Connection of the isolated Ellesmere system to the national canal network was however another 25 years away. The Birmingham and Liverpool Junction Canal completed in 1834 represented the swan song of the canal age but by connecting the Chester Canal at Nantwich with the Birmingham system at Wolverhampton incorporated the former as part of a nationally strategic route, connecting Birmingham directly to the Mersey.

The construction of Middlewich Branch from a junction with the Chester Canal at Barbridge provided the long sought connection to the salt towns and beyond, including the Potteries. The new destinations in the Midlands provided

the impetus for the substantial growth of the facilities at Ellesmere Port.

These and other canals were united as the Shropshire Union Railways & Canal Company in 1846, which soon passed into the hands of the London and North Western Railway. Nevertheless traffic levels were maintained throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries, suffering a steady decline in the interwar years on the company disbanding its dedicated carrying fleet in 1921. The last commercial traffic, carrying oil from Stanlow to the West Midlands, ceased in 1957.

During the interwar years Christleton provided the location for two pioneer hire boat operations - the harbinger of today's revival of the inland waterways. Now administered by the recently formed Canal & River Trust the canal continues to provide attractive cruising waters.

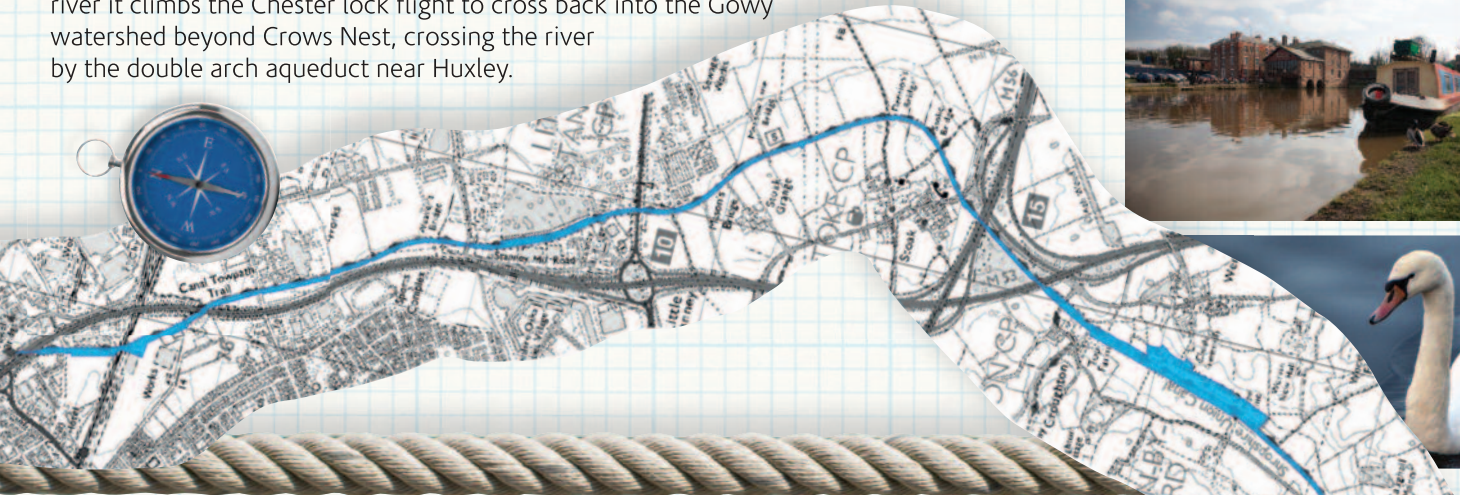
Designated Area

The conservation area is based on the route of the original Chester Canal, but also includes the Wirral Line of the Ellesmere Canal.

The area's border broadly adopts a linear format, closely following the margins of the canal. This boundary usually reflects the Canal & River Trust's ownership but in places, usually of high townscape, landscape or historic interest, is extended to include adjoining land. Where the canal is already included within a designated conservation area, for example at Ellesmere Port Docks, Chester City, Broughton Canalside, Christleton and Tilstone Bank conservation areas, the existing boundaries are maintained.

The Route Described

The canal broadly follows the course of The River Gowy from its confluence with the Mersey in the marshlands to the east of Ellesmere Port - across the Cheshire plain to climb through the incised valley from Beeston to Bunbury. Beyond this in the shallow cutting at Wardle it crosses into the watershed of the Weaver. To pass through Chester Gap the route makes a significant dogleg leaving the Gowy to pass through the Backford Gap into the watershed of the Dee, where having made a connection with that river it climbs the Chester lock flight to cross back into the Gowy watershed beyond Crows Nest, crossing the river by the double arch aqueduct near Huxley.



The canal commences at the historic canal port of Ellesmere Port at the former River Lock, where the lighthouse which guided vessels from the river, still survives. Although the complex of basins survives relatively intact, the loss to fire in 1970 of Telford's iconic multiple arched warehouse that facilitated transhipment between upper and lower basins, together with the adjoining pottery warehouse and the subsequent demolition of the lower hydraulic pumping station in the

1970s represents a significant loss to the visual and historic integrity of the complex. Significant elements survive in the form of the island warehouse; upper hydraulic pumping station; toll house, workshop, boatyard and stable ranges, and residential elements including Porters Rows and the impressive higher status Georgian townhouses of Lower Mersey Street.

The canal provides a notable greenfinger through areas of 20th

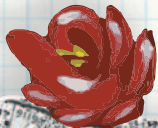
century industrial expansion to emerge into open countryside above the Gowy marshes beyond Stanney.

The canal's course is punctuated by many picturesque hump backed bridges in brick, particularly in the vicinity of Stoak, where the iron span of the "pretty bridge" at Caughall provides a notable exception. The canal enters more rolling country as it traverses the Backford Gap to Mollington Road Bridge.

Beyond Mollington Road Bridge it then passes through Chester's urban fringe, to arrive at Tower Wharf. This area is of great visual and historic interest, featuring a series of Basins; the branch canal to the Dee falling through a series of locks; the historic boatyard complex and covered dry dock where the Canal Company built and maintained its carrying fleet. The original Ellesmere Canal Company's offices, beside Telford's Warehouse, had covered loading facilities that spanned the canal

on brick arches. Immediately beyond, the canal intersects the original line of the Chester Canal to climb dramatically through the three surviving locks of the original five rise staircase. Situated here is the with wide eaved, hip roofed lock cottage.

Emerging from the locks the canal passes through the deep rock cut Northgate cutting beneath Chester's City Walls and then passes beneath the King Charles Tower.



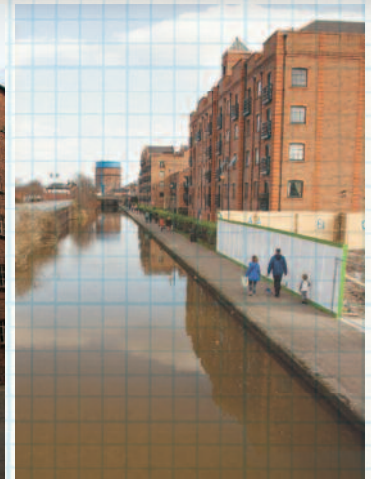


The canal then emerges on a long straight terminated by Chester's waterworks tower and lined by mills, factories and warehouses originally reliant on the canal for transport. Notable amongst these are the Lead Shot Tower (virtually all that remains of the extensive Lead Works on the site); the 19th century 'Steam Mill' - the site of an early application of steam power for Frosts Mill and then as Miln's Seed Warehouse (erroneously branded as the Steam Mill).

From here the canal climbs through five locks passing through suburbia to emerge at the top of the Chester flight in the more rural surroundings of Christleton. The locks are notable for the survival of their accompanying lock houses, with the sole exception of Christleton which has been demolished. Most, at Hoole Lane, Chemistry and Greenfield, are simple small cottages of L-shaped plan. However the cottage at Tarvin Road Lock is a more considered affair featuring wide eaves, a distinctive central bay with arched

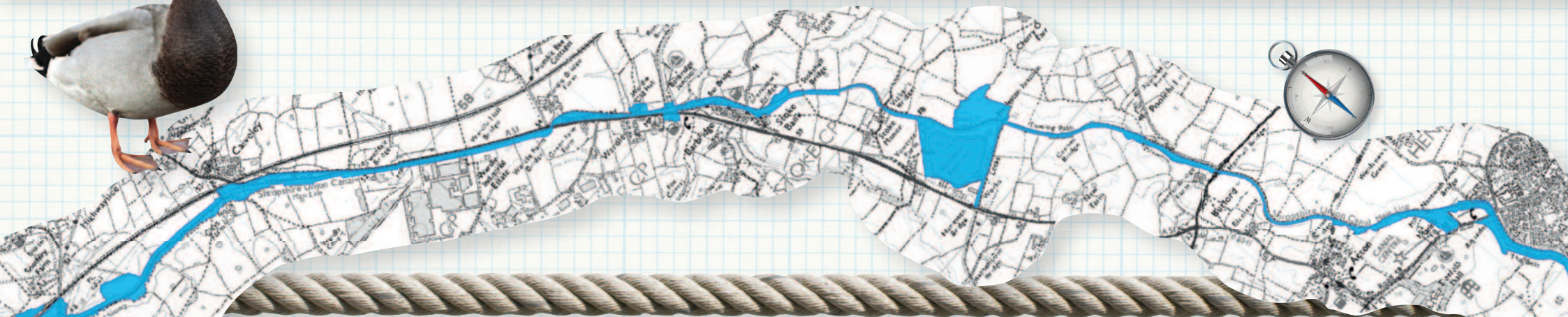
recess that is reflected in the shape of the first floor windows. This scene is further enhanced by a distinctive circular lengthsmen's hut with domed brick roof, the first of the three surviving on the Chester Canal.

Above the locks the long (eight mile) pound commences with the canal passing the former mills at Christleton and Waverton now converted to residences but indicating the past importance of the canal as an artery of commerce.



Map 2





With the crag of Beeston Castle beckoning, the canal passes through typical Cheshire dairy country on this eight mile level which culminates at Wharton's Lock where the Castle provides an impressive backdrop. The pound features many of Weston's elegant brick humpback bridges of wide sweeping span. The river Gowry passes beneath the canal at the double arch aqueduct at Huxley from which point canal and river flow in close proximity to Bunbury. The river was notable for its many water mills and at Shady Oak and Tilstone Bank, surviving mill buildings contribute to distinctive canalside compositions.

At Wharton's Lock, notable for the destruction of its lock cottage by an errant German bomb, the canal enters a more intimate landscape closed by

gently rolling hills and of a more wooded aspect. Beeston Wharf, formerly a temporary terminus whilst funds were garnered to resume construction, retains its warehouse dating from this period. The adjoining reinforced concrete bridge is typical of those produced by the Council in the 1930s and it is to be hoped that it's restrained elegance might soon be better appreciated.

From here the canal originally rose through a two-rise staircase, similar to that at Bunbury. Persistent problems, including collapse as a consequence of Beeston's notorious "running sands", led Telford to design a novel rigid iron chambered lock constructed in 1828. With the addition of, some distance away on firmer ground, a conventional stone chambered lock complete with

typical L-shaped lock house and another circular lengthman's hut. To the north the old route may still be traced to this day.

The canal continues to pass through attractive wooded country to Bunbury passing through the attractive hamlet of Tilstone Bank which provides a delightful ensemble of waterside buildings and structures, including lock and lengthman's hut (sadly the lock cottage has been demolished), hump backed bridge, mill and mill house. The whole overlooked from the higher ground to the north by a fine example of a Victorian estate farm and lesser cottages.

The Canal makes its final ascent to the level pound to Nantwich by way of the two rise Bunbury staircase, which provides a set piece canal scheme.

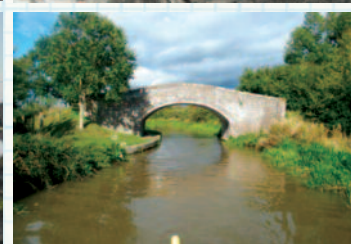
The locks being flanked by an impressive range of stables and, on the opposite bank, a pleasant double fronted canal cottage, with the bottom of the locks enclosed by a brick warehouse and original canal bridge. At Calveley the interchange warehouse that facilitated transfer between the canal and adjoining railway still stands.

At Barbridge, the Middlewich Branch joins the Chester Canal beneath the broad span of the towing path bridge. Although the junction scheme has been diminished by the loss of the timber warehouse that formerly spanned the narrows beyond the junction, the simple but elegant Georgian junction house still stands beside the bridge.

The Canal continues its journey through pastoral country until reaching Hurlston reservoir – a major balancing

reservoir engineered by Telford. At Hurlston Junction the Ellesmere Canal rises through four locks to commence its journey to Llangollen. Although seemingly remote, an elegant house by designed by Telford formerly commanded the junction.

At Nantwich the canal skirts the grounds of Dorfold Hall to terminate at Nantwich Basin with surviving wharfinger's house and cheese warehouse. Immediately before the basin, the brick roving bridge marks the beginning of the Birmingham and Liverpool Junction Canal, which immediately strides across the landscape. In this case, at the behest of the owners of Dorfold Hall, on an embankment and aqueduct setting, the scene for the highly engineered route south.



Effects of Designation

The Chester Canal Heritage Trust have been instrumental in promoting the designation of the Chester Canal conservation area in order to protect its features of interest, encourage enhancement, and protect the area and its setting from the threat of unsympathetic development.

Legislation imposes a duty on local planning authorities *"to identify those areas of special architectural and historic interest the character and appearance of which it is desirable to preserve and enhance"* and consider their designation as conservation areas.

Throughout the country significant lengths of canal have been designated as linear conservation areas including the Trent and Mersey Canal in Cheshire West. Such conservation areas have been designated not only because of the architectural and historic interest of individual features but also because of their relationship to the wider environment including landscape character. The Chester Canal and Wirral Line have considerable industrial archaeological significance. The former represents an early broad waterway, which retains considerable numbers of original bridges, locks, and canalside buildings and features worthy of retention and preservation.

The Wirral Line and the dock and wharf complexes at Ellesmere Port and Chester, represent the work of the leading civil engineer of the canal era, **Thomas Telford** (pictured above right), whose improvements to the original Chester Canal, particularly his pioneering iron lock are also of substantial note.

The effect of designation introduces additional planning controls over



demolition and certain other minor works that would not usually require planning permission. Additionally a council can introduce further discretionary controls by means of *Article 4 Directions*. Works to trees require notification to the Council. Where a vacant building is in a neglected condition the Council may, on the authority of the Secretary of State, serve an *Urgent Works Notice*.

Best practice guidance suggests that designated areas benefit from appraisals and management plans. The Chester Canal Heritage Trust have produced a comprehensive appraisal and management plan, which describes the conservation area, provides a gazetteer of heritage assets and provides management guidance in terms of day to day maintenance and enhancement. Whilst a comprehensive suite of policies provide an effective tool for development management. It is intended that this document will be adopted by the Council as guidance in the determination of planning applications within the area or affecting its setting.

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