

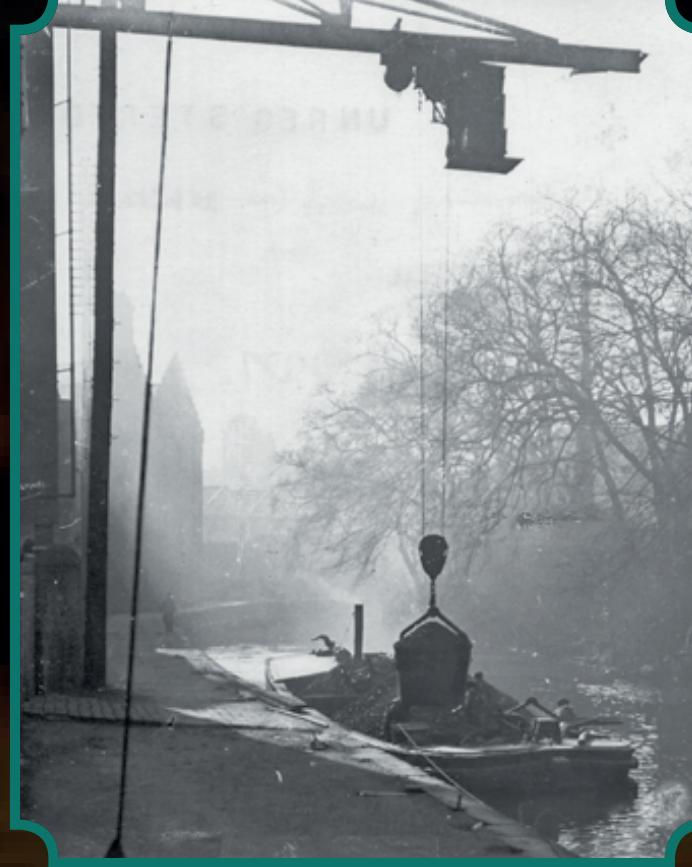
Why Build the Lancaster Canal?



By the end of the 18th century Lancashire was at the heart of Britain's Industrial Revolution. The mass mechanisation of the cotton spinning and weaving industries meant that industry was booming and towns and cities were rapidly expanding.

Coal was needed in massive quantities to power the new steam-driven factories and building materials were necessary to construct warehouses, mills and new houses. The new manufactured goods being produced by the mills and factories needed transporting to traders across the country. Products from Cumbria, such as slate, limestone and gunpowder, required onward transportation and the exotic produce that was brought into Lancaster from the West Indies needed to be moved quickly and efficiently in order for Lancaster to compete with the ever-expanding port of Liverpool.

This demand for raw materials and the movement of goods highlighted a very significant problem with the existing roads. Conditions were poor. Many roads were unsurfaced with treacherous pot holes and were often deep with mud. Even the newer turnpike (toll) roads did not always deliver a smooth ride and were expensive. Arthur Young in his 1770 'Tour of the North' described the Lancaster turnpike as 'very bad, rough



Unloading coal at White Cross Mill, Lancaster



Loaded barge on the canal (Crosland Collection, Ellesmere Port Boat Museum)

and cut up' He advised all travellers to avoid the roads 'as they would the devil' and measured ruts 'four feet deep.' Travel by road was slow, uncomfortable and economically inefficient.

Improving the transport infrastructure was vital to the success of the burgeoning industries and moving goods by new artificial waterways was an exciting possibility. The first canal to be built in this way was the Bridgewater Canal near Manchester, designed by James Brindley, which opened in 1761.

A group of Lancaster merchants proposed a new waterway and in 1792 building work began on a canal that would stretch from Kendal in the North,

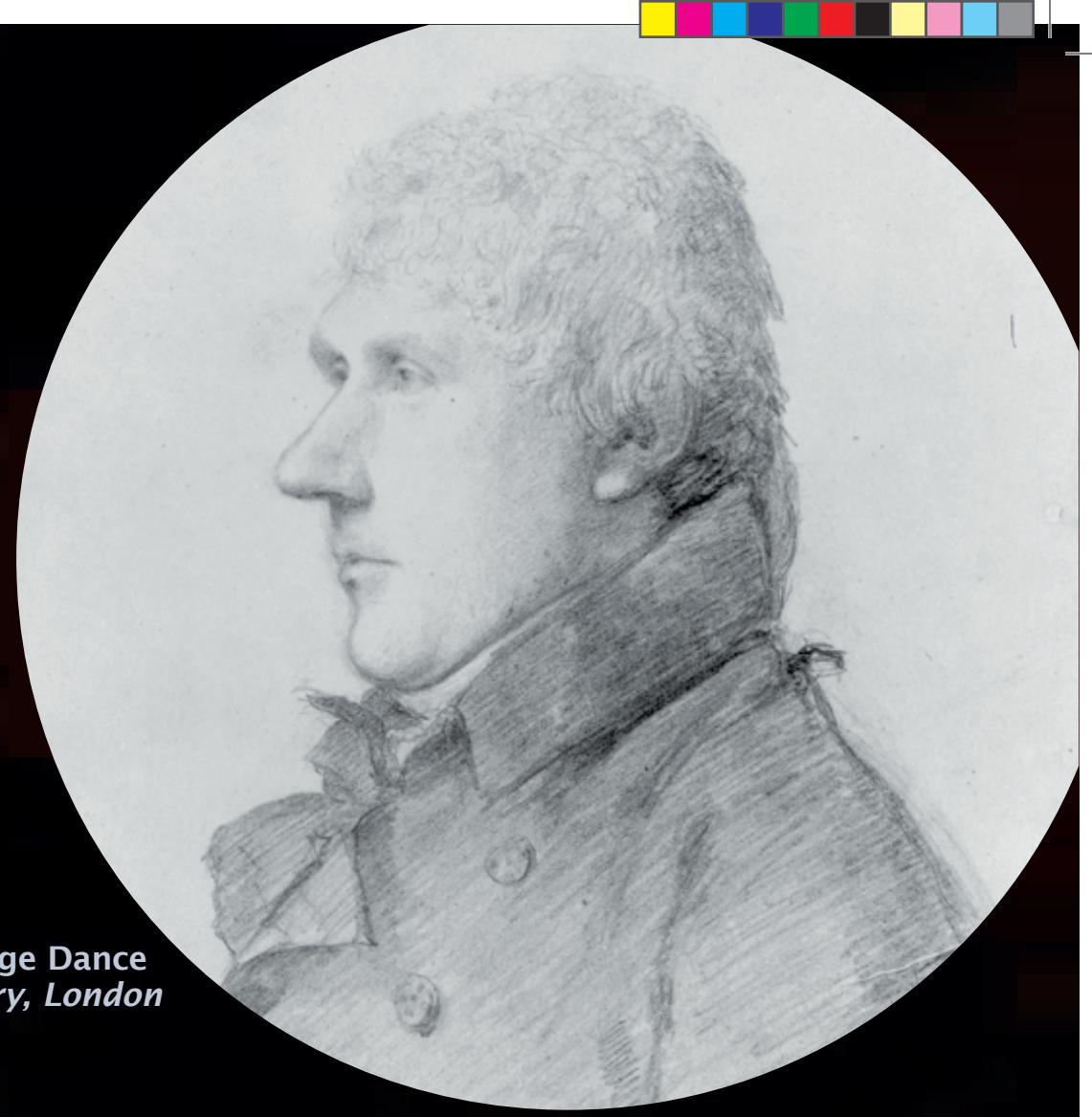
via Carnforth, Lancaster and Preston to the Wigan and Bolton coalfields in the South of the county. Covering a distance of nearly 76 miles this canal, the most northerly in England, would have nearly 200 bridges, and would have to cross two major rivers, the Lune and the Ribble.

Although the canal carried many cargoes, its primary purpose was to carry coal to the factories in the Northern part of the county, and limestone for building and for use as lime fertilizer to the south. For this reason the Lancaster Canal became known as the 'black and white' canal. It would take 33 years to complete at a cost of £816,651.

Horse-drawn barge & family (Harris Museum)



Getting Down to Work



Drawing of John Rennie by George Dance
© National Portrait Gallery, London

For merchants and industrialists, investing in canals promised rich rewards and 'canal mania' swept the nation. £414,100 was easily raised through share subscriptions of £100 each to establish the Lancaster Canal Navigation Company. In 1792 John Rennie was made Principal Engineer for the Company designing the route, the 22 aqueducts and 225 bridges along the way. It took 5 years to build the first two sections from Wigan to Walton Summit and Preston to Tewitfield. A 'temporary' tram road was built to connect these two sections but financial problems later in the project ultimately meant the proposed Ribble Aqueduct was never completed and the tram road became permanent.

In 1813 Thomas Fletcher was appointed Chief Engineer to extend the Canal 14 miles north from Tewitfield to Kendal. This stretch was completed in 1819 and included a flight of 8 locks at Tewitfield. Killington Reservoir was built to feed the Canal. The canal had some interesting engineering features including a 378 yard long tunnel built at Hincaster to serve the Sedgwick Gunpowder works. The tunnel had no towpath. Instead, the horses made their own way over Hincaster Hill using a specially constructed horsepath, the boat people having to pull the boats through using chains (later ropes) fixed to the sides of the tunnel.

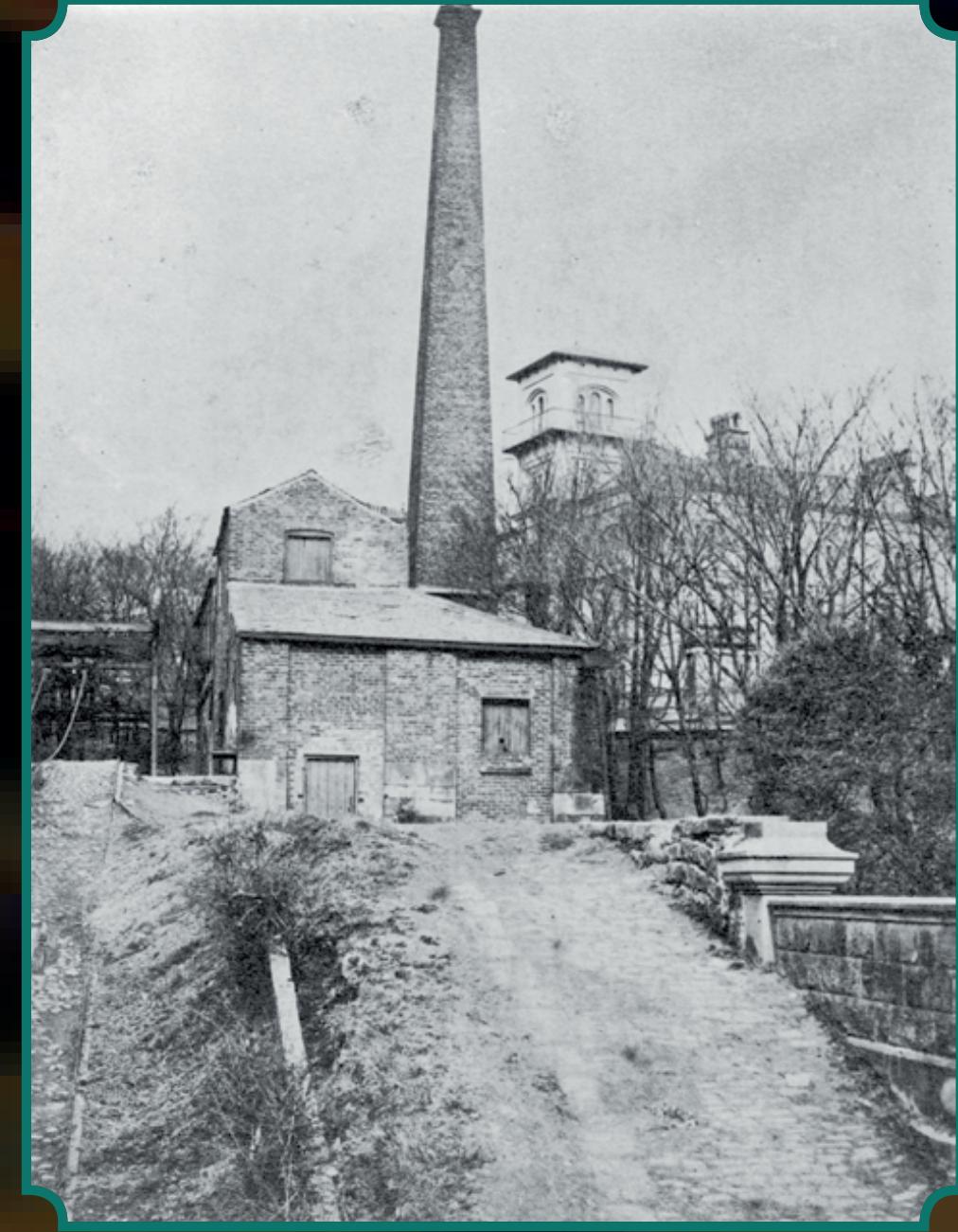
In 1826 a 2 ½ mile extension to Glasson Dock opened allowing the direct shipment of goods from the sea to the Canal via six locks. A new harbour basin was linked to the existing wet dock by a sea lock.

To 'cut' a canal the navvies worked in gangs. They would cut a trench approximately 20 feet wide and 7 feet deep using just picks, shovels and barrows. The bottom and sides of the trench were waterproofed with clay that had to be stamped down to drive out any air bubbles. Clay in places needed to be 3 feet thick. The navvies would work at this for 10 hours a day, 6 days a week, earning 2s 2d (11p) per day.



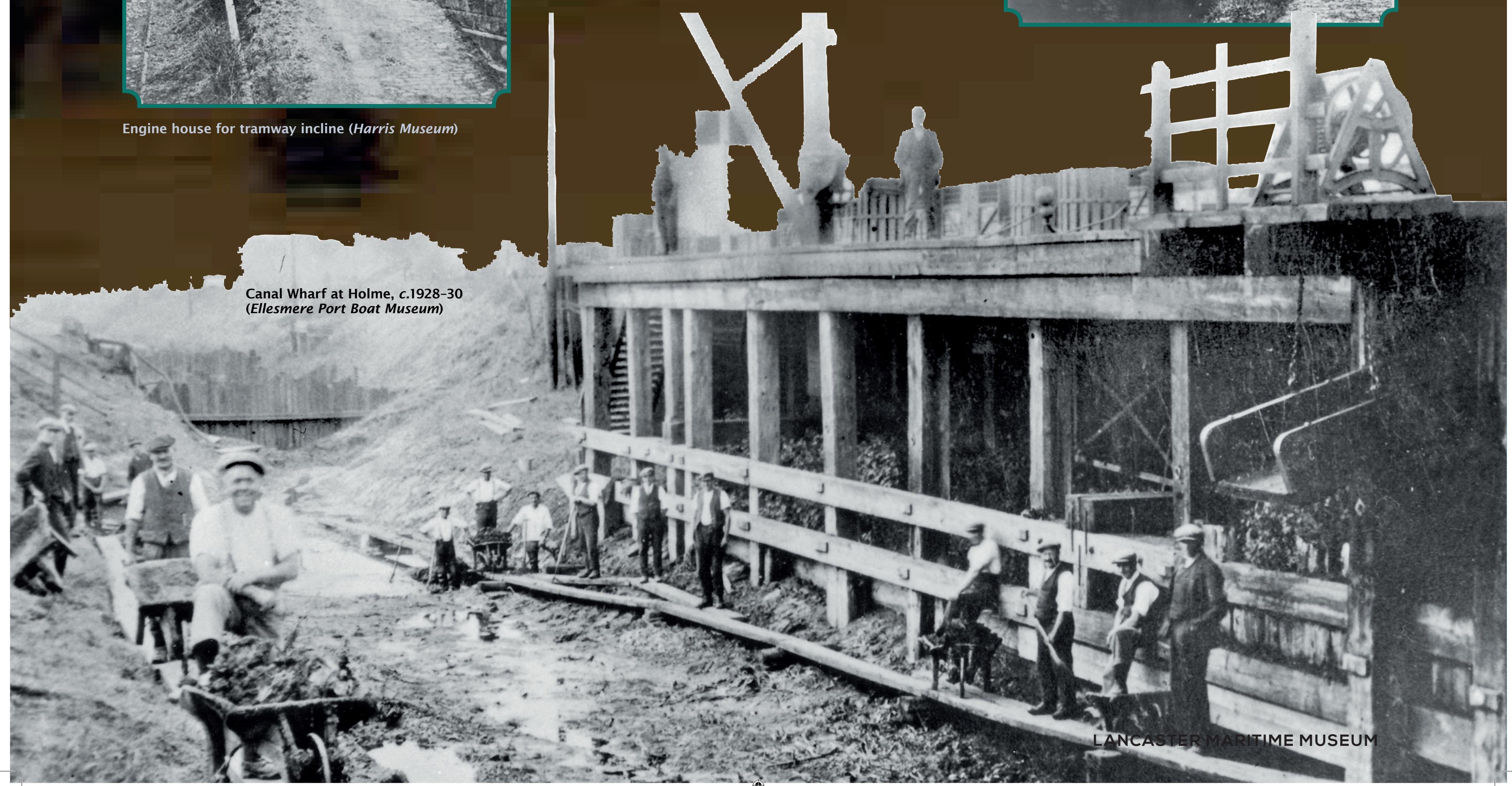
Hincaster tunnel (M. Duff collection)

Navvies, or navigators as they were originally called, did most of the hard labour to dig out the canal. They had a bad reputation for being drunk and disorderly and terrorising local villages. But the navvies experienced very harsh living conditions. They would often walk for miles in search of work, many coming from Scotland and Ireland, often finding accommodation in farm outbuildings or purpose-built camps near to the canal site.



Engine house for tramway incline (Harris Museum)

Canal Wharf at Holme, c.1928-30
(Ellesmere Port Boat Museum)



The Golden Age

The development of canals made the transportation of goods cheaper and much more efficient. The boats using the Lancaster Canal in its heyday were horse-drawn broad barges. Measuring 72 feet in length, and 14 ½ feet in width, they could carry loads of up to 50 tons. When fully loaded their average speed was 11 miles in seven hours. Early boats were built from wood and made by Lancaster shipyards such as Brockbank's. Many of the later vessels were made from steel by W. Allsup and Sons of Preston.

There were a number of boat operators on the Canal but The Wigan Coal and Iron Company became the principal carrier, delivering for the mine owners in the Wigan area. Other cargoes transported on the Canal included: spirits, packs of wool, animal hides, grain, timber, gunpowder, manure, and building materials.

The 42 miles from Preston to Tewitfield is the longest 'lock free' navigation in the country. This meant that journeys on the Canal were also fast and a passenger service soon developed using Packet Boats. The Waterwitch was the fastest of these boats and offered, in 1833, a high standard of comfort and great speed. The journey from Kendal to Preston could be made in less than 8 hours with the horses changed every 4 miles. The Waterwitch could carry 120 passengers and a journey cost 6 shillings 1st class or 4 shillings 2nd class. 16,000 people used this service in just 6 months in 1833. Packet boats and flyboats (fast boats used for picking up and delivering goods to warehouses along the Canal) had right of way over all other craft on the Canal.

For safety, economy and comfort no other mode of conveyance could be so eligible; for there the timid might be at ease and the most delicate mind without fear.

(1802 advert for the Packet Boats)

Packet boat 'Crewdson' (Waterwitch 2)

Packet boat when cut down



**THE
PACKET
BOATS
BETWEEN
Kendal and Preston,**

ARE INTENDED TO COMMENCE SAILING FROM THESE TOWNS,
ON MONDAY, THE 1st OF MAY,
AT SIX O'CLOCK IN THE MORNING,
And will continue to sail daily during the summer.

The Boat from Kendal to Preston will arrive at the Locks at nine o'clock, at Lancaster at one o'clock, at Garstang at four o'clock, and at Preston at eight o'clock.

The Boat from Preston to Kendal will arrive at Garstang at ten o'clock, at Lancaster at one o'clock, at the Locks at four o'clock, and at Kendal at eight o'clock.

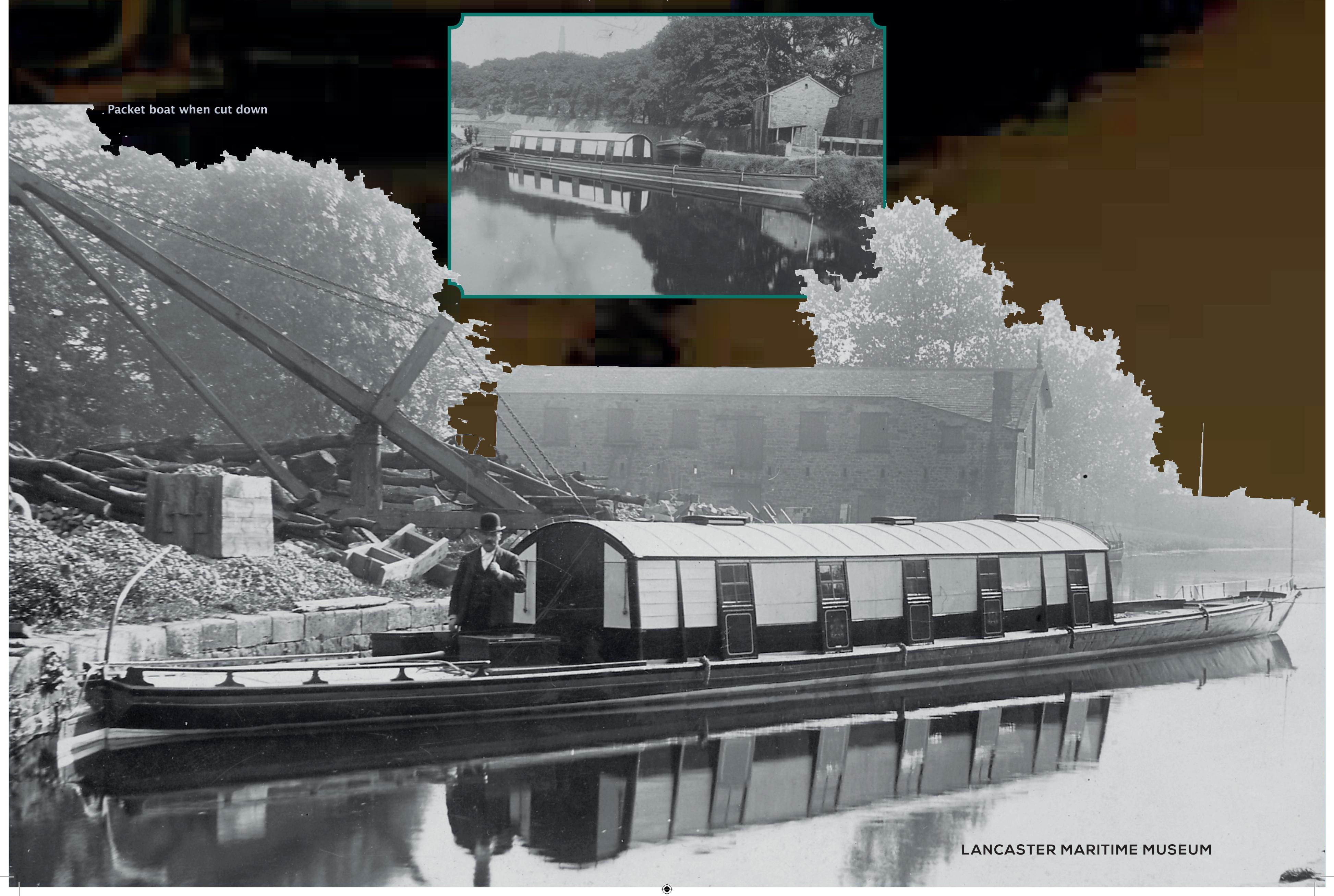
Passengers the whole length, Fore-cabin 6s. After-cabin 4s.—between Lancaster and Preston, or Lancaster and Kendal, Fore-cabin 3s. After-cabin 2s.—for shorter distances, Fore-cabin 1½d. After-cabin 1d. per mile.—Tea, Coffee, and refreshments provided.

The Coaches for the North leave Kendal soon after the arrival of the Packet. Parcels and Packages will be carried on reasonable terms, and delivered free of Porterage.

Canal Office, Lancaster, April 13, 1820.

Printed by M. & R. Bramhaile, Fish-Market, Kendal.

Packet Boat advert



All Aboard



Couple working the canal
(Margaret Duff Collection)

Life on the canal was hard work. In the early days many families lived and worked on their boats. Some boatmen recalled working as much as 18-20 hours in a day to make sure a load was delivered on time.

Inside the boat there would be a cabin and often a double bed stretched across the stern and perhaps a single side bed. There was room for storage, a fireplace in the middle and a curtained alcove for the chamber pot known as the 'guzunder.' Mary Robinson, whose family worked the Canal for several generations, recalls: 'The seven of us would sleep in the cabin with dad and mother in one bed, two in the other bed place, one or two on the shelving and at least one of the lads on the floor.' But despite overcrowding, conditions on board Canal boats were generally good. One sanitary inspector reported 'some were very creditable, a pleasure to enter.'

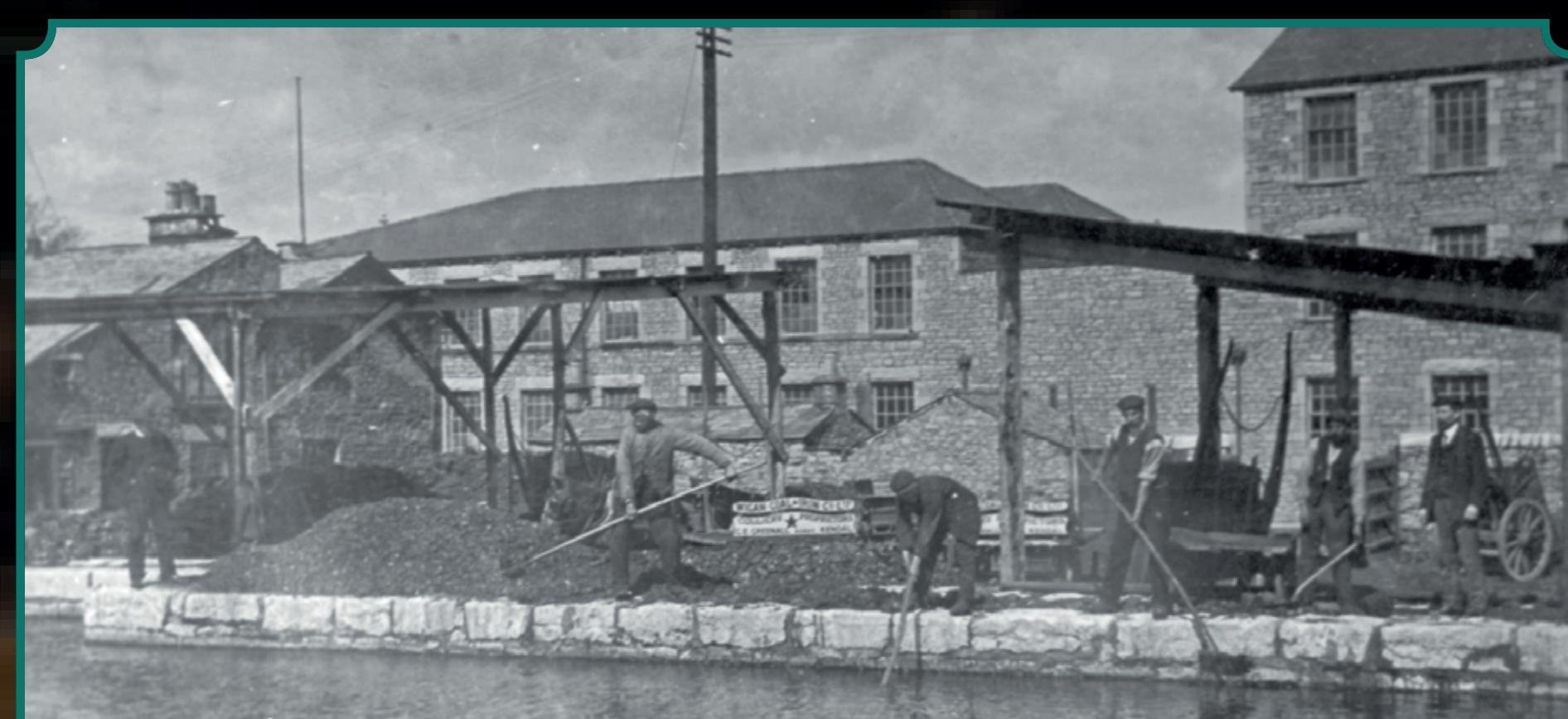


Bargee by the canal

In the 'forecastle', in the bow of the boat, there was room for storage of horse harnesses and hay. The horses were a major investment. Horses were often bought from dealers in Lancaster and were usually 11 or 12 years old and known as 'second hand horses.'

Boats were visited both by the 'humane officer' who checked on animal welfare and the school board in regard to the children's education. Before the Education Acts of the 1930s, children helped the family to unload cargoes, to steer, to walk with the horse and to open and close lock gates. Many children often stayed with family upon reaching school age so they could regularly attend their lessons and the School Board Inspector carried out regular checks. From the 1930-50s increasing numbers of families lived in houses using the boats only for work.

Photo Mary Ashcroft at the stables (C. Barnes)



Stables by Foxes Bridge



End of an Era



Disused Canal Basin, Preston, 1960
(Michael Ware Collection, Ellesmere Port Boat Museum)

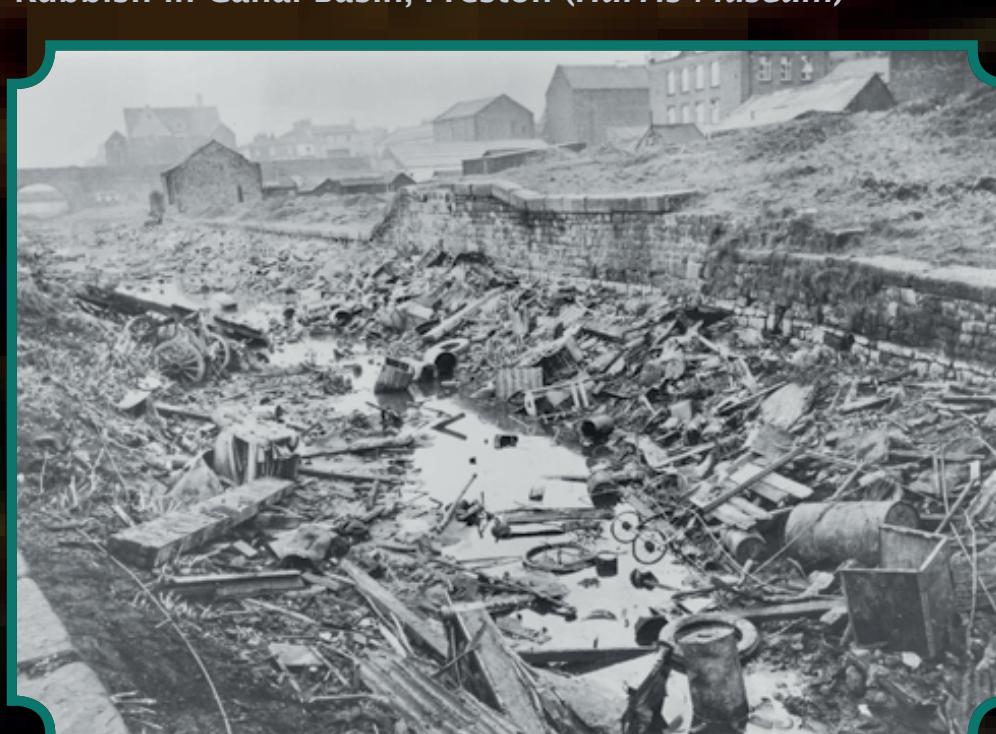
The coming of the railways signalled the beginning of the end for the Lancaster Canal. When the railway reached Preston there was initially an increase in passenger traffic on the Canal and the packet boats provided connecting services, but soon the railways were a major threat.

The Canal Company tried to compete by leasing the Lancaster and Preston Junction Railway from 1852–59 but it was proved to be an illegal arrangement by Parliament and the railway was transferred to the Lancaster & Carlisle Railway Company. In 1857 the London and North Western Railway took over both of these companies. It went on to lease the Canal from 1864 and officially took over the Canal Company in 1885. For the next four decades the Canal operated on a reduced scale but decline continued.

In the 1920s 46 boats were recorded as working on the Canal. By 1947 there were only 4. Other factors were also at play. The great freeze of 1947 meant



Infilled Canal Head, Kendal



Rubbish in Canal Basin, Preston (Harris Museum)

that boats were frozen in at Preston for weeks on end and larger factories, such as Storeys in Lancaster, switched from coal to oil fuel. Coal deliveries were no longer necessary. Some families relocated to the Leeds-Liverpool Canal where the prospect of work was better.

In 1948 Lancaster Canal, along with the railways, was nationalised and by 1955 it was classified as having 'insufficient commercial prospects to justify its retention.' The last commercial load was a consignment of coal from Barrow, via Glasson Dock, to the Storey oil cloth and table baize factory in Lancaster in 1960s. In 1962 ownership was transferred from British Railways to the British Waterways Board and in 2012 to the Canal and River Trust.

The first section of the Canal to be closed down was from Stainton to Kendal and the top two miles filled in. When the building of the M6 came along in 1968 various road crossings blocked the Canal rendering the Northern Reaches entirely un-navigable. Today only 42 of the original 57 miles remain open on the Preston to Kendal stretch.

Disused Canal Basin, Preston, 1960
(Michael Ware Collection, Ellesmere Port Boat Museum)

Infilled Canal Head, Kendal

