

The Sankey Canal



Fiddlers Ferry lock in the 1970s

Authorised in 1755 as the canalisation of Sankey Brook, the Sankey Canal was in fact built as an entirely artificial navigation adjacent to the brook; the first of its kind in the UK when it opened in 1757. Running initially from the coalfields of St Helens to the River Mersey at Sankey Bridges, it was extended in 1762 to Fiddlers Ferry, near the current power station, and later, in the 1830s, further extended to Widnes where it enters the Mersey just upstream of the Runcorn-Widnes 'Jubilee' Bridge at Spike Island.

Most of the St Helens end of the canal had been disused from the 1930s, but Sankey Sugar Works near Earlestown kept the rest of the canal going until it was finally abandoned in 1963. Although there were cosmetic improvements to various sections of the canal during the 1970s, particularly between Fiddlers Ferry and Widnes, it was not until the formation of the Sankey Canal Restoration Society (SCARS) in 1985 that there were serious moves to restore the canal to navigation.

Working in tandem with the local authorities in St Helens, Warrington and Halton, as well as other agencies such as the Groundwork Trust, there have been a number of projects initiated along the length of the canal. The length of the canal in Halton is entirely in water and but for two fixed bridges, both provisionally planned to be replaced with moving structures in the next few years, is capable of navigation. Dredging of the length immediately in front of the power station could then permit full use of the canal between the locks at Spike Island and Fiddlers Ferry.

The Halton length of the canal is sandwiched between the towers of the Fiddlers Ferry power station to the east and that of the award-winning Catalyst chemical museum on West Bank. Between them, Spike Island is a major local attraction; moored yachts and cruisers which have replaced the Mersey flats that used to serve Gossages soap works and Hutchinson's chemical works. Other features include the rudder from one of the old flats, the preserved wet dock, which was the world's first man-made railway dock, and the visitors' centre run by the council's Ranger service. From almost all of the Halton towpath, and from the trails round Spike Island, there are extensive views across the river to Daresbury, Norton and Runcorn.



Widnes Lock in its heyday (courtesy of Nigel Bowker)

Exciting plans for the area round Spike Island and West Bank are promised as part of the Widnes Waterfront scheme, with improved footpath access to the town centre and a new events venue on the Island itself.

One of the most unusual developments in recent years has been the proposed link from the Sankey to the Leeds & Liverpool Canal, which would, for the first time, create a direct connection to the main waterway system. A number of alternative routes have been put forward and the feasibility of each is currently being investigated. There is little doubt that a fully 'connected' canal would encourage far more people to use the Sankey for various leisure activities, particularly given the Pierhead Link scheme currently underway on Liverpool's waterfront.



Newton Common Lock

Sankey Canal Restoration Society (SCARS)

When the Society was formed in 1985, much of the canal in St Helens and Warrington in particular was facing a bleak future. Within five years the Society had restored the upper of the two 'New Double Locks' in St Helens, encouraging the Council to clear the lower lock and re-open the pair in 1992.

Since then, SCARS has continued to work at various sites along the canal; excavations at Newton Common Lock and Hulme Lock Cottage and regular clearance schemes at Bewsey Lock, Winwick Dry Dock, Penkford Bridge and most recently on the heavily reeded section at Fiddlers Ferry by the Halton boundary.

A series of sponsored walks along the full 20km of the canal towpath, a number in conjunction with other local charities, helped raise awareness of the restoration and the canal's many surviving features.



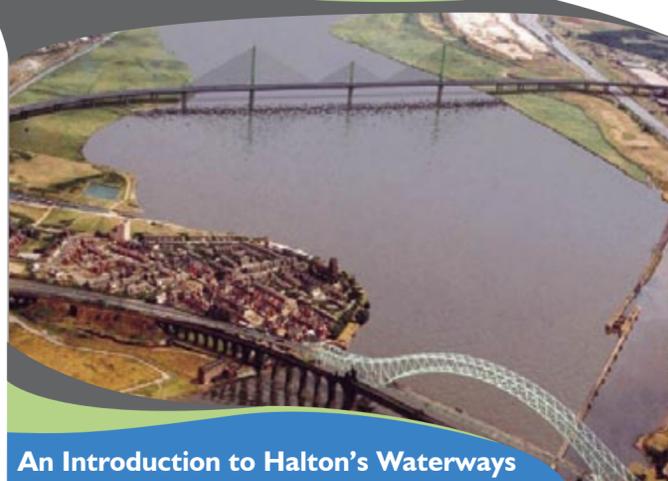
The Society has issued a Towpath Guide, as well as a series of leaflets detailing the 'Sankey Canal Trail' and continues to hold monthly open meetings to encourage others to learn about the local waterways and to participate in the efforts to see the canal fully restored.

SCARS, 16 Bleak Hill Road, Eccleston, St Helens WA10 4RW

Website www.scars.org.uk

Design by Helen Faulkner.

Halton waterways



Artist's impression of the second Mersey Crossing, with the existing Jubilee Bridge in the foreground

An Introduction to Halton's Waterways

The borough of Halton sits astride the River Mersey, one of the natural and man-made waterways that pass through, or close by, the narrow Runcorn Gap at the head of the river estuary. The sensitive restoration and development of some of the inland navigations, many of them inter-connected, that have developed over more than 250 years offer the potential of a rich diversity of industrial archaeology, natural ecology, education and leisure opportunities to be enjoyed alike by the people of Halton and visitors from much farther afield.



This project has been supported financially by Awards for All and Halton Borough Council

Halton's Waterways



The old Transporter Bridge

The abiding image of Halton for many people is the Runcorn-Widnes 'Jubilee' Bridge, which spans the River Mersey between the borough's two principal towns at Runcorn Gap. Built in 1961, it succeeded the Transporter Bridge that had been built in 1905 to replace a ferry. But barely a stone's throw from the bridge, the Sankey Canal enters Widnes along the river's north shore. The Bridgewater Canal and the Manchester Ship Canal meet at Runcorn Docks, while a little to the south, the Weaver Navigation gradually shakes off its rural aspect as it skirts round Runcorn Hill to Weston Point.

The borough's waterways offer a fascinating perspective on what made this such an important area in the period when the North West was the hot-bed of England's Industrial Revolution. And almost all of these waterways can be easily explored on foot. The Trans Pennine Trail follows the Sankey Canal towpath through from Warrington to the nature trails of Spike Island and the Catalyst museum (formerly Gossages soap works) at West Bank. It hugs the river as it passes Victoria Promenade to the Mersey Hotel, then under the Jubilee Bridge before joining the Mersey Way through Pickering's Pasture Country Park and Hale Village.



Cross the footway of the Jubilee Bridge, to find the towpath of the Bridgewater Canal, to be developed as the multi-user Bridgewater Way trail. This snakes out of Runcorn past the ruined remains of the 12th century Norton Priory, the iconic Norton water tower to where it splits into two at Preston Brook; turn left for the modern NSF Tower at Daresbury Laboratories, the canal-side village of Moore and Warrington, right for Preston Brook Tunnel and the Trent & Mersey Canal.



Runcorn Promenade

The Runcorn Promenade, highly commended in the 2004 BURA Waterfront Renaissance Awards, runs along the bank of the Ship Canal from Runcorn town centre, passing the site of the old Transporter Bridge and then under its successor before sweeping south to Halton College at the foot of Runcorn Locks, where another path leads back up towards the town.

With largely voluntary-sector led schemes looking to enhance many aspects of the Sankey, the Weaver and Runcorn Locks, this leaflet encourages you to explore what is already there, and to contribute your thoughts and ideas to the burgeoning regeneration of Halton's Waterways.

River Weaver Navigation / Weston Canal / Runcorn & Weston Canal

The scenic River Weaver rises in the Peckforton Hills and flows via Nantwich, Winsford and Northwich into the Mersey Estuary between Frodsham and Runcorn. It passes through a beautiful landscape, with only occasional pockets of industry. The river was made navigable with 11 locks from Frodsham to Winsford in 1732 to serve the salt industry. Success led to widening and deepening over the next 150 years and the number of locks was reduced to four.



The boat graveyard at Sutton Level Locks

The Weston Canal, part of the Weaver Navigation, runs through Halton to docks at Weston Point. Thomas Telford helped to complete this link to the Mersey, bypassing the now derelict Frodsham lock, which is currently the subject of a restoration project, started by the River Weaver Navigation Society.



Clifton Rowing Club, Rocksavage

The lower reaches of the Weston Canal can currently only be visited by water, and from the canal you can see the entrance lock to the Runcorn & Weston, still largely in water but un-navigable, which linked the Weaver/Weston to the Bridgewater Canal. Tramways ran down to the Weston Canal from quarries on Runcorn Hill, where there are trails and excellent views out across the river estuary.

Historic structures on the navigation include:

- the Anderton Lift, newly restored, and one of the wonders of the waterways
- the four main locks at Dutton, Saltersford, Hunts (Northwich) and Vale Royal
- stone railway viaducts at Dutton, Northwich and Vale Royal

Salt was the main export, and at its busiest in the 1890s the River carried one million tons per year. Coal from St Helens was the main import, also used in the salt industry, other cargoes being china clay and agricultural produce. In the 20th century, salt declined but chemicals thrived.

Today there is only seasonal leisure traffic, but a much wider range of users:

- boating
- angling
- rowing and canoeing
- walking, biking and horse riding
- botany and zoology
- industrial archaeology.

River Weaver Navigation Society

The Society was founded in 1997 and cares about the River Weaver, and particularly the navigable part. We aim to serve all river users, whatever their interests.

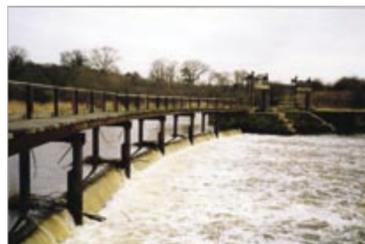
The Big Project is to restore Frodsham Lock and Frodsham Cut to navigation. A Feasibility Study was completed in May 2005 indicating a total restoration cost of £1.5m. Restoration is the key to waterfront regeneration in Frodsham, which will be a principal gateway to the Weaver Valley Regional Park.

Other priority projects are:

- to create a multi-user path along the north east bank from Sutton Weaver to Pickering's and improve access to the Sutton lock boat graveyard site
- to improve the water quality of the river. This is particularly necessary below Northwich to improve angling and make water-borne activities safer
- to improve access to information about the river, its history and wildlife, to provide interpretation boards at each lock site and support the publication of a river history
- to restore and re-instate the mileposts and boundary markers. When the navigation was progressively modernised over its 270 year history, the Trustees bought land to shorten and straighten the course. The boundaries were marked by stone, cast iron and concrete posts at various times. The project has identified all existing markers and will refurbish them.

River Weaver Navigation Society, 58 Frankby Road, West Kirkby, Wirral CH48 6EF

Website www.rwns.co.uk



Sutton Weir



Northern Star at Weston Point with navies church in background

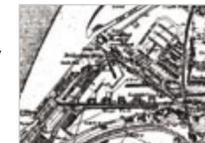
Bridgewater Canal and Runcorn Locks



Duke's Bridge, Runcorn

Conceived in 1759 purely as a means of getting coal from his mines in Worsley to markets in Salford and Manchester, the Duke of Bridgewater, employing the services of brothers Thomas and John Gilbert, and eminent canal engineer James Brindley, succeeded in extending the lockless Bridgewater Canal through to Runcorn by 1776, despite the opposition of Sir Richard Brooke at the so-called 'Battle of Norton Priory'. Only a flight of ten locks down to the river in Runcorn, took the canal off the same contour level.

The Duke built a home for himself at the foot of the proposed lock flight (now part of the College campus) and superintended the construction of the five pairs of locks below where Waterloo Bridge now stands, which were opened in 1773. Trade was brisk for many decades and with the development of the extensive Runcorn Dock system, which later developed into the Runcorn & Weston Canal, a second flight of locks was built, heading west from Waterloo Bridge, south of the original line.



Runcorn Locks in 1905



Runcorn top lock

The old line of locks was abandoned in 1949; the new line in 1966 after the Runcorn & Weston had ceased to operate. Unlike the new line which was destroyed, the original locks were merely filled in and forgotten about, until recent moves to develop a valuable footpath link between the town centre and Runcorn College, started to awaken interest in their complete restoration. The Bridgewater Way multi-user trail project, launched in May 2005, will increase use of the canal towpath through Halton and it is hoped that this will ultimately extend down the lock flight to meet Runcorn Promenade that runs northwards along the bank of the Manchester Ship Canal.

Runcorn Locks Restoration Society



Looking down through the lower locks

The Runcorn Locks Restoration Society was formed in 2004 with the aims of campaigning for the Runcorn Old Line of locks to be restored. This will reinstate the link between the end of the Bridgewater Canal in Runcorn and the Manchester Ship Canal. The link will create a second Cheshire Ring with the beautiful River Weaver and historic Anderton Boat Lift as part of the route.

A considerable part of the flight of 5 two-rise staircase lock chambers is still intact.

They are clearly visible from a footpath leading from Percival Lane, Runcorn to the historic Bridgewater House on the banks of the Ship Canal. The area is being developed for new housing etc. but the line has been protected by Halton Borough Council who are very supportive of the plan to reopen the locks.

The main obstacle to restoration lies at the top of the flight just beyond the elegant Waterloo Bridge where, in the 1960s, the feeder roads leading to the famous Runcorn Suspension Bridge were constructed over the site of the top lock of the flight. The good news here is that the government accepts there is a need for a second crossing of the River Mersey and when this is completed, 90% of the existing bridge traffic will be redirected to the new crossing and there will then be the opportunity to remove the obstruction.

What the society needs to be able to show potential fund holders is that there is a widespread desire to see the locks restored and to achieve this we need your help. By joining the R.L.R.S. (at the modest fee of five pounds per year) you will help us keep up the momentum already achieved. Our efforts have already moved the project higher up the local authority's priority list and with more support from a wider community we can give the scheme an even bigger boost. **PLEASE HELP. JOIN US TODAY.**



New footpath through the locks to the College

Runcorn Locks Restoration Society, 5 Beresford Street, Warrington WA1 3SA

Website www.runcornlocks.org.uk

