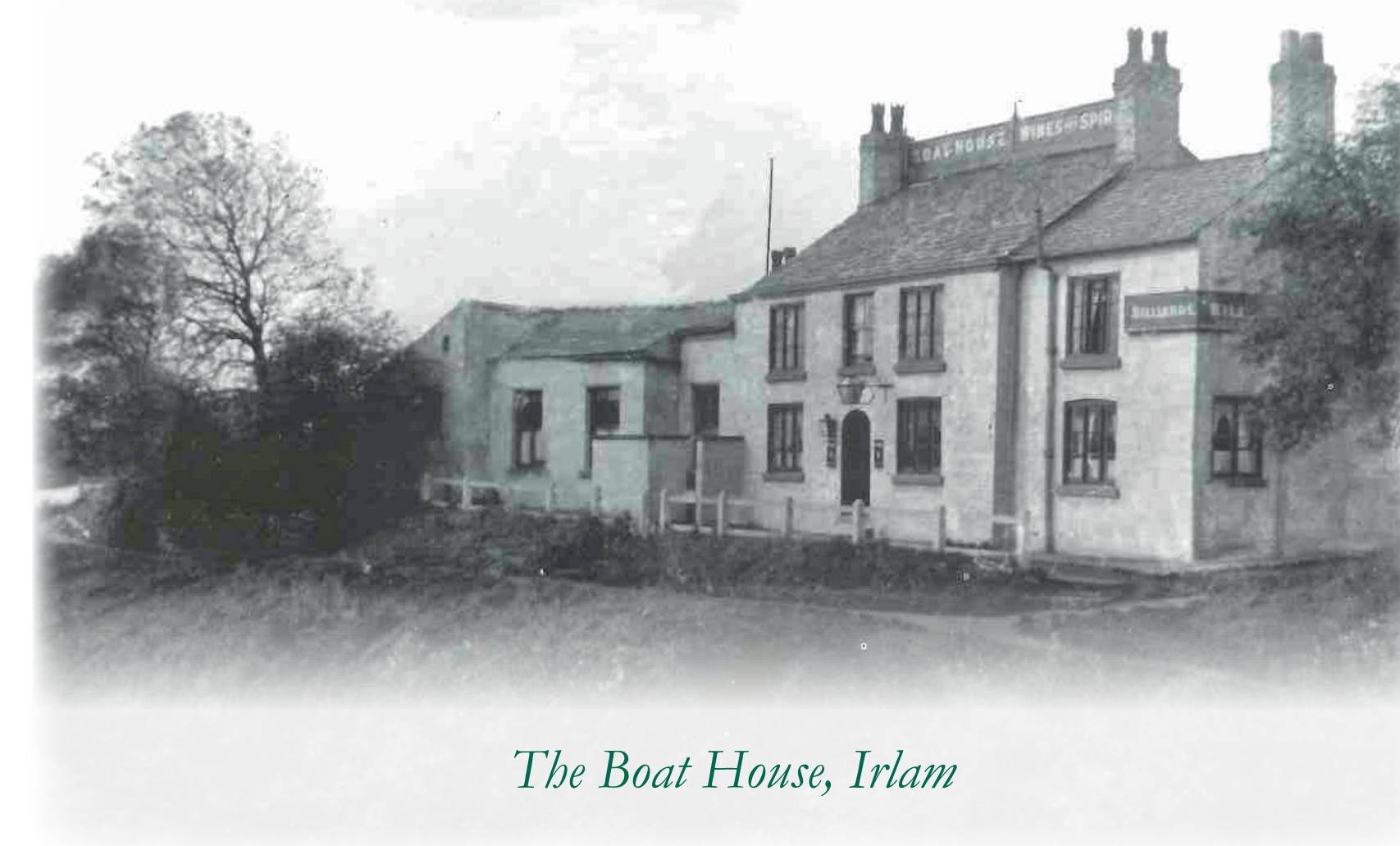


# COMMERCIAL WATERWAYS—MERSEY & IRWELL NAVIGATION

The Mersey and Irwell Navigation played an important role in the transportation of raw materials and finished goods between Manchester and Liverpool. The confluence of the Mersey and Irwell sat in Lower Irlam, making the district a key part of the navigation system.

In the 1600s several small industries operated along the river banks and goods were transported by small vessels that could navigate the winding, narrow sections. Ford and ferry crossings provided access to Flixton and Partington. In 1676 the landlord of the Boat House Inn became responsible for the upkeep of the ferry to Flixton.

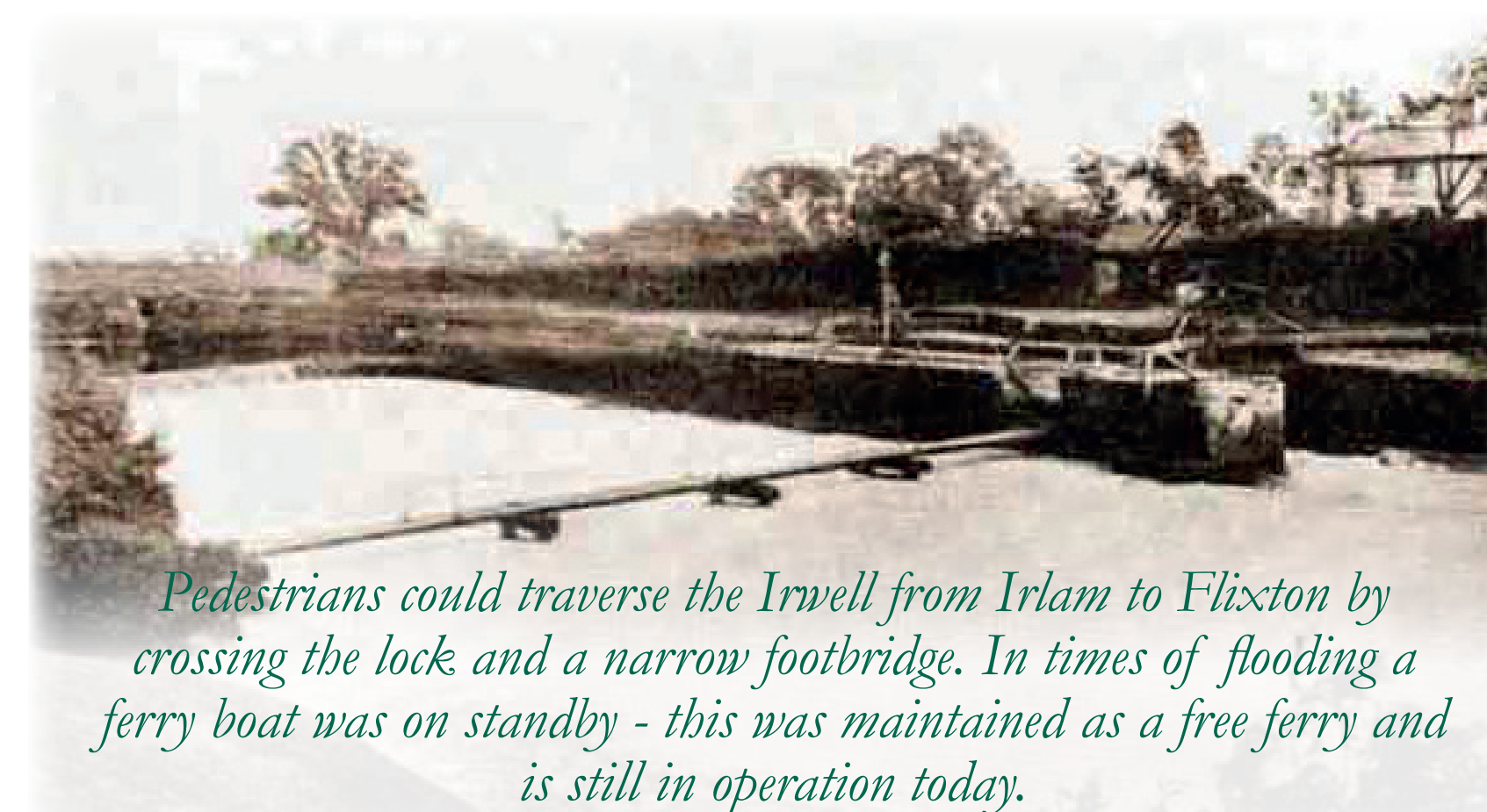


*The Boat House, Irlam*

The Mersey was navigable between Liverpool and Warrington, but heavier goods on route to Manchester then had to be offloaded onto wagons or packhorse trains and hauled via muddy, rutted roads which in bad weather were often impassable.

To ease transport problems and enable goods to be transported by water onto Manchester, engineer Thomas Steers undertook a survey of the Rivers Mersey and Irwell in 1712 to see if they could become a navigation from the Mersey estuary to Manchester. In 1721 King George I gave the royal assent authorising the go ahead of the Mersey and Irwell Navigation.

To help straighten parts of the winding route and regulate the flow and level of the water several cuts and locks were constructed in the 1720s including Hulmes Bridge Lock and Weir, which was built at Boysnope, 8 miles from Manchester. Half a mile downstream Calamanco Lock and Ferry were built on the site of an existing weir that supplied water to Calamanco Mill and Logwood Grinding Mill on the Flixton side.



*Pedestrians could traverse the Irwell from Irlam to Flixton by crossing the lock and a narrow footbridge. In times of flooding a ferry boat was on standby - this was maintained as a free ferry and is still in operation today.*

By 1725 goods were being transported along the route by small barges that could carry 30-35 tons of cargo. Designed to navigate shallow waters and cope with the locks, the barges became known as Mersey Flats. When unable to sail, due to adverse winds, these were pulled by teams of men known as bankhaulers. With the introduction of towpaths, horses were used, two to a Flat.

The opening of the Navigation in 1734 gave Manchester better access to the major port of Liverpool. At first merchants were slow to use it, the journey being unreliable and taking 13-15 hours from Manchester to Runcorn docks, from where goods could be transhipped to sea-going vessels.



Just below the confluence of the rivers a 'cut' or short canal, was made in the Mersey to bypass loops in the river thereby cutting a mile off the journey. Sandy Warps Lock was built in the cut in the 1760s.

Further downstream, between Partington and Cadishead, Owlets Nest Lock was built – the largest enterprise on the river, having to cope with a river fall of 6ft 6ins at the weir. This was sometimes called Millbank after the Occleston Paper Mill that stood beside it.



*Occleston Mill mid-1890*

Over the years, trade increased with cotton, dyewoods, pig iron, lead, copper, nails, tar, sand, grain and flour being some of the goods transported. Wharfs were built to aid goods handling and to offload manure, night-soil and marl via rail to Chat Moss.

In 1776 engineer James Brindley was commissioned to extend the Bridgewater Canal to Runcorn. To help combat competition from this faster route further improvements were made to the Navigation, with many original locks being replaced with larger stone-sided ones.

From the early 1800s several surveys were done and proposals drawn up to bring large ships straight to Manchester, utilising the Navigation. These were shelved however, partly due to opposition from interested parties in Liverpool where a duty was levied on all goods brought in by sea, and also from the newly formed railway companies.

Despite the improvements, the Navigation continued to be fraught with difficulties with vessels occasionally being grounded or capsizing and the rivers flooding. In 1866



the Irwell rose 14 feet above normal in the greatest floods ever recorded.

On 6th August 1885, the Manchester Ship Canal (MSC) Company gained approval to purchase the Mersey and Irwell Navigation, enabling them to go ahead with their plans to build the Canal. When it opened in January 1894 the MSC, at 36 miles long, was the largest canal in the world.

The newly created Port of Manchester became Britain's third busiest port despite it being 40

miles inland. Ships transported materials and goods to and from the many heavy industries that came to the district because of the Canal.

The Canal now forms the southern boundary of Irlam and Cadishead, running alongside the A57 bypass. The Mersey flows into the Canal but the remaining one mile stretch of the Irwell, known locally as the Old River, is now an isolated wildlife haven. The Boat House still sits proudly on its banks.

The original Waterways artwork can be viewed at Irlam Station House, along with other information on the district's heritage. The story of the Manchester Ship Canal can be viewed at Irlam Linear Park entrance off the Cadishead bypass.

Acknowledgements: Irlam and Cadishead Local History Society and other local historians  
For further information about the history of Irlam and Cadishead visit: [www.irlamandcadishead.net](http://www.irlamandcadishead.net)