

THE KING'S HIGHWAY

The King's Highway (Liverpool Road) that you are standing on today was an important route between Liverpool and Manchester, used by packhorses, farmers, travellers and passing armies as far back as the 1200s. The surrounding area was sparsely populated with just a few isolated farms along a strip of land bounded by the rivers Irwell and Mersey to the south and Chat Moss to the north.

In the mid-1500s the highway was little more than a well-used cart track which in bad weather often became impassable for carts, being muddy, often flooded, and heavily rutted. Packhorses, which were able to get along narrow tracks, were vital for transporting goods.

With road conditions generally being very poor at the time, the Highways Act of 1555 was introduced making parishes responsible for the maintenance of their stretch of road. However, as their responsibility only extended to the narrow causeway alongside the main road the condition of the wagonway didn't really improve.

Cadishead, Lower Irlam and Higher Irlam began as separate hamlets consisting of isolated farms and weavers' cottages. As the numbers of packhorse trains and other travellers increased several farmhouses began to offer refreshments and stabling. These stopping places eventually became inns and coaching houses and the villages grew around them. Horses were vital for carrying people, goods and mail and a busy trade built up for blacksmiths and wheelwrights.



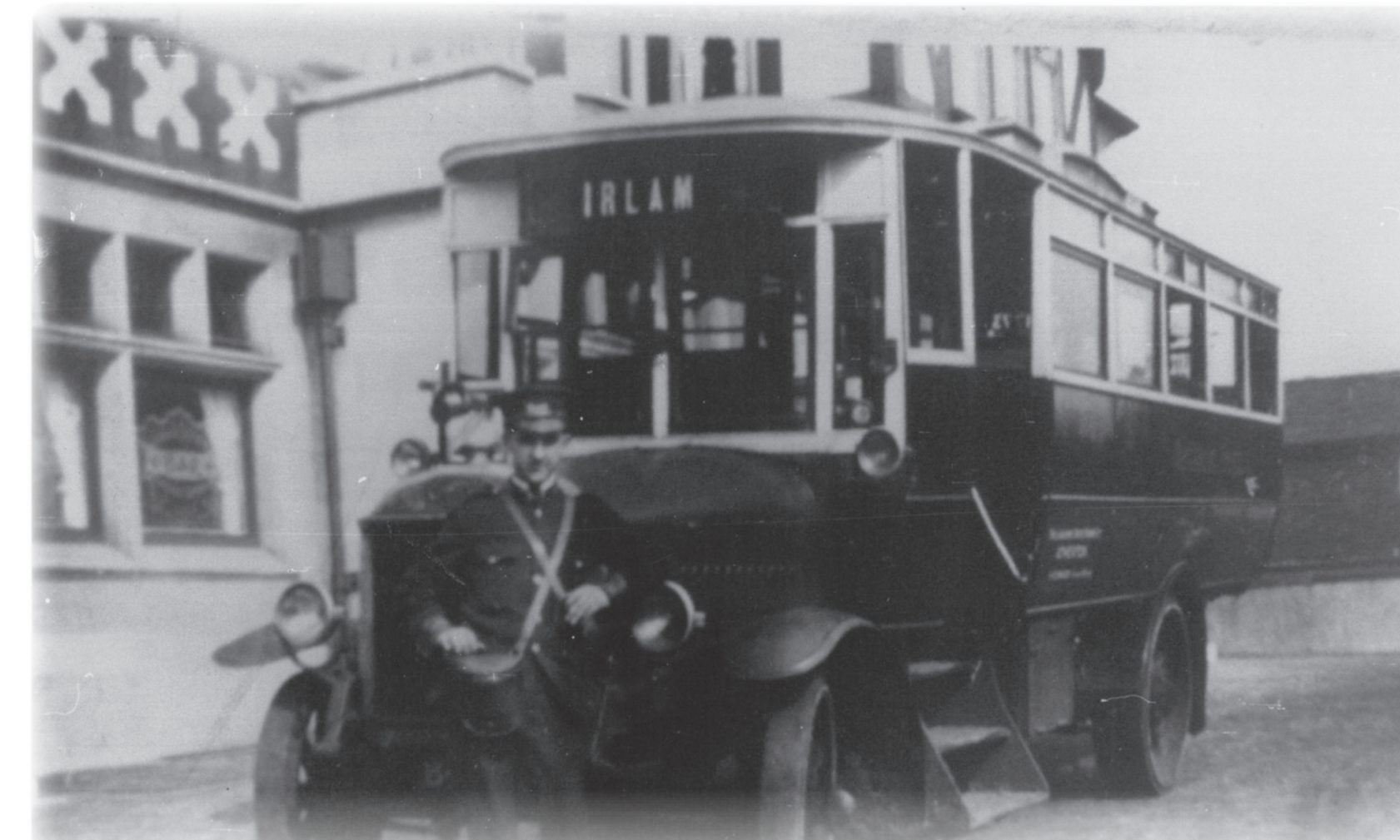
Bank Holiday trip outside the Coach and Horses, Cadishead

Smith's Ale House, which became the Coach and Horses in the late 1700s, was situated opposite the village green and became a regular stopping place for the stagecoach between Manchester and Liverpool.

Toll gate near the old Margarine Works, Higher Irlam - tolls were finally abolished 1st January 1892



With the Industrial Revolution came a need for better roads for the transportation of goods. In 1752 toll gates were erected as part of the Turnpike system, introduced to help pay for the maintenance of principal roads.



Bus outside the Ship Hotel, Lower Irlam - in the 1920s the landlord operated a passenger service between Cadishead and Patricroft

The Ship inn, a former farmhouse in Lower Irlam, situated near the village green and toll bar, was a regular stopping place where mail coaches changed horses. Rebuilt in the 1880s the inn became a hotel with accommodation for travellers and stabling for 20 horses.

Old Nags Head, Higher Irlam in 1905 - later demolished and a new one built in 1923 due to road improvements



The original Old Nags Head inn, at the centre of Higher Irlam, also began life as a farmhouse with adjacent land used for stabling visitors' horses. For many years it was known as the 'Halfway House' between Manchester and Warrington.

A cobbled Liverpool Road near Royles Ltd, Irlam - opened in 1900



Over the centuries the highway has gone from being a rough track to a dirt road, then to hard wearing cobbles and lastly tarmac. As packhorses and horse drawn carts gave way to steam-driven wagons and eventually motor vehicles the road suffered more wear and tear.

Steam driven vehicle outside the old Irlam Urban District Council offices in Irlam on its way to the Maypole Dairy in Cadishead



With the introduction of the Local Government Act of 1888 responsibility for the maintenance of all main roads was transferred to the newly formed County Councils.



Irlam Urban District Council workmen c1920

Over time Liverpool Road's original winding route has been straightened, considerably widened, and realigned to pass below the railway in Irlam. With the arrival of the Manchester Ship Canal in the 1890s came major industries such as the Soap Works, Steelworks, Margarine Works and Partington Coaling Basin. These created a huge growth in population in the 1900s as people moved into the district to work at the new industries; the Steelworks alone employed 4,000 people.

In the early 1900s Liverpool Road was designated the A57 and by the 1920s the quiet villages had been transformed into an industrial landscape with the road running through the heart of it. Increased output from local factories throughout the 1950s, 60s and into the 70s meant heavy goods vehicles bringing in raw materials and transporting finished goods filled the road.

In the 1970s the construction of a motorway running across Chat Moss diverted some traffic away from the district while at the same time many local industries ceased production resulting in lighter traffic. Cadishead Way bypass, built in 2 stages, became the A57 when the second phase opened in 2005 taking most of the through traffic. Liverpool Road, the King's Highway, which had carried traffic through the district for centuries, became the quieter B5320.

More images and information on the history of the area can be seen at Irlam Station House, along with artefacts and artwork reflecting the district's heritage.