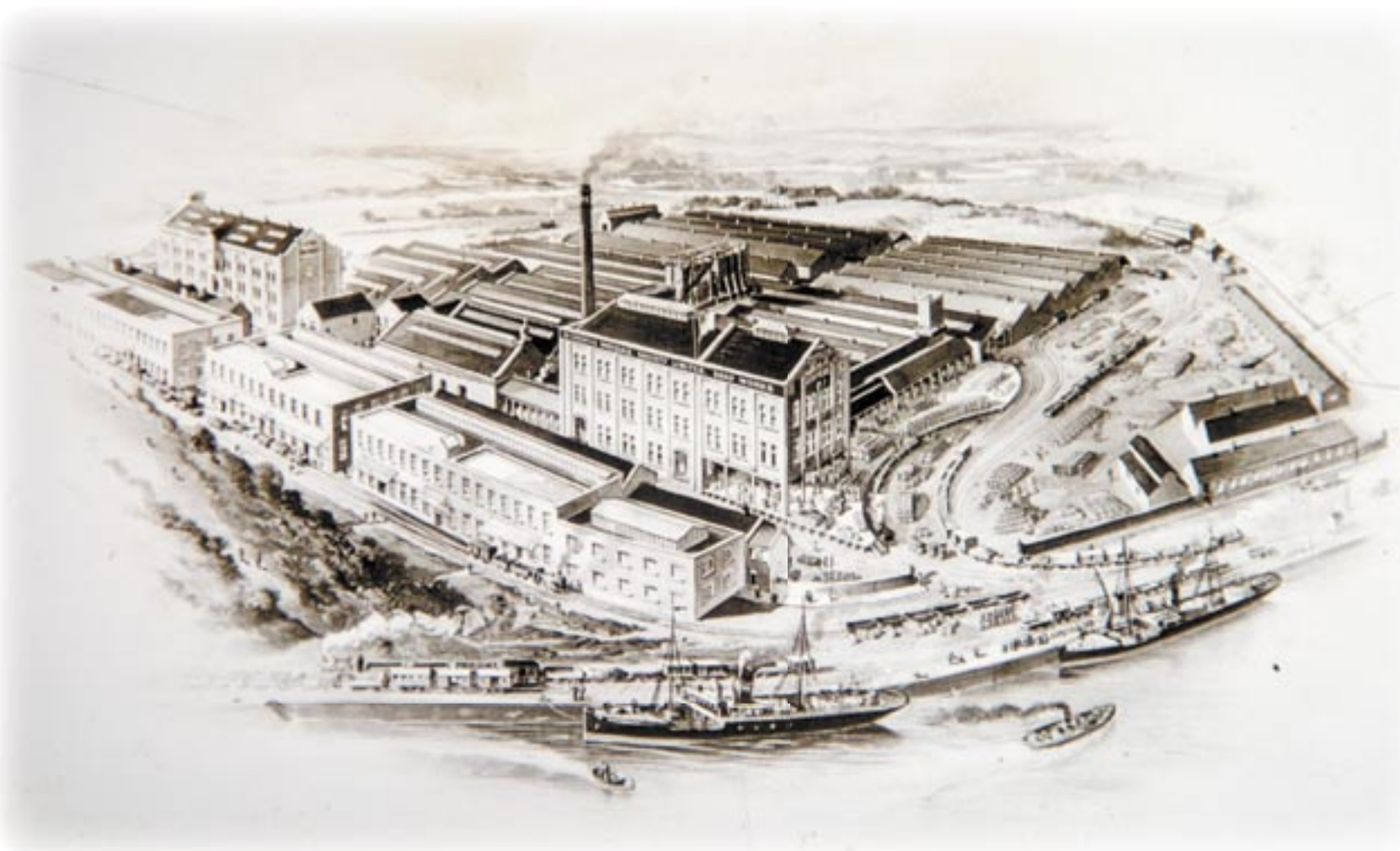


# SOAP WORKS

The Co-operative Wholesale Society (CWS) Soap Works opened in 1894 and was the first major factory built on the banks of the Manchester Ship Canal (MSC).



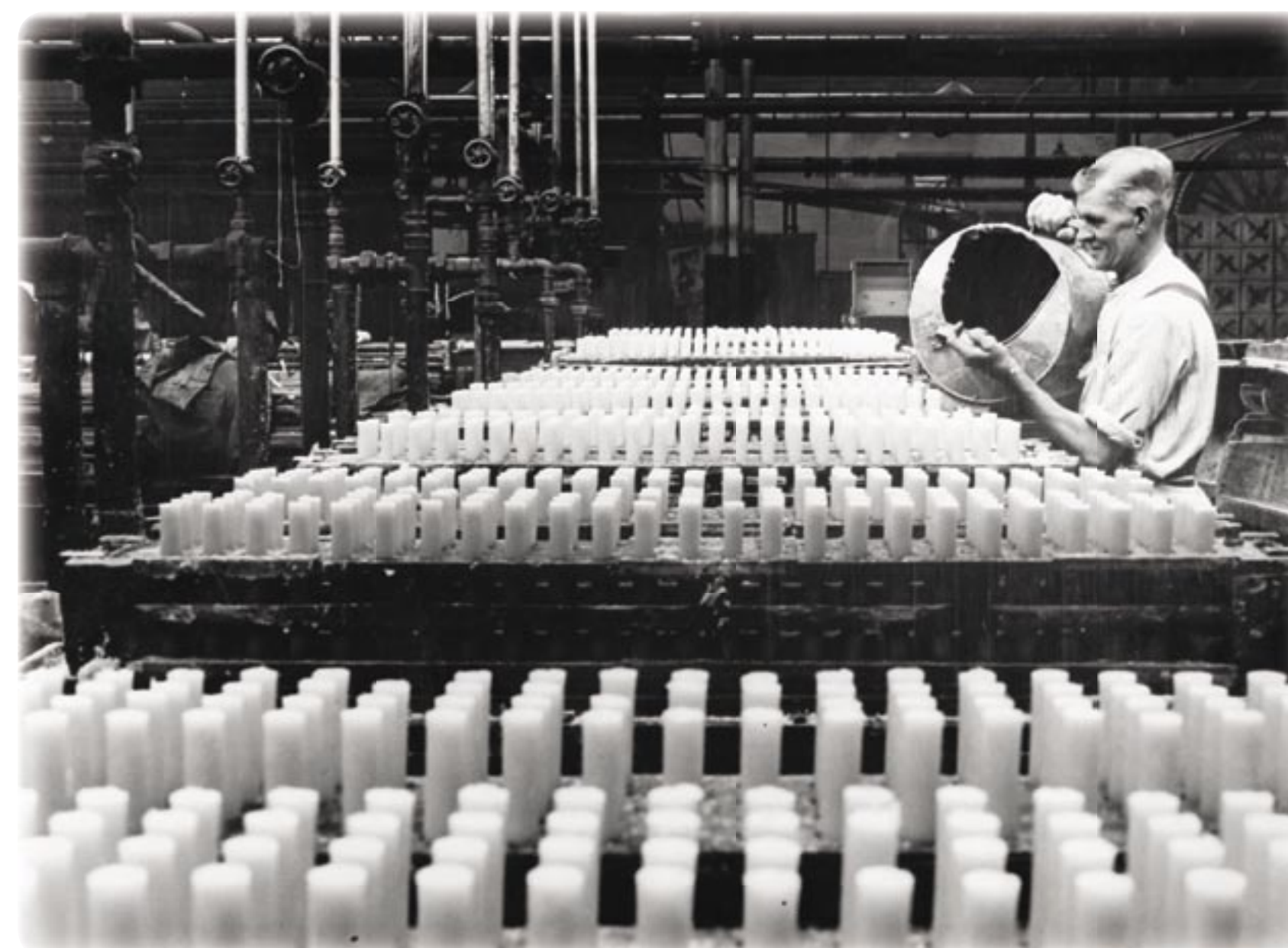
The 15 acre site, which stretched the length of Fairhills Road had its own wharf, providing direct access to the waterfront for the transportation of raw materials and finished products. Originally based in Durham, the company relocated the factory to Irlam not just to take advantage of the larger site and the space to expand, but also for its great links to both the ship canal and rail network.



Irlam Soap Works became an important part of the CWS empire manufacturing not only 'ordinary' soap, but candles, tapers, night lights, lard, glycerine, starch, lubricating oils, cleaning materials and washing powders.



In the early 1900s the Irlam works was operating every machine night and day to cope with the demand for soap. During the ten years until the end of 1905 the average weight sent out increased slowly from 72 to 265 tons weekly. By the end of 1912 the works was also producing 75 tons of candles, night lights and tapers every week.



With business booming, the CWS decided to expand, building a huge new factory adjoining the original works in 1926 providing hundreds more jobs to the area.



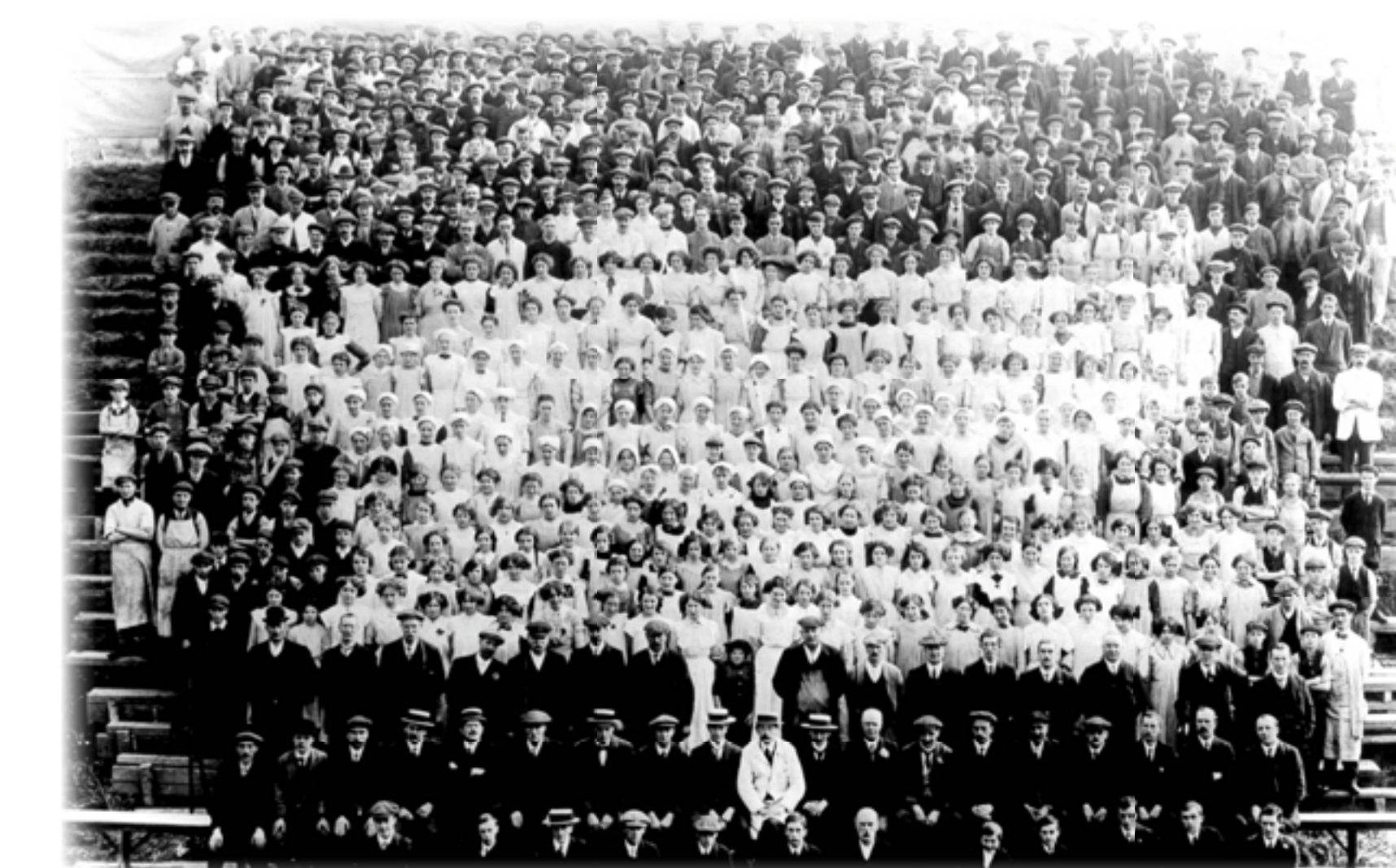
The Soap Works had its own internal rail system, which connected to the main line just west of Irlam Station, using the Cheshire Lines Committee track bed which the CWS had running rights over. The railway line, known locally as Queens Road belonged to the MSC Company but was mainly used by the Soap Works, who had their own extensive railway sidings and owned both rolling stock and locomotives.

For many years a free passenger service was operated for its workforce known as the 'Soap Works Special', which ran morning and evening to and from Irlam Station to coincide with main line train arrivals and departures. Pulled

by a four-wheeled Peckett Loco steam engine, the brown and cream ex-Midland Railways six-wheel carriage had four separate compartments split for Ladies and Gentlemen; providing comfort and convenience, making workers feel 'special' hence the name.

Being a considerate employer, the Soap Works tried to support staff during the war, promising to save jobs for workers when they returned and also offering a separation allowance for families to cover earnings whilst the men were away. One less worry on the minds of the brave soldiers!

In its heyday the Soap Works employed around 1,200 people and had an active social scene, providing a range of leisure facilities for its workers. This included bowling greens, playing fields, cricket pitches and tennis courts all close to a handsome pavilion. They also had their own fire team who would compete against other CWS teams in national fire competitions.



The pavilion was the site of a tragedy in 1953 when three CWS cricketers were killed and three others injured when they were struck by lightning during a cricket match to celebrate the Queen's Coronation.



# 1894-1989

The CWS used the rail line up until 1959 when it severed its connection with the canal lines. The bridge carrying the line over Liverpool Road was subsequently removed in 1965. Soap production ceased in 1968 but the factory continued to bottle liquid detergents and other products, with a much smaller workforce, into the 1980s. The factory was sold in 1989 to the Robert McBride Group.

One of the Peckett Locos used in the factory known locally as 'Thomas' was initially gifted to the communities of Irlam and Cadishead and has since been repainted and relocated on Cadishead Way. The Soap Works Special carriage was later restored and is on display in York Railway Museum.

A comfy replica of the 'special' carriage has been recreated, albeit in a different colour scheme. This and more images of the Soap Works and other local industries can be seen in the Station House, along with artefacts and artwork reflecting the district's heritage.