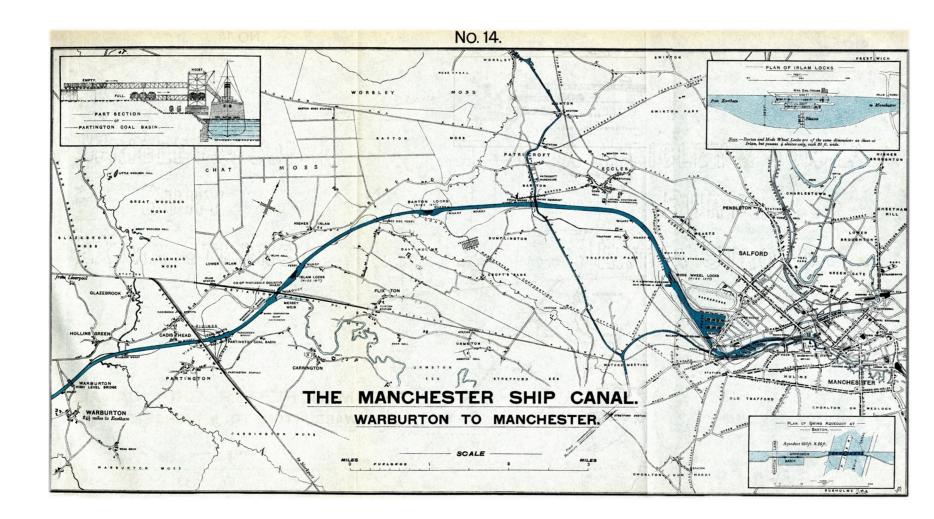
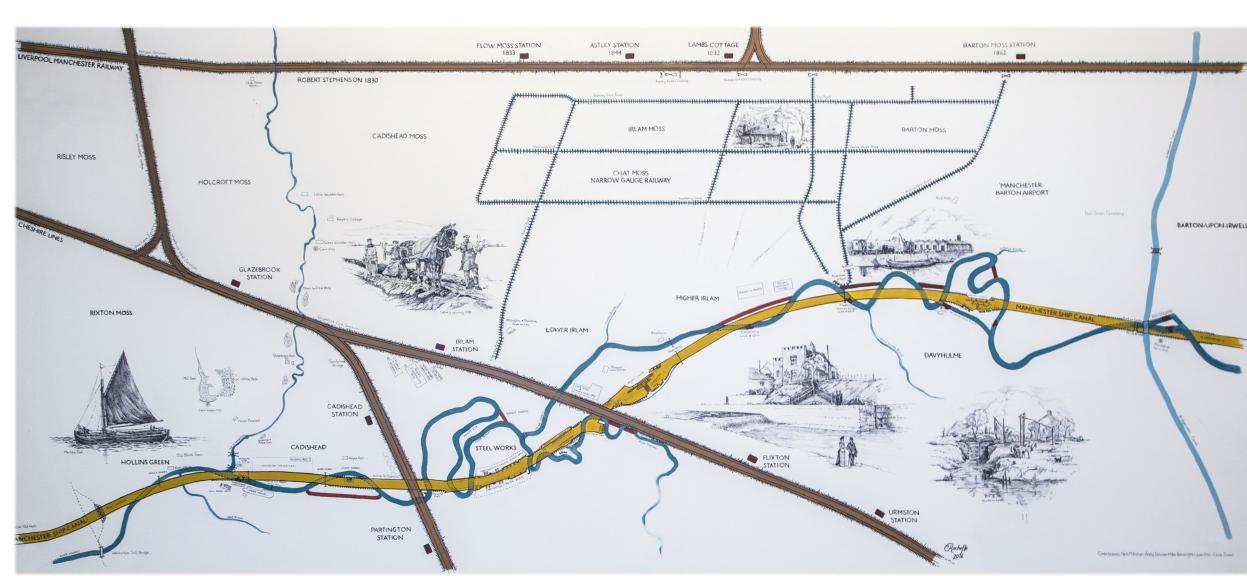
MANCHESTER SHIP CANAL



The Manchester Ship Canal (MSC), an iconic engineering feat of the Victorian era, was a vital infrastructure to the economic success of Manchester during the 20th Century. When it opened in 1894 this 36-mile-long and 8.5metres (28 feet) deep inland waterway was the largest river navigation canal in the world and gave ocean-going vessels direct access to Manchester, helping to create jobs, boost competition, and reduce transport costs.

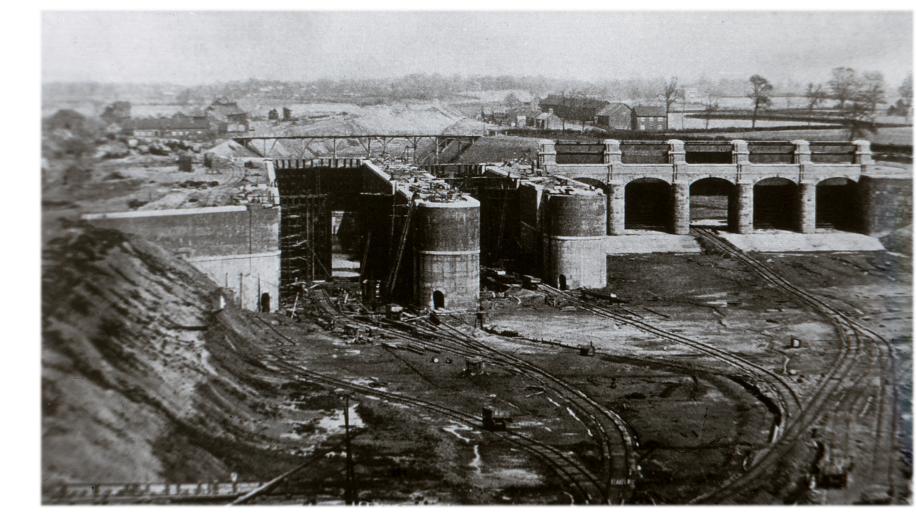
Prior to its construction, the transportation of raw materials and finished goods between Manchester and Liverpool was via the Mersey & Irwell Navigation, the Bridgewater Canal and the Manchester to Liverpool Railway. By the mid-1800s the navigation had fallen into disrepair, railway costs were high and further costs were incurred for all goods going through the Port of Liverpool.



Commercial Waterways artwork at Irlam Station created by artist Rachelle depicts the Mersey & Irwell Navigation 1734 - 1893 (blue) Manchester Ship Cana (gold) and railways (brown)

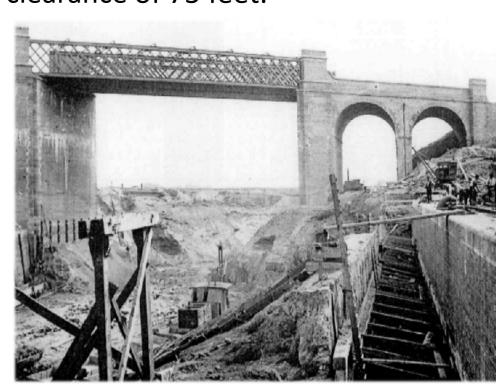
Sixty years after the initial surveys, the Manchester Ship Canal Act of 1885 was finally passed in Parliament giving the go ahead for the construction of the canal, utilising parts of the Mersey and Irwell Navigation. The first sod was cut on 11 November 1887 at Eastham on the Mersey estuary.

The canal project, affectionately known as the 'Big Ditch', was a huge undertaking requiring over 200 miles of temporary railway track to carry construction materials and workers. Irlam locks alone required 10,000 tons of cement for solid foundations.



Irlam locks and sluice during constructi

Construction involved major engineering feats including the world's first swing aqueduct at Barton and several road swing bridges. To allow for the passage of large ships, railway lines crossing the canal had to be raised to give a minimum clearance of 75 feet.



CWS wharf under construction in 1893 - one of several wharfs constructed along the length of the canal

Despite the use of heavy machinery and equipment, over 16,000 men and boys (known as navvies) were employed to undertake the arduous labour. Workers were housed in huts, local houses, and floating lodging houses.



avvies working on the canal and using the temporary canal r

Inevitably during the construction of the Manchester Ship Canal, some workers would suffer serious accidents. A chain of first-aid stations and three temporary timber built hospitals were sited along the line of the canal. In 1888 Liverpool orthopaedic surgeon, Robert Jones, was appointed to supervise what is thought to be the first organised accident service in the history of British surgery. Between 1888-1893 there were over 3,000 major accidents. Manchester's reputation in orthopaedic surgery led to many casualties of the First World War being sent there from the front.



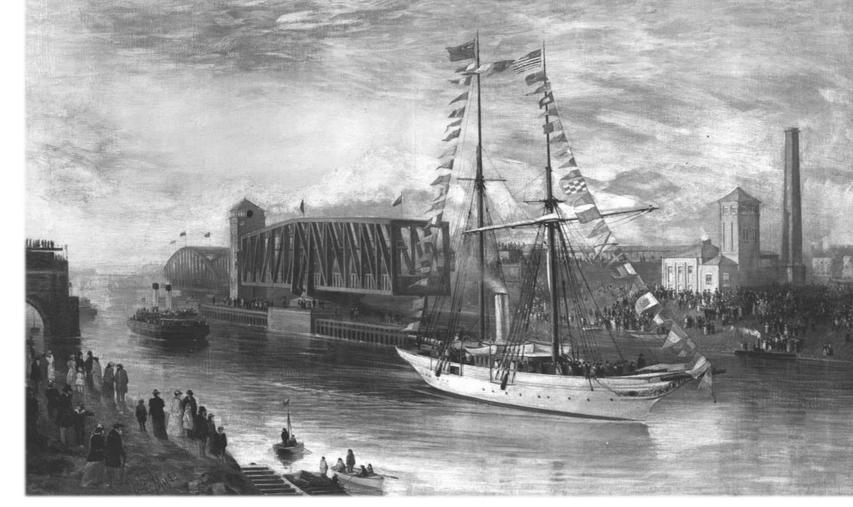
Manchester Ship Canal hospital at Latchfor

Construction was not without its problems and included harsh weather, flooding, opposition from Liverpool and compensation claims from railway companies. The canal took six years to complete at a cost of just over £15 million.



rburton High Level Bridge under construction - a road bridge over the Manchester Ship Canal

The opening of the Manchester Ship Canal took place on New Year's Day 1894 with over 50,000 people turning out to cheer as the grand steam yacht *Norseman*, carrying the company directors, led the procession of 71 ships up the canal. The CWS *Pioneer* unloaded its cargo of sugar from Rouen, becoming the first merchant vessel to be registered in the Port of Manchester.



The yacht Norseman heads the procession of vessels at the ceremonial opening on New Year's Day 1894

Queen Victoria formerly declared the canal open on 21st May 1894. The engineer Edward Leader Williams was knighted; his name and that of the contractor Thomas Walker are recognised today in local road names.

The construction railway tracks, locomotives and rolling stock formed the basis of the Manchester Ship Canal Railway Company and were utilised by the factories and heavy industries that lined the canal's length. The railway, connected to the national rail network at Irlam, could receive and dispatch goods via all the UK's main line railway systems.



CWS Soap, Candle and Glycerine Works alongside the Manchester Ship Canal in Irlam

The CWS Soap Works was the first factory to arrive as a direct result of the canal and rail links. Partington Coaling Basin was established on both sides of the canal to refuel ships and to export coal. The CWS Margarine Works, Steelworks and other factories soon followed, profoundly influencing the district, transforming it from an agricultural area to an industrial one.



Arial view Partington Steelworks and the railway over the canal



the Manchester Ship Canal docked at the Steelworks wharf in Iram - the many chimneys of the Steelworks factory dominated the skyline in the 1900s and stood as a reminder of the heavy industries that shaped the distr

Manchester Liners established regular sailings of ocean-going vessels carrying goods worldwide and the tugboats used to pilot these large ships became a familiar sight on the canal. The Port of Manchester became Britain's third busiest, despite the city being nearly 40 miles inland. In its heyday (late 1950s), 20 million tons of freight a year passed along the canal.

Over the years the canal became heavily polluted with chemicals, sewage, and spillages from factories and shipping. In the 1970s the canal began to decline, unable to accommodate the new larger liners and container ships. About the same time a general economic downturn saw the closure of local factories including the CWS Soap Works, CWS Margarine Works and Steelworks. The gradual reduction in the canal-side rail traffic resulted in the MSC railway line officially closing in 1978, though many sidings remained; the last operational section of it at Trafford Park, closed on 30 April 2009.

Today the Manchester Ship Canal is unrecognisable from the oil-slicked polluted waterway of its heyday. Now, wildlife such as swans, grebes and cormorants enjoy its clean waters and Mersey Ferries cruises can be occasionally seen on its waters.



b's Ferry memorial cruise on the Manchester Ship Canal on 30th April 2014 to commemorate the six so died and celebrate the courage of the survivors from the oil slick fire disaster on 14th April 1970

The Manchester Ship Canal remains an everlasting reminder of the ingenuity and determination of its promoters, as well as the skill, hard labour and sacrifices of those early pioneers.

Information, images and artwork about the Manchester Ship Canal can be seen inside Irlam Station House. A heritage board at the Boathouse, Irlam tells the story of the Mersey & Irwell Navigation, and a Bob's Ferry Disaster heritage board is sited on the corner of Bobs Lane and Liverpool Road, Cadishead.

