

## **Restoration and Reopening of the Canal.**

### **A Derelict Canal.**

By the end of the First World War trade on the canal had mainly ended apart from occasional boat movements at the Stalybridge & Huddersfield ends. In the dark days of 1944, Parliament agreed that the canal could be abandoned and by the early 1970s all that remained was a series of disconnected lengths overgrown with weeds or full of rubbish.

Most of the 74 locks had been filled with rubble and concreted over to form a cascade. Eighteen bridges had been culverted or rebuilt with no headroom for boats and, in one case, widened with a prop right in the very centre of the channel. Nearly two miles of the canal had been completely obliterated and filled in. In Huddersfield a mill building at Queen Street South and the workshops of an engineering company between Chapel Hill and Manchester Road were built where the canal once ran. In Slaithwaite the canal was filled in and grassed over with cherry trees lining the road. At Dobcross the embankment of the widened Wool Road blocked the canal. Further down the Tame Valley nearly a quarter of a mile had been obliterated alongside Hartshead Power Station. And in Stalybridge, where industrial buildings and a sports centre had been built on the route, no evidence could be seen that the canal had ever passed through the centre of town. Nor could boats reach the canal from other navigable waterways. The canal bridge under Wakefield Road in Huddersfield had been replaced by a small pipe for the water to flow when the road was rebuilt as dual carriageway. Links to canals to the west via the Peak Forest Canal or the Ashton Canal and the Rochdale Canal in Manchester were no easier. Locks on those canals were impassable & water was piped across an aqueduct at Store Street in Manchester.

On 13 May 1974 the canals to the west were officially reopened after a famous campaign with work mainly carried out by volunteers. This reopening of the Peak Forest and Ashton Canals together with successful work on other derelict canals encouraged volunteers to consider the future of the canals across the South Pennines. On 19<sup>th</sup> April, 1974 the Huddersfield Canal Society was formed with the intention of seeing the restoration of the Huddersfield Narrow Canal.

Earlier waterway restoration projects had involved waterways that were largely intact but restoring totally derelict canals, especially ones with long filled in lengths like the Huddersfield, was going to be far more complex. Many people thought it would be impossible.

### **Work by Volunteers.**

Local government was reorganised in 1974 and the new Councils looked at their planning policies. The Society lobbied them and presented a report noting conditions and suggesting solutions all along the route of the canal. With rapid decline in the local textile industries and recognising that the future may include visitors and tourism, the Councils agreed to protect the line of the canal so that no further development would be allowed to encroach on the route.

Despite this important early success, the 1970s was a challenging time for the enthusiasts. British Waterways, then the nationalised owner of most of Britain's inland waterways, would not allow work on the canal until the extra cost of maintaining restored lengths could be found. The Society publicised the plight of the canal and the benefits of restoration. It gained a large membership and held fund raising events with Festivals in Huddersfield and Ashton bringing boats to Aspley and Portland Basins.

After long negotiations, Greater Manchester Metropolitan County Council agreed to make an annual contribution towards the extra cost of a restored length of canal in Uppermill. On 4<sup>th</sup> April 1981 volunteers began work at Dungebooth Lock. Over the next two years they worked every weekend and had summer work camps digging out infill material from Dungebooth and Lime Kiln Locks. The locks were eventually cleared and, with new gates fitted, they were officially opening on 26<sup>th</sup> May 1984. The Society's volunteers operated a trip boat through the locks for some years until a commercial operator took over the service.

The volunteers had achieved a great success and they moved on to carry out the far more difficult task of restoring the top two locks on the west side of the canal which needed substantial rebuilding. However they knew that to reopen the canal would require work far beyond what volunteers alone could do.

### **Job Creation & Training Schemes.**

In the early 1980s, with more than three million people out of work, the government made money available for Job Creation schemes. The Canal Society saw the opportunity to provide temporary work & training in building skills at the same time as restoring locks, dredging the canal and repairing the towpath and published reports recommending Job Creation schemes in both valleys. Throughout 1983, meetings were held with the councils, with civil servants and with British Waterways. The local authorities agreed to contribute to the costs and to support maintenance of the canal afterwards.

The scheme in Kirklees was managed by the Council and work started at Marsden on 8<sup>th</sup> May 1984. A workshop was rented at Spring Grove Mill, Linthwaite to construct lock-gates. In Tameside, work on the canal began at Lock 1W in Ashton-under-Lyne in 1985 by a scheme managed by Tameside Canals Ltd, a company set up by and owned by the Canal Society.

With work beginning in both valleys, the local authorities, British Waterways and the Canal Society formed a Joint Committee to oversee the future of the canal. The Committee considered rebuilding the filled in length between the repaired Uppermill locks and the basin at Wool Road to create a self-contained length of useable canal in Uppermill. And Greater Manchester County Council agreed to do the work - the first time a public body employed contractors on restoring the canal.

This was among the last tasks of the Metropolitan County Councils because, in 1986, the government decided to abolish them and pass their duties to the district councils of Tameside, Oldham and Kirklees. Both Greater Manchester and West Yorkshire County Councils had been funding the job creation schemes and both left important legacies to help continue work.

West Yorkshire County Council decided to resolve the difficult problem of meeting the high cost of building the new bridge at Wakefield Road, Huddersfield that was needed to regain access to the canal. Work started quickly and, just before the dissolution of the council, the Chairman and Deputy Chairman of the Recreation & Arts Committee steered a boat under the new bridge which was the key to progress up the valley.

Greater Manchester Council calculated how much the County Council would have invested in future years had they been able to continue supporting the job creation work and decided to leave that sum as a legacy to allow work to continue. Because of the annual nature of the budgets of British Waterways and the three local authorities, it became apparent that the Canal Society was the only Joint Committee partner able to invest such a large sum of money to spend over a period of years. After a great deal of legal consideration, a cheque to the value of £1,200,000 was presented to the Society with very strict controls over the way the money had to be invested and spent. A condition was that British Waterways sponsored an Act of Parliament rescinding the clause of the 1944 Act of Parliament that prevented

navigation. This led to approval of the British Waterways (No. 2) Act in 1988 after which the relevant subsection of the 1944 Act no longer applied and navigation could again be permitted on the canal.

The job creation schemes continued repairing locks, towpaths and wash-walls. New lock-gates were fitted and the canal was dredged, partly by land-based machine and partly by water-based dredger. The Society bought a dredger *Norwood* and mud hoppers. By the end of 1988, 18 locks were complete and 4.7km of canal dredged in Kirklees where the canal was almost ready for use between Marsden & Slaithwaite and work was beginning towards Linthwaite. The Society's scheme employed more staff but it started eighteen months later, had to rebuild more lock walls and it also included environmental work carried out for Tameside Council. Work had reached beyond Stalybridge to Lock Nos. 9, 10 & 1W below Scout Tunnel and was then proposed to continue beyond Mossley to Locks 15 - 17W up to the boundary with the Oldham district.

In the autumn of 1988 the Government changed the emphasis of the schemes to training for work. The Canal Society soon had over a hundred trainees. The Society had purchased and refurbished a builder's yard, office and workshop at Mossley Road, Ashton-under-Lyne as the base for its workforce and the Society's headquarters. Training now had to extend beyond construction skills and a room on the first floor was filled with computers to teach basic office skills. And a workshop was rented in Dukinfield to act as a building skills classroom. Work on the canal was slower but both the Canal Society and Kirklees Council schemes continued into 1989. The Society extended its work into the Oldham district and the Royal George Locks in Greenfield. The Society's subsidiary company was renamed HCS Restoration Ltd. to reflect this move beyond the Tameside district.

### **European Money.**

With changes in the availability of grants, European Regional Development money became available for work on the canal. Kirklees Council received around £160,000 towards the training work on the canal. The Canal Society was offered £150,000 towards the crucial engineering study of Standedge Tunnel. Money from the local authorities, British Waterways, the Society and a grant from the Yorkshire & Humberside Sports Council more than doubled that amount and engineering consultants Ove Arup proved that restoration of the tunnel would be straightforward and far less expensive than feared.

By the end of 1990, the two schemes on the canal had spent over £7,000,000. 48 out of the total of 74 locks had been restored and ten miles of the canal dredged. Work in the Colne Valley had progressed to Milnsbridge and 32 out of the 42 locks in the valley were restored, but the training regime was becoming increasingly expensive and the Council had to make a significant financial input. Kirklees Council had also rebuilt Whiteley Street Bridge over the canal in Milnsbridge to allow for increased vehicle weights and removed the prop in the channel that had blocked access to lock No. 10E. In the Tame Valley, the Canal Society had completed lock restoration and channel clearance and dredging between Ashton and Stalybridge, between Stalybridge and Scout Tunnel and from Lock 15W (Roaches lock) to Lock 19W (Royal George Locks) and was working on the canal in Mossley on locks 13 & 14W.

Changes to the training scheme in 1991 meant that the costs of training would be more than the income offered. The Society had to abandon the scheme and with regret make the training staff redundant. A small building team was kept on as the Society, together with Tameside & Oldham Councils, agreed to continue paying for work on the canal at a reduced rate. A small European Union grant helped in the first year.

## **Government Grants.**

At about the same time there were changes to the government's Derelict Land Grant scheme. The Canal Society discussed this with civil servants in London and Manchester who confirmed that waterway restoration could now be eligible for these grants. On 28<sup>th</sup> October 1991 a group of civil servants was taken on a coach tour of the Tame Valley and shown where large grants were needed. They agreed that grants could be possible. The Society was still paying wages and was catching up with small jobs left earlier such as repairing walls and fences. By the end of 1992 Kirklees Council also passed the small amount of work remaining on its training scheme to the Society for its workforce to complete. The Society replaced its dredging fleet with more modern vessels, the dredger *Pollard*, tug *Ashton* and two mud hoppers.

Derelict Land Grant funded work began in 1993 followed by three years of hectic work as the partnership between the Canal Society, the local authorities and British Waterways really came into its own. The Society's workforce concentrated on straightforward lock restoration, wash-wall repair and dredging work, whilst large contractors were brought in for more complex tasks. By the end of 1996, the Canal Society had dredged the canal between Ashton & Stalybridge. It had rebuilt Staley Hall Lock (8W) and Lock 12W and the channel between there and Scout Tunnel, dredged the canal between Mossley and Manns's Wharf at Greenfield and restored all of the locks and the pounds between them on the Diggle lock flight. In Slaithwaite it had rebuilt Lock 24E (with a specially commissioned guillotine gate because a widened bridge occupied the space of traditional lock-gates) and restored Dartmouth Lock (23E). And in Huddersfield Lock 1E had been restored and the canal dredged up to lock 2E.

Contractors had built a new road bridge at Bayley Street, Stalybridge and a new channel named Staley Wharf between there and Caroline Street, a new channel alongside the site of the now demolished power station at Hartshead, new road bridges at Grove Road, Manns Wharf and Frenches in Greenfield, a new channel constructed as part of the redevelopment of the former Haigh's Mill site in Huddersfield and a new footbridge between the University buildings below lock 1E.

## **The National Lottery & the Millennium Scheme.**

Just at the time that it was becoming apparent that the major works remaining to complete the restoration of the canal would be too costly for existing grant regimes, the government funding for the Derelict Land Grant scheme was passed to English Partnerships, a short-lived quango, and the National Lottery funded Millennium Commission was created to help pay for major projects that would be built around the turn of the twenty-first century.

The key to accessing these new funds was to prove that expenditure on the large scale required would be a worthwhile & proper use of public funds so the Canal Society appointed economic consultants Coopers & Lybrand to investigate the benefits of completing the restoration of the canal. Costs of the remaining work were provided by engineers and planners from the three Councils and from British Waterways. Coopers & Lybrand's report showed that the improved environment and the benefits of waterside locations would lead to the development of more new buildings and the reuse of existing buildings alongside the canal and the creation of more new jobs than was needed to justify the cost of the work. On the strength of this, applications for grants to complete restoration of the canal were submitted early in 1996. And engineering consultants were appointed to design the route through Stalybridge where the factories on the line of the original route had closed and the

planned Tesco supermarket would now allow for rebuilding approximately on the original route through the centre of the town.

Almost three years later in January 1999, after months of detailed negotiations, nearly £15,000,000 was offered by the Millennium Commission and £12,840,000 by English Partnerships. During the long wait from 1996, very little work had taken place on the canal, although land was purchased especially through Stalybridge.

Apart from finishing dredging all that remained for the Canal Society's staff was to partly rebuild the walls of Dungebooth Lock (22W) and fit new gates to that lock and to the nearby Lime Kiln (23W). These had been the locks brought back into use nearly 20 years earlier by volunteers and it was fitting that this was the Canal Society's last work on the canal. With great sadness, the building workforce and their manager were made redundant. The Society had been unique amongst waterway restoration societies in employing a full-time team of building workers. In total, including work by volunteers, the Society had restored 29 locks and dredged the channel and rebuilt wash-walls and repaired towpaths on about 6 miles of the canal.

From mid-1999 onwards major schemes began along the length of the canal. Over the next two years work on what had been thought an impossible restoration moved rapidly to a climax. Major works included structural repairs to Standedge Tunnel and the draining of silt from the tunnel, construction of new channels through Slaithwaite and at Wool Road and High Street in Uppermill and the complete rebuilding of the canal through Stalybridge town centre. Among several new bridges in Stalybridge, that at Caroline Street linked to the earlier Staley Wharf section of new canal. Other new bridges were built at Lees Mill, Holme Mill & Mark Bottoms and the aqueduct at Golcar was restored. New tunnels under buildings at Sellers Engineers and Bates' mill were the last major scheme to be completed on the canal, although work on converting and equipping the warehouse at Tunnel End, Marsden as a new visitor centre was not finished until the very last moment. Ironically, the tunnel at Sellers only lasted for ten years until the Waterfront redevelopment scheme and the new Kirklees College allowed for a second rebuilding back to ground level.

Marked by tape-cutting ceremonies in Stalybridge and later the same day in Huddersfield, the canal was opened from end-to-end on 1<sup>st</sup> May 2001. Several months later on 3<sup>rd</sup> September HRH the Prince of Wales arrived at Marsden in the Royal Train. He walked along the towpath to Tunnel End where he declared the canal to be officially open.

Restoration of the canal had cost about £45,000,000. There had been lucky breaks in the timing of the availability of the job creation scheme and in the changing rules and the availability of grants but, without the foresight, persistence and organisation of a small number of volunteers who campaigned for and led the restoration from the very beginning, restoration would have been impossible.