



NAVIGATION NOTES – TRENT AND MERSEY CANAL.

By Nigel Hughes

The Journey southwards from Preston Brook.

The Trent and Mersey Canal starts just south of the village of Preston Brook which is steeped in canal history. The name Preston means “priest’s house or priest’s farm”. This may refer to a priest from the nearby Norton Priory being housed on the edge of the priory estates.

Preston Brook was a sleepy rural village until the opening of the Bridgewater Canal which was later linked with the Trent & Mersey Canal in 1777 at a point just 11 yards inside the north end of the Preston Brook tunnel. This spot is marked today by a milepost on the path over the tunnel, which was used to walk the horses that pulled the boats.

In January 1776 the final mile of the canal through the Norton Priory estate was cut and the canal opened for through traffic. Many trans-shipment warehouses were soon being built and Preston Brook became a very busy transport centre, with many hundreds of passing boats and boating families. At one stage a floating boatman’s church sailed along this stretch of the canal. This was the converted canal boat built in about 1840 by Lord Francis Egerton. For some years this boat went up and down the canal to be used by boatmen and their families. By 1860 it had been lifted out of the water and placed by the side of the Runcorn Arm of the canal near its junction with the Bridgewater Canal. The Rev. Charles Dodgson, the vicar of Daresbury, and the father of Lewis Carroll held services there for the boat people. It became known as the Watermen’s Church.

Once through the tunnel - which is 1239 yards long (1133 metres) boaters emerge at Dutton Stop lock. A Dry Dock can be found nearby which is an interesting structure. If you think that the ornate roof resembles Victorian railway architecture, you’d be right because it was built by the North Staffordshire Railway Company which formerly owned the canal. The Dry Dock, nearby Stop Lock and Stop Lock Keeper’s cottage and the southern portal to Preston Brook Tunnel are all listed buildings. Together with the cottages above the tunnel portal they form a significant group of

buildings giving a distinctive character to what is effectively the northern terminus of the canal.

This section of the canal including Dutton Stop Lock was originally built for barges although it has now been narrowed.

In this area is Longacre Wood, an important wildlife corridor, with a wide variety of hedgerow and wild meadow flowers found in abundance and the smell of wild garlic is particularly prominent.

The canal runs through several woodland sections. From Garden Wood, there is an attractive view of Dutton Hollow Farm on the hill top.

Perched high up on the Weaver valley side, the views from the canal are superb and between bridges 213 and 210, there is a spectacular view over the river, including the Dutton Locks on the Weaver Navigation and a spectacular profile of the Dutton Arches, a railway viaduct over $\frac{1}{4}$ mile (400 metres) long, 65 feet (20 metres) above the level of the river. Further south between bridges 208 and 207, there is an attractive view across to the Acton Swing Bridge.

The open farmland scenery gradually changes as you head further south and trees start to enclose the canalside which runs through several attractive woodland sections, including Bradley Meadow Wood, in which there is a tightly enclosed view of Little Leigh Pond adjacent to the canal.

Eventually the canal approaches Saltersford Tunnel, which is 424 yards in length, is timed due to a dog-leg in the middle which restricts visibility. Timings are northbound on the hour to twenty past the hour and southbound on the half hour to ten to the hour. There is a good mooring area close to the tunnel portal, with well spaced bollards.

Once through the tunnel the canal enters a wide between Saltersford and Barnton tunnels which once allowed canal boats to queue while waiting to travel through the tunnels. Before the introduction of tugs to the Trent and Mersey Canal, canal boats were propelled through the tunnel by 'legging' - where two boatmen would lie at opposite ends of a plank fixed to the bow and walk along the tunnel walls. On the north side of the canal remains the tug arm, where the tunnel tug was kept, and there are many buildings with historic waterways connections.

At the other end of the wide a short length of canal leads to Barnton tunnel, which is 572 yards long. There is a particularly attractive view over the Weaver Valley, including a glimpse down to the Saltersford Locks on the Weaver Navigation and a long view towards Weaverham church. When the tunnel was relined in the mid 1990's, special bricks were used to allow the colony of bats to continue to use it as a roost.

Barnton Tunnel follows a straighter course than that of Saltersford and soon exits into Barnton Basin which developed in days now gone as a service facility for canal users awaiting access to the tunnel. It incorporated a coal wharf as well as a rope

walk, smithy, clog maker, two pubs, a grocer's shop, stabling for horses and terraces of cottages. The space is enclosed by the steep hillside above the Weaver Valley. Although most of the buildings have been destroyed, traces of the cobbled street and the foundations of houses still remain. Set into the eastern portal of Barnton Tunnel, it is still possible to see the original water point.

From Barnton Basin, there is a view of the eastern end of Barnton tunnel, set against a background of trees. In the days of horse drawn boats the horse would have been led along the horse path over the tunnel. An overgrown and neglected water trough is situated alongside the wide between Barnton and Saltersford tunnels. This provided fresh drinking water for the horses, as the canal water had a high concentration of salt. Above Barnton tunnel a green space has been created. The line of the canal can be easily traced by the long depression. It is unclear why this was formed, but it is thought that structural settlement of the tunnel below required the canal engineers to dig away the overburden until the tunnel structure became stable.

Barnton and Saltersford are important canal structures. The four portals to these tunnels are listed buildings as is one air ventilation shaft above Barnton Tunnel.

To exit Barnton Basin under bridge 201 the boater has to negotiate two very extreme left hand turns, the first being the tightest and requiring a careful approach and line.

Once clear of the last turn a small terrace of former Weaver flatman's cottages come into view with a long line of moorings that make the canal particularly narrow at this point. Along this rebuilt canal section between Barnton and Anderton, special ramps have been introduced into the concrete edge to allow small mammals to escape from the water.

The canal now contours around the steep hillside above the Weaver Valley, and areas of industrial activity adjacent to the River Weaver below, are well screen by hundreds of trees.

The Stanley Arms soon comes into view. This pub has good moorings extensive gardens and play areas and serves a wide range of food and drinks.

Just beyond the Stanley Arms lies one of the most famous structures on the canal system – The Anderton Boat Lift.

The Anderton Boat Lift is a Scheduled Ancient Monument - a prime example of the use of cast and wrought iron. During the nineteenth century, their use as a construction material radically altered the approach to industrial architecture. Built in 1875 and converted from a hydraulic mechanism to electricity in 1906-7, the lift raised boats vertically in two caissons or tanks through 50 feet (15.25 metres) between the River Weaver and an aqueduct leading to the Trent and Mersey Canal. The lift was built on an island in the river, thus necessitating the linking aqueduct to the canal.

The tanks originally counterbalanced each other when filled with water, but following the conversion to electricity in 1908, cast iron weights working over new pulleys at

the top were added to counterbalance the weight of the tanks. The enormous girders, buttresses and pulleys combined to create a gigantic effect, now somewhat diminished by the industrial buildings on the other side of the river. The lift was closed in 1983, because of structural damage and makes a remarkable experience to descend to the River Weaver below.

The landscape around the lift and along this section of the canal has seen a huge amount of investment and hard work to transform it into an excellent recreational area of wooded pathways and picnic areas.

Leaving the Boat-Lift behind, the canal widens for a short distance then as it approaches bridge 199 which is known as "The Check Office Bridge" is an area of concrete on the towpath side – this was the foundation base for the old toll office for the Anderton Boat Lift.

Beside the abutments of the western elevation of bridge 198 there is possibly a boundary marker stone, inscribed 'M 1849'. It is believed that the 'M' stands for Lord Mansfield, the landowner in 1849, who had disputes with salt mining companies over ownership rights.

Once clear of the bridge on the left can be found ABC Leisure Group's Anderton Marina which is an well known centre for boat hire, marina facilities and chandlery. Anderton Marina was originally a clay pit that was developed and squared off during 1974, with the jetties and quay headings completed in 1975 when the builders broke through to the canal and flooded the earthworks.

This is also the location for one of the best kept secrets on the T&M – The Moorings Restaurant (www.themooringsrestaurant.co.uk – Tel: 01606 79789).

This highly acclaimed venue run by chef/owners Jackie and Jim is well worth a visit, but due to its popularity make sure you book in advance to avoid disappointment!

On the towpath side, a new marina has been created in what was once the canal basins and dry dock of the former British Salt Company.

Further along the towpath is the British Waterways sanitary station, which also houses toilets, showers and waste disposal compound.



After a sharp bend a small cottage comes into view on the right hand side – this is Jacksons Turn and was once a lengths-man's cottage – who was responsible for looking after the canal in this area. Approaching Brine Pump Cottages is an obtrusive pipe bridge acting as a reminder of the industrial character of the immediate area.

Along the length of the canal there are many overflow sluices, which were built at intervals to take away excess water, including those at Anderton and Barnton basins. Anderton Basin and Jacksons Turn also have overflow weirs to remove excess water. Too much water would lead to flooded towpaths, bank erosion, breached banks and unworkable locks, as it would be impossible to equalise the water pressure on either side of the top gates.



Travelling on further the canal now starts to skirt Marbury Country Park. Many of the features of the Park, including the lime avenues and the arboretum, are a legacy of the days when Marbury was a grand estate.



The last hall, built in the 1850s, was a fine looking house modelled on the French chateau at Fontainebleau, with an imposing carriage drive entrance.



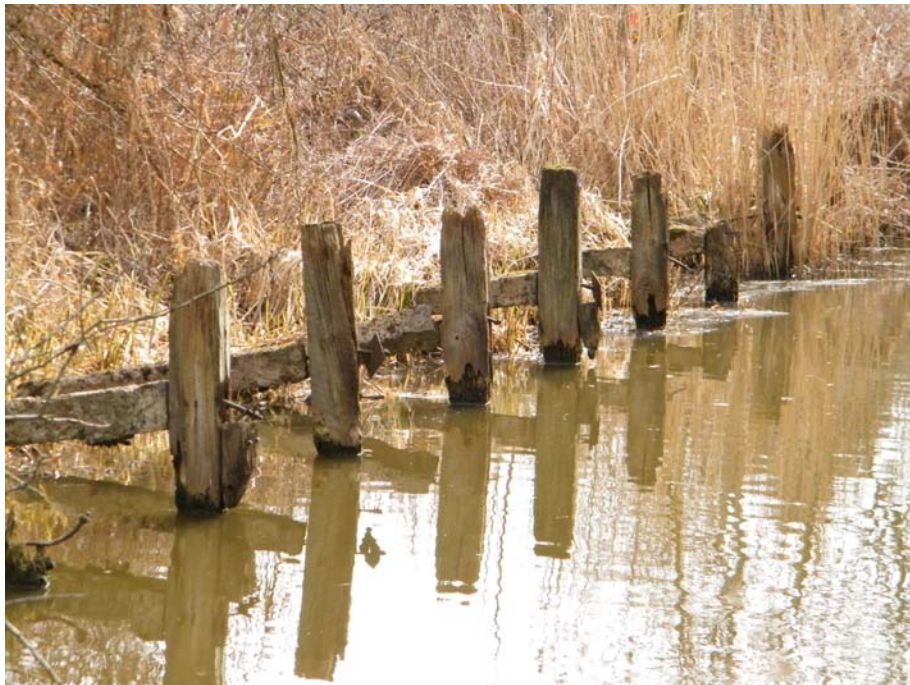
This area of splendid woodlands carpeted with bluebells in the springtime and makes an impressive sight as you glide slowly by, relaxing under the shade of the towering limes. As you leave the densely packed woodland you are get a clear view over to the left of the lush farmland across to the tower of Great Budworth Church, a Grade I listed building dating from the 14th and 15th centuries.

The canal now sweeps in a wide right hand curve and passes through a strange narrows before proceeding along a straight concrete lined section. This is Marston New and was built in 1957 because the existing stretch of canal was in danger of collapsing into salt workings. It did so as expected, about six months after the new section opened. It is about half a mile or 800 metres long. The line of the original

canal is just recognisable away to the right from these narrows it can be made out by the lines of trees that ran alongside it.

At the end of this long stretch you start to see a number of moored boats on the towpath side and as you draw near to Bridge 193 you will see the Salt Barge pub on your right and once under the bridge, the Lion Salt Works, the last to produce salt by the open pan method also on your right. Brine was pumped up from underground into large iron salt pans and heated until salt crystals formed. Owned by Thompsons, it was opened in 1842 and remained in operation until 1986. Currently, an extensive refurbishment is being undertaken to create a working museum. To the south east of the Lion Salt works, also on the towpath side, an in-filled canal loading arm can be seen in a dip in the surrounding farmland.

The impact of the salt industry on this section of the canal is considerable. The completion of the Trent and Mersey Canal, following the earlier approval for the Weaver Navigation, allowed the expansion of the industry in the 18th century. As a result, many salt works were built along the canal banks surrounding Northwich. Although the salt industry has declined, there are still remnants of the impact of salt and its associated industry.



Opposite there are open views of the surrounding countryside, including a large subsidence flash in the foreground, formerly the site of the Adelaide Salt Works.

Heading further along this section the character of the canal becomes more urban as it contours around the outskirts of Northwich, through Wincham towards Broken Cross. This is an area once dominated by the salt industry as can be seen still from the remnants of the old salt works which once lined the canal banks in the last century, to the large salt-based chemical works at Lostock and Winnington today. The views outwards along this length are dominated by two recent visually obtrusive

developments, the BP Nutrition animal feed factory and the New Cheshire Salt Works, which produce salt by the modern vacuum process and is the only remaining salt works based on natural underground brine.



Adjacent to bridge 192 is the site of the former Wincham Hotel, a canal side pub which provided refreshments for both canal and salt workers. There were two entrances, with canal workers using the back door from the towpath. It was finally demolished in 2010.



The canal's course now takes it past more light industrial businesses to pass the new Northwich Victoria and Manchester United Reserves Football ground, before entering another long wide straight.



The offside bank of the canal, between bridges 190 and 193, was once lined with salt works in the last century, which have all but disappeared, leaving the remains of wharves. These vast industrial complexes, with towering chimneys and steam-hissing pipes, dominate the views from the surrounding areas.



The winding hole on the offside was once a canal arm leading into the Wincham Hall Salt Works, which allowed coal to be unloaded more efficiently for salt production.



Just past the winding hole are the brickwork remnants of the demolished Sunbeam Salt Works and then the canal gently curves round towards a tight right hand bend and a small aqueduct which carries the canal over Wincham Brook along which there are particularly good views to Wincham Wharf which was once used for the transhipment of goods, such as coal coming in for Northwich and the surrounding area, and flour from the mill opposite intended for the town. It is now a busy canal boat repair and sales yard and space is very restricted. The warehouse was built, to service the waterways cargoes and a range of stables and associated trade buildings are alongside it. Beyond bridge 184, an old smithy can be seen backing onto the canal towpath.



As the canal leaves the long lines of brokerage boats double moored at Wincham it turns to the left and cuts through the large Brunner Mond chemical factory at Lostock which manufactures and supplies – Soda Ash (Sodium Carbonate), Sodium

Bicarbonate, Calcium Chloride and associated alkaline chemicals. The factory is a strange place to sail through the middle of with its tall towers and hissing steam pipes, but the boat is soon heading away from this blot on the landscape and out into the more rural aspects of the outer edge of Northwich.

One mile from the Brunner Mond factory is the former wharf at Broken Cross which was developed as a general goods wharf for Northwich, due to difficulties in completing the canal in the Barnton area. Salt left the canal here and was taken into Northwich by road, either for selling or loading onto barges on the River Weaver. However Broken Cross wharf became less important after Anderton was developed as the shipping point between the two waterways. Today the Broken Cross pub is all that remains of this once busy trans-shipment post.

Between bridge 184 and 185, the high grass bank to the east was built by ICI to contain the lime waste from their nearby ammonia soda works. The lime beds attract lime-loving plants.

Beyond Broken Cross the canal runs through a modern housing development with a winding hole just before bridge number 183 then sails along under the A556 road bridge past the new Morrison's distribution warehouses. Noise from traffic, Morrison's, encroaching development from Gadbrook Park to the west and the increased boating activity associated with Orchard Marina all disturb the tranquillity of the canal for the next mile.

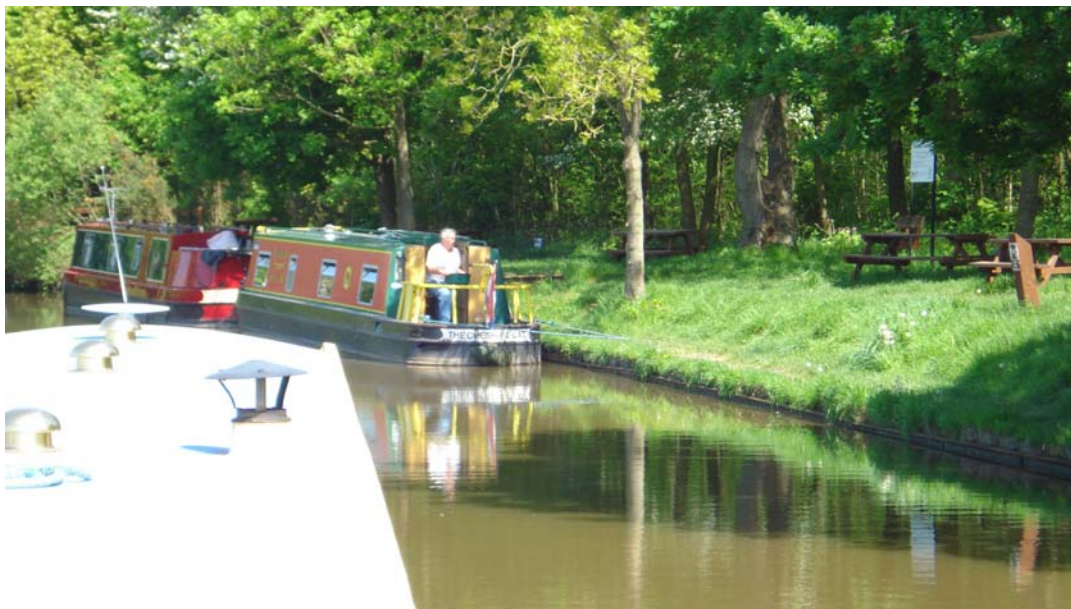
Beyond bridge 181 the canal crosses the first of three wide expanses of water – Billinge Green Flash, followed by Billinge Flash second. In some of these flashes, lie the decaying hulks of sunken barges and narrow boats, which can occasionally be seen breaking the surface of the water. These Flashes are very shallow and boats should not stray over onto them.

Once across the second "Wide" or "Flash", the canal turns sharply to the right under bridge 180 and begins its meandering route around the outskirts of Whatcroft Hall.

This section follows the line of the river Dane which can often be glimpsed down below the canals level in the valley below. The section is essentially rural in character, with very few buildings, alternating between open vistas of the surrounding countryside and attractive wooded sections. The original brick built bridges within this section enhance the character of the canal. Throughout this section there are areas where the original stone wall of the canal remains intact.



A famous feature of the Trent and Mersey Canal are the mile posts, originally essential for the calculation of tolls. Every mile along the towpath there was a cast iron post showing the distance from the inland ports at either end of the canal. Most of the mile posts in this section are original and were cast by a company in Stone named Rangeley & Dixon. They bear the casting 'R&D Stone 1819'. Most of them are "listed buildings". Where the originals were missing the Trent and Mersey Canal Society has had replicas made, bearing the casting 'T&MCS 1977'.



Shortly after bridge 176, on the east bank, lays the picturesque Bramble Cutting Picnic Site. This former waterways pit still retains some original loading rails and has been landscaped and cared for by local boating enthusiasts.



Croxton Flash



Approximately half a mile after Bramble Cutting is the last of the Wides – Croxton Flash before the canal negotiates its last bridge prior to reaching Croxton Aqueduct which was originally a complex cast and wrought iron structure of 14 feet (4.27 metres) beam, crossing the River Dane. However it was swept away by floods in the 1930's and replaced by the present narrow structure on a new alignment. The original brick abutments and centre pier foundation are still visible on the bank and bed of the River Dane, immediately to the south of the present structure.



Now the canal takes a series of gentle turns until it reaches the aptly named Middlewich Big Lock. Recently refurbished this wide lock lifts boats up onto the section above that leads into the town centre. To the left of the Big Lock lie the remains of a former Roman fort and a walk over the lock footbridge will bring you to a large information board that explains the size and scale of the settlement.

There was probably a settlement at Middlewich before the Roman's arrived, as the local brine springs would have been important to local people in the Iron Age. The Roman settlement is believed to have begun around 50 AD, when the Roman army probably built a temporary camp to guard the crossing point of the rivers Dane and Croco. Around 70 AD they built a substantial fort on what is today known as Harbutt's Field located on the hillside to the left as you approach the Big Lock.

Today there is little to show what a hugely successful salt industry was once. The line of the canal from Big Lock down through Middlewich town centre was once lined with salt works and salt related businesses. Today open grassed areas have replaced the once densely built up industrial fringe of the canal and lead to three narrow locks that see the canal climb up through the town centre to its junction with England's shortest canal – the Wardle Canal – just 110 yards long. The Wardle Canal takes boats to the Middlewich Branch of the Shropshire Union Canal.

Continuing south on the Trent and Mersey brings you to Kings Lock. Beyond Kings Lock the canal follows the main Sandbach road and climbs a number of locks on its journey to Wheelock.