

## Origins and historic development

Two economic factors precipitated the construction of the Macclesfield Canal, the need for raw materials elsewhere and the development of manufacturing industry. Two major industries in the Macclesfield area, coal mining and quarried stone were beginning to feed the Industrial Revolution and access to markets for these products was key to their continued success. However, not only were they facing growing competition from rivals who had greater access to other canals but they intrinsically needed better transport enabling cheaper, more reliable and quicker means of conveyance than the use of pack animals. Coal was being mined to feed the steam engines of the day and the need for materials to feed the construction of buildings to house new industries was growing. Initially stone from Kerridge and elsewhere and later brick from the Cheshire Brick Works and lime, all located adjacent to the Macclesfield Canal, were in great demand. In addition to these industrial needs, with the canal the silk and cotton manufacturing towns of Macclesfield and Congleton would also continue to lose out to competitors as a result of the additional cost of transferring all goods across land to their markets.

Earlier attempts to link Macclesfield in 1765, 1790 and in the early 1800s had been foiled. In 1766, Brindley, designer of the Bridgewater Canal, had given evidence against the proposals to deter any likelihood of construction, as there were fears that a new canal would divert revenue away from the Bridgewater Canal and might also have an effect on the price of coal from mines also owned by his sponsor, the Duke of Bridgewater. Finally, lack of financial support put paid to these earlier schemes.

Only when the renowned engineer Thomas Telford had been engaged to survey a route for the canal were plans and reasonable costings once again seriously considered. Based on his experience of building canals elsewhere, including the Caledonian and the Ellesmere, he was able to employ all his knowledge to construct one of the best-engineered narrow canals of the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. By placing the canal on two levels he could meet the needs of the producers of coal, stone and manufacturing who were located on the edge of the Pennines at over 500ft but also, by devising a second, lower level he could realistically cross the Dane Valley, after descending 118ft with twelve locks at Bosley.

The grouping of locks in one location was favoured by Telford as the most efficient means of traversing changes in level. It all for the maximum use of resources with the preparation of the next lock as the first was being used for the minimum loss of water. Following one relatively short burst of activity the remaining part of the canal could be navigated without further interruption.

One unusual feature of the canal is the stop lock near Hall Green, which technically is the end of Telford's Macclesfield Canal and the start of the Macclesfield Branch of the Trent & Mersey Canal. This was built to overcome the concerns of the older canal company and meant they effectively controlled movement onto the Macclesfield Canal. As there were also a few inches difference in height between the two canals, the Trent & Mersey claimed rights over the water that was used each time the stop lock was opened.

The enabling Act of 1826 emphasised the clear local needs rather than the more controversial improved north-south through route of the canal which had previously dogged its development. Through the synthesis of Telford's experience in building the Ellesmere and Caledonian canals and the judicious choice of William Crosley as the constructing engineer, who had experience of building the Lancaster Canal amongst others, the Macclesfield Canal benefited greatly from engineering excellence in the execution of its design and construction.

The canal was built at a cost of £320,000, against an estimate of £295,000 and eventually opened on the 9<sup>th</sup> November 1831 at Macclesfield, with a procession of 77 boats arriving from both the north and south of the canal. This was followed by a dinner for 200 guests at Macclesfield Town Hall. Even at this late stage some argument still raged as to whether the canal should have been built as a railway. The 'Golden Age of the Canal' had now been passed and the impact of faster bulk transport afforded by the railway system was rapidly becoming obvious to all. If the forthcoming success of the Liverpool to Manchester Railway, also opened in the same year, had been known from the outset then it has been said by some commentators that the canal would have never been built.

What followed for the next fifteen years or so was the greatest boon in activity for the area. New textile mills were proposed along the length of the canal with access to two key raw material requirements, Pennine water and coal, to wash and dye fabric and feed their steam driven engines. To support these developments saw mills, timber yards and lime kilns also sprang up, along with tramways to feed goods from distant quarries and mines directly to the canal itself.

Unfortunately, the success of the canal company was short lived, being quickly superseded by the railways in the mid-nineteenth century. A branch line from Stockport to Macclesfield was opened in 1845 and was further extended southwards to Stoke-on-Trent in 1849. In 1869 a further line followed to Marple, through Bollington and Poynton, which curtailed activities along the canal. Goods were able to be more rapidly transported around the new transport network and with more versatile loading and unloading facilities leading to further reduced costs in comparison, the canal entered a period of decline it was unable to recover from.

In September 1846 the canal was absorbed into the ownership of the Sheffield, Ashton-under-Lyne & Manchester Railway Company. The canal was managed with two others and became known as the Ashton, Peak Forest and Macclesfield Canal or APM. The move from canal to rail for goods actually produced along its length was initially low as many of the companies adjoining the canal had invested heavily in wharfs, boats, tramways and equipment related to moving goods from their point of extraction to the canal.

However, the commercial use of the canal declined in tandem with its two principal industries, as coal seams gradually became exhausted and quarried stone became less favoured for construction throughout the early twentieth

century. Traffic was all but superseded by rail and road freight by the Second World War. The canal was nationalised in 1948 and placed under the eventual authority of British Waterways with commercial traffic finally ceasing by the 1960s. Unfortunately, most of the early 19<sup>th</sup> century swing bridges which characterised the canal and served the various industries along its length have long since been removed, though some traces often survive.

The emergence of recreational use has a surprisingly long history along the Macclesfield Canal. As long ago as the 1840s the canal was utilised for passengers to take in the views across to the Pennines, facilitated by special boats being used to transport the public. By 1908, the then canal owner, the Great Central Railway Company charged for inland cruising. Although long gone, there was a fine collection of boat sheds on the canal itself, as depicted in contemporary photographs. The need to escape the grime of the city encouraged the development of prefabricated summer houses, some of which lasted until the 1990's along sections of the canal side in High Lane, Higher Poynton and Adlington.

The impact of the Second World War upon the canal was twofold. Firstly, the water barrier the canal represented on a north-south axis was pressed into service as part of the home defences swiftly erected to counter the Nazi invasion threat posed immediately after the withdrawal of British Expeditionary Forces from France and Norway in the mid 1940. The canal formed part of Western Command stop line number 6, which was put in place to defend the industrial centres of the north and midlands, from threats posed by possible invasion by German forces through a neutral Southern Ireland and onwards through Wales. This stop line consisted of pillboxes, tank traps, roadblocks and associated items, which utilised existing natural and man-made barriers such as the canal to greatest effect. Many of these can still be seen along the canal today and form an essential part of its history and interest.

Secondly, a vigorous movement grew up to restore the declining canal network for inland cruising, which was an affordable way for the masses to enjoy a water-borne experience that didn't involve the seaside. This eventually led to the formation of the Inland Waterways Association in 1946 to promote this aim, though it was preceded in 1943, by the North Cheshire Cruising Club, located on the Macclesfield Canal at High Lane. Today the canal is used by many different recreational users, but without the efforts of the Club during the early post war days, the Macclesfield Canal may well have suffered the ignominy of closure.