PROGRAMME 4
WIGAN PIER
THE LEEDS AND LIVERPOOL CANAL, LANCASHIRE

Introduction

The Leeds and Liverpool Canal - stretching 127 miles and taking 46 years to complete - is truly one of the wonders of the industrial age. In this three day walk we’re starting out at Liverpool - once the Manhattan of The North - on the road (towpath!) to Wigan. As Lancashire was thrust into the Industrial Revolution there was demand for faster, more reliable and efficient transportation of goods and canals were seen as the answer, providing the best means to transport goods inland around the country and to the coast for export.

Day 1

From Liverpool’s regenerated docks, the first day takes us through the city’s industrial heritage, as we go in search of the canal - easier said than done - and its legacy.

☞ Liverpool Docks to Aintree via Hartley’s Village and Aintree Racecourse
   Distance: 14 miles

Day 2

We up the pace as we emerge from the urban sprawl of Liverpool into open countryside to discover exactly how this canal was constructed and learn a little of the lives of a new class of people who lived and worked on the canal.

☞ Aintree to Parbold, via Halsall and Burscough.
   Distance: 18.5 miles

Day 3

We are on the road to Wigan Pier.

☞ Parbold to Wigan Pier via: Crooke, Wigan and Wigan Top Lock
   Distance: 9 miles

Please use OS Explorer Maps 275, 276, 285, (1:25k) or OS Landranger 108 (1:50k). All distances approx.
Walking Through History

Day 1 – Places of Interest

Liverpool to Aintree via:
Liverpool Docks, Hartley’s Village and
Aintree Racecourse
Distance: 14 miles

Our walk begins at the magnificently regenerated Liverpool Docks. Heading north we pass a plethora of docks and museums - a nod to the city’s past as a centre for world trade. By Pier Head Ferry Terminal you’ll see the Royal Liver Building on your right and the modern Liverpool Canal link on your left with a plaque commemorating its opening in 2009. But we’re on a mission to find the start of the original canal. Make your way inland from the docks up Chapel Street until you meet Old Hall Street on your left. Follow this north until you see Old Leeds Street on your right and a small rather out-of-place building on the left hand pavement.

Liverpool Terminus

This little company office is all that remains, but at one time the canal came right up to this pavement, where it terminated. There are a few clues to the canal’s existence here: across the road Leeds Street is a reference to the canal and old iron frame tells you that this is the ‘Gateway to the East Coast’.

This was an industrial hub with dozens of coal yards clustered around this terminal basin. In the early 18th century Liverpool had been a small town with a population little over 5000 but with the growth of Atlantic shipping and trade of coal, cotton, sugar and slaves, the city and its population exploded. And in 1766, forty leading merchants from Liverpool and Leeds met to discuss the possibility of a canal to connect their cities. All they had to do was agree a route…but that was easier said than done.

Head back over to the docks and continue north towards Bootle on the A5036 until you come to Stanley Dock Tobacco Warehouse. This warehouse is the largest brick warehouse in the world. Just beyond there is a bridge where you can see Stanley Dock on your right. This is the link between the canal and the sea. It was Jesse Hartley, Liverpool’s great dock engineer, who provided this key missing link.
Walking Through History

Jesse Hartley
Stanley Dock was built in 1847 by Liverpool’s great dock engineer - Jesse Hartley (1780-1860). A few years earlier he had designed and built the Albert Dock and there today at the Mersey Maritime Museum, you will find more information about this iconic figure. Hartley was something of a dock-building superstar and it was he who realized the canal needed to be linked directly to the sea and Atlantic trade to maximize its full potential. Goods could now pass directly from the canal into the docks for export and be imported from the docks inland along the canal, fully tapping into Britain’s empire and booming Atlantic trade.

Turn right up Walter Street running parallel to Stanley Dock and when you get to the A565 you’ll see a small doorway in the wall across the road. Cross the A565 and walk through this door. Leaving behind the roads, docks and warehouses, we enter the world of the canal with its towpaths, locks, viaducts and barges. At the end of a series of locks along Hartley’s dock link, we finally find ourselves on the main branch of the canal at Canalside Park heading towards Leeds.

The Leeds and Liverpool Canal: A War of the Roses?
There were two opposing set of interests: those from Yorkshire wanted an increased supply of limestone and a reliable through route for getting local textile products to the port at Liverpool and the markets beyond; those from Lancashire - predominantly promoters from Liverpool - were most concerned with the supply of coal for manufacturing and shipping.

When John Longbotham completed his survey in 1767, his plan for the route of the canal brought it through Blackburn and Preston. This infuriated Liverpool’s merchants whose prime concern was access to the coalfields at Wigan. So Yorkshire initially won out but through a cunning, last minute piece of diplomacy, Longbottham’s contentious route was eventually signed off with the compromise that the canal would include a branch to the Wigan coalfields.

We are now on the towpath that runs continuously alongside the canal. These paths were of course from where the horses towed the barges. Continue northwards - parallel to Vauxhall Road - towards Bootle.

Vauxhall Ward
In the 18th and 19th centuries an array of industries from sugar refineries to glass works sprang up in this area making use of the raw materials that could be transported to them up the canal from the docks. And there was another reason they began to cluster around the canal; with the arrival of steam power, the need for a supply of water was crucial to manufacturers. Pipes fed directly into the factories to power the steam pumps and the condensed steam was then fed back into the canal.

As this area became Liverpool’s epicentre for industry, the likes of Tate and Lyle, Bryant and May, Crawford’s biscuits and Hartley’s Jam among others moved in. Liverpool’s industrial growth caused a population explosion and vast urban slums developed in this area. An 1844 national survey concluded that Liverpool’s workers had the poorest living conditions in the country. In some of the poorest areas two thirds of children didn’t make it to the age of 5 and the life expectancy was just 17. It was a world away from the genteel canalside suburbs that Liverpool’s mercantile elite enjoyed.
Following the canal we pass through the areas of Bootle and Litherland on our way to Aintree. Just short of Aintree’s famous racecourse we take a detour off the canal to visit Hartley’s Village. Follow the clearly marked Cheshire Lines Path then Liverpool Loopline south to the village.

Hartley’s Jam Factory and Model Village

It may be a bit run down now but you still get a sense of its grandeur. Even today Hartley’s is probably the most famous jam and marmalade producer in the country. Its founder, Sir William Hartley, was a grocer in Pendle, Lancashire, and when a supplier failed to deliver a consignment of jam he was so angry he made and packaged his own. It was so successful he moved his business to Bootle in 1874 and then in 1886 to Aintree where he built this factory and model village.

The works at the heart of the village had a permanent workforce of 800 but in the summer 2,000 worked at the factory and the factory was capable of producing over 600 tons of preserves a week.

Almost 15,000 tons of sugar per year came from the Liverpool refineries including Tate and Lyle. Housing was built for his workers along Sugar Street, Spice Street and Hartley Avenue and it even had its own bowling green.

Back on the towpath at Aintree the canal passes along the back of the famous race course. Unfortunately an ugly stone wall obscures the course so for a better view, pop up and over the bridge at Melling Road.

Aintree and the Grand National

The Grand National arrived at Aintree in 1839 generating further opportunities for the canal companies to profit from the burgeoning population. Setting up floating pontoons, they provided some of the cheapest but best seats in the house. And still famous today, Canal Turn saw many a horse - failing to turn left having lost its jockey - end up in the canal.

As we pass Aintree back on the towpath we head towards the city limits and open country bringing us to the end of Day 1.
Yesterday we witnessed the canal’s impact on Liverpool’s industrial metropolis. Today, we have a slightly more idyllic stroll, though a fair distance to cover! As we emerge from the sprawling suburbs we pass through Melling, Maghull and Lydiate en route to bridge 23 - they’re all numbered on the canal - just short of Halsall. It’s difficult to imagine that this tranquil setting was once the main arterial route into the biggest port in the world, carrying over 2 million tons of cargo per year.

Halsall Cutting: Construction Begins
As you pass bridge number 23 - Harkers Bridge - take a look at the grooves in the stone. This is the result of ropes rubbing against the stonework over the centuries as barges were towed up and down the canal. And the reason this bridge shows so much wear and tear is because work began on the Lancashire end of the canal here in 1770.

Continue just beyond the bridge and the canal becomes enclosed by hilly woodland. You will see on your left a high stone wall - this is the Triassic sandstone that this stretch of canal was cut through. There’s a small sign that reads, ‘The Honourable Charles Morduant (local landowner) of Halsall Hall, accompanied by surveyor Samuel Holmes, ceremoniously cut the first spadeful of earth on 5th November 1770.’ Longbotham contracted teams to build different sections.

Like most early canals, this one is what we call a contour canal - if you look at the canal route map - it twists and turns all over the place following the lie of the land. This section, however, was cut through the bedrock, altering the landscape forever, and in those days it was all done by hand. Once the earth had been dug, stone masons began lining the sides of the canal and working on the bridges whilst Smithies made the iron work for mooring rings.
Walking Through History

The canal then had to be made watertight. The bottom would be lined with ‘Puddling Clay’ - normal clay contains too many stones and boulders that would allow water to seep through. But using the Puddling process (sieving), the impurities are removed, producing a fine clay. Once this has been compacted down, it’s virtually water tight. And on occasions they were known to line the canal then get a herd of cows to run through! In fact, one particular cow named Buttercup became quite the celebrity, when in 1912 she fell into the canal tunnel near Foulbridge. Unable to get out she swam the entire length of a tunnel before escaping emerging at the other end a local hero!

Navvies

Before canals, numerous inland rivers were used to transport materials and stretches of navigable river were known as ‘navigations’. These required engineering work straightening routes, securing banks and building wharves. With the arrival of canals in the 1700s, the men - who were known as navigators - who built them came to be known as ‘navvies’.

Cutting channels and raising embankments, they used basic tools like picks and shovels. Gunpowder was packed into hand-drilled holes to blast away solid rock and then the navvies moved rubble and earth with wheelbarrows. It was hard physical work and the men, moving around from contract to contract, gained a reputation as tough, hard drinking men. Many of these navvies were immigrants from Ireland and the locals were often suspicious of them leading to tensions. In 1792 one village even rose up and rioted against them.

The Horse-Drawn Barges

Traditional horse boats were used on this canal from the 18th century right up until the mid-20th century. Horses would tow the boat using a 90 foot rope and could pull up to 25 tons.

Many were ex-mining horses and this work was far easier... a horse that had retired from the mines could work another few years on the canals.
Packet Boats
The idea that the canal could carry passengers was part of the original concept and as soon as it opened in 1774 passenger-carrying boats began operating between Liverpool and Wigan, the journey taking nine hours. They also carried parcels, which is how they gained the name ‘packet boats’. Even the canal’s surveyor, Longbotham, invested in a couple of packet boats on the side!

Continue under the bridge and Burscough Wharf is on your left. This was once a busy yard with stables and a horse hospital.

Burscough
As soon as the canal opened, Burscough became an important hub for boaters because it connected the canal with the road to Preston and many of the locals here today have a long family tradition of working (and living) on the canal.

Burscough’s boatmen were renowned for being the best in the business amongst the canal community, but outside that world, the boatmen gained a rather different reputation.

As you leave Burscough heading east you’ll see a large factory on the other side of the canal. This was Ainscough biscuit factory. Contnue along the towpath until you see a branch of canal that heads left off the canal. This was the ‘Rufford Branch’. Pop a few hundred yards up this branch through beautifully quaint cottages and locks to The Ship Inn, or as its also known, The Blood Tub.

The Blood Tub (aka The Ship Inn)
This pub was originally called the ‘Blood Tub’ and it was a popular destination for thirsty bargees. Now there are two legends as to how it got its name: one that the original land-lady made rather fine black pudding but as a result, there was always a tub full of blood sitting outside the premises.

The other was that the boatmen were a rather rowdy lot - as partial to a punch-up as a few pints. Supposedly the ‘said’ land-lady wouldn’t allow them in until they’d wiped their bloodied noses clean in the tub.

Get back onto the main branch of the canal and continue towards Parbold. You’ll see on your left the Ring O Bells pub. Just prior to this there is an area of cobbled street by the side of the canal. This was a manure wharf.
Manuring / Night Soil
Liverpool’s population explosion after the canal opened had a number of consequences. 80,000 people produce a lot of waste, and in a move surely not foreseen by the original planners, the canal became the perfect solution. Sewage was collected every night to avert a disease pandemic. It was shipped out by canal into the Lancashire countryside - up to 3000 tonnes of it a week.

From a Liverpudlian point of view, this sounds great... but what seems a bit more odd, is that the local people welcomed the commodity. In fact, sewage was one of the few commodities on which you didn’t have to pay toll charges; it was good for the fields and the Lancastrian farmers loved it!
Day 3 – Places of Interest

Parbold to Wigan Pier via: Crooke, Wigan and Wigan Top Lock
Distance: 9 miles

Arriving in Parbold along the towpath, you come across the unique chimney shape of the old Parbold windmill. Long since disused, it’s now The Old Mill Gallery.

Parbold: The Money Runs Out
With the American War of Independence, the money ran out. Work stops for ten years and the original plan was abandoned. When work resumes, technology had developed and coal was the most important thing to everyone. What had been the temporary connection to Wigan ends up being the permanent route. Wars of the Roses resolved!

Crooke
The canals were teeming with the coal trade as the Industrial Revolution took off. There are some great examples of old coal barges moored at Crooke, a village that was focused entirely on mining the six surrounding pits and bringing the coal to the canal.

The barges could hold around 80 tons of coal and they were able to load them up in 25 minutes. They were primarily horse-drawn until steam and motors were perfected, but adding engines meant there was less living space for the boatmen and their families inside. As it was important to carry the maximum amount of coal possible on each trip, the preferred barge design was a square stern to increase capacity. (It also gave the barge painters more room for their elaborate and skilled designs).

There were disadvantages to these square sterns: steering was more difficult because the transom restricted the flow of water to the rudder and they were slower through locks as the boat had to be right into the lock chamber before the gates could be shut.
Leaving Crooke and passing the Marina on the left, the canal path leads you on towards Wigan. Notice Grimshaw’s Bridge #48, which has two concrete blocks on it from World War 2. It is apparently named after a clog fighting boatman. The landscape turns industrial, with more warehouses and a partly cobbled route to Wigan Pier.

George Orwell and ‘The Road to Wigan Pier’
Wigan Pier was immortalized in George Orwell’s famous book of 1937. The Pier was actually just another coal truck tipping frame and Orwell’s use of the term is ironic, even sarcastic.

He wrote to raise awareness of the social conditions in the Industrial north describing ‘filthy slums, the belching foundries, stinking canals and slag-heaps’. Orwell’s depiction of Wigan has stuck but it is a bit unfair. With coal and huge iron and steel works, the town was one of the driving forces of the region’s economy.

As a 19th century essay says ‘no part of the kingdom has benefitted more from a public work of this kind than the country through which the Leeds and Liverpool canal passes.’.

Follow the canal as it bends northeast and steepens through the amazing Wigan Flight of locks. Pass Kirklees Hall on the left, built in 1663, and the remnants of the Kirklees Hall Iron Works on the other side. This whole area was the centre of Wigan industry from Victorian times and well into the 20th Century.

Wigan Flight

The final stretch of the canal was one of the most difficult to build but is a extraordinary feet of engineering. Over three miles to Top Lock, the terrain rises 200 feet and incorporates a magnificent flight of 23 locks.

The date, 1816, (etched into the stone under the Britannia Bridge No.53) marks the year that the two ends of the Liverpool to Leeds Canal eventually joined.

It’s the end of the road for our canal walk as you reach Top Lock, the highest point of the locks. Time to put your feet up!