

# Quays to the past

At the inland end of the Manchester Ship Canal was the third largest port in the country until containerisation meant ships became too large to dock. Now known as Salford Quays, its heritage has been charted in a huge community history project, reports **Jo Nightingale**

**One hundred and sixteen years after its opening, it's easy to take the Manchester Ship Canal for granted. But this audacious scheme to bypass Liverpool and bring the sea to Salford was a groundbreaking feat of Victorian engineering, shattering records with its cost, manpower levels and achievements over nature. The result was that inland Manchester had become the country's third largest port by the 1920s.**

A community-based project by the Lowry has spent the last year uncovering the hidden heritage of the place now known as Salford Quays. Supported by the Heritage Lottery Fund, Unlocking Salford Quays has involved thousands of people living or working in the area in history sessions, art workshops and social activities, bringing its complex history back to life.

"Manchester wanted to improve its navigability to the sea as early as the 17th century," says local expert Chris Makepeace. "The Mersey and Irwell were deepened to enable boats 'of moderate size' to pass through in the 1720s but industrial demands soon outgrew this route, and with Liverpool raking it in from Manchester in dock dues there were pressing reasons to find another."

## ***Even during the docks' boom, Lancashire's traditional textiles base was losing ground***

In 1882 manufacturer Daniel Adamson's scheme to build a new stretch of canal bypassing the Mersey got through Parliament on the third attempt. Following intense opposition from Liverpool it would emerge on the Birkenhead side of the Mersey Estuary, the £5 million needed for construction and land acquisition to be raised via a record 39,000 shares sold initially in instalments to working people.

By 1887 the Bridgewater Canal and swathes of land along the planned route had been purchased, and the 17,000-man team got to work. By the end of the projected four years, however, the job was far from finished, and harsh weather, the chief engineer's death and a funding deficit meant work was almost abandoned. To save face Manchester Corporation invested £3 million in return for representation on the Ship Canal Company's board, lending a further £1.5 million the following year in return for a majority.

Ultimately costing £15 million, the 36-mile canal was the world's longest when it opened in 1894. Passing through Ellesmere Port, Runcorn and Warrington it included the world's first and only swing aqueduct, and overcame the 60-foot elevation between the coast and Manchester with a sophisticated series of locks. Four small docks were built on its south side at Pomona and four larger ones, for ocean-going vessels, in Salford, with another added in 1905.

Within 10 years of its opening 10,000 new homes had been built in Manchester. Imports of food and raw materials, initially to feed Lancashire's industrial frenzy, made the docks a specialised produce distributor, and exports went far beyond cotton as manufacturers set up in the neighbouring Trafford Park Industrial Estate. This complex industrial base protected Manchester from the worst of the Depression, and by 1933 over 200 American firms had set up there.

"It was frenetic," recalls Sue Grimditch, a local historian who grew up near the docks in the 1950s. "Traffic stopping and starting as cargo trains went by, cranes all along the docks, men from all over the world – and a lot of the activity was 24-7."

"It was organised chaos," agrees John Baker, who worked in the docks from 1963. "There were 2,000 dockers, crane drivers, railwaymen. At 5pm there'd be a row of buses from the Dock Office all the way to the swing bridge."

But, even during the docks' boom and thanks partly to its own exported machinery, Lancashire's traditional textile base was losing ground, and after the Second World War the canal's benefits began to shift westwards to new industrial sites in Ellesmere Port and Runcorn. The docks remained prosperous until the mid-1960s but the motorway revolution and shift to containerisation had a devastating impact, as Manchester lost out to ports on the south and east coasts.

"It was very sudden," Grimditch remembers. "Manchester Liners was one of the first companies to invest in container ships, so it was very forward-thinking, but the ships quickly increased in size and wouldn't fit up the canal. It had a very depressing impact; I went away to work and when I came back the area and people had become downtrodden."

Baker adds: "Over three or four years things nosedived. Everybody could see that its era had finished.



## **Dock Idols wanted**

The Lowry has commissioned musical artists Aidan Smith, Girl Peculiar and Albert Thompson to pen lyrics for a new batch of songs inspired by the history of Salford Quays.

The Lowry is now on the look-out for musicians and composers, be they classical, country, heavy metal or hip-hop, to write and perform music to accompany these lyrics and become the first ever Dock Idols.

Budding Dock Idols need to compose and make a rough recording of their version of the lyrics, which can be found, along with submission details, at [www.thelowry.com/dockidols](http://www.thelowry.com/dockidols).

Performers without recording equipment can drop into the Dock Idols recording booth on 21 November to perform, record and submit their tracks. Deadline for submissions is 28 November.