

The Manchester Ship Canal in Verse and Song

“I'm a navvy, I work on the Ship Canal,
I'm a tipper and live in a hut with my Sal.”

So wrote the Ship Canal navvy poet about his position on what was arguably the last great work to be carried out by the navy in this country: the “Big Ditch”, stretching 36 miles from Eastham to Salford, and connecting Manchester with the sea; a waterway providing “Cottonopolis” with a gateway to the whole world.

Five years after our aspiring Poet Laureate penned these words the job was done, and on New Year's Day, eighteen hundred and ninety-four the Manchester Ship Canal was opened to commercial traffic. The crowning glory came on May 21st, of the same year, when Queen Victoria formally opened the canal, although this event was greeted in some quarters with rather less solemnity and sense of occasion.

“I stood on the Bridge at Barton
While the clock was striking then hour
And I watched the yacht, the “Snowdrop”
Steam past the new watch tower
I listened to the cheering
Among those missing hills,
Then turned away, and quietly took
A pair of 'Beecham's Pills”.

Perhaps this rather cynical approach was allowable for the Ship Canal had been the subject of incident and derision, from its conception in 1824, to its inception seventy years later.

In 1825, a bill was taken before Parliament, asking that permission be given to build a “navigable channel from Manchester to the sea”. It was swiftly discharged whence it came, much to the public delight of members of Liverpool, because the applicants, in their enthusiasm had omitted to state where the canal was to join the sea and the route it would take from the sea to Manchester!

The canal supporters became the butt of many tales and rhymes, one of which was printed in the Liverpool Kaleidoscope of April 1st, 1825. The significance of the date was not lost upon the Manchester men.

Entitled “Manchester Grand Ship Canal” the poem describes in typical florid language of the period, how Neptune decided to explore his universe. Having with one stroke progressed from Land's End to Holyhead, he ventured further and found “that he'd got into what appeared just like a pond” and mused :

“Can this be proud Liverpool, famed for her ships
Her wealth and her docks, her piers and her slips
What mean these long chimneys – these smells that confound
Cried the Monarch as sternly he looked him around
Can these be her pilots, her riggers, her tars
Can these be the men who retired from the wars
Employed now as porters, or boatmen in wherries
To carry the passengers over the ferries
Surely these squalid fellows could never have been

O'er the seas that fill up the vast space between
Both the Indies and England, and Ireland and Spain
Surely these never crossed o'er the wide spreading main."

Having been assured that he was now in Manchester and having been asked to protect the Ship Canal trade, the Sea King

"Advised them in future to stick to their jennies
And in aping their betters, not to make themselves ninnies"

After sternly admonishing the Mancunian traders he returned to his kingdom and proceeded to take action :

"As the Manchester men soon began to find out,
For assembling his sea gods and Boreas to aid
With a good stiff nor-wester he soon spoiled their trade,
By means of a land bank he closed their canal
And to it and their projects he put a finale."

The supporters of the canal were not idle and the city's Theatre Royal soon echoed to the sound of the "Manchester Ship Canal".

I sing a theme deserving praise, a theme of great renown,
The Ship Canal in Manchester, that rich and trading town,
I mean to say, it once was rich, ere these bad times came on
But good times will come back again when these bad times are gone.

In 1825 when we were speculating all
We wise folks clubbed together and we made this ship canal
I should have said we meant to do so, for we'd the scheme laid down
That would have made this Manchester a first rate seaport town.

Alas too for poor Liverpool she'd surely go to pot,
For want of trade her folks would starve, her custom-house would rot
I'm wrong, they'd not exactly starve or want for it is true
They might come down to Manchester, we'd find them work to do.

Over the next decade and a half the Manchester Ship Canal proposal lay dormant. People had more pressing problems to deal with: the influence of the railways, the creation of an Empire and the new social consciousness as epitomised by Shaftesbury and the Factory Acts of 1832. Then in 1840, renewed interest was sparked off by reports that an ocean going ship had proved that there was a navigable waterway from the Mersey estuary to the heart of Manchester.

The first full news was given in a broadside written by "Old Jack" and printed by Wilmot Henry Jones of Market Street, Manchester, and tells of the exploits of the "Mary"

The Union Flag iss flying
By the Company's wharf Old Quay,
And Mary of Dublin lying
Unloading her praties today.

In the Irish Sea I hailed her,
As I stood in the packet boat,
With equal pride I never saw,

A merchant sloop afloat.
Your name? The 'Mary', Captain Hill
Your cargo? Praties, sir!
Where from? Dublin. Whither bound?
The port of Manchester."

Eighteen hundred and forty,
October the twentieth day,
At half past four in the evening
She anchors in the quay.

It always does my heart good
To see the Union Jack
So here's success to 'Mary'
And soon may she come back.

And soon may scores of others
Perform the trip with her
And trade and commerce double
In noble Manchester

The following year the 'Manchester Guardian' confirmed the above event and reiterated the belief that Manchester could become a port of some importance, saying "such are probably the small beginnings of Manchester's future greatness as one of the ports of the United Kingdom".

"The Ship Canal Song" was swiftly followed by more versifying by a canal supporter in "The Herald of Improvement" or "Manchester as it ought to be", entitled "The Way to Mend Times in Manchester". It was a rousing call to all Mancunians.

"Behold Men of Manchester now is your time
Though Liverpool gents cry out it's a crime
Let's deepen old Irwell that vessels may glide
From Victoria bridge o'er the Atlantic wide.

Five feet let us dig and the coast let us clear
One million at least it will bring us a year
Loud strife let us drive to Old Wick in a flame
Ship-building's our study, navigation's our aim.

The Liverpool gents cry out Smugglers be wary
What e'er you do, touch not the estuary,
If you do this my boys, by the big hill of Howth
You'll self murder commit for you'll stop up the mouth.

Five feet let us dig – make the crooked parts straight
From New York let the steamer bring hither their freight
Let Turks bring their coffee, dates, rhubarb and figs
And Irishmen butter, eggs, praties and fish.

The Dons of Oporto will bring sparkling wine
And herdsmen from Scotland their well fattened kine
The Lascars and Tartars will bring Howgna

With Lapsang and Souchong, Congon and Twankey

Let boats bring their codfish, fluke, haddock and sole,
And even fat salmon with manorial toll.
To dock and to bond we must have working men
And thousands are certain employment to gain.”

Fifty years later these prophets, had they been alive, would have seen their wildest flight of fancy become reality.

During this half-century, bills were presented to Parliament; the populace of towns through which the canal would run exhorted to support the scheme; and the acrimonious relationship between Liverpool and Manchester continued until in 1888 Parliament legislated that a navigable waterway be cut to allow the passage of ocean going vessels between Eastham and Manchester, a distance of 36 land miles, being of an average width of 150' and an average depth of 29'.

To excavate these 91,872,000 cubic yards of earth, the directors hired 15,000 navvies; men who at that time were called 'banditti' and were classed as lower than gypsies. A breed apart; noted for their crude behaviour, their vivid walking out clothes, their immense capacity for work, matched only by their capacity for drink. Fifty years before, Thomas Carlyle had written of them : “I have not in my travels seen anything uglier than that disorganic mass of labourers, sunk threefold deeper in brutality by the threefold wages they are getting”.

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Transcribed from the **North West Federation of Folk Clubs Newsletter**. Issues : June-August 1978, Sept-Oct 1978 and Nov-Dec 1978