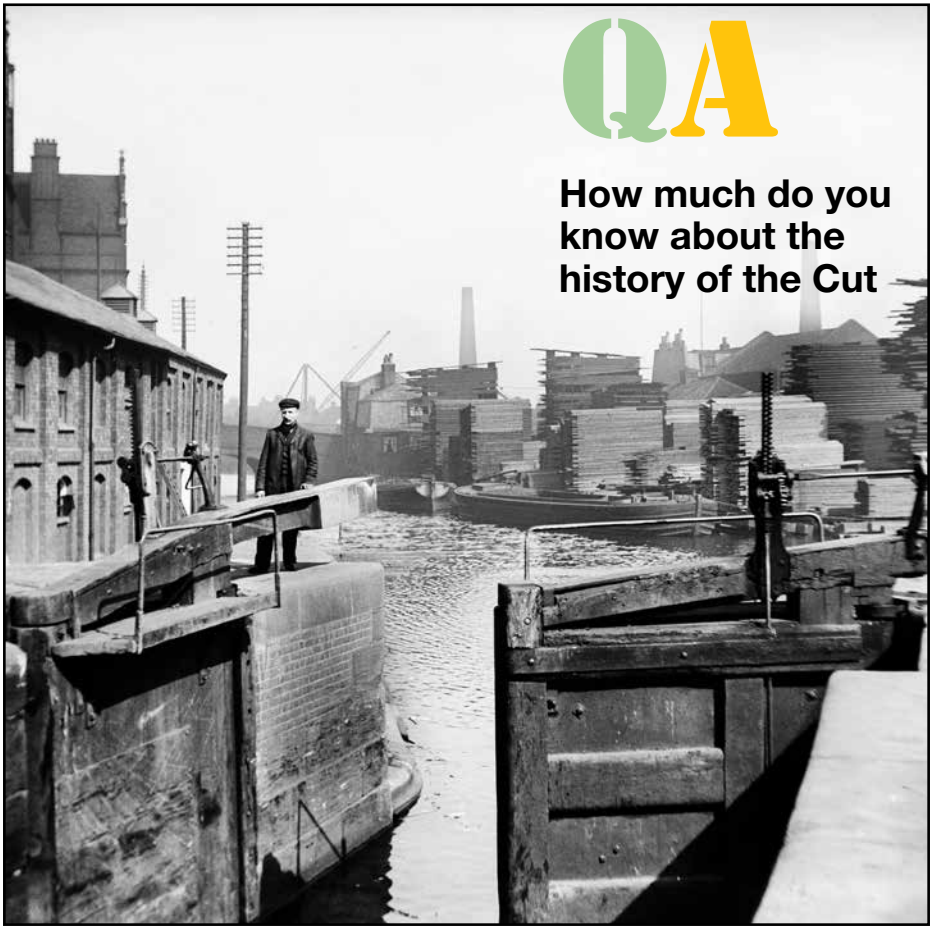
Regent's Canal
in Islington



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Cover Back: City Road Basin,1970s ©Bernard James

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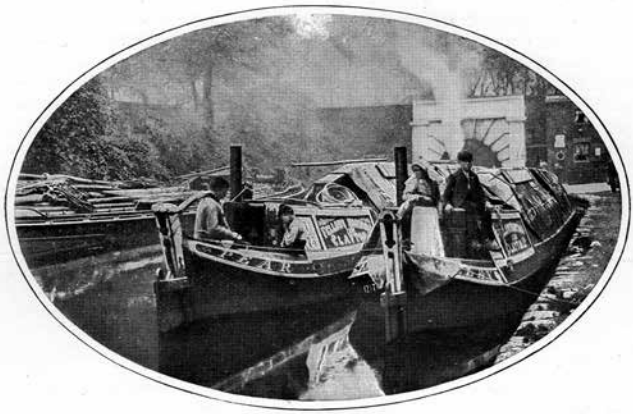


"MONKEY BOATS" WAITING AT ENTRANCE TO ISLINGTON TUNNEL.

INTRODUCTION

The Regent's Canal in Islington has been a source of livelihoods, recreation and relaxation for two hundred years. Much has changed over that time on the canal's banks, but the waterway is a constant, influencing the places it runs through and providing a familiar landmark.

The Young Actors Theatre Islington, with support from the National Lottery's Heritage Fund and London Canal Museum, has traced the canal's heritage. With the help of community historian, Carolyn Clark, and a group of volunteers, we have gathered stories, photos and information about the Islington reach. Many locals such as Fred Rooke still call it the Cut: 'I keep saying canal but it's not a word we used when we was kids, we only knew it as the Cut. Nobody ever said shall we go down the canal, it was shall we go down the Cut.' Ernie Philips explained: 'they cut the ground, that's why they call it the Cut.'

The rich history of our canal is revealed in this quiz. Use the questions in the front and answers in the back to add to your knowledge, or just to explore the canal's maritime and industrial past and the memories of people who worked and lived by it.

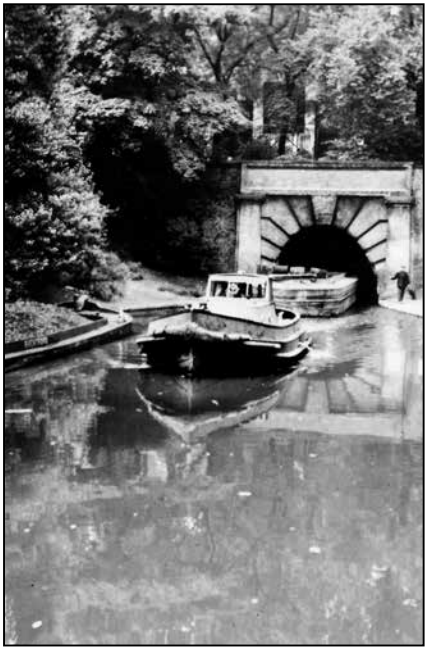
Timberyard east of the Rosemary Branch Bridge, c1905

BOATS

A horse can carry thirty times more weight on water than over land. This made the Regent's Canal the most efficient means of transport in 1820 when it opened. Ships brought raw materials from all over the world to the Regent's Canal Dock in Limehouse, London's gateway to the national canal network. Canal craft carried the materials to factories, and transported products back for export. Traditional narrow boats carrying 50 tons were increasingly replaced in the C20th by barges carrying twice as much or more. David Pearman travelled with his grandfather on: 'big steel barges with a great tiller and he'd say how many times he got pushed in by the sudden movement of the tiller, dangerous job.'

Q1 *What were the main goods boats carried?*

Steerer, 1905



Loaded barges by Islington Tunnel in 1910

A QUESTION OF POWER

Canal horses were a popular sight. Fran remembered 'bigguns with big, fluffy, white feet'. Albert Churchwood 'rode the Shire horses if the gang keepers let me. All the horses had long hair, grab it and I'd pull myself up.' Fred Rooke remembered: 'they just used to plod along pulling that massive barge, mind you once it got started it was probably quite easy.' Celeste Chapman lived in Noel Rd and remembers the boatmen crossing the bridge: 'we used to call them gypsies because they lived on the boats. The men rode side saddle with a sack of horse food on their backs.' Small tractors replaced horses during the 1950s. In Hanover School, John Rowlinson remembered hearing: 'the distinct sound of the tractors – tick, tick, tick coming up to Anderson's.' Self-propelled boats were powered by steam engines until supplanted by diesel.

Q2 *Can you identify canal features from the time boats were towed?*

Sturt's Lock with horses and a tractor towing boats, 1950s

THE TUNNEL

Islington tunnel took three years to build and has fascinated local people for generations. Carol Noble used to swim into it from the Cally end: 'it was as black as Newgate's knocker when you went under the tunnel. All you got was a little light at the end.' The photo, below of the Islington tunnel keeper, could be of Mary Rockingham, who took over the job in 1902 from her husband. She lived in the two roomed cottage against the wall of the bridge, marshalling the barges and sometimes taking the horses over the hill.

Q3 *How did boats travel through the tunnel?*

East portal of Islington Tunnel, 1905

LOCKS

Locks allow canals to run flat when the landscape undulates, using the same operating system since 1820. Lock keepers worked twelve hour shifts when both lock chambers were in constant use. As commercial traffic declined, one chamber was made into a weir and the lock keeper job disappeared. City Road Lock had a forge and stables for a change of horse between the large inland port at Paddington and Limehouse. The lock keeper's cottage on the opposite bank was replaced in the 1950s by three houses for British Waterways' workers next to Anderson's Timber Merchants.

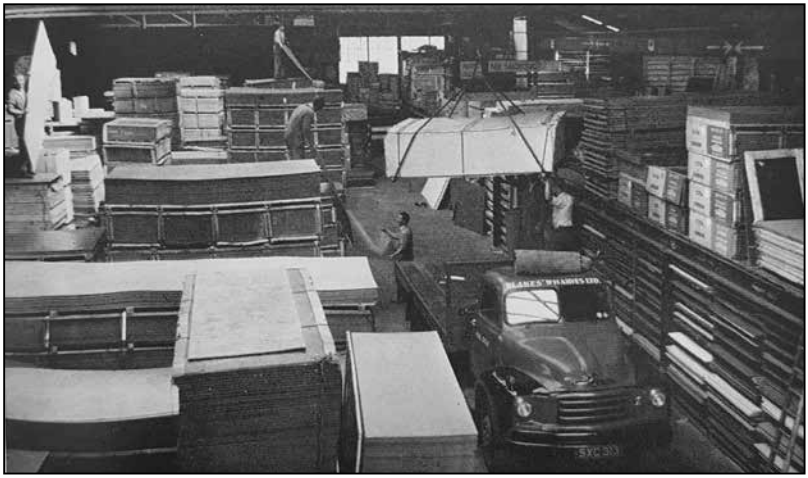
Q4 *Sturt's Lock had no forge. So what did it use coal for?*

City Road Lock, with both lock chambers in use, 1973

TIMBER

Timber came through the docks to timberyards, sawmills, and veneer factories which dominated the canal's banks. An early account describes 'continents of timber and sierras of concrete darken the sky' by Battlebridge. Anderson's timber merchants took over Harris Wharf in City Road Basin from a plywood importer in 1937 and used barges to transport wallboards. The company supplied timber for sets at the Gainsborough Film Studios and made prefabs and Hurricane bombers during World War Two. In 1944, Harris Wharf and surrounding buildings were substantially damaged when a V2 rocket hit the entrance to City Road Basin, resulting in one death and eighty people seriously wounded.

Ted Harrison saw 'barges come up with big logs on them. They used to dump them off the barge and let them float in the water chained up. They kept them wet to stop them 'shaking' – when they dry out, they split open and it spoils the veneer.' Brine Veneers in Arlington Street was 'more like a visit to a museum in fine wood than a normal veneer store'.



Inside Anderson's at Harris Wharf, 1970s

In the 1950s, Brine's claimed 'it's no exaggeration to state that the majority of decorative veneers used by shipyards in the British Isles originate from Brine's veneers.' The Royal Yacht Britannia and the Canberra were included.

Q5 *Which local industries used wood?*

BASINS

Canal basins allow boats to dock, unload, load and turn. City Road, formerly called Regent's Canal Basin, covered four acres. It ran both sides of City Road and had several arms on the east side. The first industries in the basin reflected the canal's main purpose as an artery of commerce, transporting heavy cargo such as coal, timber and building materials. Canalside factories, wharves and warehouses were built using these same materials. Warehouses around the Basin stored products such as Davenport china brought down from Stoke on Trent by boat. Pickfords specialist canal carriers may well have provided the transport or Fellows, Morton and Clayton, also based in City Road.

Q6 *What was the name of the campaign against plans to fill in City Road Basin?*

Fellows, Morton and Clayton yard on City Road Basin, 1905

BATTLEBRIDGE BASIN

When Battlebridge, or Horsfall Basin was built in 1825, it was dominated by timber and builders' yards and a flour mill. Since then it has contained businesses as diverse as Plaistowe Jams and Dickenson's paper. Pre-war, a regular service of canal boats passed between Dickenson's warehouse and their papermill in Croxley. Boats also delivered huge rolls of paper to printers and wallpaper makers. Haywards Artistic Wallpapers came to Arlington Street in 1894 where they pioneered stencilling rather than hand blocking patterns. Carlisle and Clegg were 'Paper Stainers' on City Road Basin in the same period.

Q7 *Which is the third basin on the Islington reach?*

Battlebridge Basin, 1969. From left: Haggis Timberyard; Carlo Gatti's ice house; 1850s Flourmill; early Corn & Salt warehouse; Plaistowe Jams; Porter's Bottling Co; Westinghouse Signals & Brakes

ICE HOUSE

Before refrigeration became widespread, Carlo Gatti harvested ice from the canal and ponds to make ice cream and to supply local businesses. As demand grew, ice was shipped from Norway to the dock and taken by boat to Gatti's deep ice wells in Battlebridge Basin. Most workers were from Italian families who came to work in 'the ice game'. Carrying hundredweight/51 kilo ice blocks and splitting them into three was tough work. Dom Bergonzi's father and grandfather worked for Gatti's. Dom remembered their workwear of hobnail boots, thick leather jerkins and the long silk scarf he wound round and round his grandfather's neck. Delivery drivers often chipped off a slither of ice to give to local children to suck like a lolly. The ice house is now the London Canal Museum.

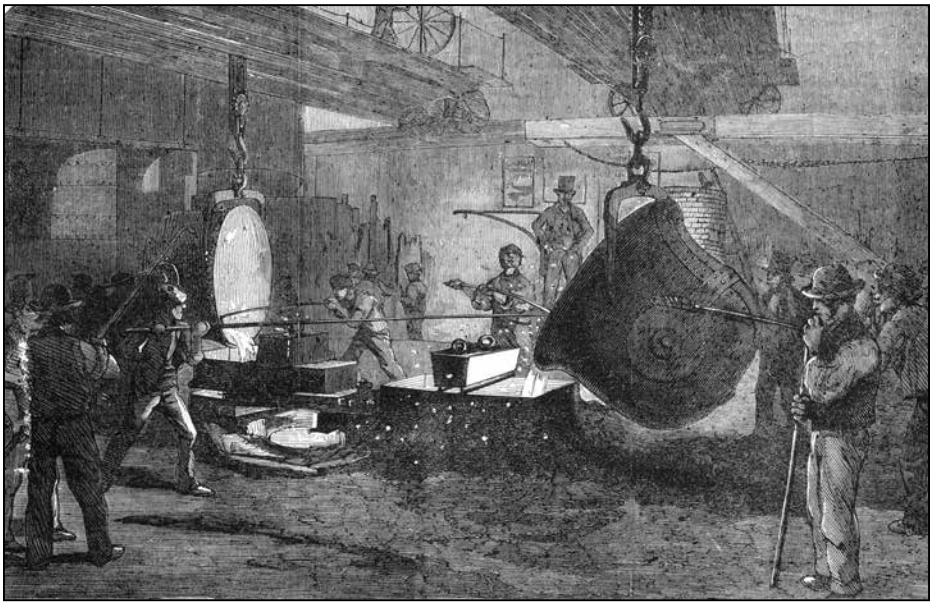
Q8 *What canalside industries were associated with ice?*

Carlo Gatti's delivering in Clerkenwell, 1900s

HOT METAL AND COOL WATER

The canal transported iron, brass, copper and coal to ironworks and foundries, as well as providing water to create steam and to cool hot metal. From 1840, the Regent's Canal Ironworks in Eagle Wharf Road made decorative ironworks for Buckingham Palace and the Floral Hall in Covent Garden. The building and its chimney can still be seen opposite Sturt's Lock. Ted Harrison watched foundry workers: 'turning and riveting girders together. One man used to hold what they called a dolly. And the other man had a special riveting hammer. A boy used to warm the rivets up and throw them red hot with tongs. The man used to catch them in a ladle and plump them in the hole, put the dolly on it and rivet them. If the boy dropped the rivets, of course he got a clout.'

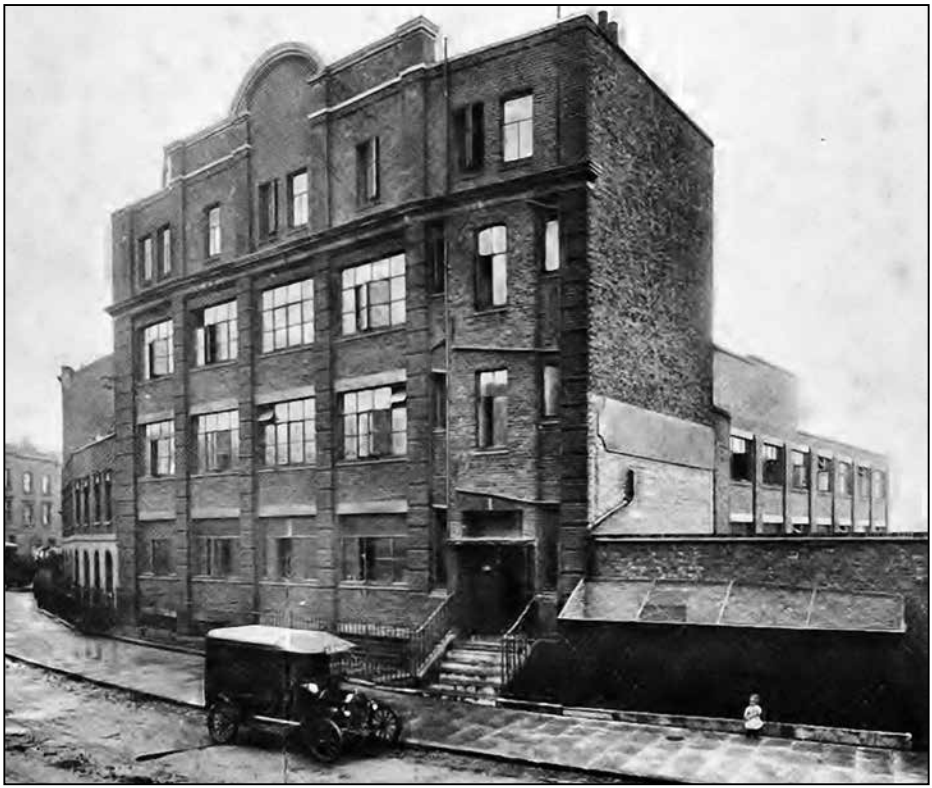
Metalworks supplied Islington's significant engineering industry. From 1885, T.G.Lynes engineers set up by the canal in Thornhill



Regent's Canal Ironworks, c1840

Wharf and in shops along the Caledonian Road. Negretti & Zambra in Half Moon Street above the west portal of the tunnel and in a wharf by Thornhill Bridge engineered scientific and marine instruments from 1911 to 49. In the same tradition in the 20th century, but not using canal transport, International Harvesters sold farming machinery by City Road Basin and Westinghouse made equipment for railways and roads by Battlebridge Basin.

Q9 *Which building on City Road Basin used millions of gallons of canal water a year?*



Negretti and Zambra's Half Moon Factory, 1914

AWAY FROM IT ALL

Carol Noble remembered: ‘we used to knock out the bricks to get a foot hold to get down the wall. We swam from this side to that side of Battlebridge Basin and someone would shout, get me a plank of wood, oh yeah all right. If it was a hot day, you all done it. Some kids learnt to swim down there. We used to nick the rope off the barges for skipping cos it was heavy and thick. And when we finish, we took ‘em back – where would you keep it?’ Fred Rooke recalled: ‘we never had swimming costumes, we just take off our clothes, dive in the water, we never had towels. Just past York Road Bridge, Idris made drinks and they had hot water or steam, so if it was a bit chilly, we’d say ‘let’s go up the warm waters’. Albert Churchwood remembered before the war, ‘our gang used to swim from Copenhagen Street to Colebroke Row. We’d be naked, there was no one about, we were lucky, we had waterproof bags from America to put our clothes in. If we saw a boat coming through, we’d cling to the side, so got a free ride. We used to swim through the tunnel. No lights in there.’ Ernie Philips: ‘used to watch them jump off the big pipe, I walked across. Dangerous, all them bikes and prams underneath.’ Steve Havens didn’t swim either because: ‘if you put a cup in there and pulled it out, it would be as dark as coffee’ but ‘as a kid, I spent a lot of time playing around the canal, getting up to mischief.’ Anna Perkins remembered: ‘there used to be things left in the factories, parts or tools. My brother found a long


NOT WHAT SHE EXPECTED

SCENE—*Canal side, Sunday morning*

Lady. “Do you know where little boys go to who bathe on Sunday?”

First Arab. “Yus. It’s farder up the canal side. But *you* can’t go. Girls ain’t allowed!”

Punch cartoon, c1900

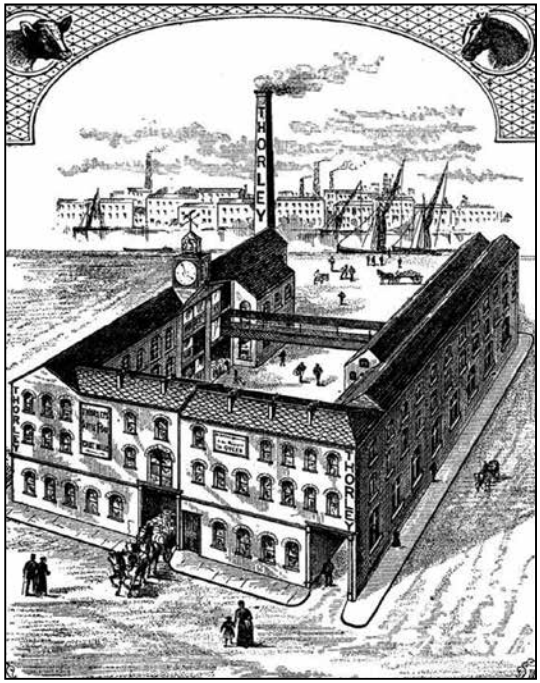
heavy chain with links, brought that home and they thought they'd found treasure, they were over the moon. The boys would choose a place for a den and get old chairs from the factories and sit there. Kids are kids.'

Q10 *What was the other major leisure pursuit on the towpath?*

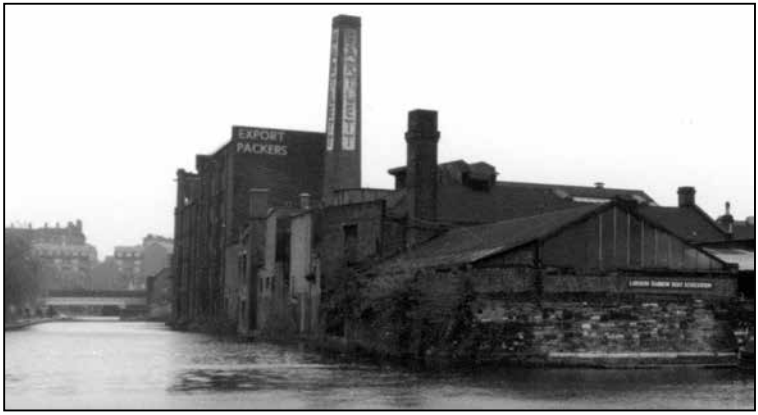
THORLEYS

Thorley's Food for Cattle was writ large on their mill chimney. It was built in 1860 on a former lime kiln site east of Battlebridge and conveniently close to Caledonian Market. Their cattle cakes and 'Ovum' for poultry set the international standard for animal feed. Locust, or carob beans, were a key ingredient which Fred Hill pinched from the boats: 'It was brown and horrible, it looked like a burnt cornflake, but we used to eat them, it didn't do us any harm.' Fred Rooke was: 'the best swimmer, I used to swim across and throw the locust over to the other boys, you used to hear them shout 'Ere you are Fred'. One day I heard a deep voice say 'Ere you are Fred' and it was my dad and I got a real good telling off.'

Q11 *What valuable commodity did cattle and horses produce?*



Thorley's Mill with the canal behind



Top, Bartlett's packing case factory in the former Thorley's Cattle Mill

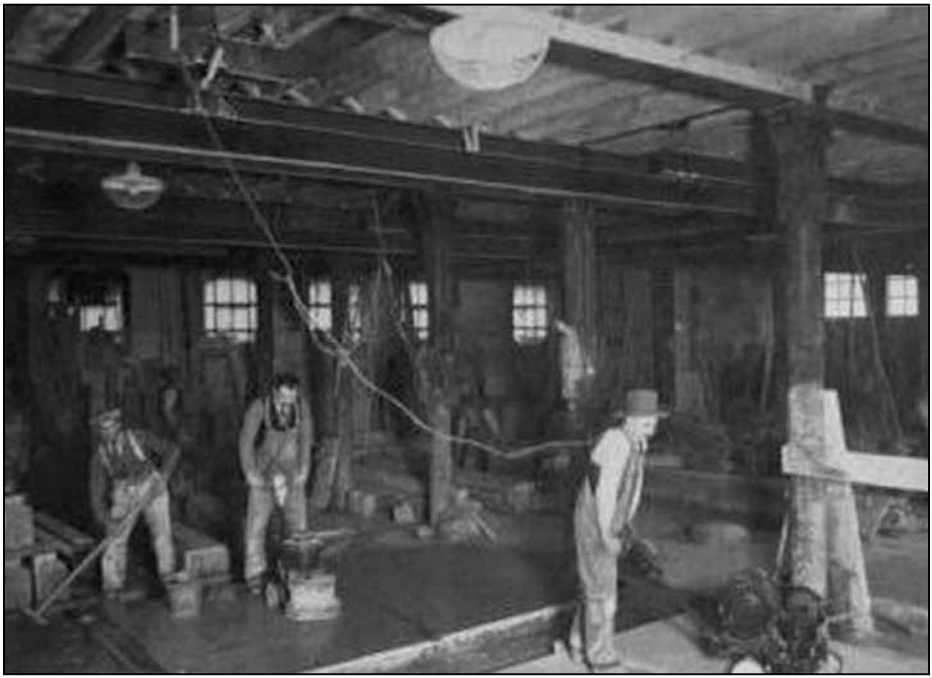
Middle, Thorley's promotional display, 1908

Bottom, Diespeker's in Graham Street, 1931

DIESPEKER

Diespeker's terrazzo and mosaic flooring factory was built on a former timber wharf by City Road Basin in 1908. Customers included the National Portrait Gallery and Selfridges, as well as houses in Vincent Terrace. Two hundred and fifty craftsmen worked there. Celeste Chapman said: 'all the Italians worked at Diespeker's, most of them come from up north. During the war, the workers were interned.' Classified as 'enemy aliens', Italians were initially shipped to Canada. The Italian community in Islington still mourns many members killed when the ship carrying them was destroyed by German bombing on route.

Q12 *How did the marble arrive at Diespekers?*



Making terrazzo in Diespeker's, 1931

BRITISH DRUG HOUSES

Several drug companies merged to become British Drug Houses in 1908. BDH dominated both sides of City Road Basin, linked for a short time by a rickety bridge. Tony Byfield watched as staff: 'pushed trollies like nurses over the bridge from the development side to the production side.' BDH produced the first synthetic Vitamin D in the world on an industrial scale. Their product range included aspirin, insulin, birth control pills, vanishing cream, penicillin. Celeste Chapman remembered the smells from the factory drifted over Hanover School and: 'lunchtimes, they'd all be outside on the little hill by the canal having their lunch. If you worked there, you could get cod liver oil and malt cheap.'

Q13 While BDH made innovative products, which nearby company invented containers for them?

The British Drug Houses' Laboratory, c1950

DODGY DEALINGS

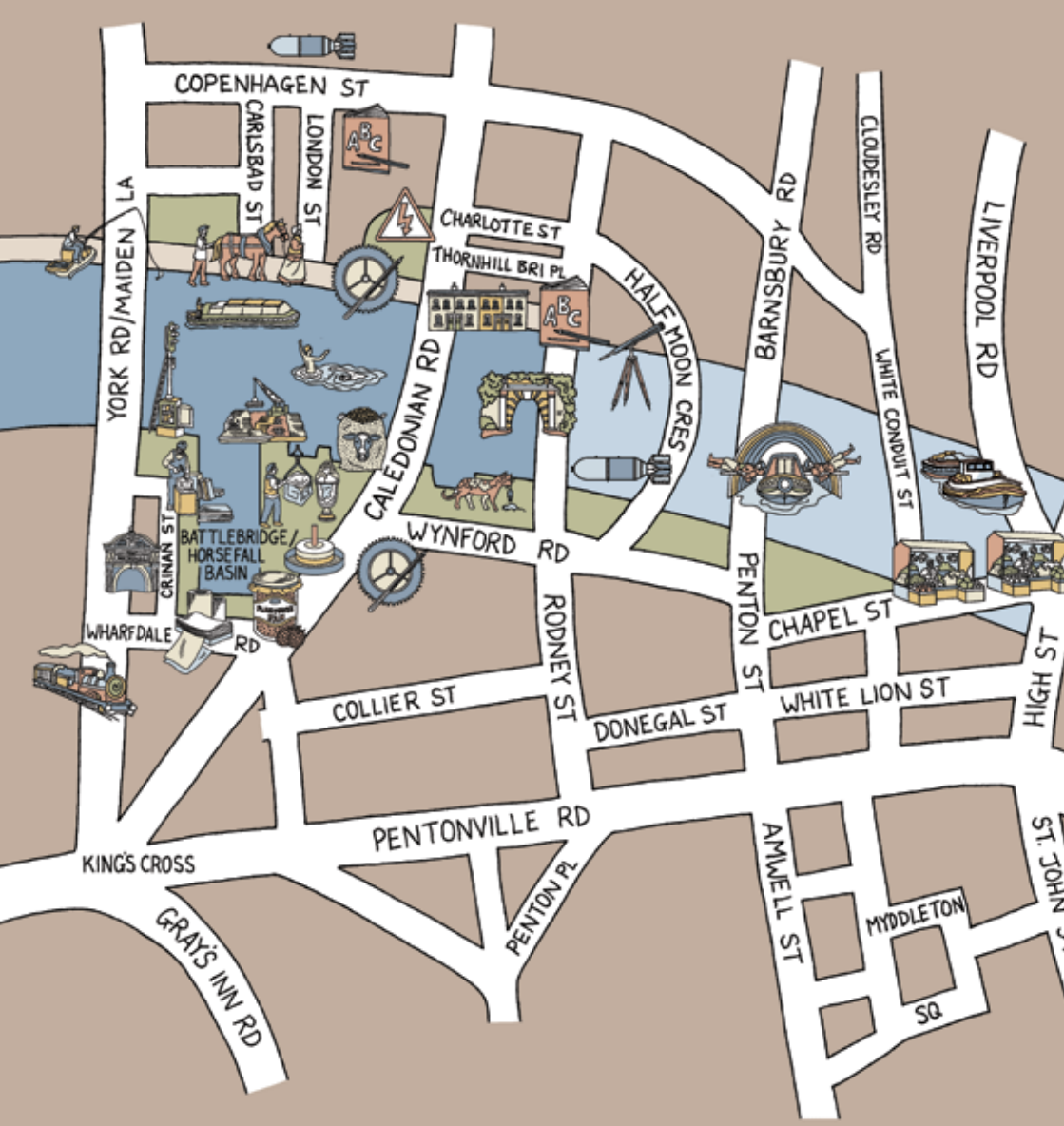
Canals were private property until 1964. Keep Out signs threatening fines, however, were an invitation to people looking for action. The towpath was a sheltered spot for illegal gambling. Fred Rooke 'was sitting on the wall watching the men play pitch and toss to win money and the police came down. One of the men grabbed hold of a little boy and the policeman said 'you'd better take him up quick mate or you'll get arrested like all these.' He took the little boy away and gave him sixpence.'

Things regularly 'fell off the back of a barge'. In 1831, John Young was found guilty of theft from Charles Turner timber merchant on City Road Basin. The foreman spotted he had strips of veneer hidden in his trousers worth sixpence. John admitted 'I took a bit of veneer to make a birdcage'. Over the years, a lot more wood made its way into people's homes.

Q14 *Who was Long Tom and the Cut Runner?*

Lads gambling on the towpath, 1907

Battlebridge Basin from the air, 1921



The part of the Regent's Canal from Islington to the Thames opened on 1st August 1820 to a fanfare of brass bands on a procession of boats coming through Islington Tunnel and fireworks on City Road Basin.

The canal cost almost £800,000, twice the estimate and took 8 years to build its 8.5 miles/13.7 kilometre length. The Islington reach from York Way to New North Road is 1.8 miles/3 kilometres, including the 875 metres in Islington Tunnel.

In 1929, the Grand Junction and Regent's Canal Companies merged into the Grand Union Canal Company. The company emblem reflects the canal network, its links to the sea, the importance of horses and the Prince Regent's feathers. These maps represent the history of the canal in Islington. The images show canalside features over the years, many referred to in this booklet.

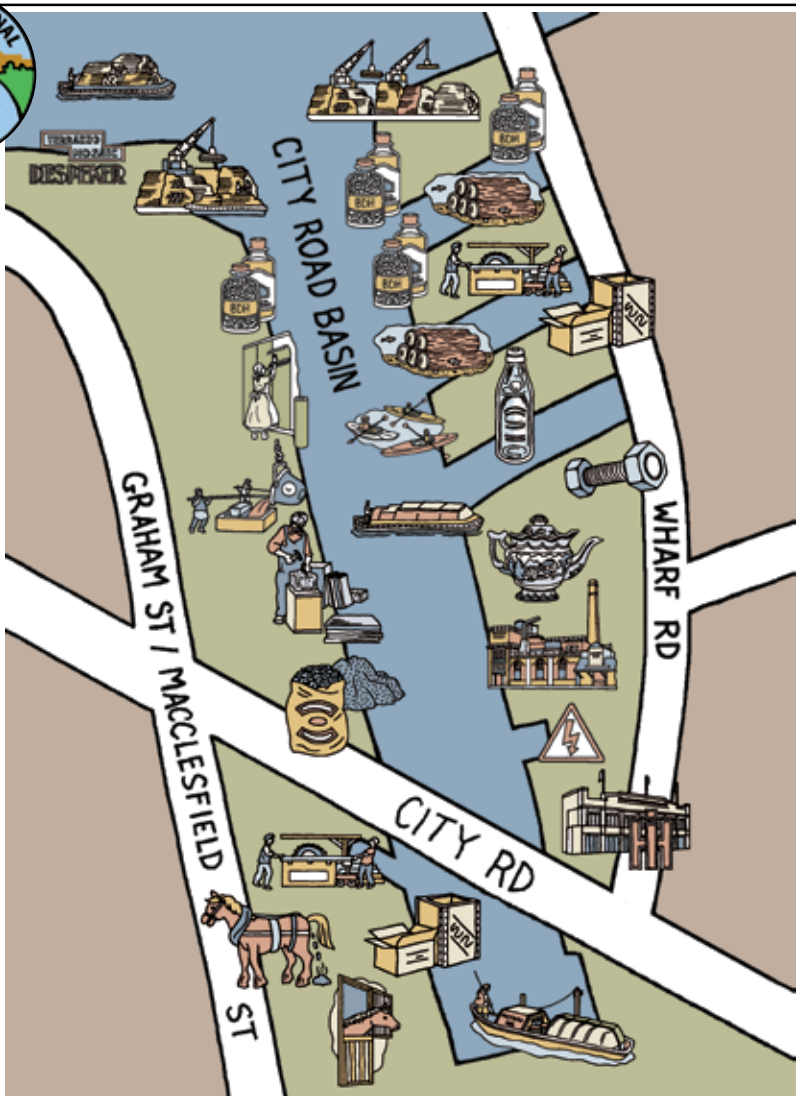
ISLINGTON MAP ICONS INDEX

GENERIC: WW2 Bombs | Schools | Engineering works | Stone or Marble works | Cabinet/Furniture makers | Packing case makers | Veneer works | Wallpaper makers | Ironworks/Foundry | Sawmills | Timberyards |

KEY

1. Westinghouse Brakes
2. Porter's bottling company
3. Dickenson's paper
4. Plaistowe jam
5. Cornmill
6. Carlo Gatti's ice well
7. Thorley's mill
8. T.G. Lynes
9. Islington Tunnel west portal
10. Negretti and Zambra
11. Legging
12. Tunnel tug
13. Chapel market
14. Noel Road houses
15. Islington Tunnel east portal
16. City Road Lock stables and forge
17. City Road lock keeper's cottage
18. Diespeker's
19. British Drug Houses
20. Pickfords
21. London Hydraulic Pumping Station
22. Betts & Co
23. Islington Boat Club
24. Gutta Percha
25. Waterson printer
26. Narrowboat Pub
27. Canda factory
28. Brittania Wharf engineers
29. Barnet & Foster
30. Pilkington's glass factory
31. Henry Rifled gun factory
32. Gainsborough Film Studios
33. The Pipe
34. The Rosemary Branch
35. Southgate Arms
36. Thomas Briggs factory

Islington Boat Club, 1970s



1. Coalyard
2. Manure being made!
3. Stables for Pickfords
4. Pickfords carriers
5. International Harvesters
6. Electric sub-station
7. Davenport's china warehouse
8. Iron works
9. W. Pitt Soda Water

How well did you do?

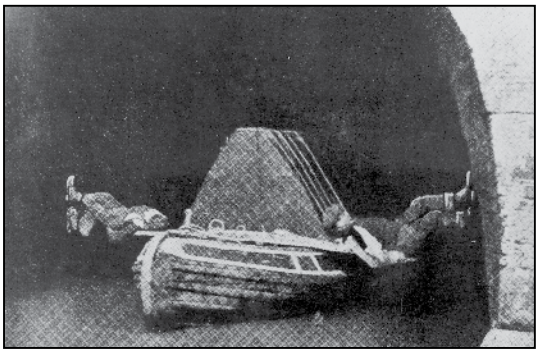
A1 Coal, timber and building materials made up the majority of loads, but there was not much that was not carried by canal. Canal company profits came from tolls on each load of 'coal, limestone, cattle, iron, manure, bricks, corn, salt, and all other goods and wares whatever'. Whatever included hoof and horn waste, dandelion roots, clock dials, dog collars and Jews harps. Albert Churchwood remembered boats with: 'anything that could be carried, clothes, sheep, coal and timber. Seen tanks going down the canal on a flat boat.' Anna Perkins saw: 'lots of bundles of wood. Some barges had stuff with the tarpaulin over them, they were just fit for carrying and nothing else, a working barge.' Kathy Hawkins remembered: 'one had a load of fruit and veg. I waved to them and said to my little girl looks fresh and the man said they are fresh, my love and said 'here ya, catch' and gave me four juicy apples.'

Loaded barge at the tunnel's west portal, 1967

A2 Horse slips are small inlets in the towpath with ramps up from the canal for horses to climb out when they fell in. Friction from tow ropes embedded with grit cut the grooves in older bridge arches, even when protected by iron fenders.

Wharf Road Bridge showing rope grooves

A3 The tunnel has no towpath so boats were 'legged' through. Two people lay on their backs on planks hooked at right angles to the front of the boat. They gripped the boards with their hands and pushed their feet against the wall crossing one leg over the other which moved the boat through. Narrowboats were still legged in the 1930s when Albert Churchwood and his mates: 'used to get called "jump on and walk", so we used to get on and help them. Some bricks stuck out so you could put your foot on. Paid? You must be joking. We enjoyed it, for kids like us it was something to do.' Legging was slow, so a steam tug was introduced in 1826 to take several barges at a time. This 'impossible compromise between a locomotive and a raft' had a steam-powered winding drum linked to a submerged chain which guided it through. The air was so poisonous in the tunnel that tugs had to be crewed by two people in case one passed out. This practice continued when diesel exhaust replaced the sulphurous smoke from steam engines.

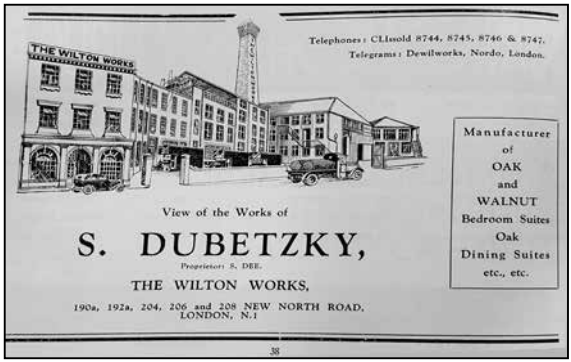


Legging in Islington Tunnel, c1916

A4 A lock chamber takes 56,000 gallons of water to fill. The water flows downstream and has to be replaced. At one time, steam engines at various locks back pumped water from the Thames through pipes under the towpath. Sturt's had a steam engine to pump water above City Road Lock. This was expensive, so a reservoir was created by damming the River Brent to supply water. Hazel White's husband, John, was the Regent's Canal Foreman: 'if they lost water through a leak, they would have to fill the lock up. That took a lot of water out the pond (i.e. water above the lock). They'd have to phone up and say 'please get somebody to run a drop of water, I'm so many inches short.' My husband knew to the inch how much everything held.'

Sturt's Lock, c1950

A5 Besides building work, hardwoods were used by furniture makers, such as Dubetzky at 208 New North Road. Pipe and walking stick makers near the canal used exotic woods. Henry Howell & Co at 180 Old Street was a world leader in the production of quality walking sticks. Their archive is held at Kew Gardens. Negretti & Zambra's woodwork shop made cases for their scientific instruments. Cheaper woods were used by packing case makers by the canal, such as Bartlett near Battlebridge.

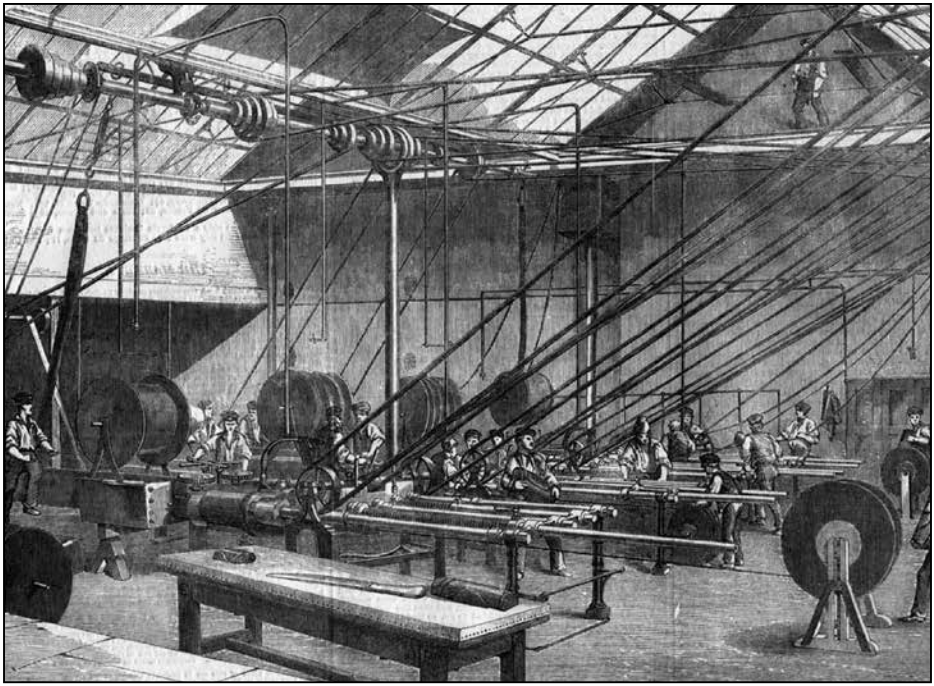


The woodwork shop at Negretti & Zambra's Half Moon Works, 1911

A6 The basin south of City Road and a small part on the other side have been filled in. But for the 'Save the Basin' campaign, it would have disappeared completely. The campaign was led by Crystal Hale who turned an inner city canal into a children's paradise when Islington Boat Club opened in 1970. The Clubhouse was The Water Gypsy, an old Thames barge moored on the east bank. Bernard James, Club Leader in the mid-1970s, remembered: 'to get to the club you went through a council yard off Wharf Road with all the sand piles and builders' lorries. The watchman had to open the gates to let the kids in. It was remarkable that this had been possible to arrange. The club started very basically and after a few years was a bit ramshackle – nails poking though pontoons that just kept together, canoes had holes in. People initially saw the basin, a canyon of derelict warehouses, just as a neglected and miserable ex-industrial wasteland – but after you'd been there awhile, it had a romance about it, a brilliant secret place for the children to think of as their own'. John Rowlinson was one of the first club members: 'it was just so different to everything else that was around. As an inner London kid from a tough area, I had horizons opened up by it.' When the Basin was redeveloped, the club moved to a new clubhouse on the west bank.

'Save the Basin' on the former BDH factory on City Road Basin, 1970s

A7 Wenlock Basin was at the cutting edge of telecommunications in 1846, when the Gutta Percha (a tree gum like rubber) Company made the twenty nine miles of underwater telegraph cable which connected England to France. A hundred years later, the building housed Waterlow's printers. Apprentice printers faced the initiation rite of being put in a cardboard box, covered with ink and thrown into the canal. That was not all that was being thrown in. Carol Noble saw: 'people bring up prams, them big bassinettes, from the canal. We'd take the wheels off and make carts.' While Richard Savage was clearing Wenlock Basin for residential moorings, he found: 'British Drug Houses used to occupy the site at 50-56 Wharf Road which we back onto and during dredging we found hundreds of old bottles and jars.'



Inside the Gutta Percha Factory at 44-48 Wharf Road, c1850

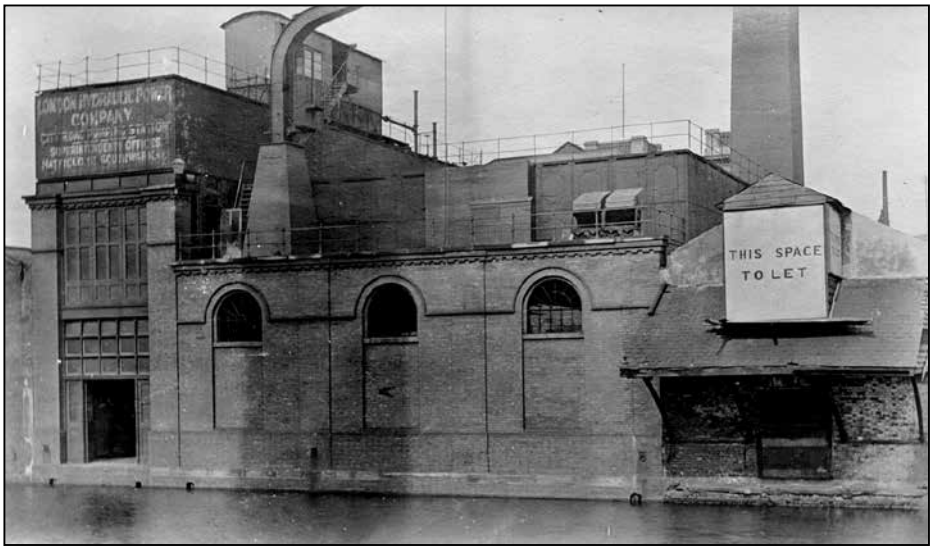
A8 Ice makers and brewers were supported by neighbouring engineering industries. Barnett and Foster, as well as G.J. Worssam in Wenlock Road, manufactured ice making and brewing equipment.

Barges carried barrels of thick Guinness concentrate to Robert Porter's bonded warehouse in Battlebridge Basin. Porter's mixed the concentrate half and half with water, bottled and exported it and other beers with their Bulldog brand. Ada Fisher worked there: 'deliveries were made as far away as Margate, Clacton and Southend Kursaal. Beer was exported via barge to Holland and Denmark from the canal basin at the back. Mainly India Pale Ale.

A General Lighterage barge loaded with barrels for Porter's, 1960

Customs and Excise were based in a small office in Wharfdale Road to monitor movements of such.' Carol Noble remembered: 'Some barrels got nicked. A friend worked there, so if you had parties you used to get it off him. If you didn't use it all, you'd take it back and he'd give you your money back.' Porter's was not the canal's only association with alcohol. You could say gin and tonic was brought about in Islington. In 1858, W. Pitt on City Road Basin developed the first carbonated tonic water as a medicinal product to overcome the risk of malaria for the British overseas. Despite the addition of sugar, the bitter taste of quinine persisted and gin was used to blunt the sour tonic. So the G&T was born to help the medicine go down.

A9 The most impressive building on City Road Basin was the Hydraulic Power Pumping Station. City Road was the only one of the five pumping stations in London to use canal water. The company paid £1000 each year to extract one hundred million gallons. It supplied water under pressure to operate machinery in

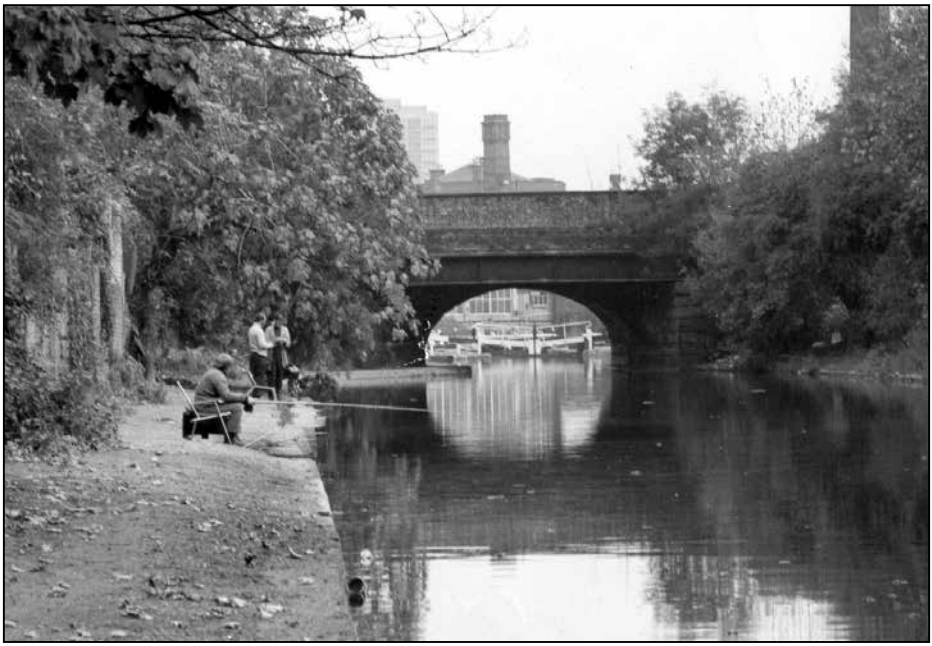


Hydraulic Power Pumping Station, late 1940s

Inside the Hydraulic Pumping Station, 1944

factories and for many other purposes such as to power the London Palladium's revolving stage and the Tower Bridge lift. Sadly, the building was demolished just before it could be listed.

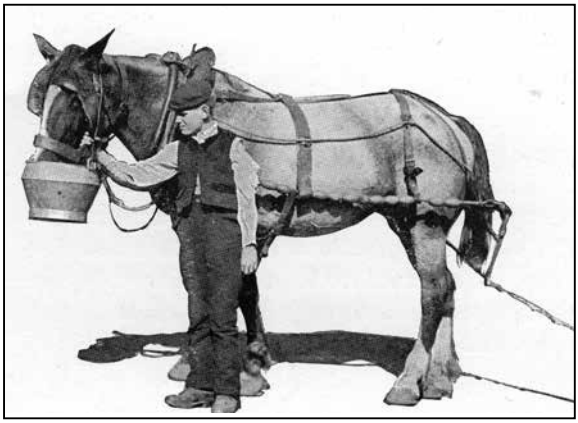
A10 Albert Churchwood used to catch carp, tench, roach, bream, chub, pike, stickleback, gudgeon and eels during a lifetime of fishing on the Cut in Islington and his favourite spot opposite Kings Cross Gasholders.



Fishing by Frog Lane Bridge, 1975

Anna Perkins remembered: ‘Carnegie Street’s where dad would bring us, with bamboo rods with a little net he’d buy from the oil shop on Pentonville Road. It was a big palaver with sandwiches. Would you believe it, it’s five minutes from your house, it was like a day out.’ Fred Rooke: ‘called it dragging. We got an old bicycle wheel, knock out all the spokes, cover the wheel with canvas and then cut three strings up and a long string, drop it into the water, leave it for a while, then pull it up and we would get fish.’ Bill Morand, the longest serving employee at Negretti and Zambra, grabbed the company fire bucket to fill with the fish he caught ‘roach bashing on the Cut’ in his lunch breaks.

All Carol Noble lived near Copenhagen Street: ‘people used to go down the canal to collect the droppings for their gardens, before they knocked all the houses down.’ Ted Harrison explained: ‘if the horse done his business, the little boys used to rush and scrape it up. We used to call it ‘sparrow starving’, because the sparrows used to eat the seeds out of the manure which was sold to farms for fertiliser on the ground. That’s why I think our food was better. We had the natural stuff. It was all horses.’ Ted’s dad was ‘a scavenger’ – at night, three men and a horse-drawn brush swept rubbish from the roads onto a cart. They took it to one of the two refuse wharves on City Road Basin. Piles of manure were left to drain into the basin until it was ready to be shovelled down a shoot onto a barge.



Regent’s Canal towing horse, c1910

Diespeker's advertisement, 1931

A12 Tony Byfield drove canal tractors in the 1950/60s and delivered: 'hundredweight sacks of marble chips, size of sandbags, with Diespeker on them. Four porters would be hired from the Port of London and work all day unloading. One stood in the barge, throwing the bags onto a plank across the boat, and the other porters picked them up from the barge and took them into Diespeker.'

A13 Betts & Co manufactured and patented 'capsules' – collapsible metallic tubes which were the origin of the modern toothpaste tube. Betts had a large factory at the southern end of Wharf Road. Booth's Survey of the London Poor c1890 reported of the surrounding area: 'The inhabitants are employed locally, the men in the Engineering, Gutta Percha and cable works (employing 400 hands) and sawmills, the women in the Capsule Works.'

A14 Fred Rooke recalled: 'In those days, the canal bank was patrolled by a policeman on a bike. We all knew him as Long Tom. When he came onto the canal from Caledonian Road Bridge, we could see him and we had time to go over the wall and get away. But even if he caught us, I'm sure he wouldn't have done anything, because there's no point in

prosecuting or fining us because nobody had no money anyway.' Fred Hill agreed: 'they couldn't catch us, we just jumped in the water and that was it.'

In the late 1940s, the British Transport Commission reported: 'The most usual crimes canal policeman, sometimes called Cut Runners, has to deal with are thieving and smuggling, but among special problems are canal bathers. At one time between City Road and Caledonian Road, an average of twenty persons drowned each year. The problem became so bad it became necessary to build a house for a canal policeman near the spot. This move, although not altogether popular among nearby residents, succeeded, after much hard work and many prosecutions, in reducing the deaths to less than one a year.' In 1953, an irate lady complained to Sergeant Waters near the Tunnel about cruelty to a horse pulling a barge containing 75 tons of goods. To placate the lady, the good sergeant took off his tunic and pulled the barge himself for several yards.

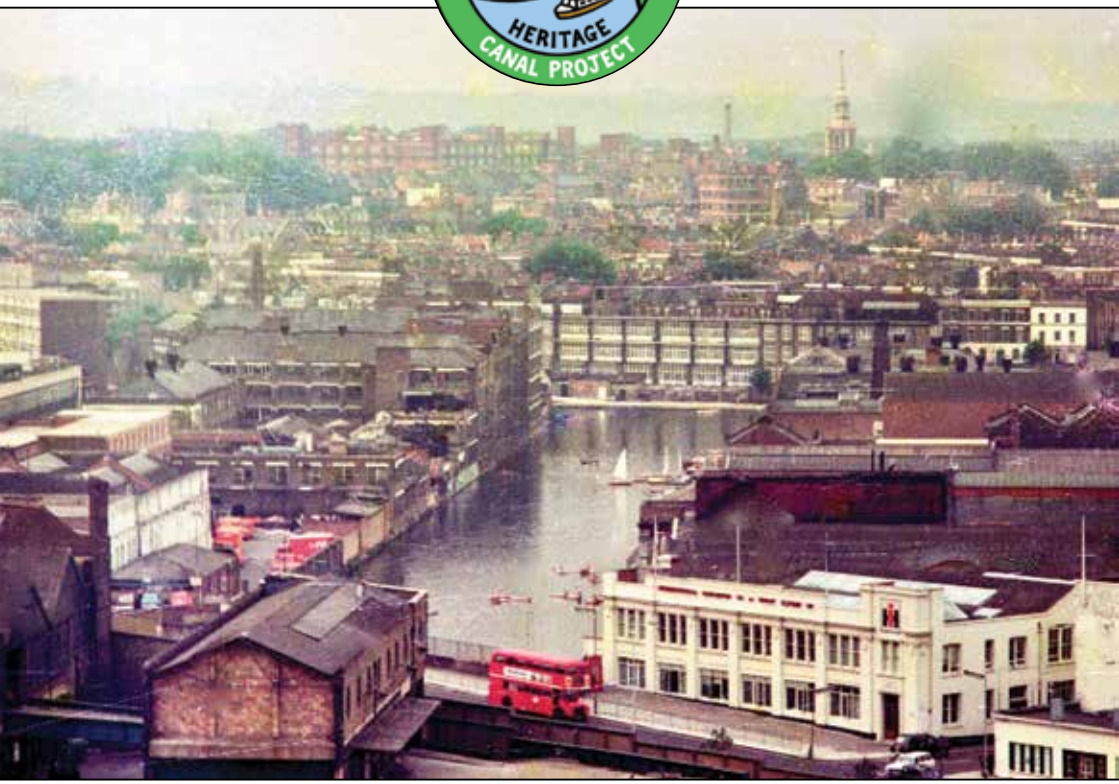
Line up of the Regent's Canal Police, c1920

And Today

Post war, the canal was a shadow of its former self. Steve Havens recalls the canal as: 'dark, dingy, damp and not a nice place to be.' The government had concluded that the usefulness of canals for commercial transport had dwindled, but they are 'socially valuable for drainage, water supply, recreation or amenity.' By the 1970s, the towpaths began to open up with steps added onto bridges. The canal is now predominantly a public amenity. But it has always been that for many local people as Anna Perkins remembered: 'as children, the canal was a treat. I have a vivid remembrance of a school outing and we would sit there after we drew flowers. My dad had a bit of a nervous disposition. When things got a bit too much, he'd just go and sit down there on the edge or on the capstan. So on a lovely sunny day it was a nice escape. You can actually lose yourself, you come round a bend and there's nothing but trees.'

Wenlock Basin, 1981

ISLINGTON REGENT'S CANAL HERITAGE CANAL PROJECT



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