

Parbold & Lathom Dry Docks

Historical Background

The Grand Canal and Douglas Navigation

The first proposal for a 'Grand Canal' connection between Leeds and Liverpool was surveyed and mapped out by John Longbotham in 1767 then approved by Act of Parliament in 1770. The canal was privately financed and building commenced simultaneously in Lancashire and Yorkshire. By 1780 the canal had been built from Liverpool to Parbold at the Lancashire end and from Leeds to Gargrave at the Yorkshire end, work on the canal was then halted due in part to the cost of the American War of Independence and in part to some financial irregularities associated with the accounting of shareholders' funds.

From the turn of the 18th century coal had been exported from Wigan using boats on the River Douglas, the cargo was transferred from the river boats onto sea going vessels at Tarleton. This route depended on tidal flow in the lower reaches and even after sections were canalised was only fully navigable for freight during high spring tides.

The River Douglas route was privately owned and originally separate from the 'Grand Canal', it was developed in 1774 into what became known as the 'Upper Douglas Navigation' which included a stretch of canal from the 'Grand Canal' at Parbold to Gathurst and known, after the man who financed this improvement, as 'Leigh's Cut' it rejoined the river Douglas via Deans Lock.

The Lower section of the river was fully canalised in 1781 and was known as the Lower Douglas Navigation. It runs from Lathom to the Ribble estuary and is now known as the Rufford Branch of the Leeds & Liverpool Canal.

The Douglas Navigation Company was eventually bought by the 'Leeds & Liverpool Canal Company' and the already canalised section 'Leigh's Cut' was eventually extended to the Wigan 'Piers' where the original basins for loading vessels on the River Douglas were located.

By the end of the century the development of the Port of Liverpool and its associated industry increased demand for cheap coal and provided the finance for the improvement of this route and the canal section was extended to the basin originally linked to the River Douglas in Wigan.

The final course of the Leeds & Liverpool canal was made by linking the Leeds end to the Lancaster Canal (South) at Whittle Springs and linking the Upper Section of the Douglas Navigation to the Lancaster Canal (South) via the Wigan Flight - 23 locks starting from what was originally the loading basin on the Douglas now commonly known as Wigan Pier.

Wigan Basin 1802 Survey Map

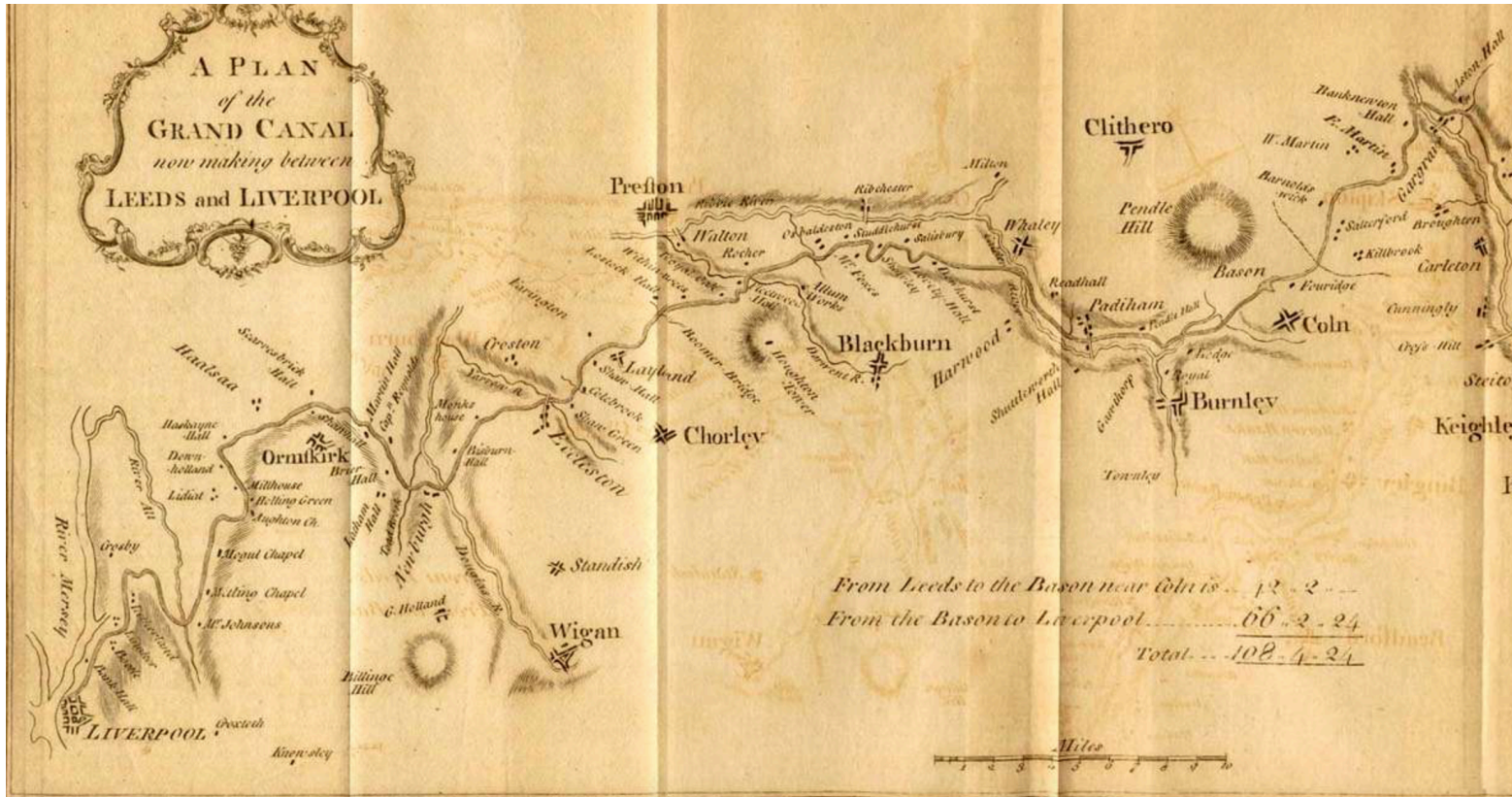
Wigan Basin was originally on the River Douglas, on this 1802 survey map the Upper Douglas Navigation had been extended through to the Basin.

The final link to the Lancaster Canal (South) at Bark Hill (Wigan Top Lock) was only completed in 1816.



Original Plan of the Canal From Liverpool to Leeds

Parbold is not identified but is at the junction of the River Douglas and the 'Grand Canal' between Newburgh and Eccleston. The village of Burscough grew as the junction between the canal and the road between Ormskirk and Preston



Parbold and Lathom Dry Docks

Lathom

The Dry Dock at Lathom is purpose built and connects to the top of the Rufford Branch, it was probably in use from the late 18th Century when the canal links were completed. The basin can be isolated from the canal using stop planks then drained via a sluice and channel back into the Rufford Branch at a lower level down the lock flight, the basin is refilled by closing the sluice and removing the top stop planks then the rest once the water levels had equalised allowing the entry and exit of boats into the dock. The Lathom Dock is a Grade 2 listed structure and was in use up until around 1980.

The Dock has not been used in recent times - the original boatbuilders hut has been demolished and houses around the basin have been extended - it is understood that the dock fell out of use due to leakage through the walls damaging the basements of the surrounding cottages.

Parbold

The Dry Dock at Parbold was formed from part of what became the redundant blind end of the canal - the last built section of Longbothom's original route through Parbold towards Ecclestone, beyond the junction where the Douglas Navigation met what had been intended to be the main line of the Leeds and Liverpool Canal.

It was used for boat building and repair from around 1800 to 1940 and uses the same method of stop planks and sluice gate, the water was run off from the dock into the adjoining brook which feeds back into the River Douglas. It features as a dry dock on the Leeds & Liverpool Canal survey map for 1802.

The basin was restored to a working dry dock in 1990 funded by a European Social Grant and Lancashire County Council as part of a training scheme which included the purchase of the 'Rose of Parbold' - after this restoration the Dock was used to fit out the Rose which was delivered to the site as a shell. The dock was owned by British Waterways and for a period maintained by the 'Rose of Parbold' charity until British Waterways following Health and Safety concerns and leakage of water from the canal into the brook retook responsibility for the dock - a clay bund was constructed on the canal side of the stop planks to minimise leakage into the dock. No further maintenance took place over the following 20 years, Nature took its course and the basin became overgrown with trees and other vegetation.