

Who would have thought that there was once a ship-building industry in land-locked Carlisle? Members of Appleby Archaeology Group followed local author David Ramshaw's every word as he addressed a packed February meeting on the subject of the "The Carlisle Ship Canal".

Construction of Carlisle's canal started relatively late in the day, but when the Ship Canal eventually opened in 1823 it had a remarkable effect on the future of the city.

The canal ran for 11½ miles from its mouth at Port Carlisle (formerly Fishers' Cross) to a city basin near the Carr's (presently McVitie's) Biscuit factory. Its opening was an appropriately grand event. Newspaper reports estimated that around 20,000 people came out to watch a flotilla of 11 ships, bedecked with flags and wreathed with the smoke of cannon-fire, make a majestic progress along the canal and into the city. For many of these observers, the sight of masted sailing-ships floating virtually beneath the city walls must have been a near-traumatic event.

For the important thing to note is that this was a **Ship** canal, as in "Manchester Ship canal" (though on perhaps a rather more modest scale). Though relatively small, the ships in the procession were ocean-going vessels, not mere barges, and ships from Carlisle were capable of trading into the Baltic and even across the Atlantic. They were hauled along the canal by horses.

Though the canal itself never made much money, it may be argued that it was the stimulus that turned sleepy, agricultural Carlisle into the vibrant, industrial City it subsequently became. The years that immediately followed its opening saw the growth of the aforementioned Carr's biscuits empire, the construction of Dixon's Shaddon Mill (in its day, the largest cotton mill in England) and the start of Messrs Cowan Sheldon's production of heavy engineering goods. The unlikely ship-building concern also developed in the City basin.

The canal had an effect on the social composition of the city too. The arrival of large numbers of "navvies" turned the Shaddongate area of the city into something akin to the Wild West. Perhaps it was a reaction to this that led Carlisle to establish its first police force in 1827. The opening of the Cumberland Infirmary shortly thereafter may be pure coincidence, but it demonstrates a growing confidence and ambition on the part of the city fathers.

By 1853, however, the canal was redundant. New technology in the form of the steam locomotive had simply overtaken it - while the journey to Port Carlisle by canal took around 3 hours, a train would cover the same distance in 30 minutes! The Board of Directors had little hesitation in determining to cut their losses by the simple expedient of draining the canal and laying a track on the bed. Sadly for them, another railway, this time to Silloth with its substantially larger docks, killed their business shortly thereafter.

Few relics of the canal now remain. The curious may wonder how the "Jovial Sailor" pub came to stand in "Port Road" in Shaddongate. The old docks at Port Carlisle are still visible and may one day be suitable for restoration as a marina. A few strangely-featured bridges and buildings may still be observed in the fields between these two locations. But there is little now to show for such an enormous expenditure of effort. Nevertheless the canal may be said to have left its mark in a much more substantial way - namely the modern city of Carlisle.

David was thanked by the Secretary for a most interesting and stimulating talk. David's book on the Carlisle Ship Canal is available from P3 Publications, priced at £13.

The next meeting of the Appleby Archaeology group will be on Tuesday March 10th when Harry Hawkins will be talking about “The Medieval Deer Parks of Cumbria”.