

THE DEVELOPMENT OF GLOUCESTER DOCKS

The present main basin was opened in 1812, and probably had quays along the west, north and east sides. The south side had an earth bank like the canal itself. At first, access to the basin was only through the lock from the river Severn, but after 1820 some traffic came along the completed section of the canal from the junction with the Stroudwater Canal. By 1824, a small warehouse had been built to the north of the basin, and there was a timber yard adjacent to it (1). A boat-building yard had been established in the south-west corner of the basin, apparently making use of a primitive dock on the line of an old drainage ditch (where the small graving dock was later to be built).

From an early date, the Gloucester and Cheltenham tramroad had several sidings running down to the waters edge on the east side of the basin (2). As traffic built up (mainly coal and stone), this area became overcrowded, and so in 1824 the canal company built a small basin to the south now known as the Barge Arm. The surrounding land was divided into sixteen yards, each with its own tramway siding. In 1834, one such yard was surrounded by fencing seven feet high, with a pair of gates that opened on wheels (3). Inside the yard, there were two moveable huts which served as offices, and there was a small warehouse that contained weighing machines, barrows, wood, iron pipes, tar and oil casks etc. There was also a cast iron crane, and it is possible that it is the post of this crane that can still be seen embedded in the quay on the north side of the Barge Arm.

The canal was eventually completed to Sharpness in 1827, and the next ten years saw a steady growth in traffic and a corresponding expansion in the facilities at Gloucester. Relaxation of the corn laws in 1828 allowed a considerable increase in imports of foreign corn, and the developing port of Gloucester was able to capture a large share of this new trade. The canal company demolished their original warehouse and built what is now known as the North Warehouse in 1826-27. They leased individual floors to various corn merchants as they required them. The larger merchants (such as Joseph and Charles Sturge) also built their own warehouses on land leased from the canal company along the west side of the basin and later also on the east side (4). Another trade that was to become very important for Gloucester was importing timber from the Baltic and North America. A group of local landowners and businessmen, lead by Samuel Baker of Hardwicke Court, arranged to widen the canal and establish a new quay to the south of Llanthony Bridge. The adjoining land known as High Orchard was largely sold off for timber yards, and William Price (whose firm later became Price, Walker & Co.) had a yard at the southern end (5). A third trade which developed during this period was salt from Worcestershire, which was in increasing demand for the manufacture of soda needed for soap and glass-making. Around 1835, two single storey warehouses were built just to the north of Hempsted Bridge, and new quays were formed beside them. The northern one was built for the Droitwich Salt Co., and the southern one was built for the British Alkali Co. and later taken over by the Stoke Prior Salt Co. (6). To help cater for the

increasing number of ships using the canal, the canal company built a graving dock in the south-west corner of the main basin, and close by they installed a steam-powered pump to improve the water supply to the canal (both circa 1834).

By 1840 there were two further extensions to the water space and quays, although no trace of either can be seen now. A small dock was built as a branch to the canal half-way between the Barge Arm and Llanthony Road (5). This may have been too small to have been of much use, as Causton's map of Gloucester in 1843 shows that it had largely been filled in again by then. Also by 1840, the 120 yard long High Orchard Dock was formed as a branch to the canal towards the southern end of Bakers Quay, roughly following the line of the Sudbrook. The idea was that the Birmingham and Gloucester Railway should use it as their point of access to the canal, particularly for Bristol traffic. However, it was not until 1848, after various unsuccessful attempts, that the rail link was provided (2). A line into the main docks was also built at the same time, and this marked the beginning of the end for the Gloucester and Cheltenham tramroad which had linked the railway terminus and the docks in the meantime. Probably by 1870, the High Orchard Dock was filled in and the ground was used by the Midland Railway Co as a goods yard. (The site is now occupied by West Midlands Farmers Ltd.).

In spite of the increase in facilities, there was still some overcrowding in the basin in 1846. With the prospect of continued growth in traffic due to the movement towards free trade in general and the repeal of the corn laws in particular, the canal company embarked on a major programme of expansion. The main project was the Victoria Dock which was opened to vessels in 1849, and further warehouses were built beside it (4). A new barge dock was also constructed on land known as Berry Close, almost opposite the existing Barge Arm (7). It was about 120 yards long and 20 yards wide, and probably had earth banks with several wooden landing stages. The surrounding land was used for timber and coal yards and for boat building. (Later in the century, the dock was filled in and a malthouse was erected on the site) While all this was going on, the Gloucester and Dean Forest Railway were proposing to build a huge new dock on Sizes Ground just to the south of Llanthony Road (8). This was to have been about the same size as the main dock basin and would have involved diverting the road to Hempsted, but it was never built. By 1851, the railway company was running out of money, and so it was agreed that they would just construct a quay wall along the canal with a goods yard behind it and a branch into the west side of the main dock area (9). One much needed development that did get carried out soon after this was the construction of a new graving dock to accommodate the larger ships that were now using the canal.

During the second half of the century, there were few changes in the water-space, but the docks became a centre for industrial development. By 1870, three flour mills were operating in the main docks area (4), Foster Brothers oil mill was built at the southern end of Bakers Quay, and engineering works, saw mills and timber yards spread southwards between the Bristol Road and

the canal (10). Timber yards were also established on the west side of the canal, and Monk Meadow Dock and the nearby timber pond were formed in the 1890s. In the present century, there has been a gradual decline in traffic, but many of the quays and warehouses remain. It is to be hoped that some new use can soon be found for them, and that the story of the development of Gloucester Docks can be continued.

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References

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