

# PORTLAND BASIN INDUSTRIAL HERITAGE CENTRE

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Portland Basin Industrial Heritage Centre is housed in a former canal warehouse on the Ashton Canal, in Ashton-under-Lyne. The geographical location of the warehouse is significant, situated as it is at the junction of the Ashton and Peak Forest Canals and close to where the Ashton Canal joins the Huddersfield Narrow Canal. Thus, when the canal network was at its busiest, Portland Basin was the ideal place for transshipment and storage of goods coming in to the area and being transported all over the country.

The warehouse was built by the Ashton Canal Company in 1834. It was originally three storeys high and cost £8,901 13s 6d to build. The canal company's first warehouse was at Ducie Street in Manchester, but a further warehouse was needed to cope with the ever increasing canal traffic.

The building of the Ashton Canal began in 1793, during the period known as 'canal mania'. Merchants, colliery owners and traders in Ashton and surrounding areas recognised quickly the benefits that the Duke of Bridgewater's canal had brought. Transport times were reduced dramatically and transport costs were cut affecting the price of essential goods such as coal. The Canal was eventually opened in 1797.

Direct links with other canals were planned. The Peak Forest Canal gave access to limestone quarries whilst the Huddersfield Narrow Canal provided links with Yorkshire and the woollen districts. With the completion of the Rochdale Canal from Dale Street Basin to the Bridgewater Canal in 1804, a link was provided to the Trent and Mersey Canal and the Midlands.

## Restoration of the Warehouse

With the coming of the railways, the use of the canals began to decline. By the mid-twentieth century the Ashton canal was derelict. Eventually, after much campaigning, the Ashton Canal was restored and re-opened in 1974. Unfortunately by the time the canal was re-opened, the warehouse had suffered severe damage in a fire in June, 1972. The fire destroyed all but the ground floor. The building remained

derelict for some time, until Tameside Metropolitan Borough Council decided in 1985 to restore this important listed building. Work began on the project in 1986, first to stabilize and then rebuild part of the warehouse, and then convert it to museum use. The cost of restoration of the whole building was prohibitive. However, it is likely that in the future further restoration and development will take place and the museum will expand.

As well as the investment by Tameside, substantial grant-aid was received for the restoration work from a number of sources. These included the Museums and Galleries Commission, North West Museums Service, the now defunct Greater Manchester Council, the Department of the Environment's Urban Aid Programme, and the European Regional Development Fund.

The museum opened to the public in July, 1988, the official opening taking place in April, 1989. The museum welcomed its 100,000 visitor in July, 1992. The museum's permanent displays occupy the ground floor. The mezzanine floor is used for a regularly changing programme of temporary exhibitions and other activities.

## Social and Industrial History of Tameside

The museum tells the rich story of Tameside's social and industrial history over the course of the last 200 years. Of course, until 1974 and local government re-organisation, Tameside did not exist. Tameside came about as the result of the merger of nine towns into one new metropolitan borough. The nine towns making up Tameside are Audenshaw, Ashton, Denton, Droylsden, Hyde, Mottram, Longdendale and Stalybridge. These nine towns have common threads and it is the history of these communities that is brought together at Portland Basin.

The museum looks at the effect of the industrial revolution on the people living and working in the area. The displays draw together many themes ranging from cotton spinning to Chartism and from religious sects to fish and chips.

## Collections and Displays

The bulk, but not all, of the museum's collections relate to the history of Tameside during the period 1870-1940. Some items in the collection illustrate and interpret themes at both Portland Basin and Tameside's other museum, the Museum of the Manchesters. The collecting policy for the museum service is directly linked to the geographical area of Tameside and its people. The museum is divided into seven sections: Pre-industrial Tameside, Industrialisation, Class and Community, Radicals and Reformists, Religion, Local Government and Tameside Today. Although each section is distinct, the history of the last 200 years is complex and many subjects are explored in more than one section.

The story is presented and interpreted in a number of ways, through panels of text and illustrations, through the use of large objects on open display, through objects in display cases and through recreation of certain areas such as the blacksmith's shop, a working-class kitchen, and a canal boat cabin.



A local boat in the 1930s.



*The fire at Portland Basin, 1972.*

### **Pre-Industrial Tameside**

To put the impact of industrialisation in its proper context this opening section shows what Tameside was like before the industrial revolution. In 1750 Tameside was no more than a collection of small, sparsely populated rural villages, whose occupants made a living from agriculture and the domestic textile industry, producing wool and fustian cloth.

### **Industrialisation**

This second section of the museum concentrates on the radical changes brought into being by the Industrial Revolution and the effects these changes had on Tameside. One of the greatest changes was the growth and impact of the cotton industry. Cotton factories came to Tameside for a number of reasons: the climate was right, there was a tradition of textile production, there was access to transport, and there was the advantage of locally established finishing trades such as bleaching, dyeing and printing. The first purpose built cotton mill in Tameside was Throstle Nest in 1779 and by 1831 there were 27 mills in Ashton alone. By 1852 this number increased to 54, employing some 26,000 people and consuming nearly 2.5 million pounds of raw cotton each week. The decline of the cotton industry after the First World War due to foreign competition and a lack of investment in the cotton industry, had serious effects on the local communities.

Although the cotton industry grew the most rapidly in Tameside, it did not grow in isolation. It needed support services and it stimulated the growth of other industries. Coalmining, though never a major industry, was important to the development of the cotton industry. Mining took place in the towns of Denton, Ashton, Dukinfield and Hyde, though most of these collieries ceased production by the end of the nineteenth century.

Engineering, joinery, clog making and cane basket weaving (for mill skips) all flourished as a result of the rapidly expanding regional economy and are all featured in the museum displays.



*Mechanics' Institute, Hyde.*

As well as looking at the growth of industry, this section also examines the factory system, how it changed people's lives and the resulting responses to it. In particular, the harsh discipline imposed by factory life, the use of very young children in mills and the devastating effects on health that resulted from factory work are discussed.

### **Class and Community**

This section looks at the problems associated with the rapid growth of new industrial towns during the nineteenth century. It highlights the problems of overcrowding, inadequate housing, poor sanitation, endemic disease and high mortality rates. The emergence of the urban working class is examined as are the concepts of leisure and self-help and self-education. This section also looks at changes in the relationship between mill owners and workers and the growth of paternalism from the 1850s onwards.

### **Radicals and Reformists**

This section outlines the growth of political awareness among the local working class and the resulting growth of radicalism in the early part of the nineteenth century. Luddism and the Chartist Movement are highlighted in this section as are the reasons for the development of the more stable, respectable and reformist values of the mid-Victorian period of 1850-1880.

### **Religion**

In the nineteenth century churches were the most important social institutions in Tameside. They provided for spiritual needs and offered a variety of social and recreational pursuits. The churches



*Chapel interior from Trinity Street Mission.*

were responsible for virtually all the education available and to a large extent determined political allegiance. There were many different religious groups in Tameside and these displays look at the reasons for the development of many different nonconformist groups. One of the most famous of Tameside's nonconformists was Joseph Rayner Stephens. He was a local Chartist and reformist and opened a people's school in Stalybridge in 1841. This later became a Church of England Mission Hall in the 1880s: the interior of the mission hall including the organ are now on display at Portland Basin.

### **Local Government**

This penultimate section looks at the administrative bodies set up to cope with the new towns and provide services such as the fire service, transport, the issuing of poor relief and so on. At the same time local government provided a vehicle for mill owners to have a wider influence in the community.

### **Tameside Today**

Tameside has changed dramatically in the last 200 years, yet the legacy of the industrial revolution remains. Many of the cotton mills have disappeared, but

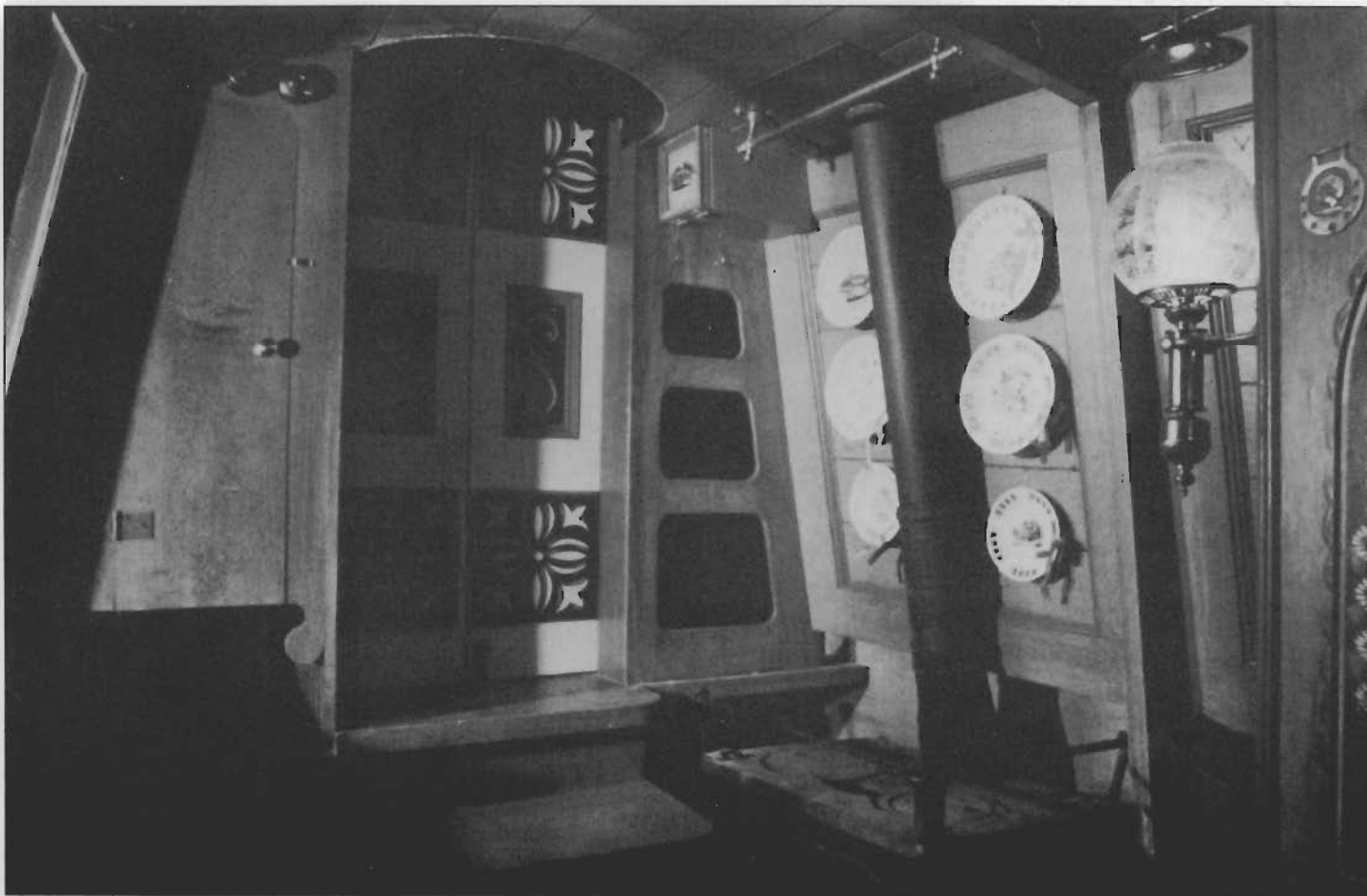
traces of the older industrial society remain in tangible ways such as public buildings, churches and street layouts. They also remain in intangible ways through such elements as social movements, leisure activities and people's attitudes. All these themes are looked at in this last section.

### **Canal Age Exhibition**

This is the most recent addition to the museum's permanent displays, and although on the ground floor, it is separated from the other permanent exhibitions both physically and by style of presentation.

It is situated where the canal comes inside the warehouse to what is in effect an inner wharf, and where the original cranes for loading and unloading still remain. The exhibition tells the economic and social history of the canals both nationally and locally, and their importance to the local community.

Outside the museum there is a large wharf area containing a number of exhibits, the most important of which is the water wheel. The hoists inside the warehouse were originally operated by hand. But during 1839-1841, due to increased use of the warehouse, a water wheel was installed to generate more



*Interior of a reconstructed canal boat cabin.*



Water wheel at Portland Basin.

power. The wheel, a high breast shot suspension type, 24 feet in diameter, was quite a sophisticated design for the time. It had similarities to waterwheels designed by the renowned Manchester engineer, William Fairbairn. During 1987 and 1988 the wheel was restored to full working order and can be seen working regularly.

Beyond the bounds of the museum walls there is the opportunity to explore the canal network. Portland Basin provides an ideal starting point to see some of the industrial archaeology of the area as well as the more scenic parts of the Peak Forest Canal.

### Other Activities

The museum runs a programme of temporary exhibitions, so that as well as the permanent displays there is usually something new for the return visitor. Exhibitions are chosen on the basis of their connection with social and industrial history, and this gives a very wide area to choose from. Recent exhibitions have ranged from Children in the Mines to the Story of Vimto.

The busiest weekend of the year for the museum is each July when the annual Ashton Canal Festival takes place. Narrow boats from all over

the country attend for what is a very colourful and lively event. The museum has received as many as 9,000 visitors over the festival weekend. Throughout the year and particularly at Christmas, boat trips run from the museum on a horse-drawn traditional narrow boat. These activities help to encourage people who would perhaps not otherwise visit a museum to come and see what we have to offer.

The full address of the museum is: *Portland Basin Industrial Heritage Centre, 1 Portland Place, Portland Street, South, Ashton-under-Lyne, OL6 7SY.* All enquiries regarding the collection should be addressed to Carol O'Mahony Museums Officer.

The museum is open April–October, Tues–Sat., 10.am–6.pm, Sun., 12 noon–6.pm. October–April, Tues–Sat., 10.am–4.pm, Sun. 10.am–4.pm. Admission is free and there is full disabled access to both floors. There is a small shop where publications on local history and souvenirs are available. Light refreshments are also available. School and other parties are welcome, though booking in advance is required.

Details of summer activities, the canal festival and temporary exhibitions can be obtained by writing to the museum's Marketing Officer or telephone the museum (Tel No. 061-308-3374).



Displays at Portland Basin from the upper floor.