MARPLE LOCKS - A HISTORY

Marple Locks are situated on the Peak Forest Canal in Marple Cheshire.
The Peak Forest Canal runs from Buxworth in Derbyshire, where an arm also services nearby Whaley Bridge, through Furness Vale, New Mills and Disley to Marple. Here it is joined by the Macclesfield Canal. At Marple the canal descends a flight of sixteen locks, lowering the level by 210 feet before crossing 100 feet above the River Goyt on a magnificent three arched stone aqueduct. The canal continues through Rose Hill cutting, originally a tunnel but opened out many years ago, on to Romiley, Woodley, Hyde, and Dukinfield before its junction with the Ashton Canal. The total length of the canal is a little over fourteen miles.

The main objective of the canal was to improve the transportation of bulk manufactured goods and raw materials, particularly limestone from the quarries at Dove Holes, high up in the Peak Forest. Construction was financed by a joint-stock company formed in 1793 called the Peak Forest Canal Company. Money was raised by the sale of shares, these were mostly bought by local businessmen who expected the proposed canal to be beneficial to their trade. Samuel Oldknow, a prominent local industrialist, was a major shareholder in this company and became the chief promoter and chairman. Oldknow, whose mill employed mainly women, recognised that as well as the direct benefits of improved transportation, the canal would provide employment for the men of the district. An Act of Parliament was necessary to enable the compulsory purchase of land, diversion of waterways and crossing of existing highways.

Construction of the canal was authorised by an Act of Parliament (Act: 34 GIII c26) and given the Royal Assent on Friday 28th March 1794. Actual work on the canal did not start until two months later, on Tuesday 20th May 1794, the "effective" date of the act.

The Canal Company's appointed Engineer for the Peak Forest Canal was Benjamin Outram, who was also responsible for the Ashton, Derby and Huddersfield Narrow Canals, all under construction or consideration at around the same period. He was assisted by his Resident Engineer Thomas Brown of Disley who, over thirty years later, was also Resident Engineer on the Macclesfield Canal.

Canal builders would, as far as possible, always use local materials. In the case of the Peak Forest Canal, an ample supply of stone was readily available in the district and this was used almost exclusively in the construction of lock chambers and bridges. The canals were "cut" by gangs of men using picks, shovels and wheelbarrows. The skilled diggers were called cutters or bankers and the unskilled, labourers, although soon they all became known as Navigators or "Navvies" for short. The locks were built by masons and the lock gates by carpenters or joiners. Miners were also used for the construction of underground tunnels and shafts, often using gunpowder to blast their way through the rock. Once dug, the canal had to be "puddled", which involved lining it with clay to make it watertight. Approximately three feet of "puddle" was laid on the canal sides and up to eighteen inches on the bottom if the canal bed was porous.

Construction commenced in May 1794 at both ends of the Peak Forest Canal and at the same time the first stone was laid for the foundations of the Marple "Grand Aqueduct". The Upper Level of the canal, from Bugsworth to Marple was opened for traffic on 31 August 1796. The Peak Forest Tramway, which had been started the previous year, was still in construction, so limestone was conveyed between Dove Holes and Bugsworth using horse-drawn carts. Samuel Oldknow commenced construction of his lime kilns near Top Lock at Marple at this time and the first recorded delivery of lime was received on 31 July 1797.

Work on the Lower Level between the Marple Aqueduct and the Ashton Canal stopped for a period in March 1797 due to financial difficulties. These were eventually overcome and the Lower Level as far as Ashton was finished in 1799. By this time the arches on the Aqueduct were keyed in and the work continued until 1800 when it was completed and water let in. The Aqueduct had taken nearly seven years to build and seven men lost their lives during the construction. The Aqueduct is three hundred and nine feet across and rises over one hundred feet above the River Goyt, the whole structure contains 8,000 cubic yards of masonry.

With continuing financial difficulties it had become apparent that there was nowhere near enough money available to build the proposed flight of locks at Marple. This was a serious problem as it meant that the canal could only be used in two separate sections, with no through traffic, making its usefulness strictly limited.

This problem was overcome by the construction of a tramroad which started near Oldknow's lime kilns, ran across what is now Strines Road, cut across the corner of the present Recreation Ground and along the banking which can still be identified near the children's play area. From there it went towards the modern St. Martin's Road but turned to cross the canal at lock 10 near the Tollgate Cottage. The grooved support stones for the rails and the holes for the wooden pegs which held them in place can still be seen. The route then continued down what is now the towpath until it crossed "Back Lane" (now Station Road). The remainder of the route is no longer certain, but it seems likely that it followed the route of the access road to the Aqueduct Works on the opposite side to the towpath. The tramroad was nearly a mile and a half long and when first built was only a single track. The traffic was so heavy that it was working night and day and in 1801 the track was doubled.

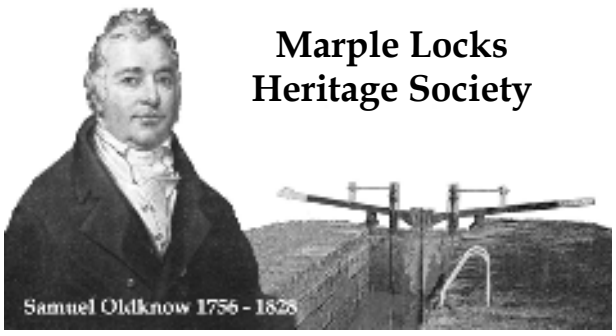
Around the same time as the tramway was doubled, the Canal Company began its efforts to raise the money to pay for the Marple locks. This proved difficult to resolve as initially Samuel Oldknow and Richard Arkwright had agreed to lend most of the money, but Oldknow's finances were not in good shape and he was later forced to withdraw the offer as he would have been unable to honour it. Eventually, in August 1803, Arkwright agreed to lend the money on his own and construction of the locks was finally able to commence. By this time Outram had left and Thomas Brown had been made Engineer. Each of the sixteen locks was constructed with a rise of thirteen feet, nearly twice the usual depth and reputedly the second highest in the country.

A canal arm was constructed between Oldknow's lime kilns and the main canal, joining it below lock 13. This arm, which ran alongside Strines Road, was filled in years ago but the blocked off tunnel that lead to it though Posset Bridge can still be seen. The story of how the bridge came by its name is well known, but worth repeating. It was built during the last stages of construction and Samuel Oldknow, who was anxious that one of his boats should be the first to navigate the locks, was concerned that it may not be finished in time. Oldknow encouraged the workmen by providing them with ale possetts for breakfast. These were prepared at the nearby Navigation Inn and must have been a success as the bridge was finished in 1804, in sufficient time for Oldknow's boat "Perseverance" to make the first trip through the locks when they were completed.

Marple Locks

- There are 16 separate locks in this set or 'flight' of locks
- They raise the water level in the canal a total of 209 feet (62.7 m) over 1 mile
- Each lock raises the water level by approximately 13 feet (3.9 metres)
- Each lock has a set of double gates at the bottom and a single gate at the top
- Around 44,000 gallons of water are needed to lift a boat through one lock
- They are among the deepest locks in the country

Leaflet prepared for Marple Locks Heritage Society by Peter Clarke with contributions from Ann Hearle of Marple Local History Society and Mark Whittaker of The Marple Website.



Marple Locks Heritage Society works in partnership with British Waterways to promote and enhance this historic flight by recruiting membership, organising task days and staging the Marple Locks Festival every other year. We are also actively involved in educational projects aimed at schools through the National Curriculum.

For full membership details visit our website:

www.marplelocks.org.uk

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Marple Locks Heritage Society

Marple Locks Trail

A Taste of our Heritage

Supported by:
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STOCKPORT METROPOLITAN BOROUGH COUNCIL

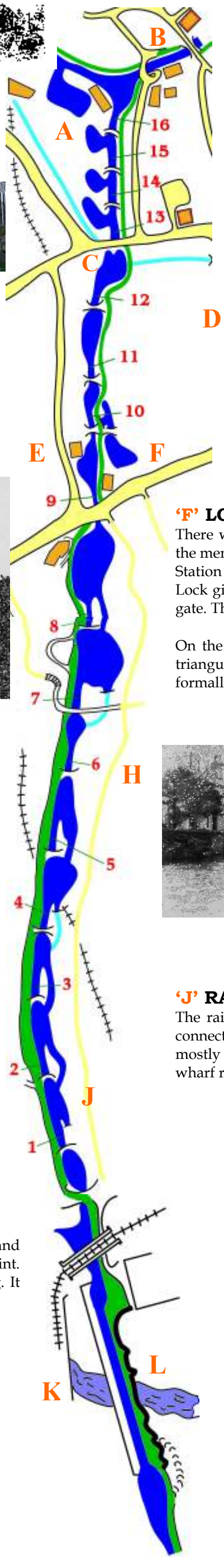
Lock Numbers Are Shown In Red

‘A’ JINKS BOATYARD, TOP LOCK

A boat building and repair yard was operated by the Jinks’ family, from 1840 to 1935, next to Top Lock house.
There was even a dry dock next to the house, which was built by Samuel Oldknow probably for his canal manager.

‘C’ POSSETT BRIDGE

So named because it is said that Samuel Oldknow encouraged his workmen to finish the locks by giving them a ‘possett’ of ale for breakfast! Under the bridge are three tunnels, two for boats, one for horses. The one on the left, now sealed, was an arm of the canal to the Lime Kilns.



‘ B’ THE WHARF

Between bridges 1 & 2 is situated at the start of the Macclesfield Canal. The warehouse allowed for the transfer of goods under cover. Boats were able to moor inside the building.

‘D’ MEMORIAL PARK

Looking to the side of Lock 12 one can see Marple Memorial Park. Gifted to the community in 1922 as a memorial to those who fell in the Great War. The memorial itself was extended following World War II.

The park is now a popular centre for local activities. As well as being home to three Bowling Clubs you can also find the Police Station, Library, Senior Citizens Hall and Health Clinic within its precincts.

‘E’ LOCKSIDE MILL

Built to allow the transfer of both raw and manufactured cotton between canal and road, whilst also providing protection from the weather.

St Martins road was the first part of the route to Mellor Mill in the valley below at the Roman Lakes. At that time the lakes were the mill ponds!

‘F’ LOCK KEEPERS COTTAGE

There were a number of these cottages for the men who looked after the locks.
Station Road has been widened at this Lock giving a longer entrance to the lower gate. The tow path also changes sides here.

On the opposite side of Station Road is a triangular gatehouse standing at what was formally an entrance to the Brabyns Estate.

‘G’ BRABYNS PARK

First registered in the 17th century, the Brabyns estate remained in private hands until 1941. In 1949 it was opened as a public park and has remained so ever since. The Hall, which was used as a military hospital in both World Wars, was sadly demolished in 1951 following the discovery of dry rot.

The 1813 Iron Bridge in Brabyns Park.

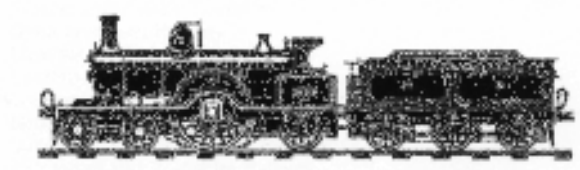
‘H’ GLEN COTTAGE

Another lock keepers cottage by Lock 6. By the 1960s when the canal and locks in particular were in a derelict state the cottage was in ruins and was demolished.

Unusually the lock’s by-wash, a system whereby excess water in a pound can run away to the next, actually ran under the cottage garden.

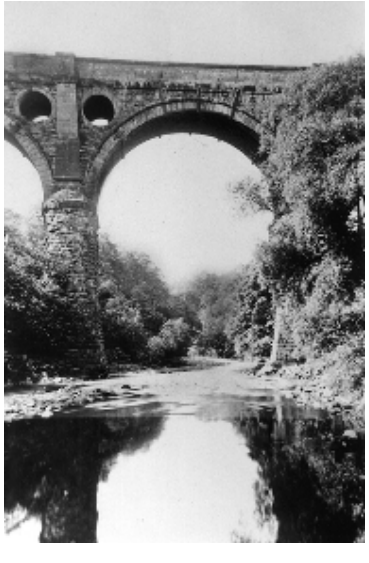
‘J’ RAILWAY SIDINGS

The railway goes under the canal between locks 4 and 5. There was a rail connection between the canal and railway that allowed the transfer of goods, mostly stone, from boat to train. Alongside the basin between Locks 1 & 2 this wharf remained in use until the 1920s.



‘K’ MARPLE VIADUCT

The viaduct carries the railway across the River Goyt and is 124' (37.8 metres) above the water at its highest point. Built with 12 stone arches and 918' (280 metres) long. It took only one year to construct.



‘L’ MARPLE AQUEDUCT

Designed by Benjamin Outram the Marple Aqueduct took seven years to construct and was completed in 1800. As the locks had not yet been built, a tramway was needed to transport goods between here and the upper part of the Peak Forest Canal.
Due to the amount of canal traffic the tramway continued in use until 1807.

Both the Lock system and the Aqueduct are grade 1 listed structures. The Aqueduct was also awarded a Blue Plaque in the year 2000.