

The City Road Basin: development and evolution

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Introduction

The City Road Basin is on the Regent's Canal close to the Angel, Islington. It is now little more than an expanse of concrete-edged water, cut off at its southerly end by a modern, if bleak and empty, 'piazza' abutting the busy City Road, around which rise three extremely high, modern buildings, and bordered by a mixture of urban green space, modern electrical distribution sites, offices and a variety of housing from the last thirty years. The sole user of the water space is the Islington Boat Club with its premises alongside. To its north the Basin opens out onto the Regent's canal just below City Road Lock.

There are few clues as to the Basin's past, although in the close neighbourhood a few remains of an industrial past can be found, as in Graham Street, Wharf Road, City Garden Row and Dingley Street. For about 140 years, however, the City Road Basin was an important industrial area, and at its opening it was a major transshipment point at the southern end of a vital transport system that connected most of the major industrial towns of the country by inland waterway to the City of London and to the London Docks.

The Regent's Canal opened throughout its length on 1 August 1820, a date only decided on by the General Committee of the Regent's Canal Company on 19 July, having been postponed (in vain) in the hope that the wharfingers would have moved to their new premises on City Road Basin before the opening.¹ The celebrations included a grand procession starting from Battlebridge Basin, near what is now King's Cross, passing through Islington Tunnel and into City Road Basin 'where a salute was fired' with 'the loudest acclamations from the numerous crowds stationed on the shore' before passing on down the canal to the Thames and to dinner at the City of London Tavern.² Several boats 'laden with manufactured goods, one of which arrived from Manchester the same morning' joined the procession into City Road Basin to be the first commercial vessels unloaded there.³ The crowds were attended by street robbers on the City Road, those of whom were apprehended were swiftly tried and hanged.⁴ The procession 'consisted of beautiful state barges and smaller boats upward of twenty in number and all filled with genteel company of both sexes. They were all decorated with flags and each barge had a band of music. They set out ... in the presence and amidst the shouts of an immense multitude.' ⁵ A sketch plan prepared for the procession shows that each vessel was complete with a barrel of beer and, as well as for the canal's proprietors and the major canal carriers, space was provided for workmen whose labour made the opening possible. This was a very significant event as England's inland waterways, the arteries of commerce, were brought within easy access of the City of London for the first time. The King himself conveyed to the canal company 'his anxious desire for the prosperity of an undertaking which promises so much commercial advantage to the Metropolis and such facility to the general commerce of the Empire'.⁶

Innovation

The Regent's Canal was named for the Prince Regent who had acceded to the throne (on 29 January 1820) as King George IV by the time the canal eventually opened. Nearly nine miles long, it was built on an unprecedented scale, as a barge canal large enough to take 100 ton vessels. Until the Regent's Canal opened the nearest access to London from the canal network, and so to the Midlands and beyond, was via the village of Paddington, five miles (and nearly two hours by wagon) west of the City of London. 'The immense value of land [had] for a long time prevented the formation of a canal nearer to London than Brentford, where the line of the present Junction Canal united with the Thames, subjecting its commerce with London to the delays of the tide. This inconvenience produced the branch called the Paddington Canal, which brought means of canal conveyance to the edge of the town.'⁷ With the opening of the Regent's Canal, England's canal arteries were linked to within a short distance of the City of London, to Limehouse (and the Regent's Canal Dock), and



Figure 1. City Road locks 1825[?] (T. H. Shepard). *Yale Center for British Art*

from there to the Port of London and its growing docks. As it was more prosaically expressed at the time ‘The Regent’s Canal ... conveys the produce of the inland port of our island ... to the bosom of old father Thames’⁸. Goods could now be brought to and collected from the City of London and the London docks with greater ease and efficiency.

The twinned locks were each large enough to take a Thames barge or lighter, which would generally ply from the Thames estuary and the London docks to the canal wharves close to London, and back (Figure 1). Two seven-foot wide narrowboats could also pass at a time, although each normally drawn by its own horse. All long-distance travel was by narrowboat because until the 1930s all locks north of Braunston in Northamptonshire were only seven-foot wide. Water supply was always a problem for canals and the Regent’s Canal locks contained the innovation of an interconnecting sluice operated by ground paddle gear between the locks. By using this to empty a lock into the adjacent empty lock chamber until they were at the same level, and then closing it and proceeding as normal to respectively empty and fill the two locks through their own respective paddles, the amount of water used in passing the locks could be halved. This interconnecting paddle gear remained visible into the 1960s. The lock gates used cast iron balance beams, rather than the usual timber, so that they could be shaped in order to overlap one another on the narrow space of the central lock island. The awkward height of some of the balance beams today is the consequence of this. (Both these innovations are visible in Figure 1.)

Early years

The original plan for a basin serving the City of London had been for a basin situated further east of Islington than the current City Road Basin and at the end of a half-mile branch, commencing at what is now New North Road, and ending at Aske Terrace (half a mile north of Old Street), but there were difficulties acquiring the land (see plan at Figure 2). After the significant problems the Regent’s Canal Company had acquiring land from a litigious barrister, Mr Agar (between Camden and Islington) there was no stomach for another fight, this time with the landowner Mr Sturt, whose name lives on in the eponymous lock.⁹ Consequently in 1819 an Act of Parliament was obtained authorising City Basin, so named for its purpose as the point of loading and unloading for the City of London, but within 20 years – and in this article – it was known more commonly

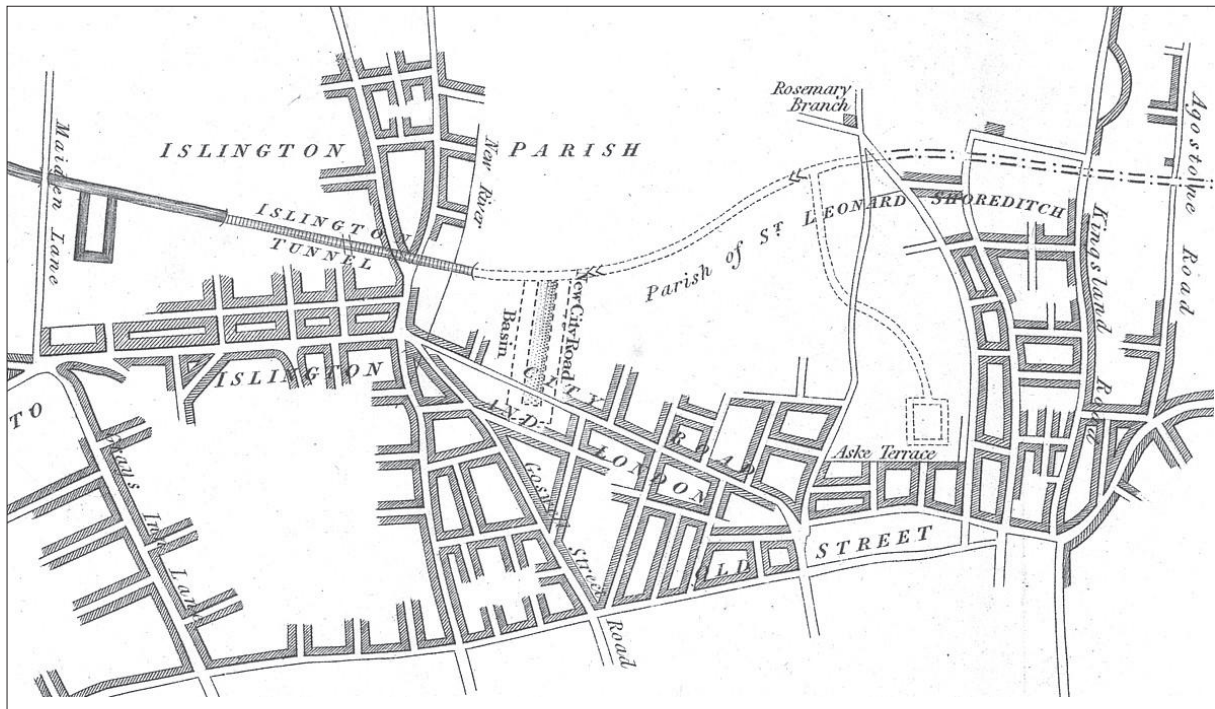


Figure 2. Extract from Regent's Canal plan 1819. Yale Center for British Art

as City Road Basin for its location astride the City Road. It was built on 34½ acres of open farmland purchased from the Bishop of London and Dr Samuel Parr (of which nine excess acres were subsequently sold to the architect John Nash, a director of the Regent's Canal Co), and connected with the City via the broad City Road, built in 1761 as a continuation of the New Road from Paddington to Islington (Figure 3). The City was now a short horse-drawn journey from the canal. Measuring 550 yards long by 35 yards wide, it ran under City Road through a bridge, the line of which is still discernible. By 1824 the Basin boasted seven side docks, including a covered gauging dock, which was required by the canal carrier Pickford & Co. in November 1820 and was rapidly built, and the site of which now lies below the modern Crystal Wharf (Figure 4). Its status was such that, together with Limehouse Basin, it was, and remains, the only basin along the line of the Regent's Canal owned by the canal operator, rather than privately.

The canal's route skirted the north side of the then-built London. By building the canal largely through open fields much money was saved in its construction, at the price of a less commercially convenient route. Illustrations from the 1830s show fields and haystacks in the areas of what are now Noel Road and Vincent Terrace near the tunnel mouth. But that rapidly changed as the city expanded north to encompass the canal. Even by 1822 the Basin was already described in the *Morning Post* as 'now completely inclosed by large roomy warehouses or storehouses for the reception of goods coming to London by water or intended to go from thence by conveyance to various parts of the country ... besides which there are a number of other warehouses, wharfs and erections forming. These added to the loading and unloading of the vessels, and the noise and bustle of the persons employed, make the scene quite animating. Various streets have been built next this spot ... and other streets are also fast building in the opposite field.'¹⁰

With financial incentives from the Regent's Canal Company, including for example the payment of £5000 to Pickfords towards the cost of construction of their new warehouses on the Basin, the canal carriers previously based at Paddington Basin moved en masse to new premises at City Road Basin to take commercial advantage of this new development. A mixture of short and long-distance carriers was soon trading, including Pickford & Co, Snell & Brice, Whitehouse and Sons, Kenworthy & Co, Brache & Co (Morris Herbert & Co) and Robins Mills & Co. A total of 14 canal carriers moved into the basin. Over the years the carriers amalgamated or were taken over, and reduced in numbers, and in 1845, in response to the competition from the railways, canal companies were first permitted to carry on their own account. In later years, long distance transport was concentrated in the Grand Junction Canal Company's carrying

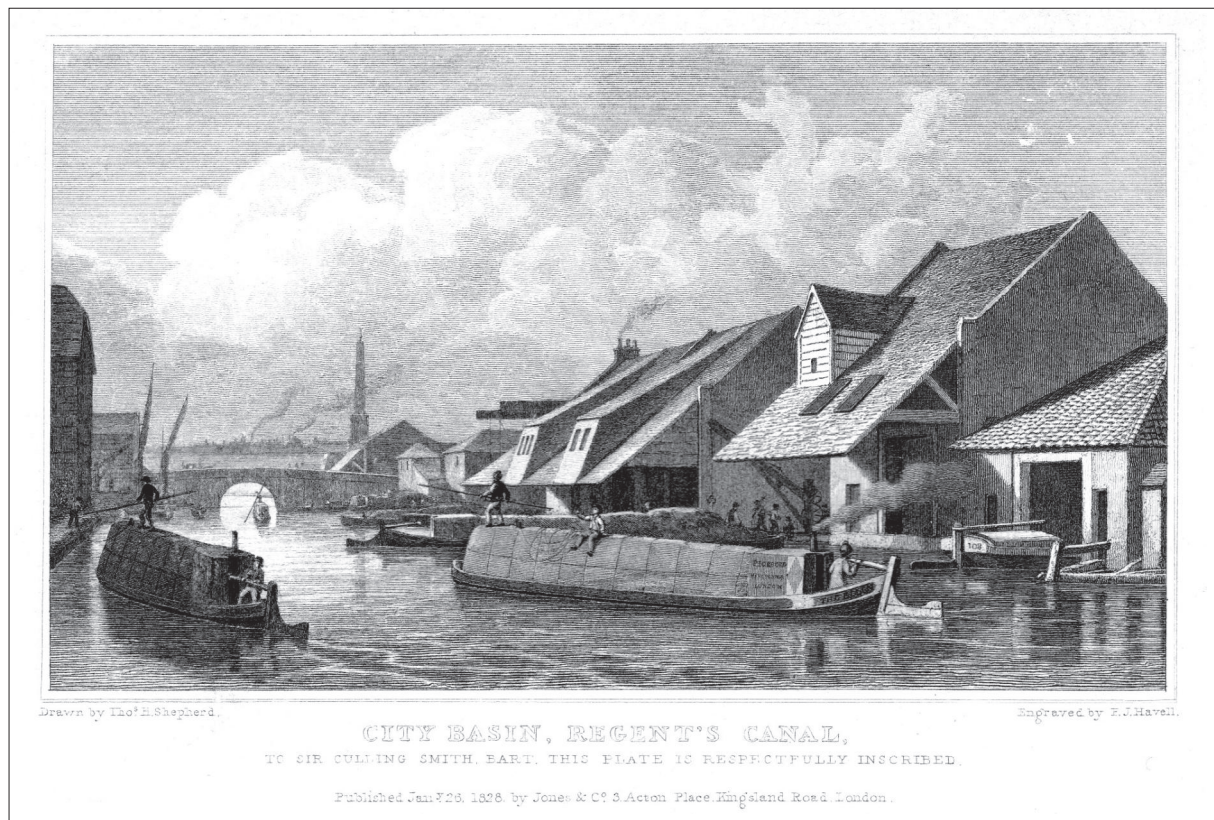


Figure 3. City Basin 1828 (T H Shepherd) *Author's collection*

department (GJCCCD) and thereafter Fellows Morton & Clayton, both of which had substantial presences, the latter continuing until nationalisation in 1948.

The importance and success of the Regent's Canal in its early years is reflected in the tonnage of goods carried, rising from 195,000 tons in the first full year (1821), to 495,000 tons in 1829 and 625,000 tons in 1834.

In 1833 there were still ten canal carriers located around the Basin but other traders included coal, stone, iron, lime and timber merchants, and corn and salt merchants, a brewer, seed crusher, a pottery and glassware warehouse, a wheelwright, a whiting manufacturer and the parish rubbish carters.

Population growth

The impact of the Regent's Canal, and the associated industrialisation of the fringes of the city, can be seen in the growth figures for Islington. Between 1821 and 1841 the population increased 250%. By the 1870s there had been a 10-fold increase while the increase in housing, not surprisingly, failed to keep pace with only an 8-fold increase.

Canal Carriers

Pictures of the Basin from the 1820s show a large number of sailing barges and narrowboats tied up on the wharves. Short distance traffic to and from City Road Basin was in barges, including sailing barges off the Thames and its connecting waterways, as well as by narrowboat. Sailing barges on the Regent's Canal came from Rochester, Maidstone, Faversham and Sittingbourne, among other towns, and from as far as Suffolk. In the 1880s the majority of these barges were described as bringing building materials to London, such as bricks, lime, cement and chalk and taking back ashes and manure from the dust-wharves and coke from the gasworks.¹¹ Even as late as 1908 Messrs Tate & Sons Ltd, sugar refiners, were transporting their product by barge from the River Thames at Silvertown to City Road Basin where it was transferred to narrowboat for onward transmission to the Midlands.¹²



Figure 4. Gauging Dock, City Basin (T H Shepherd) © London Metropolitan Archive (City of London)

While barges did bring some cargoes from towns north of London, such as 80 ton barges of hay from Leighton Buzzard, long-distance traffic was by narrowboat, in order to be able to travel north of the Grand Junction Canal, which linked the Regent's Canal via its Paddington Arm and main line to Braunston, Northamptonshire, at which point narrow gauge (7 foot width) locks prevailed.¹³ This traffic was either 'fly', travelling non-stop using regular changes of horse and with all male crews of four working in shifts, or 'slow boats', which were more commonly (but by no means all) family operated, working during the day and reliant on a single horse.

Fly boats departed according to a fixed timetable and arrived generally within a narrow window of time. They were not dependant on a full load being found, often carrying only 10 to 14 tons of general merchandise, manufactured goods, perishables and higher value heavy goods (as against up to 30 tons fully loaded). The journey between London and Birmingham could be covered in 72 hours by horse boat,¹⁴ in 54 hours on the introduction of steamers,¹⁵ in contrast to the slow boats which more commonly took five days, and to Liverpool in seven days, subsequently reduced to five. To hasten the passage of these boats, in 1833 the Grand Junction Canal Co. agreed to the addition of gate paddles on their locks (in addition to the existing ground paddles) to speed the filling and emptying of the locks. Given that one 15 ton load might involve up to 150 consignees,¹⁶ the scale and complications of the operation of running fly boats is apparent, and it is not surprising that a visitor to the City Road Basin wharf in 1842 saw 'upward of a hundred clerks engaged in managing the business of [Pickfords]', arranging the consignments and the payments of tolls to the 20 or so canal companies over whose waters the boats passed.¹⁷ This administrative burden must have been common to all of the long distance carriers, even if not quite on the scale of Pickfords, with the continued refusal of the individual canal companies to simplify the tolls charged and to agree through-rates, and explains, in part at least, the reduction in the number of carriers during the first half of the nineteenth century.

Pickfords' national headquarters was moved to, and based at, City Road Basin in Wharfs 1 and 2, and included stabling 'for a large number of horses', a warehouse, 'an enormous roofed building with open sides', and a range of offices and 'counting houses'. An average of 35 tons (requiring at least two fully laden narrowboats travelling fly) left the Basin every day travelling north, and twice that from Manchester southwards, although not necessarily all of that was destined for London. Conditions were unsophisticated

for the warehousemen and boatmen who worked day and night. When in 1824 a carboy of liquid was dropped during loading onto a boat for Birmingham, it was necessary, in the darkness in which they worked, to light a taper to examine the damage. The ensuing fire, resulting from the ignition of the spirit which had spilt, totally destroyed the warehouse and burnt several workmen to a cinder.¹⁸ It seems likely that working conditions had not much changed by 1852, save for lighting on the wharves at night, when a visitor to the GJCCCD wharf reported entering 'the large gas-lighted, roof covered yard, amongst a group of Warwickshire, Staffordshire and Lancashire bargemen, dressed in their short fustian [rough cotton] trousers, heavy boots, red plush jackets, waistcoats with pearl buttons and fustian sleeves, and gay silk handkerchiefs slung loosely round their necks' as they 'threaded our way between waggons, horses, cranes, bales and men'.¹⁹

In 1841 the census recorded 21 boats tied up at Pickfords' wharf.²⁰ Most were occupied by four adults, a crew reflecting the demands of a fly boat, although it is possible that some were passengers. Of the 89 named people, all but one being noted to be illiterate, six were adult females and three were aged 12 or under. Fly boats generally had all male crews, although a captain was allowed to travel with his wife, while 'slow' boats were more likely to have a family crew. Curiously, despite the presence of a number of other long distance canal carriers, and many wharves served by boats and barges, no other vessels are recorded in the 1841 census at City Road Basin.

In 1843 Pickfords moved its headquarters from City Road Basin to Castle Inn, Wood Street in the City, to concentrate on rail and road transport and by 1848 Pickfords had ceased carriage by canal. However they retained, and expanded, their premises at the southern end of the basin, although the business there was now using road transport only, and eventually in the early 1900s the end of the basin south of City Road was filled in as more space was required to park their vans and lorries. (A substantial transshipment centre for goods travelling by rail was subsequently built on the Regent's Canal above Hampstead Road lock on the site of what is now the Pirates' Castle.)

The number of long-distance carriers reduced because of the complexities of the business²¹ and then again in the face of rail competition. The GJCCCD moved to City Road Basin (from Paddington Basin) in 1849 having taken over Pickfords' canal carrying business, including its substantial London–Manchester trade, as well as (amongst others) the following carriers at City Road Basin; Messrs Soresby at Wharf 27, Worster & Co at Wharf 32, John Whitehouse & Sons at Wharf 17 and Crowley & Co at Wharfs 30 and 31.²² In 1855 the GJCCCD is recorded as the only canal carrier in the Basin, at nos 16 and nos 30–32 Wharf Road, and Covington James & Co as the only 'lightermen'. A boat-building and repair yard was set up by GJCCCD at Wenlock Basin, close to the City Road Basin.²³ This was no 16 Wharf fronting onto Wenlock Basin and also onto the Regent's Canal with access from Wharf Road close to the City Road Basin wharf of GJCCCD. The total fleet of GJCCCD had reached 200 boats in March 1848 and continued to grow thereafter before contracting during the 1850s. This 'boat building establishment' was substantial, as evidenced by the sales catalogue when the lease of the premises and its contents were sold off in October 1876 on the demise of GJCCCD. The sale was advertised in the *Birmingham Gazette* and Lloyds' List and included at Wenlock Basin 14 horse boats, 3 steam boats, 9 working steam tugs and the hulls of 5 further steam tugs (with evocative names such as 'Spanker', 'Havoc', 'Ratler' and 'Pincher'), a pumping and fire engine, a gunpowder boat, 3 barges and a great collection of parts and equipment including a floating wet dock. (A further 19 horse boats and 4 steamers were sold off from the Birmingham site at Fazeley Street.)

GJCCDC ceased trading in 1876,²⁴ with its business being acquired by the London & Staffordshire Canal Carrying Co and the London & Midland Counties Carrying Co, which in turn were absorbed by Fellows Morton & Clayton Ltd (FMC) by 1889. The commercial directories for 1888 show FMC at Wharf 30, sharing it with the only other significant carrier on the Basin, Landon John & Co of Aylesbury. Boatmen and their families were therefore increasingly either employed by one of these large employers or subcontracting to them.

FMC continued operating fly boats from City Road Basin, using a steamer towing a butty (unpowered) boat to carry between them about 40 tons on the London to Birmingham route. As the census returns show (and from 1851 the only boats included in the census were those at Wharf 30) the steamers worked with a crew of

four to ensure non-stop operation. By 1883 FMC were reporting that the remaining fly boats were run as a 'loss leader' to retain customers who would otherwise have turned to the railways and that most of their boats were by then 'slows'.²⁵ The lack of return loads led to the development of FMC as a coal merchant in Uxbridge (on the Grand Junction Canal), providing the boats with full loads when travelling south. Other than FMC no canal carriers were listed for City Road Basin in the Handbook on Canals published in 1918 by the Canal Control Committee of the Board of Trade. FMC's fly boat services were eventually forced to end with the imposition of air raid precautions in the form of night-time stop planks at the beginning of World War II, so that boats had to tie up at night rather than risk flooding in the event of an enemy 'hit'.²⁶

Cargoes

There is generally little evidence of the variety of goods carried in one fly boat and the many destinations carried to from City Road Basin, but the clearest is available for 2 October 1874. That night a train of five narrowboats pulled by a steam-powered narrowboat was involved in an explosion at Macclesfield Bridge, Regent's Park, and the invoices for the goods being carried were detailed in the subsequent Majendie Report into the explosion. The goods were loaded onto the boats at City Road Basin and set off at about 2 am that morning. They included tea, coffee, sugar, pickles, cheese, ginger, candles, headstones, bacon, butter, cement, wine, sardines, nuts, jams, petroleum spirit and, of course, the gunpowder that caused the explosion (ignited by petroleum vapour leaking from wooden barrels of spirit which was lit by the lamps or the open fire on the boat). One boat had 42 separate consignments on board. The destinations included towns from Uxbridge, Leighton Buzzard, Warwick, Birmingham and Wolverhampton to Leicester, Nottingham, Derby and Chesterfield.²⁷

Some further information about the cargoes and destinations of the craft at City Road Basin and on the Regent's Canal is provided by the missionaries (about whom, see more below). In 1881 the missionary for the canals of London East and North described the narrowboats as 'constantly plying between Northampton, Leicester, Nottingham, Birmingham, Droitwich etc'.²⁸ In 1883 the traffic on the Regent's Canal was described in these terms: 'The barges [presumably the terms is loosely used to include narrowboats] carry from 22 to 28 tons and travel from 20 to 200 miles. The short distance boats bring in principally hay and straw from Buckinghamshire, while those that go to the Midland counties bring various kinds of merchandise. The numbers on board these little craft vary very much. There are a few fly boats, so called because they work night and day until their destination is reached. These are each worked by three active young men [if accurate, this was a reduction from the crew of four which was common earlier in the century although census returns suggest the fly boat crew was still four]. Others are worked by one man and two young people. But the larger number of boats are worked by a man, his wife and several of his family.'²⁹

The boat people

Written records give little information about the boatmen and bargemen, and their families, employed bringing vessels into and out of City Road Basin. There is no clear evidence as to the numbers of vessels, and therefore boatmen, bargemen and their families, working the Basin at any time throughout its commercial existence. The largest carrier on long distance routes, Pickfords, had built up their national fleet of narrowboats, which would have been used for carriage to the Midlands and beyond, to 116 boats by 1838³⁰, but not all of these would have worked to London. The scale of Pickfords' operation is well illustrated by the contract in July 1822 to transport 800 men of the Regiment of Guards from Paddington to Liverpool (presumably to sail to Ireland). This used 26 boats based at City Road Basin, each boat with a captain and three men, and so it can be assumed travelling 'fly'. Assuming an equal distribution of the cargo, that would indicate about 30 soldiers per boat hold, but presumably in addition family members, possessions and supplies were squeezed on board. This was by no means a unique operation.³¹

Of the other long-distance carriers based in the Basin during the period from 1820 to 1850, including Snell & Brice, Whitehouse and Sons, Kenworthy & Co, Brache & Co (Morris Herbert & Co) and Robins Mills & Co much less appears to be known than of Pickfords. Regular narrowboat traffic also served the warehouses in the Basin of the Davenport pottery at Longport, Staffordshire, and the Droitwich Salt Co.



Figure 5. Cottage Lane marked on 1862 map (from <http://www.mappalondon.com/london/north-east/clerkenwell.jpg>)

There was little public interest in the boat people, except for their perceived potential for causing crime as they passed by, and their ‘immorality’ and ‘ungodliness’ as asserted by missionaries and others seeking social reforms, particularly reform of the Sunday Observance laws. In the early nineteenth century, the boatmen enjoyed a singularly unsavoury reputation, being described as ‘a vile set of rogues’ by the Braunston agent of Pickfords. A partner of that same business expressed, to a parliamentary committee, grave doubts about the state of the boatmen’s morals, describing how the company had to take precautions against the men’s thieving.³² Pickfords found an effective solution to the problem of pilfering from the cargoes of boats. They made the boat captain responsible, by a legally binding contract, for all goods in his charge until he had delivered his cargo and, if it was not intact, the loss was then set off against Pickfords’ payment to him.³³

Soon after their arrival on the Regent’s Canal in 1820 there was some concern expressed about the moral well-being of the boatmen and bargemen, and in particular their knowledge of the Bible, their literacy skills and their sobriety. There was also concern that they were working on the Sabbath (Sunday). Boatmen had been working the inland waterways of England for half a century beforehand; it seems likely that it was the close proximity to the metropolis and to the missionaries working with seamen in the docks, on the River Thames and with the industrial working classes that brought the people working the inland waterways to the attention of the missionaries. In April 1827, under seven years after the opening of the Regent’s Canal, a Boatmen and Rivermen’s Bethel Union Chapel was opened by the North London Auxiliary Seamen’s and Soldiers’ Friend Society, led by the indomitable G C ‘Bo’sun’ Smith, a Baptist minister, in Cottage Lane, City Road.³⁴ Cottage Lane no longer exists (although the line of the road can still be identified by the alignment of the fencing along the Peregrine House play area) but this was a short road on the south side of City Road by St Mark’s Hospital, about 100 metres from the Basin (Figure 5).

This was only a temporary arrangement as by June 1828 there was sufficient interest for a new chapel. ‘The committee are now building with great spirit and zeal a boatmen’s chapel, in which they are greatly encouraged by the respectable wharfingers of the [City Road Basin] ... it is one of the first efforts that has been made in London to instruct the boatmen of canals that intersect nearly the whole island.’³⁵ By the end of 1828 a new chapel had been built in Macclesfield Street South (now Macclesfield Road) (Figure 6), which ran along the west side of the southern end of the Basin.³⁶ It was claimed at the time as being ‘the first chapel that has ever been built in the kingdom expressly for boatmen and their families without standing connected

with any one religious denomination'.³⁷ Indeed it is generally recognised as being the first boatmen's chapel to be erected in the country although swiftly followed by chapels constructed for boatmen at Paddington, Lambeth and Southwark.

The services were announced in some style at the new chapel. 'A mast is rigged out over the chapel and the Bethel flag was displayed this day with very good effect, as it was distinctly seen from the bridge in the City Road.'³⁸ The following year it was recorded that 'many boatmen and their families have been induced to attend here from the Regent's Canal Basin and the Bethel flag flies every Sabbath on a mast at the head of the chapel visible to all the Paddington coaches'. The blue Bethel flag was at that time commonly used by those preaching to sailors to call them to religious meetings on ships and other places.

Although the total cost of construction is not known, the debt on the chapel following completion was the then princely sum of £300. Shortly after it opened it was stated that 'the chapel is uncommonly well attended ... we have been visited by some of the wharf-owners, who have expressed their approbations of the place and have contributed to its support, and I am happy to say that I think the value and importance of the institution are daily gaining ground among them'.³⁹ Whether this 'approbation' was sufficient to encourage contributions to relieve the debt is less clear.

In March 1830 it was reported that 'since the commencing of the year, not less than 1,000 individuals have been brought from the boats and wharfs adjacent to the Boatmen's Chapel' and 'many evenings 40 or 50 of these men, some having their wives and children with them ... and, on one occasion during the late severe frost, 100 were present at the chapel'.⁴⁰ The figures provided by those operating the chapel must be treated with some caution as self-serving. Such reported success no doubt would have fuelled more generous donations to help reduce the debt on the chapel. It was also announced that 'a pious solidier', a Mr Richardson, had been engaged 'to enter upon the laborious duties of a canal-boatmen's missionary'. He expressed his concern not only for the boatmen but for 'wharf-porters [who were] equally ignorant and depraved; indeed if possible, they rather excelled in wickedness, so much so, that a respectable wharf-owner remarked to him that he believed the very church or chapel would bow to these men, if they entered it'.⁴¹ In addition to concern for the souls of the boatmen and their families, more tangible help was provided in the form of financial support for those in need. For example, £3 18s 6d was given 'to boatmen in Sickness or Distress' from a collection of over £8 at the opening of the boatmen's chapel.⁴² Further financial assistance was provided to boatmen and their families and recorded in the regular accounts.

The missionaries brought the boatmen the Bible and religious tracts to 'improve their souls' and sought to make the word they preached relevant to their congregation, although illiteracy must have been an impediment to this. In March 1830 one of the secretaries of the City Road Boatmen's Chapel, E Chartier, claimed that 'some hundreds of tracts have been gratuitously distributed and many others have been left in the boats on the Sabbath-morning and the men have brought them to the chapel in the evening; and thankfully returned them, having perused them during the interval of worship'.⁴³

In celebrating the first anniversary of the chapel, what was then the North London Canal Boatmen's Society announced that not less than 2,000 boatmen had attended the chapel during the year, again many of them being noted to have their wives and children with them. 'A Sunday School, for the instruction of children, and a lending library for the use of adults' had been started 'immediately connected with the chapel'. Because of the 'want of teachers, only 30 [children] can be stated an average attendance'.⁴⁴

The subsequent history of the boatmen's chapel built in 1828 is not entirely clear but it continued to serve (or to be associated with) the boat people for some years. In 1837 there is reference to the 'Christian Benevolent Society's Chapel, Macclesfield Street'⁴⁵ and in 1838 to 'Boatmen's Chapel, Macclesfield-street (independent)' with accommodation for 180 to attend.⁴⁶ In May 1843 the chapel was referred to in *The Mariners' Church Gospel Temperance Soldiers' and Sailors' Magazine*, as was also open-air preaching by City Road Basin. In 1847 it was reported that the Inland Navigation and Railway Mission Society celebrated its tenth anniversary at the Boatmen's Chapel, Macclesfield Street.⁴⁷ In 1851 Crawford Chapel in Macclesfield Street is noted as having places for 190 sitting and that 'seats are always provided for Boatmen, Railway and Wharf Labourers'.⁴⁸ There was also a day school in the week for 40 children.

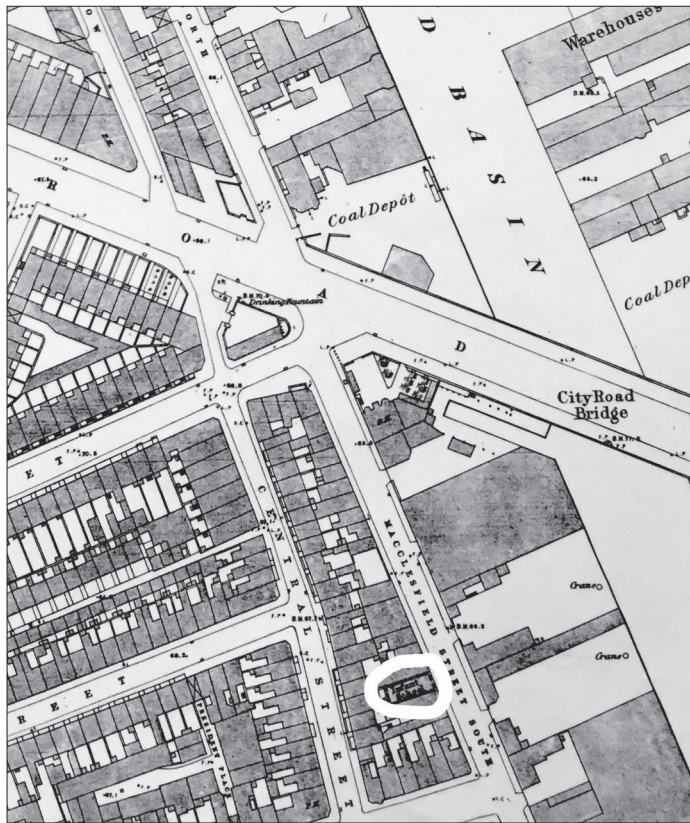


Figure 6. 'Infant School' Macclesfield Street on 1874 OS map

This appears to be the last reference expressly to boatmen and the chapel. On what appears to be the same site (nos 27 and 29 Macclesfield Street – what was previously Macclesfield Street South) an Infants' School is marked on the 1874 Ordnance Survey map (Figure 6). Macclesfield Mission Chapel existed in Macclesfield Street in 1884 and was referred to as the Macclesfield Street Chapel in 1888⁴⁹ when used as a venue for an annual tea and entertainment and for a concert, and as Macclesfield Street Mission Chapel in 1890 for a harvest festival.⁵⁰ Subsequently a Sunday School is noted on the 1896 Ordnance Survey map. The site was redeveloped in the 1970s.

However, in October 1877 there were still sufficient boatmen on the Regent's Canal that the London City Mission (formed by G C Smith in 1824) appointed a missionary for boat people on the canals of London. He reported a boatman in City Road Basin complaining that he was the first person to speak to him of Christ despite his coming to the Basin for a few days every three weeks for more than 10 years,⁵¹ and in November 1879 the Mission resolved to appoint a second missionary on the London canals because by then 'the demands on [the sole missionary] overtaxed his strength'.⁵²

In November 1895 the role of 'missionary to Canal Bargemen' in the east of London, covering Limehouse to Islington Tunnel (as well as the River Lea to Tottenham and the Surrey Canal to Camberwell and Peckham), fell to Edwin Blanchard. There were regular visits to, and services for, the boatmen. His two surviving diaries for 1903 and 1917 detail the numbers of boats he found at City Road Basin on his regular near-weekly visits on a Wednesday. In 1903 sailing barges outnumbered 'monkey boats' (narrowboats) with up to 11 sailing barges and up to nine monkey boats being found and the number attending the service he conducted in the mission hall (probably in Macclesfield Street) being up to 32. In 1917 the situation had changed, with many fewer sailing barges found – between none and four (save one occasion when there were 12), and more monkey boats – up to 12. The reduction in sailing barge traffic might reflect the impact of conscription on the bargemen, or a decline in building work and the demand for building materials, in London during the war.



Figure 7. Davenport warehouse 1975. *Malcolm T Tucker*

Increasing activity unconnected with the canal

Long distance boats, with their resident boat people, continued to operate out of the Basin but in diminishing numbers, firstly in the face of railway competition and secondly as road transport improved. As the number of canal carriers reduced, the Basin increasingly became an industrial area, and in particular from the mid-nineteenth century. A variety of businesses were established which would, at least initially, have benefited from the ease of transport that the canal provided, such as timber merchants, coal merchants and all types of building materials suppliers – stone, marble, sand, lime and cement. These, along with iron and brass foundries, would have fed the huge demand caused by the expansion of the City.

A description of the area appears in the *Illustrated Magazine of Art* in 1853: 'City Road is crossed by the Regent's Canal and all along both sides of the canal and round the Basin are various large wharves and manufacturing establishments. The pedestrian ...finds himself in a neighbourhood, the characteristics of which differ almost as much from the ordinary City streets as does a backwood settlement from a village highway. In the place of houses and shops and well-dressed people, he is suddenly in the midst of coke, lime, slate and stucco works and he sees few other passers-by than workmen in their ordinary work-a-day clothes, sometimes very much whitened and soiled with dust'.

Several salt merchants held wharves through the decades so that in 1879 a visiting missionary recorded that 'in the City Basin I find nearly all I visit are monkey-boats, or narrowboats, that come from the Midland Counties. Many of these are Mr John Corbett's salt boats from Stoke, in Worcestershire.'⁵³ Davenports, a large pottery business based in Longport (now Stoke on Trent) constructed a substantial warehouse which was used through much of the nineteenth century to house its goods on the way to its outlets in the City and the Strand. The warehouse was constructed partially over one of the side-arms of the basin so that goods could be unloaded directly from boats into the building. Unusually for the buildings round the Basin, this one was photographed and surveyed prior to its demolition in the 1970s (after the side-arm had been filled in) (Figure 7).

Businesses which were not directly dependant on canal transport then became established. The Anti-Dry Rot Company constructed tanks at Wharf No 4 where wood was immersed in mercurial salt to preserve it, using a process called 'kyanising' and reputedly a wooden picket fence still standing in Regent's Park was



Figure 8. London Hydraulic Power Company, 1966[?] *Islington Local History*

produced by this means. In close proximity to the mercury at Wharf No 3 was Bass, the brewer. The world's first carbonated tonic water, invented as a medicinal product containing quinine to combat malaria when working in the colonies, was first made and produced by W Pitt & Co. at Wharf No 28, although it lost out in the end to the marketing power of Schweppes. Nonetheless Pitt continued manufacturing on the Basin until World War I. In 1862 Carlisle & Clegg took over Wharf No 16, subsequently expanding into neighbouring wharves, and becoming 24–30 Graham Street, to design and print wallpaper. St Luke's Vestry, subsequently Finsbury Borough Council, handled refuse at its wharf.

In 1893 the London Hydraulic Power Co built large premises at 34 Wharf Road to produce pressurised water which was piped around London to operate machinery as varied as Tower Bridge and theatre safety curtains. Its magnificent building, subsequently used by a furniture manufacturer, was demolished in the 1970s when it was about to be listed to preserve it (Figure 8). The County of London Electric Lighting Co built an electricity generating station on Oak Wharf, alongside City Road, where it produced power from 1894 until 1930.

Starting in 1909, most of the Graham Street side of the basin (16–30 Graham Street), and subsequently parts of the Wharf Road side, as well as other buildings in the immediate area, became the premises of a pharmaceutical company, British Drug Houses (BDH), where there were developed, amongst many other drugs, anaesthetics, insulin and penicillin. With buildings on both sides of the Basin, a chain bridge was constructed to connect them. Tolls had to be paid to the canal company on the tonnage transferred by ropeway across the canal company's water, in the same manner in which tolls on the tonnage of goods passing in boats on the surface of the water had to be paid. Subsequently it was replaced with a more conventional bridge. Some of the buildings suffered severe damage from a V2 rocket bomb which landed in the Basin on the night of 23/24 November 1944, an event described from the viewpoint of a boatwoman on board a narrowboat at the time by Susan Woolfit in her autobiographical *Idle Women*.⁵⁴ The BDH buildings were repaired and business continued.



Figures 9 and 10. Basin looking north and south, 1966. *Islington Local History*

In 1937 the timber merchant Andersons, with large premises on Islington Green, acquired Harris Wharf on Graham Street, where the gauging dock had been constructed by the Regent's Canal Company in the 1820s (Figure 9). Also damaged by the V2 rocket bomb in 1944, Harris Wharf was rebuilt. The adjoining City Wharf was purchased in 1955 and the combined premises continued to be used for a mixture of storage of timber and its retail into the 1980s. Although water transport of timber products from the Surrey Commercial Docks did not last long in the face of competition from road transport, this was probably one of the last businesses on the Basin to use water transport.

The last canal carrier in the Basin, FMC, had ceased trading after the War in 1948. By the early 1970s, by which time BDH was part of Glaxo, the extensive pharmaceutical site was abandoned. As a result, much of the Basin had by then become derelict.

The wharf just outside the Basin, immediately above City Road locks, had been a timber yard but in 1926 it was taken over by a Mr Diespeker, the sales representative of Luigi Oderico of Hamburg, to produce terrazzo and mosaic, this being the source of many of the terrazzo doorsteps in the immediate area. When this use ceased in 1994, the wharf was repurposed as the offices of architects PTE, retaining much of its previous character.



Figure 11. Looking south, c. 1976

Save the Basin

The Basin was declining fast after WWII, along with the rest of the Regent's Canal. Traffic was minimal and the general state of the canal poor. With the formation of the Inland Waterways Association in 1946 to campaign for the conservation, use, maintenance, restoration and sensitive development of British Canals and river navigations a spotlight occasionally fell on the Regent's Canal. A number of boat trips were arranged to show members of the public the potential for the canals. On 20 May 1950 members of the IWA travelled from Commercial Lock to Little Venice on board the pair of narrow boats of George and Sonia Smith, Cairo and Warwick, and a small fleet of launches. Accompanied by the BBC as far as City Road Basin, of which both film and photos still exist, they stopped for tea at a work's canteen in City Road Basin. Representatives of the Docks & Inland Waterways Executive, the now nationalised operators of the Regent's Canal, travelled with them and even extended a toll-free trip to the whole fleet.

By the 1970s much of the area around the remaining basin was unused but had not yet been cleared (Figure 11). There was a complicated picture of land ownership around the basin. Islington Council had a plan for using the area for housing and wanted to extend its ownership of the land. The Central Electric Generating Board (CEGB) needed to establish a 'switch station'. The British Waterways Board, then the owner of the canal, the Basin and some of the old wharves, wanted to maximise its rental income by leasing. None of these key players was averse to filling in a significant proportion of the remaining Basin to achieve their ends. Meanwhile the Islington Boat Club (IBC) was established and was making use of the Basin for water activities for local young people (as it still does).

News leaked out of a plan to fill in between one-third and one-half of the Basin. A public meeting was organised by those opposed to this, but the Islington planners approved a scheme to reduce the Basin by up to 25 per cent. To demonstrate how the Basin could be used as a water resource a rally of boats was organised for 22–23 September 1973. An important local personality behind this was Crystal Hale, a resident of Noel Road nearby, who had been in large part responsible for the establishment of the IBC, and also, in the early 1970s, the charity running the community canal narrowboat, *Angel of Islington*, also based in the Basin (and which also continues). A public inquiry into the development of the Basin area followed in November 1974. The final outcome was the loss of only about 15% of the remaining waterspace at the southern end, just North of City Road.

The Greater London Council's (GLC) Historic Building division had taken a look at the remaining buildings and noted as meriting preservation the Hydraulic Power Co's pumping station at 15 Wharf Road. In their view this was a building of special archaeological or historic interest, and was structurally sound, and it was recommended for listing to preserve it. It was demolished before it could be listed. The GLC also noted the warehouses at 49–53 Wharf Road, the former Davenport's warehouses, but these were also demolished.

At that point, no building of historic interest remained on the Basin and the site was ready for wholesale redevelopment, but the majority of the water area had been saved.

The current site

Starting from the north western corner, Diespeker Wharf remains, by the lock, sympathetically converted into offices by Pollard Thomas Edwards. The former Regent's Canal Co offices and the gauging dock finally disappeared under Crystal Wharf. A significant part of the British Drug Houses (the former site of Carlisle and Clegg) became a public park (Graham Street Park) with the IBC given a club house at its southern end. Housing, low to high rise, then takes over the southern end of the remaining Basin, with a largely unused 'plaza' or 'piazza' adjacent to the City Road, where the line of the old bridge can be seen. On the eastern side, electrical buildings take in the southern end, a small part of which was built in a sympathetic style reminiscent of the pre-development buildings, and the rest to low rise housing, and at the north-eastern end, the other major BDH plot has become a nursing home.

As in the earliest prints and paintings, passers by on the towpath sit and take in the view down the Basin. However instead of views of boat activity, St Luke's spire and the sky, the passer-by sees a series of very high rise buildings containing flats and an expanse of water surrounded by concrete sides. We are to be grateful for an open expanse in this city centre site but can only muse on what it once looked like and the activity to which it was once home.

Further reading

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Alan Faulkner, *The Grand Junction Canal* (Waterways World 2005)

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The author

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- 31 *Morning Chronicle* 26 July 1822. 'A Detachment belonging to the 91st Regiment of Foot is ordered to march, on Monday next, from Deptford, for the purpose of embarking on board a canal boat, in the City Basin, for Liverpool, on route to Dublin' as reported in the *Morning Post* 17 March 1826. 'A Detachment belonging to the 7th Fuzileers embarked on Friday, on hoard a canal boat in the City basin, for Chester' as reported in the *Morning Post* 20 August 1827
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