Ashton Canal Towpath Bridge Over Junction With Stockport Branch Canal

Grade II listed

Heritage Statement



View along north elevation looking east (photograph 12/2003 before partial wall collapse)

Introduction

Stockport Arm Bridge is a Grade II Listed structure with several defects. The wrought iron bridge beams have surface corrosion throughout. The western span, southern edge beam has severe corrosion and web section loss. The western ramp's southern parapet has collapsed resulting in pedestrian falls from height risk. The steel fence adjacent to the western ramp has severe corrosion and is at risk of collapse. Works are proposed to address the structure's maintenance and safety risks.

The Stockport Arm Bridge is at the junction of the Ashton Canal and the former Stockport Branch canal. It consists of two spans, a shorter one over the disused arm of the steel works (wet dock, now buried) and a longer one over the main line of the Stockport Branch canal. Ramp access is both to the east and west of the Ashton canal, and south to Stockport on its eastern side.

The bridges are riveted iron plate beams with transverse brick arches from the flanges of the beams. The external beams are in a very poor condition, particularly the bearing points. It should be noted that some of the bearing points at the ramp in the direction of Stockport are built in and cannot be inspected.

The Ashton Canal was promoted to carry coal from the mines of Ashton and Oldham to Manchester. In 1792 an Act of Parliament was lodged to create a company to be called the Manchester, Ashton-under-Lyne and Oldham Canal, with the original scheme completed in 1796, running from a large basin behind what is now Piccadilly Station in Manchester, and climbing gradually eastwards via 18 locks to Fairfield, Droylesden.

In March 1793, a second Act of Parliament authorised a branch from Clayton to Heaton Norris, Stockport (via Openshaw, Gorton and Reddish) and a second branch from Droylsden to Hollinwood. In January 1797, the canal opened to Stockport.

An Inland Waterways Association plaque identifies "*This bridge is the start of the line of the canal which terminated at Lancashire Hill. It opened in 1797 to serve the developing town of Stockport. Known as the Lanky Cut, it carried goods and passengers to and from the many mills along the 4.2 miles from Clayton to the terminus at Stockport*".

It is not clear who engineered the canal. In September 1793, the company advertised for an engineer (but do not seem to have found one). In August 1798, it was reported that 'Works of the . . . Canal have been in many instances improperly managed for want of the assistance of a proper Engineer'. James Meadows, agent, had possibly overseen construction.

In the first half of the 19th century the Ashton Canal prospered, traffic being so great that the company started to convert the locks into double (twin) locks, although they only completed the two Fairfield locks, 17 and 18. However, the coming of the Railway Age saw a loss of trade for the canals. In 1848, the railway, now the Manchester, Sheffield and Lincolnshire Railway, bought the Ashton, Peak Forest and Macclesfield Canals in order to feed goods into their railway system.

The canal continued to be utilised for the transport of substantial amounts of coal and other products until the early 20th century, but during his period many of the mines served closed whilst the other main trade of textiles was also in steep decline, this being illustrated by the drop in goods carried on the Ashton Canal, which fell from 50,000 tons in 1933 to just 7 tons in 1955.

The various branches of the Ashton Canal closed in sections between 1932 and 1962, and due to the drop in trade it appeared that the Ashton Mainline would follow rapidly after these closures. However, in 1964, the Peak Forest Canal Society was formed and, with the Inland Waterways Association, fought to keep the Peak Forest and Ashton Canals open and to restore them.

Following discussions between the relevant local authorities and the Canal Societies in 1971 the canal was given a reprieve and restoration was approved, over the next two years with volunteer help and mechanical plant, the whole canal was cleared and restored, finally being re-opened for navigation during 1974.

Since then, the use of the canal network for leisure has developed and the Ashton Canal is an important link in the Cheshire Ring.

Map regression indicates a slow urbanisation of the area from the mid to late C19 (1880s chemical and soap works), with a collection of buildings, including Junction House, associated with the junction. In the early C20, a basin was constructed at the south of the bridge/west of the branch line; this was connected to the North Street Engineering Works (and others in Openshaw and Gorton?) by rail; by 1933 the rail connection had gone and by 1950 the basin is shown as 'disused'.

The list description (6 June 1994) identifies bridge function, date of construction, materials, design and alterations:

"SJ89NE ASHTON CANAL, Beswick And Clayton 698-1/5/524 Towpath bridge over junction with Stockport Branch canal
GV II
Towpath bridge over junction with former Stockport Branch canal. Probably c.1800; altered. Red brick and sandstone rubble, with cast-iron beams. Horizontal span carried on cast-iron beams, with long sloped abutment ramps on each side (that on the east side mostly of rubble), with ridged copings to the parapets and cobbled deck; similar ramp at right-angles on south side, recently restored. (Former branch canal now filled in, leaving only a small basin on the south side of the bridge.)".

The bridge is within the setting of a number of listed buildings. This includes the functional setting of locks 15 to 8 and the visual setting of locks 11 and 10 (all Grade II).

Assessment of significance

NPPF paragraph 207 and 208 identify the importance of heritage asset significance assessment in decision making.

NPPG: Historic Environment: paragraph 6 identifies that significance derives not only from a heritage asset's physical presence, but also from its setting. Heritage interest may be archaeological, architectural, artistic or historic.

• Archaeological interest: the potential of a place to yield evidence about past human activity;

• Historical interest: the ways in which past people, events and aspects of life can be connected through a place to the present – illustrative or associative; a material record

of our nation's history; can also provide meaning for communities derived from their collective experience of a place and can symbolise wider values such as faith and cultural identity.

• Architectural and artistic interest: design and aesthetics. The art or science of the design, construction, craftsmanship and decoration of buildings (architectural); other human creative skill (artistic).

The Ashton Canal has historical and communal value, illustrating the early development of the national canal network and was instrumental to the C19 industrialisation and urbanisation of inland Manchester and its satellite towns. Its continued use and operation (albeit recreational) reinforces historic significance.

Junction bridge's traditional and mostly locally sourced materials, evidence of original construction techniques and survival of many of the design distinctions of the Ashton Canal has Archaeological and Architectural value. Its present form includes important evidence of historic alterations and additions.

The juxtaposition of the junction bridge with other historic canal structures reinforces the significance of each building's setting.

Nature of works

Beam repairs - all beams assessed. Patch repair and clean and paint with a corrosion inhibiting paint system or necessary strengthening works. Repair masonry around the beams.

Strengthening of the western span edge beam is required. The existing steel edge has severe corrosion and it is not feasible to replace it without removing a significant section of the bridge (parapet & bridge deck). Therefore, it is proposed to place a new beam beneath the corroded beam to make it redundant. The defective wrought iron beam shall be supported by a steel beam on a pair of masonry columns (like the canal side spanning beam); a fence panel across the span will prevent unauthorised access/anti-social behaviour.

SW Parapet rebuild - a 2.8m high parapet collapsed in 2021. This had been artificially raised in the C20 in order to connect to a factory wall (subsequently demolished). Also, the surviving brickwork appears to be of a different phase and of poor construction, with no buttress to help support the 3m brickwork. Therefore, it is proposed to re-build the parapet to its original height (matching the height of the Stockport ramp parapets). Original copers and brickwork are within the bushes beneath the ramp - these will be reinstated. Matching bricks will be used where those salvaged from the collapse are unsuitable for reinstatement. In addition, a number of bat bricks will be incorporated into the new parapet in order to compensate for potential habitat loss from vegetation clearance around the structure.

Selective pointing and brickwork repairs - to main parapets over the canal span. Also, around the short span beam on the canal side there are sections of brickwork which are missing and pointing required.

Removal of steel railings - the heavy duty 2.8m high steel railings at the end of the former parapet is suffering from corrosion at its feet and is at risk of falling. It is intended to remove the length of fence between the parapet and the footpath to the park to avoid the future risk of the fence falling when the parapet is rebuilt. This element of works does not appear to affect the character of the listed building or require LBC. However, it is included for completeness.

Conclusions

Repair works are required to the listed building for public safety and to ensure its proper preservation (avoiding the need for more intrusive interventions to the historic fabric at a later date). The need for minimum intervention to the historic fabric has informed scheme design.

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