Rochdale Canal Union Street Bridge, Redhill Street

Grade II listed

Heritage Statement



View of bridge from the south

Introduction

Union Street Bridge is a Grade II listed road and towpath 'roving/change-over' canal bridge and an important component of the Ancoats Conservation Area. It forms a group with the towpath retaining wall to the west of the bridge (Grade II) and adjacent former mills (Grade II* and II). The list description identifies that this bridge is the fourth iteration (1903 rebuild of late C19; earlier swivel and lift bridges) in this location. Historic maps show that there were a number of canal arms (now infilled) and natural watercourses in the vicinity of the bridge.

A towpath sinkhole has developed adjacent to the retaining wall beneath the bridge. The defect has exposed a substantial void beneath the retaining wall, creating a risk of

further towpath collapse, loss of support to the wall structure, and potential deterioration of the canal infrastructure if left unaddressed.

The Rochdale Canal (opened 1804) was the first trans-Pennine canal in the country. Spanning 32 miles with 91 locks, it connects Manchester, Oldham, Rochdale, and Calderdale and played a pivotal role in the industrial revolution. The canal closed in 1952, with only a short section remaining active in central Manchester. However, volunteer restoration has breathed new life into this iconic waterway, reestablishing it as a vital part of the region's history and modern recreation.

'Rochdale Canal Lock Paddle Gear: Conservation Statement', Clarke M. (2004) discusses the history of the Rochdale Canal. It was built 1794-1804. Because it had virtually ceased to be used by the end of the Second World War, the canal was not included in those which were nationalised in 1948 and it remained independent until restoration was well under way.

The first proposal for a canal from Manchester to Sowerby Bridge came in 1766. James Brindley made two surveys, one as the canal was subsequently built and one for a line via Bury.

The Rochdale Canal Act passed in 1794; it was for a broad canal. William Jessop was retained as the Consulting Engineer, with William Crosley and Henry Taylor appointed Resident Engineers (Crosley died in 1796 and was replaced by Thomas Townshend, who in turn was replaced by William Crosley Junior in 1802). The first section of the canal, from Sowerby Bridge to Todmorden, opened on the 24 August 1798. In Manchester, the section from Castlefield to Piccadilly, opened at the end of 1799 with water supply from the newly opened Ashton Canal. The canal fully opened on the 21 December 1804 at a cost of c. £600,000.

The canal was successful, regularly producing a £4 dividend per share. By 1819 it was carrying 317,050 tons annually; coal, stone and corn being the main cargoes.

In 1830 a railway surveyed by George Stephenson was proposed, following closely the route of the canal. When the Manchester and Leeds Railway opened in 1841, the canal company had to reduce tolls to retain business. The company resisted take-over bids from railway companies but leased the canal to a consortium of railway companies in 1855. The canal remained profitable for some time but by the twentieth century the tonnage being carried was in sharp decline. In 1937 the last boat made the through journey across the Pennines on the Rochdale Canal.

The nine Rochdale Canal locks from Castlefield to Piccadilly were the link between the Bridgewater and Ashton Canals. The restoration of the Ashton Canal by volunteers in the 1960s and '70s, and subsequently by British Waterways, removed the possibility of the Manchester section of the Rochdale Canal being closed. It was the success of the

Ashton Canal restoration that led to similar plans for the Rochdale Canal, which subsequently reopened in 2002.

The list description for 'Union Street Bridge, Redhill Street' (Grade II; 6 June 1994) identifies particular interest from its relationship to other elements of the historic streetscape (group value), dual function, materials and changing canal-crossing technologies at one site:

SJ8498 REDHILL STREET, Ancoats 698-1/17/464 (South side) Union Street Bridge

GV II

Towpath and public road bridge over Rochdale Canal. Later C19, rebuilt 1903, and recently restored. Roving or turn-over bridge. Cast-iron and brick, with sandstone terminal piers. Crosses canal diagonally, has cast-iron panelled parapets and a tow-path deck on the south side with similar but lower parapet, and a spiral ramp at the south end with brick sides and cobbled deck, leading down from this deck to the towpath tunnel. History: replaced an earlier swivel bridge which itself replaced a draw bridge built with the canal in 1804. Included for group value.

The site is within the immediate setting (visual/functional) of 'Rochdale Canal Retaining Wall on South Side of Redhill Street, West of Union Street Bridge' (Grade II), 'Doubling Mill Fireproof Mill' (Grade II*), 'Little Mill' (Grade II), 'Decker Mill Old Mill' (Grade II*) and 'Former Warehouse and Offices of Old Mill, Decker Mill, and New Mill' (Grade II). The list description for the latter states "*The building formed part of Adam and George Murray's textile works, established on this site in 1798 and expanded to form a courtyard in which 3 spinning mills were linked by warehouse and office blocks around a courtyard and canal basin*".

Union Street Bridge is within the Ancoats Conservation Area. The appraisal on the Manchester City Council website identifies the juxtaposition and inter-linking of mills, canal and housing at Ancoats to have functioned as the first industrial estate in the world.

Map regression. The 1845 OS map appears to show two canal crossing points and a canal arm (to coal wharfs) at the southern end of what is now Radium Street. The 1888 (and 1905) OS map appears to show one canal crossing point at the southern end of what is now Radium Street (German Street in 1888) and the disappearance of the canal arm.

Features. A low stone slab safety wall (of similar form to the parapet of the listed retaining wall) projects c. 10m northwards along the towpath from the bridge. To the north of the bridge, the towpath has a concave bay projecting into the canal; this appears to be mirrored on the offside. It is not known if these features are related to the current or earlier bridges. A plaque on the bridge north parapet identifies the manufacturer as 'Handyside 1903 Derby & London'.



View of bridge from the north



Plaque to north parapet of bridge

Assessment of significance

NPPF (August 2026) HE5 identifies the importance of heritage asset significance assessment in decision making.

NPPF Annex B: Glossary identifies that significance is the value of a heritage asset to this and future generations because of its heritage interest. The interest may be archaeological, architectural, artistic or historic. Significance derives not only from a heritage asset's physical presence, but also from its setting.

• 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 Rochdale 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.

Union Street Bridge's dual use, roving and skewed form, materials and evidence of original construction techniques has Archaeological and Architectural value.

The juxtaposition of the canal and bridge with the Murray's mills complex and other canal-related structures reinforces the significance of each building's setting and the character and appearance of Ancoats Conservation Area.

Nature of works

The towpath frequently exhibits voiding/erosion next to the 'horse tunnel' of Union Street Bridge (No. 88). It is thought that this is due to canal water flowing under the towpath washing out soil towards historic canal arms or infill on the immediate eastern side of the canal.

In September 2026, temporary stabilisation works were undertaken to reduce the risk of structural movement. These works included the installation of timber props beneath the retaining wall and the placement of bagged MOT material to provide temporary support and maintain stability until the permanent repair solution can be implemented.

It is proposed to (i) underpin the unsupported retaining wall and fill the void in the towpath and behind the wall and (ii) excavate the Type 1 stone from behind the canal washwall and seal the leak from the canal to the towpath.

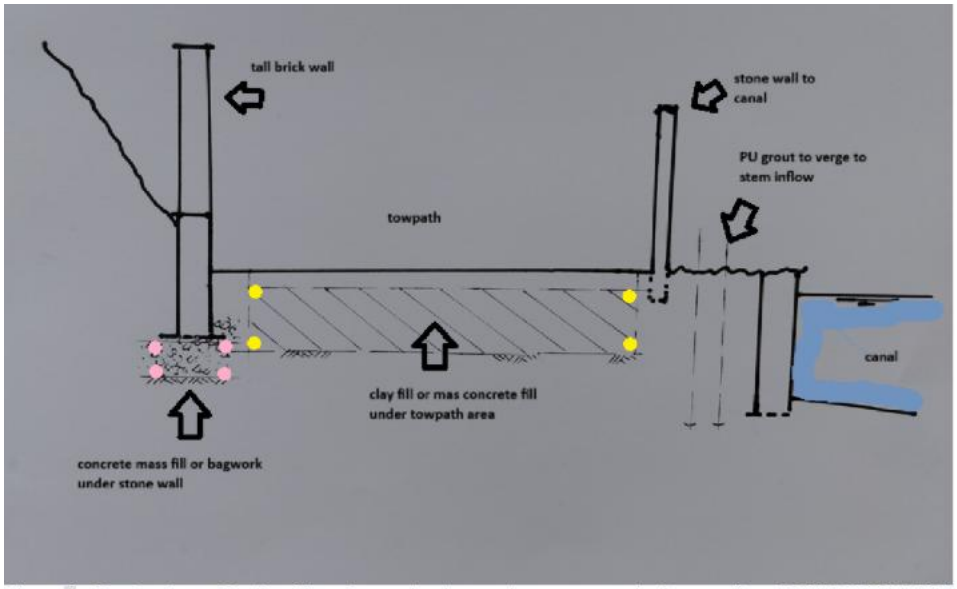


Figure 8 - Design Cross Section Mass Concrete etc per stages approach given earlier. DO NOT EXCAVATE UNDER STONE EDGE WALL TO CANAL

Conclusions

Repair works are required for public safety and to ensure the proper preservation of this historic site (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. The works will have a positive effect on the listed building.

Adrian Dowd MRTPI IHBC

Heritage Advisor, Canal & River Trust