



Canal &  
River Trust

## PRESS RELEASE

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### **LEEDS & LIVERPOOL CANAL BICENTENARY CELEBRATIONS (1816-2016)**

Canal enthusiasts across the country start a year of celebrations this month to mark the bicentenary of the completion of Britain's longest single man-made waterway, the Leeds & Liverpool Canal, on 22 October 1816.

A heritage mile marker project, a new choral symphony, the pioneering Desmond Family Coast to Coast Canoe Trail, the Super Slow Way arts project and dozens of festivals and events will mark the special 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary year along the canal's 127 mile route.

The celebrations will be led by the Canal & River Trust, which cares for the canal, the Leeds & Liverpool Canal Society, the Inland Waterways Association and the 12 boroughs through which it travels. These will culminate in October 2016, with the awarding-winning, heritage education boat, Kennet, run by the Leeds & Liverpool Canal Society, re-creating the first complete trans-Pennine journey along the canal by the merchants of Yorkshire and Lancashire 200 years ago.

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The original five day journey in 1816 represented a triumph of grit and determination for getting the job done. There were numerous debates about the exact route of the canal. Construction began in 1770 at either end and by 1777 the canal was open from Leeds to Gargrave and from Liverpool to Parbold. At this stage the money ran out and work stopped until 1790. The route was then altered to take in the growing industrial towns of East Lancashire but it was not until 1816 that the last section between Wigan and Johnson's Hillock, near Chorley, was finished, finally creating a trans-Pennine link between the two great cities.

In its heyday, the canal carried cotton, coal, wool, limestone, sugar and other vital commodities through the rapidly expanding industrial communities of Lancashire and Yorkshire. From the Second World War onwards, it suffered declining cargo traffic and narrowly escaped closure in the 1970s. Two hundred years on, the canal is still cherished but now as an oasis for wildlife, a thriving centre for tourism, recreation and leisure and a catalyst for regeneration.

Chantelle Seaborn, local waterway manager with the Canal & River Trust, said: "The Leeds & Liverpool Canal is such a special waterway and it's fantastic that so many people want to celebrate this landmark anniversary with festivals and other events.

"To leave a lasting legacy, we will be launching a major project **EveryMileCounts** in November to replace the missing or severely damaged mile markers which have been lost from the canalside over the last two centuries. We are very excited to work with local communities who want to be involved with refurbishing or replacing mile markers, and are

looking for sponsors who would give £200, in our 200<sup>th</sup> year, to help with this important legacy project.”

Mike Clarke, Leeds & Liverpool Canal Society president and canal historian, is publishing an updated version of his book “*The History of The Leeds & Liverpool Canal*” and will be giving several illustrated talks during the year.

He said: “It was the opening of the Leeds & Liverpool Canal which encouraged the development of the textile industries in Lancashire and West Yorkshire. For many years, they were the mainstay of Britain's economic development so the Leeds & Liverpool can rightly be said to be the most historically significant canal in the country.

“In 2016 we will celebrate the 200th anniversary of the canal's completion and reflect upon its importance to both the towns and cities it connects, and to the country as a whole. Today there are fewer industries along its banks, but the canal still gives many benefits to communities along its route. Today there are opportunities for leisure where once hard labour prevailed, and the towpath is open to all.”

Any organisation or volunteer who would like to get involved in the bicentenary celebrations, should contact Canal & River Trust project manager Sarah Knight, email [sarah.knight@canalrivertrust.org.uk](mailto:sarah.knight@canalrivertrust.org.uk).

More information about events, festivals, special projects and talks can be found on the Canal & River Trust website: [www.canalrivertrust.org.uk](http://www.canalrivertrust.org.uk).

**ENDS**

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**Notes to editors:**

The Canal & River Trust is the guardian of 2,000 miles of historic waterways across England and Wales, caring for the nation's third largest collection of listed structures, as well as museums, archives, and hundreds of important wildlife sites.

We believe that *living waterways transform places and enrich lives* and our role is to make sure there is always a place on your doorstep where you can escape the pressures of everyday life, stretch your legs and simply feel closer to nature.

[www.canalrivertrust.org.uk](http://www.canalrivertrust.org.uk) @CanalRiverTrust @crtcomms

**Key Events**

<b>Date</b>	<b>Event</b>
<b>2015</b>	
October 28	Launch of canal bicentenary celebrations
November	Launch of Mile Marker heritage project
December (dates tbc)	Santa Splash canoe races, Bootle and Burscough
<b>2016</b>	
February 13&14	Barrowford Lock gate restoration open days
February 13 & 14	Bingley Three Rise lock gate restoration open days
April 16&17	Saltaire World Heritage Weekend
April 30 – May 2	Skipton Canal Festival
June 3-5	Liverpool Mersey River Festival
June 4&5	Blackburn Colour Run
June 11 & 12	Inland Waterway Association boating festival – Eldonian Village, Liverpool.
June 18&19	Burscough heritage weekend, West Lancashire
June 24-26	Leeds Waterfront Festival
June 25 & 26	Blackburn Flora and Fauna weekend
July 23 & 24	Blackburn Canal Festival
August 27-29	Burnley Canal Festival
September 3	Canal Step Dance – World Record Attempt
September 9-18	Saltaire Heritage Festival
September 9-11	Leigh Canal Festival
September 10&11	Heritage Weekend in Blackburn and other canal venues
October 15-23	Kennet recreates inaugural voyage along the full length of the canal
October 16	World premiere of Super Slow Way Symphony, performed in Liverpool, Blackburn and Leeds.

**A Short History of the Leeds & Liverpool Canal by Mike Clarke**

Canal technology developed over many centuries. The lock, with gates at either end of a chamber, was perfected in fifteenth century Italy, with the first true canals, with locks, aqueducts, tunnels and an independent water supply, being built in seventeenth century France. Britain was a bit of a backwater until the eighteenth century, but then the towns of Leeds and Liverpool became the centres for the development of new inland waterways that were to change the world.

Leeds was first with the Aire & Calder Navigation, opened in 1700, the first inland waterway to be built by merchants rather than the crown or landed gentry. Liverpool quickly followed suit, with local merchants building the Mersey & Irwell, Weaver and Douglas Navigations, all of which were in use by 1741. These new waterways marked the start of the industrial revolution; for the first time economic change was brought about by local people rather than government or aristocracy.

The Douglas Navigation was built to supply Liverpool with coal from the Wigan coalfield,

and in 1772 was to become part of the Leeds & Liverpool Canal. The canal was initially promoted by woollen merchants in Bradford who wanted a better supply of limestone from Craven and a route for their products to the growing port of Liverpool. The canal was too big a project for them to finance alone, so they sought partners from other areas, especially Liverpool. The merchants in Liverpool were more concerned to have a good supply of coal as the town was perhaps the largest industrial centre in Lancashire at that time.

Each group suggested a route for the canal. The Yorkshire men proposed following the Aire Valley and then crossing into Lancashire at Foulridge, the canal then passing through Padiham, Whalley, Leyland and Parbold before crossing the West Lancashire lowlands to Liverpool. The Lancashire men suggested a different route through East Lancashire, passing Burnley, Blackburn, Chorley and Wigan before rejoining the Yorkshire men's route at Parbold. The two groups argued, and eventually it was decided to use the Yorkshire men's route, with construction starting at each end simultaneously. The Douglas navigation was purchased to give access to the Wigan coalfield, a branch canal from Parbold joining the old navigation at Gathurst.

Construction began in 1770, and by 1777 the canal was open from Leeds to Gargrave, and from Liverpool to Parbold, together with the link to the Douglas Navigation. Then money ran out and, apart from minor improvements, work ceased until 1790. Over that decade, East Lancashire had become a much more important industrial area, and in 1794 the route was altered to serve the growing towns of Burnley and Blackburn. Unfortunately, there was a problem between Johnsons Hillock and Wigan. The Lancaster Canal had obtained its Act in 1793, allowing it to build a canal on the best line through the Douglas valley from Chorley to Wigan. Because of this, the Leeds & Liverpool Canal proposed to use a different route from Johnsons Hillock, passing near Horwich and then down a flight of thirty locks from Aspull to Wigan.

By 1801 the southern section of the Lancaster Canal was open from Aspull, passing Johnsons Hillock and on to Walton Summit, from where a tramroad to Preston connected it with the canal's northern section from Preston to Lancaster. In the same year the Leeds & Liverpool Canal was extended from Burnley to Clayton-le-Moors, with Blackburn being reached in 1810. All that remained was to join Blackburn with Wigan to complete the through route across the Pennines. Money for canal construction was limited, and as a temporary measure the Leeds & Liverpool Canal suggested a junction with the Lancaster Canal at Johnsons Hillock, and then a flight of twenty-three locks down to Wigan from the Aspull end of that canal. This was agreed, much to the annoyance of the Manchester Bolton & Bury Canal who had hoped to build a branch to the Leeds & Liverpool Canal near Horwich. Following this agreement, the Lancaster Canal built the Johnsons Hillock Locks and the Leeds & Liverpool built the Wigan Locks, thus completing their through route between Lancashire and Yorkshire in 1816.

The canal's Leigh Branch was built to the Bridgewater Canal in 1821, forming a link with the canal system in the Midlands. Finally, in 1846, the Stanley Dock Branch opened in 1846, giving canal boats access to Liverpool Docks and the River Mersey. It had taken 76 years for the canal finally to link the Irish Sea with the North Sea.

The Leeds & Liverpool Canal continued to operate successfully until the First World War, and was well able to compete with railways. However, after the war road traffic increased and traditional canalside industries declined, and by the end of the Second World War there was much less traffic on the canal. long with most other canals, the Leeds &

Liverpool Canal was nationalised in 1948, and today it is still a public asset.

Freight continued to use the canal until the early 1960s. Coal for mills, wool for Yorkshire, and sugar from Tate & Lyle's in Liverpool were the main cargoes. There were even a few trial loads in the 1970s, when enthusiasts tried to resurrect traffic on the canal, but the hard winter of 1963/4 had effectively brought an end to trade. The canal might have closed at that time, but it survived, its future secured by Barbara Castle when she was Minister of Transport in the early 1970s.

Today the Leeds & Liverpool Canal is maintained by the Canal & River Trust whose local office is in Wigan. They are responsible for around 3,600km of inland waterways which run from Ripon in the north to Basingstoke in the south, together with several canals in Scotland. The Leeds & Liverpool Canal is linked to the rest of the system in two places. At Leigh it joins the Bridgewater Canal which runs to Manchester and Runcorn, and at Leeds it joins the Aire & Calder Navigation which leads to the rivers Trent, Don and Ouse.

Most of the canals in the north of England are wide canals, capable of carrying boats fourteen feet in width, with lengths varying from 57.5 feet for the Calder & Hebble Navigation to 72 feet on the Rochdale Canal. A few waterways take larger craft, those on the Aire & Calder Navigation carrying cargoes of up to 700 tons. On the Leeds & Liverpool Canal boats up to 14.25 feet wide by 62 feet long can sail between Wigan and Leeds, with 72 feet long boats able to sail between Leigh, Wigan and Liverpool. The depth of the water was originally about five feet, but because of silting and people throwing rubbish into the canal, today the shallowest parts are about three feet deep.