

SANKEY CANAL RESTORATION PLEDGE - BRITAIN'S FIRST INDUSTRIAL CANAL

Restoration of the Sankey Canal, Britain's first industrial canal, has been given a major boost thanks to the new Sankey Canal Partnership, formally launched at a conference at the St Helens World of Glass, on Wednesday 27 September.

The Sankey Canal Restoration Society, the Canal & River Trust, plus St Helens, Warrington and Halton borough councils, all came together to pledge their support for the regeneration of the 14 mile Sankey Canal corridor. The man-made waterway begins in St Helens and runs through Newton-le-Willows, Winwick, Warrington and ends at Spike Island in Widnes, where it connects into the River Mersey.



Yachts on Sankey Canal near Fiddlers Ferry.

Opened in 1757, the Sankey pre-dates the Bridgewater Canal by four years and was built primarily to carry coal from the Lancashire coalfields to the growing port of Liverpool. Its construction and later extensions led to the birth of the chemical industry on the banks of the Mersey at Widnes.

The canal is remarkable for featuring Britain's first staircase lock and first viaduct crossing of a canal by a railway – George Stephenson's original line from Liverpool to Manchester.

After canal cargoes declined in the early 20th century, the Sankey was officially closed in 1963. Today much of the canal remains in water but the navigation is now severed by the M62 motorway, several roads, a footbridge and a railway line.

In the 21st century the canal route has been successfully re-invented as the Sankey Valley Trail, converting almost the entire length of the former towpath into a long-distance, off-road footpath suitable for cyclists, walkers, prams and wheelchairs. Thriving boat clubs operate at the two locks into the River Mersey at Fiddlers Ferry and Spike Island, and the trail is popular with a wide range of groups and individuals from anglers to dog-walkers.

The Sankey Canal Restoration Society (SCARS) was formed in 1985 with the aim of returning the canal to navigation. Since then hundreds of volunteers have donated many hours to renovating locks and bridges, and improving pathways. The borough councils of St Helens, Warrington and Halton have also played a major role delivering improvement projects in their own areas.

Now the Canal & River Trust, the charity which cares for 2,000 miles of the nation's waterways, has joined forces with the three councils and SCARS to form the Sankey Canal Partnership.



Pledge signed to restore Sankey Canal by representatives from Halton, Warrington and St Helens Councils, Canal & River Trust and Sankey Canal Restoration Society.

Partnership Chairman Lady Kirsty Pilkington explained: “At the conference, the five organisations pledged to develop the Sankey Canal and promote economic regeneration, health and prosperity for the benefit of all who live and work along its

route. We know from canal restorations that have taken place in other parts of the country, this is a proven way to enrich people's lives and re-invigorate communities."

Chantelle Seaborn, NW Waterway Manager with the Canal & River Trust, commented: "Canals were once the motorways of their day but now two centuries later they are undergoing a wonderful renaissance as peaceful havens for people and wildlife, away from the bustle of modern urban life.

"The Sankey Canal offers huge potential to drive forward economic prosperity, health and well-being. The long-term aspiration is for full restoration of the route. However this will take time and funding. While we work towards this vision, we will continue to regenerate the canal corridor, to share its heritage and encourage more people to use their local green gym!

"The Partnership will be carrying out surveys and further consultations in preparation for funding bids which would enable the canal's restoration to be delivered in phases."

Dave Smallshaw, SCARS chairman, added: "Volunteers will play a key role in delivering the partnership's ambitious goals. We are hoping to formally adopt a stretch of the Sankey Canal around the historic double locks in St Helens, and would love to hear from anyone who would like to get involved. We hold regular work parties but there are also other ways people can contribute without getting their hands dirty."

For more information about volunteering on the Sankey Canal, please contact SCARS. Email: colin.greenall@btinternet.com or telephone 01744 731746. Website: www.sankeycanal.co.uk.

For more information about Britain's national waterway network, contact the Canal & River Trust. Tel 0303 0404040. www.canalrivertrust.org.uk.

Quote from Halton Council:

Cllr. Keith Morley said: *"The Sankey Canal extension of 1833 was a key factor in the development of the town of Widnes. It is therefore a very important part of our history and that is something that we recognise. We believe that this historic asset plays a key role in our redevelopment of our Widnes Waterfront and has a role to play in the 21st century as it has the potential to bring business and tourism to the local area."*