

Unlocking the Unused Potential of the Pennine Canal Corridor.

Introduction

The Leeds and Liverpool Canal is Lancashire's single largest industrial heritage monument, it 'connects three northern powerhouse cities - Manchester, Leeds, and Liverpool' (Peake and Greenhalgh, 2021, p.10). However, at 127 miles in length, these 'powerhouse cities' are not only what it connects - the canal passes through many smaller, equally valuable towns and cities. (Anon, 1997, p.68).

It has been previously stated that the 'canal offers the boater, walker, and cyclist alike an exhilarating link between two superb cities' (Anon, 1997, p.69). The first of these cities is Liverpool, one of Britain's largest ports, which remains an embodiment of culture 'that will grow and flourish' even after being stripped of its UNESCO World Heritage status in 2021 (Adams, 2021). It is a city which has stood since the first century AD as 'Livgerpul', the place where the Beatles began their journey to fame, and where a memorial now stands to the engineers of the Titanic which sank in 1912 (Anon, 1997, p.70).

Leeds holds claim as the birthplace of the iconic British store Marks and Spencer, as the home city of many world-famous musicians and singers such as Alt-J and MEL B, and interestingly, as the first place on record to film a 'moving picture' (Connolly, 2021).

The importance of these 'two superb cities' can be verified (Anon, 1997, p.69). However, the statement neglects the value of Lancashire County; Lancashire is after all where the bulk of the canal runs. It can also be said that today, the canal offers its visitor not only a link

between 'two superb' or 'three powerhouse cities' but also an exhilarating experience of the culture of Lancashire (Anon, 1997, p.69; Peake and Greenhalgh, 2021, p.10).

Heritage and culture of industrial and post-industrial towns

Lancashire is 'a place where everyone matters' (Harding, 2006, p.1), or 'natters' if you accept the artistic edit of the 'm' into an 'n' on the stretch of A-road that marks the border of Cumbria and Lancashire.



Fig 1: Creating Conversations (2016) *Everyone natters*.

In a 2002 Lancashire County Council meeting, it was stated,

Culture matters in Lancashire. It matters because it lies at the heart of the quality of life for Lancashire people. It matters because it is about people doing things which please and excite them and which help them to realise their potential. It matters because it helps to bind communities together. It matters because it contributes to the Lancashire economy and the standard of life for Lancashire people (Lancashire, C,C, 2002, p.3).

While Lancashire is a fairly affluent county, with many parts enjoying a high quality of life, there are also areas of deep-rooted deprivation. According to *The English Indices of Deprivation* (2019), five of Lancashire districts, Blackburn with Darwen, Burnley, Pendle, Preston, and Rochdale are ranked amongst the most deprived in the country. It is

interesting to note that Manchester, Leeds, and Liverpool also fall into this category (UK Gov, 2019).

Lancashire's cultural strategies have usually been affected and enacted through the policies of the industry, with the most recent investment strategy being made for Lancashire's '2030 Vision' (Fogg, 2020 p.8). During the industrial age, many of the towns in the Pennine Hills began to emerge, with their growth directly correlated to the building of the Leeds and Liverpool canal in 1796 and its completion in 1816 (Peake and Greenhalgh, 2021, p.5).

Mills were the first of this emergence, which 'sprang up like mushrooms in the night' (Leaver, 1998). This was shortly followed by homes, and later towns. Nelson grew very quickly due to the emerging industry – its population had grown to over 20,000 people by 1891. Nelson was thought of as a place without a past, with many citing its potential as the 'America of Lancashire' (Leaver, 1998).

Industrial towns such as Burnley and Nelson were primarily concerned with cotton weaving and textile production, though sheet metal and steam engine factories were among the 527 mills up and running in 1827 (Miller, 2018, p.16). Historic England found that out of 1660 original sites in Lancashire, 540 have survived up to date: of these 540 surviving sites, 424 are in the Pennine area (Miller, 2018, p.16). However, many of these sites have been repurposed such as the Weaver's Triangle in Burnley and Northlight in Nelson (Peake and Greenhalgh, 2021, p.10).

The Pennines seemed to have retained much of their industrial heritage, perhaps this can be due to how pertinent the industrial culture of towns was to their growing landscapes.

Nelson's most recent monument, 'a 12m high steel sculpture of a weaving shuttle'

surrounded by granite blocks, which are engraved with local sayings and an old mill song, not only celebrates the town's importance in the industrial revolution but also sheds light on the town's nostalgic attitude towards the industry that once made it (BBC, 2021).

When taking an objective view of the layout of towns such as Nelson and Brierfield, a divide can be seen in the town's original planning. Factory and mill workers often lived close to their places of work in tightly packed terraced houses. Every Street was the main street that ran parallel to the industrial estate in Nelson – a fitting name for the housing of every man who worked in the mills.

For the most part, factory and mill owners lived away from their workers. They lived in the far-removed mansions of Marsden, with 7 bedrooms and 3 bathrooms, and with local golf and gentleman clubs. Even in the post-industrial era, this split is still visible. In fact, it may be more pronounced.

Lomeshaye industrial estate in Nelson, Lancashire, which in the 1800s was bountiful with the production of cotton, worsted wool, and metals goods that were exported nationally and internationally, is now the site of many abandoned and disused factories (Clarke, 2014). Production had been outsourced during the decline of the industry and the 'use of [the canals for] the navigation for freight declined through this century; the hard winter of 1962/63 finished off many traders' (Anon, 1997 p.69).

The closure of these mills and factories severely affected the use of the canals – footfall fell along with the use of the barges for freight. However, with the revitalizing impact of the 2017 Canal Festival, which brought in 12,000 visitors, and the 2018 Canal Festival which brought in 20,000 visitors over 3 days, this footfall increased. It is important to note that

due to the mitigating circumstances of the Covid19 pandemic, the Canal Festival did not take place in 2020 and 2021 (Super Slow Way, 2017; Burnley Canal Festival, 2018).

The usage of the canal for events such as the Canal Festival can encourage wider participation and enjoyment of the canal by its communities. The culture(s) along the canal can flourish given the right promotion, interaction, and participation. There is potential, which 'has been imagined and studied for two decades'; however, in its current condition, 'much of the canal environment is in a state of decline' (Peake and Greenhalgh, 2021, p.8). This has resulted in major reassessments, plans, and precedents being put forward.

Engaging with culture - the benefits, opportunities, and barriers of the canals.

Article 27 of UN Declaration of Universal Human Rights (1) states:

Everyone has the right freely to participate in the cultural life of the community, to enjoy the arts and to share in scientific advancement and its benefits (United Nations, 1948).

This human right is important for both larger cities and smaller towns, as much as it is for the parts and people that make them – therefore the Leeds and Liverpool canal is central to the 'cultural life of the community' (United Nations, 1948). This cultural life can come in the forms of awareness, inclusion, and cohesion. The subsequent sections of this essay will look at how the canals can create a space for this cultural life.

Several organisations actively study and work with the canals. The Canal and River Trust, which was the subsequent charity formed after the dissolution of British Waterways in July 2012, are responsible for the care of over 2000 miles of canals and rivers across England and Wales (British Waterways, 2012). The Super Slow Way is a collective organised by the Canal

and River Trust as ‘a cultural development programme’ (Super Slow Way, 2021). They concentrate on a 20 mile stretch of the Leeds and Liverpool canal from Blackburn to Pendle, using it as a vehicle to bring people together on a waterway that everyone shares. They aim to work with residents, artists, designers, manufacturers, growers, or anyone whose energy and imagination can help build more resilient and sustainable communities. This enables them to develop social spaces where ‘people can express their own cultural identities and celebrate their own everyday creativity, whether singing in the mosque or on the football terrace or choosing what to wear in the morning’ (Super Slow Way, 2021).

Today, the canals offer the local population additional corridors of space to use as walkways, leisure spaces, or even just as areas of respite. However, there are concerns and barriers when travelling along the canal. Many of its walking paths and access points are clustered around unsafe areas, with local histories of crime and even accidental drownings and bodies being found in the canal (Nelson Leader, 2020; Molly, 2021). Two young boys have drowned in the exact same spot along the canal in Nelson (Nelson leader, 1999).

The lack of places in towns available to people, especially younger people, has led to much anti-social behaviour. Burnley is regarded as having a high crime rate, being classed as the second most dangerous major town in Lancashire – 43% of crimes committed in Burnley in 2020 were of an anti-social nature (Crimerate, 2021). Perhaps an intersection of community crossover, such as community initiatives and projects that use the canal as a cultural space, could help alleviate some of this anti-social stigma and form the basis of social cohesion.

Creative Lancashire, who are the creative industries development service for Lancashire County Council, issued the Linear Park Magazine in 2021. The magazine outlines many areas

of focus, which adhere to the specific aims of Creative Lancashire to ‘develop, enhance and promote the environment for creative industries in Lancashire’ (Peake and Greenhalgh, 2021, p.1; Creative Lancashire, 2021). These areas range from infrastructure and landscape improvements, heritage and cultural considerations, water access, horticulture and agricultural developments, and community access and custodianship.

Taking these as relative starting points, by citing relevant background information, cultural importance and highlighting precedents, it may help to better understand the potential of the Pennine canal corridor.

What is being done? A look into projects and interventions that utilise the canal-ways and celebrate community culture / local culture / industrial heritage.

Infrastructure and Landscape

At the forefront of this potential is the appearance and the beauty of the local area. With the canal’s ‘front’ in a general state of decay and disarray, repairs are needed to optimise the area. Initial focus has been placed on the widening of footpaths and walkways, creating new and improved access points, and the addition of new amenities such as public toilets, bike stands, and storage facilities (Peake and Greenhalgh, 2021, pp.18-19).

Developing these new and improved public spaces with signage and leisure opportunities will encourage usage by pedestrians and cyclists, improving health in the public realm. This also unlocks much potential for projects such as open play areas, public gardens for respite, and public spaces for civic use. As some locals have said, ‘there is so much opportunity all the way through’ (Peake and Greenhalgh, 2021, p.25). These opportunities may come in the form of

leasable plots of land, or purchasable fields and buildings, or projected blueprints for the redevelopment of disused pubs and old war bunkers that line the canal.

A working example of reimagining the canal can be seen in the Port-Loop project, Birmingham. Port-Loop is a '43-acre island community located between Birmingham Canal Old Line and Birmingham Canal' in the place where 'the industrial heart of the city' once stood (Peake and Greenhalgh, 2021, p.25). The development includes energy-efficient housing, a community hub, commercial office spaces, a leisure centre, traffic-free streets, cycle paths, and a new public green space. Port Loop effectively built a vibrant 'brand new neighbourhood from the ground up' (Port-Loop, 2021). They offered local training and apprenticeships and new job opportunities in the region. By developing the skills and employing local people, Port-Loop curated a team and workforce that not only reflects the diversity of the local community but a 'team [that] is full of exceptional creative talent' (Port Loop, 2021).

Visibility and lighting are also of major importance in drawing out the canal's potential, especially after dark. An increase of night-time footfall could be encouraged by selecting sensitive and environmentally friendly lighting, and by increasing the amount of surveillance in the area. In turn, this could open pop-up bars and open-air stages, and light art installations, which will prompt locals to head out for evening walks and boat trips. This may be a way for the locals to better enjoy the nocturnal biodiversity, wildlife, and landscape of their area.

Lumiere, the UK's largest free outdoor light festival, took this as a central tenant of their project and invited both local and international artists to create light-art installations that

were able to change the ways in which buildings and public spaces were experienced. In 2018, Lumiere, funded by both public and private organisations took to London and pedestrianised many areas of the West End and the Regent's Canal Waterway. In 2021 Lumiere repeated a similar festival in County Durham. The festival was a big hit and brought over 140,000 pedestrians to previously inaccessible areas (Lumiere, 2012). This is a great example of how these opportunities can open-up spaces and bring a general well-being to the area.

The Canal and River Trust have also addressed the potential for improvements to the day and night-time public transport infrastructure. These include the use of buses, bike share opportunities, and a network of safe accessible streets (Canal and River Trust, 2020).

Water Access

The famous barges that have travelled up and down the canal-ways since their inception are held in particular regard, not only for their aesthetics but for their practicality. There are still several residential boats docked on the canal, however, they 'would hardly be able to carry a cargo' (Clarke, 1990 p.11). Over the past few years, many of these barges have been repurposed and reused for social and cultural activities.

Supported and funded by the Canal and River Trust and Super Slow way, Small Bells Ring is a floating library that holds the largest collection of short stories in the UK. The RV Furor-Scribendi, a repurposed canal boat was moored along the Leeds and Liverpool canal around Accrington until the end of June, before making its way along the UK's canals to Coventry, the City of Culture, for the summer. It made its return to Lancashire, docking at the Reedley Marina in the Autumn of 2021 (Small Bells Ring, 2021).

‘Pedestrians became passengers’ as they were invited on board to read or write for the afternoon, or just to hop on to daydream and float (Small Bells Ring, 2020). This live event was also streamed digitally. Podcasts were recorded, Instagram pages were set up and activities and events were updated regularly. However, there were issues tied into accessibility - with less than 500 followers on Instagram, it was almost only internal networking. More work needed to be done in direct communication with the local citizens. This was a project which not only sought to reinvigorate the canal but also to prop up the libraries through creative change (Super Slow Way, 2021).

The Arts Council England saw the future potential of Small Bells Ring and offered a £1,000,000 fund to the charity for it to keep ‘delivering creative projects with artists and communities to express their own cultural identities and their own everyday creativity’ (Small Bells Ring, 2021). Small Bells Ring have also retained the barge for future use.

Similarly, many disused barges have the potential to be put to good use, e.g. to move materials to development sites and manage waste collection. A small project in London, iRecycle, has done just this (iRecycle, 2021). iRecycle is:

A waste management company who uses London’s canal network to transport waste using a fleet of barges to reduce congestion and pollution. They also bring in office supplies and equipment by water for businesses along the canal. A canal clean-up team also removes all rubbish in reach while waste is being transported. iRecycle also provide employment opportunities for homeless people (Peake and Greenhalgh, 2021, p.24).

Additionally, the canal may also be used for water-based and leisure activities. However, due to the laws surrounding the direct public use of the canal’s water – the opportunities for kayaking, canoeing, fishing, water sports, and other types of activities are restricted but can be sought out in new frontages and reservoirs.

Heritage and cultural considerations

As for the challenges of finding creative and inclusive solutions to the vacant and underused historic buildings, much has been done. In some instances, repurposing historic features for new uses has brought about a new faculty for the canals – as seen with the Port Loop redevelopment.

Lancashire Enterprise Partnership's *Cultural Investment Strategy* (2020) highlights the importance of 'connecting the county's cultural opportunities through developing a new compelling narrative for residents, visitors and businesses' (Fogg, 2020). The canal offers exactly this compelling narrative.

Supported by the Super Slow Way, The National Lottery, and the Heritage fund, The Exbury Egg was a 'temporary, energy-efficient, self-sustaining workspace, located at Finsley Gate Wharf, Burnley. In collaboration with Burnley Wood Community Centre, the artist, Stephen Turner, spent much of 2016 'conducting personal, environmental, historical and cultural investigations' on the site 'to share knowledge, explore its present state and better inform its future' (Peake and Greenhalgh, 2021, p.10). The site, which was closed by British Waterways more than 30 years prior, was opened for use as a public space. The year-long programme sought to renovate the canal-side and develop it as a cultural and leisure asset for the neighbourhood.

Stephen Turner states:

"Before I came, there had been no access to it (it had been closed by [British Waterways since 1986). I open it to visitors for an hour a day. I invite people in to talk about life in Burnley Wood. It's very local – maybe the surrounding 15 streets. I

invite people in for tea and chat ... I'm using the concept of the Egg as a conversation piece. I'm quite interested in what makes a home for people and other animals who live around and how people live together – or don't" (2016).

A critical review of the Egg and its impact was undertaken by Lynn Froggett, who notes some interesting outcomes such as residents becoming ambassadors for the Egg, and organisations, such as schools and charities, coming forward to take care of, and benefit from the site. There also came a pride and a curiosity in the canal as it was cleaned up and transformed into an attractive public place. The project also saw new networks, and more importantly, new relationships being formed, which helped grow a sense of local civic responsibility (Froggett et al., pp.21–27, 2016).

The closing statements of the essay fully exert the benefits of the project and show an awareness of the value of the art and cultural life of a community:

It should be emphasised that one of the major achievements of The Egg was to mobilise 'human cultural capital' – the relationships, enthusiasm, talent and capacity to care for the environment in a community that had hitherto benefitted from little cultural investment and therefore had low expectations and confidence in their capacity to bring about improvements. It raised levels of local interest and a sense of ownership of 'their' canal, and their continued involvement should be a major plank of regeneration plans going forward (Froggett et al., p 27, 2016).

The Egg made the Leeds and Liverpool Canal become 'their canal', resulting in a greater awareness of the potential that had lain dormant for so long. This awareness brought much activity to the area which culminated in The Canal and River Trust's generous donation of £2.9 Million in 2021 towards the restoration of Finsley Gate Wharf. It is set to become a 'bustling centre of activity once again' - 'once again' being the optimum phrasing (Deehan, 2021).

Developing and repurposing already permanent structures by optimizing them for current cultural activity can bring communities together to connect, play, and socialise, and more importantly, as seen, to enjoy the culture(s) they help to create. As with the infrastructural improvements, considerations of heritage and culture will support area identity (perhaps even enhancing it), promote a sense of belonging, and bring much civic pride. It will also encourage the geographical spread of Lancashire's culture and create a greater space for tourism, not only for town centres but for the natural expanse of rich surroundings that Lancashire has to offer.

Horticulture and Agricultural Developments

The canal's proximity to industrial businesses and estates makes it vital to address its immediate landscape and collaborate with local groups to unlock the economic potential and benefits of the area. The underused buildings and disused green spaces open much potential for indoor and outdoor urban farming. With much of Lancashire being a natural and rich farmland, there are great opportunities for local meat and plant-based food production, and textile production (Council, L, C. 2002, p.8).

Creative Lancashire have provided an outline for an example site at Imperial Mill, Blackburn, citing 'potential for vertical, aquaponic growing, in addition to outdoor fields of flax and linen processing and spinning inside' (Peake and Greenhalgh, 2021, p.10).

Offering garden spaces and places of respite will not only bring 'greener and softer edges' to the canal-side but also allow residents to have a primary role in the community's food production and distribution. A real-working example of this can be seen in Liverpool where a

former sugar factory was transformed into an urban farm for the local community (Peake and Greenhalgh, 2021, p.36).

Farm Urban runs a multifaceted business, supplying healthy food, supporting the local community, and offering educational packages for primary and secondary school children, reconnecting them with growing food and sustainable urban living. Farm Urban was born out of the Life Sciences Department at the University of Liverpool, linking scientific research with local food production. (Peake and Greenhalgh, 2021, p.10).

‘Farm urban’ is not only a great way to produce regenerative and resilient crops in an urban environment but is also an educational and cultural resource for the community. Produce grown at the farm is distributed amongst the growers, and then sold to wider communities. The profits are then reinvested into the business.

Planting and landscaping are known to improve the biodiversity of an area and promote the mitigation of pollution by sequestering tonnes of CO₂ per year. This can greatly enhance the character, quality and social value of the Leeds and Liverpool canal.

Community access and custodianship.

Building Bridges, a local community initiative for the arts, has allowed for interrelations between many community members. They have been at the forefront of interfaith and cross-cultural projects since 1994. In 2019, Building Bridges established the ‘Talking Society’ (Building Bridges, 2021). Later that year, members of the society contributed to the ‘walk and talk’ project. It was a proactive project which sought to connect people to allow them to converse freely and explore the local area. The canals facilitated many of the walks. Open areas such as the Burnley Embankment – known locally as ‘The Straight Mile’, which offered walkers clear views across the town, saw increased activity and footfall. After a brief intermission in 2020, the project resumed in late 2021, and the canals have seen a steady

increase of activity after the easing of lockdowns (Building Bridges, 2021). Many of the active participants would have otherwise been mutually excluded from each other's company, and many community connections blossomed from the project (Building Bridges [Youtube], 2019).

Further opportunities and conclusions.

Providing incentives, repurposing, and revitalising the Leeds and Liverpool canal can significantly help the cultural life, as seen with The Exbury Egg, Port Loop, and Farm Urban among other projects. Simply by using the canals, there comes a greater sense of 'ownership' by the community and can again encourage local people to take responsibility of the canals as caretakers themselves.

Gaining access to funding bodies such as the Lancashire Environmental Fund and the Arts Council England fund, and working with the Canal and River Trust, Creative Lancashire, and the Super Slow Way can help create repurposed, and even new visible and accessible destinations.

From its inception to its current state, to its future potential, the Leeds and Liverpool canal remains not only as Lancashire's biggest monument but a place of bustling activity that plays an active part in the community and culture of Lancashire. It is important to fully emphasise the far-reaching and lasting impact of the canal. Unlocking the unused potential will lift Pennine Lancashire's image, reposition its cultural status, and benefit its people, places, and art because these are the things that matter in Lancashire.

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Fig 1:

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