

The Canal Trade at Middlewich

Ellesmere Port Boat Museum Archives and the Chester Record Office have a range of receipts and letters that relate mainly to the Middlewich Wharf. These tell us about the type and quantity of goods going in and out of Middlewich including: - the carrier, customers or traders names, forwarding trade destinations and boat masters.

Sometimes the receipt is stamped by the official carrying company and a letter with instructions is used. By reading these we can get an idea about how busy the wharf area must have been; it could be translated as being a type of 'post office'. Amongst the trade supplies were more personal items such as hampers, livestock; even one chair & one bag of tobacco was carried from Longport to Middlewich! Items would then be collected for the onward destination to their owners.

Lots of thriving businesses during the early 19th century depended on the canal system and the new markets that had become accessible for them. This in turn increased the town's population and importance. The canal system was on a large scale, enabling goods to reach London and major ports.

Middlewich exports were various but two commodities were carried regularly and in large quantities to various destinations, these were Salt and Cheese.

Cheese producers in the local area transported their produce to a dealer in London on a frequent basis; for example, a letter headed, Mr Thomas Toft, June 6 1839, 'deliver your cheese to Mr Sadler as the forwarded as below.

143 cheese VVX for Mr G Jackson, 21 Todley Street London', signed John Wilding, Cheese Factor.

Lots of receipts were signed by Mr Vernon Smith, Porter at Canal Wharf, he lived at Wharf Cottage with his wife and daughter, one acceptance signature is required on the receipt, and a lot of the time it was his.

Although two Carriers were based at the Wharf sites, there were many more Carrying Company's in operation such as Pickford's, Anderton Co and Joseph Smith & Co to name a few. In one year 26 Carrying Companies were listed in the archives as trading with Middlewich.

Some Captains were regular transporters and a few receipts show that traders addressed their notes directly to the Captain. For example, in 1847 two Captains were regularly named, Captain Herraday and Captain Stokes.

'Number ones' were so called because the Captains were also the owners of the boat. They carried various cargos but could only survive in areas where there were profitable trades, which could be carried with little interference from large companies. Cargos such as hay & straw were unpopular with railway and canal carrying companies, but to smaller carriers they were lucrative cargos.

The larger companies generally became bigger in the second half of the 19th Century, absorbing many of the smaller companies who had left the waterways or went bankrupt in the wake of the railways 1840/50's. Companies such as Crowley & Co were employing between 4-500 boatmen by 1841.

The table below shows the stability of tonnage being carried along the Trent and Mersey in the later stages of the 19th century. Business is steadily rising despite the railways; the Middlewich line opened in 1868. There is a small drop off in goods travelling via the Canal network in the 1880's but not significant at this stage.

Tonnage carried on Trent & Mersey (118 miles)

| 1848 | 1858 | 1868 | 1888 | 1898 |
|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| 1,341,611 | 1,363,384 | 1,494,524 | 1,139,098 | 1,215,540 |

Henry Seddon & Sons, salt proprietors was registered as carriers in 1907. Because the salt works were on the bank of the Trent & Mersey, Seddon used water transport to Anderton where the salt was transhipped to his Weaver vessels. Boats operated from 1900, the two vessels called 'steam packets' were built at Yarwood's in Northwich, Weaver Belle and Danehurst. Weaver Belle was paired with Gowenburn built for H Thompson of Northwich in 1902 and acquired by Seddon. At Anderton they received bagged salt from the narrow boat and took it to Liverpool & Birkenhead for export. Narrow Boats also carried salt to places like Manchester & Bolton, and then returned with slack coal from pits near Stoke on Trent to fire their open pans. Seddon acted as a general carrier when any boats were spare.



Above: A normal team would consist of three men to shovel out 20 tonnes of slack and load into barrows ready for the salt pans.
Opposite: Anderton, the two bigger boats are the Weaver Belle and Gowenburn, in the middle is Seddon's Narrow boat loading bagged salt. The loose salt chute is in the right foreground.

Items brought into the town via the Town Wharf were variable but there were reoccurring supplies such as Salt pan plates or lead sheets; here are some examples of deliveries.

Anderton Carrying Company records 1838-39, 1844-45

This large company averaged 3-6 deliveries to Middlewich a month, mainly from Anderton, running boats named: Neptune, Venus, Mary, Alexander and Magnet. They carried cargo such as tar, sugar, feathers, rum, hemp, linen, rice, barley, tin, wood, gin and candles.

James Suthen & Shardlow Boat Co 1844-1850

Deliveries came from: Liverpool, Shardlow, Etruria, Stone, Preston, Red Bull, Uttoxetter and Longport. Loaded with oats, malt, oranges, lemons, coffee, linen, hats, hosiery, beans, shoes, sugar, soup, tea, brushes, raisins & currants, figs,

gunpowder, timber, pan, leather and biscuits. On average 15 deliveries were made for Middlewich each month.

Other goods listed were; ale, beer and gin, iron, nails, soap, seeds, books, tea & drugs, mustard, stationary, plates, hoops, tin & chains, 1 pair of snatch blocks, 1 screw jack, 100 bricks, 100 scaffold poles, 4 sheer poles, 1 winch, casks, grapes, herrings, treacle!

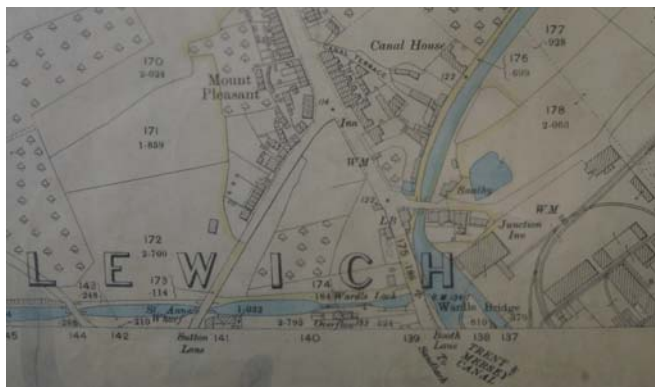
The carrier J Robins & Co had 10 cheese deliveries to make each month from Middlewich and most of that was to London. Henshall's also ran 4 boat loads of cheese out of Middlewich Wharf in a month, the recorded destinations were Preston Brook, Fradley, Shelton, Hall Green, Wincham, Longport and Shardlow.

Henshall's carriers were also contracted to take regular boat loads of salt from the Kinderton Salt works to Anderton for their onward journey, the receipts illustrate ad hoc shipments. When large orders came in for the salt works the boats were working continuously, occasionally it was necessary to get in extra carriers to help with the delivery.

Records also show that lime was regularly delivered to Wincham and bricks were taken directly from the Cledford brick kilns, who had a works wharf, to local delivery points (including Middlewich, Anderton and Stanthorne Hall), these deliveries took place a couple of times a month.

Another important Middlewich regular was the firm Smith & Hitchins, with Master Thomas Wagstaffe, – 25 tons of flint was carried from the Croxton Mill to Longport, and receipts appear for this company on a regular monthly basis.

Other destinations were not so clear, especially if Wardle Lock was involved, the high tolls must have created problems for the carriers and companies that needed access to the Shropshire Union. Quite often in the register of goods a reference will be made for deliveries to go through the lock or deliver to Wardle Junction on the Trent and Mersey. Many journeys appear to stop at the Junction, for example Henshall's in 1833 sent Thos. Cook Master, to deliver salt to Wardle Junction. Wardle Lock is frequently listed as a carriers starting point. This seems to re-occur quite often with different carrying companies, but on further reading it seems that the cargo left at the Junction one day, reappears the day after with another carrying company from Wardle lock to an onward destination.



1897: The map shows the connection between Wardle Canal and the Trent and Mersey. On this version, St Anne's Wharf is at the bottom of the map, on the same side as Wardle Cottage. It is only after 1911 that it started appearing on the town's side! The wharf area which is cut off on this map is flat against the canal with no buildings. The Junction Inn is a substantial building with canal side access and to the rear has a railway line extension.

Chester Record Office

The situation could be that tolls were being avoided by some of the carriers. Onwards of 1868 one particular map shows a railway line behind Wardle Junction which may have been used by traders, (above).

On the junction of St Ann's Road and Sutton Lane by the canal is a small plot of land described as '*St Anne's Wharf*', owned by various people including Thomas Reeves, it has no storage facility or winches. Could it be that goods were off loaded at the Junction, carted over the bridge and down the road to the wharf site? With the toll by passed, another boat company can continue the onward journey.

Thomas Reeves was a 'Number One' for a time before joining in a partnership and trading as Reeves and Shaw Carrying Co., he carried various goods including white salt, hampers, boxes and casks. His business records cease after 1847 as a carrier and William Court bought the Wharf land. For anyone wanting goods transported the wharf site is in a good place and toll free, however there is no turning circle for boats on any of the records found so far and a couple of letters refers to a Jetty by Wardle, so the mystery of St Anne's Wharf continues.

With all this activity going on in Middlewich, repairs and maintenance were essential. Independent yards were said to be as numerous as garages are today, the census returns and trade directories tell us that a lot of people were employed by the Canal Companies or had associated trades. Aside from the repair yard of the canal terrace site, jobs were listed as boat builders, rope and fender makers, sail makers, painters, shipwrights, ironmongers and blacksmiths.

James Williams in the 1874 Morris & Co Directory was listed as a boat builder and timber dealer. At the top of King's Lock there was a dry and wet dock, the cut into these docks can still be seen today. This was run by Tommy Williams in the early 20th century and local boat people can just remember him being there and living on site. For a boat & repair yard such as Williams, any new construction of boats was generally done in the winter months because repairs, their main income, was difficult at that time, rotten wood could not be detected if the water it held was frozen. A narrow horse boat took around 6 weeks to build with 8 men working on it; repairs take as little as a week making good caulking, re-blackening the hull, repainting and decorating the cabin inside and out.

Tommy Williams worked on the Seddon's boats doing their repair and painting work; the boat building appears to have ceased. Seddon's had a fleet of 11 boats that required constant attention; their crafts were being built by Nursers, Costin's and Yarwood's of Northwich.



The Trent and Mersey Canal at Booth Lane.

Notice the width of the canal and the two large workshop areas comprising of a wet dock and dry dock. This is the site of the Williams' boat maintenance and repair yard.

The site buildings can be seen on maps before the opening of the Wardle Canal in 1833 and given the width of the canal, it's possible that the boat yard was built or conceived at the same time as the canal was built.

The Old ICI plant can be seen in the background.
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