



## The Middlewich Wharf

There are two important buildings that reflect the town's prosperity during the canal age and both are associated with wharf activity, in particular, the trading between the canal and train companies, and the manufacturing and mineral industries. The Wharf and its associated buildings are probably contemporary with the opening of the canal.

The district offices of the Trent & Mersey Canal Company were located within the Wharf area along with their carrying company, 'Henshall's', which took their name from the engineer Hugh Henshall, who finished the Trent and Mersey after the death of James Brindley. The district offices for agents to the North Staffordshire Railway and Canal Company and the Shropshire Union Canal Company moved into the Wharf building after the opening of the Wardle Canal in 1833. In addition a series of merchants operated within the wharf area including in 1850, a coal merchant, a beer retailer and a 'wharfinger' by the name of William Henshall. Wharfingers were in charge of a particular site and in the case of Mr Henshall were also registered as the contact for Henshall's Carrying Company promoting a service all over the Kingdom daily from Bridge Wharf. There would have been various other jobs on a wharf site and associated trades nearby, these can be seen clearly on census returns, occupations included canal company porter, rope makers, sail makers, boat builders and boatmen.

The building fronting the canal tow-path is a large three storey red brick wharf storage building; built into the gable-end, above the ground floor entrance are two loading hatches, used for winching goods into the upper floor spaces. Timber and stone could be stored outside while perishable or valuable cargoes required the warehouses. There was additional space built on the side of the warehouse at one time, (shown in the aerial photo of 1928).

The yard side door has original set paving outside and the existing roof structure is original. Around the back of the storage building is the coal yard and storage area, access to this could be gained from the wharf yard or through a gateway on the canal tow-path. This building is associated with England's first Trunk Canal building project and was essential to the running of the wharf.

The Wharf Cottage, as with the warehouse is an early build, it's identification in 1816 and again on the Tithe map of 1848 is that of a house and office. There is a single storey bay on the left; this side



Remains of the historical and significant Middlewich Wharf buildings

was used as offices while the right hand side was a house. The brick alignment is slightly out so either it was built and then enlarged soon after or there was a rebuild of the left side before 1816. The building's first floor openings retain splayed lintels, which are likely to be original and so is the roof. Like the warehouse, this building was essential for the functioning of the wharf and pre-dates 1816. Both buildings are of significance in the history of the canal and of Middlewich.



The records show that in 1819 there was considerable growth on the Town Wharf site with the addition of a 'weighing machine house'. There were also alterations to the buildings north of the bridge indicating considerable commercial activity. In 1827 the trade range was increased again this time with connection to the Ellesmere & Chester Canal just outside Middlewich and by 1833 the Wardle Canal branch opened.

From 1847 most canals were under railway ownership but the wharf continued to prosper with commercial and private goods. In 1872 more development on the wharf was completed with several new buildings in the wharf area up to Leadsmithy Street. The very peak of the wharf was as late as 1900 despite the railways and the decline of Canal trade.

The first sign of the Wharf decline was the unveiling of the New Town Bridge plans in 1929 – 1931. Much of the physical evidence of the site's history is lost, due to the bridge expansion. Local reports of the time suggest that, 16 houses, 4 shops and a warehouse were demolished, including the Navigation Inn and Malpas Wharf.

In 1935, Croxton aqueduct was re-constructed for the third time due to subsidence; the new steel structure was only 7ft wide. This affected barge transports as they were now too big to gain access to Middlewich.

The wharf was used as a maintenance depot by British Waterways after 1948 and the cottages were let to individuals who either worked for British Waterways or engaged in commercial activities until the 1990's when it was abandoned. There was no gas or electric installed when the cottages were first let and the wash house was a small building in the front of the cottages that was the ticket office in its previous life!