

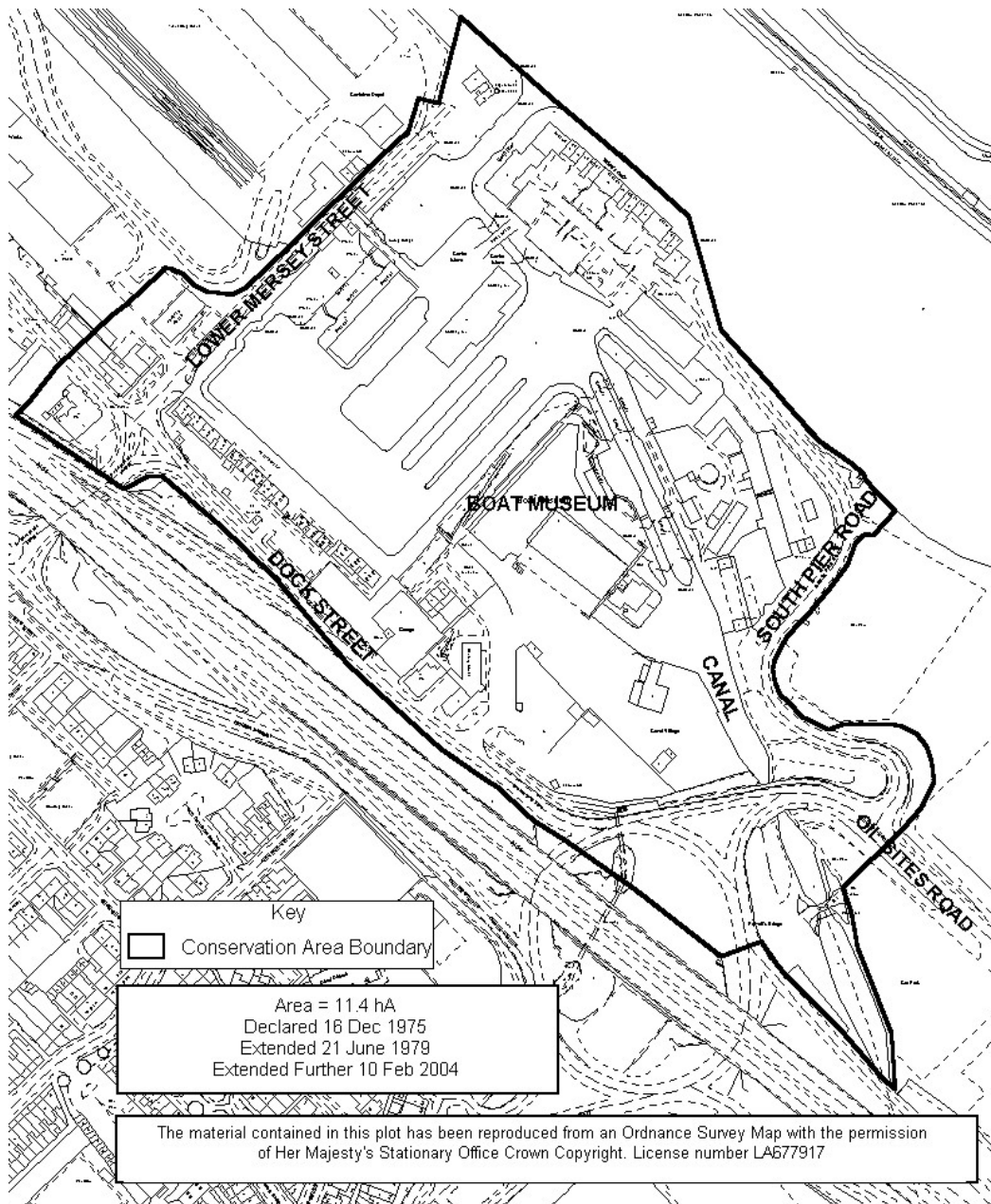
*Ellesmere Port and Neston Borough Council
Planning Services*

Ellesmere Port Docks Conservation Area



Character Appraisal

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1 Introduction

- 1.1 This document aims to provide an assessment of the special architectural and historic interest of Ellesmere Port Docks Conservation Area. If approved it would form supplementary planning guidance to the adopted Ellesmere Port and Neston Borough Local Plan and Policy ENV14 in particular. It will help to guide decisions on planning applications in the conservation area, and assist applicants in drawing up schemes. It will also be used to formulate proposals for the preservation and enhancement of the conservation area. The Local Plan has been prepared having regard to the County Structure Plan

Policy R1, national planning guidance such as that issued by English Heritage and Regional Planning Guidance.

- 1.2 The appraisal is not intended to be a comprehensive plot by plot survey, and omission of any particular building, feature or space should not be taken to imply that it is of no interest.
- 1.3 This document will hopefully raise awareness of the special qualities of the conservation area, so that as Ellesmere Port Docks Conservation Area continues to evolve, it does so in a sympathetic way and the pleasing character of the conservation area is maintained for future generations.

2 Physical Setting

- 2.1 Ellesmere Port Docks, in Wirral, can be found on the southern shore of the Mersey estuary, approximately 16 miles from the mouth of the river. Prior to the construction of the port, in the late C18th, the area was occupied by low-lying marshy meadowlands, uninhabited and isolated from the nearest settlements, apart from footpaths and cart tracks through the fields. Traditionally the site of the canal port lay within the township of Whitby, the agricultural village that occupied higher ground 1.5 kilometres to the south-west. The site was located at the head of a low-lying gap of land, linking Chester with the River Mersey. Furthermore, at this point, a reliable channel could be found, as the outlet of the River Gowy helped to scour the shoreline. It was therefore a logical terminus for a canal between Chester and the Mersey.

3 Settlement Development

- 3.1 The origin of the port lies in the decision to take the Ellesmere Canal from Shrewsbury to the Mersey. The canal was conceived to deliver coal, iron and limestone from North Wales, north to the Mersey and south to the Severn. The first section, linking Chester to the Mersey, opened to passenger traffic in 1795 and was designed by the engineer William Jessop, assisted by Thomas Telford. Telford created a tidal basin, in 1801.
- 3.2 The land bought by the Canal Company, for a terminal, was initially restricted because of high land prices. This resulted in the terminal area of the port being too small for trans-shipment and warehousing. Consequently the port changed little during its first 30 years. However, in 1816 work began on the construction of a pier head to protect the entrance of the tidal basin from the Mersey currents. That year the company also invested in a steam packet, and passenger traffic continued to provide significant income until the 1840's. An inn, bathing huts and archery butts attracted visitors, and there was an attempt to turn the new settlement into a resort but commercial activities soon dominated.

- 3.3 Increased goods traffic, in the mid 1820's, caused the Company to consider expansion. In 1828 Thomas Telford was ordered to prepare plans for a warehouse and covered transhipping place, with wharf's on different levels to assist loading and unloading of sea going vessels. The resulting winged warehouse at Ellesmere Port became the pinnacle of the multi-level warehouse design. Completed in 1835 the building had four storeys built between the upper and lower canal basins. Cargoes were unloaded in the lower basin, from sea going boats, which could sail under the three arches. Produce was carted through the building then out into the upper basin, which was roughly 5m's higher than the lower basin, to the narrow boat loading area, which was protected by a timber awning. Each arch was over 13m, the



Telford's Winged Warehouse

largest arched shipping spans in the region, dwarfing the 9m spans seen in Manchester warehouses. Sadly, the warehouse was lost by fire in 1970. The location of the warehouse can still be identified today by the pontoons between the Holiday Inn and the Boat Museum. Following Telford's death, in 1834, William Cubitt built the sea lock and a new dock in 1839/40, which could now handle up to 50 coasting vessels. At the same time, warehousing was also constructed on the site of the current Holiday Inn. By 1843 the port contained an extensive range of warehouses, a dock, wharf's and ship building yards.

- 3.4 When the port was initially built, no one lived permanently at the terminal, apart from the innkeeper, lock keepers and a tonnage clerk. Houses were built in 1835 and 1838, much of it bought by the Shropshire Union Canal Company and located adjacent to the port. Some early housing remains at Porters Row and 1-4 Lower Mersey Street. By 1843 the port contained nearly 100

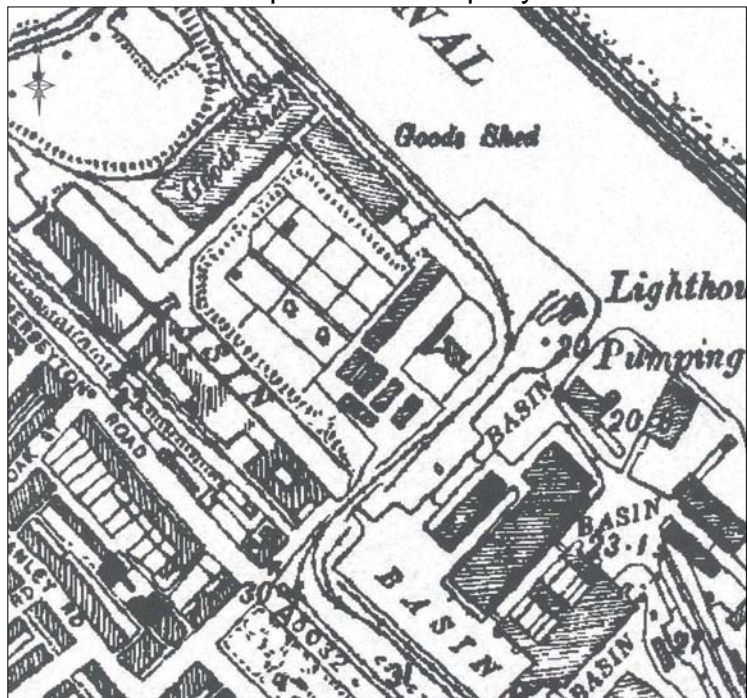


Porters Row Cottages

houses at Primrose Hill (site of the former container port), Dock Street and Church Street. Dock Street, was also the main shopping road in the town. In between Dock Street and Queen Street could be found the remains of brick kilns dating from the construction of dock buildings in the 1830's and 40's. Later this area of land was to become Victoria Park, constructed to celebrate Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee and which remained the principal park in the town until the 1930's. The Grosvenor Hotel overlooked the park. The park and shops on Dock Street were demolished when the motorway was constructed.

3.5 The development of the canal port continued into the second half of the C19th. In 1863 the Canal Company built a gas works within the port, which supplied the town and warehouses until 1916. The Island Grain Warehouse was built in 1871 and is now used as the main exhibition hall for the Boat Museum. Other buildings were built notably the rebuilding of the lighthouse in 1881 and workshops associated with the operation of the port. These buildings of the Canal Company constituted the hub of Ellesmere Ports activities until the opening of the Manchester Ship Canal.

3.5 The development of the Manchester Ship Canal in the 1890's provided some protection to the mouth of the canal port. The company was responsible for the Dock Office Building, built in Ruabon brick, with its tall clock tower. The Ship Canal was also an impetus for the further enlargement of the canal port to accommodate three large flourmills to the north of Lower Mersey Street, in the first decade of the C20th. The mills were accessed via a new canal arm that ran under Lower Mersey Street.



Canal Branch Arm that Served Flour Mills

3.6 The canal arm extended for 400m's to the north with a further branch of 300m's running at right angles to the east. The area of the mills is outside the conservation area and only one of the former mills now survives. These canal arms have been filled in but their entrance can still be seen in the wall of the dock near Raddle Wharf.

- 3.7 Today the canal port is largely redundant apart from pleasure craft and the core of the port has now been taken over by the Boat Museum. Other major land uses include large apartment developments and The Holiday Inn Hotel located on the site of a former warehouse. Outside the conservation area the land adjacent to the Ship Canal is still largely occupied by industrial or port related activities.

Townscape

General

- 4.1 The townscape character of the dock area is of a hard surfaced, nineteenth century port/industrial area, comprising large warehouse style buildings generously spaced by quays, docks and canals. The townscape still reflects its former port activities and the buildings display a robust functional character derived from their industrial origins.



Island Warehouse and Toll House

- 4.2 The area is at the same time highly urban and yet spacious. The buildings are linked by hard landscaped quays and bridges but are separated by docks and canals, with the higher parts of the port enjoying expansive views across the estuary and north west of the estuary towards Liverpool. The effect is particularly noticeably on the slightly higher ground, now largely occupied by the Boat Museum,

where the closely juxtaposed dock environment contrasts dramatically with the exposed and expansive estuary.

- 4.3 Even the largest buildings are relatively low rise and the space between the buildings resulting from the waterways and hard-standings ensures a bright and fresh feel.

Building Materials

- 4.4 The buildings are generally constructed from locally produced red brown common bricks, with the buildings of the mid and late C19th date decorated with pressed blue brick. There are also a small number of traditional buildings clad in corrugated iron. Roofs are clad in blue black Welsh slates or occasionally corrugated iron. Windows are either constructed from timber or cast iron, reflecting either the age of the building or their status and windowpanes are normally Georgian or small paned. Ruabon pressed brick can be found on two buildings, the landmark Dock Office Building and the eclectic Grosvenor Hotel. The latter marked the boundary of the port and the former town centre. These two buildings display far greater decoration than other buildings in the port often expressed in Storeton sandstone.



Grosvenor Hotel

Style

- 4.5 The largest warehouse buildings were traditionally massive in scale and define the layout of the smaller buildings, which were built to serve them. The complex of warehouses still largely exists despite the loss of

warehousing around the Holiday Inn site. These are large and sober buildings displaying a simplified classicism in their proportioning and decoration.

- 4.6 In between are a range of smaller buildings of various ages and styles, from the simple and utilitarian stables, built by Jessop, to the attractive Toll House built in typical Telford style with wide hipped eaves, sandstone sill bands and recessed small paned windows. The architectural focal point for the port is the former Dock Office Building with its walls of crisp Ruabon brick dressed with stone decoration and Tuscan order window surrounds. The tall, octagonal clock tower on the Dock Office is the highest structure in the port, reflecting the economic and social importance of the Ship Canal Company to the early town.



Dock Office

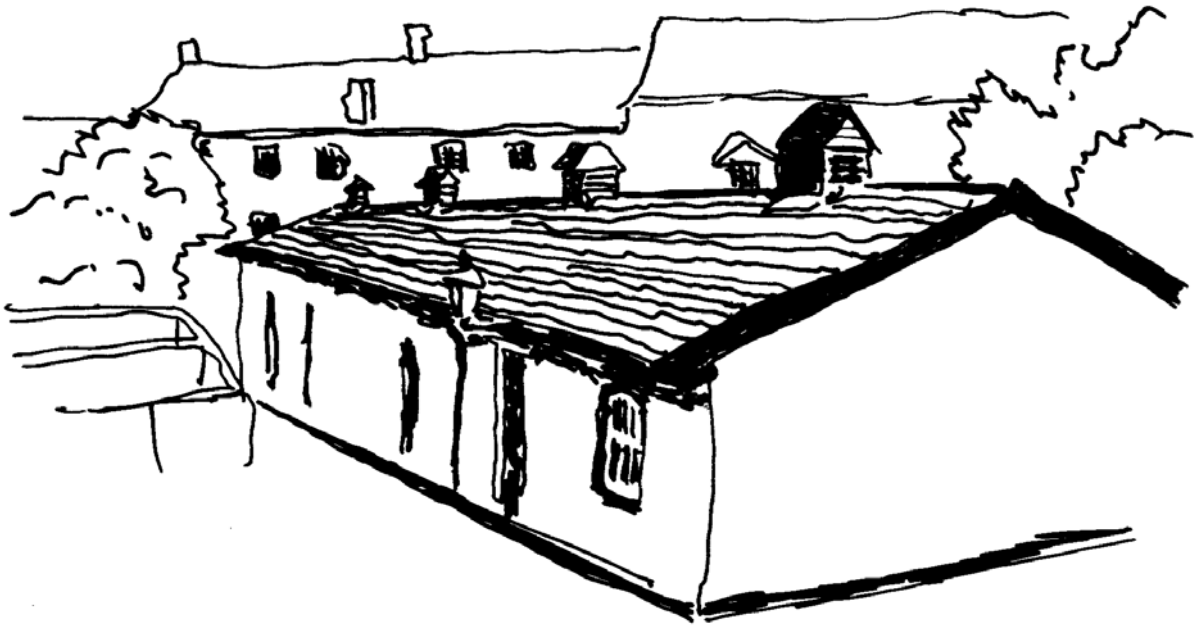
- 4.7 New buildings in the port have been designed to reflect the general character of the warehousing. This has been very effective in providing a sense of enclosure to the port and acting as a screen for the unsightly M53, which is elevated at this point.

Density

- 4.8 In the port area the buildings are generously spaced and separated by docks, canals and basins. There is a feeling of spaciousness in the dock complex.

Building Heights

- 4.9 Buildings are low rise being 1,2 or 3 floors in height. Exceptionally one of the newer buildings is 4 storeys high, although because the floor to ceiling heights are lower than in the traditional buildings it is similar in overall height to other buildings in the port. Two buildings provide tall focal points, the former lighthouse on Lower Mersey Street and the clock tower of the Dock Office. Generally taller buildings of 3-4 storeys can be found adjacent to the lower basin while buildings are 1-2 storey adjacent to the upper basin. Taller buildings adjacent to the motorway have helped to block out traffic noise.



Canal Stables

Urban Spaces

- 4.10 There are a number of linear open spaces in the form of paths alongside canals and docks. There is no parkland but generally the dock area is pedestrian friendly as vehicular traffic is effectively curbed by the arrangement of canals. Pedestrian permeability is relatively good, and it is possible to walk from the car park on South Pier Road across to the hotel and on to Raddle Wharf. Pedestrian access is, occasionally, across lock gates and therefore disabled persons or pram users may have some difficulty when using certain routes. The area of the Boat Museum means that entrance into a large part of the conservation area is only possible after paying an entrance fee. However, once in the Boat Museum, access is good and the historic quality of urban spaces in the museum is very good. There is only one public assembly area in the port, designed as part of the Boat Museum it only works if assemblies are for a contrived purpose. It is not a natural meeting point.

Views Into and Out of the Area

- 4.11 Views into and out of the area from the town side are quite limited by the raised motorway embankment. On the river side, views can be seen north west up the estuary towards the Liverpool waterfront and across the estuary to Liverpool John Lennon International Airport, and to Helsby Hill in the south. The promenade alongside the Manchester Ship Canal provides views northwards and southwards along the Ship Canal.

Landscape

- 4.12 The landscaping is mostly hard with typical surfacing of pressed brick with sandstone copings abutting the canal sides and less commonly sandstone setts and gravel. However, some discrete low level planting has been introduced relatively recently. Shrub and tree planting do not contribute to the historic character of the area and substantial planting could actually damage its character. There is some informal green space alongside the canal leading away from the port.



Lighthouse

5 Historic Interest

- 5.1 Ellesmere Port Docks is one of three most important canal ports of the early 19th Century. Along with Gloucester and Stourport it was here that large scale, canal architecture was constructed and became a precursor to the buildings resulting from the railway boom. It was also the result of the work of three great engineers Jessop, Telford and



Former Canal Workshops

Cubitt. William Jessop and Thomas Telford were involved in the early construction of the port. Jessop was the Canal Company's first engineer and was senior to Telford until 1805. Telford was then made responsible for planning all bridges, aqueducts, tunnels, locks, reservoirs, buildings, wharf's and other works. After Telford's death in 1834, William Cubitt took over and finished his designs.

6 The Local Economy

- 6.1 Port activities have now ceased within the dock area but employment is still provided by the Boat Museum, The Holiday Inn, a restaurant, two pubs, a cafe, shops and a car dealership. Some office space still

remains in the Dock Office and on Telfords Quay, however the majority of Telfords Quay is used for residential purposes, as is Raddle Wharf.

7 Sources

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