

# Artefacts of Industrial England

By Albert J. Schmidt

In 2008, I embarked on an unlikely tourist junket - one of sampling the landscape of 19th century industrial England. I traveled principally in England's West Midlands — in and around Birmingham, Manchester, and Liverpool — where I focused on industrial artefacts — canals, viaducts, aqueducts, factories, and the like — which had made England *the first modern nation*. Here I present abbreviated journal entries of my travels:

**Manchester Center: the Bridgewater Canal & Castlefields Basin.** I made my way to Castlefields, the basin where the historic Bridgewater Canal from Worsley, ten miles distant, linked the Duke of Bridgewater's coal mines with the Salford and Manchester quays, the city's cotton factories, and eventually Liverpool via the Manchester Ship Canal. Castlefields lay at the confluence of three bodies of water--the River Medlock and the Bridgewater and Rochdale Canals. The most impressive aspect of this setting, aside from its historic significance, is its regeneration: docks and warehouses have been transformed into a modern living community called Castlefields Urban Heritage Park. A front yard sign succinctly says it all:

*In the early 19th century canals cut through the green fields beside the Roman fort on the outskirts of Manchester. A few decades later the castle and fields survived only in the name of warehouses, wharves and poor houses. Two canals changed Castlefields: the main arm of the Bridgewater Canal built in 1764 sweeps around this wharf. The branch to the left led to Potato Wharf, the site of the now demolished Stratfordshire Warehouse. The lock opposite marks the junction of the Bridgewater with the Rochdale Canal. The latter, which opened in 1805, connected Manchester to Pennine towns and ultimately the east coast port of Hull.*

**Manchester to the Sankey Viaduct and Canal.** I took a train to Earlestown to view the Sankey Viaduct, known locally as The Nine Arches, because of its round-arch spandrels. Built of brick and sandstone, it was and still is a vital transportation link between Manchester and Liverpool. The Sankey Canal beneath it, now dried up and filled with rubbish, in its heyday was used for shipping coal to the industrial cities around Liverpool.

**Manchester to Bolton, Blackburn, and Burnley.** I set out for three old textile centers. Bolton and Blackburn were once the largest cotton manufacturing and spinning centers in the world. In Burnley the Weaver's Triangle is regarded today as 'probably the finest example of a cotton weaving neighborhood in the whole of England,' appearing much as it did two hundred years ago.

The Burnley journey, which took me through the scenic Lancashire countryside, led only to disappointment: The Weaver's Triangle was closed that day. I persisted and struck up a conversation with a canal boatman on the wharf in back of the mill. He was a Lowland Scot (from Jedburgh, near the border). We found a common interest: his having retired from the faculty at the University of St. Andrews and my having been a student there sixty years earlier. Before long he invited me to join him on his canal boat to a town some six miles farther on, where I could catch a train back to Manchester.

Riding in a canal boat in England for even this short distance was something that I had long hoped to do. And in our brief excursion we passed the backs of decaying factories and warehouses and through a tunnel and an aqueduct which passed over one of Britain's four-lane motorways.

**Liverpool to Pontcysyllte (Wales).** The short trip from Manchester to Liverpool was uneventful; however, the 20- 30 miles into north Wales from Liverpool led to a magnificent engineering site — the famed Pontcysyllte Aqueduct. This great bridge over the River Dee, both higher and longer than the Sankey rail bridge, is part of the Llangollen Canal, which itself has been called one of the most beautiful waterways in Europe. An advertisement reads as follows:

*The Llangollen Canal leaves the Shropshire Union Canal just north of Nantwich in rural Cheshire and climbs through deserted Shropshire farmlands to cross the border into Wales near Chirk. It then cuts through increasingly hilly countryside to finish alongside the River Dee tumbling out of Snowdonia, just above Llangollen. It is 41 miles long and takes at least three days to cruise (one way).*

The aqueducts at Chirk and Pontcysyllte, both equipped with cast iron troughs, were the work of the engineers Thomas Telford and William Jessop. As the blurb reads: At Pontcysyllte the trough is exposed and sits atop 120 foot high slender masonry towers. When you cross it by boat there is an exhilaratingly sheer drop on the non-towpath side! The dimensions of Pontcysyllte — 1,007 feet long, 11 feet wide, 5.25 feet deep, an iron trough 126 feet above the river, and supports of 19 hollow piers, each creating an arch 53 feet wide — made this an incomparable structure.

This trip, which included more than just the places mentioned, convinced me that England's urban rust belt is possessed of its own kind of fascination. As such, it allows for a favorable comparison with the country's more heralded rural landscape.



1. Manchester: Castlefields Urban Heritage Park where River Medloc and Bridgewater and Rochdale Canals meet.



4. Burnley. The Leeds/Liverpool Canal. Passing the backs of old factories.



2. Manchester: (Same location as #1 above) The Castlefields Urban Heritage Park.



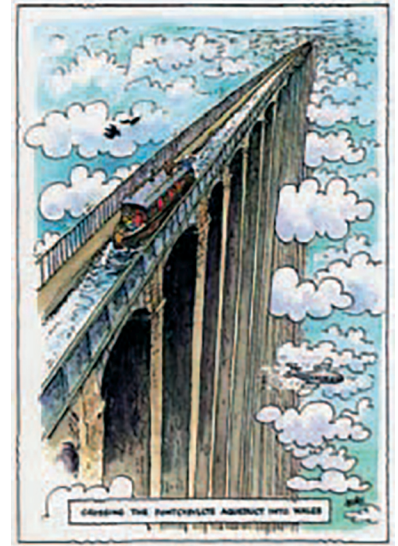
5. Burnley. The Leeds/Liverpool Canal. Entering into the Gammow Tunnel.



3. Manchester/Earlestown. The Sankey Valley Viaduct as it appears today.



6. Burnley. The Leeds/Liverpool Canal passing over a four-lane motorway.



7. Wales, the Llangollen Canal, the Pontcysyllte Aqueduct. Postcard dramatizes its height.



8. Wales, the Llangollen Canal, the Pontcysyllte Aqueduct. Distant View.



9. Wales, the Llangollen Canal, the Pontcysyllte Aqueduct. View of Telford and Jessop's cast iron trough.

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*Photos by Albert J. Schmidt*

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