

Christleton Heritage Walks 1 (2.2km) The Boatman's Tale.



Horse drawn working barges in 1920's



Wain's Yard in Skip's Lane

The Shropshire Union Canal.

*The Chester canal designed by **James Brindley** was opened in 1772 in an attempt to increase the trading position of the port of Chester, with a link to The Potteries. In the 16th/17th C Chester had been the second most important port on the west side of England after Bristol, with trading links with Africa, Spain, Portugal, Ireland, Norway, The Baltic ports and Russia. However the silting up of the Dee caused that trade to stop and the ports of Liverpool and to some extent Ellesmere Port became important. In a final attempt to improve the position the Dee Navigation Company was formed in which **Robert Townsend** Recorder of Chester from the Old Hall in Christleton was a major shareholder. He owned the land in Christleton, which he sold to the company, in order that the canal could be built. Irish Navies took just three years to complete the stretch from Chester to Beeston, and later to Nantwich. This was a remarkable feat considering they had no machines to help them. They also had the difficulties of the sand stone ridge to negotiate, and to build locks that would take the boats over this ridge. The locks at Boughton and Christleton are made using sandstone blocks and local bricks from our village sources, The Quarry and Christleton Pit. The canal era was soon superseded by the coming of the railways, and the London Holyhead line runs through a cutting to the south of the village, with an aqueduct taking the canal over the railway lines near Christleton Lock.*

We start this short walk on The Village Green.

Walk from the village along Pepper Street towards the Canal. Stop on route to look at Christleton House, Ivy House, Stoneydale, Christleton Hall

Merchants living in these exclusive Georgian Houses in Pepper Street might have used the canal to get to Liverpool.

Go over the canal bridge and then down the steps or slope to get to the towpath and turn towards Chester and the A55 bridge over the village. Walk along the towpath until you reach Christleton Lock.

This is a typical lock used on this section of the Chester Canal which was double width to accommodate Mersey Flats, the type of boats used to bring grain to the mills along the canal including Butlers Mill at Christleton. Every lock also has a sluice to take excess water to prevent flooding. The area on the north side of this lock has been used for several years as a lagoon to store mud when the canal has been dredged and cleared. Look at the railway bridge just beyond the lock, this is a tunnel that takes the railway under the canal, and there is an L shaped trench 200m long on the houses side that was built as a diversion route whilst the tunnel was dug.

Now return the way you have come to the Trooper Bridge.

Notice the bridge construction, typical of an “egg bridge” on this canal and like nearby Quarry Bridge was intended for cart traffic. They are both constructed of local materials as described for the locks. Quarry Bridge is adjacent to the Quarry which was at one stage 30ft deep from the field level we see today. Quarrymen’s cottages stood on the west side of the bridge and the “winding hole” just beyond the bridge was a turning area for boats bringing grain to Butlers Mill.

The Trooper was the name given to a Civil War horse soldier. The **Battle of Rowton Moor** took place around the townships of Rowton and Christleton on September 24th 1645. The Parliamentarians had control of Christleton and King Charles 1st was within the city walls in Chester.



Troopers



Butler’s Mill & Quarry Bridge (121)

Now walk along the towpath east towards **Quarry Bridge** and “**The Cheshire Cat Inn**”. Stop at the former **Butlers Mill**.

Butler’s Mill

This mill on the south side of the Shropshire Union Canal on Whitchurch Road, was primarily used for producing animal feeds, but also produced flour for its own bakery. The Butler Family were also heavily involved in the life of Christleton village. In addition to the mill and bakery at Roadside, they owned the Village Stores in Village Road, and built a large number of properties on Roadside and along Whitchurch Road. They also owned the first Petrol Station in the village, on what is now Durban Avenue.

Tom Butler started in business as a grocer and corn dealer in the mid nineteenth century. The mill itself was motorised and was very active in producing various kinds of grain and animal feed stuffs until 1975. Older inhabitants of the village remembered when wide “Mersey flats” would be lined up uploading grain into the mill by the cantilevered hoist which extended over the canal. This was operated by a gas powered system, and by using the power of the heavy horse which pulled most of these barges. The horses would be walked along the towpath in the direction of the canal turning circle under Quarry Bridge, as the hoist lifted the bags of grain into the mill. This hoist framework is still a feature of the mill, although the buildings have now been turned into flats and residential accommodation.*

On the roadside of the building, large wagons could be seen loading flour, corn and animal feeds, and taken to farms in outlying parts of the district. A separate bakery produced bread to be sold in the village, and photographs exist of a donkey cart being used to take the bread being delivered. We also have a photograph of the miller and his baker standing on the canal side of the building with large paddles used in the process of making bread. The bakery closed in the 1930’s.

**"Mersey flats" were double width canal boats used mainly for transporting large amounts of grain, in this instance between Nantwich and Ellesmere Port. Some had sails and could come into the port of Chester via the River Dee. These flat boats on the canal were also put to good use during WWI taking injured troops to Beeston Castle for rest and recuperation. The outings started and finished by Butlers Mill. This first visit was paid for by Mrs Melchoir from Moor Lane in Rowton and supported by townspeople from Chester. In 1918 two "Mersey flats" took St James' Sunday School, and on another occasion all the children from the village on outings along the canal to Beeston, each paid for by Mrs Townsend Logan, whose husband Lt Col Edward Townsend Logan had been killed in France in command of the 15th Battalion Durham Light Infantry.*

**Walk along the towpath and keep your eyes open for the "dovecot" on the A41.
(The new housing being built here might just obstruct your view.)**

This unique pipe was part of the village sewerage system and was the vent pipe for sewage being pumped uphill towards Chester.

*In the distance to your right is **Christleton Grange** a grand house built in the 19C was once the home of **Dr Fleming MD** whose grandson Capt. Hugh St John Hartford was killed in France during WWI.*

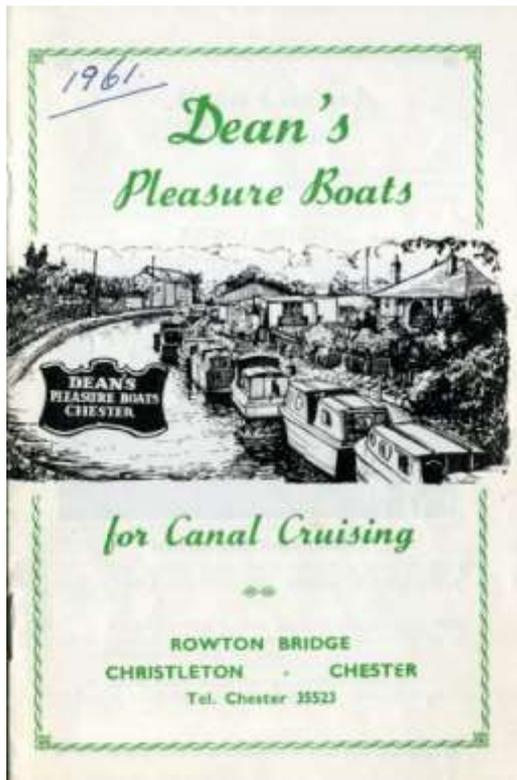
Continue walking until you reach the Cheshire Cat Inn with the slipway opposite to your left.

The Cheshire Cat.

*The Georgian style house now "**The Cheshire Cat Inn**" was built for Mr Heywood, a wealthy wool merchant from Manchester, someone who contributed a great deal to the local community of Christleton and to the City of Chester. This site was also a productive market garden until the 1980s and was also used as a Headquarters by the Military in WWII*

Boat building in Christleton.

On your left you will see a slipway, which was once used to launch pleasure boats by **John Dean & Sons**. This was just one of three boat building yards in the area, with **Wain's** and **Luxton's** yards sited on Skips Lane just beyond Rowton Bridge.



It was in Christleton in the 1930s that two of the earliest canal boat hire companies on the whole network were established. They were the first to operate extensively and advertise nationally. The earlier of the two main yards was the **Inland Cruising Association** founded by Geoffrey Wain and friends in 1935. Their hire base was built in a field adjacent to Wain's house in Skips Lane, and the wharf was covered by a canopy from a nearby Petrol Station owned by Thomas Butler on Durban Avenue. The business was successful and by 1939 they had a fleet of 13 boats. The outbreak of war caused a reduction in trade and the number of boats but after the war the business was restarted by converting four ex landing craft to canal cruisers. Geoffrey Wain died in 1956 and his son David took over expanding the boat building using traditional craft skills. The business was sold in 1973, and the impressive detached houses we see today were constructed with their gardens down to the waters edge hiding this unique history of this small village. The main competition to Wain's was from Jack & Sid Dean, a family of local builders who set up their marina in 1947, still known today as Deans Marina. Dean's also converted ex army pontoons into cabin cruisers and later constructed marine ply boats themselves. One of the most amusing incidents to take place along the canal happened in the winter of 1962/63 when David Wain drove his Vauxhall car on the frozen canal from Christleton to Waverton & back!!

Over 100 small wooden pleasure craft were built on these three sites, and were inspired by the exploits of **L T C (Lionel) Rolt** who created a new enthusiasm for the canal industry in the 1930s. His grandmother Annie who lived at what is now Birch Heath Lodge was the sister of Canon Garnett hence his Christian name Lionel.



2014 Steam driven "President" from Black Country Museum towing a butty boat at Rowton Bridge.

Now walk up the slip to the gate at Rowton Bridge, and turn left over the bridge towards the village.

*The middle of the first three cottages **Twocotts** was the home of George the "Salt Man" where you could purchase salt to keep your meat salted and hung for your family through the hard winter months in Victorian times. Often these hams and other joints, together with cheeses and fruit would be stored in the village "**Ice House**" just to the right of the main entrance to Christleton High School.*

Walk along Village Road and up to the Village Green to end The Boatmans' Tale.