

## **London Canal Museum Podcast script – Podcast 1**

**May 2007**

### **PART ONE**

*(part one is aimed at the listener in his/her own home, on the train to work, etc)*

There have been man-made canals in Britain for centuries, but canal building only took off after 1776, when the Bridgewater Canal, in the north west of England, demonstrated their potential. They made the industrial revolution possible; without them inland transport would have remained a very difficult, slow, and expensive business that could not have coped with the demands of the new industries.

Canals reached London rather late: it was not until 1801 that the Grand Junction Canal, - much later a part of the famous Grand Union Canal - opened a branch to Paddington. It brought Birmingham and the north of England rather closer by water to a large part of London. The Grand Junction had reached Brentford earlier, in 1794, offering a somewhat circuitous route to London via the River Thames. It was the river that had always been London's great water highway, but although it linked the capital to the sea, it only provided a slow and roundabout route north via the winding Oxford Canal.

The Grand Junction Canal transformed the village of Paddington into a thriving inland port, where goods were transferred to warehouses and carts that used the New Road, now Marylebone and Euston Roads, to carry them on to other parts of a growing metropolis. But this was not really good enough and it wasn't long before plans were being made to build a further waterway on to the docks in the east of London. It took

until 1820 for this new canal to be built, and opened. The Regent's Canal skirted around the then built-up area, to connect the Grand Junction with the docks. Indeed it had a dock of its own, the Regent's Canal Dock at Limehouse, where goods were exchanged between seagoing ships and canal boats.

Canal boats were at first crewed by land-based men but as the railways began to compete with water transport in the 1830s and 1840s, costs had to be reduced and the family operated boat took over much of the long distance trade. Families lived in extremely cramped conditions and had no other home. From this period the famous tradition of brightly decorated boats grew up, although nobody is really sure how it started. The decorations usually included depictions of castles, and roses or other flowers. By today's standards the living conditions were appalling but the largely outdoor life was less unhealthy than that of the 19<sup>th</sup> century urban poor, living in crowded slums.

One of the most surprising cargoes on the London canals was natural ice, imported from the cold mountains of Norway. Ice was imported in large quantities from the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century until the early 1900s. One of the leading importers was Carlo Gatti, an immigrant from Switzerland who built up a large business in the trade. Gatti built two huge ice wells beside Battlebridge Basin on the Regent's Canal near King's Cross and a large warehouse above ground to cover them and, it is thought, stack even more ice above ground. There were a number of other ice wells alongside the canal – north London was ideal for these wells because of its clay soil. Gatti's wells at King's Cross are the only such wells in preservation that can be seen, in London or anywhere else

in Britain. These commercial wells differ in scale from the small ice houses of country estates.

The building that was once Gatti's ice warehouse, with its wells beneath, is now the London Canal Museum. The adjoining basin is now something of an urban beauty spot, hidden away from the busy district that is King's Cross today, and home to many colourful canal boats. The museum building was substantially rebuilt, after ice imports ceased, in 1905, as a stables for the ice cart horses that now delivered man-made ice, made possible by the march of technology. The fine Victorian roof and the colourful exhibits combine to make a place of great charm and character. The museum tells the story of the London canals and the people who worked on them. There is an exhibition called "Horse Power" that tells the horse's tale, for the horse was essential to the canals, for hauling boats, and to the ice trade, for delivery to the customer. Visitors can go inside a canal boat cabin and wonder what it must have been like to bring up a string of children in a tiny cabin. They can also peer down into the huge partly excavated ice well, and see an exhibition about the forgotten trade that kept Victorian London cool, and that is now hardly remembered, but for the heritage preserved in this unique museum.