
6.0 TOURISM AND LEISURE

6.1 Introduction

The St Helens Canal is not located in an area of high scenic value but for much of its length it runs through a pleasant green corridor, the Sankey Valley, between urban areas.

A population of some 4 million are with ½ hours travel and most of the North West Region about 8 million is within 1 hours travel.

The North West is rich in industrial heritage and many of the most popular visitor attractions are centred around waterway features for example Wigan Pier, the Boat Museum at Ellesmere Port, Castlefields in Manchester and Albert Dock in Liverpool.

The restoration of the St Helens Canal would create an additional tourist/leisure facility for both formal and informal activities. These activities could include:

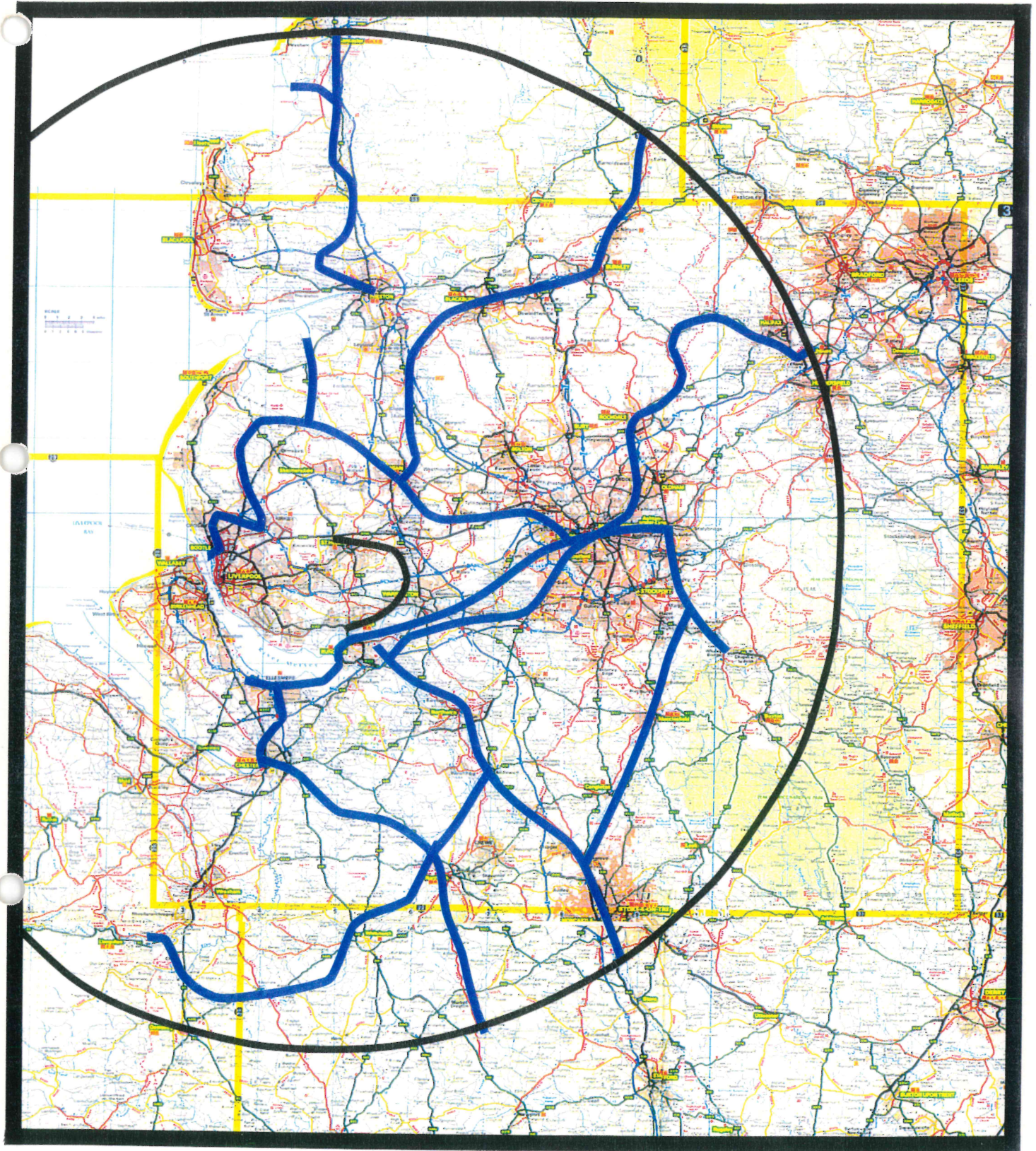
- boat hire
- trip boats
- private boats
- canoeing
- angling
- walking
- cycling
- horse riding
- "gongoozling"

This section of the report examines the factors affecting formal (ie. boating) and informal (ie. non-boating) activities on the canal and wider factors which will influence the use of the St Helens Canal as a whole.

6.2 Waterways in the Region

There are a number of waterways within 40 miles of St Helens as shown in Figure 4.

The Manchester Ship Canal and the Weaver Navigation are considered to be commercial waterways, although the future of the latter will depend increasingly



ST HELENS CANAL
Waterways in the Region

FIGURE 4

on the leisure traffic particularly with the restoration of the Anderton Lift connecting it to the Trent and Mersey Canal, which is expected to be completed by 1999. The main leisure or cruising waterways are described below.

The Leeds and Liverpool

The Leeds and Liverpool Canal is 127 miles in length, excluding its branches. It is the longest canal in Britain built by a single company and took 40 years to build after authorisation in 1770. It has over 72 public houses and seven boatyards, two of which provide boat hire.

Rufford Branch

Completed in 1781, the branch leaves the Leeds and Liverpool Canal at Burscough, some ten miles north of St Helens. It has five public houses and one boatyard.

Leigh Branch

This branch leaves the Leeds and Liverpool Canal at Wigan Power Station providing an important link to the Bridgewater Canal. It has nine public houses and no boatyards.

Peak Forest Canal

The Peak Forest Canal was authorised by an Act of Parliament in 1794 initially to provide an outlet for limestone at Doveholes. It was completed in 1800 and now accommodates 11 public houses and three boatyards, one of which provides boat hire and boat trips.

Macclesfield Canal

This canal, opened in 1831 forms part of the 100 mile Cheshire Ring. It has 31 public houses and eight boatyards, three providing boat hire.

Trent and Mersey

In 1766 the Trent and Mersey Canal Act was passed by Parliament and subsequently opened in 1777. In the industrial era it was important to the pottery industry and now forms part of a popular cruising circuit, the Cheshire Ring. It

has over 30 public houses and twelve boatyards, five providing boat hire and two providing boat trips.

Llangollen Canal

This canal is the most popular cruising canal in the country, with 31 public houses and seven boatyards, all providing boat hire, and a canal museum at Llangollen which also arranges boat trips.

Shropshire Union Canal

The Shropshire Union Canal was formed from the Chester Canal and the Birmingham and Liverpool Junction Canal. The through route was completed after the Act of 1825 and opened in 1835 as an important form of transport for the pottery industry. It has in the region of 35 public houses and fourteen boatyards, with half providing boat hire, and the Boat Museum at Ellesmere Port also providing boat trips.

Bridgewater Canal

The first section, opened in 1761, was constructed to carry coal from Worsley to Manchester and, for this reason, it consisted partly of underground canals which carried coal from the mines. The canal was extended to Runcorn, being completed in 1776 and was used commercially until 1974. It now has no locks along its length but has two to connect it to the Manchester Ship Canal. There are approximately 35 public houses along its route and eleven boatyards, four providing boat hire and two providing boat trips.

Rochdale Canal

The Rochdale Canal, one of three cross-pennine routes, is currently in two sections, one of which is connected to the national waterway network, and the other which is an isolated canal. The central section of the canal has not yet been restored for navigable use.

Calder and Hebble Canal

This canal was originally linked to the Rochdale Canal and hence to Manchester but has been separated by an unnavigable break for some while. However, in

May 1996 connection should once again be made to reopen the entire canal. There are seventeen public houses and one boatyard on the canal.

Lancaster Canal

This canal, constructed in 1792, is an isolated canal providing access from Lancaster to Preston. The canal was truncated by the M6 and now provides 45 miles of lock free cruising with approximately 45 public houses and five boatyards, one of which provides boat hire and boat trips. Although connected to the sea via the Glasson Branch, the Lancaster Canal was never connected by water to the national canal system. However, studies are in hand for a link to the River Ribble via which a navigable connection could be made to the Rufford branch of the Leeds and Liverpool Canal.

St Helens Canal

The majority of these canals have become very popular leisure/tourism facilities providing environmental, social and economic benefits to their immediate area. Although the St Helens Canal has the potential to plug into these markets, problems arise because of its isolated nature ie. it is not part of the national canal network.

6.3 Isolated Waterways

The St Helens Canal has the disadvantage that it is an isolated canal with no link to the rest of the canal network. Although the canal is equally attractive to the informal users (ie. non-boating) as any other canals connected to the national network, the effects are felt by the formal users, mainly the boat hire market. This characteristic can substantially reduce the canals attractiveness as a route for boat hire as a result of the limited cruising length and the repetition of a return journey. It is for this reason that circular routes are the most popular.

However, the St Helens Canal is not the only isolated waterway in the United Kingdom. There are a number of other canals with this characteristic either as originally constructed or through disuse, including: the Chelmer and Blackwater Navigation, the Medway Navigation, the Rochdale Canal (section), the Montgomery Canal (section), the Lancaster Canal and the Brecon and Abergavenny Canal (also known as the Monmouthshire and Brecon Canal).

Chelmer and Blackwater Navigation

The Chelmer and Blackwater Navigation consists of 13 miles of canal and 11 locks. It was opened in 1797 with the main purpose of transporting coal, grain and timber and was used until 1972. Recent years have seen a change in the promotion of boat hire and the canal has benefited from a significant increase in the short break market.

The canal is unique in that it passes solely through rural areas with no urban development seen along its route (including the absence of any canal side pubs). The scenery is very attractive and cruising holidays are therefore sold on the basis of its rural attractions for example country parks, lakes and nature trails. A number of churches on the route of the navigation are the only advertised attractions.

The canal does eventually reach Chelmsford but this has fewer attractions than St Helens. There is one hire boat base on the Chelmer and Blackwater Navigation which is based in Chelmsford with 4 boats. As a result of this waterway being isolated and a return cruise is only 14 hours, Blackwater Boats offer 3-4 night short breaks as well as weekly holidays as required.

Medway Navigation

The Medway Navigation, in Kent, passes through two major market towns, Maidstone and Tonbridge. Despite this, however, the route of the waterway is mainly rural. The tourist attractions are therefore scenic and activities would include walks, nature trails and visits to country parks. Its length is approximately 18 miles with 9 locks. This would allow for a 14 hour return cruise.

There is only one boat hire base on the Medway Navigation, the Tovil Bridge Marina which has three boats. It advertises from 1 day hire to 7 day hire which allows for either a short break or a leisurely longer holiday.

Rochdale Canal

The Rochdale Canal, completed in 1804, was one of three Trans-Pennine waterways. The course of the canal was from Manchester to Halifax linking the Bridgewater and the Calder and Hebble Navigations, a total of 33 miles with 92 locks. The canal reached a state of disrepair and the last boat made the passage in 1937. Restoration began in 1970 with 2 miles of the canal in Manchester

(which is not an isolated waterway and is therefore irrelevant to this study) and later the restoration of 15 miles of the canal on the Halifax section. This 15 mile section originally linked to the Calder and Hebble Navigation but there is now an unnavigable break which results in an isolated waterway.

Following the restoration of the Rochdale Canal, Shire Cruisers, based on the Calder and Hebble, placed one boat on the canal as a good will gesture for the restoration of the canal. This proved very successful and subsequently the hire boat base on the Rochdale Canal expanded. There are now two hire boat bases, Shire Cruisers and Baltimore Boats, and one trip boat company, Calder Valley Cruising. The canal has proved such a success as a result of the scenery and the fact that it passes through the Pennines where walking is most popular.

The canal has a return cruise period of approximately 24 hours, suitable for both short break and leisurely holidays. Both Shire Cruisers and Baltimore Boats offer 3-4 day short breaks and 7-10 day holidays.

In May 1996 the break will be removed and, once again, a major part of the Rochdale Canal will be connected to the national canal network.

Montgomery Canal

The section of Montgomery Canal presently navigable consists of 5 locks and 9 miles of restored canal (the Welshpool section) although the original length of the canal was 35 miles. The canal route is from Ardleen to Welshpool which is a popular tourist town in Mid Wales. Attractions along the canal include nature reserves, walks, steam railway and a number of public houses and restaurants.

Anglo-Welsh is the only hire boat base on the canal and with only one boat. This may, in fact, be similar to the circumstances on the Rochdale Canal where a hire boat was placed on the canal as a political exercise.

Lancaster Canal

The Lancaster Canal was constructed in 1792 from Kendal to Preston. The canal was unique in that the 75 miles of canal had only 8 locks. Since the 1930s, however, the canal has been progressively shortened at the northern end and today the canal is 45 miles long with no locks on the main line (the Glasson Branch to the River Lune has 6 locks).

There are four hire boat bases on the Lancaster Canal: Canal Boat Hire; Arlen Hire Boats; Preston Hire Cruisers and Nu-Way Acorn. Canal Boat Hire, based in Lancaster, offers 2-4 night short breaks and day hire. A further two companies, the Lady Fiona and the Duke of Lancaster offer boat trips on the canal in Lancaster.

Although the length of the canal would accommodate a holiday cruise (approximately 33 hours return cruise) and Lancaster is an established tourist centre, the canal is one of the least popular. These may be due to the relatively few locks on the canal, which consequently limit the attractiveness and enjoyment of the cruise. The scenery, although pleasant, is not spectacular in comparison to some of the other waterways in the area, for example, the Rochdale Canal. As a result, one of the boat hire bases on the canal offers one-way short breaks.

Brecon and Abergavenny Canal/Monmouthshire and Brecon Canal

The Brecon and Abergavenny Canal was opened in 1796, abandoned and partly infilled in 1962. Almost immediately after the abandonment and with the development of the Brecon Beacons National Park, the potential of the canal for tourism purposes was realised. Restoration began in 1964 and the canal was reopened as far as Cwmbran in 1970. It now offers 35 miles of cruising with 6 locks and two tunnels. It is one of the most outstanding cruising waterways of all the canals in the country extending up into the Brecon Beacons National Park.

There are at least five boat hire bases including: Castle Narrowboats, Road House Holiday Hire Narrowboats, Red Line Boats, Beacon Park Boats and Cambrian Cruisers. There are also two boat trip companies, one operating from Abergavenny and the other from Gilwern. It is interesting to note that none of these hire boat bases offer short breaks (only one week holidays are available). This is due to the attractiveness of the scenery through which the canal passes and the paces of interest that are readily accessible. The client market usually consists of walkers and those interested in mooring at a particular point and spending the day off the boat. This canal is not used as an intensive cruising route.

In the past the majority of canal holidays, particularly those which form part of a cruising ring, are promoted and sold on the basis of their cruising route through a specific countryside.

As many of the boat hire operators on isolated waterways have realised, in situations where the cruising route is limited, i.e. on short isolated canals,

promotion of other benefits are required. These benefits include places of interest and attractions along the route. This is particularly important with short canals providing only 10-15 hours cruising.

6.4 Access to the St Helens Canal

The benefits to be derived from restoring the St Helens Canal are severely affected by its comparatively short length and the difficult access from the rest of the canal system. The St Helens Canal is only accessible from the River Mersey via either Widnes Lock or Fiddlers Ferry Lock. Any journey from the inland waterway system would involve, therefore, navigating the tidal estuary and also, on most of the possible routes, the Manchester Ship Canal, both of which create a number of difficulties.

At present, because of the closure of many former locks into the estuary, there are only two practicable routes to the St Helens Canal. One, from the Leeds and Liverpool Canal terminus at Stanley Dock, requires a passage through the Liverpool Dock System to exit at Langton Lock, in an exposed location at the mouth of the estuary, and then a passage of about 22 miles upriver to Widnes. This journey could be hazardous for small inland craft and would require favourable tide and weather conditions. It is, however, a route that is used occasionally by canal craft travelling between Stanley Dock and the Boat Museum at Ellesmere Port.

The other route is via the Manchester Ship Canal to Eastham and then about 12 miles up river within the inner estuary to Widnes, which although not as exposed to the sea, still requires favourable tide and weather conditions. Access to the Ship Canal from the inland waterways system is currently possible at Ellesmere Port from the Shropshire Union Canal, at Frodsham from the Weaver Navigation and at Manchester (Pomona and Hulme Locks) from the Bridgewater Canal.

The difficult passage within the tidal estuary could be reduced in length if it were possible to restore and reopen former locks on the Ship Canal eg. Weston Mersey Lock or Old Quay Lock in Runcorn or Walton Lock in Warrington. It is unfortunate, in this context, that since the closure and removal of the Runcorn flight of locks, there is no longer a direct connection between the Bridgewater Canal and the Ship Canal at Runcorn.

Reopening the Old Quay Lock, for example, would reduce the crossing of the River Mersey to approximately a half-mile. Narrowboats and other pleasure craft could reach this lock from a number of different waterways:

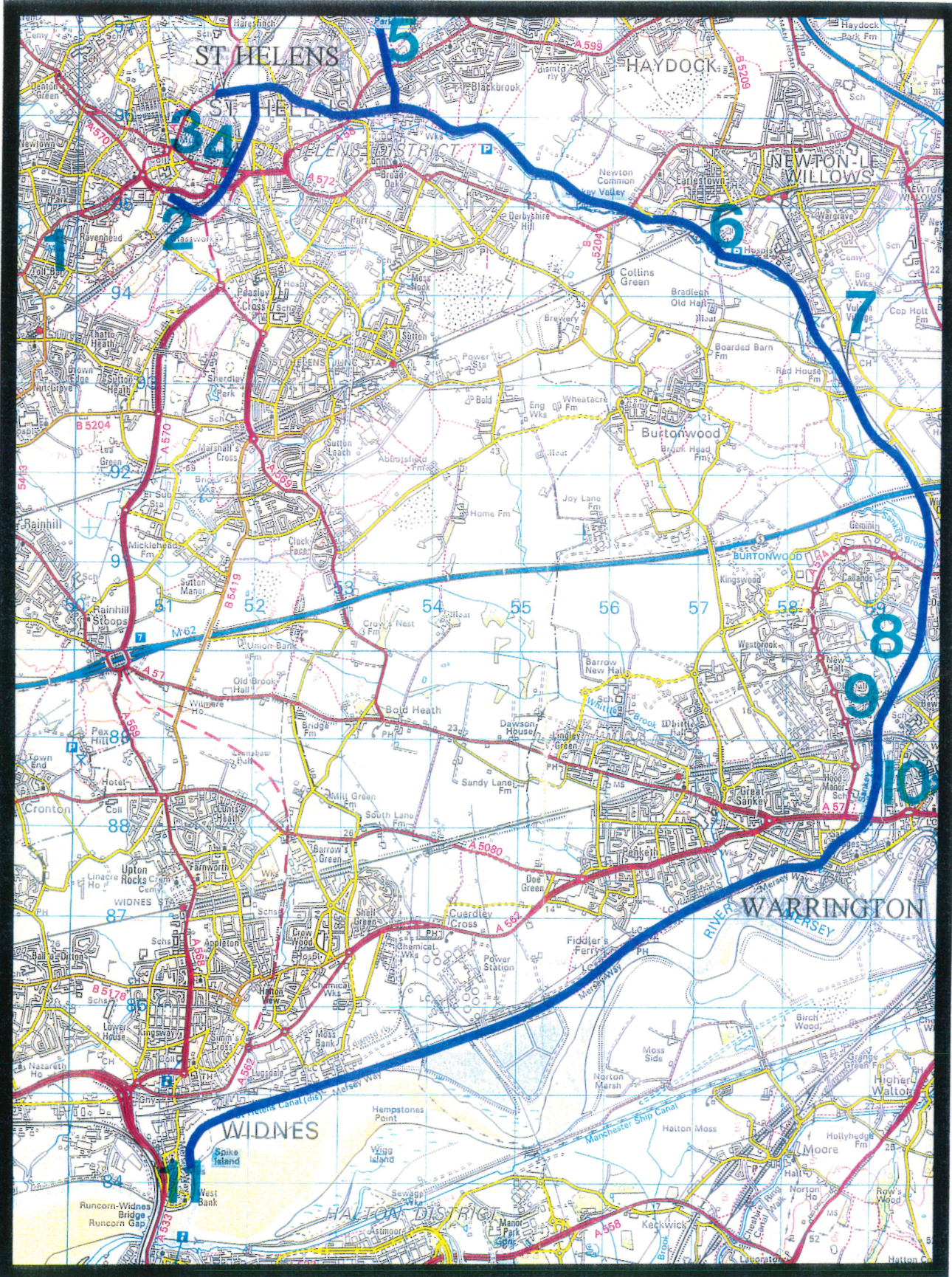
- the Shropshire Union Canal to Ellesmere Port and 10 miles on the Manchester Ship Canal to Runcorn
- the Trent and Mersey Canal and the Weaver Navigation to Frodsham and 3 miles on the Ship Canal to Runcorn, providing the restoration of the Anderton Lift continues as planned
- the Trent and Mersey Canal and Bridgewater Canal to Runcorn, descending via a restored flight of locks at Runcorn to the Ship Canal
- the Bridgewater Canal to Manchester and the Ship Canal to Runcorn

Alternatively restoration and reopening of Walton Lock, 6 miles east of Runcorn would give access to the tidal River Mersey and a 5 mile cruise down stream to Fiddlers Ferry Lock on the St Helens Canal would then be possible.

The major difficulty with the above options is cruising on the Manchester Ship Canal. At present narrowboats and other pleasure craft are allowed to travel on the Ship Canal, by arrangement, although there strict regulations governing the passage. There is a large amount of paperwork to complete prior to the travel date with costs in the region of £150 (depending on the length of the boat and the distance of travel) and also requirements during travel of, for example, an anchor, extra long chain, lights, maps. The ideal route would, therefore, minimise the distance to be travelled along the Ship Canal.

6.5 Attractions along the Route of the Canal

Attractions along the route of the St Helens Canal are equally important to the informal and formal users of the canal. Eight attractions of significance have been identified with a further three sites identified as having potential for development as tourist attractions; the locations are shown on Figure 5.



- 1 Pilkington Glass Museum
- 2 Hotties Science and Arts Centre
- 3 St Helens Museum and Art Gallery
- 4 The Transport Museum
- 5 The Sankey Valley Country Park Visitors Centre
- 6 Sankey Valley Viaduct
- 7 Vulcan Village
- 8 Gulliver's World
- 9 Old Bewsey Hall
- 10 The Warrington Museum
- 11 The Catalyst Museum

ST HELENS CANAL

Current and Potential
Attractions along the route
of the Canal

FIGURE 5

Current Attractions

Pilkington Glass Museum

Situated on Prescott Road this is approximately 1.2 km from the canal in St Helens town centre. The museum exhibits the history of glassmaking techniques from the ancient Egyptians to the present day, the applications of glass and hands on exhibits. Entrance is free of charge. The museum had approximately 23,000 visitors in 1994.

Hotties Science and Arts Centre

The Hotties Science and Arts Centre is proposed for the old Pilkington Glass building alongside the Chalon Court Hotel. At present, portacabins are located in the car park opposite, housing an exhibition on the proposed centre. The old brick building, which is the first in St Helens in which glass was produced, is a listed building and will eventually become a heritage centre devoted to the development of St Helens through its industrial expansion. It is known as "The Hotties" because of the hot water which was used in the cooling process in the nearby glassworks is returned to the canal at this point via the sprinkler nozzles along the bank.

St Helens Museum and Art Gallery

Located in the centre of St Helens, it is 700 metres from the canal. It displays the history, present and future of St Helens looking at mining, glassmaking, homelife and leisure. The Art Gallery features a permanent collection of paintings, touring exhibitions and displays by local artists. Entrance is free. There were 18,384 visitors to the museum in 1994.

The Transport Museum

Also situated in St Helens town centre, it is approximately 200m from the canal. It contains a collection of over hundred vehicles, ranging from 1902 to 1972. The entrance fee for adults is £1.00 and for children and OAP's it is 50p.

The Sankey Valley Country Park Visitors Centre

The Sankey Valley Country Park stretches from the St Helens section of the canal to the River Mersey. It is, therefore, under the control of the various councils

through which it passes and within each Borough there is a visitor centre. In St Helens this is located towards the top of the Blackbrook Branch, in Warrington it is at Bewsey Hall and in Halton it is at Spike Island.

Gulliver's World

This theme park is situated in Warrington, 500 metres from the canal. It is ideal for a family day out with over 40 rides and attractions. The entrance fee is £4.95 per person and includes all the rides in the park.

The Warrington Museum

The museum, opened in 1848, is approximately 1.3km from the canal and has a collection of items from all over the world in areas of natural science, art, ethnology and local history. Admission to the museum and gallery is free. There were 89,280 visitors to the museum in 1994, a 57% increase from the previous year.

The Catalyst Museum

The Catalyst is an award winning museum of science and technology and is only 200 metres from the St Helens Canal. It has a high level of interpretation with hi-tech, interactive exhibits for both children and adults based the chemical industry. Other facilities include a cafe, shop, education service and conference facilities. The entrance fee is £3.00 for adults and £2.25 for children. In 1994 there were 40,000 visitors.

Sites with Potential for Development As Tourist Attractions

There are a number of sites/features along the length of the canal which have been identified as capable of development as tourist attractions. Some simply require a small level of interpretation while others require a substantial level of investment.

Sankey Viaduct

The Sankey Viaduct, also known locally as Nine Arches, was built in 1830 as part of the Liverpool and Manchester Railway. It is a significant structure constructed in the Classical style with 70 foot high arches. It represents the world's first

steam powered passenger carrying railway crossing the first industrial canal. The viaduct is still in use today, although there are no signs of the canal beneath.

In terms of visitor appeal, no attempt has been made to interpret the Sankey Viaduct as an attraction. Considering its relationship with the canal, and its importance to heritage in the area, there is the potential for its development as a tourist attraction. This would require adequate presentation and interpretation for both formal and informal users of the canal and the area as a whole.

Vulcan Village

Vulcan Village is an industrial village built during the industrial revolution for the workers at the Vulcan Foundry. The foundry was opened by Charles Taylor in 1830 and in 1832 was joined by Robert Stephenson. In total 6,250 steam locomotives were exported to destinations all over the world. The foundry went on to build diesel engines, including the first diesel engine for British Railways and also tankers during World War II. At that time it was very common to develop a village based around an industrial works. Today, few of these residential developments alongside industry survive of which Vulcan Village is one.

Vulcan Village is extremely well preserved. The village never expanded beyond that initially developed for the workers. However, in the 1980's the houses were in a severe state of dilapidation and, as a result of the housing needs for the area, the Local Authority decided to undertake substantial housing and environmental enhancement.

The original character of the village has now returned and hence is an important industrial heritage area. As such, with adequate interpretation, it could become a valuable tourist attraction for visitors interested in industrial heritage. A further attraction of the village is its public house, "Vulcan Inn", located approximately 300m from the canal. The Foundry is now owned by Rushton Diesels, specialists in marine diesels.

Bewsey Old Hall

Bewsey Old Hall, in Section K of the canal route, is the most important historic site in Warrington (Grade II*). It was the home of the Lords of the Manor from the thirteenth century and has been occupied until the beginning of the twentieth

century. It is now partially occupied by the rangers for the hall and its grounds and for the Sankey Valley Country Park.

It has been the aim of the Bewsey Old Hall Heritage Trust to develop the hall as a Heritage Centre for public use with a suggestion that development should be based upon the tourist attraction Llancaiach Fawr Manor in Nelson, South Wales.

This attraction is an award winning living history museum which has been in operation since 1991. The manor house, like Bewsey Old Hall, has a long and detailed history dating back to the seventeenth century and has recently been restored to its previous state.

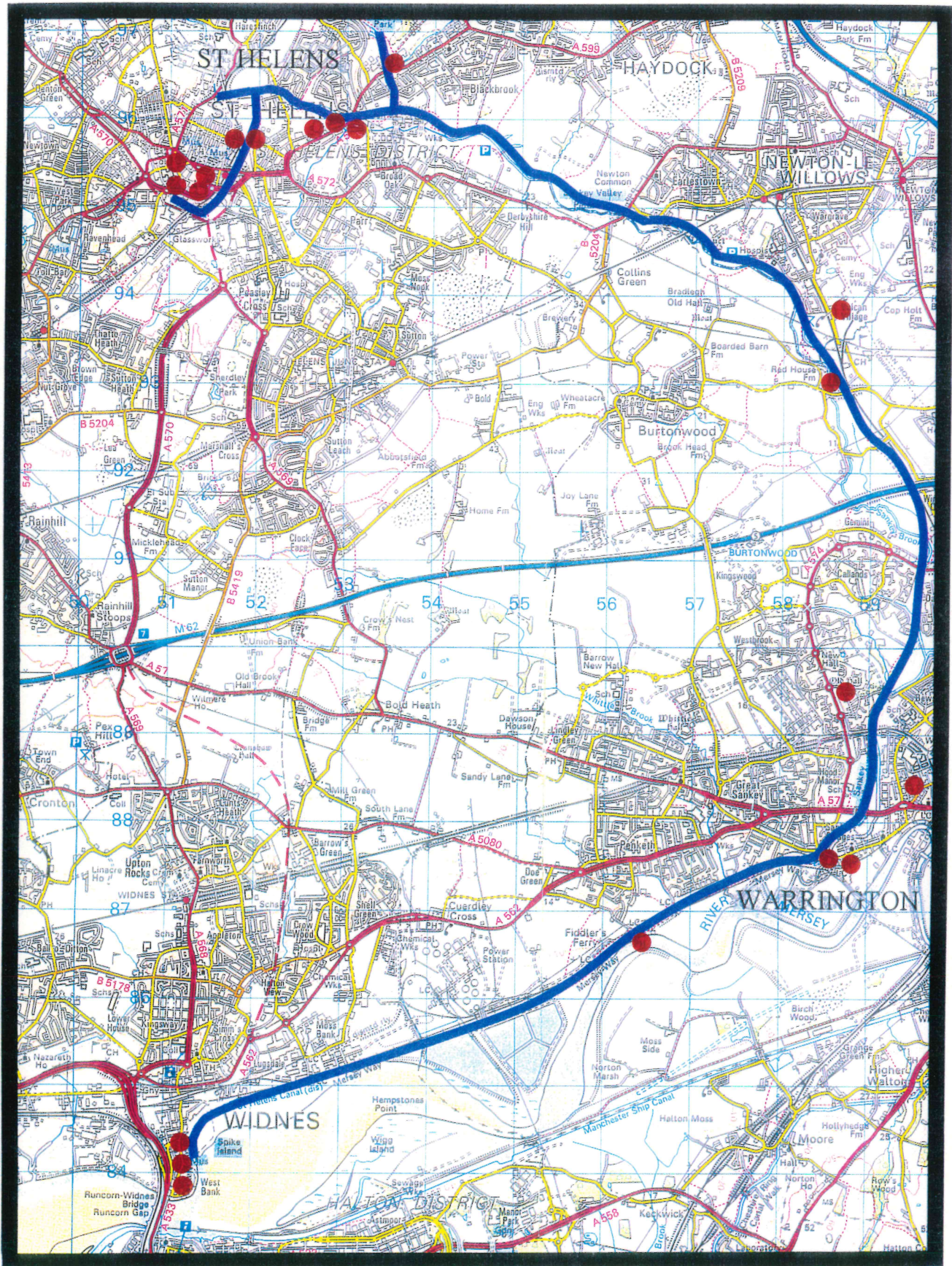
Llancaiach Fawr is based on animated interpretation by characters which lived in the manor in 1645. These characters, the servants of Colonel Prichard, welcome visitors into the house, provide a unique guided tour and integrate with visitors as though they were still in the seventeenth century. The attraction also incorporates a display area (with details of the history of the manor), a cafe, a shop and hosts a number of special events including Ghost Tours, Seventeenth Century Evenings, Craft Fairs and Murder Mystery Evenings.

Llancaiach Fawr has been a great success as a tourist attraction with 26,000 visitors in the first year, 55,000 in the second and 65,000 in the third. Their aim is to receive an average of 120,000 visitors per year. Perhaps more important to history of the local area, the attraction has also been a success in terms of preserving a valuable heritage site.

Public Houses

Public houses are an important facility for visitors to the canal, both informal, for example those cycling or walking the length of the canal, and formal, i.e those on boats stopping for refreshments.

Twenty public houses have been identified within close proximity of the St Helens Canal identified on Figure 6. Over half of these are located in the St Helens region, west of Old Double Lock including: The George Hotel (300m from the canal); The Nelson Hotel (120m); Raven Lodge Hotel (200m); Union Inn (160m); Victoria Hotel (60m); the Black Horse (200m); the Primrose Vaults (2m); the Princess Royal Hotel (20m) and the Ship Inn (40m). There is then a lengthy stretch of canal, from Old Double Lock to Vulcan Village where no public houses in close proximity to the canal have been identified. From this point to Spike



ST HELENS CANAL
 Public Houses along the
 Route of the Canal

FIGURE 6

Island there is an even spread of public houses including: the Vulcan Inn (300m from the canal); the Fiddler i'th Bag Inn (220m); the Mad Hatter (580m); Bewsey Farm (150m); the Sloop Inn (45m); the Black Horse (200m); the Ferry Tavern (2m); the Swan Inn (150m); the Main Top Hotel (240m) and the Angel (280m).

Visitors are also a valuable form of revenue for public houses and if marketed positively, the establishments can receive major benefits from development of a canal. This is likely to encourage further investment, for example, in the development of beer gardens and the provision of meals. They will also be important in the provision of facilities for visitors without which without may reduce the enjoyment of a visit.

6.6 Informal Users

There is a great opportunity for informal users of the St Helens Canal. The Sankey Valley Country Park provides attractive countryside for walking and cycling from one end of the canal to the other with activities include wildlife, conservation and orienteering. There is also a small length designated as a bridleway and along certain lengths of the restored canal day tickets are available for coarse fishing, which is very popular.

The Trans Pennine Trail, which provides a network of paths from the west to east coasts for walkers and cyclists, passes adjacent to the canal in the Halton and part of the Warrington section. The total length of the trail in Warrington is 11.5 miles.

Spike Island, an area of grassland and woodland between the River Mersey and the St Helens Canal, accommodates a large open air festival every summer. The site is also used for a wide range of other events and is an important site for use by informal users of the canal.

The Sankey Valley Country Park in Warrington is also a site for events including the "Sailing the Sankey" and a Medieval Fair.

Although the number of informal visitors to the canal is, at present, high with activities in the Sankey Valley Country Park and nature and heritage trails along its length, there are a number of issues to be addressed if the informal visitors are to benefit from the restoration of the St Helens Canal.

The quality of the route for walkers and cyclists from St Helens to Widnes is inconsistent varying in appearance and quality. There are additional obstacles for cyclist where barriers aimed at preventing motorbikes using the route are inconvenient and an annoyance to cyclists.

Already conflicts between the various informal users are experienced, particularly between those fishing and the walkers and cyclists.

A further concern is that lack of facilities for informal users of the canal corridor at present. In the Sankey Valley Country Park in the Warrington region, for example, no refreshments available and there are extremely poor toilet facilities. There is a similar lack of facilities on other sections of the canal.

Commuting Corridor

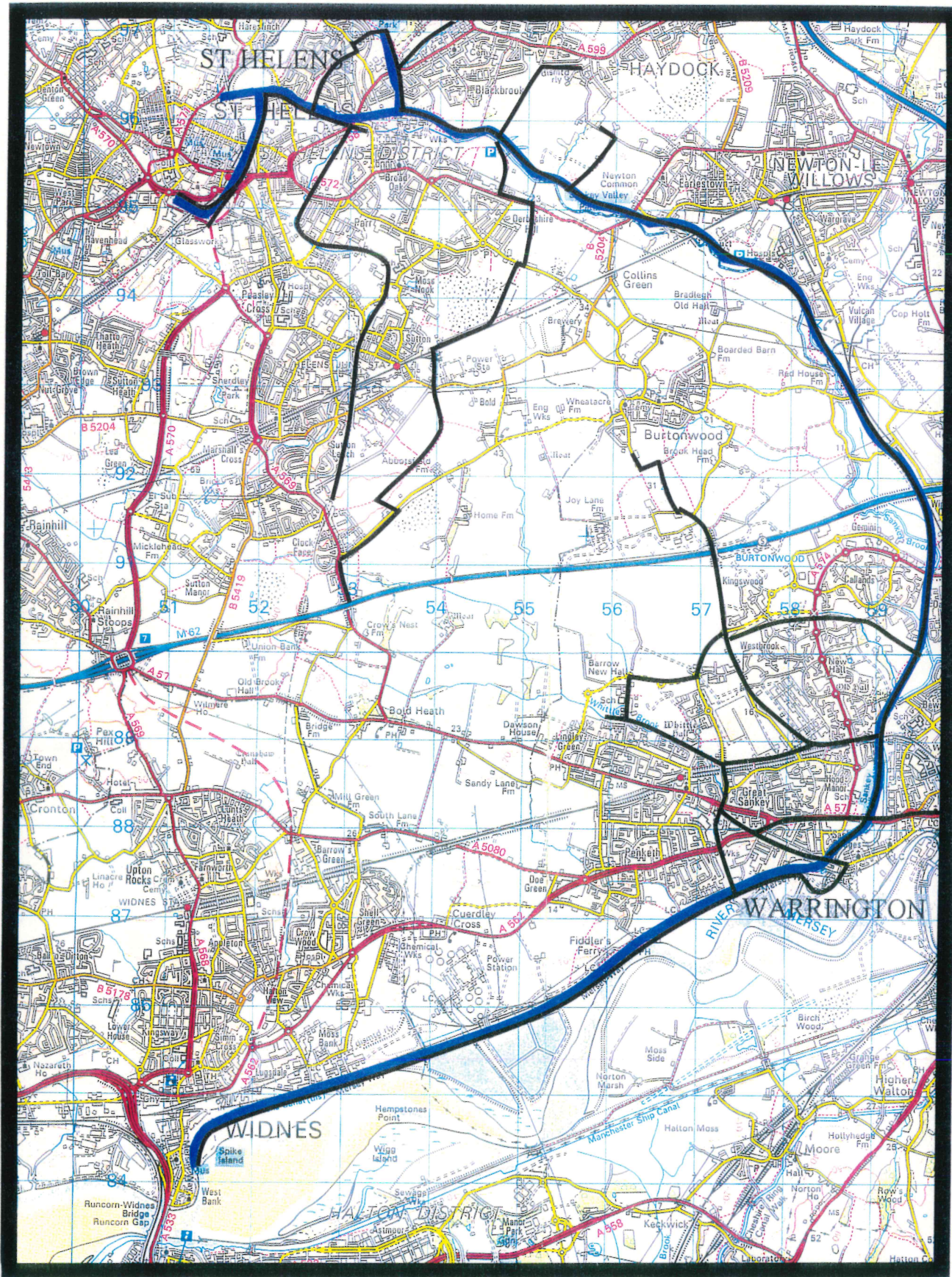
In addition to the use of the canal for informal recreational purposes, it is also predicted that the canal towpath would act as an important route for commuters. The towpath would be a valued traffic free route and would also assist in achieving the strategic planning policies to develop comprehensive network. It is envisaged that the route would be used by both commuting pedestrians and utilitarian cyclists.

This is in line with the St Helens Metropolitan Borough Council's Unitary Development Plan which states that the "council will give due weight to development proposals which would provide new links within the network or improve existing links" and will pursue measure for "the development of an off road pedestrian/cycle network".

Warrington Borough Council has identified the importance of cycling in their future transport system and identified a network of strategic cycle routes connecting main residential area with town centres and district and will establish this network as resources become available. It has been estimated that cycling accounts for between 2% and 6% of all journeys made in Warrington.

Halton Borough Council will also "give favourable consideration to development proposals which provide important additional links in the recreational route network and seek to negotiate such linkages where necessary".

Although a strategic cycling network, shown on Figure 7, has been identified by the individual boroughs, and this network incorporates the majority of the canal,



ST HELENS CANAL
 Strategic Cycle Network
 Adjacent to the Canal

FIGURE 7

this still remains a long term objective. The restoration of the canal, and the development of a multiuser towpath, would assist the borough's in meeting these objectives and help in the development of sustainable transport programme. It would ensure that at a minimum this section of the cycling network was completed possibly earlier than would otherwise have been the case and the completion of adjoining footpaths and cycleways may also be prompted.

The restoration of the canal would also ensure coordination between the three borough councils in the formation of a footpath and cycling network which may not otherwise have occurred.

In restoring the canal a number of facilities and structures will be provided which could not have been financially justified for the sole purpose of developing a footpath and cycle network. The facilities would include commercial developments such as refreshments and environmental improvements. The investment in structures would include the provision of culverts to avoid cyclists having to dismount and cross busy roads, the provision of pegasus crossings, an off road multi-user corridor for the entire section from St Helens town centre to Widnes and a good, consistent surface quality.

The restoration of the canal would form a continuous route from Widnes to St Helens town centre including the section on the main branch, between the Blackbrook Branch and Blackbrook Road, currently not designated by St Helens Borough Council as part of the Strategic footpath and cycling network. A route south of the original alignment of the canal has been identified by the borough, but only between Boardmans Lane and Blackbrook Road. This would provide a continuous off road cycleway from Widnes, and from the Sankey Valley Country Park on the Blackbrook Branch, to St Helens which might not otherwise have been provided.

There are a number of points along the length of the canal where the highway network crosses the original route. Some of the bridges which have been constructed since the closure of the canal have insufficient headroom for cycling. Cyclists must dismount, leave the cycleway, cross the road on foot before rejoining the cycleway. Raising bridges or providing culverts could not be justified for a cycleway but would be provided where it is necessary for boats to pass under the structures. This would apply to the following public highways:

- Parr Street, St Helens;
- Corporation Street, St Helens;

- Park Road, Blackbrook Branch;
- Sankey Way dual carriageway;

where culverts are provided for the towpath, it may still be necessary for cyclists to dismount.

In addition, crossing facilities as appropriate would need to be provided at other road and rail crossing points.

6.7 Visitor Information

The nearest tourist information centre to the St Helens canal is in Warrington. The centre displays a large selection of information on other areas of the UK but information on the immediate area appears limited.

It was noted from the brochures that there was no corporate promotion of the Sankey Valley Park by the three local authorities through which the park lies. Instead, the councils market the park independently and, hence, there is no consistent approach. This lack of coordination between the three authorities was also noted during a site visit. Inconsistencies were recognised from a signage perspective (including logos) and there was also a definite difference in the quality and appearance of the route between the authorities.

Difficulties in obtaining visitor information were also experienced in the Sankey Valley Country Park. Brochures identified information/visitor centres in the park, for example, that on the Blackbrook Branch and that in Old Bewsey Hall. However, on arrival at the centre on the Blackbrook Branch, it was closed and no visitor information was visible. In the park at Bewsey, although Bewsey Old Hall was identified for visitor information, this was at the back of the building which was difficult to find and extremely limited. There is also a visitor centre at Spike Island but this is only open on Sunday afternoons and only at other times by arrangement.

Information boards have recently been erected in the Warrington section and although these provide valuable information on the canal and its heritage, they are covered by an unattractive and obtrusive anti-vandalism grill.

It is essential from both an interpretation and information perspective that a corporate promotional strategy is identified between the three local authorities for the promotion of the canal and its corridor.