Spike Island Urban Heritage Walk

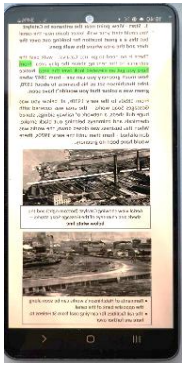
by Bob Roach

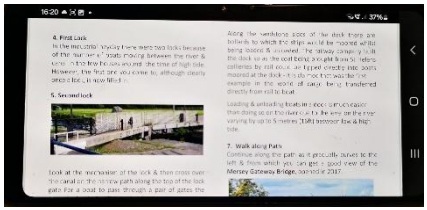
2026

How to Read this Document

This urban heritage guide has a square page layout, with (largely) two columns per page. Hopefully, this allows it to be read on a range of devices. particularly a mobile phone as you walk around the route, e.g.:-

- **With the phone held vertically**, you can read a column at a time without scrolling, and then flick to the next column or page,
- **With the phone held horizontally**, you can read two columns by scrolling down as you read.





Images by Hamish Mill

Maps of the Area – 1895 and Now

Map of the Route

Based on OpenStreetMap

Spike Island?

This doesn't appear to have been a long term name of either the whole area or of the area on the other side of the canal. Up to 40 years ago, the area was often referred to as 'The Cut'. The earliest use of the term 'Spike Island' that I have found is in a booklet with that title produced by M L Greatbatch MA and P J Mercer BA. In the early 1980s, they were involved in assembling written material for a museum 'in order to preserve and record the history of the chemical industry in the Halton area.'

b) Practicalities

Parking

- **Catalyst car park**
- **Boat Club car park** on the banks of the canal

No charge or time restriction on either.

Distance

This walk is about 1.5 km, a little under a mile. The optional addition to the Mersey Gateway viaduct adds an extra 0.5 km, 550 yards. At a brisk walk you could complete it in under 30 minutes but to get in touch with the heritage & nature of the area will take about an hour, or even more if you take your time.

Weather

In good weather, Spike Island can be a very pleasant open space. However, because it is close to a wide section of the River Mersey, **it is exposed to any sun, cool wind or rain that is around**. If sunny, use skin protection cream. If windy & / or there is a possibility of rain, go suitably equipped - **there is no shelter on this route.**

Safety

Water

The walk takes you close to the Sankey Canal and Widnes Dock - care is needed when near open water.

Steep, Slippery Banks

At several places along the route there are warning signs about keeping to the path because of steep & slippery banks between it & the river - be warned!

Wildlife

Swans - see below.

Cyclists

Because the Trans Pennine Trail path is along part of this route (between the lock & the Mersey Gateway viaduct), you need to be aware of cyclists being around - it is wise to keep to one side of the path.

Heritage Walk Around Spike Island - Route Description

The route is marked on the map on the previous page

1. Start - View-point near the entrance to Catalyst
You could start your walk lower down near the canal but **this a a great location for looking out over the river and the area where this walk goes.**

There is no need to go into Catalyst - walk past the entrance to the fencing above the play area. From here you get an elevated look over the area**. Notice how much greenery you can see - from 1847 when John Hutchinson set us his business to about 1970, green was a colour that you wouldn't have seen.**

From 1850s to the early 1930s, all the flat land this side of the canal was Gossages Soap works – the area was covered with huge dull sheds, a network of railway sidings, stored chemicals, and chimneys belching out black smoke. When this business was closed down in the 1930s, the works was demolished - from then until the early 1970s, there would still have been no greenery.

Aerial view showing Catalyst (bottom right) and the sheds and chimneys of the Gossage Works – **below white line**

The canal & river would have been busy with large barges, called Mersey flats, bringing in raw materials & taking product out to market. Nowadays, the boats on the canal are solely for pleasure purposes.

2. Car Park
Walk down past the children's play facilities to the near corner of the car park & then take the unsurfaced path towards the canal. This flatter area is where Gossage set up in business, initially to make alkali but eventually focusing on the manufacture of soap, using the alkali made by others nearby.

If you are starting from the Boat Club car park and don't want to go uphill to the viewpoint outside Catalyst, join the route by walking towards the canal locks.

3. Towards the Lock
At the end of the path from the Catalyst car park, go right towards the lock. See the notice to the right about the **Trans Pennine Trail** that runs from north of Bootle all the way to the North Sea coast. It is popular with cyclists, many doing fairly short stretches but some doing the whole 346km (215 miles) miles of the coast

to coast route. The trail has come along the side of the Mersey from Pickerings Pasture. After passing through Spike Island it follows the Sankey Canal to Fiddlers Ferry & south Warrington.

There are usually numerous swans by the canal, probably attracted by the bread that visitors feed them with - apparently, not a good diet for them!

Although they seem well accustomed to people approaching the lock, it would be wise to keep some distance away from them.

Safety by the canal & locks

Care important because, although there is some fencing, there is a danger of falling - either into deep water if the lock is filled with water or a long drop into shallower water & thick mud if the lock is ready to receive incoming vessels.

4. First Lock

In the industrial heyday there were two locks because of the number of boats moving between the river & canal in the few hours around the time of high tide. However, the first one you come to, although clearly once a lock, is now filled in.

5. Second lock

Look at the mechanism of the lock & then cross over the canal on the narrow path along the top of the lock gate. For a boat to pass through a pair of gates, the water had to be level on each side. Then the pen lock gates would be opened for the boat to pass from canal to river or river to canal.

Look back towards Catalyst from here across the the flat area between the canal and Catalyst where the Gossage Soap Works was located, although all you would have seen then was grey sheds.

Catalyst with its glass lift beyond where Gossage's soap factory used to be. *Photo by Bob Roach*

6. Widnes Dock

Again, be careful of the water.

The large square area of water on your left was Widnes Dock that was connected to the river via locks & not to

the canal. The access between river & dock has also been filled in but you can see where it was.

Along the sandstone sides of the dock there are bollards to which the ships would be moored whilst being loaded & unloaded. The railway company built the dock so as the coal being brought from St Helens collieries by rail could be tipped directly into boats moored at the dock - it is claimed that was the first example in the world of cargo being transferred directly from rail to boat.

Loading & unloading boats in a dock is much easier than doing so on the river due to the level on the river varying by up to 5 metres (16ft) between low & high tide.

7. Walk along Path

Continue along the path as it gradually curves to the left & from which you can get a good view of the **Mersey Gateway Bridge**, opened in 2017.

You may not be able to notice it but, rather than the highest point being in the middle as is normally the case with bridges, the roadway is rising gradually as it nears the Runcorn side - this is to accommodate the masts of ships sailing on the Manchester Ship Canal that is on that side of the river.

Apparently, such a bridge could be built with just two taller towers but due to the proximity of Liverpool Airport, they would have been a hazard to air traffic. It is a good navigation point for pilots flying into the airport.

Fiddlers Ferry Power Station is very noticeable - it is now closed down &, as of Oct 2025, is in the process of being demolished, with just four of the original eight cooling towers remaining. For 50 years, it produced electricity by burning coal, a fossil fuel. The vapour rising from the cooling towers affected the climate of those living to the north, with the vapour either blocking the Sun or creating a damp and misty climate when there was little wind blowing.

Up to Warrington the Mersey is an estuary, i.e.

- there is fresh water from much of the Northwest flowing out to the sea, &
- sea water (i.e. salty) coming in & out from the Irish Sea more or less twice a day, according to the tides.

As a result, there are often wide stretches of sandbank, with channels of fresh water flowing out to sea. A few hours later, when the tide has flowed in, there is no sign of a sandbank.

Can you see if the sea water is coming in, going out or is the flow quite still? With, as already said, a tidal difference up to 5 metres (16 feet), that is a vast amount of sea water coming & going, with the saltwater mixing with the constant stream of fresh water, e.g. from rain.

8. On the Left.

Section of 1849 Ordnance Survey Map Surveyed 1846 to 1847, Published: 1849
Reproduced with the permission of the National Library of Scotland

As the path straightens up, much of the area on your left was a reservoir that supplied water to make up for that lost via the lock gates to Widnes Dock - see the 1895 map. However, that was filled in many years ago, with trees being planted in the 1970s. Even though the land had been badly polluted, they have grown well.

9. Widnes Dock Community

The map shows Spike Island after the construction of the railway and canal. Although there were some small factories in the area, this was before the major developments that are described below.

However, as can be seen, there was a small community with a school and at least one pub (more about that later). There is now no trace of these buildings.

At first, you are walking fairly close to the river - one of the low tide channels usually flows close to the bank. Further on, the river curves away & you are looking out over salt marsh land that can flood when the tide is very high. As a result, there has rarely been much farming here - the area is known as Widnes Warth.

You can also see the approach road to the Mersey Gateway bridge from the Widnes side. Building the bridge & also transporting all the heavy material for the bridge itself across marsh land required an access road of a layer of stone that was removed when construction was completed.

10. On the right – vegetation

Take a look at the range of bushes in the hedge on the right. Depending on the time of year, there can be colourful flowers & berries, some are thorny, some not.

11. Bridge over the Canal

As you carry on walking you come to the canal once again - it has curved around from where you first crossed it. Where the path meets the canal was once the location of a swing bridge. This carried the St Helens to Runcorn Gap Railway (a very early railway) over the Sankey Canal – **both railway and canal were constructed to carry coal from St Helens to the river.**

A new fixed bridge has been installed - the turning mechanism of the original bridge can still be seen.

New fixed bridge, with the remains of the original turning mechanism

Engine crossing the swing bridge over the canal - 1962 – Harry Arnold Archive.
Tower Building (now the location of Catalyst) is on the horizon on the right of the image

Although this part of the Sankey Canal from Fiddlers Ferry was a later addition, the Canal from St Helens to the Mersey near Warrington was opened in 1757. As such, it was **the first industrial era canal in Britain.**

In 2023 a journalist who walked the route of the original canal said that it was **perhaps the most significant improvement in infrastructure since the Romans built their roads.**

12. To the Mersey Gateway Viaduct - **optional**,
an extra 200 m (220 yards) each way.
You can walk along the canal towpath towards & underneath the viaduct. Because the path is fairly

narrow, with the canal on one side, be careful both of the water & also cyclists - I suggest you walk on the hedge side rather than on the water side.

Although it can get quite noisy with the traffic, you may be interested to see from below how the viaduct was constructed. Also, look at a nearby concrete support for the viaduct - rather than the concrete pillar directly bearing the weight of the road, you can just make out a springing mechanism that responds to the weight of traffic. You can hear when a vehicle passes over this mechanism.

The canal-side path continues for miles - that suits the cyclists, but I suggest you turn around here & return to where the trains used to cross the canal.

13. From the location of the new bridge across the canal

You are now heading back towards your starting point but by a different route. Walk on the grass alongside the canal as it gradually curves to the left. *Keep well away from the bank of the canal.*

Dam to Retain River Water

Originally, the water for full length of the Sankey Canal was supplied from Carr Mill Dam in the north of St Helens. However, because of several blockages along its route, this supply of water has ceased. At the time of writing, great efforts are being made to maintain a reasonable level of water into the Spike Island section of the canal by constructing a dam near where the canal goes under the Mersey Gateway.

The purpose of this is to retain water that can flow into the canal from the River Mersey at high tides. Drawing in river water like this is not ideal but is better than the depth in this part of the canal being low.

Pub on Spike Island

Although there is no sign of it now, you will walk past the site of the Commercial Inn. One means of getting there was by means of a rudimentary ferry - as can be seen on the photo, passengers stood up and were towed across the canal to and from the pub.

My grandfather lived nearby and liked to go to this pub for a drink. He was said to have arrived home soaking wet a few times because he had fallen into the canal on the way back!

'Ferry' across 'The Cut'

Also named Bob Roach, he worked in the chemical industry and died in 1919 at the age of 44. On his death certificate he was said to have been a 'Chemical labourer' and that he died of tuberculosis, then a very infectious disease and often referred to as consumption. However, perhaps being a chemical worker hadn't helped.

The other side of the canal

The approach to the Mersey Gateway Bridge dominates the view on the other side of the canal. However, for decades railways and factories were main features.

Railways

Whilst the St Helens to Runcorn Gap railway was constructed for carrying cargo, a demand for a passenger service led to the Runcorn Gap station being constructed just to the north of the canal. In addition, rail links to Warrington and Garston were later formed

just north of the canal. 'Runcorn Gap' refers to the narrow part of the River Mersey – where the Silver Jubilee road bridge and the Railway viaduct cross the river.

Factories

Immediately opposite was Gaskell-Deacon alkali works, with other alkali works stretching out along that side of the canal, e.g. Muspratt's (closed about 1958), Widnes Alkali Works, Pilkington & Sons', Sullivan's (the latter two became Pilkington Sullivan Works)..

Alkali Works along the north side of the canal

Muspratt Works, with the Sankey Canal on the right

14. Pyrites Kilns

As you follow the curve of the canal, you come into the area stretched out on this bank of the canal where John Hutchinson set up the first Leblanc factory for manufacturing alkali, a chemical that was used in soap and glass making and a range of other useful substances.

You eventually come to two arch shaped brick structures on the left. Their purpose is to protect remnants of pyrites burners.

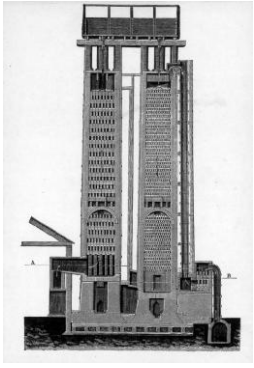
Brickwork sheltering remnants of pyrites burners

The Leblanc process required the manufacture of sulphuric acid & for some years the source of sulphur for this was iron pyrites. This was the one ingredient not available relatively nearby - it had to be imported. The pyrites ore was heated in such kilns & the sulphur was used for the manufacture of sulphuric acid.

15. Tower Bases

Walk away from the canal and turn right on to a wide path. In about 20 m you come to large square blocks of stone on the right - they are York stone, again used because of its chemical resistance. You can see grooves in these large stones that was where towers that were part of the Leblanc process were fitted**.**

Stone bases near the path

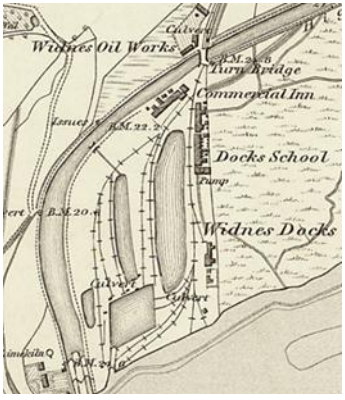


Type of Towers that stood on these bases

Between these bases and the canal there are more stone bases of towers of the Hutchinson alkali works.

From here you can go back to the main path or take the woodland paths as shown below - due to their nature, they are slightly uneven. Take care not to trip.

16. Back to Widnes Dock



If you return to the main path, Widnes Dock appears on your left. As shown on the 1895 Ordnance Survey, where there is now woodland was another reservoir. Also, there were train tracks up to the dock, enabling coal wagons to tip coal directly into boats in the dock.

Crossing back over the Canal

Again, take care crossing the canal on the lock gate. Once you have crossed the canal, your walk is almost completed.

17. Refreshments

There are refreshments available at:-

The café at Catalyst - from the locks, return to the starting point of the walk by either:-

- returning the way you walked down to the canal,
- or carry straight on through an adventure playground area for youngsters and go up a flight of steps

Boat Club Café - from the locks, go right along the side of the canal - the Boat Club Café is the building on the left.

Features About Spike Island

Stone Roses Concert May 1990

There was an attendance of about 30,000 at this historic (for some) concert was in May 1990.

'*… the Stone Roses gig was scary, shambolic – and pure bliss It was an outdoor show that would enter indie folklore, a milestone night in British music history*.' Guardian.

Apparently, the event was nearly affected by a very high tide.

Level of Water in the Canal

The original supply of water to the Sankey Canal was unsalted water from Carr Mill Dam in the north of St Helens. However, that flow is now blocked in several locations along the route of the canal.

For several years, the canal from Fiddlers Ferry to Spike Island was supplied with water by Fiddlers Ferry Power Station – this was part of a large amount taken out of the river for use by the power station.

However, now that the Power Station is closed, that supply is no longer available. As a result, the level of water in the canal has been affected - there have been lengthy periods when it has been low, with boats not having sufficient depth of water to stay afloat.

In an attempt to maintain a reasonable level of water in the canal, the Boat Club members pumped river water into the canal. One problem was that this pumped water could flow from the canal at Spike Island towards Fiddlers Ferry.

However, constructive meetings of all those with an interest in the area led to a decision that Halton Borough Council would arrange for a dam to be constructed under the approach roads to the Mersey Gateway Bridge to reduce losses by it flowing away.

This arrangement of introducing salty river water is untypical of most canals in that they are fed by streams etc.

Dam built to maintain water in the Spike Island part of the canal
In the photo there is water beyond the dam – that was because of heavy rain in days prior to this photo being taken

People Visiting Spike Island

The numerous people who are attracted to visit the canal and the Spike Island area are a wide range of interesting people. Some are just 'one off' or occasional visitors but some are regulars, finding some aspect of the area a strong attraction.

The Swan Enthusiasts

The swans and their cygnets that tend to gather at the lock have their enthusiasts who identify them by name. There are regular posts on Facebook of which swans are currently around, which ones haven't been seen for some time, etc. As well as up to 10 or so swans and several of their cygnets, here are usually Canada geese, ducks and many pigeons around the lock, probably attracted by the food given to the swans, but they don't seem to have attract much attention. It isn't unusual to see herons and egrets in

the area, although perhaps more likely on the riverbank rather than near the canal lock.

The Bird Feeders

They tend to visit to feed any birds that are around, often with bread that is, apparently, not recommended as bird feed. However, the birds seem to like what is on offer and gather around anyone offering food.

Café at the Canal

This is a popular meeting place for quite a few people - perhaps some have been coming here for years. It is a cosy place to get away from the chilly wind that can be around.

Boat Club Members

They have their own room attached to the café. They are often to be seen setting up or looking after a pipeline and a pump that pumps river water into the canal – whilst not as immediately effective as a very high tide, it provides a steady flow of water into the canal or the dock. As this uses quite a lot of fuel, there are sometimes invitations to contribute to the cost of the fuel.,

Spike Island Strollers

Provided the weather is reasonably pleasant (and, such is **the exposed location** it can be very unpleasant at times) there are usually people out for a walk, often with a dog. There are great views over the Mersey estuary at first, and then along the banks of the Sankey Canal, if someone is following a circular route.

Trans Pennine Trail Bikers

Not many of them but because they are moving faster than those of us strolling along, it is wise to be aware of the possibility of them coming up behind you.

Illegal Pitch and Toss Gambling at Spike Island

My source – 'West Bank The Glory Years' on Facebook – extract from Weekly News, March 29th, 1945

A Sunday afternoon raid by police on a gambling school led to eight men being summoned to appear at Widnes Magistrates Court on Monday.

They were summoned for playing pitch and toss and also for trespassing on the L.M.S. Railway.

…

P.S. Aldcroft said that on the afternoon of February 25th he was on duty with Sergt. Travis P. C. Smith and others, when they saw a crowd of between 30 and 40 men playing pitch and toss near the lock-keeper's cabin at Spike Island. They ran away among the railway wagons and other places. All the defendants were caught.

P.c. Travis, who gave corroborative evidence, said watching the game was not allowed. 'You either play or get out' he added. They don't allow ringside seats.'

The question about whether the defendants were trespassing on the ground where the game was being played was raised, and an L.M.S. Railways special constable said they were trespassing going to Spike Island, because they had to cross the lock of the canal, which belonged to the railway company. There were notices to the effect that trespassers would be prosecuted. After the gambling school had broken up the men went straight across the metals, thus committing a trespass.

Smith was questioned by the Chairman as to how he had got to the spot where the gaming school was taking place, and the Chairman said he could not get thereby way of Short Steet without trespassing.

Smith: It has always been a public way.

Edge went into the witness box and swore that Smith took no part in the game.

Smith was fined 6s (30p) for trespassing, the summons against him for gaming was dismissed. All the others except Moran were each fined 6s for trespassing and 10s for gaming.

At a later hearing, Moran was fined 6s for trespass and 12s 6d for gaming.

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With the approach of the Police, those playing would usually scatter, often leaving money on the ground in their rush to get away. Apparently, children would sometimes follow the Police raid to pick up the money.

The later development of the chemical industry elsewhere in Widnes

This is another story and one I hope to describe in a separate publication, e.g., more about the industry:-

- on the north bank of the canal
- on the on the other side of the railway viaduct
- elsewhere in southern Widnes, e.g. what used to be where the Green Oakes shopping area and car parks are now.

In view:-

- Steam train towing wagons; the engine is at the ‘cross-over tracks, heading along the St Helens to Runcorn Gap towards St Helens. The rear trucks are still on Spike Island and have yet to cross the Sankey Canal that can be seen on the left.
- In the background are the towers of the Transporter Bridge, the new Runcorn Widnes Bridge (later to be called the Silver Jubilee Bridge) is being constructed.
- The tower of St Mary’s Church and the Tower Building, built by Hutchinson, and now (with an observatory added on to it) Catalyst Science Discovery Centre and Museum

Appreciation to the 8 D Association of Widnes Railway enthusiasts for permission to use this superb image

I hope you enjoyed the read of this document and that, as a result, you know more about the Spike Island area. Also, if you haven't been there before, I hope this encourages you to go.

Bob Roach

March 2026