



Timewalk of The Mersey Corridor in Warrington



Close your eyes and imagine the story under your feet. The Timewalk of the Mersey Corridor is incredible and starts 4 and a half billion years ago, when the earth formed.

2.7 billion years ago algae-like cells formed. They started producing oxygen, and it took 350 million years for them to make enough oxygen to turn the sky blue for the first time. More than a billion years later the first recognisable animals appeared, jelly-fish and sponges in the sea.

360 million years ago the rainforest of the Carboniferous period grew. Later to form the Lancashire Coalfields.

Coal was formed and buried, it took huge quantities of carbon dioxide out of the atmosphere. This cooled the planet.

Continents shifted.

The dinosaurs ruled the earth from 245 million years until 66 million years ago, possibly wiped out by a major asteroid that hit the earth.

The Timewalk now moves forward rapidly.

Our early ancestors started using stone tools 2 and a half million years ago. The earliest fossil record of modern humans is 190,000 years old.

Early civilisation and the first cities emerged 12,000 years ago.

As the glaciers retreated from the Carbon Landscape 10,000 years ago, it carved out the Mersey River Valley. At the same time hollows in the Upper Mersey Terrace lead to lowland-raised bogs. Sphagnum moss dominated for millennia. Peat bogs are the most effective carbon sink on the planet. A few remaining fragments of these mosslands, with their unique wildlife, can be found in Warrington at Risley, Pestfurlong and Holcroft.

An international team, led by researchers from the University of Oxford, looked at the DNA of 2000 people from rural communities with at least 4 generations living in the same area. This suggests Neolithic nomads were travelling through Warrington between 4000 and 2500 BCE. These people were genetically diverse from the celts of Cornwall and Ireland.

An unused stone-age axe head was found south of what was once a meander of the River Mersey at Thelwall. It was made in Langdales, in the Lake District, a 100 miles away. Brought here by Neolithic man along an ancient trading route.

Dating to about 1000 BCE, bronze age axes were found across the Mersey Corridor and evidence of an early settlement can be found in Grappenhall.

Around 70 A.D., the Romans came north through Wilderspool and created their famous Roman industrial site. Pottery, glass, iron and bronze artefacts are at Warrington Museum including a Roman actor's mask, showing enjoyment for past times and the theatre.

South of the River Mersey at Thelwall, fearing invasion by the Vikings, the Saxon King Edward the Elder created a "burgh" in 923AD. This was a fortified settlement. Historians think the year may actually have been 919AD as that sits better the Anglo Saxon Chronicles. The River Mersey became a boundary between Saxon Mercia and Viking Northumbria.

Saxon words remain "Maeres" means boundary and "Ees" land close to a River. Hence the River "Mersey". Thelwael means river by a plank bridge; Laskey means salmon river.

"Wearp" is a Viking word and gave the name "Old Warps" to the area that is now Victoria Park. At the southern end of the park, a gravel ridge occurred naturally in the River, normally with no more than two feet of water over it. This was the ford that gave access to Warrington until the 1300s.

Local historian Michael Taylor charts the landowning families from the Norman Conquest. Of interest are the fishing rights on the River Mersey showing there were eels, lamprey, gudgeon and salmon as big as 20 pounds.

Parliamentarians with Cromwell beat the Royalists in Old Lancashire. Charles the First was beheaded in the first Civil War. This led to his son Charles the Second being exiled. The Battle of Winwick in the 2nd Civil War was a decisive win for Cromwell in Warrington. However, Royalists had a minor victory on the Mersey in 1651 in the Third Civil War at the Battle of Warrington Bridge. Even today cannon ball marks can be seen on the walls of St Elphin's church.

The Civil War led to the three scourges "sword, plague and famine". The plague in 1650 lasted for three years and with the combination of civil chaos and lack of workers for the fields, hunger stalked the land. The Plague House in Wash Lane, Latchford was built with a secret tunnel to Christ Church. There was a "plague stone" hollowed out to allow for money to be left in vinegar to disinfect it. This paid for provisions. The plague house is lost to history but the plague stone remains as an exhibit at Warrington Museum.

The early Industrial Revolution began in the 1700s when coal use was starting to become common place. The Lancashire Coalfields provided the fuel for the industrial revolution and paved for the mass people exodus of people from countryside to factories and mines. Canals, known locally as "Cuts," revolutionised transport and marked the beginning of the golden canal era which was to last until the 1830s.

Woolston "Old Cut" was built in 1755 to bypass a loop in the River Mersey and John Stanton, a merchant from Liverpool, took his opportunity to build the most important gunpowder factory at that time on the Thelwall side of the river. Gunpowder

supported the Slave Trade destined for the Americas and supported the War of Independence on both sides. Gunpowder is made from Saltpetre, brimstone (sulphur) and charcoal to be mixed when damp. Brimstone came from Italy in the "Genoa Galley." This seafaring vessel had oar ports to enable it to navigate the River Mersey. The Powder Mill exploded exactly a hundred years later, never to be rebuilt.

In 1761 the Duke of Bridgewater opened the Bridgewater Canal to the south of Warrington with a view to getting the coal from his Worsley coal mines into both Manchester and Liverpool. As you can imagine this was direct competition to the Mersey and Irwell Navigation Company. In 1762 the latter bought the much celebrated horse "Old Billy". He was employed as a gin horse towing barges on the Woolston "Old Cut" and banks of the River Mersey. He retired at the ripe old age of 62 in Latchford and is reputed to be the world's oldest horse.

During the eighteenth century pack horses were common place. The Twiggeries, located close to Kingsway Bridge on the River Mersey and being between Manchester Road and Farrell Street, were woodland coppice providing the willow whips for a thriving weaving industry. This was a time when goods like coal were sold by the basket. When other forms of transport took over, the pack horses were no longer needed. The Twiggeries continued to provide baskets for other industries like the tanneries. The overgrown coppice remains today.

In 1793, a mail man had been ambushed, his throat slit and he was left to drown in Padgate Brook. Edward Miles was put on trial at Lancaster Castle where he was hanged and his body was taken back to Warrington, coated in tar to preserve it and hung in chains on a gibbet frame by Bruche Bridge to act as a deterrent to other would be highway robbers.

Woolston "New Cut" replaced Woolston "Old Cut" in 1821. This bypassed more of the meanders of the Mersey and had Paddington Lock at its western end and Woolston Lock at its upper end. The two lock chambers, together with some of their mechanisms and original bridges can still be seen today. Mersey Flats were the barges of the day carrying the cargo for the industrial revolution, cotton and coal.

Industry was appearing all along the Mersey. Paddington Soap Works was built in 1820. They had a secret room as a conspiracy to defraud the government of taxes and on discovery went bankrupt. After this, it became the "Boneworks" where glue, gelatines, agricultural fertiliser and, rather surprisingly, Aspirin tablets were produced. Animal hides were also processed for tanning at the various Warrington tanneries and bone grinding for use in china clay. The stench is still vividly remembered by the local people with "the works" only closing in the 1970s.

By the 1850s the Mersey and Irwell Navigation Company had a number of "Cuts" along the River Mersey taking out the "Hell Hole" of Howley, Butchersfield and Double Locks at Rixton. There was also a wooden aqueduct from Paddington Locks to Westy Point across the Mersey which was built as part of the New Cut Canal which opened in 1821. This aqueduct supplied water for the Runcorn to Latchford Canal, the eastern section of which was known locally as the Black Bear canal. The aqueduct also had a walkway which was used to take boat horses from one side of

the river to the other, for onward towage of the barges to Runcorn. Whenever the level of the Mersey is dropped, usually for maintenance purposes, the wooden supports of the aqueduct can still be seen to this day.

However, improving navigation did not mean that the Mersey and Irwell Navigation Company could withstand what was coming.

In 1894 the Manchester Ship Canal was opened. An incredible feat of Victorian engineering using then state of the art steam powered cranes and locomotives. It employed 16000 people at its peak. However, there was a human cost with 160 of the navvies dying, many of whom were undocumented and so are buried in unmarked graves. When complete, the Manchester Ship Canal allowed ocean-going ships to get direct access to Manchester. It cost £15 million in its day, which is the equivalent to £1.7 billion today. Fears in the Second World War about German invasion via the Manchester Ship Canal meant that there are still the remnants of a spigot anti-tank mortar emplacement near Kingsway Bridge.

There is an exception in the Mersey and Irwell Navigation "Cuts" falling into disuse in Warrington. The Black Bear Canal continued until the 1960's, with barges leaving the Manchester Ship Canal at Twenty Steps Lock, alongside Northwich Road swing bridge, with barges transporting hides to the tannery at Howley.

All this heavy industry of the River Mersey was fuelled by coal. Over the last two hundred years the climate has begun to change again. Greenhouse gases have been spewed out into the atmosphere. These molecules of carbon had been locked deep in the earth for over 300 million years but they are now being released when fossil fuels are burnt. This is causing the planet to warm and modern-day climate harm.

Yet out of the blackness of the Industrial Revolution comes a story of hope.

The Ship Canal needs dredging and this has led to the deposit grounds of the Woolston Eyes becoming an internationally important breeding ground for wading birds and particularly the black necked grebe. Woolston Eyes gained Special Site of Scientific Interest status in 1985. The Woolston Eyes Conservation Group manage the site with permit entry. They are developing a dynamic rotating wetland on Bed 4, which is the first demonstration of this in Britain.

Rixton Clay Pits, a former boulder clay extraction site, started in the 1920s providing the raw materials for the adjacent brickworks. Clay extraction ended in 1965 but the Brickworks is still operational today. The Clay Pits are home to healthy populations of Great Crested Newts. In 2000 it was declared a Special Area of Conservation site, which is a European designation.

Despite these enclaves of nature, sadly much of the River Mersey housed landfills and had to deal with heavy industrial pollution from upstream. The River Irwell, a tributary to the Mersey, accommodated more than one hundred cotton mills with their associated dyes and chemicals ending up as pollution in the waterways flowing downstream.

The Mersey Basin Campaign started in 1985 to tackle what had become the most polluted River in Europe. In 2002, oxygen levels were such that they could support healthy fish populations and allow the Atlantic salmon to return.

Other bioremediation began of the New Cut in 2002 in conjunction with Liverpool John Moores University. A partial section of the New Cut had its heavy metal poisons capped and then was re-watered. The Bioblitz in 2019 identified over 100 species of plants within a 300 metre length of this stretch.

Further up the canal bed the land has been left to wet woodland and is an important site for Britain's most endangered non-migratory bird the willow tit.

Adjacent to the "New Cut" Paddington Meadows. This is a nationally rare water meadow with farmland birds and some of Cheshire's oldest hawthorn hedges. The Meadows have been farmed in a similar way for at least 200 years and the aim is to take an annual hay cut to encourage more wildflowers. A summers meander round the Meadows may provide, for the well-informed observer, over 40 species of birds with a chance of 10 species of Warbler, 20 Species of Butterfly and Moths plus at least 6 species of Dragonflies and Damselflies.

After flood defence works near to Kingsway Bridge, South of the Mersey, Latchford Arts and Music Association, with Alderman Bolton Primary School, have sown a wildflower meadow. There "Sammy the Seal" was spotted swimming up the Mersey. The group also organises the Latchford Annual Duck race with Warrington Rowing Club. The sport of Rowing on the Mersey can be traced back 200 years but it was not until 1985 that it was revived.

The Friends of Westy Park and Green Spaces are working towards getting a cycle way linking to the Transpennine Trail and a new Public Right of Way. The Westy Trail is rich in wildlife with birds we all can easily recognise, swans, coots, herons, cormorants and mallards.

The Friends of Woolston Park, with the support of the Young Friends group, are creating an educational trail with pond restoration and a wildflower meadow along the Spittle Brook a feeder to the River Mersey.

The Mersey Corridor's story is one of restoration and being brought back to life. The jewel in the crown is that Atlantic Salmon and an otter have been caught on an underwater camera at the Woolston Weir gate making their way up stream. A sure sign that nature is being restored.

Support the Friends groups on facebook and getting involved in the Mersey Corridor.

Learn to survey wildlife as knowing where it lives helps you to project it.

Keep your greenspaces and waterways clean – litter pick, reduce, reuse and recycle. There are regular litterpicks with Warrington Wombles, Keeping Britain Tidy Litter Hero Ambassadors, the New Cut group, Friends of Westy Park and Greenspaces, Friends of Woolston Park and the Warrington Rivers Partnership.

Think what you can do to reduce greenhouse gasses – such as leaving the car at home and exploring by foot and bicycle.

Without nature reserves and wildlife corridors species will be lost for ever.

It's our wetland landscape where we live, work and play. Get involved with volunteering and exploring. Together we can create a green revolution, helping wildlife, people and future generations to thrive.

For more information visit www.carbonlandscape.org.uk

The Timewalk is based on the work of Dr Joanne Tippett from the University of Manchester and Fraser How who both developed the RoundView Programme. It is funded by the National Lottery Heritage Fund and we are grateful to the many contributions from people living, volunteering and working in East Warrington.