

The SANKEY Canal

A children's guide to
the historic canal on
your doorstep

Key Stage 1 & 2



Find out why the Sankey Canal
was important to St Helens,
the UK and the world!



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The SANKEY Canal



The Sankey Canal was England's **first canal of the industrial age**. It opened in 1757.

It was the high-tech internet of its day, revolutionising transport and industry. It led to the growth of our villages and towns and it shaped our modern world.

Businesses used the canal to bring in raw materials and to transport goods. It was much more efficient than using a horse and cart on a bumpy, winding road.

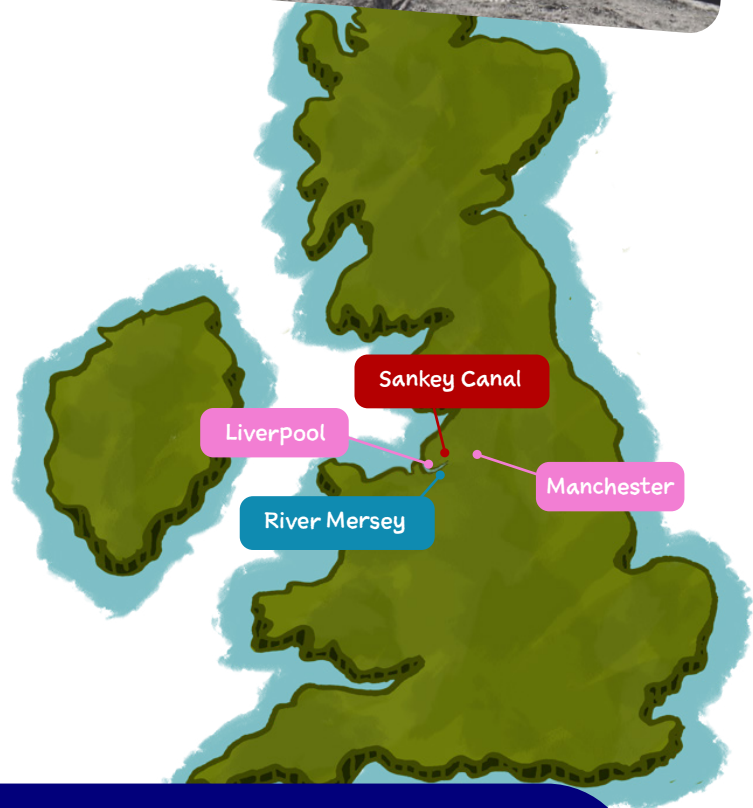


Fiddlers Ferry (Joe Hobson 1920s)



It's sometimes called the **St Helens Canal** or the **Sankey Brook Navigation**.

FUN FACT



The original route of the canal mostly followed the line of the Sankey Brook from St Helens to Warrington. It was extended to Widnes in 1833.

It runs for 15 miles (25km) from the River Mersey at Spike Island, Widnes to Warrington, Newton Le Willows and St Helens. At St Helens the canal divided in to 5 branches to Blackbrook, Gerards Bridge, Boardmans Bridge, Sutton and Ravenhead. There were **10 canal locks**, **3 river locks** and **about 30 swing bridges** (road, railway and pedestrian).

Carr Mill Dam was the original main water supply for the Sankey Canal.



QUESTION...

What would life have been like in the 1750s when the canal was being made?

There were no mechanical diggers or cranes in the 1750s. Everything was built using brute force and hand tools. As you can imagine, it was long and hard work for the labourers. These people were called Navvies (short for Canal Navigators).

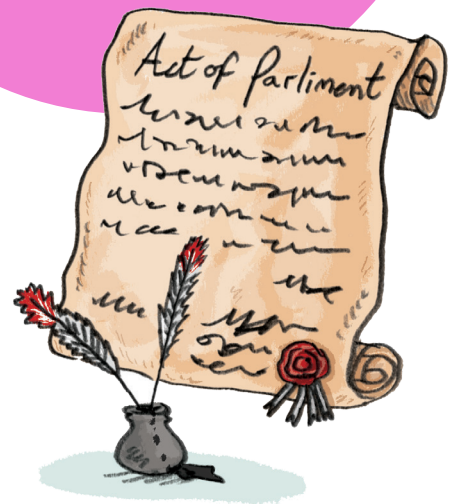


FUN FACT

The first crane appeared in 1834, it was hand operated and made of cast iron. The first steam powered excavator shovel appeared in 1836 but they were not widely used until the 1870s.

An Act of Parliament had to be passed before the construction of the canal could go ahead. This happened on 20 March 1755.

The canal was designed by an engineer called Henry Berry. It was first built to carry coal from St Helens to the Port of Liverpool and the Cheshire salt factories.



QUESTION...

Why did businesses need coal in the 1700s?



Local industries benefited from the flow of coal, copper ore, salt and limestone. The canal had an important role in the growth and success of the area. St Helens and Widnes did not exist as towns before the canal. Warrington and villages along the canal all grew after the canal was built.

Mersey Flats

The Sankey Canal had to be constructed as a **wide** waterway to make room for the Mersey Flats. These were sailing boats that transported goods and cargo along the canal. Mersey Flats were about 20m long and 5m wide with a large sail, this allowed them to travel on canals, rivers and the sea. The boats were sometimes pulled along the Sankey Canal by horses walking along the towpath.



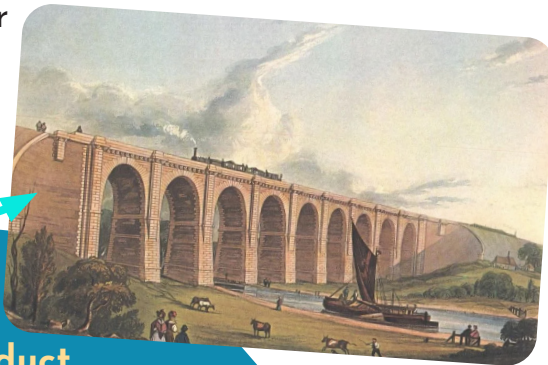
Crossing points over the canal had to be constructed as swing or lifting bridges to allow for the boats' sails to pass.



Can you name any rivers or streams that are near the Sankey Canal?

The Mersey Flats could carry up to 80 tons of cargo. This was usually coal but also included other materials such as copper ore, slate, stone and manure and later on sugar cane.

The Sankey Viaduct by Thomas Talbot Bury



The **Sankey Viaduct** (also known locally as *Nine Arches*) was opened in 1830 to allow trains to pass over the canal and the Sankey Brook. It was part of the world's first intercity railway from Liverpool to Manchester. The viaduct had to be designed with 21-metre-high arches to allow the Mersey flats to pass underneath. It was the world's largest railway viaduct of its time and was designed by an engineer called **George Stephenson**.

QUESTION...

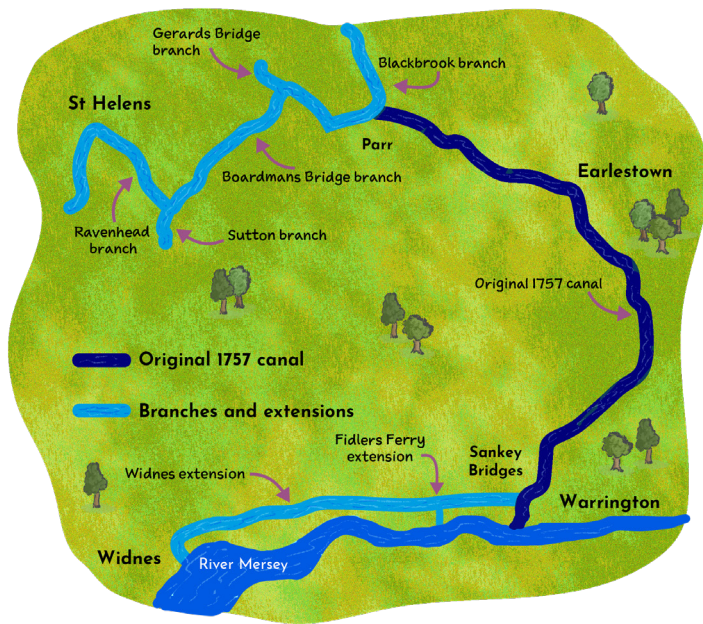


What's the difference...
between a canal and a river?
Rivers are naturally formed but canals are man-made.



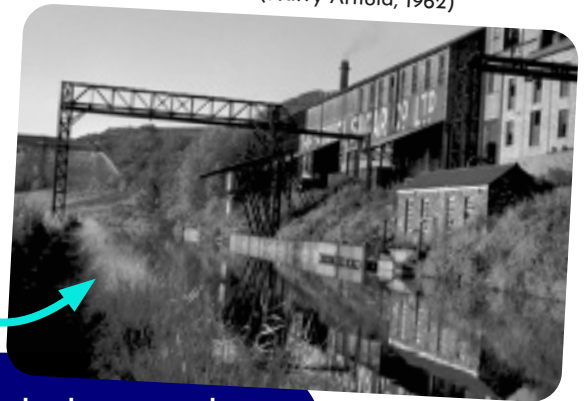
The Sankey Canal

Through Time...



The canal was originally built to take coal down to the River Mersey and Liverpool. Other materials were also transported for the glass, chemical and copper works in St Helens. As industries grew, 5 canal branches were added in St Helens and the canal was extended to Runcorn Gap (later called Widnes).

Sankey Sugar Works, Earlestown
(Harry Arnold, 1962)



In later years, sugar cane became the main cargo on the Sankey Canal. Imported, raw sugar cane was transported from Liverpool to the Sankey Sugar Works at Earlestown.

Over time, canals were viewed as an outdated way to transport goods, they were also proving to be expensive to look after. Road and rail transport became much more popular. In 1931, the canal closed beyond Newton-Le-Willows, and in 1963 the Sankey Canal closed entirely. Fixed bridges quickly replaced the old wooden swing bridges. In the 1970s, the construction of the M62 motorway and other new roads meant that the canal became even more neglected. A lot of the canal was filled in with old bricks and rubbish from homes and businesses.

Winwick Quay, 1976



Restoration of the canal began in 1980. In 1985 the Sankey Canal Restoration Society (SCRS) was formed to bring the canal back to life for people and for wildlife.



SCRS has now joined together with local councils and the Canal & River Trust to form the Sankey Canal Partnership. As a team, they hope to restore the canal for the benefit of all who live and work along its route.



The Sankey Canal Map

St Helens to Warrington to Widnes

Industrial Powerhouse

The success of the canal in the 1700s and 1800s led to industries rapidly spreading along its route especially around St Helens and Widnes (coal mining, chemicals and glass). The businesses brought money and jobs to people in the area. Maybe your family knows of someone who worked in one of these industries?

Stanley Bank Iron Slitting Mill

The water powered mill was built in 1773. It heated and rolled solid iron ingots, forged at Carr Mill, into sheets. These were then 'slit' into bars for the nail-making industry.

In the 1820's the slitting mill, Blackbrook, was demolished and a corn mill was built in its place. The corn mill lasted until 1910 when that too was demolished. This area now forms part of the **Sankey Valley Country Park**.



Collieries (Coal Mining)

Havannah Colliery operated from 1871 to 1936. Mining too close to the surface led to parts of the nearby land collapsing! We now know this as the Havannah Flashes. The sunken land formed ponds that are a haven for wildlife.

Coal mining was very dangerous, in an explosion in 1878 at Wood Pit Colliery, 204 men and boys were killed. In another explosion in 1930 at nearby Lyme Colliery, 13 men were killed.



Sankey Sugar Company Limited

The Sankey Sugar Works opened in 1855. The raw cane sugar was brought by barge on the canal from Liverpool and taken to the refinery to be converted into the finished white product. It closed down in 1979 and the site is now part of the Sankey Valley Industrial Estate.

Sankey Sugar Works (Brian Bennett 1975)



Muspratt's Vitriol Chemical Works

This was set up by James Muspratt in 1834 alongside the Sankey Canal to manufacture Vitriol (Sodium Carbonate). The process created a lot of toxic gas which harmed people, plants and animals. The chemical works also created a lot of alkali waste which was piled high to form the 'Mucky Mountains'. Over time, wildlife and lime-loving vegetation has begun to thrive and the area is now a nature reserve.



Mucky Mountains (Harry Arnold, 1962)

Wildlife and Ecology

A lot of work has been done to restore and improve the environment of the Sankey Valley including the Sankey Canal and Sankey Brook. Without the industrial use it has become a wonderful green corridor cutting through built-up areas. The Sankey Canal is able to support a huge variety of wildlife, some of which are on the endangered species list.

HAPPY HABITATS

Reed beds along the canal in Warrington and Halton make ideal habitats for **Water voles**. Willow thickets are perfect places for **Willow tits** to make their nests.

Some wildlife is in decline across the UK, however canals offer nature an important sanctuary, with a wonderful mix of homes by the water.

Fishing is a great activity and is popular along the canal. The canal runs near 3 local nature reserves and 35 sites of local ecological importance. Habitats like wet woodlands, reed beds, and raised mires are protected by law.

Water vole



Willow tit



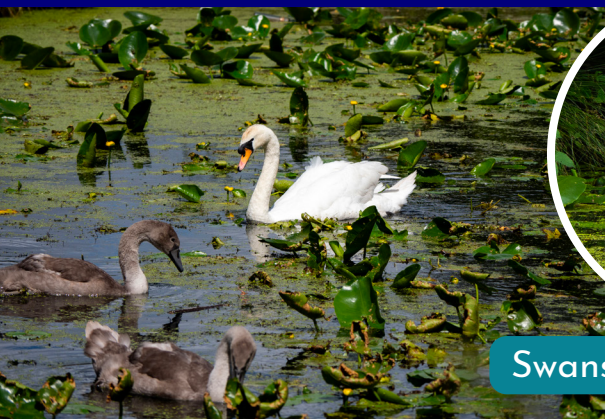
Bumble bee



Heron



Swans



Coots



Grey wagtail



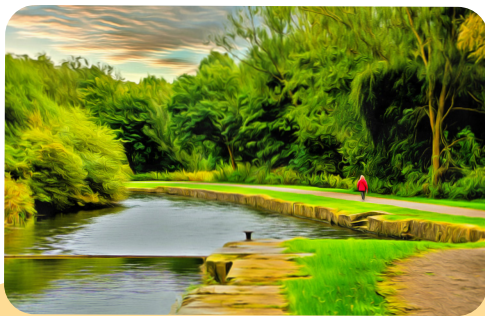
During a visit to the Sankey Canal you might be able to spot wildlife like swans, herons, kingfishers, coots and even grey wagtails. In late spring, orchids can be found in the meadows and a colourful assortment of wild flowers along the hedgerows and along the canal banks.

Health and Wellbeing



Spending time near water and in green spaces is a great way to support your **health** and **mental wellbeing**. The Sankey Valley is an ideal place for lots of different activities like walking, cycling and bird watching.

Towpaths have been improved and widened to become more wheelchair and pram friendly.



We need your help to make the Sankey Canal even better:

- Visit the canal with your family. It's a great place to enjoy the outdoors and to spot wildlife.
- Share the interesting things you have learnt about the canal with your friends and family.
- Help to keep the area clean by not dropping litter. You and your school could even join the Canal & River Trust's 'School Plastics Challenge'.
- Join a volunteer group with your family to help to improve the area. This might involve a litter pick, habitat creation or tree planting. Volunteering is great for a healthy mind, body and planet.

The **Sankey Valley Trail** and **Trans Pennine Trail** are beautiful green spaces that follow the route of the canal. They provide fantastic places to walk, jog, cycle, canoe and fish, away from the hustle and bustle of modern life.



Don't forget to stay safe near water!
Please stay away from the edge and always visit the canal with a grown-up.



The Sankey Canal Quiz

How much can you remember about the Sankey Canal?

1 What year did the Sankey Canal open?

1757 ☐

1777 ☐

1797 ☐

2 Where did a lot of the water come from for the **original** Sankey Canal?

Havannah Flashes ☐

River Mersey ☐

Carr Mill Dam ☐

3 The workers who dug out the canals were called **Navvies**. What is the word short for?

Naval Officers ☐

Navigators ☐

Navicrocks ☐

4 What were the boats called that travelled along the Sankey Canal?

Mersey Narrows ☐

Mersey Flats ☐

Mersey Tops ☐



5 Name two types of cargo transported along the Sankey Canal.

6 What is the Sankey Viaduct also known as?

Nine Bridges ☐

Nine Loops ☐

Nine Arches ☐

7 Water voles make their homes along the Sankey Canal. What is their perfect habitat?

Willow trees ☐

Reed beds ☐

Short grass ☐

8 Which of the following is a trail that follows the route of the canal from St Helens to Warrington?

Sankey Valley Trail ☐

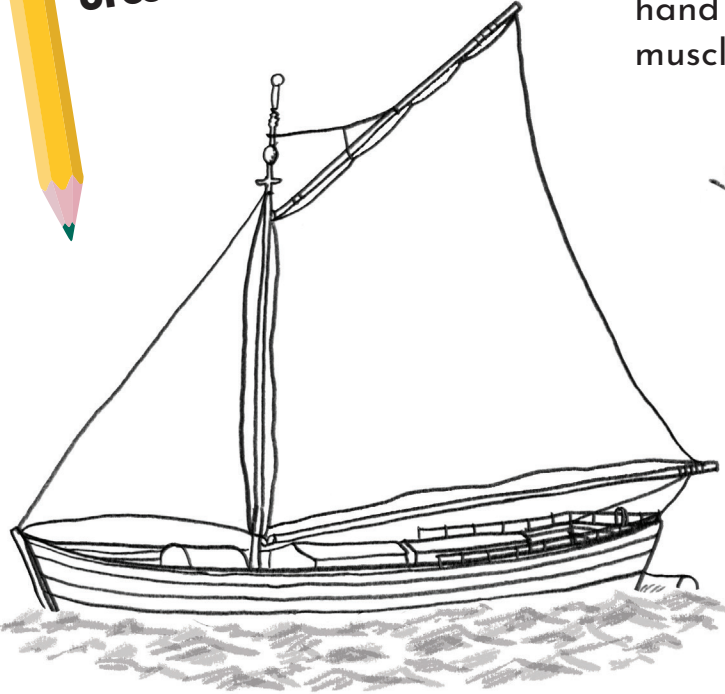
Sankey Channel Trail ☐

Answers: 1 - 1797. 2 - Carr Mill Dam. 3 - Navigators. 4 - Mersey Flats. 5 - Coal, copper ore, slate, manure, salt, sugar. 6 - Nine arches. 7 - Reed beds. 8 - Sankey Valley Trail.

Colourful Sankey

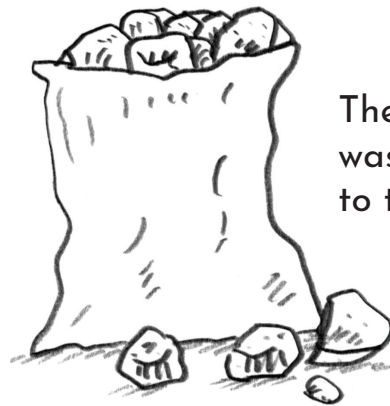
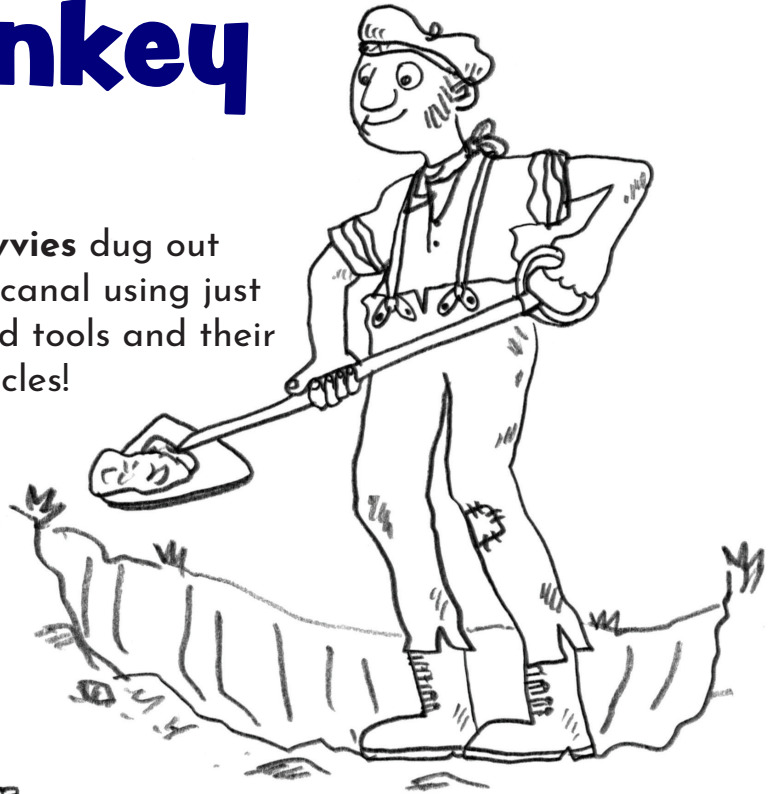


Bring our Sankey images back to life with a splash of colour.



Sailing boats called **Mersey Flats** travelled along the canal. They were sometimes pulled by a horse walking along the towpath.

Navvies dug out the canal using just hand tools and their muscles!

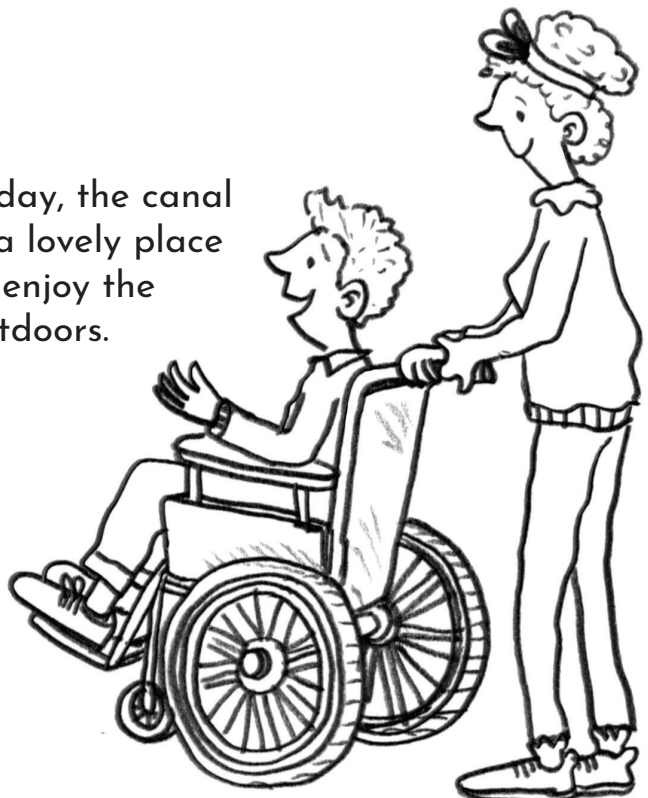


The Sankey Canal was originally built to transport **coal**.

The Sankey Canal is now a haven for wildlife and birds like **Grey wagtails**.



Today, the canal is a lovely place to enjoy the outdoors.

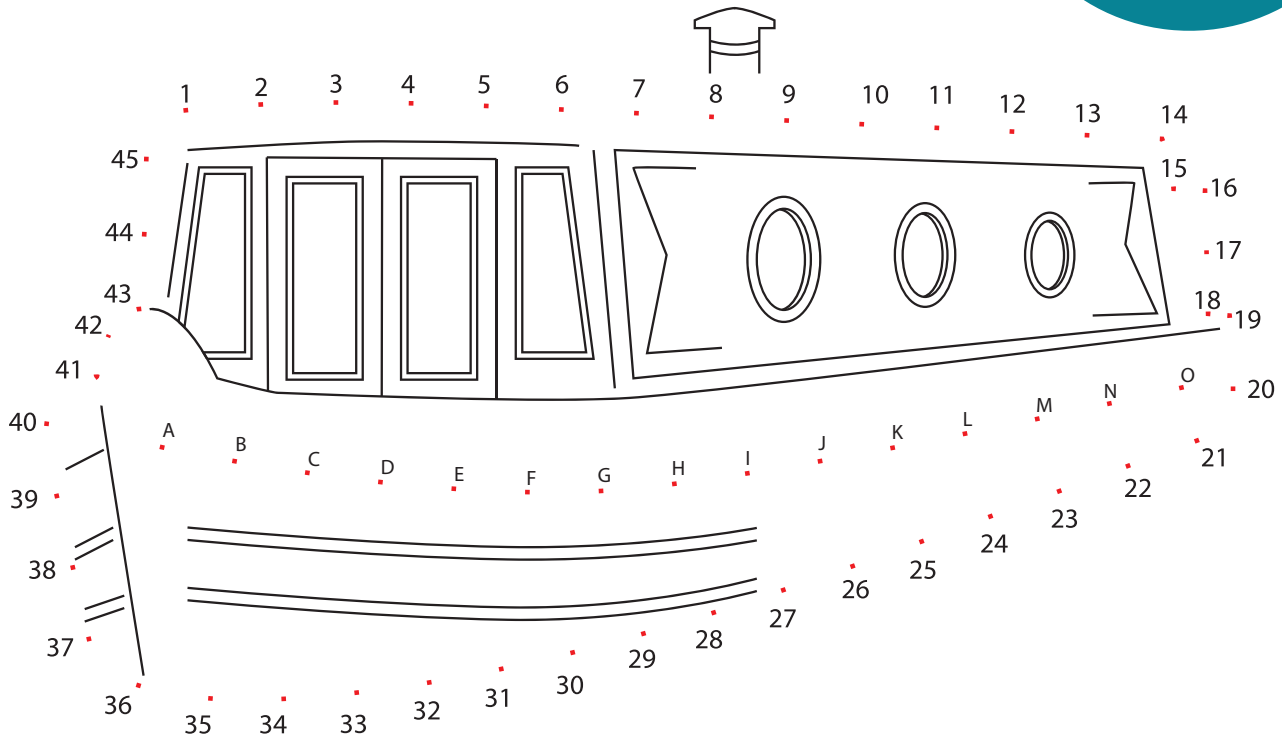


Dot-to-Dot

What is this type of vessel called?

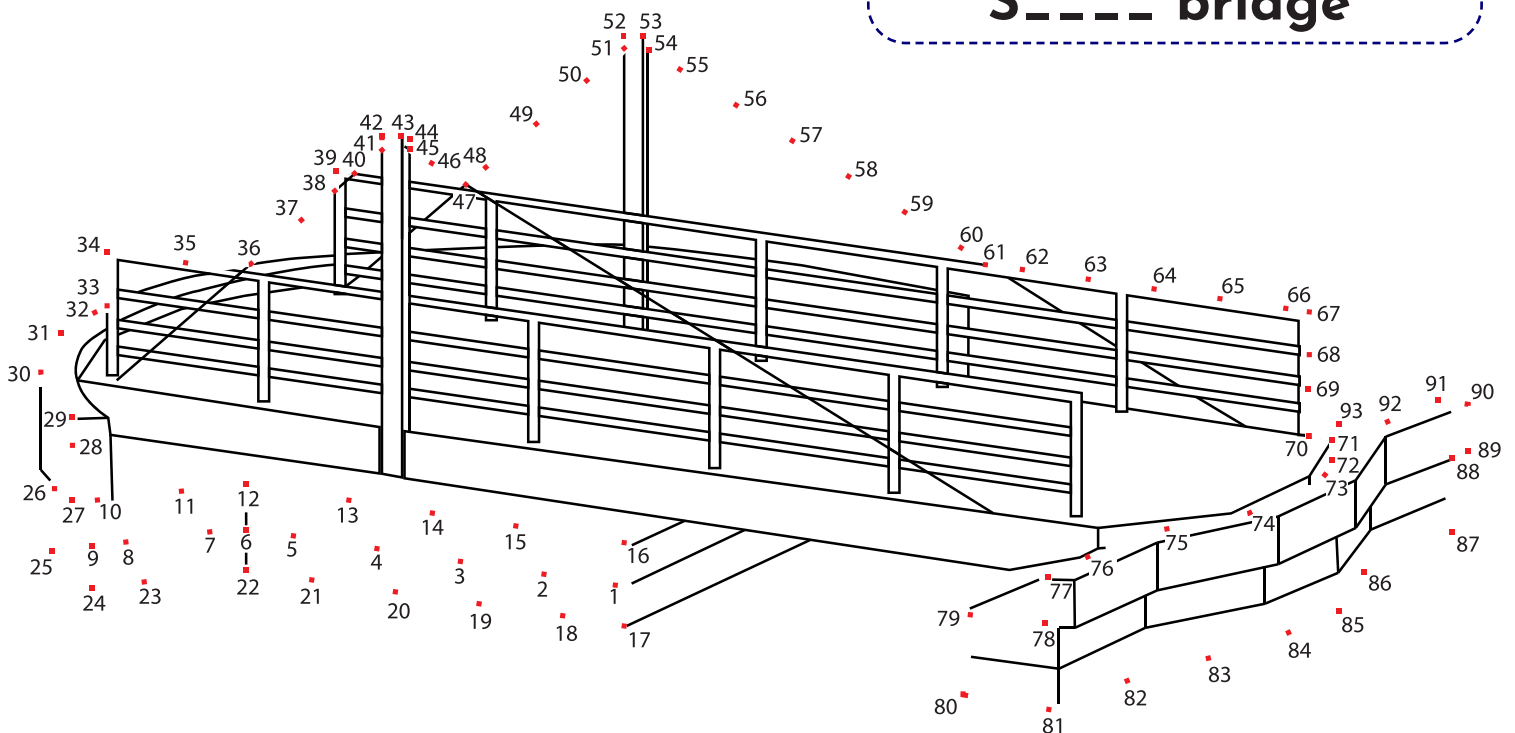
N _ _ _ w _ _ _ t

Can you
complete the
Sankey
Dot-to-Dots?



What is this type of bridge?

S _ _ _ _ bridge



Ready for More?

Why not try some of these fun activity ideas to continue learning about the Sankey Canal...

Visit the canal and other great attractions like the World of Glass and Catalyst Science Discovery Centre!

- **Make** a timeline of the Sankey Canal using the information in this pack. Think of interesting ways you could present the information. You might like to visit the library or do some online research to find more interesting facts.
- **Construct** a model of a Mersey flat that is capable of both floating and carrying cargo.
- **Investigate** one of the industries that the Sankey Canal supported. You could choose the Sankey Sugar Works, Ravenhead Copper Works, Pilkington's Glass Works, or something else.
- **Plan** an improvement project for a local stretch of your canal. What would you do to make it better for people, plants and animals?
- **Research** a plant, animal or bird found along the Sankey Canal. Where does it like to live? How has it adapted to the environment?



Pilkington's Glass Works
(John Tolson, 1971)

World of Glass Museum



Extra information

The Sankey Canal

If you would like to find out more about the Sankey Canal, visit the following websites:

- The Sankey Canal Restoration Society: www.sankeycanal.co.uk
- The Pennine Waterways: www.penninewaterways.co.uk/sankey/sa2.htm

Love Your Environment

Find out more about canal environments and habitats on the Canal & River Trust website:

- Corridor for Nature: www.canalrivertrust.org.uk/explorers/learning-bundles/corridor-for-nature
- Canal and River Habitats: www.canalrivertrust.org.uk/explorers/learning-bundles/canal-and-river-habitats

Respect The Water

Learn some great tips to keep you and your friends safe near water:

- RNLI - Water safety education resources: www.rnli.org/youth-education
- Canal & River Trust - Water Safety: www.canalrivertrust.org.uk/explorers/learning-bundles/water-safety
- United Utilities - Stay safe at our reservoirs: www.unitedutilities.com/reservoir-safety

Sankey Viaduct

