JACK DOBSON remembers how he helped to build the Ship Canal—and the amazing men he worked with

Singing navvies who carved a slice of history

Ninety-three-year-old Jack Dobson, of Canal Cottage, Stockton Heath, stands beside the Manchester Ship Canal . . . he is one of the few living people who worked on its construction.

SITTING quietly in his canalside cottage, the old man smiles and nods his head to the rhythm of singing gangs of toiling "navvies."

Sharp-toothed picks bite and rip into the earth in unison as the strains of "Maggie Murphy's Home" and "The Man Who Broke the Bank at Monte Carlo" float through the dust-filled air.

But the music is in the old man's head and the thudding of the picks died a long, long time ago. They are the indelible boyhood memories of one of the thousands of anonymous men who cut a pathway to the sea.

Jack Dobson is 93. Mention the Manchester Ship Canal to him and a new light returns to his eyes.

He was just a lad of 17 when Queen Victoria opened the canal on May 21, 1894—75 years ago—but he had spent over four years growing into a man alongside the broad-shouldered navvies.

By DAVE DUTTON

☆ Seventy-five years ago Queen Victoria officially opened the life-line which was to build the North-West into one of the world's great industrial power-houses.

Over six years of back-breaking labour went into the construction of Manchester Ship Canal, which linked the heart of the city with the rest of the world.

Now the Manchester Ship Canal Company is celebrating the 75th anniversary of the opening.

Three of the men who worked on the construction of the canal are to be invited next Wednesday to relive old memories on a cruise down the canal. Now all in their nineties, they are Mr Charlie Williams, of Fallowfield, Manchester; Mr Jack Dobson, of Moore, Cheshire; and Mr Charles Chambers, of Heptonstall, Hebden Bridge, Yorkshire.

Their story is one of happy, pick-swinging "navvy" gangs—brawny men whose muscles changed the face of the North-West—and of the 36-miles big dig that became the Manchester Ship Canal. . . .

Those were the navvies who helped to construct the Big Dig.

Characters

Proudly, Jack Dobson, Canal Cottage, Moore, Cheshire, tells his own piece of history. . . .

"I was 13 when I started work on the canal as a 'fat' lad putting grease on wagons at Acton Grange. After that I was sent to Moore where I was a 'nipper' to a gang on the railway and I used to brew their tea and carry their tools.

"Then I went fatting wagons at Wilderspool until I joined a platelaying gang where I worked as a lad and a man until the canal was completed.

"I remember well the navvies who were singing all the time they were working. They sang songs like 'Left Like a Dog on a Doorstep to Die'. Yes, the navvies were a tribe on their own."

He pauses and smiles as he brings to mind the characters who worked on the canal and continues:

A doctor

"There was 'Cleanworking' Charlie Smith, a ganger who turned up for work wearing a white frilled shirt and there was 'Scholarship' Stan who had been a schoolmaster but was kicked out because he hadn't behaved himself. 'Devon' Jimmy was another schoolmaster who lost his job through looking at the bottom of too many pint pots. Another man had been a butler who forgot that the silver plate didn't belong to him.

"A fellow in the platelayers gang with me who I knew as 'Stafford' once got a splinter in his hand. He was taken to the doctor who looked at the various bottles on the shelves and took one down to treat the hand. Stafford looked up and said: 'I'm not having that.' The doctor asked how he knew what the bottle contained and Stafford replied that he too had once been a doctor in Staffordshire.

Plenty to drink

"The doctor asked which part and then told Stafford he knew the particular rector of that area. 'That's my father' said the platelayer.

"Navvies wore cord trousers and moleskin jackets with pearl buttons. For dinner they ate beef steak between two lumps of bread one-and-a-half inches thick. Each gang used to have a nine-gallon barrel of ale and they drank it out of cow horns. They didn't care for anybody. There were no punches pulled about having a pint but if they were found drunk on the job, they were sent off.

"One man who we called Policeman Jack was an ex-policeman from Cardiff and a member of the Camel Corps in the Sudan War. He would have fisticuffs with anybody and no matter how hard you hit him, you couldn't knock him down. Him and Steve Cork had a battle one day from nine in the morning till noon and their wives brought them ale. Old Jack finally knocked out Steve but they both looked rough after that fight."

Jack Dobson worked on the section of the canal from Latchford Locks to Runcorn Swing Bridge, Cheshire. The 35½-mile length from Eastham on the south side of the Mersey Estuary to Manchester Docks was split into segments each worked by a contractor with a schedule to make. The navvies followed their favourite contractor.

Latchford cutting and railway viaduct during the construction of the canal.

Accidents

Also in use were steam navvies—great earth-shifting machines which could fill a wagon with three shovelsful and were capable of filling 144 wagons a day. Very impressive, but a drop in the ocean considering an estimated 50M cubic yards of soil was removed to make the canal.

Accidents were inevitable. Jack recalls the worst tragedy which caused a storm at the time.

"It happened at Eastham and dozens of men were killed. A young boy let some wagons down the side of the canal and they fell on chaps who were filling wagons below. There was a trial later at which it was stated the boy had been working for 36 hours. The judge dismissed the case and said it was the boy's master who should have been in court."

The canal was completed and the gangs of navvies were paid off. On New Year's Day, 1894, it was opened to traffic.

First ship

"On the day the first boat sailed up the canal, I was at Latchford Locks. The first to sail from Latchford to Manchester was Platt's yacht—owned by a textile machinery maker. The yacht had an auxiliary steam engine and all the crew were dressed like sailors. There were plenty of people about, all waving at the yacht."

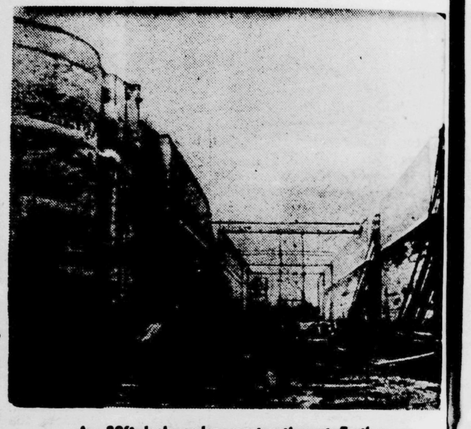
Jack did not desert his beloved canal. He worked on until 1946 as a workman, ganger and finally maintenance inspector of the stretch of the canal between Moor Lane Bridge and Runcorn Swing Bridge.

Now he spends his days walking by the canal side thinking of the old days.

And the boats sail by without tribute.

January 1, 1894, and the Ship Canal is open to traffic. The royal opening was performed in May of the same year.

The steam navvy which could fill a wagon with three scoops of earth.



An 80ft lock under construction at Eastham.