How the port of Chester cost Heswall and Parkgate their sandy beaches

by Greg Dawson

It is common knowledge that Chester was one of the most important Roman cities in Britain. It was a port and garrison town, home of the 20th legion. The Romans also had an outpost and naval base at the small port of Meols and were also believed to have had an observation post on Hilbre Island. In Saxon and Norman times, Chester continued to be an extremely important port and military base. Ships sailed to and from British and Irish ports, France, Spain and Germany, and troops gathered there for Welsh and Irish campaigns. During the Middle Ages the world climate grew colder causing the sea level to drop, also the River Dee at Chester began to silt up due to shifting sands and erosion of the shoreline. This forced ships to use smaller ports along the Wirral coast where the water was deeper. Cargo and passengers were offloaded at these small ports and transported to the City of Chester in smaller boats or by road.

Shotwick, being one of the nearest anchorages to Chester became a busy little port and during the reign of Henry VI (1422-71) a quay was built there. Silting eventually reduced the depth of the channel at Shotwick and shipping moved along the coast to the deeper waters of Burton Point and Denhall. Burton Church is dedicated to St. Nicholas, the patron saint of mariners and at Denhall in Ness was the ancient Hospital of St. Andrew, for the poor and shipwrecked mariners. Also, alehouse records of 1561, list five inns and alehouses in Burton and two in Ness. These facts indicate that there was a great deal of shipping using these ports during the Middle Ages. For many years the merchants of Chester had been collecting money to build a new quay at Lyghtfote Pole (Lightfoots Pool) at Little Neston. Eventually, in 1569, work began on the 'New Haven' (later called the New Quay) and it served as a port for about 200 years. Not only passengers and goods, but also Irish cattle and Welsh ponies were shipped to Neston. Also, army horses and troops were marched out from Chester to Neston for shipment to Ireland. All ports in Wirral and those along the Welsh side of the Dee and around the coast as far as Rhyl were part of the Port of Chester in shipping terms, as they were under its jurisdiction. In 1569, even Liverpool was still 'a creek port within the Port of Chester' in legal terms, with a fleet of only 12 ships. Over half a century later, during the reign of Charles I (1625-49) £100 ship money was demanded from Chester, but only £15 from Liverpool. In Captain Grenville Collins' lifetime the River Dee was still more important than the Mersey. In 1687, when Liverpool was beginning to rival Chester, he wrote "...at Nesson and Dorpol, lower down than Chester, you may anchor in three-fathom water" (18 feet).

In 1699, an attempt was made to improve the channel from Neston to Chester. The main problem was that the River Dee had such a wide estuary that the tidal flow did not scour the channel and with ships being built progressively bigger, the river was just too shallow. The New Quay at Little Neston (by this time called the Old Quay) was in decline. Parkgate, with its deeper waters, took over as the most important port on the Dee, with ferry services to Dublin, Flint and Bagillt. A ferry service also ran from Gayton to Flint and Irish ferries sometimes used the port of Dawpool near Thurstaston. Deep sea vessels were firstly anchored in the Hoyle Lake for quarantine before proceeding to Parkgate or Liverpool. At Parkgate and Dawpool, cargoes and passengers were transferred to smaller craft for shipment to the shallower waters of Chester or taken by road.

The New Cut, looking toward Chester from the Queensferry Bridge 1998

This was both inconvenient and time consuming and it was obvious that unless something was done, the City would die as a port.

In 1731, a decision was made that would alter the River Dee forever. Nathaniel Kinderley of Lincolnshire suggested that a deep-water channel or canal could be cut from the City of Chester to deeper waters in the Dee Estuary. There was opposition to this scheme from the Port of Liverpool (by this time the most important port) as Liverpool merchants feared that they would lose trade if Chester once again became a deep-sea port. However, after an Act of Parliament was passed, a wide channel, 16 feet deep at high tide, was dug from Chester, along the Welsh coast and through the White Sands to Flint, during 1753-6. This 'New Cut', as it was called, was not the natural course of the river, as the deep water channel flowed to Chester along the Wirral coast.

The New Cut was a success, giving Chester a new lease of life. Docking facilities were built along the 'Cut' at Chester, Saltney, Sandycroft, Queensferry, Hawarden Bridge and Connah's Quay. The River Dee Company was formed in 1740 to maintain the depth of the New Cut and keep it navigable. Parkgate remained a very important port, particularly for Irish shipping, due mainly to its ferry and mailboat service which ran to Dublin four times a week. Even with the New Cut, Chester could not now compete with Liverpool whose sea trade was growing in leaps and bounds. One great drawback for Chester was that large vessels took two tides to reach the City from the open sea and two tides to get out. However, this did not impede shipbuilding as shipyards sprang up along the Welsh side of the Dee and in Chester. In 1806, more ships were built along the Dee than on the Mersey. But, by 1817, The River Dee Company was forced to engage the famous engineer Thomas Telford to improve the New Cut as it had begun to silt up. On the English side of the Dee, Wirral was robbed of the natural channel that gave life to its small ports. Parkgate had already lost its Irish ferry service by 1815, due to the silting of its anchorage. However, it was still deep enough for the smaller Flint and Bagillt ferries, small coasters and fishing boats to operate. Sadly, by the mid 1860s, Parkgate waters became too shallow for the Flint and Bagillt ferries, but they continued to operate from deeper waters off Gayton Boathouse Inn (now Gayton Cottage) at the bottom of Cottage Lane.