



Window Museum Display No. 20.

The History of Ipswich Dock

IMT Occasional Series of Papers – No 7
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Publication of this Paper is designed to coincide with the Window Museum display No. 20. It is hoped to prepare these Occasional Papers in conjunction with all future Window Museum displays to provide a fuller permanent record of as many as possible of the items included in these necessarily temporary exhibitions, and each will include a dated photograph of the completed display.



Our Window Museum was opened on 13th October 2009 by Capt. Jim Lawrence, with the Mayor of Ipswich, and our then Chairman Capt. Geoff Hartgrove, with the Ipswich Sea Scouts providing the guard of honour. It is estimated that since then it has been viewed by tens of thousands of visitors.

It is the hope of the Trust that this Window will in time be augmented by other similar Windows offering scope for other forms of digital media display.

Past exhibitions displayed in the Window Museum to date since its opening in 2009 have been:

- The Sprintsail Barge and Sailmakers -13.09.2009
- The Sprintsail Barge and Shipwrights - 24.03.2010

- Shipbuilding in Ipswich - 28.10.2010
- A Celebration of 50 years of the Orwell Barge Match – 27.04.2011
- Maritime Trade in Ipswich - 03.11.2011
- Historic Vessels through the ages in Ipswich – 04.05.2012
- Ipswich Dock through the age of Photography – 31.10.2012
- A Celebration of Admiral Broke – 30.04.2013
- The Port of Ipswich in Wartime – 31.10.2013
- Navigation on the Orwell – 25.04.2104
- A Celebration of Local Yacht and Boat Building 24.11.2014
- The Caley drawings of Ipswich Waterfront – 06.05.2015
- Celebrating the Thames Sailing Barge – 27.11.2015
- Celebrating Leisure on the Orwell – 15.09.2016
- From Pleasure Beach to Modern Port: The History of Cliff Quay – 27.04.2017
- Celebrating the Thames Barge trading here, there, and everywhere – 29.11.2017
- A Selection from the Collection of the Museum of Knots & Sailor's Ropework – 03.05.2018
- Maritime Ipswich - A selection of historic buildings with a maritime connection – 23.10.2018
- Celebrating the Ships and the Role of Ipswich in the Last Grain Race – 29.05.2019
- Celebrating the History of the Ipswich Wet Dock - 2020

Images and highlights of all of our past Window Museum displays may be found on the Trust's website.

Window Display No. 20 - The Development of Ipswich Wet Dock

This display tells the story of the transformation of the Ipswich waterfront from the early 1800s to the present day. Since Anglo Saxon times, Ipswich has been a seaport. Ships used to sail up the Orwell, ideally on a rising tide, to reach their berth at high tide at quays close to the town to load or unload their cargoes. When the tide went down, the ships were left high and dry, often leaned over and were impossible to move.

This became an increasing problem at the end of the 18th century as ships got larger and deeper and something had to be done to keep Ipswich alive as a growing commercial port. Edward Caley's 1837 drawings depict an active waterfront but the quays were quite dilapidated in places.

A 'Dock Committee', formed in 1836, asked civil engineer, Henry Palmer, to assess the viability of a "wet dock", whereby ships could stay afloat in deep water at all stages of the tide. A copy of Palmer's report is in this display.

The idea was to dam the River Orwell near the present lock, dredge out the river bed and remove adjacent boggy marshland to provide a stay-afloat dock some 13 hectares in extent.

The tidal river channel would be diverted along a new cut and ships would enter the dock through a lock opposite what is now Felaw Street. Work started in 1838 and the dock opened for business in 1842. But the lock was awkwardly placed for ships to enter and was replaced by a new lock in 1881. This lock is still in use today.

The bold initiative to build the dock transformed the economic fortunes of the town, giving us the Victorian legacy that we still enjoy today. New quays were constructed around the dock during the 19th and 20th centuries to cater for new industries in the town. The dock's heyday was probably in the early years of the 20th Century but by this time ships were becoming ever larger requiring the development of the new deep water Cliff Quay and later the West Bank Terminal.

Leisure boating increased during the 1980s and the dock has been largely converted to a marina, although timber is still regularly imported into one dockside warehouse.

The building of the Wet Dock coincided with birth of photography, and Ipswich was fortunate that its Victorian wealth enabled a number of local enthusiasts to try this brand new medium, choosing the new dock as an ideal location in which to develop their skills.

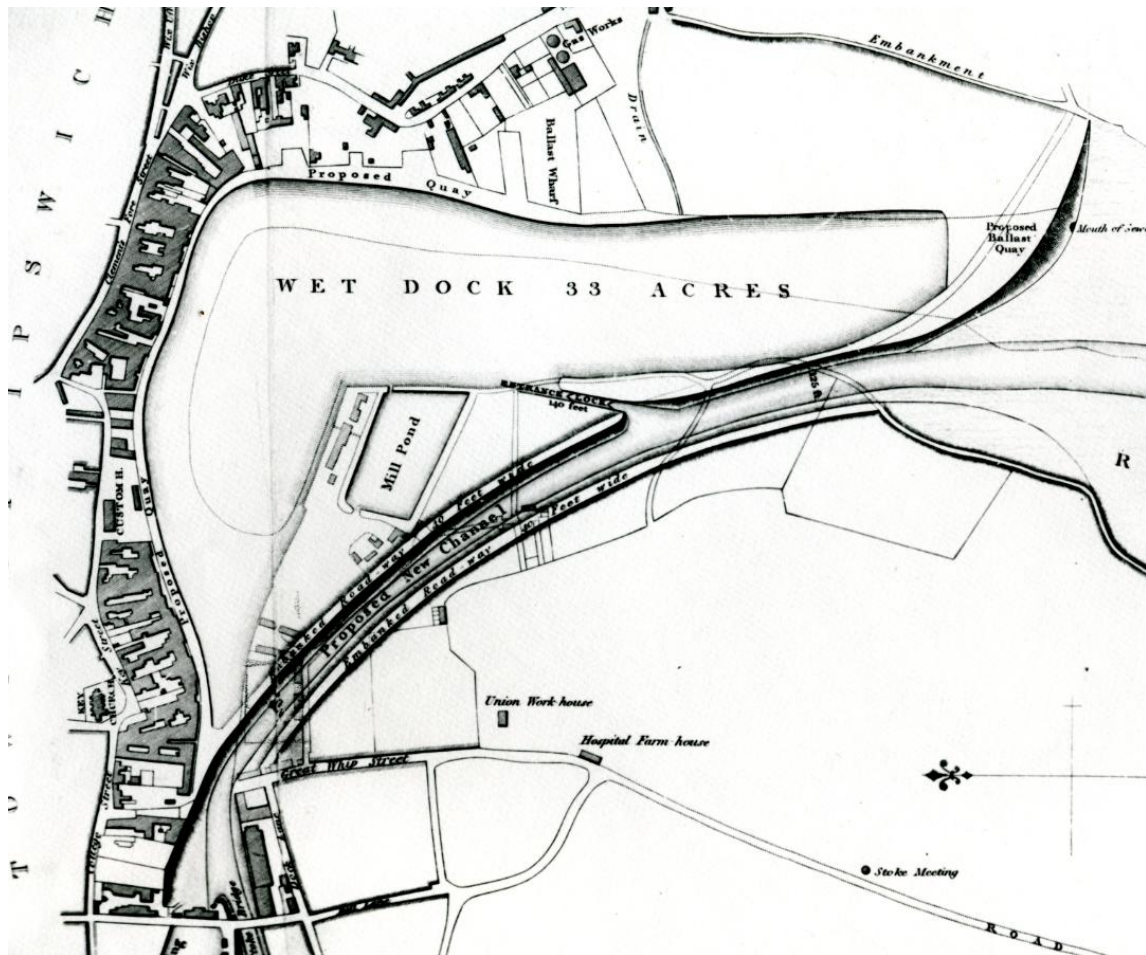
One image in particular, of the newly completed Custom House c.1848, taken by pioneer Ipswich photographer John Wiggin is now recognised by the National Museum of Photography as one of the finest surviving early images of its kind in existence.



The display illustrates each phase of the development of the new Wet Dock beginning with a lecture given in London by George Hurwood to the Institute of Civil Engineers showing this sketch of a proposal to improve the Ipswich River to include a Wet Dock.

The estimated cost was £25 – £30,000. This is the actual map he showed in his talk, outlining the proposed new dock by a black rectangular outline.

over 12,500 townspeople people gathered to watch the laying of the lock Foundation Stone on 26 June 1839.



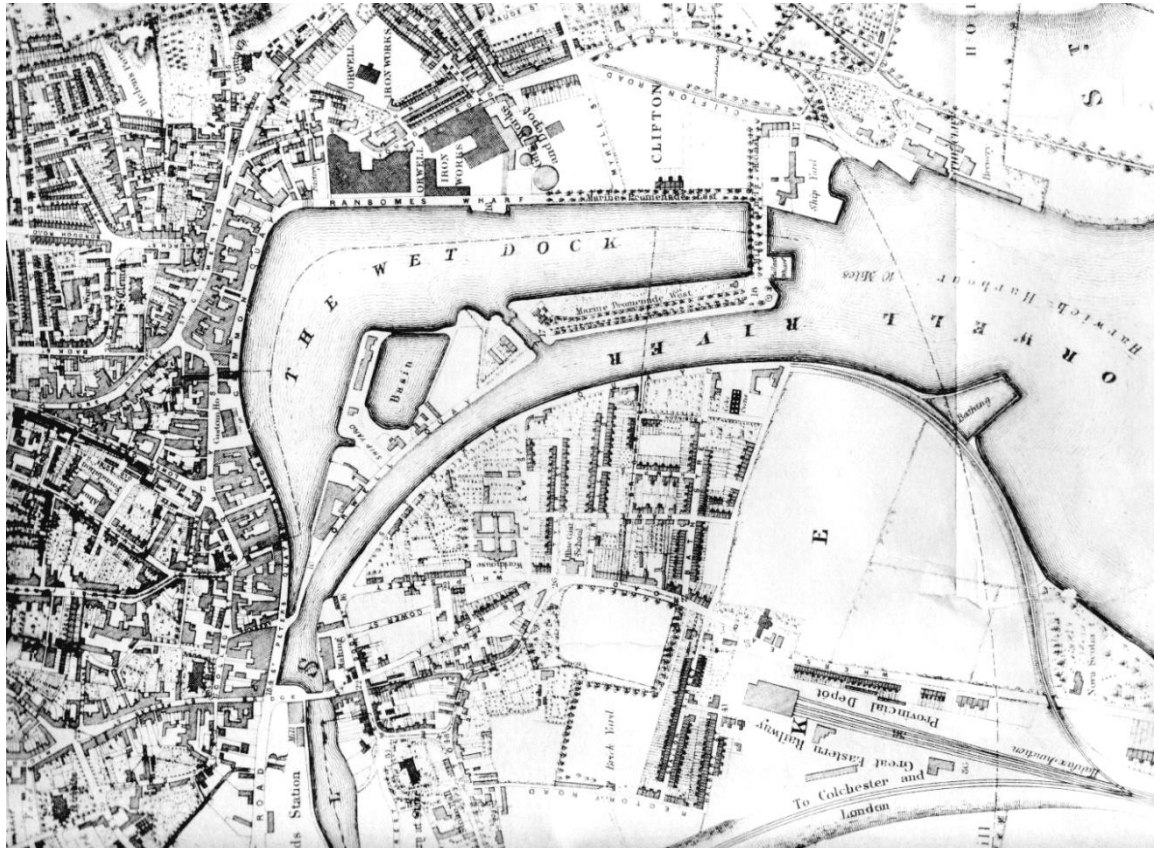
Reports of the meetings of the Dock Commissioners both during and after construction of the new Wet Dock reveal fascinating discussions about the problems such as:

- disagreement with the project engineer Henry Palmer over the increasing costs of the project,
- problems relating to the high costs of the quay walls on the northern quays and whether or not to extend them further down the dock. Henry Palmer's concern was about reliance on the integrity of only a clay embankment at the southern end of the dock without the strengthening provided by the stone capped timber and brick faced walls as on the Northern Quays.
- objections and concerns of warehouse owners at the head of the dock whose premises would be adversely affected by creating a second lock at St. Peter's dock,

- difficulties of dealing with the town's sewage outfalls were a weir to be erected across the New Cut.

It is interesting that so much of these disagreements were reported in such detail through the columns of the local newspaper (fore-runner of today's 'Ipswich Star').

This map of 1867, by Edward White, is the closest contemporary map of the time of the opening of the dock.

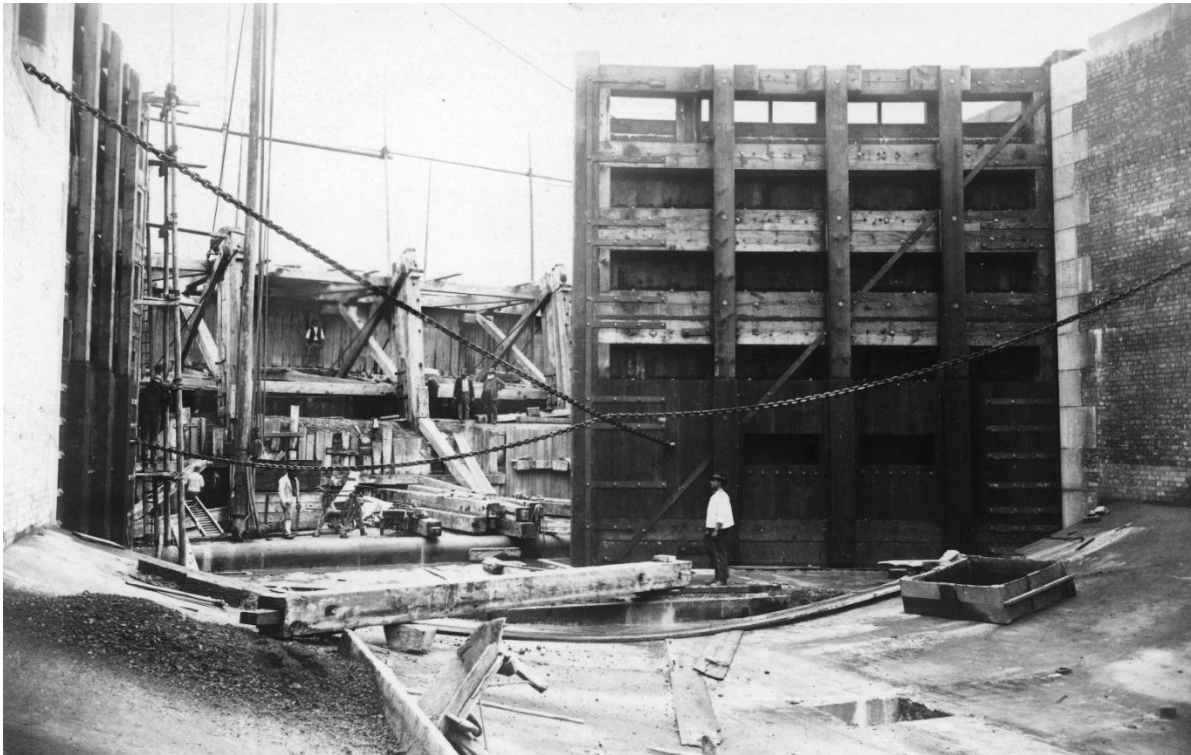


By this time the original lock into the New Cut had proved to be a major hazard to sailing vessels turning into and out of the tidal river, as had always been foreseen by local seamen. This photograph is believed to be the only image showing a ship exiting the dock, and taken at the time of White's map.



This soon resulted in a proposal to build the new (present day) lock, which was duly opened in 1881. The 'Basin' on the centre island had previously been mudflats and was retained as a timber pond, and later as a 'Branch Dock' until it was filled in in 1923.

The construction of the new lock was a major engineering operation in itself, remarkably captured in a series of recently restored photographs of which this next image is one.



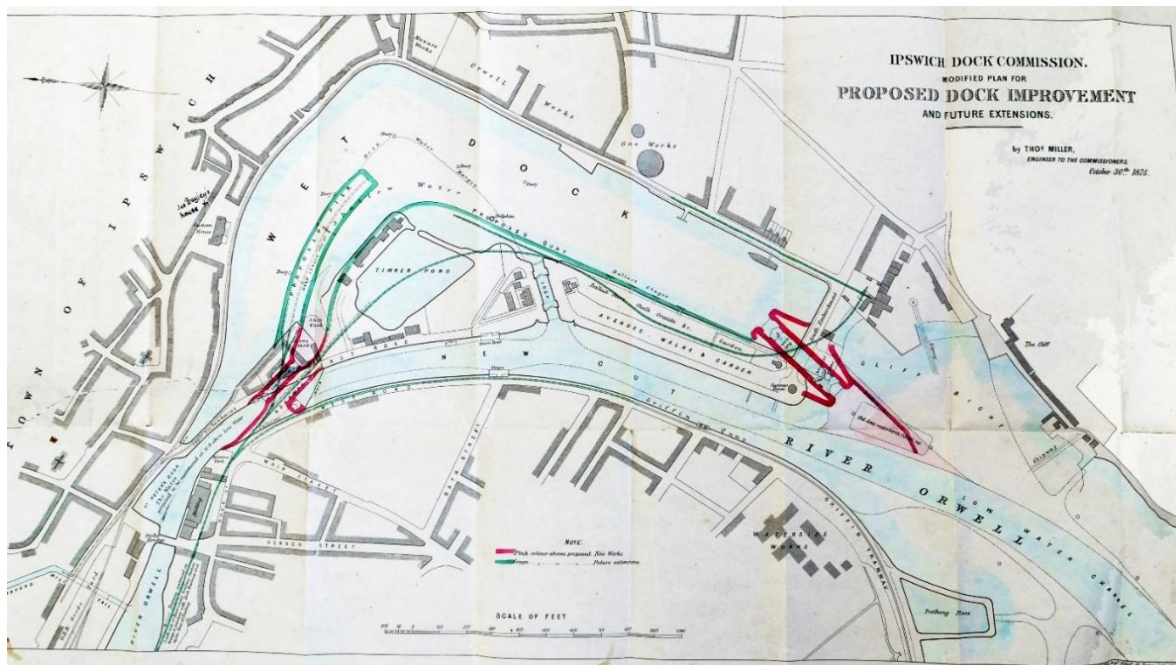
The formal opening of the lock featured another grand ceremonial day, including the opening of the town's new High Street Museum, Cornhill Post Office, and new Corn Exchange.



Prior to the opening of the new lock the development of the 'Stowmarket Navigation', and the movement of the manufacture of fertiliser from the dock to Bramford led to new ideas to build a weir across the New Cut, and a second lock from the head of the Wet Dock out into the river below Stoke Bridge. This would have retained a higher water level in the Gipping, but with unresolved problems associated the retention of foul water within the dock.

If completed this would have brought into being one of Henry Palmer's original concepts to permit the easy transfer of cargo from Wet Dock ships to river barges for onward movement up the Gipping.

Included in the display is a reproduction of the 1875 original map of these proposals, shown below. Of these proposals only the new lock was ever constructed, and river barges bound for Bramford and Stowmarket were required to exit the new lock then turn sharply back up the New Cut on the tide for their journey up through the Gipping locks, until the development of road transport eventually resulted in the commercial demise of the navigation.



The dawn of the 20th century saw many changes to the fortunes of the dock, starting with the conversion of the timber pond on the island site into a Branch Dock, seen here in the only surviving image of it in operation.



The manufacture of armaments for the World War I in such companies as Ransomes Sims and Jeffries required the closure of the Wet Dock to the public, removing many of the rights of way that had long been enjoyed by the townspeople of Ipswich, including the island site Promenade, and Orwell Quay on New Cut East, previously one of the departure points of the popular Victorian paddle steamers.

The gradual enlargement of the average size of vessels led to a number of proposals designed to increase the efficiency of maritime trade in the dock.

These included a scheme to build an outer deep water berthing area for ships outside the new lock, and finally in 1971, proposals for the filling in of large areas of the wet dock by then largely redundant due to the need for large vessels to use the deep water quays out in the tidal estuary.

Ipswich is fortunate that such plans were never implemented, so leaving us with the hugely popular and historic Waterfront of today.

This 1,400 year history of England's oldest continuously inhabited town gives the context for the very recent transformation of the Wet Dock.

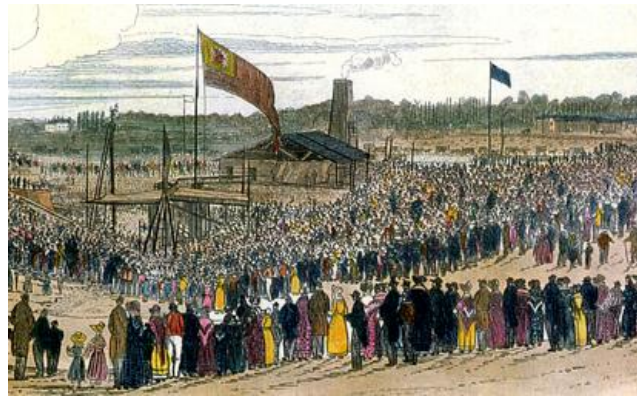
600 – 1838

Following the establishment of Gippeswyk around 600, International trading had taken place continuously from the town's quays for more than a thousand years before the building of the Wet Dock.



1839 - 1842

The building of the Wet Dock involved the digging out of 33 acres of river-bed mud using only hand shovels, together with the building of brick faced quays above the medieval wooden wharves. All of this basic structure still survives today.



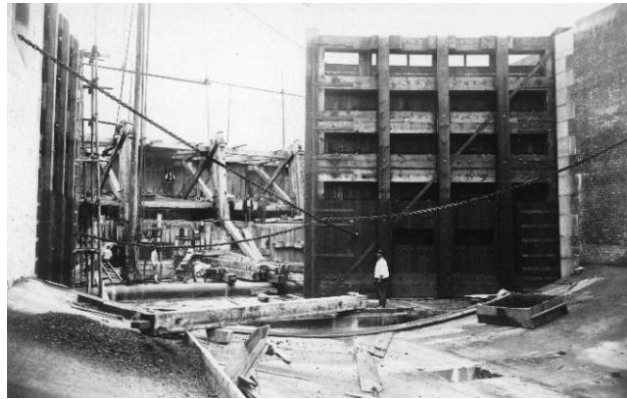
1843 -1880

The new Wet Dock enabled Ipswich to grow in prosperity at a great rate. Following the building of the new Dock Tramway, factories, mills, maltings and warehouses flourished, together with the many trades needed to service sailing ships of all kinds.



1881 - 1902

Construction of the new lock in 1881 improved the ease of access for increasingly large vessels, together with steam ships. The new South-west quay replaced the old ballast quays made largely redundant by the decline of trading under sail. The development of the dock railway produced an extremely efficient port operation.



1903 – 1922

The first World War required the closure of the Dock to the public to enable companies such as Ransomes, Sims and Jefferies to make armaments and generally service the war effort under strict security.



1923 -1981

Following the filling-in of the old Branch Dock (formerly the timber pond), the Dock continued to flourish, but the increasing size of shipping made the construction of Cliff Quay out in the tidal estuary a necessity.





IMT Image Archive: A view from the Gasholder in 1977 image courtesy of David Kindred taken to replicate an earlier watercolour by Leonard Squirrell

1982 - 2020

The formation of the Ipswich Maritime Trust in 1982 and other local initiatives helped to deliver a new future for the dock based on leisure activity, These plans for the total transformation of the Wet Dock into the Historic Waterfront of today are now largely complete, giving the town a new status, and international attraction for both business and tourism.

With the active support of port owners ABP, historic vessels are now encouraged to use the Wet Dock which now regularly hosts North Sea Rallies of square-rigged sailing ships.



For more information we hope you will visit our website

www.ipswichmaritimetrust.org.uk

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