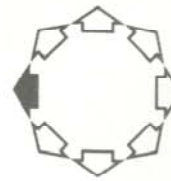


CAUSTON'S map, surveyed in 1843, showing the docks with the original basin, some associated warehouses, one 'graving dock' (now the smaller dry dock), and the sidings and tracks of the Gloucester and Cheltenham Tramroad (by now linked with the Gloucester and Birmingham Railway). The Victoria Dock was not yet built.

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Trading token halfpenny, issued by private traders during a scarcity of small change. *Reproduced by courtesy of Gloucester City Museum.*

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THE PORT OF GLOUCESTER



History

Gloucester was a port before it became a city. The convenience of the site for water-borne transport undoubtedly influenced the Roman army's decision to make it a base for the invasion of Wales. Short stretches of Roman quay walls were discovered near the prison in 1846 and beneath the new Westgate flats in 1973. Like the Saxon and early Mediaeval quaysides, they related to the now-vanished eastern channel of the Severn, which flowed close to the line of the present ring road between Kingsholm and the Cattle Market, and passed under Foreign Bridge in Lower Westgate Street before rejoining the existing river. The main quay must then have been to the north of Westgate Street where the river channel formed a wide pool. One of the arches of Foreign Bridge (built before 1150) was designed with extra width to allow shipping into this area. As this channel of the river silted up in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, the centre of activity moved south of Westgate Street to the area still known as the Quay. There it stayed for some five centuries.

In 1580 Queen Elizabeth granted letters patent giving Gloucester the formal status of a port having its own custom house so that vessels trading with foreign countries could load and discharge cargoes. The eighteenth century Old Custom House still survives on the Quay.

Gloucester had always been handicapped by the difficulty of navigating the Severn and was overtaken by Bristol as a commercial centre early in the Middle Ages. By the time of the late eighteenth century canal revolution, it had fallen far behind. So the idea of building a canal to bypass the worst part of the river had obvious attractions for local commercial interests. The more optimistic thought it might reverse the city's fortunes compared with Bristol.

The Act of Parliament for the Gloucester and Berkeley Canal was passed in 1793—a decade after the first surveys had started—and work began on the canal and Gloucester docks the following year. It was an inauspicious time to start, since 1793 was the year when 'canal mania' reached its peak, shortly to be followed by a financial slump. The Gloucester and Berkeley project had the further disadvantage of its cost being severely underestimated. A figure of £121,329 10s. 4d. was calculated by its first Principal Engineer, Robert Mylne. Money ran out in 1799, when only 5 of the intended 17½ miles of canal had been built. It was not until 1812, after the Gloucester and Cheltenham Railway Company had asked permission to end their tramroad in Gloucester docks, that the docks basin was opened to shipping using the river. The tramroad linked the docks with Cheltenham and the Leckhampton quarries. John Upton suggested that the original route of the canal should be shortened by entering the Severn at Sharpness instead of Berkeley, and work made progress again in 1817, with the aid of a government loan to provide work for Napoleonic war veterans. The final stages

of construction were supervised by Thomas Fletcher under the direction of Thomas Telford, acting as consultant engineer to the Exchequer Bill Loan Commissioners. Until Fletcher's appointment the canal suffered from a series of inefficient or corrupt resident engineers.

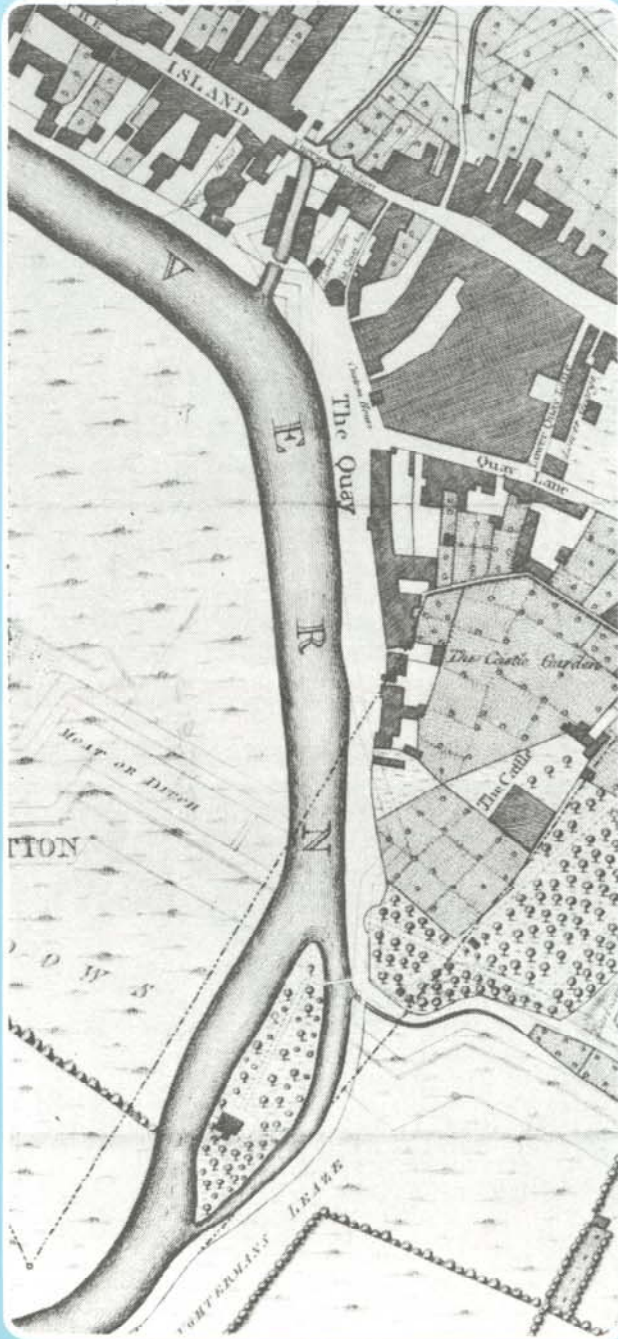
In 1820 the canal was linked with the Stroudwater and thus also with the Thames and Severn Canal, so connecting London with the Midlands via Gloucester. Further money troubles followed, and more loans had to be obtained, but the whole 16 miles from Gloucester to Sharpness—then the longest, broadest and deepest ship canal in Britain—were finally opened in 1827.

One important traffic that soon developed was the import of corn to help feed the growing industrial towns of the Midlands. It was this that led to the building of the warehouses that are such a feature of the docks today. In the early days most of the corn came from Ireland as foreign imports were restricted by a heavy duty. The Repeal of the Corn Laws in 1846 removed this duty and, to meet the resulting expansion in trade, the Victoria dock was opened in 1849 and further warehouses were built. Another significant commodity being imported was timber from the Baltic and North America, and most of Baker's Quay to the south of Llanthony Bridge was originally laid out as timber yards. The only regular export traffic was salt from Droitwich and Stoke Prior in Worcestershire.

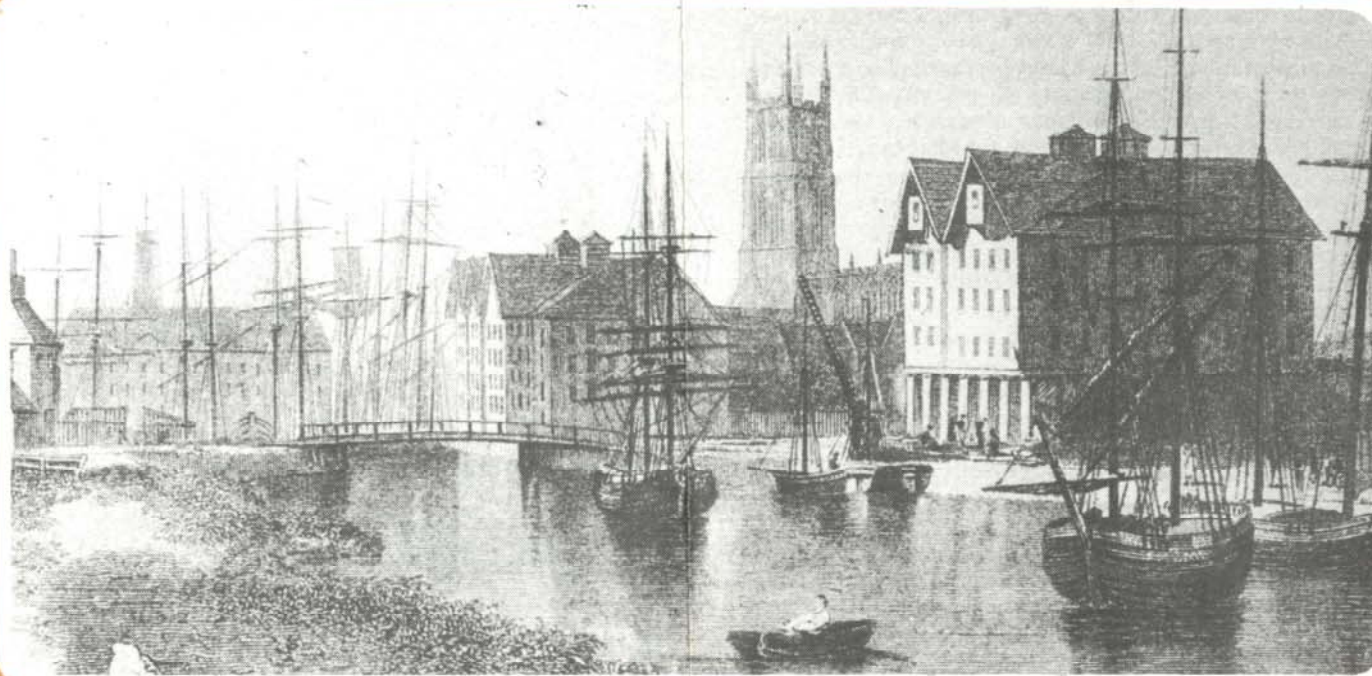
During the 1860's, it was feared that Gloucester would suffer because the larger ocean going vessels of the period were too big to come up the canal. So new docks were built at Sharpness (opened 1874) where vessels up to 5000 tons could unload their cargoes into barges to complete the journey up the canal to Gloucester. Improvements were also made at Gloucester, where Monk Meadow Dock to the south of Llanthony Bridge was opened in 1892. But these changes were not enough to keep up with the neighbouring ports, such as Avonmouth, and trade has declined in this century leaving the docks very much as they were a hundred years ago.

'The fact is, that Gloucester is in certain respects unfortunately situated with regard to Trade. Bristol in its direct vicinity has a most convenient access to the whole Coast of South Wales. Bath and Cheltenham occupy the toy and dissipation trade; indeed the latter is a very shouldering unpleasant neighbour. It is surrounded by hills, so that the trade depending on Canals is lost as to heavy goods, because a less circuitous channel is more favourable.'

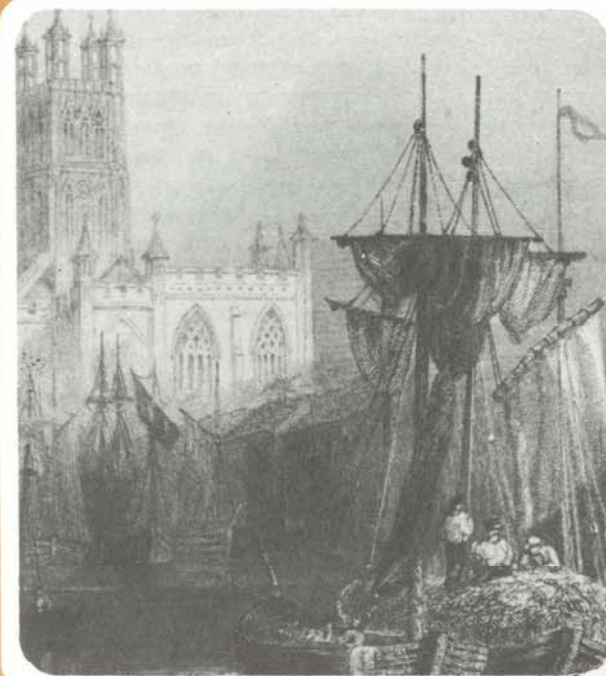
T. D. Fosbrooke *History of Gloucester 1819*



HALL AND PINNELL'S map of 1780, showing Foreign Bridge and the old course of the Severn, the Quay with the Old Custom House, and the area of the docks as yet unbuilt.



Llanthony Bridge with the Main Basin behind and the Pillar Warehouse (1843)



To See the Docks

The main dock area is no longer used by sea-going ships and is now a popular place for pleasure craft. The warehouses have been little used for many years, but they are an important industrial group recognised by the Department of the Environment. They are now part of an imaginative development which is bringing new life to the docks.

From **Llanthony Bridge, Point A**, there is a fine view of the **Main Basin** and the southern warehouses.

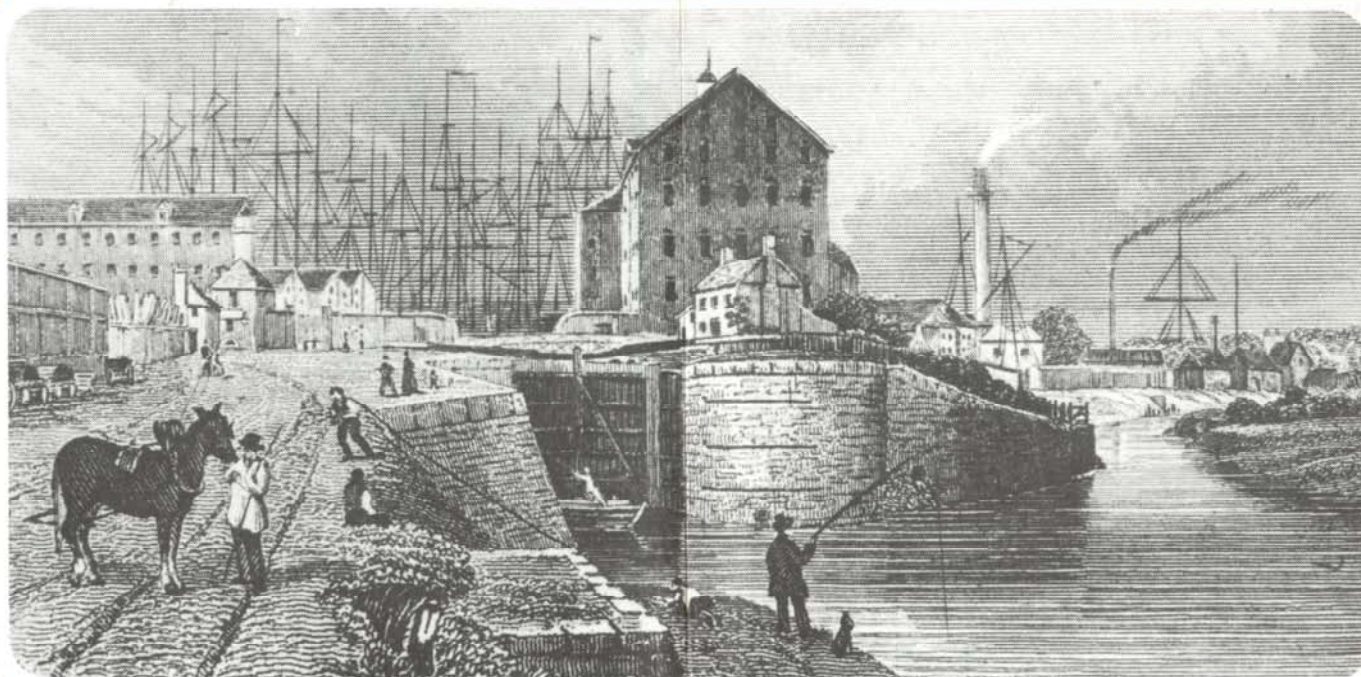
1. 2. **Biddles and Shiptons Warehouses** were built in the early 1830's. In the present century they were used by the Severn and Canal Carrying Company who had a fleet of tugs, barges and longboats operating between the Severn ports and the Midlands.

The **Barge Arm** of 1824 was originally surrounded by small yards served by tramroad sidings. On the north side are the posts of two former cranes.

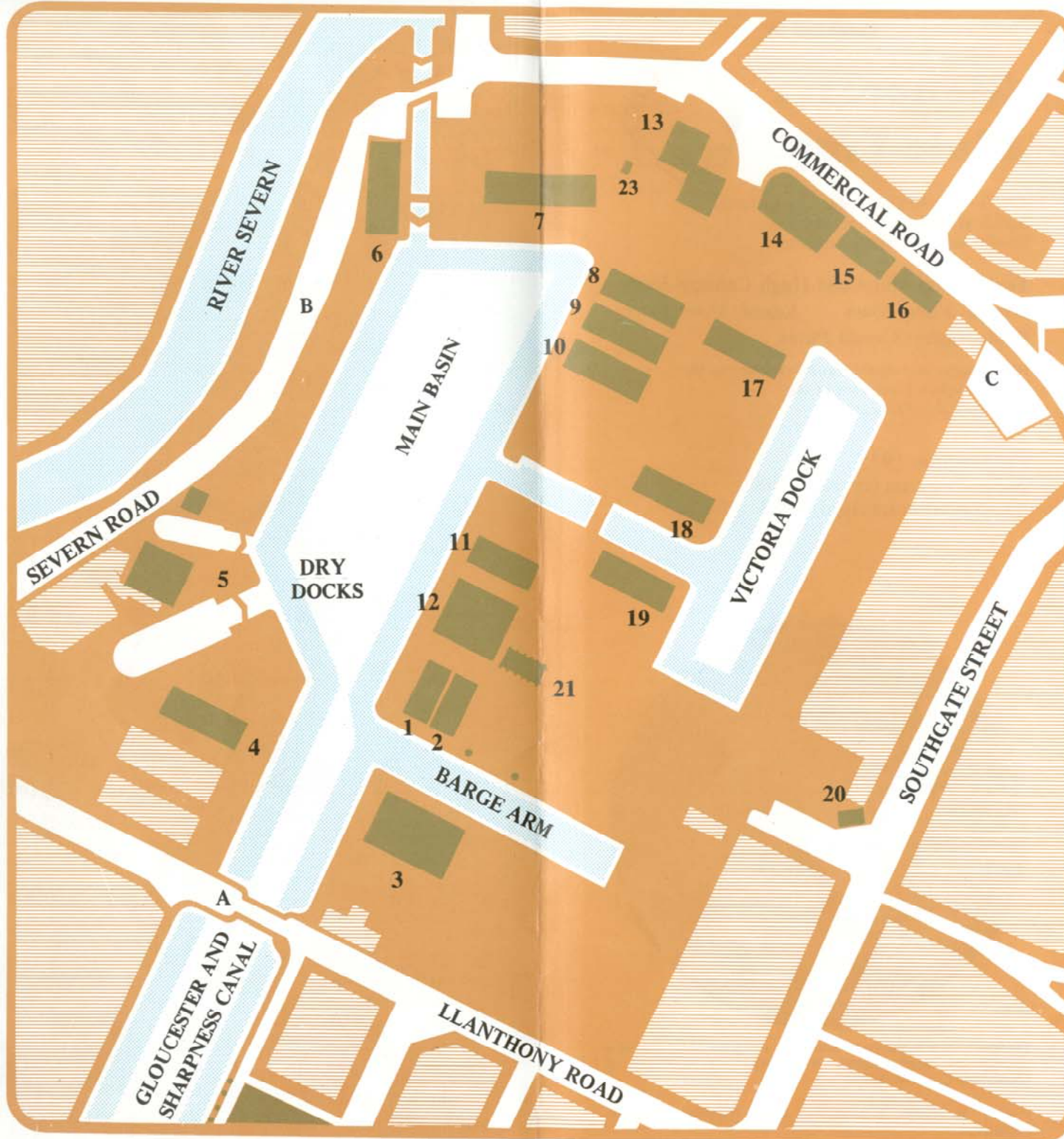
3. The **Llanthony Warehouse** was built in 1873 and was the last of the big warehouses. It is now the National Waterways Museum.

Llanthony Bridge is a modern vertical-lifting, hydraulically operated bascule structure of light alloy. Adjacent is the former bridgekeeper's house. Looking south can be seen the **Gloucester and Sharpness Canal** with **Baker's Quay** on the left and the **Pillar Warehouse** of c. 1838 with direct unloading from the canal. The two other buildings with pillars were originally a malthouse and an oil and cake mill. On the right are **Llanthony Quay** and a grain silo of the 1940s.

4. The **Alexandra Warehouse** was built in 1870. The Great Western warehouse of 1863 formerly stood next to Llanthony Road, but it was badly damaged by fire



Gloucester Lock viewed from the river quay circa 1850



of 1803 formerly stood next to Llanthony Road, but it was badly damaged by fire and only the ground floor remains. Between the two is a malthouse of 1888.

5. The old **Engine House** formerly contained steam powered pumps used to feed the canal with water from the river, and the stump of the chimney can still be seen. The building now houses an electric powered pump with a capacity of three million gallons per hour, and there is a second pump in the small modern building to the north. In between is the **Small Dry Dock** dating from 1837. The **Large Dry Dock** was built c. 1853 to accommodate the larger vessels that were using the canal by that date. Both are still used fairly frequently for refitting tugs, barges and sailing vessels.

The best view of the warehouses round the **Main Basin** is from **Point B** (the site of some demolished warehouses).

6. The **Lock Warehouse**, built in 1834, is the prototype of what became almost a standard design. The larger windows date from the 1920s when the building was used for sack cleaning and repairing. It is now an Antique Centre with the upper floors designed as arcades of small shops.

7. The **North Warehouse** is the oldest in the docks and is sometimes called the Telford warehouse as it dates from his time as consultant engineer to the Exchequer Bill Loan Commissioners (see HISTORY). It was designed by Martin Haigh of Liverpool. An inscription on a central stone high up near the roof reads 'The Gloucester & Berkeley Canal Company's Warehouses erected by W. Rees and Son Ano. Dom. 1826'. It has recently become the main offices of Gloucester City Council.

8. 9. 10. **Herbert, Kimberley and Phillpotts Warehouses**. These were built in 1846 to accommodate the expected increase in trade following the Repeal of the Corn Laws.

11. 12. **Vinings and Sturges Warehouses**. These were built in 1840 for two important corn merchants. Until recently they were used for storing wheat and flour for the neighbouring Albert Mills (see 19).

Gloucester Lock allows access from the Main Basin to the river for boats carrying up to 400 tons, which can then navigate up to Worcester, and smaller boats can go on to Stourport. The original lock-keeper's house can be seen by the river entrance.

13. The former **Canal Company's Office** was built in 1830 with later additions. On the wall is a plaque unveiled in 1980 by H.R.H. Duke of Gloucester commemorating the 400th anniversary of the Port of Gloucester. Nearby is a drinking fountain inscribed 'Gloucester Local Board of Health 1863'.

14. The **City Flour Mills** date from 1850 with later additions. Since 1886 they have been run by Friday Metford and Company, and are still in operation.

15. 16. The classical **Custom House**, opened in 1845, is now the Museum of the Gloucestershire Regiment. The stone-fronted **Offices** were built in 1848 for the merchants who operated in the docks.

From **Point C** there is a good view of the **Victoria Dock**, opened in 1849. In the present century, the Victoria Dock was used for loading salt on to schooners and ketches for Ireland and the Continent.

17. 18. 19. The **Victoria, Britannia and Albert Warehouses** were built between 1849 and 1861 to accommodate the growth in the corn trade following the Repeal of the Corn Laws. The Albert Warehouse was converted to a flour mill by James Reynolds in 1869, and this only closed in 1977. The Britannia Warehouse was gutted by fire on 1 April 1987, and a replica is being constructed.

20. The neo-Greek **Weighbridge House** echoes the architecture of the bridgekeepers' houses along the canal.

21. The Mariners' Chapel was built in 1849 in the Early English style and is still in regular use (but not often by mariners).