

PRESTON BROOK PARISH COUNCIL

To: **Members of Preston Brook Parish Council**

Report: Celebration of the 250th Anniversary of Preston Brook Tunnel

Background:

The Preston Brook Canal Tunnel, listed as a Grade II heritage structure, was first designated on October 31, 1983. Its listing underscores its historical significance, particularly its role in the development of the Bridgewater Canal during the Industrial Revolution, and its profound impact on Britain's economic landscape.

Spanning 1,250 yards and designed by pioneering canal engineer James Brindley, the tunnel is a crucial component of the Bridgewater Canal, often hailed as the "first true canal" in England. Completed in 1770, this canal was ingeniously designed for navigation, featuring artificial cuts and locks that optimised trade efficiency. Unlike earlier waterways, which were constrained by natural paths, the Bridgewater Canal was meticulously planned to facilitate the swift transportation of coal from the Worsley mines to Manchester, establishing a model for subsequent canal construction across the nation. The Bridgewater Canal was pivotal in setting the model for canal construction during this transformative period. The efficient movement of goods via canals helped establish Britain's dominance in industrial production, with the canal network acting as the arteries of trade, fuelling urbanisation and technological advancements throughout the late 18th and early 19th centuries.

The tunnel played a vital role in linking the Bridgewater Canal to the Trent and Mersey Canal, thus creating a vital trade route that enabled the efficient movement of coal, pottery, and other goods between Manchester and the Midlands. This connection marked a significant leap in infrastructure, reducing transport costs and stimulating economic growth across Northern England.

Preston Brook played a crucial role in the construction of the Bridgewater Canal, serving as a key point for connecting the canal to the navigable River Weaver. The successful engineering of the canal through Preston Brook demonstrated innovative canal-building techniques and the canal as a whole set a benchmark for future infrastructure projects in Britain, influencing future canal developments across Britain during the Industrial Revolution.

The tunnel's 250th anniversary in 2025 highlights its enduring historical importance as a feat of engineering that remains a reminder of Britain's industrial heritage. This milestone offers an opportunity to celebrate not only the tunnel's engineering achievements but also its role in shaping the region's economic and social history. This celebration will likely serve to emphasise the tunnel's role in the region's economic and social history, and this community reflection on the tunnel's impact will highlight its enduring legacy as a critical piece of Britain's industrial heritage.

Introduction:

Preston Brook Canal Tunnel will celebrate its 250th anniversary in 2025, marking a significant milestone for one of the UK's earliest and longest-standing canal tunnels. Built as part of the Bridgewater Canal, construction first began in 1769, with approximately 300 local men employed, with the tunnel construction completing in 1775.

The first boat through the tunnel carried 50 tonnes of coal to Barrington Wharf (Acton Bridge) and returned with 'farm goods' that likely included various agricultural products, such as grain, livestock, or dairy items, reflecting the trade connections between local farms and urban markets.

The anniversary is expected to be a momentous occasion for local heritage groups, historians, and canal enthusiasts, celebrating both the engineering achievement and the tunnel's enduring legacy in British canal history.

Celebrating the 250th anniversary of the Preston Brook Canal Tunnel is essential for recognising its historical and cultural significance. This milestone provides an opportunity to educate local children and adults about their heritage, fostering a deeper understanding of the area's history and the role the tunnel played in the Industrial Revolution. Such educational initiatives can strengthen community ties, enhance social cohesion, and inspire a sense of pride in local identity.

Moreover, recognising and celebrating heritage can aid in securing conservation status by demonstrating community value, which can attract funding and support for preservation efforts. Engaging the community in heritage activities fosters stewardship and encourages collective responsibility for protecting local history, which is one of the Parish Council's key directives, ensuring that future generations appreciate and maintain their unique cultural legacy.

Ideas:

Here are some ideas for activities and entertainment for the Preston Brook Canal Tunnel 250th anniversary celebration:

1. **Open Wharf Stalls:** Local artisans and vendors can sell crafts, food, and canal-related products.
2. **Historical Fairground Games:** Traditional games from the 18th century, such as ring toss or bean bag throw.
3. **Skill Demonstrations:** Craft demonstrations, including roses and castles painting (decorative boat painting).
4. **Historical Boat Tours:** Guided talks on historical boats, allowing visitors to explore and learn about canal trade. Possible boat trips up and down the canal to transport people to and from the event from neighbouring parishes along Bridgewater Canal.
5. **'Legging the Tunnel' Demonstration:** A reenactment showing how horses would pull boats through the tunnel and/or people would use their legs to push.
6. **Outdoor Historical Videos:** Screening short films that provide historical context about the canal and its importance.
7. **Clydesdale Horse Interaction:** Allowing visitors to stroke and groom traditional Clydesdales, educating them on their role in canal transport.
8. **Traditional Music Performances:** Live music by artists like Tom Kitching.
9. **Historical Artifact Displays:** Exhibits showcasing artifacts related to canal trade and the Industrial Revolution.
10. **Family History Booths:** Workshops where families can learn about their own local history and connections to the canal.
11. **Guided Historical Walks:** Tours around the canal area highlighting significant landmarks and stories.

- 12. Craft Workshops for Children:** Activities such as making boats from recycled materials or decorating canal-themed crafts.
- 13. Canal Cleanup Events:** Engaging the community in preserving the canal environment as part of the celebrations.
- 14. Trade Related Activities:** Hands on activities associated with the goods that would have been transported on the canal, such as cow milking, pottery wheel, yarn spinning, and wheat chaffing.
- 15. Interactive Storytelling:** Sessions for children and families featuring tales from the canal's history.
- 16. Art Installations:** Inviting local artists to create installations inspired by the canal and its heritage.
- 17. Traditional Dress Competition:** Inviting local people to dress in 18th and 19th century dress to symbolise the bygone era.
- 18. Launch of Classroom Boat:** Promotion of the aspiration to have a permanent classroom boat on the canal.

These activities can not only entertain but also educate attendees about the historical significance of the Preston Brook Canal Tunnel, fostering community spirit and awareness of local heritage.

When:

Hosting the Preston Brook Canal Tunnel anniversary during Heritage Week from September 12-21, 2025, presents a strategic opportunity for thorough planning and collaboration with local stakeholders and museums. This timing will foster stronger relationships with key partners, potentially leading to enhanced support for the Council's efforts to secure Conservation Status. Additionally, the event can benefit from cross-promotion, attracting wider community engagement and reinforcing the significance of local heritage while emphasising the need for its preservation.

Costs:

Securing support from stakeholders such as Peel Holdings and the Canal & River Trust could be beneficial for the celebration and conservation of the Preston Brook Canal Tunnel. Additionally, the Council can pursue funding from two key sources: the Liverpool Combined Authority, which offers grants up to £30,000, and the National Lottery, which provides grants of up to £20,000. Engaging these stakeholders and funding bodies can enhance the project's visibility and viability, ensuring the preservation of this important heritage site, without direct costs to the taxpayer.

Potential Stakeholders:

Potential stakeholder in this event include:

Preston Brook Heritage Group
 Daresbury District Heritage Group
 Warrington Museum
 Commercial Boat Operators Association
 National Historic Ships
 Inland Waterways Association
 Historic Narrow Boat Club
 Liverpool Museum
 Liverpool Black History Group
 Cheshire Local History Association
 Peel Holdings
 Canal and River Trust
 WI Groups (Preston Brook, Runcorn, Moore)
 Acton Bridge Parish Council (and possibly all other parish councils along the Bridgewater Canal route)