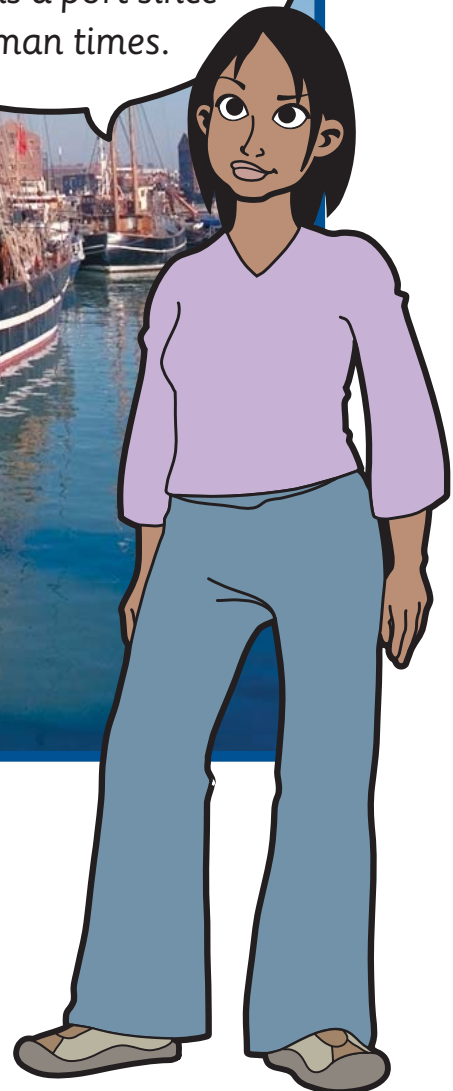


# Gloucester Docks Fact File

wow  
wild over waterways



Did you know?  
Gloucester has been  
used as a port since  
Roman times.



Tall ships at Gloucester Docks in 2008.

## Why build the canal and docks?

Gloucester Docks are located where the River Severn meets the Gloucester & Sharpness Canal. The River Severn has been used to transport goods since Roman times. Then in 1580 the city was granted a charter by Elizabeth I which gave permission to its people to build an inland port.

The opening of the Gloucester & Sharpness Canal in 1827 meant that bigger ships could reach Gloucester without getting stuck in the ever changing River Severn. Bigger ships meant more cargoes which needed bigger docks and warehouses.

It had taken 30 years to build the 16 miles between Gloucester and Sharpness. This may seem like a very long time to build something but this was a canal unlike others before it. It was to be big enough to take ships weighing up to 800 tons – about the same as 800 small cars. At the time it was the widest and deepest canal in England.

I wonder if the Romans would recognise Gloucester today?



A busy scene in the docks with ships, barges and narrowboats.

## What goods came through the docks?

Goods such as grain, timber and sugar were imported into Gloucester, this reached a peak in the 1850s. However most ships left empty as the main export from the Midlands, salt was in short supply. Some clever merchants made money by carrying emigrants who were leaving England to start new lives abroad.

Cargoes were also loaded onto narrowboats and then transported to factories in the Midlands on the River Severn and linking canals.

Some warehouses, such as the Albert Warehouse were converted into flour mills meaning that grain could be ground into flour as soon as it was unloaded.

## What did they arrive on?

Tall ships brought the cargo to the docks and it was not unusual for there to be a queue of boats waiting to be unloaded. The Victoria Dock provided a waiting place at busy times. Over time tall ships were replaced by steam powered boats.

A dry dock was an important part of any dock as wooden ships often needed repairing. The boat sails into the dock and the gates are closed, then the water is let out so that work can be done all around and under the ship.



A tall ship being repaired in the dry dock today

## Flames

Fires were a common risk as many dry goods were stored within the warehouses. This was very dangerous for the people living in Gloucester as the fires could easily spread into the city centre.

In 1875 the 6th floor of the Alexandra Warehouse set on fire. Unfortunately when the firemen arrived to extinguish the fire the water would only reach up to the 3rd floor as there wasn't enough pressure. They actually had to wait for the fire to reach the lower floors before they could put it out.



Britannia Warehouse after a major fire in 1980s.

## A Motley Crew

Corn porters shovelled loose grain from the ships into sacks.

Ships brought cargoes from all over the world, and workers then moved them from the ships to be stored in the warehouses.

All of this was hard physical work, although the dockers did use cranes and pulley systems to lift heavy loads.

Living near the docks were many low paid workers but there were also other people working there. A local newspaper in 1860 describes people seen and heard in the docks.

A Frenchman from the rich vine districts of Brittany, an Italian from the fertile plantations around Palermo. Again a Swarthy Negro escaped from the Slave States of America and a sprinkling of Norwegians, Danes, Dutchmen and Germans, compose the motley crew of arrivals in our port.



## Decline and rebuilding


Once cargo ships became too large to use the Gloucester & Sharpness Canal they could not reach Gloucester Docks. Cargoes were carried on the railways instead and on roads from ports nearer the sea, such as Sharpness. Gloucester Docks were used less and less.

Today the docks have been regenerated and are a fantastic example of how old buildings, which are not used for their original purpose can be restored and used for new uses – such as housing, shops, museums, offices and cafes.

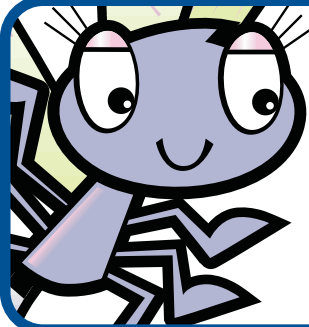


A restored warehouse at Gloucester Docks.

## Fascinating Facts



The bridges on the canal had to swing or lift as the ships were too large to go under them!



When the ship *Atlas*, which had made voyages to India and China, was broken up the ship's bell was saved and hung on the North Warehouse in 1832. It was rung to mark the beginning and end of the day at the docks. It had to be taken down in the war as no bells were allowed to be rung unless there was an invasion.

In 1864 a water fountain was installed in the docks for the workers to ensure they had fresh water and so were less likely to get ill.

**Floods** were common problem in Gloucester from the River Severn **bursting its banks**.

The chapel even distributed bibles in Chinese and Hindustani.

In the 20th century the Gloucester & Sharpness Canal carried cocoa beans for Cadbury's.

In 1945 the Great Western Warehouse set on fire and the fire boat *Salamander* had to be called to the rescue. However in the hurry to help the boat was not tied up properly and when they turned on the hose the boat turned and sprayed all the people watching on Llanthony Bridge instead!

The weigh bridge at the docks was once used to weigh an elephant as a publicity stunt for a circus.

**Strange but True**



Find out more about the docks in the Gloucester Docks Trail or download a poster for the Gloucester & Sharpness Canal at [www.wow4water.net](http://www.wow4water.net)

Always remember to stay **SAFE** near water – Stay Away From the Edge.