



Runcorn Street Art

INTRODUCTION

Halton Borough Council's "Reconnecting Runcorn" programme is set to breathe new life into Dukesfield, with the Street Art initiative taking centre stage. Supported by the Government's Town Deal and falling under the broader High Street Connectivity plan, the project aims to create a vibrant environment for cyclists and pedestrians.

As part of the "Trumpet loop" demolition in 2021, the Silver Jubilee Bridge approach viaducts were demolished, which opened up a new area. The remaining viaduct piers have been suggested as 'canvases' for a Street Art project, ideally situated in helping to create a pleasant walking route and encourage people to go from the Bridgewater Canal towards the River Mersey. Completed in 1961, the concrete viaduct piers have endured for 62 years, adding to the 155-year bridge history in this area

Local history from Dukesfield has inspired the stories and artwork for the project, with streets named after figures tied to the Duke of Bridgewater and the canal, forming the historical backdrop. The community had a say in the selection of stories, as a public consultation in 2021 gathered input to shape the project.

A collaborative effort involving the Council, local residents, and the Runcorn & District Historical Society has shaped the initiative. Hazlehurst Studios is crafting this booklet, pairing artwork with narratives, to document and share these stories, sparking conversations and community engagement.

The Street Art project is an exciting opportunity to enhance the beauty and cultural richness of Runcorn. By blending art with the town's unique history, the initiative celebrates its existing charm and invites residents to engage with their surroundings in new and inspiring ways.

RUNCORN STREET ART



The Stories

FROM 915 TO THE 1960S
Spanning over a 1000 years of History

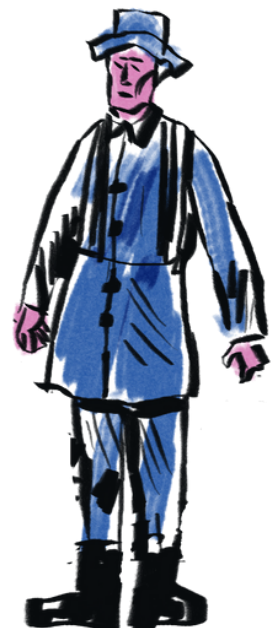


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THE STORIES

Introducing the stories that have shaped the Runcorn Street Art Project, where we delve into over a thousand years of history. As you explore the stories, we would love to know which ones resonate with you. Do you have a favorite? As you envision the scope of the project and the possibility of seeing these stories as large-scale murals, does that influence your choice?

1. Æthelflæd 915 AD
2. The Ferryman and The Fish 1844
3. The Census 1851
4. Bruin the Bear 1877
5. The Shaw's 1881
6. Tommy Burns 1889
7. George Pye and Son 1890
8. The Bomb 1913
9. Transporter Bridge
10. The Pubs and Theatres that used to be



ÆTHELFLÆD: 915 AD

Æthelflæd, the Lady of the Mercians (871–918), remains a foundational figure in the history of Runcorn. In 915, she founded the fortified town to protect Mercia from Viking threats and to foster trade. Runcorn proudly commemorates her impact with a blue plaque and the Ethelfleda Bridge (commonly known as The Runcorn Railway Bridge, built in 1868). Additionally, the stained glass window in All Saints Parish Church depicts Æthelflæd, and a sculpture titled 'Queen of Mercia' stands on Mersey Road. A mention of her can also be found alongside the timeline within a railing design on the Runcorn promenade.

While her profound influence on Runcorn endures, the mystery of Æthelflæd's appearance adds an intriguing dimension. Artistic imagination paints a picture of a tall, slender woman with long, flowing hair. Perhaps inspired by her name, Æthelflæd /'æθəlfælð/ is an Anglo-Saxon female name meaning "noble beauty." This enigmatic quality only deepens the fascination surrounding this extraordinary historical figure. Æthelflæd's vision and leadership continue to shape Runcorn's identity, leaving an indelible mark on the town's formation and development.



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ÆTHELFLEÆD: 915 AD



THE FERRYMAN AND THE FISH: 1844

In the historical account chronicled by the Westmoreland Gazette
on the 13th of July 1844

"A large fish - on Tuesday, the 2d instant, a fine sturgeon was captured at Runcorn, opposite the Old Quay Company's Docks; the length was between eight and nine feet, and its weight about 2 cwt (over a 100kg). It was captured by the men employed at the Runcorn Ferry, who fired at it with a ball without effect, but eventually, they struck a strong boat hook in its gills, and thus secured it; it was taken to Manchester and there sold."

This extraordinary capture unveils a regal aspect of the tale. Sturgeons, as recognized by the United Kingdom's law of the land, are deemed royal fish. This means that upon capture, they automatically become the personal property of the reigning monarch, constituting part of their royal prerogative.

Runcorn Ferry

Established in 12th century by the sixth Baron of Halton, John FitzRichard. The ferry, comprising nothing more than a rowing boat, continued to be used for centuries. The building of the Runcorn Railway Bridge in 1868 (with its pedestrian walkway) led to a decline in passenger traffic for the ferry, and the service finally ceased in 1905 with the construction of the Runcorn & Widnes Transporter Bridge.



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THE FERRYMAN AND THE FISH: 1844



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THE CENSUS: 1851

As you meander through the streets of Dukesfield, the echoes of history envelop you! Have you ever contemplated the lives of those who resided in these houses over a century ago and wondered about their tales?

Unveiling occupations from the 1851 census on Waterloo Road reveals a fascinating array: a SailMaker, a Professor of Music, and a mysterious "Panty Dealer" (though the exact nature of this occupation remains unclear, as 'panty' wasn't a commonly used term in the 1850s).

Speakman Street, it seems, may have been named after Philip Speakman, a multifaceted figure - a shipbuilder, coal & lime merchant, Justice of the Peace, member of the Runcorn Board of Commissioners, member of the Cheshire County Council, and an Alderman.

The 1861 census paints a vivid picture of Ashridge Street, boasting a shipbuilder, ropemaker, customs officer, mariner's wives, ships carpenters, and a dock porter. This snapshot underscores the significance of shipbuilding and docks in shaping the identity of Runcorn. Nearby shipyards, major employers of the time, further emphasized this maritime connection.



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THE CENSUS: 1851

2 MARINER'S WIVES



1 SHIP BUILDER



1 DOCK PORTER



2 SHIP CARPENTERS



1 OFFICER OF CUSTOMS



1 ROPE MAKER

BRUIN THE BEAR: 1877

On May 5th, 1877, the Illustrated Police News reported a captivating incident on Runcorn Railway Bridge in England. A lady found herself face to face with a large brown bear that had escaped from its keepers in Widnes after a street performance. The bear, known as "Bruin" due to its brown fur, made an unexpected appearance on the bridge.

Unaware of the approaching bear until it was just four yards away, the lady showcased incredible presence of mind. She disconcerted the bear by staring at it intently and deftly walked backward, maintaining eye contact. This quick thinking allowed her to escape unharmed, while the bear performed acrobatics and eventually fled towards Runcorn.

The term "bruin," associated with brown bears, stems from the Old English word "brūn," signifying brown. The news account, published in the Chester Courant, vividly described the lady's encounter and the subsequent pursuit of the escaped bear by its keepers. This extraordinary tale blends elements of danger, quick decision-making, and a touch of theatricality on the part of the bear, leaving a lasting imprint on the readers of the time.



THE BEAR: 1877



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THE SHAW'S: 1881

In 1875, William and Mary Shaw established their home at 22 Waterloo Road, Runcorn, as recorded in the 1881 census.

Following William Shaw's service in the Royal Navy and River Police, he dedicated himself to missionary work at St Peter's Mission, a hub situated by the 'bottom locks' of the Bridgewater Canal.

In 1891, a significant milestone marked the tireless efforts of William and Mary. Through their dedicated fundraising endeavors, including bazaars and sales of work, they amassed £2,125. Their slogan, 'Give a penny to buy a brick for the Sailors,' echoed through the community and enabled the Mersey Mission to Seamen to commence building a new Mission. This structure took shape on land between Station Road and Stonecroft on the southern bank of the Bridgewater Canal at the bottom of Pig Lane, known as Piggy Lane.

Within their residence, the Shaws had earlier founded a Seaman's Hospital, later expanding to the Cottage Hospital due to increased demand. Their fundraising efforts played a crucial role in this expansion.

Facing the persistent issue of inebriated sailors meeting tragic ends in the docks, William Shaw took action by forming a 'grappling corps' to recover bodies, even in challenging circumstances.

THE SHAW'S: 1881

Mary Shaw, William's very able and supportive assistant, played a pivotal role in the Seaman's Hospital, where she nursed sick seamen back to health. Coping with both her caregiving duties and raising their large family of 11 children was nothing short of remarkable.

Financial challenges also prompted the couple to seek funds for a memorial in Runcorn Cemetery, addressing inadequate burial arrangements for sailors. Both William and Mary found their final resting place there, leaving a lasting legacy in Runcorn. This overview merely scratches the surface of William and Mary's remarkable contributions to the community.



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TOMMY BURNS: 1889

Hailing from Liverpool, England, Tommy Burns, a renowned British diver, etched his name in history with audacious feats that defied death. Born in 1868, Burns initiated his record of exploits with a daring dive from Runcorn Bridge on October 9, 1889.

Embarking on an extraordinary journey, he swam 18 miles down the River Mersey to Liverpool, traversed on foot and by running to London, executed a daring dive off London Bridge, and returned home, completing the entire odyssey in a remarkable nine days.

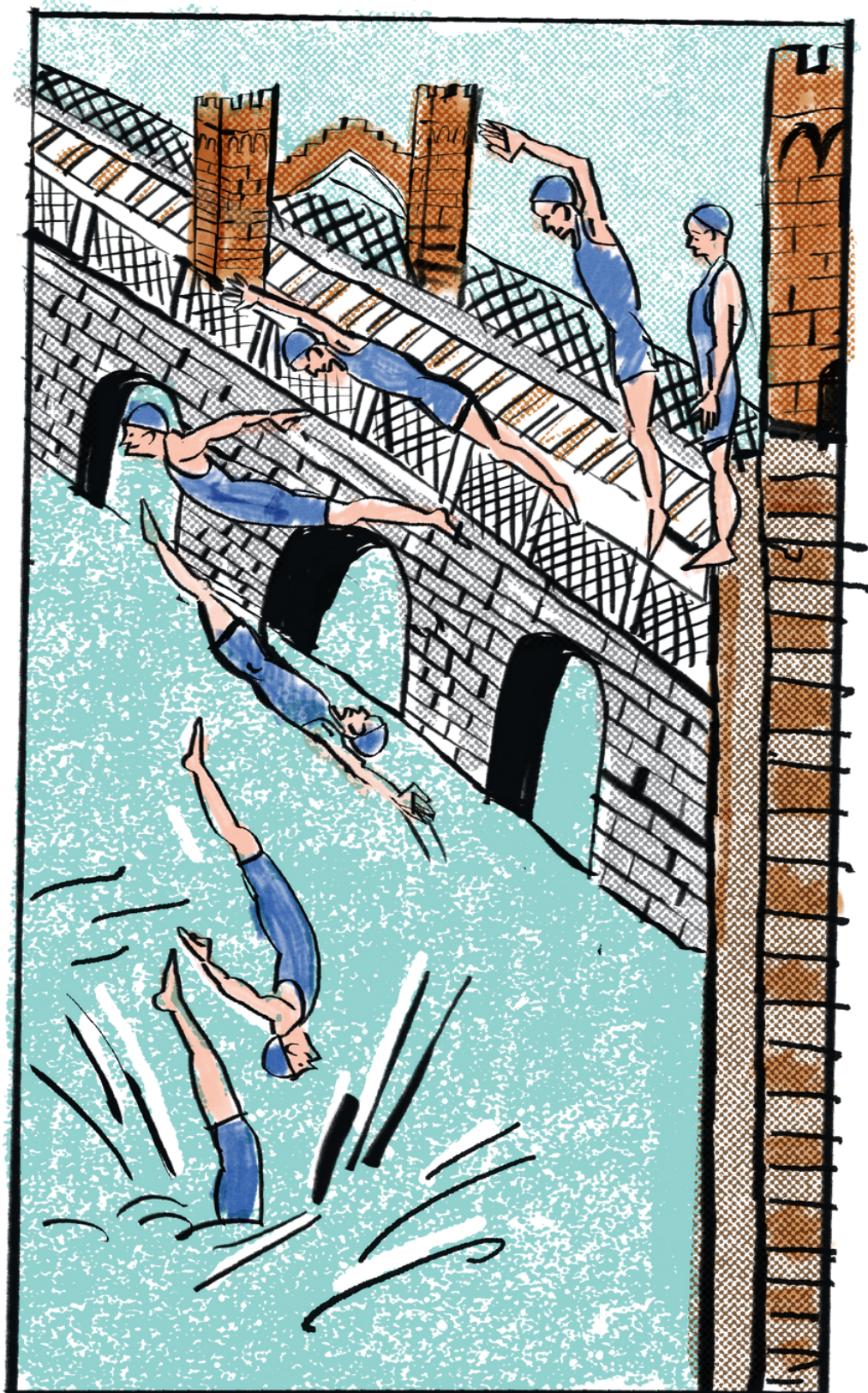
This remarkable feat became a repeated spectacle, captivating audiences on October 26, 1889, February 20, 1890, and June 19, 1890. The latter date marked a notable competition against Carlisle D. Graham, acclaimed as the Hero of Niagara Falls for his pioneering journey through the Great Gorge Rapids in an oak cask four years prior.

Tragically, Burns' final plunge occurred on July 6, 1897, in Rhyl, North Wales, leading to his untimely demise at the age of 30.

For those interested in exploring the legacy of this fearless diver and the circumstances of his final dive, a dedicated website offers a comprehensive view of his life and exploits:

www.tommyburns.org.uk

TOMMY BURNS: 1889



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GEORGE PYE AND SON: 1890

In the 1890 census, George Pye and Son, residing at 1 Speakman Street, were documented as photographers. During this era, photography was predominantly a professional pursuit, and the emergence of consumer photography in the late 19th century signaled a notable shift in the history of the craft. This prompts an intriguing question: How did this transformation affect the photography business for George Pye and his son?

A interesting local fact unveils a unique connection from the early 1870s. Vero Driffield, an engineer at Gaskell & Deacon Works in Widnes, formed a friendship with Swiss chemist Ferdinand Hurter, the chief chemist at the same works. Initially bonded by a shared interest in music, Driffield, fueled by his passion for photography, persuaded Hurter to explore the art form as a hobby. This laid the foundation for a collaborative and fruitful partnership.

Utilising their scientific expertise, Hurter and Driffield immersed themselves in photography, conducting groundbreaking research in the field. Their collaboration led to the introduction of the first independent speed rating for all photographic emulsions, known as 'H & D numbers,' in 1871.

GEORGE PYE AND SON: 1890

Over the years, the duo published eight papers showcasing their significant contributions to the understanding of photography. In 1898, their remarkable achievements were duly recognized when they were jointly awarded the Progress Medal by the Royal Photographic Society.

Following Driffield's passing in 1915, he was laid to rest in the churchyard of Farnworth church, Widnes.

Those intrigued by the story of Hurter and Driffield can explore further details at the Catalyst Science Discovery Centre and Museum.



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THE BOMB: 1913

In June 1913, a box of explosives was thrown from a train passing over Runcorn Bridge, landing in Ashridge Street. The police, considering it a practical joke, found no serious damage, but it caused alarm. Miss Bradley, whose employee, Mrs. Sharp, suffered harm from being awakened, was nearby. The police, unable to identify the perpetrator, collected bomb fragments, including a piece with the letters "Ex."

Earlier, two suspicious individuals in a car had visited the bridge, hinting at suffragette involvement. This aligns with the context that suffragettes in Great Britain and Ireland had orchestrated a bombing and arson campaign from 1912 to 1914. Led by key figures like Emmeline Pankhurst, the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) targeted infrastructure and the public, using explosive devices and other forms of violence. The police, aware of suffragette designs on the bridge, had kept a close watch.

The bombing incident, landing in Ashridge Street and affecting Miss Bradley's employee, reflects the suffragette campaign's indirect effects, causing alarm rather than serious harm. The broader suffragette campaign, marked by violence, was paused in 1914 with the outbreak of war. The police, despite collecting evidence, couldn't pinpoint the Runcorn Bridge perpetrator.



THE BOMB: 1913



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TRANSPORTER BRIDGE 1905 -1960'S

The Runcorn Transporter Bridge, a marvel of engineering, graced the landscape in 1905, connecting the towns of Runcorn and Widnes over the River Mersey. Crafted by the skilled French engineer Ferdinand Arnodin, this historic structure served as both a passage for vehicles and a walkway for pedestrians. However, with the increasing number of cars on the road, the bridge faced obsolescence. This prompted the construction of the Runcorn Road Bridge, which opened in 1961 and is now known as the Silver Jubilee Bridge.

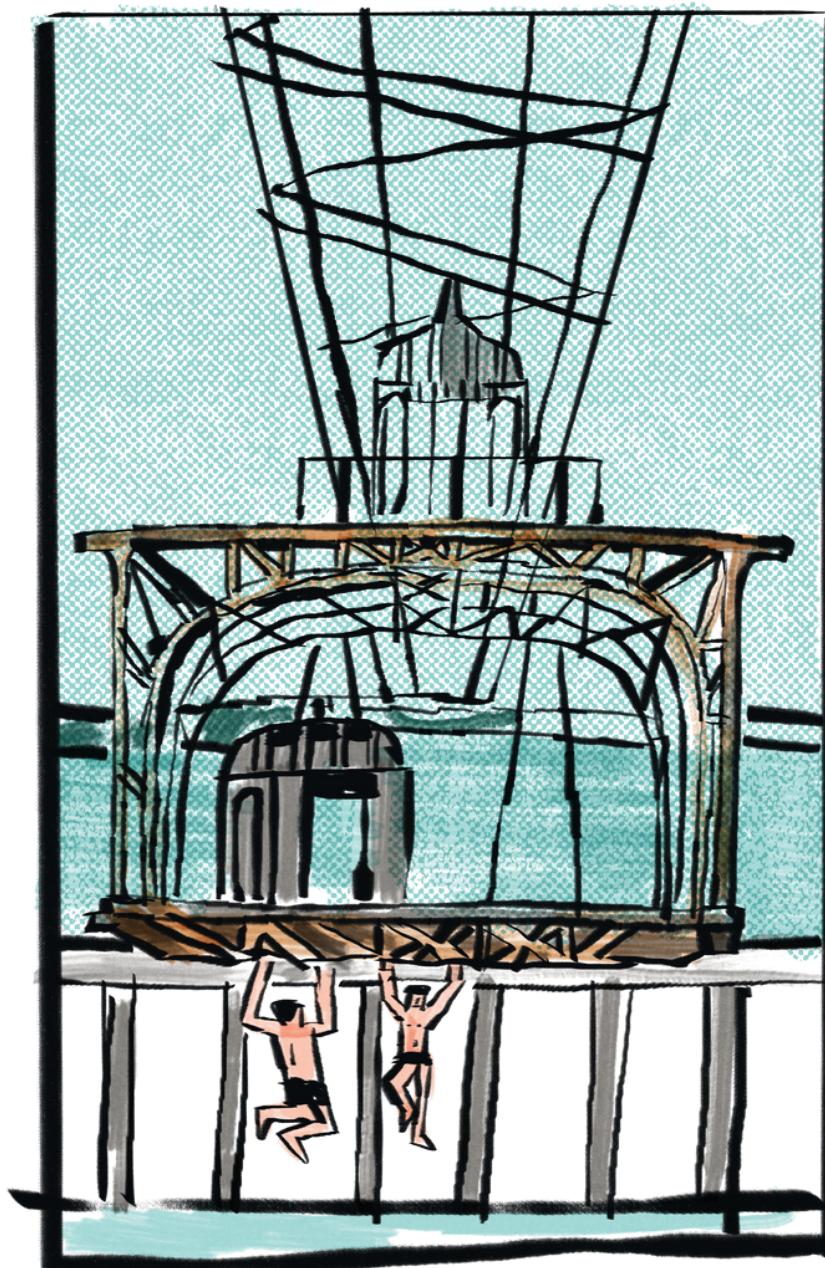
As a result, vehicular access ceased on the Transporter Bridge in 1961, and it closed entirely in 1964, marking the end of an era. Despite fervent public protests, the dismantling of the bridge became inevitable, and in 1969, it was disassembled.

Embedded in local lore are vibrant recollections, particularly those recounting the daring escapades of boys who hung from the bridge, seeking an exhilarating and free ride. These spirited tales, now vividly brought to life in an accompanying illustration, inject a dynamic and adventurous layer into the bridge's historical narrative.

While the physical structure of the transporter bridge has disappeared, the Catalyst Science Discovery Centre in Widnes features a collection of items related to the bridge, along with a vast archive of images. This exhibition thoughtfully preserves the legacy of the transporter bridge, allowing visitors to explore its history and significance.

The Runcorn Transporter Bridge, though absent in form, endures as a poignant symbol of local heritage, celebrated for its innovative design and the spirited tales of youthful exuberance that once echoed along the picturesque banks of the River Mersey.

TRANSPORTER BRIDGE 1905 -1960'S



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THE PUBS AND THEATRES THAT USED TO BE

The Theatre Royal, built in 1869 on Duke Street behind the old Waterloo Hotel, was a popular venue for plays and vaudeville.

Unfortunately, it burned down in 1906 after hosting unique competitions, such as an eccentric walking competition with 56-pound weights and a boy finding a sixpence in flour with hands tied.

It's fascinating to delve into the history of The Bridge Hotel in Ashridge Street, operating from 1864 to 1971, and its connection to pub tokens from the 18th and 19th centuries. Pub tokens, crafted from materials like copper or brass and adorned with images of the pub or local surroundings, offered a unique form of payment redeemable for drinks or goods. These tokens played a crucial role for those without regular currency, providing a creative solution for tracking expenses and even evading taxes on alcohol.

In the illustration, The Bridge Hotel in Ashridge Street is prominently featured, along with three other highlighted pubs: Percival Lane's Bridgewater Arm's Hotel (closed late 1970s), Mariners Hotel (closed mid 1970s), and The Devonshire Hotel, affectionately known as 'The Dev,' which closed in 2022. The destiny of The Bridge Hotel in Ashridge Street was entwined with two bridges. One bridge gave its name—the Runcorn Railway Bridge in 1868—while the other sealed its fate: the construction of an approach road for the Runcorn Road Bridge in the early 1970s led to its eventual demise.

The four highlighted pubs in the illustration, each with its own unique story, serve as reminders of the rich history and challenges faced by such establishments. Community support and advocacy play vital roles in ensuring the continued existence of these cultural hubs

THE PUBS AND THEATRES THAT USED TO BE



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THANKS TO

We would like to express our gratitude to the individuals and organisations that played an important role in the Runcorn Street Art project:

The Runcorn & District Historical Society, for sharing their historical expertise; Halton Borough Council, for their continuous support and partnership; and Millie Chesters, for their exceptional artwork that beautifully captures the essence of Runcorn's history.

Our heartfelt thanks also go to all the supporters who have generously dedicated their time, knowledge, and resources. Their significant contributions were crucial in furthering the goal of preserving Runcorn's heritage, as well as changing and enhancing the built environment. This ensures that the stories of our past are cherished and shared for generations to come.

Hazlehurst Studios was commissioned by Halton Borough Council as part of the Reconnecting Runcorn programme of projects, supported by the Government's Town Deal.

Reconnecting Runcorn is an ambitious set of seven projects that collectively aim to improve the lives and livelihoods of local people and boost the local economy. The initiative seeks to invigorate and enhance local connections through improved training and economic opportunities, enhanced transport links, housing and environmental improvements, and upgraded visitor attractions.



HM Government