

Learning the Ropes: Parkgate, Rope-making and The Ropewalk

Anthony Annakin-Smith

Many people wonder about the origins of The Ropewalk – the long straight footway in Parkgate (*Figure 1*). This article looks at the history of rope-making in the area and the background to the path.

Parkgate was a significant west coast port from the late seventeenth century to the early nineteenth. Vessels travelled principally to Ireland and North Wales but some went to southern Europe, the Baltic and even across the Atlantic. As well as being a port there was also ship-building and ship-repairing going on. Unsurprisingly, therefore, many trades associated with shipping developed locally – records mention, for example, sailmakers, anchorsmiths, ships' painters and blockmakers (as well as numerous mariners). Rope-making was another one of these local trades.

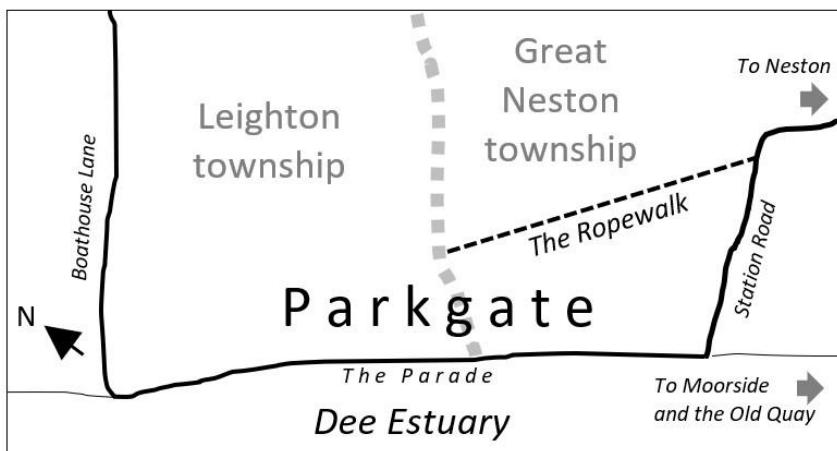


Figure 1 : Parkgate and The Ropewalk.
Principal locations mentioned in the article are shown including modern road names. The Parade is about 1,100 yards (1 km) long.

Parkgate's Ropemakers

Ropemakers are recorded in Parkgate over much of the eighteenth century and into the next – see Table 1 on the next page. Twelve have been identified so far, with two others uncertain. From around 1800 efforts to divert the Dee towards the Welsh side of the estuary meant ships found it increasingly difficult to access Parkgate and the last scheduled service to Ireland, by packet ship, was in 1815.¹ It is little surprise, then, that the records of local ropemakers die out in the early nineteenth century.²

Local rope-making was dominated by the Downards/Downarts/Downwards ('Downward' will be used hereafter for simplicity), a father and son both named Thomas. The elder Thomas was recorded as a ropemaker for at least 52 years, from 1729 to 1781.³ He had another son, Charles, a mariner, at whose house Emma Hamilton stayed when she visited Parkgate in 1784 (at that time under the name Emma Hart).⁴ She was already celebrated for her beauty and would go on to become mistress of Admiral Lord Nelson.

It may be that many of Parkgate's ropemakers were employed by Downward senior: a 1781 document shows he needed to take on 'several' local men to help him deliver a substantial order. A few of the men in Table 1 were recorded at times as having a different occupation – mariner or, for Frederick Brown, blockmaker – suggesting that rope-making was not necessarily a full-time or permanent job for them. Thomas Brown was recorded as a 'ropier' when admitted as a Freeman of Chester in 1747,

Name	Wife	<i>Earliest/Latest Record as Ropemaker/Roper</i>
Thomas Downard/ Downart/Downward	Anne (d.1740); Rachel	1729-1781
Richard Meadows/ Meddows	Mary	1730-1736
(uncertain) Thomas Downart	Mary (error for Anne?)	1731
Robert Price	Anne	1732 -1738
Joseph Davies	Margery	(1742) 1743-1750 (1758)
George Brown	Margaret	1745-1764
Thomas Brown	Ellin/Ellen	1746-1756 (1757-9)
Thomas Penny/ Monnypenny	Margaret	1751 -1760 (1763-9)
Frederick Brown	Margaret	(1748-1752) 1755 (1757)
(uncertain) George Brown ('George' error for 'Thomas'?)	Ellin/Ellen (error for Margaret?)	1760
Thomas Parry	Margaret	1767
Thomas Downard/Downward	Hannah	1777-1783
John Edge(s)	Nancy (d.1791)/Anne	1790-1795 (1798-1801)
John Watson	Anne/Hannah	1792-1805 (1806-1811)

Table 1: Men listed as ropemaker or roper in Parkgate. The dates in bold are the earliest and latest where their occupation is recorded; dates in brackets are earlier or later ones where a different occupation, or none, is given for that individual. Sources: Neston parish registers, Cheshire Marriage Licence Bonds and Allegations, Land Tax Assessments for Leighton, Great Neston and Little Neston, and, for Thomas Downart senior, CALS, ZTCP/8/153.

a status which came with trading and voting rights.⁵ However, the parish register later sometimes listed him as a porter.⁶ Surviving documents suggest that both of the Downards and another of the ropemakers, John Watson, were well educated inasmuch as they were able to sign their names neatly.⁷ In particular, Thomas Downard junior was employed both as a foreman and 'to receive orders for his father [and] to keep his books, accounts etc'.⁸

Most of the ropemakers are recorded in parish registers as simply living in 'Parkgate', but other information is available for a few. Thomas Downard senior was sometimes listed as being from Leighton which would mean somewhere north of today's Mostyn Square.⁹ 'Parkgate' was the location usually recorded for his son but in the early 1780s he was living at the Old Quay. The property there was Neston's House of Correction, housing miscreants and Irish 'vagrants' awaiting deportation to their homeland, and was run at the time by Downard's father-in-law, William Aldcroft.¹⁰ John

Watson resided at Moorside and was one of the men who took on local rope-making after the Downwards moved to Liverpool no later than 1784.¹¹

The 1781 document referenced above related to a legal dispute concerning payment for both cables (i.e. anchor and mooring ropes) and rigging (ropes attached to the sails and masts) for a ship being built in Chester. Cables and rigging were stock-in-trade for ropemakers; often they made nets too. Their primary customers were involved with shipping but nearby Ness Colliery, opened in 1759, was another potential source of business. However, in 1770 at least, the colliery was buying its ropes from one of Chester's most prominent ropemakers, Jonathan Whittle (whom Thomas Downward senior clearly knew very well).¹²

Rope-making and The Ropewalk

Ropes were made from hemp, specifically the long fibres in the plant's tall stems; netmaking typically required the finer fibres of flax.¹³ While there are records of hemp (and flax) being grown regionally, it does not favour Cheshire's clayey soils; Henry Holland, writing in 1807, said 'hemp and flax are ... cultivated to a very trifling extent in this county'.¹⁴ There are, though, many records of hemp being brought by ship to the port of Chester, which included Parkgate, in the eighteenth century.¹⁵ The hemp needed to be dipped in tar to make it waterproof and barrels of pitch were sometimes imported alongside the hemp.¹⁶ The hemp and flax then need to be prepared – a task undertaken by a flax-dresser who combed out the fibres using a steel-pinned 'hackle'. Several flax-dressers appear in local records in the eighteenth century.

Large quantities of hemp and other materials were needed for rope-making. Thomas Downward claimed that 100 cart-loads were needed to make the cables and rigging commissioned for the new ship.¹⁷ When the customer, ship's captain Hugh Williams, reneged on his order, Downward's total damages claim to cover costs incurred for materials and labour was a very substantial £500. Williams' excuse for cancelling the order was that Jonathan Whittle in Chester was going to take on the rope-making for the vessel as he was to be a part-owner; other parties included Williams himself, well-known Chester merchant James Folliott, and a Dublin man, John Fitzpatrick.

Rope-making required the use of a ropewalk – a long, straight piece of ground on which equipment was positioned and along which the rope was formed. Chester had a long history of rope-making; one of the ropewalks was to be found alongside the city walls at St. Martins (along part of today's City Walls Road).¹⁸ Liverpool still has an area named Ropewalks, around Bold Street. In Parkgate there is The Ropewalk, situated in what was the township of Great Neston. It seems likely, given its distinctive and lasting impact on the landscape, that this was the area's only ropewalk although we cannot be sure. We also do not know when this ropewalk was first used. It is not explicitly indicated on an estate map drawn in 1732 although a building later apparently associated with the ropeworks does appear to be shown.¹⁹ The first known documentary reference is in Thomas Downward's 1781 legal paper. An 1814 map – based on a survey in 1811 and perhaps drawn around the time the walk was being decommissioned for rope-making – gives the first depiction of its location. It appears as a narrow way laid out between today's Station Road and Brookland Road and about 570 yards (521 metres) long (*see Figure 2*).²⁰ A later newspaper account mentioned that the ropewalk had been hedged on each side, with a particularly thick and high hedge on the east side to give protection against easterly winds.²¹

The 1814 map shows a building approximately 29 feet by 21 feet (8.9 m x 6.5 m) sitting directly on the ropewalk, 184 yards (168 m) from the Brookland Road end (all measurements given here assume scaling on the map is accurate). To the other end it was 386 yards (353 m), almost two cables – a cable being a traditional nautical measure for rope-making of about 101 fathoms or 202 yards (185 m). It



Figure 2: The ropewalk in 1814. It is marked by parallel dotted lines towards the top of the map. The building on the ropewalk is arrowed. Parkgate front is at the bottom of the map, with the sea-wall partly built. Source: Bangor Archives, Mostyn MSS S 8702 (detail). With thanks to Susan Chambers.

seems likely that this building would have housed one or more ‘jacks’.²² The jack was a frame on a spindle fitted with three or more hooks and pointed along the walk (Figure 3). The jack was used to make both yarn – a continuous series of overlapping hemp fibres – and rope, made up of long strands of yarn. In order to make rope, a movable hook was placed at a distance from the jack commensurate with the length of rope being made. Strands of yarn were strung between the jack and hook. As one man rotated the jack using a crank handle, another man walked slowly from the hook, controlling the rate of twisting of the rope forming behind him. The hook would slowly be moved closer to the jack as the length of the developing rope contracted as the yarn was twisted.

Close to the building on the ropewalk shown on the 1814 map is another, slightly larger one. This was later said to have been used to store machinery as well as being a warehouse for the hemp, yarn and finished rope. There was also an adjacent boiler house where ropes were tarred.²³

It seems that it was when rope-making finished in Parkgate that the walk was adopted as a promenading route to use when weather was unfavourable on The Parade.²⁴ Much activity was going on in Parkgate in the first couple of decades of the nineteenth century to boost its appeal to visitors including the introduction of a theatre, libraries, warm baths and development of the sea wall.²⁵ The new walkway was considerably narrower than the old ropewalk and the parallel hedges were apparently removed.²⁶

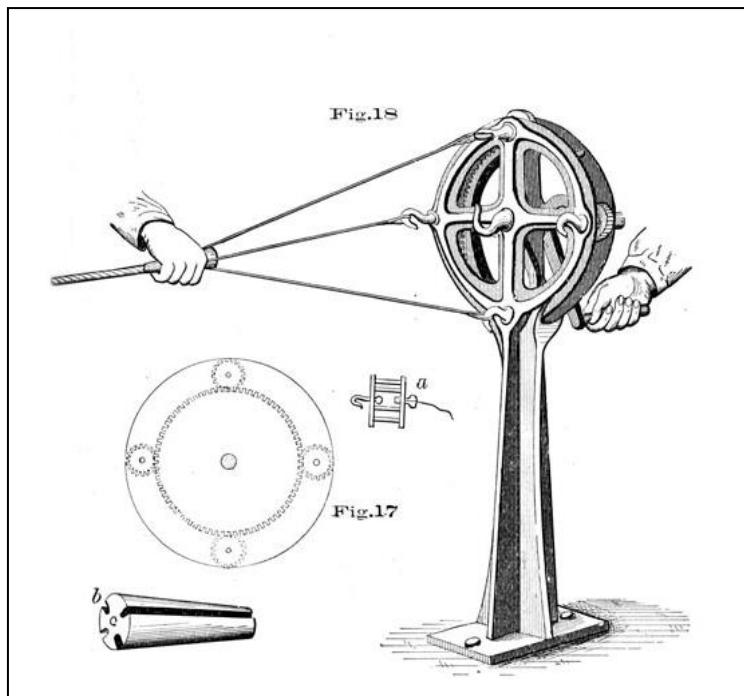


Figure 3: Rope-making equipment. A jack is on the right – the one(s) at Parkgate would probably have been wooden. The conical device, ‘b’ is a ‘top’, held by the hand on the left to keep the strands of yarn separate until they are twisted. Source: S.B. Luce, *Textbook of Seamanship* (New York, 1891), p. 22.

The use of the name Ropewalk, or a variant, first appears in the apportionment to the 1847 Great Neston tithe award.²⁷ It was applied to a field adjacent to the walk – Rope Walk Field; two nearby fields had related names. The walk itself was named Cheltenham Walk in 1849 when Edward Mostyn Lloyd Mostyn sought to give a more salubrious feel to the area as he sold it off in an auction (the nearby row of black and white houses on Station Road, built in 1900, was to be called Cheltenham Place).²⁸ References to both Cheltenham Walk and Rope Walk can be found for decades after Mostyn’s sale – sometimes both names can be found in reports of a single local council meeting.²⁹ However, Cheltenham Walk appears to have been the officially recognised name and it was not until 2 May 1955, after some argument, that Neston Urban District Council issued an order permanently altering the name to ‘Rope Walk’ – which soon mutated to ‘The Ropewalk’ (Figure 4).³⁰

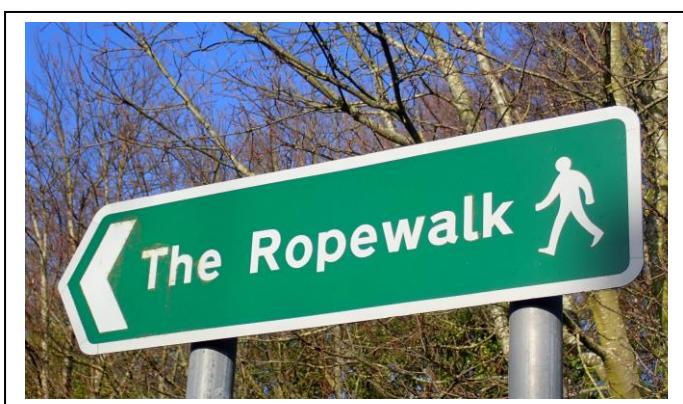


Figure 4: One of several signs for The Ropewalk in Parkgate today.

References

- ¹ G. Place, *This is Parkgate*, 2nd edn (Parkgate and District Society, 1999), p. 5.
- ² There are two later entries for ropemakers in the parish registers, in 1832 and 1851; however, neither man was local.
- ³ Neston parish registers [hereafter NPR]; Case and Opinion of Mr. Rob. Townsend: CALS, ZTCP/8/153.
- ⁴ G. Wright, *Emma, Lady Hamilton (1765-1815): Neston's Most Famous Daughter* (Burton & Neston History Society, n.d.). She initially recorded her lodging house keeper's name as 'Mrs Darnwood'.
- ⁵ *The Rolls of the Freemen of the City of Chester, part two*, ed. J.H.E. Bennett (RSLC, LV, 1908), p. 336; *VCH Cheshire*, V i, pp. 140-41.
- ⁶ Ropemaker 1746, 1748, 1750, 1752, 1756; porter 1754, 1757.
- ⁷ Will of Samuel Williamson (1769); Cheshire Marriage Licence Bonds and Allegations [hereafter CMLBA], Thomas Downward [jnr.] (25 Nov. 1775) and CMLBA, John Watson (14 June 1792).
- ⁸ CALS, ZTCP/8/153.
- ⁹ Neither he, nor any other known ropemaker, is listed as living in Great Neston i.e. south of today's Mostyn Square, in 1732 ('Field Book to the Survey of ... Great Neston': Bangor Archives, Mostyn MSS 6086).
- ¹⁰ G. Place, 'The Repatriation of Irish Vagrants from Cheshire, 1750-1815', *JCAS*, LXVIII (1986), pp. 131-32. Thomas Downward and Hannah Aldcroft were married in 1775.
- ¹¹ Baptism of Sarah, daughter of Thomas jnr., on 5 Sep. 1784 (Toxteth, St. James parish register); Downward snr. died in Liverpool, aged 84, in 1785 but was buried in Neston (NPR and *Chester Courant*, 28 June), as was baby Sarah when she died around the same time (NPR, 6 July 1785); Downward jnr. was buried at Neston in 1791.
- ¹² 'A State of the Accompts. at Ness Colliery': Lancashire Archives, DDCL 1065; 'The Families of Whittell or Whittle of Chester', *Cheshire Sheaf*, ser.3, XXVI (1929) , pp. 56-58 (and many other sources). He was joint guarantor with Downward of the latter's licence bond on his remarriage in 1742 (CMLBA, 1 June) and also of a bond assuring support to the daughter of Downward and his late wife Anne, in 1751 (CALS, Admon (Tuition), Bethya Downward, 18 May).
- ¹³ A. Sanctuary, *Rope, Twine and Net Making* (Oxford, 2010), p. 3.
- ¹⁴ H. Holland, *General View of the Agriculture of Cheshire* (London, 1808), p. 168.
- ¹⁵ For example, TNA, E190 1440/3, 3 July 1769 (7 cwt. hemp from Liverpool), and E190 1438/7, rough hemp and 'undrest flax' from Danzig (now Gdansk, Poland), 21 July 1766.
- ¹⁶ For example, TNA, E190 1367/13, 14 Aug. 1764 from Liverpool (52 cwt. rough hemp and 20 barrels of pitch).
- ¹⁷ 'Draft declaration for Thomas Downard': CALS, ZTCP/8/157.
- ¹⁸ J. Hunter, *Survey of the Ancient and Loyal City of Chester* (Chester, 1789). Others, at Handbridge (as well as many elsewhere in the county), are listed in the Cheshire Historic Environment Record; see also 'One of the Blomfields', *Cheshire Sheaf*, ser. 1, III (Jan. 1884), p. 103.
- ¹⁹ 'Map of the manors or townships of Great Neston, Leighton and Thornton': Bangor Archives, Mostyn MSS, S 8699; *Chester Chronicle*, 6 May 1882.
- ²⁰ 'Map of the township of Neston': Bangor Archives, Mostyn MSS, S 8702. It may also have marked the route of a 'proposed road', shown on James Hunter's 'New Map of the Hundred of Wirral' made in the early 1790s, shortly after Station Road was built. Brookland Road is often now known as Brooklands Road.
- ²¹ *Chester Chronicle*, 6 May 1882.
- ²² Sanctuary, *Rope, Twine and Net Making*, p. 10.
- ²³ *Chester Chronicle*, 6 May 1882.
- ²⁴ Place, *This is Parkgate*, p. 7.
- ²⁵ *Chester Courant*, 26 Mar. 1811 and 28 May 1816; *Chester Chronicle*, 11 Aug. 1815 and 22 Aug. 1817.
- ²⁶ *Chester Chronicle*, 6 May 1882.
- ²⁷ Great Neston Tithe Award and Apportionment: CALS, EDT 176/1 & 2.
- ²⁸ 'Plan of land in Parkgate to be sold at auction': CALS, D 9274; Place, *This is Parkgate*, p. 7.
- ²⁹ For example, *Cheshire Observer*, 12 Dec. 1891 and 12 Nov. 1892.
- ³⁰ Comments on the name and usage of the route, and the naming order are in CALS, LuNE 8620/11 which also records its designation as a highway. *Birkenhead News and Advertiser*, 17 Nov. 1956, talks about 'The Ropewalk'.