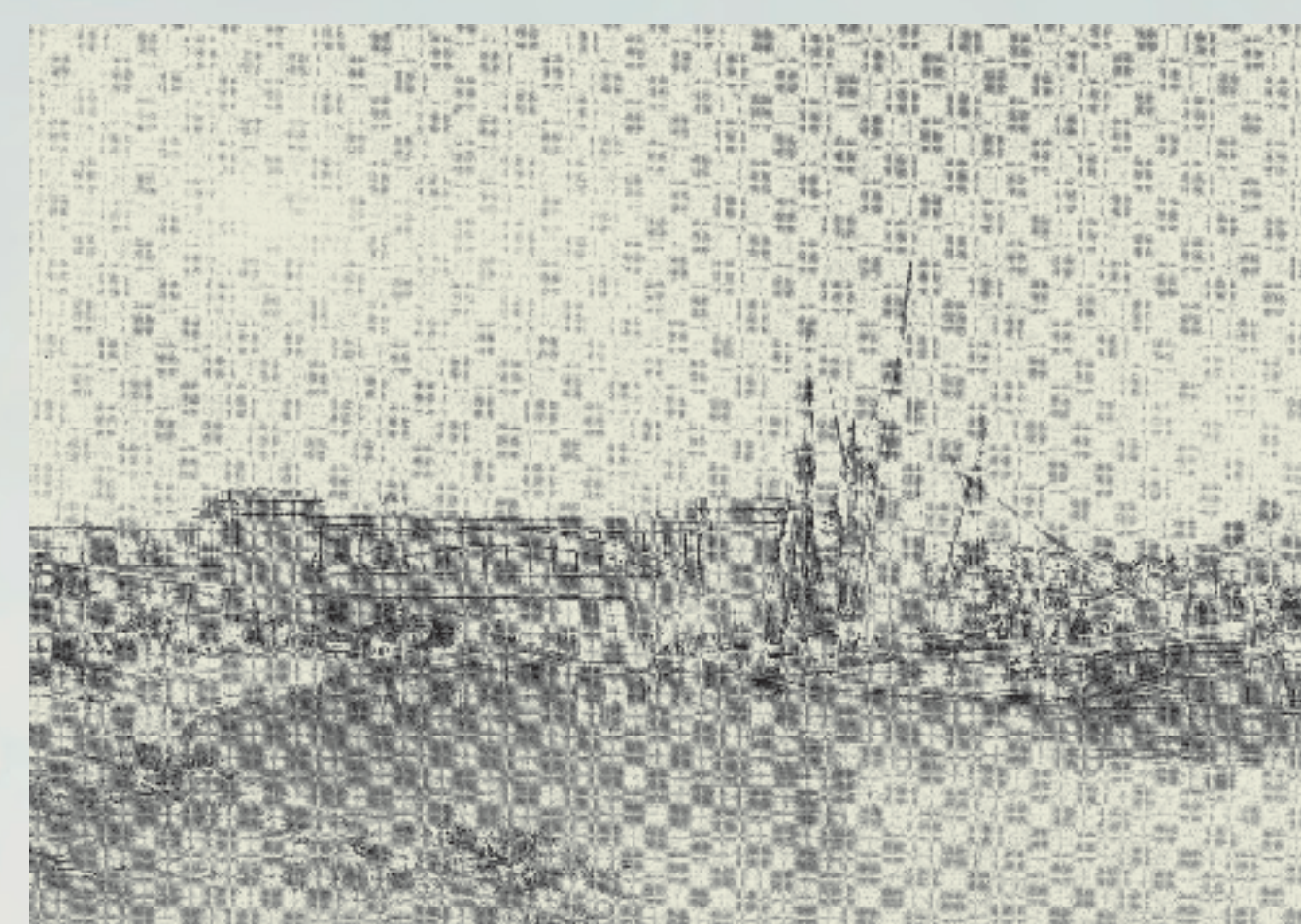


4 The Coming of the Railways and Afterwards

The Railway Years

From the 1830s railways were the rage and many canals died as a result of the railways' success. But unlike some rural canals, the Regent's Canal continued to thrive since it served the Port of London, up until the 1960s when the old docks closed.

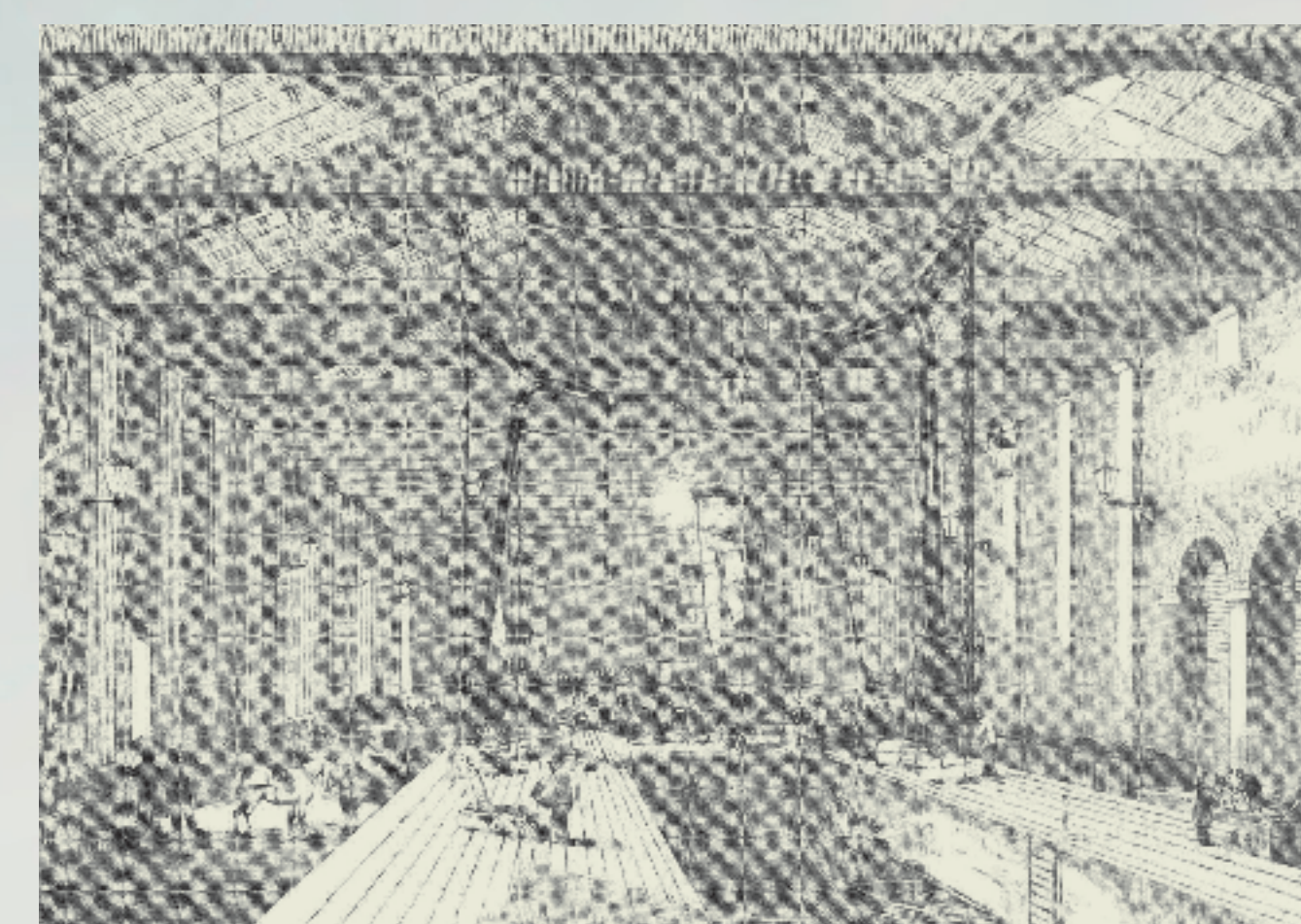
In 1837 the London and Birmingham Railway opened to London's first mainline railway terminus at Euston. It started to take long-distance goods traffic away from the canal and the outlook for a short while seemed gloomy. Railways appeared more versatile and there were speculative schemes in 1845-6 and later to convert the entire canal to a railway. But the Regent's had the advantage of strong and growing local traffic, particularly through its connections by water into the Thames and the Docks. From there, raw materials and coal were cheaply brought by barge to local factories and traders. London's growing population and prosperity sustained other traffics suited to the canal – bricks, lime, timber and stone to build houses and roads, fodder for the ever-increasing horse population, household refuse and manure carried away in return. The Regent's Canal moreover found a role distributing coal, grain, beer and other goods that arrived in London by rail.



Railway Bridge at Camden



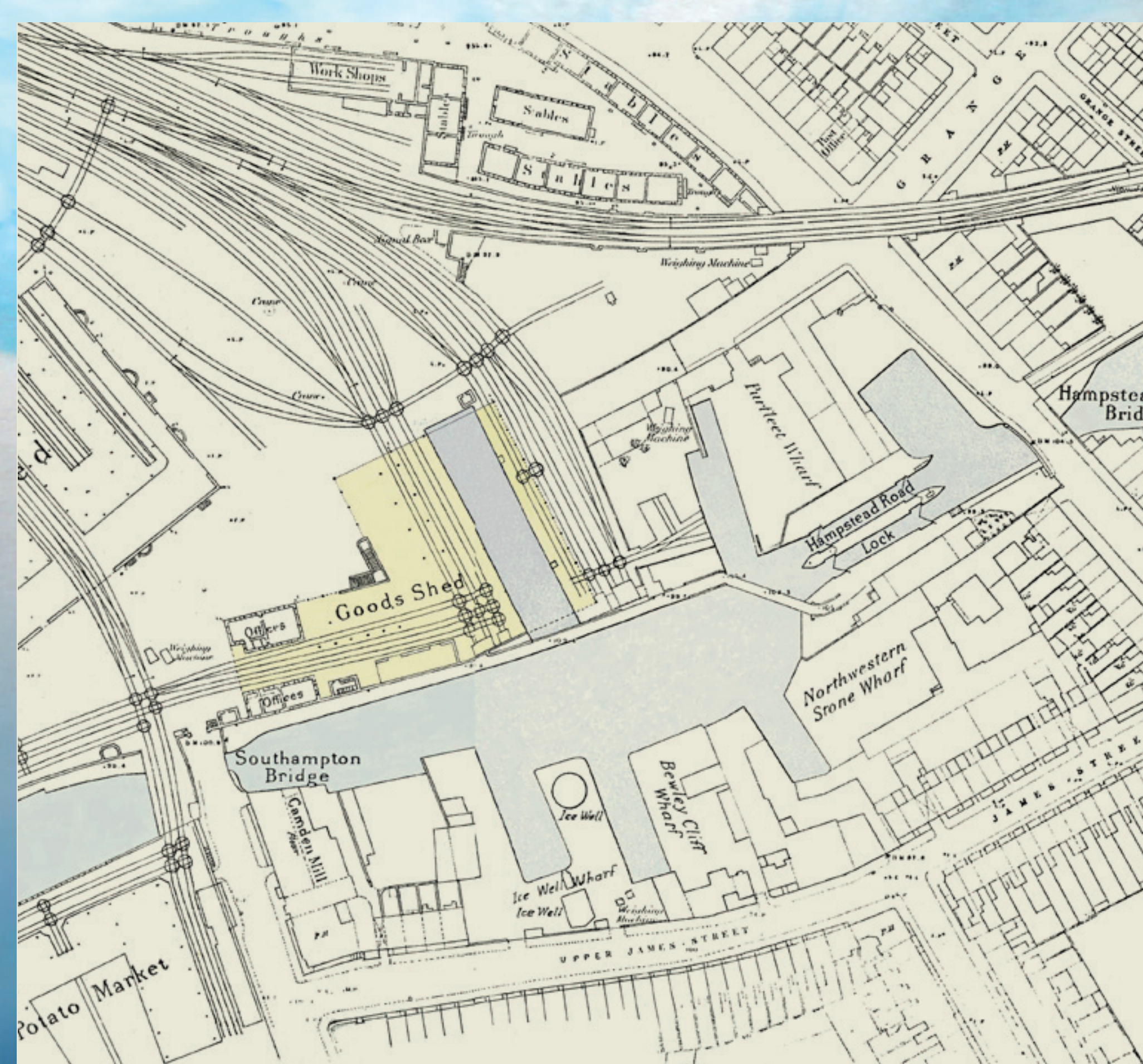
The Great Northern Railway's granary warehouse and basin that opened in 1851. The two centre arches allowed canal craft to access the main warehouse whilst those on the left and right served transit sheds, one handling incoming and the other out-going traffic.



Inside one of the Great Northern Railway's transit sheds showing goods being exchanged between railway wagons and canal craft. (From Illustrated London News, 28th May 1853)



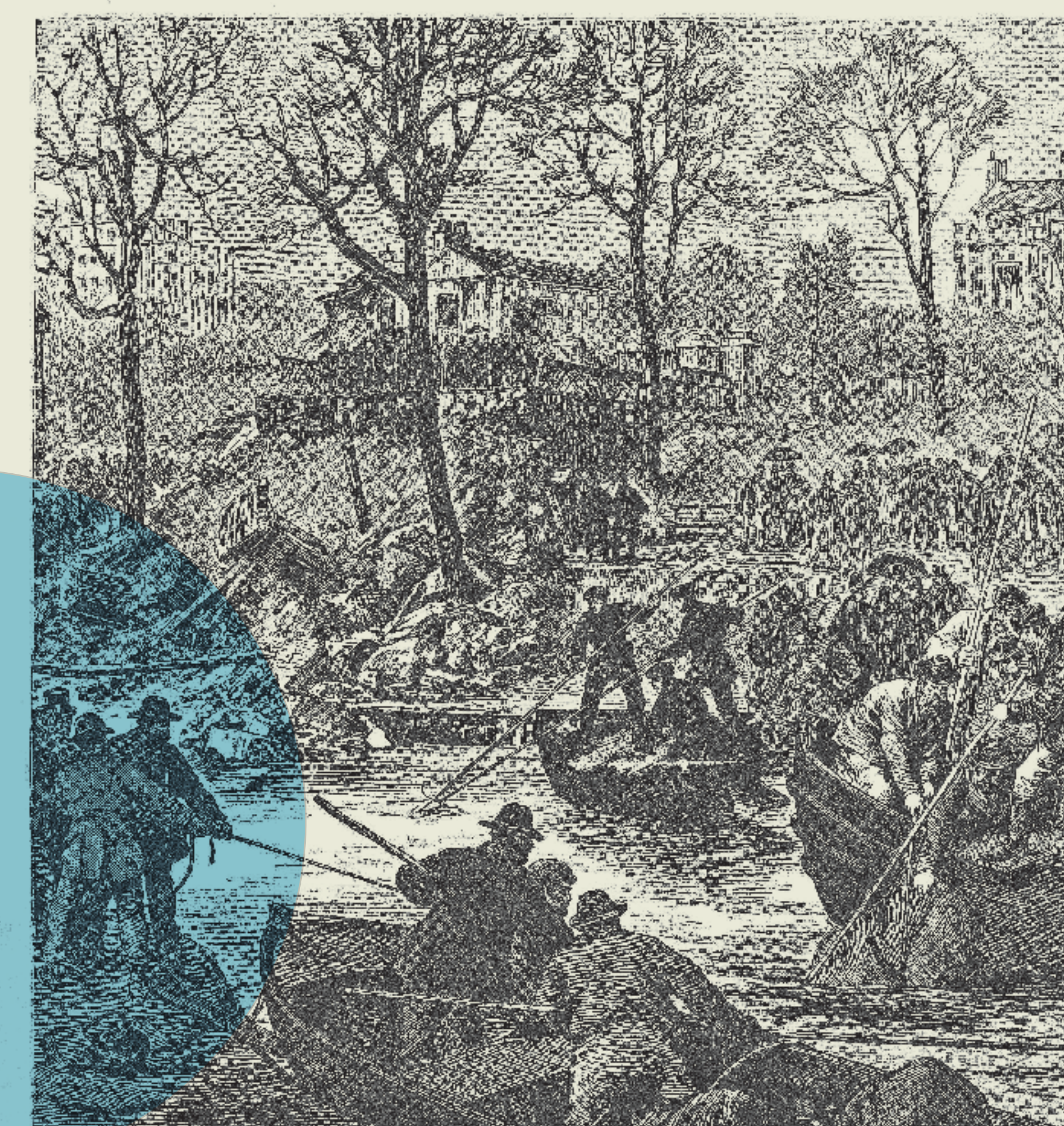
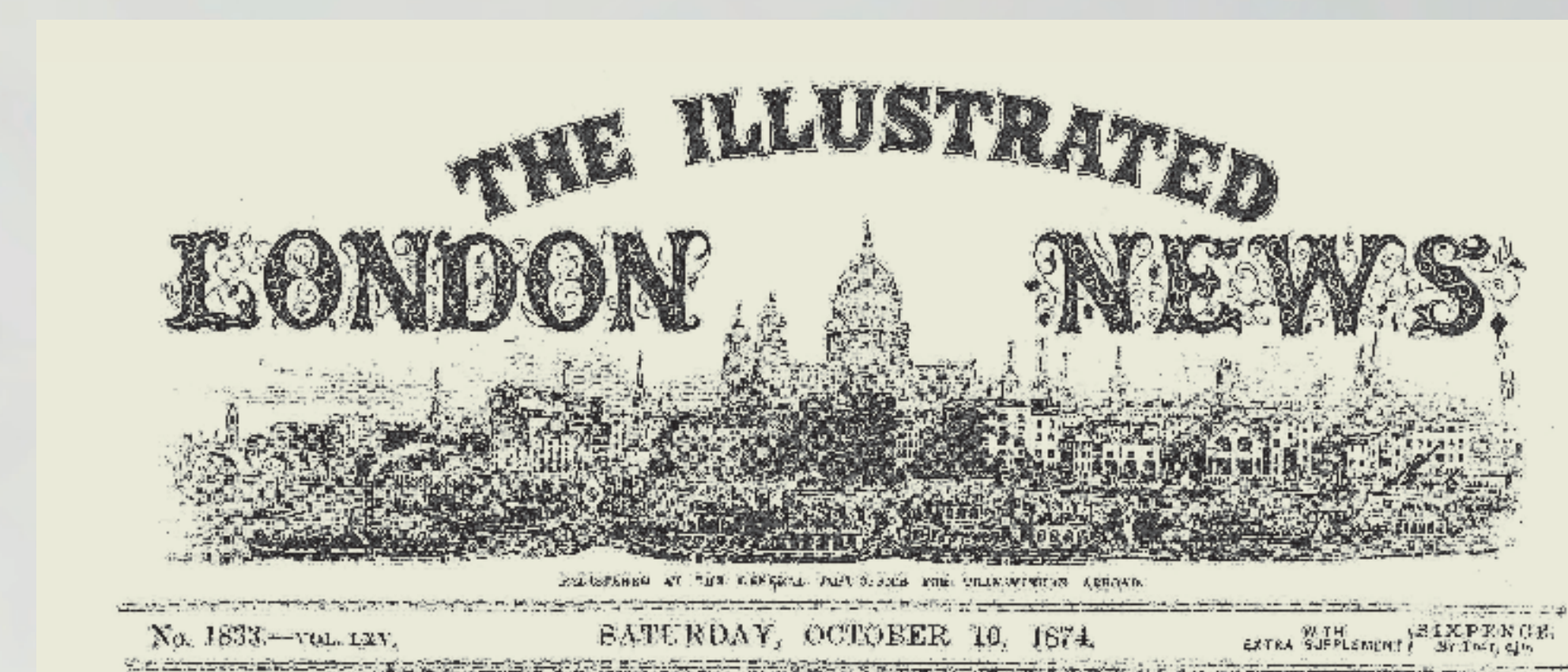
Skating in the tunnel (Illustrated London News, 3rd March 1855)



Map of Camden Town in 1871

Macclesfield Bridge Explosion

Railways were reluctant to carry explosives, so gunpowder was carried extensively by water, both for military purposes and for civilian uses, such as quarrying. One of the most notable incidents in the history of the Regent's Canal occurred in October 1874 when a narrowboat named the Tilbury blew up under Macclesfield Bridge. It was one of five boats being pulled by a tug and it had been carrying gunpowder in loose bags and petroleum in barrels. The force of the explosion destroyed the bridge, killed three men and a horse and caused much damage by sending debris in all directions. The explosion accelerated the passing of the Explosives Act in 1875, to regulate the manufacture and carriage of these dangerous substances.



Macclesfield Bridge Explosion

Twentieth Century

In the late 1920s talks took place between the Regent's Canal and other parties resulting in a merger between them in 1929. The Regent's Canal Company bought the canal assets of the other parties and the new enlarged undertaking was renamed as the Grand Union Canal Company. There was major investment to reinvigorate long distance traffic and this proved its worth during World War Two (1939-45), when. Traffic increased on the canal system as an alternative to the hard pressed railways. Stop gates were installed near King's Cross to limit flooding of the railway tunnel below, in the event that the canal was breached by German bombs.



Camley Street, Plimpsole Coal Drops



Tunnel tug boat at Western portal of Islington Tunnel, 1905