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Sheepcote Street in Ladywood

Few districts are represented by a single road, however the 20th & 21st century transition for Sheepcote Street, from slum housing, higger-mugger with heavy industry to one of the cities' new residential and tourist areas shows how quickly we can forget what made this city as the thriving industrial centre up until the post war years.

Situated in the Ladywood district of Birmingham, the area was once part of a tree covered area called Saint Mary's Wood. Whilst the housing started to be built around 1840s to accommodate all the workers needed to fuel in the industrial explosion, there was already a canal built authorised by the Birmingham Canal Navigation Act 1768 and built from 1768 to 1772 under the supervision of James Brindley from the western edge of town of Birmingham with termini at Newhall Wharf and Paradise Wharf near to Gas Street Basin and at its northern end to meet the Staffordshire and Worcestershire Canal at Aldersley (north of Wolverhampton). It opened for business on 14 September 1772.

The canal, as were many at that time, was of the contour variety, which meant it followed the contours, taking the long way round. By the time it formed part of the Birmingham Canal Navigations (Shortened to BCN) it was causing delays and the proprietors engaged Thomas Telford to build the more direct route, as 'straight as an arrow'. Telford achieved this using deep cuttings and embankments to reduce the distance by 7 miles from 22 ½ to 15 miles. This resulted in two routes, still in evidence today. Brindley's Birmingham Canal Old Main Line and Telford's Birmingham Canal New Main Line. One result of this was there are three loops in the combined old and new main lines. The combined canal ran on until Smethwick Junction, where the two canals went their own ways until Bramford Junction where they reunited just short of Oldbury. The first loop is the Oozells Street Loop, followed by the Icknield Port Loop and finally the Soho Loop. Our area is only connected with the BCN mainline and the Oozells Street Loop.

Our romance with canals and canal boats, is one of the reasons why this district is so appealing to us and the accessible parts of the Oozells Street Loop only makes this even more so, because you have to work out how to get down to water level and that's not always straight forward. The reason for that is that some of the apartments have their own passageways and bridges and steps, that for their security and protection are gated communities, with

keypad or other controlled areas. In addition, there is a boaters community based around the Sherborne Wharf, which has parts that are similarly controlled.

The transport system is a network of roads, canals and their towpaths, occupy two levels with the canals and their towpaths being at the lower level, along with some of the roads and with Broad Street, Sheepcote Street and St Vincent Street being at the higher level. This means to gain access to different parts will require flights of steps and ramps to get you up and down. When the factories fell silent so did their branch canals and wharves, however the canals have survived, along with much of the area's roads, with Broad Street at one end and St Vincent Street at the other.

Travelling up Sheepcote Street from Broad Street, on the right-hand side, both Oozells Street North and Nile Street have gone; and on the left-hand side Grosvenor Street West is still there; further over to the west the streets of Browning Street, Morville Street, Sherborne Street and Ryland Street also survive.

Within this network, much industry was confined between the Oozells Street loop and Sheepcote street: tube works, tricycle works, timber yard, saw mill, more iron works, brass and tube works and on the other side of Sheepcote Street, Niles Foundry, brass and ironworks, warehousing, Oozells Street wharf, Jame's Foundry Iron and brass, this together with and commercial and local government buildings, schools and churches. Many of the buildings were re-purposed; incorporated into new buildings or were demolished in the 60s and have been replaced with some low-rise estates, medium and high-rise apartment buildings.

Looking at the six-inch 1842 -1952 maps of Birmingham and comparing it with the current street map you begin to see how much remains and what was swept away to make way for the residential regeneration we see today. For the purposes of this Grid Project this 'District' is the area surrounding either side of Sheepcote Street.

Prior to 1960s on the west side of Sheepcote Street, you had densely packed housing, with little space to spare for any grass for children to play on or trees to help clean up the air from factories spilling out fumes and noise.

We must presume by the standards of the day; folk lived no worse or better than anyone in the Birmingham area. Whole sections of Lady Wood were affected, despite the area being home to families rich in community spirit living in "poorly-built compact houses and unsanitary courtyards that families were still living in 120 years after they were built," according to Ted Rudge writing in his book *In and Around Ladywood Through Time*, change was a long time coming.

However, by the early 20th Century, social reformers and town planners were looking to provide better housing but that would take nearly a century before the bulldozers moved in the 60s. Many homes were demolished as part of a redevelopment programme in the 1960s and 1970s. In 1990s and continuing into the 2020s mixture of developments can be seen alongside Sheepcote Street, St Vincent Street, Browning Street, Sherborne Road and Ryland Street.

Symphony Court occupies the triangle by the Oozells Street Loop, BCN Main Line and Sheepcote Street; Brunswick Arcade the other side of the Oozells street Loop. King Edwards Wharf and Watermarque Apartments line up around St Vincent Street and Browning Street. The former papermill of Baldwins & Sons at Sherborne Mill has now been converted into one of Jupiter's Apartments. In fact, Jupiter has 11 apartments spread around the Sherborne Road area (at the time of writing this article).

Whilst for the renters they either can access their apartments along towpaths or walkways, steps, ramps and bridges, we have to use our navigation skills and tact to seek where we can and can't go and at all times show the locals respect and check if we have strayed into off-limits areas.

The canals that provided the transportation for the many factories now are used for boat hire, tourist boat trips and the leisure boaters coming into the city and tying up at the recognised wharfing, such as Gas Street Basin.

For two hundred years, one could imagine the steady plod of the horses pulling their barges along the towpaths when the first canals were built. Later towards the start of the 20th century steam began to replace horsepower and later still diesel engines would 'put-put' between the canyons of tall factories and satanic mills and warehouse built up to the canal sides.

Whilst many low-rise developments are located to the north of the new main line canal and Bellcroft off Browning Street; around Sherborne Street area you will see the distinctive Jupiter Apartments, Ulysees, Voyager, Sinope, Europa and Placido; these contrast with 30+ floors built more recently around Brindley Place and lower Sheepcote Street near to Broad Street like the Bank Apartments.

The best way to see the area, is on foot or by bike. Planning your route can be challenging because of the two levels nature of the area and the gated communities of the blocks of apartment, however sussing out the area, you will be able to walk along much of the towpath system, some are blocked off for safety reasons and for maintenance, others because you are about to enter private property,

So, it will be by trial and error that you get to see as much as you can, risking the odd dead ends, however perseverance will be rewarded. I would suggest making your way down the left-hand side of Sheepcote Street towards the junction of St Vincent Street and Sheepcote Street.

Arriving at Sheepcote Bridge glance over at The Distillery (from where you can enjoy a jar or two access via the towpath below). Beyond you will see the fine circular outer wall of an unusual building that begs you to investigate. Make your way around the corner into St Vincent Street and the entrance is on your left. It is free to enter, though they appreciate donations as they are an independent charity.

Nr 1 Sheepcote Street, The Roundhouse, is a good starting point when discovering not only because of its location but also you can begin to see how Birmingham has changed over the last 120 years from the display panels in its visitor centre.

The conservation work has revealed a fine example of a Victorian working building and see how beautifully the internal arrangements were for its working horses to their stables as a self-contained unit. Surprisingly, it had no connection with the canals.

Managed as an independent charity created through a landmark partnership between Canal & River Trust and the National Trust. As a heritage enterprise and independent charity, its charge was, 'to look after and maintain the Grade II* listed building and use it as a base for tours and activities and to see The City Differently'.

Designed by a local architect W H Ward and built in 1874, being part of a massive city improvement, Ward's Roundhouse, then known as Corporation Wharf or Sheepcote Street Depot, was used as a stables and stores for the Birmingham Corporation's Public Works Department. As with many buildings in Ladywood it became redundant and was acquired by British Waterways (now Canal and River Trust) in 2017. The full-scale renovation we see today saved the historic buildings and provided a much-needed focus for people to explore the canals on water. You can book your boat there.

It has an attractive visitor centre overlooking the BCN, where they have leaflets and you can see some old 1970s Channel 4 videos of canal travel up the Farmers Arm locks. The centre also houses offices for the Canal and River Trust and the National Trust and rooms for hire and a friendly and comfy café Jonathans.

Leaving the Roundhouse, through the ramp that goes under the outer walls of the structure you will find yourself on the towpath of the BCN Main Line, where you can go one way

towards NIA or the other towards Wolverhampton. Alternatively, should you wish to follow at street level from the Roundhouse turn right from the entrance into St Vincent Road and then immediately right on to Sheepcote Street.

Whilst you can try to navigate using a street map, part of the adventure is to follow your nose, but you are going places where cars cannot and if its free for you to go enjoy the experience but respect the privacy of those living in this area.

The easiest option is just to follow the BCN Main Line on both sides, taking all legitimate steps and ramps, bridges and you will be surprised where you have got to. Or you could be to explore the streets around Sheepcote Street, including Browning Street, Sherborne Street and find Ju Jus café in Sherborne Wharf. On the other hand be more adventurous and cut through from King Edwards Wharf and over the Oozells Street Loop and over Sherborne Street through to Ryland Street. Wherever you go you will find exciting new building mingling with the old, an echo of the long history of canals and roads and the businesses they served. Finally, as you pass The Crescent, you will find yourself in Brindley Place, where you can find more cafés and bars.

Good luck, happy exploring.

10 Pictures of Sheepcote Street

- (1) The Distillery and the Round House from Sheepcote Bridge Street Bridge
- (2) Brindley Point Apartments Sheepcote Road
- (3) Liberty Place Sheepcote Street
- (4) Looking down Sheepcote Street to Bank Apartments
- (5) Crescent Theatre on Sheepcote Street
- (6) Former Sherborne Mill from Sherborne Street
- (7) One of the Jupiter apartments Sherborne Street
- (8) Private bridge across Oozells Street Loop
- (9) Tourist boat going under Oozells Street Bridge
- (10) Low-rise housing in Bellcroft, off Browning Street

I have made use of a number of websites covering the area, Ladywood, The Roundhouse, BCN Canals, Brindley, Ted Rudge for 'In and Around Ladywood Through Time' and others.
