

MALCOLM VEITCH

Dartmouth Circus on Middleway

I was doing one of my Landmarks for the 2023 Grid Project, when I visited Dartmouth Circus to record Boulton and Watt's Blowing Engine, which originally provided the air for two blast furnaces and was reassembled there when the junction was being built in the 1990s. As a motorist you see the Beam Engine after you leave the Aston Expressway on the slip road (Aston Road North) to join Dartmouth Middleway. In front of you on the other side of the Circus is the characteristic structure planted firmly in the Circus, in amongst trees.

For the purposes of the Grid23-Nodes, this is a major transport interchange, built at the time of the Middle Ring Road A4540 (Middleway) which encircles Birmingham City Centre and built in the late 1990s.

Dartmouth Circus on A38M to Gravelly Hill Interchange

In 1972 the still famous Gravelly Hill Interchange, colloquially known as Spaghetti Junction, was completed on the M6 and traffic could travel into the heart of Birmingham City Centre via The A38M Aston Expressway. The Expressway was the UK's first Tidal Flow motorway with seven lanes and no central barrier, where during the rush hour in the morning overhead electronic signs indicate 4 lanes available for incoming traffic, 3 lanes available for outgoing traffic. In the evening the pattern is reversed.

The mostly elevated motorway of 2 miles, was built at great cost, not only financially but also of the land that was taken including part of Aston Park (now a museum) and a great number of 19th and early 20th century houses. Between Park Circus and Dartmouth Circus the A38M is in a cutting, after which it ramps up to street level and becomes the A38 and Corporation Street.

When the A38M was built it had 4 junctions, at Gravelly Hill, Park Circus and Dartmouth Circus. The traffic island at Dartmouth Circus was built where Aston Road met with Dartmouth Street, Bracebridge Street and Allesley Street, where the White Hart public house had been sited. 4 roads now use the junction, A4540 Dartmouth Middleway (previously Dartmouth Street) J13, A38(M) Aston Expressway, A38 Aston Road and A5127 Aston Road.

Negotiating Dartmouth Circus by car

Whilst journeying by car, to from home to the M6 north as well as A5127 to Erdington, and done the reverse, I have negotiated Dartmouth Circus I now want to visit it as a pedestrian. What I was able to see was that it was very busy most of the time, with traffic building up on all approach roads by the traffic lights, which allowed the vehicles to move on to continue their journeys.

Dartmouth Circus as a *Node*

For the purposes of the Grid Project *Nodes*, this is a major transport interchange, built at the time of the Middle Ring Road A4540 (Middleway) which encircles Birmingham City Centre. How does it stand up as a node, a focus, a hub and a junction, 50 years after its completion? From the pedestrian perspective it was a safe place to explore, at no point did I have to encounter traffic. There are wide pavements, ramps and 4 underpasses into the circus itself and a bridge over the A38M. On the day of my visits, I noticed someone on a bike and several on foot carrying on with own their business. There are extensive barriers keeping people safe from cars, lorries and buses and the area is flooded with 12-metre-high street lights overhead. The Circus is roughly elliptical which is divided into two unequal parts by the A38M and as in the nature of things, the journeys from side to side can be a bit convoluted, however for pedestrians using Dartmouth those on foot or bike, there are a number of routes using the underpasses, ramps, bridge to go in all directions safely on their way.

My walk to Dartmouth Circus

My intention was to walk from Lancaster Circus up one side of the joint Corporation Street and A38 up to Dartmouth Circus and then take all possible pavements adjacent to the roads approaching in all points of the compass. This would mean crossing to the circus a few times, with its grassed banks, mixed with tree plantings, its wide paths and the pedestrian bridge.

From Moor Street Queensway to the junction with Jennens Road I turn right into James Watt Queensway, passed one of the many of Birmingham's high-rise buildings going up. Next is the student accommodation for Aston University as I approached Lancaster Circus. In former times Corporation Street and Steel House Lane met Loveday Street, Lancaster Street and Aston Street. Later developments meant Corporation Street was extended, and around 1934 the Birmingham Central Fire Station was built. This was in its day a landmark but lost some of its sparkle with the building of the St Chad's Queensway, linking Great Charles Street with the Aston Expressway. After its closure in 2009, the old fire station was converted into apartments presumably for Aston University.

At Lancaster Circus, the elevated section of the A38, having left the tunnels as the St Chad's Queensway it glides over the Circus on a curved flyover, past the old fire station, coming into to land on the remaining bit of Corporation street left over after all the massive road building was done last century.

So, having crossed over the concreted circus to 1 Lancaster Circus, I walked along the left side of Corporation Street, with the A38 on my right. A mixture of modern and old buildings jostles together along Corporation Street and just after Bagot Street I cross over the Birmingham Canal Navigation, (BCN), coming from Farmers Arm. On the far side of Corporation Street, the canal splits at Aston Junction, with its many pedestrian bridges, the left-hand to goes northeast as Birmingham and Fazeley Canal, whilst the other as Digbeth Branch Canal.

My walk around Dartmouth Circus

Just after this is where Corporation Street gives way to Aston Road, the A38 becomes the A38M Aston Expressway and drops into a cutting that divides Dartmouth Circus unequally one third to two thirds.

Ahead on the left, the distinctive Matalan clothing store, which opened in 2001, set above the pavement with its octagonal turrets making it a landmark. This store was built around the time of the Middleway, it is still owned by the Hargreaves family.

Around to the left I walk a little way along Newtown Middleway, with the traffic coming off Aston Road or from Dartmouth Circus heading west towards Lucas Circus. As I was wanting to get to the other side of Newtown Middleway, there was no immediate way, except by back tracking to the plaque on the wall of Matalan's confirming the development of the store as their flagship store for Birmingham and what it replaced, in terms of older properties including Hufton Williams Buildings and Bluegates Warehouse in 2000.

The ramp took me to down to my first underpass under one sector of the Dartmouth Circus Road into the grassed circus with trees and a good pathway that splits to a footbridge over the A38M with the traffic streaming below in the cutting and standing up above the Boulton and Watts Blowing engine. Instead of crossing over the bridge, I turned down the path and headed down to long underpass under Newtown Middleway to get to its north side, from the ramp on my left I joined the pavement, and I could see Matalan through the tree belt planting in a narrow island between the two carriageways. As I looked north below me were industrial units built off the former network of streets cut off by the new roadwork, Allersley Street and Miller Street.

Ahead of me the traffic was queuing at the Circus traffic lights, those on the left going down Aston Road, which divides to the left Thomas Street and the right Aston Bridge Street that takes traffic over the A38M and on to Aston Cross. Also going left is the traffic bound for the A38M and Spaghetti Junction. Those of the right going around parts of the Circus to Dartmouth Middleway and further round to Aston Street and into the City Centre.

Back under the tunnel into Dartmouth Circus going up and on the left the path took me to railings and the A38M below. On to the bridge, where I could look across to the Boulton and Watts Blowing Engine, partially screen by the tree bare from the autumn leaf fall.

I now wanted to explore the traffic coming up the A38M, mixing with those on the Aston Road North. Held up by the traffic lights the vehicles waited whilst those coming from Newtown Middle took their turn. Behind me the large Autoglass National Skills Training Centre, dominates the view from the Circus. Leaving the Circus, the ramp took me up to Dartmouth Middleway, where if I continued would take me over the Birmingham and Fazeley Canal and beyond that a modern art installation at Waterlinks House.

Then again, I had to return to the Circus and take my final underpass to the south carriageway of Dartmouth Middleway, behind me were more industrial units below me. The traffic on the left were heading along Aston Road, so to become for a short while Corporation Street and several large industrial units and the Birmingham and Fazeley Canal and the Digbeth Branch Canals about to join becoming the BCN. The traffic in the outer lane would go along at least one section of the Circus to go west or North.

That concludes my tour of Dartmouth Circus, it is surprising what you see on shanks' pony, two feet are better by car. And you don't get bothered by the hold ups with the traffic.

Credits

I am indebted to the various websites connected with the road-building of the Middleway, A38M, Matalan, the old fire station and use of Microsoft Bing. Any views expressed in this article are mine and are my interpretations of any of the documents that I have encountered, I apologise for any inaccuracies
