

JOHN HILL

Station to Station

On a cold, overcast morning, I arrived at Selly Oak to make my way canalside to Five Ways. Trains that leave the station for city centre cross immediately above Bristol Road, as the canal curves beneath. Expecting a muddy overgrown towpath I was surprised to see vast improvements in accessibility and hardcore surfacing underfoot. Although I've walked and cycled this route many times, it has been a few years. We've since been in and out of lockdown learning new skills; for example, how to wash our hands.

Being aware of the maximum of ten photos per path, I had soon used this amount on the first road bridge. Passing under the next railway bridge, I was transported back to a time of rivalry - for conveying goods - between steam train companies and slow outdated narrowboats. Here, the two systems become locked together, side by side into the city.

The canal water had been mostly frozen solid but was showing signs of thawing: bright sunshine starting to dominate the skies. Joggers, cyclists and dog walkers appeared with increasing regularity on approaching an elevated section of the canal (a metallic culvert that spans the A38) - with great views of the University of Birmingham and Queen Elizabeth Hospital. The newly improved University railway station and surrounding area are well worth seeing.

Relative quietness was broken by occasional passing diesel trains. The rest of the path becomes a bit repetitive and somewhat featureless, due to long stretches of metal fencing. An exception is Edgbaston Tunnel at 96 metres in length, which has internal lighting, improved ground surface and is thankfully pothole free. A flight of raised steps could be spotted in the distance and, before long, an invitation upwards to my destination: Islington Row Midway, Five Ways. Water levels remain constant throughout, having no need for locks.