

**MALCOLM VEITCH**

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### **Canals Versus Road Traffic**

The canal building era that hit Britain between 1770 and 1830, created a national network of over 4,000 miles. Some say it either helped to create the Industrial Revolution or the Industrial Revolution created it. As often is the case, necessity is the mother of invention and the brains behind the canal building, were like-minded men who needed new ways of getting their raw materials into their manufactories and their finished goods out.

Because of the very poor state of the roads In Britain, these manufacturers and the mine and quarry owners needed another solution. This was especially the case for Birmingham, where much of the traffic was heavy, bulky raw materials, the land through which the cart tracks went was boulder clay, left behind by the ice age, were impassable in the winter rains. Additionally, having to bring heavy loads up from the river valleys around the Birmingham Plateau rising up 200 m above sea level, meant the situation could not be worse for an expanding economy.

Until the coming of the canals, everything had to go by carts drawn by pack animals. Road building was very primitive, and it was only after John Loudon McAdam in the 1820s devised an almost Romanesque road design, did we start to get roads but it was too late to get the Industrial Revolution kick-started.

The earliest canals were making rivers more navigable, however the bulk of the new canals were for narrow boats with locks 2.1 m wide. The use of locks enabled the boats to be able to step flights of locks on to the plateau and lock down to leave it.

Whilst the technology solved the problems of the topology, it took the entrepreneurs and those promoting and financing this agent of the Industrial Revolution to make it happen and it happened just as the Industrial Revolution was starting.

However without all this coming together of all these strands the canal system and its beneficial effects on the supply chains and those products being exported to London and Bristol, would have held back this city of 1,001 trades and the Industrial Revolution would not have happened.

## **The North Stratford Canal**

Although The Stratford upon Avon Canal is an entity being 25.5 miles it has 56 locks, from the operational level it is treated as a canal in two halves. The North Stratford Canal branches off the Worcester and Birmingham Canal in Kings Norton and on its way south, it links with the Grand Union Canal at Kingswood. From this point on, it is designated as the South Stratford Canal and goes on to the Bancroft Basin in Stratford-upon-Avon by the Royal Shakespeare Theatre and the River Avon.

Its purpose like many midland canals at the time was transporting coal. It was built in 3 stages from 1793 to 1816, as the finances allowed and particular the North Stratford Canal flourished well in 19th century, however by the start of WW2 traffic had practically ceased. Around 1947 no. 2 Lifford Lift Bridge got stuck and GWR replaced it with a fixed bridge too low for boats to pass under. It took members of the new Inland Waterways Association including Peter Scott to get the bridge lifted and the new Lifford Lane Swing Bridge was erected 1950. It has recently been removed altogether (Picture 5).

Meanwhile the South Stratford Canal fell into disrepair and was going to be abandoned in the 1950s and group of canal enthusiasts saved it from closure and was given to the National Trust, who in turn passed to the British Waterways Board, now the Canal and River Trust. All the footpaths are in good order throughout its length and the new lock onto the River Avon was built in 1971. With 3 boatyards, three aqueducts and so many locks the Stratford upon Avon Canal is a popular canal for not only boaters but for walkers and cyclists.

## **The Route**

I have chosen to walk part of the north section of the Stratford-upon-Avon starting from the Alcester Road A435 walking broadly westwards to the Canal's junction with the Worcester and Birmingham Canal in Kings Norton. It is a walk my wife and I have used over many years, in its own right but have incorporated into many walks from Hall Green to Midlands Arts Centre (MAC) in Moseley along the River Rea Number 5 cycle route into Birmingham along the Worcester Birmingham Canal. We started walking the towpaths of Birmingham's canals in the early 70s and they presented challenges of where to access the canals and how to complete our walk when the way was blocked and the tow path missing altogether in a steep bank of brambles.

Fortunately all is well and I hope you will enjoy your walk along this section of the canal which being a contour canal and one short tunnel (which has no tow path) is easy walking and also very varied with mixed rural, old industrial and suburbia with a good towpath all the way.

Whilst officially our start is at our walk from the bridge Number 5 over the A435, you will be deviating to see the only boat yard on this section by going east for ½ mile to reach the Lyons boatyard off Limekiln Lane Warstock, an old canal-side boatyard with all local services (Picture 1).

Retracing our steps back towards the Horseshoes Inn you pass a canal-side pair of cottages with switch-back drive from the Alcester Road, you will dip under the modern concrete bridge and come up to a more rural affair.

Shortly you may pass a narrow boat moored up on the far canal side, this shows that for this section nearby houses have gardens that come down to the canal-and the householders are able to moor up their own boats against the canal moorings. (Picture 2)

The canal here is wooded on both sides, with a park beyond to our right. Later the ground rises steadily on both sides, until round a corner you will have your view ahead of the eastern portal of the Brandwood tunnel (352 yards).

The eastern portal is curved and has a large central stone tablet with a moulded shield panel, and two round-arched blind windows.(Picture 3)

Brandwood tunnel was built around 1795, lined in brickwork, with no towpath so the horse had to go over the top and the boatmen propelled the boat by 'legging'. You too must follow where the horse would have been led over Monyhull Road, a small road than today's larger version with 5 roads joining. You have to follow down Brandwood Park Road and take the first left into Shelfield Road. On the right hand side in 100 yards you will find the access down a steep path passing the western portal before returning to the tow path.

Look back at the western portal, which is slightly different from the eastern one, with the 'voussoir elliptical and lofty retaining wall, with a circular plaque on the eroded bust of Shakespeare within a pedimented panel'. Just as you start again you will see a boxed water main overhead.

The portal is the fancy part of the tunnel where it holds back soil or rock, through which the tunnel is excavated. Some have very attractive stonework and if there are many tunnels on a canal the design of the portals may be the same as part of the style of that canal. The eastern and western portals here have different adornments.

Whilst the canal has a lot of curves which makes it more interesting to walk, it technically is not a contour canal, which takes the long way round hills and avoids having any locks.

Canal building was very expensive for the early investors who wanted value for money on their canal ventures. So, engineers had to use their knowledge and experience not only to make the canals as workable to build and to run as cost effective as possible, they also needed to find sufficient water to keep the system 'in water'. (See reference to Lifford Reservoir).

When faced with an obstacle such a hill, the engineer was faced with a multiple choice, contour around, which could mean long diversions; make a cutting, which meant a shorter canal but generated moving large amounts of soil or rock about; tunnelling, as with the Brandwood Tunnel, which was very time consuming; or creating a flight of locks, which was the only way when having to lift the boats from the plains to the Birmingham Plateau but were costly to maintain and reservoirs had to be constructed to provide the water to keep the locks in water. The engineer for the first section was Josiah Clowes and he and his assistant would be weighing up all these possibilities as they walked the possible routes and surveyed them to see how feasible they would be.

As you walk along the canal you realise you are walking along a water corridor, safe in your world and thoughts, unaware of much around, just what lies ahead. The temptation just keeping to the waterway, which is natural but to discover more, you may want to detour off. I did just that to follow Tunnel Lane, nearby to the western portal, which led to a large open area of grass, with some interesting landscaping of curved banks. Today this is just an open space but in earlier times, it had a pavilion, tennis courts and the like. Further along I got a couple of photos of the Lifford Swing bridge and Chemical works. You will notice how many trees have grown up to create a semi wooded area.

Back on the canal to the right peaking over the trees is an estate of apartments off Brandwood Park Road that had been built recently including one unusual 'banana shaped' block with a square tower at each end with curved windows. (Picture 4).

As we approach the former Tunnel Lane crossing you will be aware of the former Lifford Chemical Works, whilst today they have taken down much of the canal side buildings, which are now a target for the graffiti artists. This cluster of building has always interested us, wondering what we were seeing. In the early days of our walks, the works seemed to be dormant and a strange hopper type steel structure hung over the area, that seemed to move as we neared the site.

The Chemical works is not a thing of beauty, however it's part of previous generations sometimes noisome activity and employment for local folk who would have worked and lived locally. The current owners Speciality Minerals, appear to have been very active in the last few years in developing the site.

The canal at this point was crossed by a variety of bridges as mentioned above and all that remains is the concrete surround and floor for turntable base and the support ring and pin, around which the bridge pivoted, swinging the bridge around to join the two sides of the lane over the canal. (Picture 5)

Tunnel Lane is now just a track cum footpath that starts near the western portal off Shelfield Road and on our bank side a yellow barrier prevents vehicular access down past Speciality Minerals to Lifford Lane.

You may want to explore Lifford Reservoir, just below the mineral works, which was built in 1815 in compensation to Lifford Mill for loss of water taken by the canal.

As you return to continue to the canal you can see some striking examples of Graffiti art that has been spray-canned on to the lower brick walls of the former canal side buildings (Picture 6).

Next to come around another corner is the surprising sight of what looks like a version of the French device for capital punishment. It is in fact the iconic Guillotine locks, complete with brick pier, tubular iron columns, surmounted by a curved gantry and three wheels, chains and the paddle held into two iron channels into which the gate slides up and down, when required to be opened or closed. (Picture 7)

One of the problems of building a canal to join another were the terms upon which you were allowed to use their canal. This was the increased tariffs for all the goods in transit and also the requirement that the water level in the Stratford canal had to maintain 150 mm water level difference between the Stratford and the Worcester and Birmingham canals, when the two canals were run by separate companies.(Picture 8)

There may be other examples of these guillotine locks in East Anglia, these are the only ones in the Midlands. They were thought to have been chosen as they took up less space than conventional locks but were sufficient as stop locks. There is one still in use on a ship canal in the Netherlands.

Though the locks were restored to some kind of order the lock gates like most surfaces in the area were graffitied. You can see the mechanism that allowed the lock-keeper to raise and lower the lock paddles using a windlass and chains but they are corroded, which safeguards them from being used incorrectly.

Ahead is the graceful beautifully, rebuilt, brick constructed Lifford Bridge and Broad Meadow Lane Number 1, with its elegant arch replacing a concrete bridge similar to that at the crossing of A435. And after that you meet the duplicate guillotine lock and a noticeboard about the two sets of locks and their restoration, after which the canal opens out into a wide channel, with wharfing for loading and unloading of coal and other cargoes before it meets the Worcester Birmingham canal.

To our left, across the canal, is another former recreation area, popular with dog walkers. On our left a high ornamental brick wall surrounds the former Sherborne Mill, with its restored mill pond and 60s building and a former engine shed providing steam power for the former Sherborne Mill, also known as the Kings Norton Paper Mill, which produced brown wrapping papers until 1965.

In the 80s my company was involved with the landscaping of the Patrick Collection, home for Alexander Patrick's collection of more than 150 vintage cars, the site is now being used mainly for offices.

Follow the towpath over the beautiful arched roving bridge on to the Worcester and Birmingham canal towpath, left for Worcester and right to Birmingham. There is a lovely view of the Worcester and Birmingham canal striking northwards through the bridge (Picture 9) Just by the junction is the fine Victorian former tariff building, undergoing extensive renovations. Just beside that is a tall signposts with finger posts informing boat crews not only the distance to their destinations in miles but also in the number of locks, pointing back the way you have just come to Stratford and Warwick (via the Grand Union Canal; to Birmingham and Worcester. (Picture 10).

You have arrived at the journey's end. I hope you enjoyed your walk along Part of the North Stratford-upon-Avon Canal. You can walk off across Kings Norton Park for your transport home or follow the tow path and get off along the way or finish in Gas Street Basin.

On your way I hope you noticed the following places of interest:

Lyons boat yard (picture 1)

Eastern Portal Brandwood Tunnel (picture 2)

Moored Boat (picture 3)

Unusual apartment block by housing off Brandwood Park Road (picture 4)

Former Tunnel Lane Swing Bridge Number 2 and current Chemical Factory (picture 5)

Graffiti on Side wall old chemical works (picture 6)

Lifford bridge and Guillotine lock (picture 7)

Close up of Guillotine lock (picture 8)

Worcester and Birmingham Canal with bridge over from Stratford Canal (picture 9)  
Signpost pointing to Worcester, Stratford and Warwick and Birmingham (picture 10)

I have made use of a number of websites covering the area, Birmingham. Canals Stratford-upon-Avon Canal-Lifford-Patrick Collection-Sherbourne Mill and others

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