

MALCOLM VEITCH

Why I Chose This Canal

Just walking much of this canal over the years, as part of The River Cole Way and Millstream Way doesn't mean I know that well, either what's there now or what it was like 150 years ago when this canal was built to fill in one of the gaps linking Birmingham with London. I want you to explore with me from Anderton Road in Sparkbrook and finishing at Woodcock Lane in Acocks Green.

Birmingham's Surprise:

The Settlement That Grew Into Britain's Leading Manufacturing City

It appears 'the manorial and accounts records for the earlier Birmingham were lost' making research into Birmingham's early history, nigh on impossible, so much of what we know is based on speculation when Birmingham was no more than a settlement 1100 CE. It appeared to be better at trading with its neighbours first with agricultural products, foods and also raw materials, iron and coal, millstones, pottery and spices. Later high quality metal products, including jewellery and guns and more cheaply produced trinkets helped to make it expand. Were it not for Birmingham's own endeavours in the medieval period the town would probably never have prospered into the manufacturing centre it would become. In late 17th century its population was 15,000 and rose in a century to 70,000. Without the heritage that favoured some towns, Birmingham had to create its own to trade beyond Britain across the world.

Having none of the advantages of the maritime communities and road networks only just adequate hindered its expansion. None of Birmingham's rivers such as the Rea, Cole and Tame were navigable.

Standing atop the Birmingham Plateau some 200 metres high above the surrounding river valleys of Trent, Severn and Avon, much of Birmingham's raw materials had to be carted by packhorse uphill and finished goods downhill.

The endeavours also encouraged like-minded people networking through regular, informal contacts, especially the Lunar Society of Birmingham 1775 -1813. Here such men as Erasmus Darwin, Matthew Boulton, Josiah Wedgwood, Joseph Priestley, James Watt and Benjamin Franklin and many others met to discuss issues and above all new thinking.

It's not surprising transporting their goods must have cropped up in their discussions and the new 'cuts' must have seemed to be the silver bullet to these landlocked Birmingham people. So when the 'Industrial Revolution' hit the Midlands, the massive canal building period must have gone hand-in-hand.

Canals And Their Impact On People

Whilst we tend to dwell on the enormous benefits the canals brought to country's rise in prosperity in the 18th and 19th centuries, we should also think of the tremendous upheaval the canal building had on the lives of ordinary folk, who were not to benefit from the canal building.

Seeing strangers on horseback surveying the proposed route, must have been worrying, a threat to the smallholdings and their way of life. Then the frenzy of the navvies digging the 'cut' as it was called, the gash it made through their countryside.

The noise of the shovels and pickaxes and the packhorses taking it away very disturbing not used to it in their rural way of life. Then builders using millions of locally made bricks for the bridges, locks, tunnels.

Canals aren't that new, The Exeter Ship Canal was constructed in 1560s and predates 'canal mania' 200 years later. Already the principles of locks had been settled as the major canal building began, however the new generation of canal engineers used their ingenuity to make their own mark. The canal mania was hastened by the investors, who saw big returns. Some canals made good enough sense to coal mine owners who were now able to transport their coal by canals for 50% less.

The prescriptive way of building a new canal, was through an Act of Parliament, the whole process which whilst very expensive, did not deter new canals being proposed. The process met with stiff opposition, which will have caused delays, losing time and incurring more expense. Later canals were more at risk of being affected by inflation from the Peninsular War. One commentator at the time remarked, "navigable cuts and canals are of great and general utility; while at the same time they frequently require a greater expense than suits the fortunes of private people" (Adam Smith, 1776). Royal Assent, for the Warwick and Birmingham Canal, the Act authorising the canal was passed in 1793, which meant the work could start.

Canals are artificial rivers and had to have sufficient water in the system to make it work. Whilst the engineering centred around, cuts, embankments etc, hydrographic engineering had to tap into any source of water they could, including creating reservoirs along the canal.

Locks were the means of going up and down hill, but they use large amounts of water. Every time a lock is emptied, as when going downhill, 35,000 gallons flow into the next lock. The same happens going uphill.

James Brindley, one of the pioneers of the canal builders in the 18th century, worked around the midlands, working on the nearby Trent and Mersey canal where he used the 'narrow locks design', later building the Birmingham Canal 'Old Main Line', which meandered its way from Wednesbury to Birmingham. Brindley is celebrated in 'Brindley Place at the heart of the canal network in Birmingham.

The network developed: 'the Trent and Mersey Canal was supplemented by the Wolverhampton Canal now part of the Staffs and Worcester canal, connecting the Trent with the Severn. The Birmingham Canal and the Coventry Canal gave through navigation from the Trent at Lichfield and the Oxford canal to the Thames'.

It was to Birmingham's unique advantage that it was at the centre of the canal system, with the network of canals going in all directions linking manufacturer to customer many miles away.

It's interesting to note, the canal boats went at the speed of a horse which we might find very slow, but in its day, speed wasn't yet of the essence, whereas certainty was, sending your goods by canal guaranteed they would get there, when your customer expected them.

The Warwick and Birmingham Canal

The Birmingham Canal Navigations (BCN) wanted an alternative link to London and so helped The Warwick and Birmingham Canal by providing them with Samuel Bull and William Felkin surveyor and engineer respectively. Earl of Warwick's support for the Bill and the Act of Parliament Bill had little difficulties in being passed.

However The Warwick and Birmingham faced stiff competition from the Fazeley, Coventry and Oxford Canal to London. Things got worse, when the London and Birmingham railway was opened in 1833. Consolidation by the Canal becoming part of the Grand Union Canal which restored the canal and built the wider 'barge' double locks 12 feet 6 inches (3.81 m) and bridges, up to Knowle between 1931 and 1937.

The economics of transportation by canal over packhorses, can be judged that the same load say 100 tonnes, could take 1000 pack horses, whereas it could take between 5 and 10 boats, that meant 5 to 10 horses.

Like much of the canal network, the canal business gradually wound down and today are essentially for narrow-boaters.

The Walk

You are starting your walk in Sparkbrook which today is inner City of Birmingham, earlier would have been in rural Warwickshire. The farming Sparke family may have named the local stream the Spark brook and area took its name, remaining agricultural until the 18th century and with the coming of the Industrial Revolution the population doubled. Before you descend at Anderton Road bridge 90, note the attractive red brick building, The Montgomery pub. (Picture 1)

Going down the steps and heading left you are walking in south east, you should see the Montgomery peering over the high wall to your right. Also, you will see another very dominating tall, red brick factory, alas with broken windows. (Picture 2). You may feel at this point the canal is in a valley, because of the tall iron fences on your left are standing on rough concrete, brick walls and rubble walls.

Ahead of you is Golden Hillock Road, and it's worth taking the steps up and over the road and going down Armoury Road to the former factories of the BSA. This was a hive of activity for around 100 years. Armoury Road, was home to the British Small Arms (BSA) factory, when 14 gunsmiths from the Gun Quarter formed the new company in 1861, bought 25 acres of land and built factories along the road. Soon busy with an order for 20,000 Turkish infantry rifles and later they were developing magazine-loading rifles for the War Office and branching out with safety bicycles, During WW2 they managed to build ultra-lightweight foldable cycles, and also parachutable bikes. The cycle business was sold to Raleigh in 1957. They were into motorcycles, trucks, aeroplanes aero engines. During WW2 they were the only government contractor and accelerated and increased production of whole range of machine guns and motorcycles.

Twice the factories were bombed, with the loss of the production of rifles set back by 3 months. Later they dispersed to 67 factories spread over the midlands. Walking to the end of Armoury Road, you will see what remains of the business (BSA Guns UK) Ltd. (Picture 4)

Back to bridge 85 and as you descend notice large water pipes attached to bridge on both sides of the bridge. (Picture 3) The building just passed the bridge on the right-hand side with all the cables is a substation, previously the BSA power station would have stood here.

Spark Brook runs along the south of the Akers site, after which it joins the River Cole, which in turns goes under the former Oxford and Birmingham Railway and the former GWR (now the North Warwickshire Railway and Birmingham and London Marylebone railway). Later the Cole crosses under the Warwick and Birmingham canal.

The green area was known as Eckleshole Meadow, and now as Ackers. In 1985 the Ackers Trust was created to provide a range of activities for young and old, including, skiing, snowboarding, climbing, kayaking, team challenge and management training, orienteering and the descending the high tower by cable. Originally the area was locally known as Ackerduck possibly from a misunderstanding of what an aqueduct was and from that came plain Ackers. As you continue south east, you will be aware of the graffiti art on all sprayable surfaces. (Picture 5)

The striking tall climbing and descending tower is visible in its own area right up the far side of the canal in the Ackers Site. (Picture 6)

Ahead are twin bridges 88E, a road bridge and a pedestrian bridge. A flight of steps brings you up the road level and the Ackers and Cole Valley Walk. You will have good views both ways, towards the Climbing tower and the grey chimney of the Energy Recovery Facility at Tyseley. (Picture 7)

As railway lines were added extra bridges were added, 4 in all. Soon on your left is an alley with steps leading to a bridge over Small Heath by-pass. By the alley is the Ackers Residential Centre and the Ackers aquatic centre, with a canal pond. Canoes go out on to the canal, through a small branch under the humpback bridge over which you are about to walk. The waymark sign on the left leads off left where you can explore the Millstream Way, which later joins the Kingfisher Way.

Look down in a few yards to see the river Cole several meters below you going under the canal. As the canal curves to the left, you will glimpse the Veolia Environmental Services' Tyseley Energy Waste Plant, opened in 1996, the Veolia plant converts some of Birmingham's waste into electricity. 350,000 tonnes annually goes through the plant which treats waste that cannot be re-used, recycled or composted.

Ahead Bridge 88A, Energy Way which is how motorists get to the plant from Redfern Road bringing their household waste.

Off Redfern Road, is the restored Hay Hall, a 15th century mansion, formerly in Reynolds Tubes premises, now Rovex Business Park.

As the canal now curves towards Kings Road bridge 88 and there are a great number of industrial and commercial businesses on both sides, heavily protected by security fencing. After the bridge the canal cuts directly through the central sand and gravel, ridge of Tyseley was quarried and taken away by boat in earlier times. The quite recent developments on the far side by Sertec Aluminium and Kuehe & Nagel are fully open to the canal, but accessed by Wharf Road. (Picture 8)

Amington Road off the left hand bank, where former car components manufacturer Wilmott Breedon had one of their factories and former Bakelite works had a factory there 1929 until 1987. Ahead at Bridge 87 is A4040 Stockfield Road part of the Outer Circular Road beyond which you enter the deepest cut on the system, with the high tree covered embankments.

Along at bridge 86A South Yardley Road B4148 is a short tunnel (280 yds), (Picture 9) which was bridged in 1935. The paved winding ramped path will take you up the road. If you look across the road and to the left is the South Yardley Cemetery.

Along the canal beyond off the opposite bank you can see and hear recycling plant for building materials. Before you get to the grassed space, there are allotments and on the opposite bank smaller ones in front of houses. A path leads through the grass to steps and a children's play area and relatively new housing around Eaton Wood Drive. A wooded section along the opposite bank, has paths running through it. This leads to the pedestrian Bridge 86 Woodcock Lane, with pleasant steps up to the end of the walk at Woodcock Lane and Acocks Green. (Picture 10)

I hope you enjoyed your walk along part of Warwick and Birmingham Canal, (now part of the Grand Union Canal) and journeying with me along it and through time.

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

The Montgomery pub in Sparkbrook. (Picture 1)

Looking down the canal from bridge 90 to south east. (Picture 2)

Large water pipe crossing canal bridge 89. (Picture 3)

BSA works Armoury Road. (Picture 4)

Graffiti on brick wall by tow path after bridge 89. (Picture 5)

Ackers climbing tower from grounds near bridge 88E. (Picture 6)

Railway bridge nr 88E with Veolia recycling plant behind. (Picture 7)

New canal side logistics and road transportation centre. (Picture 8)

South Yardley Tunnel Bridge Nr 86A. (Picture 9)

Woodstock bridge 86 in Acocks Green. (Picture 10)

I have made use of a number of websites covering the area, Sparkbrook, Warwick and Birmingham Canal, BSA, History of Birmingham, Acts of Parliament, getting Royal Assent, The Canal and River Trust, Packhorses and Trains of, James Brindle,

© Malcolm Veitch

2nd March 2023