

STUART FISHER

CANALS — OF — BRITAIN

A COMPREHENSIVE GUIDE

*'No mere travelogue: history, heritage, engineering,
folklore, wildlife...meticulously researched'*

Waterways World

3RD EDITION

BLOOMSBURY

STUART FISHER

CANALS — OF — BRITAIN

A COMPREHENSIVE GUIDE

3RD EDITION



ADLARD COLES NAUTICAL

B L O O M S B U R Y

LONDON • OXFORD • NEW YORK • NEW DELHI • SYDNEY

Contents

Foreword	4	32 Staffordshire & Worcestershire Canal	164
Introduction	5	33 Stourbridge Canal	172
1 Birmingham Canal Navigations, Old Main Loop Line	6	34 Shropshire Union Canal	177
2 Birmingham Canal Navigations, New Main Line	8	35 Llangollen Canal	189
3 Wyrley & Essington Canal	12	36 Shropshire Union Canal, Montgomery Canal	196
4 Walsall Canal	15	37 Shropshire Union Canal, Middlewich Branch	202
5 Daw End Branch	17	38 Trent & Mersey Canal	204
6 Tame Valley Canal	19	39 Macclesfield Canal	218
7 Birmingham & Fazeley Canal	22	40 Caldon Canal	221
8 Coventry Canal	26	41 St Helens Canal	224
9 Ashby-de-la-Zouch Canal	31	42 Bridgewater Canal	227
10 Oxford Canal	34	43 Leeds & Liverpool Canal, Leigh Branch	232
11 Grand Union Canal	46	44 Bridgewater Canal, Stretford & Leigh Branch	234
12 Grand Union Canal, Leicester Line	69	45 Rochdale Canal	237
13 Cromford Canal	77	46 Ashton Canal	244
14 Erewash Canal	80	47 Peak Forest Canal	247
15 Grantham Canal	83	48 Huddersfield Narrow Canal	250
16 Grand Union Canal, Aylesbury Arm	86	49 Calder & Hebble Navigation	256
17 Grand Union Canal, Paddington Arm	88	50 Leeds & Liverpool Canal	259
18 Regent's Canal	92	51 Aire & Calder Navigation	278
19 Royal Military Canal	97	52 Aire & Calder Navigation, Wakefield Section	284
20 Basingstoke Canal	102	53 Leeds & Liverpool Canal, Rufford Branch	286
21 Kennet & Avon Canal	106	54 Lancaster Canal	288
22 Grand Western Canal	126	55 Pocklington Canal	295
23 Bridgwater & Taunton Canal	129	56 Driffield Canal	298
24 Gloucester & Sharpness Canal	133	57 Louth Canal	300
25 Monmouthshire & Brecon Canal	138	58 Stainforth & Keadby Canal	303
26 Monmouthshire & Brecon Canal, Crumlin Branch	144	59 Chesterfield Canal	305
27 Neath Canal	147	60 Fosdyke Navigation	311
28 Tennant Canal	151	61 Union Canal	313
29 Stratford-upon-Avon Canal	153	62 Forth & Clyde Canal	320
30 Worcester & Birmingham Canal	157	63 Crinan Canal	325
31 Droitwich Barge Canal	161	64 Caledonian Canal	328
		Index	334

Adlard Coles Nautical
An imprint of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc
50 Bedford Square 1385 Broadway
London New York
WC1B 3DP NY 10018
UK USA

www.bloomsbury.com
www.adlardcoles.com

ADLARD COLES, ADLARD COLES NAUTICAL
and the Buoy logo are trademarks of
Bloomsbury Publishing Plc

First published 2009
Reprinted 2010
Second edition 2012
Reprinted 2014, 2015
Third edition 2017

© Stuart Fisher, 2009, 2012, 2017

Stuart Fisher has asserted his right under the Copyright, Designs and
Patents Act, 1988, to be identified as Author of this work.

All rights reserved.
No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in
any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including
photocopying, recording, or any information storage or retrieval
system, without prior permission in writing from the publishers.

No responsibility for loss caused to any individual or organization
acting on or refraining from action as a result of the material in this
publication can be accepted by Bloomsbury or the author.

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloguing-in-Publication data
has been applied for.

ISBN: PB: 978-1-4729-2972-3
 ePDF: 978-1-4729-4002-5
 ePub: 978-1-4729-4003-2

2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

Typeset in 9pt Bembo by Stuart Fisher
Printed and bound in China by C&C Offset Printing Co

Bloomsbury Publishing Plc makes every effort to ensure that the
papers used in the manufacture of our books are natural, recyclable
products made from wood grown in well-managed forests.
Our manufacturing processes conform to the environmental
regulations of the country of origin.

To find out more about our authors and books visit
www.bloomsbury.com.
Here you will find extracts, author interviews, details of
forthcoming events and the option to sign up for our newsletters.

Contents

Foreword	4	32 Staffordshire & Worcestershire Canal	164
Introduction	5	33 Stourbridge Canal	172
1 Birmingham Canal Navigations, Old Main Loop Line	6	34 Shropshire Union Canal	177
2 Birmingham Canal Navigations, New Main Line	8	35 Llangollen Canal	189
3 Wyrley & Essington Canal	12	36 Shropshire Union Canal, Montgomery Canal	196
4 Walsall Canal	15	37 Shropshire Union Canal, Middlewich Branch	202
5 Daw End Branch	17	38 Trent & Mersey Canal	204
6 Tame Valley Canal	19	39 Macclesfield Canal	218
7 Birmingham & Fazeley Canal	22	40 Caldon Canal	221
8 Coventry Canal	26	41 St Helens Canal	224
9 Ashby-de-la-Zouch Canal	31	42 Bridgewater Canal	227
10 Oxford Canal	34	43 Leeds & Liverpool Canal, Leigh Branch	232
11 Grand Union Canal	46	44 Bridgewater Canal, Stretford & Leigh Branch	234
12 Grand Union Canal, Leicester Line	69	45 Rochdale Canal	237
13 Cromford Canal	77	46 Ashton Canal	244
14 Erewash Canal	80	47 Peak Forest Canal	247
15 Grantham Canal	83	48 Huddersfield Narrow Canal	250
16 Grand Union Canal, Aylesbury Arm	86	49 Calder & Hebble Navigation	256
17 Grand Union Canal, Paddington Arm	88	50 Leeds & Liverpool Canal	259
18 Regent's Canal	92	51 Aire & Calder Navigation	278
19 Royal Military Canal	97	52 Aire & Calder Navigation, Wakefield Section	284
20 Basingstoke Canal	102	53 Leeds & Liverpool Canal, Rufford Branch	286
21 Kennet & Avon Canal	106	54 Lancaster Canal	288
22 Grand Western Canal	126	55 Pocklington Canal	295
23 Bridgewater & Taunton Canal	129	56 Driffield Canal	298
24 Gloucester & Sharpness Canal	133	57 Louth Canal	300
25 Monmouthshire & Brecon Canal	138	58 Stainforth & Keadby Canal	303
26 Monmouthshire & Brecon Canal, Crumlin Branch	144	59 Chesterfield Canal	305
27 Neath Canal	147	60 Fosdyke Navigation	311
28 Tennant Canal	151	61 Union Canal	313
29 Stratford-upon-Avon Canal	153	62 Forth & Clyde Canal	320
30 Worcester & Birmingham Canal	157	63 Crinan Canal	325
31 Droitwich Barge Canal	161	64 Caledonian Canal	328
		Index	334

Adlard Coles Nautical
An imprint of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc
50 Bedford Square 1385 Broadway
London New York
WC1B 3DP NY 10018
UK USA

www.bloomsbury.com
www.adlardcoles.com

ADLARD COLES, ADLARD COLES NAUTICAL
and the Buoy logo are trademarks of
Bloomsbury Publishing Plc

First published 2009
Reprinted 2010
Second edition 2012
Reprinted 2014, 2015
Third edition 2017

© Stuart Fisher, 2009, 2012, 2017

Stuart Fisher has asserted his right under the Copyright, Designs and
Patents Act, 1988, to be identified as Author of this work.

All rights reserved.
No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in
any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including
photocopying, recording, or any information storage or retrieval
system, without prior permission in writing from the publishers.

No responsibility for loss caused to any individual or organization
acting on or refraining from action as a result of the material in this
publication can be accepted by Bloomsbury or the author.

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloguing-in-Publication data
has been applied for.

ISBN: PB: 978-1-4729-2972-3
ePDF: 978-1-4729-4002-5
ePub: 978-1-4729-4003-2

2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

Typeset in 9pt Bembo by Stuart Fisher
Printed and bound in China by C&C Offset Printing Co

Bloomsbury Publishing Plc makes every effort to ensure that the
papers used in the manufacture of our books are natural, recyclable
products made from wood grown in well-managed forests.
Our manufacturing processes conform to the environmental
regulations of the country of origin.

To find out more about our authors and books visit
www.bloomsbury.com.
Here you will find extracts, author interviews, details of
forthcoming events and the option to sign up for our newsletters.

STUART FISHER

CANALS — OF — BRITAIN

A COMPREHENSIVE GUIDE

3RD EDITION

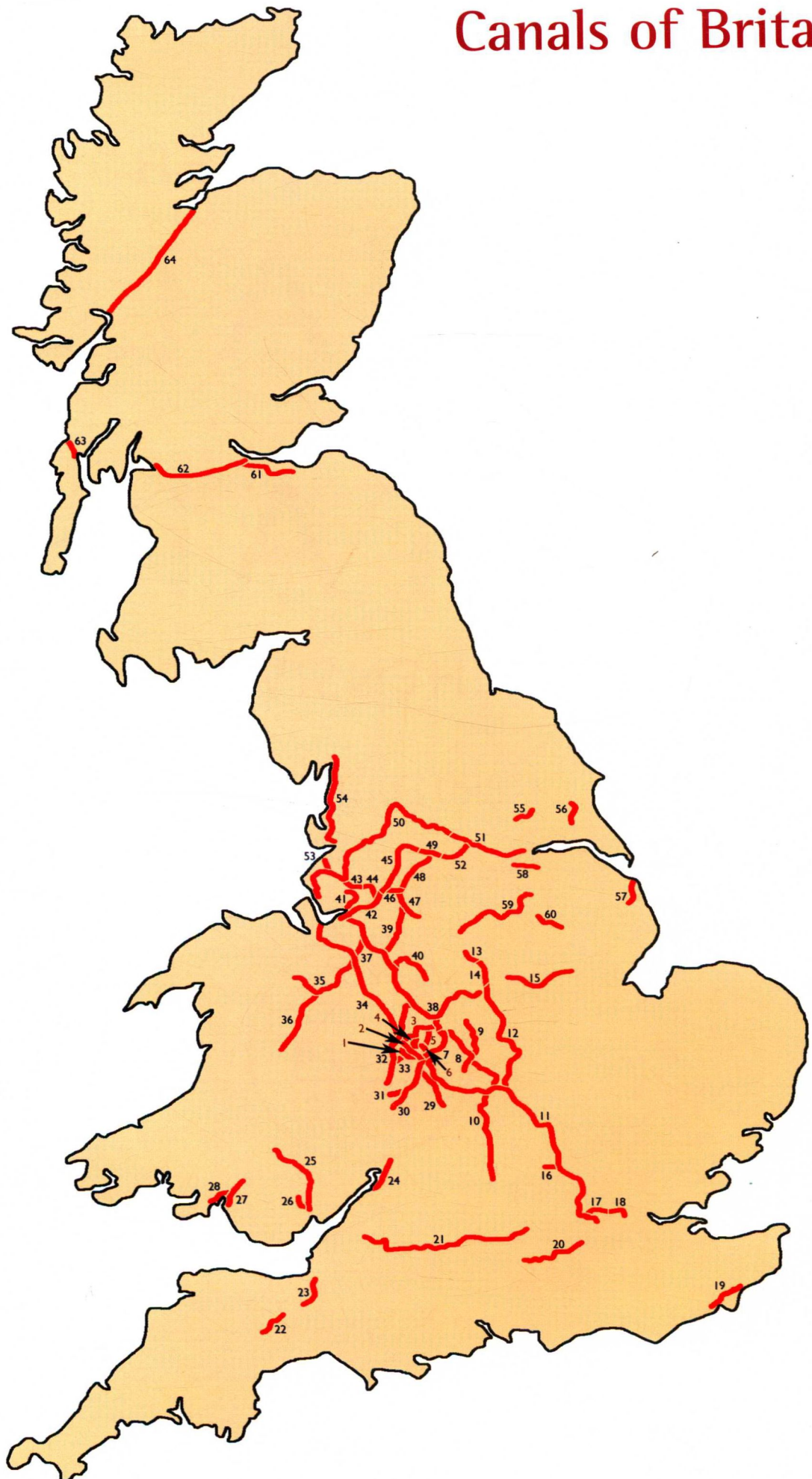


ADLARD COLES NAUTICAL

B L O O M S B U R Y

LONDON • OXFORD • NEW YORK • NEW DELHI • SYDNEY

Canals of Britain



Contents

Foreword	4	32 Staffordshire & Worcestershire Canal	164
Introduction	5	33 Stourbridge Canal	172
1 Birmingham Canal Navigations, Old Main Loop Line	6	34 Shropshire Union Canal	177
2 Birmingham Canal Navigations, New Main Line	8	35 Llangollen Canal	189
3 Wyrley & Essington Canal	12	36 Shropshire Union Canal, Montgomery Canal	196
4 Walsall Canal	15	37 Shropshire Union Canal, Middlewich Branch	202
5 Daw End Branch	17	38 Trent & Mersey Canal	204
6 Tame Valley Canal	19	39 Macclesfield Canal	218
7 Birmingham & Fazeley Canal	22	40 Caldon Canal	221
8 Coventry Canal	26	41 St Helens Canal	224
9 Ashby-de-la-Zouch Canal	31	42 Bridgewater Canal	227
10 Oxford Canal	34	43 Leeds & Liverpool Canal, Leigh Branch	232
11 Grand Union Canal	46	44 Bridgewater Canal, Stretford & Leigh Branch	234
12 Grand Union Canal, Leicester Line	69	45 Rochdale Canal	237
13 Cromford Canal	77	46 Ashton Canal	244
14 Erewash Canal	80	47 Peak Forest Canal	247
15 Grantham Canal	83	48 Huddersfield Narrow Canal	250
16 Grand Union Canal, Aylesbury Arm	86	49 Calder & Hebble Navigation	256
17 Grand Union Canal, Paddington Arm	88	50 Leeds & Liverpool Canal	259
18 Regent's Canal	92	51 Aire & Calder Navigation	278
19 Royal Military Canal	97	52 Aire & Calder Navigation, Wakefield Section	284
20 Basingstoke Canal	102	53 Leeds & Liverpool Canal, Rufford Branch	286
21 Kennet & Avon Canal	106	54 Lancaster Canal	288
22 Grand Western Canal	126	55 Pocklington Canal	295
23 Bridgewater & Taunton Canal	129	56 Driffield Canal	298
24 Gloucester & Sharpness Canal	133	57 Louth Canal	300
25 Monmouthshire & Brecon Canal	138	58 Stainforth & Keadby Canal	303
26 Monmouthshire & Brecon Canal, Crumlin Branch	144	59 Chesterfield Canal	305
27 Neath Canal	147	60 Fosdyke Navigation	311
28 Tennant Canal	151	61 Union Canal	313
29 Stratford-upon-Avon Canal	153	62 Forth & Clyde Canal	320
30 Worcester & Birmingham Canal	157	63 Crinan Canal	325
31 Droitwich Barge Canal	161	64 Caledonian Canal	328
		Index	334

Adlard Coles Nautical
An imprint of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc
50 Bedford Square 1385 Broadway
London New York
WC1B 3DP NY 10018
UK USA

www.bloomsbury.com
www.adlardcoles.com

ADLARD COLES, ADLARD COLES NAUTICAL
and the Buoy logo are trademarks of
Bloomsbury Publishing Plc

First published 2009
Reprinted 2010
Second edition 2012
Reprinted 2014, 2015
Third edition 2017

© Stuart Fisher, 2009, 2012, 2017

Stuart Fisher has asserted his right under the Copyright, Designs and
Patents Act, 1988, to be identified as Author of this work.

All rights reserved.
No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in
any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including
photocopying, recording, or any information storage or retrieval
system, without prior permission in writing from the publishers.

No responsibility for loss caused to any individual or organization
acting on or refraining from action as a result of the material in this
publication can be accepted by Bloomsbury or the author.

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloguing-in-Publication data
has been applied for.

ISBN: PB: 978-1-4729-2972-3
ePDF: 978-1-4729-4002-5
ePub: 978-1-4729-4003-2

2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

Typeset in 9pt Bembo by Stuart Fisher
Printed and bound in China by C&C Offset Printing Co

Bloomsbury Publishing Plc makes every effort to ensure that the
papers used in the manufacture of our books are natural, recyclable
products made from wood grown in well-managed forests.
Our manufacturing processes conform to the environmental
regulations of the country of origin.

To find out more about our authors and books visit
www.bloomsbury.com.
Here you will find extracts, author interviews, details of
forthcoming events and the option to sign up for our newsletters.

It is surprising that, other than Hugh McKnight's *The Shell Book of Inland Waterways*, there have been very few complete works describing the canals of Britain. Adding to this surprise is that Hugh first published his book in the 1975 and it has not been updated since the 1980s.

Considering so many narrowboaters have navigated the complete canal system, it is nothing short of amazing that this new, highly informative work, is the result of 'paddling' the waterways by kayak. As one of those who has, by narrowboat, navigated just about all the inland waterways and made some 2,000 miles of coastal connections from and to rivers and canals, I have only the utmost admiration for Stuart Fisher who, before writing the *Canals of Britain*, authored another equally informative production after paddling the entire coastline of Britain! THAT IS an experienced canoeist!

Stuart's expertise as a 'paddler' is matched by his writing talent. If you are looking for an informative reference to British waterways here it is. It even includes landlocked waterways we narrowboaters cannot get to or, in many cases, could not navigate on if we could, except perhaps with the ship's dinghy!

Chris Coburn MBE



Acknowledgements

P6 from *Old Sam* by Peter Dodds.
 P8 from *A Working Boatie Man* by Graeme Meek.
 P15 from *The 'Orrible Trip* by David Blagrove.
 P19 from *The 'Orrible Trip* by David Blagrove.
 P22 from *The Mystery Load* by Dusty Miller.
 P26 from *The Mystery Load* by Dusty Miller.
 P31 from *Paper Tiger* by John Burman.
 P34 from *Tom Beech's Last Trip* by David Blagrove.
 P46 from *The Greasy Wheel*, Anon.
 P69 from *Birmingham to London in 4 1/2 Minutes* by Hilary Rhodes.
 P77 from *Matlock Bath* by John Betjeman.
 P80 from *Paddy is Yer Man* by Peter Chapman.
 P83 *Grantham Canal*, Anon.
 P88 from *The Finest of Them All* by Dave Ritchie.
 P92 from *The Tilbury*, Anon.
 P97 from *The Rolling English Road* by GK Chesterton.
 P102 from *Gunga Din* by Rudyard Kipling.
 P106 by George Day.
 P129 by Thomas Amory.
 P134 from *The Bargee Song*, Anon.
 P138 from *The Bells of Rhymney* by Idris Davies.
 P147 from *The Neath and Swansea Canal* by Elizabeth Davies.
 P153 from *Venus & Adonis* by William Shakespeare.
 P157 from *Chocolate Charlie* by Bill Malkin.
 P164 from *The Fray Bentos Tinned Pie* by Ian H Bruce.
 P172 from *Rosie* by Buz Collins.
 P177 from *There's Something in the Cutting* by Dusty Miller.
 P189 from *Telford's Bridge* by John Warner.
 P196 from *Saturn* by Bill Webb.
 P202 from *A Working Boatie Man* by Graeme Meek.
 P204 from *The China-Mender* by Thomas Hood.
 P218 from *Carrying Coal* by Ian H Bruce.
 P221 from *Bosley in the Rain* by Ian H Bruce.
 P224 from *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* by Lewis Carroll.
 P227 from *Bolinder Boatman* by Ian Woods.
 P234 Anon.
 P237 from *The Rochdale Canal* by Mair Potter & Brian Green.

P244 from *The New Navigators* by Johnny Handle.
 P247 from *The Bugsworth Tiplers* by Ian H Bruce.
 P250 by William Pontey.
 P256 from *On Ilkka Moor bah t'At*, Anon.
 P259 Anon.
 P278 from *The Trip* by Gezz Overington.
 P284 Anon.
 P288 from *The New Canal* by Ron Baxter.
 P300 from *To His Coy Mistress* by Andrew Marvell.
 P303 from *It'll be the Death of Me* by Pete Thompson.
 P305 from *The Foresters* by Alfred Lord Tennyson.
 P311 from *Humanitad* by Oscar Wilde.
 P313 from *The Union Canal* by Robin Laing.
 P320 from *The Canal Cruise* by Bob Smith's Ideal Band.
 P325 from *The Crinan Canal for Me*, Anon.
 P328 from *The Lovely Lass o' Inverness* by Robert Burns.

Every effort has been made to trace authors. Bloomsbury are happy to correct any error or omission in future editions.

I am extremely grateful to Julie Arnold, Malcolm Bower, Graeme Bridge, Caroline Brown, Peter Brown, Ian H Bruce, Colin Cohen, Tony Collins, Bob Gough, David Guest, Di Harris, Maggie Hartford, Pablo Howarth, Ian Hunter, Peter Keen, Tommy Lawton, John Lower, Chris Morgan, Trevor Morgan, Hugh Potter, John Roddis, Peter Stone and Andy Talbot for advising on content. They sometimes undertook masterly studies in considerable detail. On exceptional occasions I have not taken all the offered advice. The blame stays with me for any errors.

Generally, I have failed to give adequate credit for the restoration work of the Waterway Recovery Group and the many canal societies. I list relevant websites at the end of each chapter. Do visit these to get a fuller picture of what the societies have been and are doing to restore the canals to full use.

Within Adlard Coles Nautical I am particularly grateful to my commissioning editor, Janet Murphy, and editor Jonathan Evers.

Last but not least, this book would not have happened without the support of my wife, Becky, and sons, Brendan and Ross, who have also toured the canal network widely.

Introduction

We are fortunate to have, in this country, a canal network like no other in the world. It was the first commercial canal system, leading the way for the Industrial Revolution, but has remained largely as built. The canals are mostly small and intimate. Restoration in recent years, supported by lottery and other funding, has outstripped the pace of construction even during the Canal Mania years.

Overseas, where canals have been enlarged to take modern commercial craft, you can look at the distant bank and wonder whether you will be run down by something the size of an office block or a multi-storey carpark, complete with cars. In this country the biggest risk is running aground and you could usually wade through the mud to either bank. It is a safe environment with limited scope for getting into serious trouble. For the walker and cyclist, canals provide routes which are mostly flat. As far as possible, descriptions are given downhill and with the flow for those who have a choice of direction.

We have canals with scenery which changes frequently, open countryside, wildlife, heritage industrial buildings, canalside public houses, modern city centres, wild moorland and coastal harbours, all mixed up. Anywhere on the system fantastic engineering structures can be found.

Sixty canals are described, all but the shortest ones. I have excluded the river navigations, by which many people mean joined up waters deep enough to take at least a narrowboat. However, for those with suitable boats there are 65,000km of navigable river in England and Wales alone, scope for a whole library of books. Not all the canals described in this book are linked to the rest of the system and not all are physically passable for many boats or have towpaths you can or may use. You may need a spirit of adventure, like the earlier recreational boaters.

I have been fortunate enough to have travelled all the canals in this book with a kayak. That is not to say that I was always in it. A 7km portage through Failsworth and Miles Platting on the Rochdale Canal, before the concrete cap was removed during restoration, was memorable for the wrong reasons. Some of the canals I have also travelled by narrowboat, by bike or on foot, including a happier run down the Rochdale after restoration.

Who uses the canals? If you look at canal magazines you will see smiling couples or families busy in the summer sunshine. In practice, you may find the picture rather different. Often the canals are deserted, except for wildlife that finds the canals an ideal environment, without needing all humans and boats to be banned. My unscientific survey suggests that cyclists might be the commonest humans, followed by dog walkers. Joggers, local walkers, ramblers

and boaters are less frequent users, even though it is boaters who are asked to foot the licence bill.

The sun isn't always shining, either. Rain, graffiti and barbed wire are a few of the less attractive elements that appear in the photos, hopefully presenting an honest balance of what will be met around the system.

The intention is that the book should be engaging to all who travel the canals. I do not usually give navigation instructions, depths and headrooms, portage routes or what to do when the towpath runs out. If the present state of a canal is such that it is limited to one kind of user, usually someone able to undertake portages, I may refer to that category of user, otherwise I talk more generally. I draw attention to features near the canal, especially in heritage cities such as Bath and Chester, because most canal travellers will not want to pass through without stopping.

I raise a couple of concerns for purists. There may be some who take issue with the use of metric units. Metrication was supposed to have been completed in 1965. It is the system which was taught in school to most people still below retirement age. Canals are not just for an ageing population. (One canal society moved to new premises for lectures partly because increasing numbers of members could not manage the stairs at the previous venue.) We need to attract young users. Ah, you protest, the canals were built to imperial units. If this was a book about the pyramids, would you expect me to give all the measurements in cubits and spans?

I make one concession, small value coinage. This has no more sense of its contemporary value in post decimal figures than if left in shillings and pence.

The other confession is that I have often referred to bridges by the numbers of the roads they are carrying. Canal company bridge numbers (or even just names) are less accessible to those without detailed canal maps.

If something is shown on a map it is within 4km of the featured canal. On the canal or towpath you are going to need the listed OS 1:50,000 maps or something comparable to support your spirit of adventure.

This book has been developed from a series of guides first published in *Canoeist*. Revisiting canals, it is surprising how much additional greenery there is, often meaning that old pictures could not be retaken from previous positions. At the same time, much canalside grass is now kept much tidier than in the past. The canals are changing constantly. You may find things which have changed since the book went to print or, heaven forbid, actual errors. If so, feel free to protest and slap my wrists at mail@canoeist.co.uk or via Adlard Coles Nautical.

Stuart Fisher

Legend for maps

- Featured canal
- Other canal or river
- Motorway
- Other road
- Railway
- Open water or sea
- Inter-tidal zone
- Built-up area
- Woodland

Scale 1:200,000.

North is always at the top.

Photographs

Chris Coburn p4
Becky Fisher p150
bottom, p162
centre left, p168
bottom left
Ross Fisher p140
bottom right
Chris Jones p35
bottom two, p36.
All other photos
by the author.

Favourite canal experience of 2016

Encountering skipper Nick Walker playing the tune to the hymn *Alleluia, sing to Jesus* using the Clyde Puffer *Vic 32's* whistles, halfway up Neptune's Staircase on the Caledonian Canal. This is believed to be the only steam ship in the UK with a permanently-fitted calliope, a full octave of whistles.



1 Birmingham Canal Navigations, Old Main Loop Line

**Birmingham's
oldest canal**

*Now Oldbury's a filthy place –
No trees, no leafy glades –
But you should see Sam's smiling face,
As he's locking down the Brades.*

Jim Stringfellow

Of Britain's operational canals, only the Fossdyke and the Bridgewater predate the Birmingham. The Birmingham Canal Company were authorized to build their line in 1768 and it was opened as far as Wednesbury as a contour canal by Brindley the following year, picking up many industrial premises in what Thomas Carlyle called 'iron Birmingham' in *The French Revolution*. The whole 36km was completed in 1772. Because of the minerals and industry it was immediately highly successful. In 1790 the Smethwick summit was lowered from the 150m level to the 144m Wolverhampton level with the removal of three locks on each side, saving time and reducing water supply problems.

Several loops of the old line have been cut off or filled in but the section between **Tipton** and Smethwick remains, a contour canal with more features of interest than the more efficient New Main Line.

The old line divides from the new at Tipton Factory Junction, just a stone's throw from the top lock on the New Main Line. With a westerly wind there is the acrid smell from nearby metalworking industries. At this end the water is not too bad but the quality deteriorates towards Birmingham.

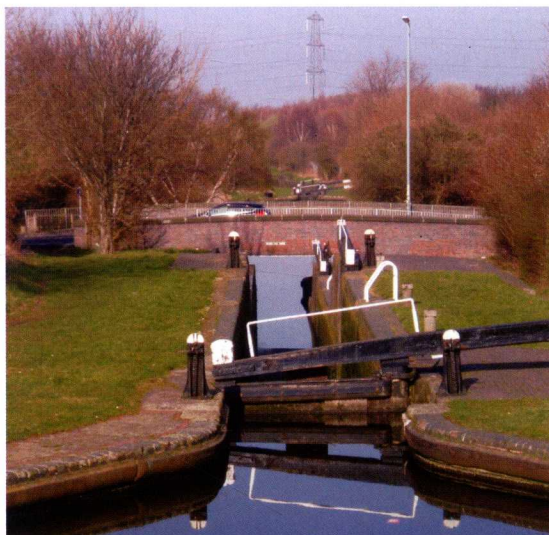
The Malthouse Stables have been restored as an outdoor activity centre.

Tipton Green has been pleasantly landscaped to make the most of the canal, with assorted new housing standing around the Fountain Inn. This was formerly the home of 19th century canalman and prize fighter William Perry, the Tipton Slasher, whose statue stands on the green.

The Tipton Green Canal used to lead from Tipton Green Junction. From Tipton Junction there is a spur, the Dudley Canal No 1 Line, which leads to the Black Country Living Museum and the **Dudley Tunnel**.

Housing, with gardens behind greater reedbeds, gives way to old brick factories. The view opens out at Burnt Tree. The Silurian limestone ridge behind is topped by a couple of masts on Darby's Hill. The canal is wider here as it approaches Dudley Port.

The canal crosses the Netherton Tunnel Branch Canal on an aqueduct and it is worth looking over the parapet



The Gower Branch Canal drops away from Brades Hall Junction through the Brades Locks.

at the imposing cutting leading to the mouth of this 3km long tunnel.

At Brades Hall Junction there are two arches on the left, the first abandoned but the second leading past an ivy-covered wall to the first of the Brades Locks on the Gower Branch Canal. This drops down as a midway connection to the New Main Line. Once again it is an area of industry. Factories vent acrid gases over the canal as oil begins to appear on the surface but this doesn't last for long. The former Oldbury Loop to the north has been lost.

The character of the canal changes sharply at **Oldbury** as the M5 is in close proximity to the canal for the next 2km, mostly overhead. As with the River Tame in Birmingham, an elevated route over a waterway has proved to be the most acceptable line for a motorway to be squeezed through the city.

This does not indicate any lessening in canal complexity, however. North Junction and South Junction of the closed Oldbury Loop Line are still visible and the Houghton Branch Canal leads away under the motorway. Once under what can be a useful canopy for a rainy day, Oldbury Locks Junction accepts the Titford Canal which descends through six locks from the Crow, a feeder from Rotton Park Reservoir.

The concrete jungle intensifies as the A457 passes



The Malthouse Stables centre at Tipton Factory Junction. Only the two storey part is original.



Contrasting scales of bridge, a footbridge and the M5 viaduct.



Smethwick New Pumping Station. The New Main Line is in the deeper cut which lies to the right.



Smethwick Lock, formerly duplicated. The chamber on the left side has been filled in.

between canal and motorway and the canal comes out into the open air for a breather. At one point there is a traditional brick-arched bridge over the canal, noticeably out of place among all the vast concrete columns and walls. The complexity reaches its zenith. The M5 passes over the main railway line, which passes over the Old Main Loop Line, which passes over the New Main Line on the Steward Aqueduct. The aqueduct would probably have been more of an honour to Birmingham Canal Navigations committee member Stewart if the name had been spelled correctly. Telford's 2.1m iron-trough aqueduct of 1826–8 is now a listed structure.

Spon Lane Wharf and Junction are now beneath the motorway. Spon Lane Locks Branch provides a connection down to the New Main Line through Spon Lane Locks, the remaining bottom three from the six that descended from the original summit. These three locks are probably the oldest working locks in Britain. Top Lock has a split cantilevered bridge to pass ropes through without unhitching towing horses.

The cutting between Sandwell and Smethwick has one of Britain's greatest concentrations of canal architecture.

Chance's glassworks were on the right, founded in 1824 and including a number of listed buildings. They pioneered sheet glass, were the leading producers of optical glass for lighthouses after 1838 and made the glass for the Crystal Palace in 1851, going on to manufacture microscope lenses, rangefinders, telescopes and searchlights. They are now in Malvern.

Looking back on the left side the prominent feature is the listed small timber belltower of 1847 on the seven-storey offices of Archibald Kenrick & Sons, who have made ironmongery since 1791. George Salter, manufacturers of such things as spring balances, weighing equipment and steam locomotive safety valves, sited their foundry beside Top Lock.

The motorway was built in 1969 but suffered badly from chloride attack by road de-icing salts to the extent that late in 1991 a start was made on replacing complete crosshead beams. A 33m x 1.7m x 1.1m beam was the first to be removed and replaced as the entire six lanes of motorway plus hard shoulders were jacked up, the first time this operation had been undertaken in Britain. Further crossheads followed although there was considerable delay when deck movements were found to be four times greater than anticipated.

Eventually the M5 turns away as the canal enters a deep cutting below the original summit, lined with bulrushes. Notable on the left bank were colliery loading chutes, built about 1930. These were fed by a narrow tramway from the Sandwell Park and Jubilee collieries, later replaced by conveyors. While boats were being loaded, boatmen and horses were able to shelter in a brick building, the ruins of which still stand on the opposite bank. The chutes were dismantled in 2006.

A scheduled ancient monument, Summit Bridge of 1791 is a great brick arch with an unusual sloping parapet wall. Concentric arches reduce towards Galton Tunnel, which has a towpath and passes under the A4168 Telford Way. Samuel Galton was a Birmingham Canal

Committee member, self-educated in the sciences and the owner of a gun foundry. Galton House was built on the right before the tunnel, its gardens continuing beyond.

On the left side is a marshy bank with a flight of steps leading up to the Night Inn. Tiers on the south side beyond the New Main Line support the railway line, the A457 with some very gaudily painted buildings and then a slim church spire.

Smethwick New Pumping Station of 1892 had two steam engines to pump water from the New Main Line to the Old Main Loop Line to replace water lost by boats locking down at Spon Lane and Smethwick. Built to supersede the Smethwick Engine, it ceased operation in the 1920s although a diesel engine was installed for fire fighting during the Second World War. It is a restored listed building used as the Galton Valley Canal Heritage Centre.

Smethwick Brasshouse of 1790, later the District Iron & Steelworks, had its own canal wharf at Brasshouse Lane. The top three locks and the existing summit were discarded by Smeaton in 1790 and the present level used.

The Engine Arm was a feeder to the summit level from Rotton Park Reservoir via the Boulton & Watt engine which operated for 120 years. It leads across Telford's magnificent Grade II* Engine Arm Aqueduct of 1825. The Old Main Loop Line towpath is taken over the Engine Arm Canal on a brick footbridge with indented honeycomb stone quoins.

The three locks down to the lower level are the bottom ones of the original six, all listed structures. In 1789 Smeaton duplicated these three locks. Brindley's originals were filled in during the 1960s. There was a Toll House between the upper pair. The layout of Pope's Bridge, carrying Bridge Street, shows the alignment of the two lock flights.

The two main lines meet at Smethwick Junction, Soho, notable features being two cast-iron footbridges installed in 1828 after being prefabricated at the Horseley Ironworks in Tipton. Once again these are listed structures. Their semi elliptical shape gives an advantage over segmental curves by allowing greater headroom for horses passing below.

Distance

10km from Tipton
Factory Junction to
Smethwick Junction

Navigation

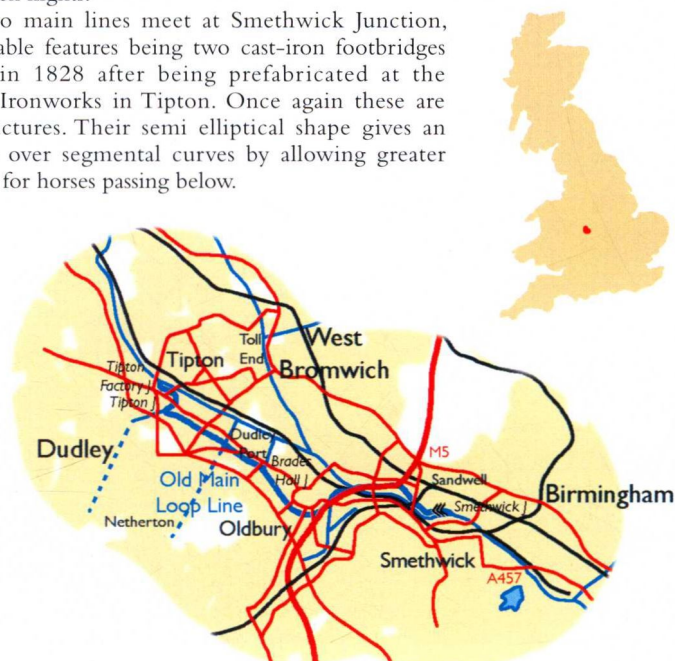
Authority
Canal & River Trust

Canal Society

Birmingham Canal
Navigations Society
www.bensociety.co.uk

OS 1:50,000 Sheet

139 Birmingham
& Wolverhampton



2 Birmingham Canal Navigations, New Main Line

Telford gets
straight to
business

*At Wolverhampton town we then
Unload and turn her round again.
This trip will earn us five pounds ten
For a working boatie man.*

Graeme Meek



The Broad Street Bridge in a brick panorama.



The International Convention Centre at Brindleyplace.

The major improvement to the Old Main Line came between 1825 and 1838 when Telford engineered the New Main Line between Deepfields and Birmingham. He introduced bold cuttings and embankments, producing extra water space to ease traffic congestion and shortening the route by 11km at the lower 138m Birmingham level.

Possibly because Birmingham is the only major city not located on a large river, it has had to rely on its manmade waterways, having more canals than Venice. The whole canal network spreads out from Birmingham and it is to the Birmingham Canal Navigations that many loose ends connect. It is, therefore, intensely complex, completely built-up and often industrial. Its past commercial influence is declining but still enough to reduce its attraction as a cruising waterway, resulting in lighter traffic.

The canal starts from Gas Street Basin at the end of the Worcester & Birmingham Canal in the centre of **Birmingham**. The Tap & Spile precedes Broad Street Bridge, a vast tunnel with at least two increases in cross section along its short length and buildings on top. Much of the New Main Line has twin footpaths, partly because of the complexity of the system and partly to reduce congestion.

The Pitcher & Piano and the Handmade Burger Company are among the amenities at the much restored Brindleyplace opposite the International Convention Centre and Symphony Hall, a former working environment where business suits are more at home these days.

Much of the blue brickwork on towpath bridges has been renovated to convert the towpaths to attractive canalside walks, now fully surfaced with brickwork.

Old Turn Junction is at the start of the Birmingham & Fazeley Canal, opposite Sherborne Wharf on the Oozells Street Loop. Three of the four corners of the junction are occupied by the Malt House hostelry (as visited by Bill Clinton), the National Sea Life Centre and the Barclaycard Arena. The island was a wartime measure to make it easier to close off the canal in the event of a breach.

Further west are modern residential buildings. Three loops show where the contour canal used to run before being straightened, Oozells Street Loop, Icknield Port Loop via Rotton Park and Soho Loop which winds its way past Birmingham Prison at Winson Green. The Soho Loop rejoins at Winson Green Junction, the first of several toll islands on the canal. Opposite are the remains of the Cape Arm loop, rejoining opposite the start of the former Soho Foundry Loop. By this stage it has already been joined by the West Coast Main Line, remaining in close proximity for most of the distance. Another arrival which is a feature of this part of the canal system is the presence of purple lupins growing wild on the embankments. Even less expected in 1976 was ball lightning which struck a woman in a local house, causing minor injury.

Bridges over side arms have low lattice parapets, manufactured in the local Horseley works. Metal products factories are a constant feature of the canal with their attendant odours. The ghost of a boat family nurse has been seen on the towpath at Black Patch Park as an elderly woman in a red cape.

At **Smethwick** the Old Main Line diverges to the right, rising through three locks from the Birmingham Level to the Wolverhampton Level. A feeder, Engine

Branch, crosses the New Main Line on Telford Aqueduct. It is a magnificent cast-iron structure, highly decorated, its dark brown paintwork highlighted with red and white detailing. The feeder name came from the Boulton & Watt steam pumping engine which fed the Birmingham Canal Navigations summit level for 120 years.

The New Main Line turns into its boldest cutting at Sandwell. Earthworks here were some of the greatest in the world when undertaken. On the north bank is Galton Valley Canal Heritage Centre. There was formerly a view straight down the 21m deep cutting to Telford's elegant Galton Bridge. A fitting end to the straight cut, it has a 46m span, the world's longest canal span when built in 1829, and is 23m high. In 1974 this changed with the construction of a 112m long tunnel next to it with an embankment over the top to carry the A4168. Galton Tunnel has a towpath. With a railway bridge just beyond, Galton Bridge can no longer be seen at its best from either direction.

Again, a long straight leads under another interesting group of bridges. A brick road bridge has been widened with a concrete arch which provides a striking facade. The Old Main Line crosses to the higher ground on the south on the Steward Aqueduct. The M5 viaduct is supported on uncompromising nodes in the centre of the canal.

A slip road drops through the three Spon Lane Locks to join the New Main Line at Bromford Junction.

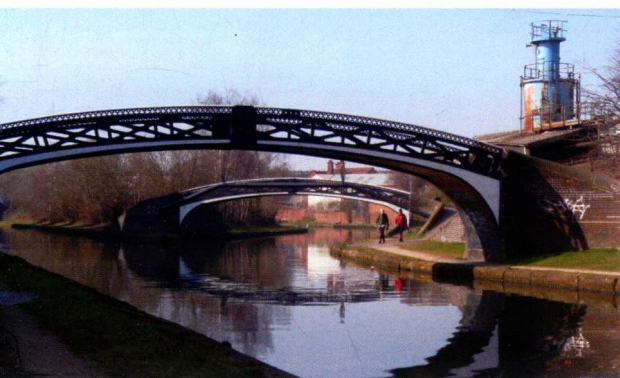
Pudding Green Junction leads off northwards to the Walsall Canal in an area of small but bustling works. By now the New Main Line is on a dead straight 4km run through to Tipton. At Albion Junction the Gower Branch, with its deep locks, connects with the Old Main Line.

The New Main Line now runs onto an embankment, and the only extensive views of the route are to be seen in the form of the hills around **Dudley**.

From Dudley Port Junction the Netherton Tunnel Branch runs parallel to the Gower Branch and, in the distance, it can be seen passing under the Old Main Line and up to the mouth of Netherton Tunnel, the largest cross section canal tunnel in the country.

Residential properties close in on the south side of the canal. A canal cottage sits on top of the embankment near a couple of aqueducts. The Ryland Aqueduct of 1968 clears the A461 with a single 24m concrete span.

Two branches which have been lost from the north side here were Dixon's Branch and the Toll End Communication, which linked with the Walsall Canal, opposite the former Tipton Green Canal. A thrust bored box tunnel on the B4517 at Tipton station replaced one of the last level crossings



Smethwick Junction with the Old Main Loop Line leaving to the right.



Old Turn Junction with the Birmingham & Fazeley Canal leaving to the right under the iron bridge between the Malt House and the Barclaycard Arena.



The New Main Line crosses the picture while the Oozells Steet Loop is ahead with Sherborne Wharf next to a National Sea Life Centre.



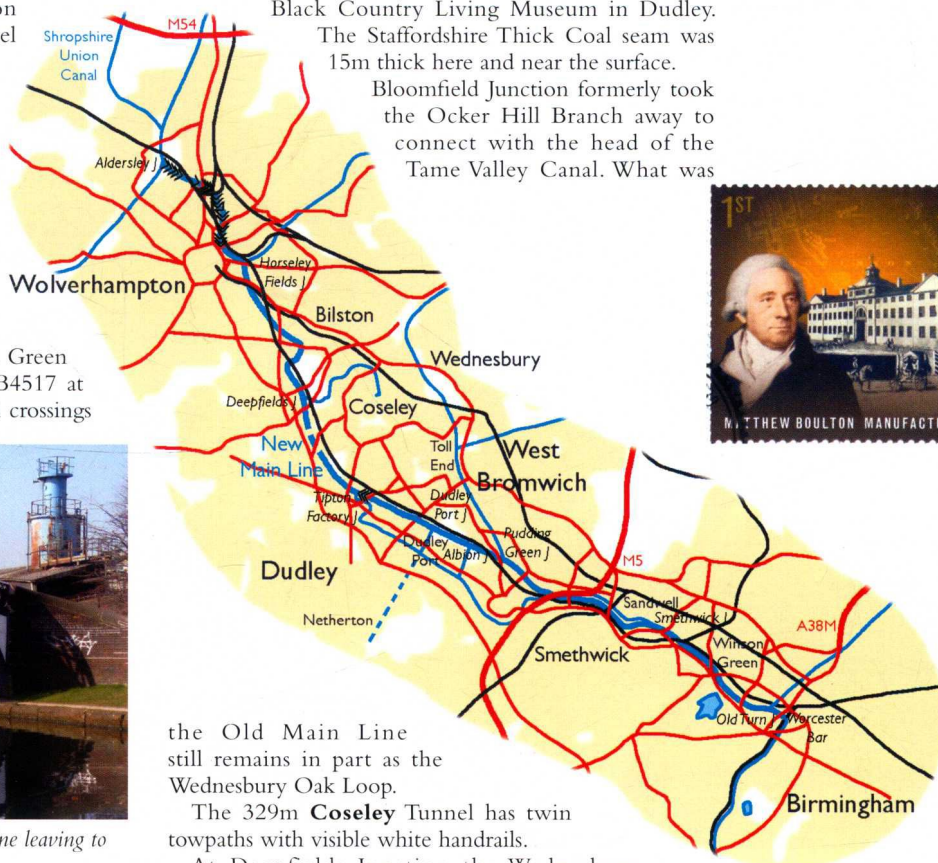
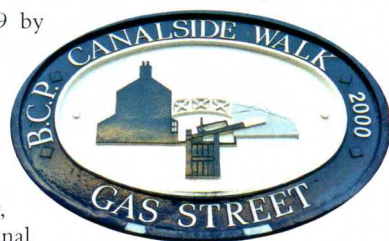
on the West Coast Main Line in 2009 by Caggy's Boatyard.

Beyond the Noah's Ark the three Factory Locks bring the New Main Line up to rejoin the Old Main Line at Tipton Factory Junction. Noteworthy are a split bridge over the bottom lock, a boatman's chapel now converted into a factory, a large warehouse and a Birmingham Canal Navigations cast-iron boundary post. The Factory

Bridge of 1825 has now been removed to the Black Country Living Museum in Dudley.

The Staffordshire Thick Coal seam was 15m thick here and near the surface.

Bloomfield Junction formerly took the Ocker Hill Branch away to connect with the head of the Tame Valley Canal. What was



the Old Main Line still remains in part as the Wednesbury Oak Loop.

The 329m **Coseley** Tunnel has twin towpaths with visible white handrails.

At Deepfields Junction the Wednesbury



Telford Aqueduct carries the Engine Arm over.



Coseley Tunnel.



Galton Bridge, now less easy to view.

Oak Loop is a remainder of the contour canal, from which the New Main Line cut 5km on this loop alone. Contours changed dramatically at Deepfields on one occasion when subsidence dropped the canal area 1.2m in a few hours. A nearby tip has been landscaped but factories lie in various stages of dereliction. **Bilston** Steelworks was, until 1981, the last surviving blast furnace in the Black Country. These days the area seems to be used for storing plant. It is not all construction plant, though. Water plants are joined by increasing amounts of algae. Yellow iris is also present along the banks.

As the canal edges into **Wolverhampton**, capital of the Black Country, the atmosphere deteriorates. In quick succession come factories of corrugated-iron as often as of brick. In *The Lazy Tour of Two Idle Apprentices* Charles Dickens and Wilkie Collins describe Mayport as having a seasoning of Wolverhampton and Dickens also admires the wonderful Wolverhampton tinware in *A Christmas Tree*. Born here in 1683 was Jonathan



A striking widened road bridge, the Steward Aqueduct carrying the Old Main Line and the M5 bridge.



Repair is an ongoing requirement: a collapsed wall at Wolverhampton.

Wild, who called himself the Thief-Taker General of Great Britain and Ireland, moving to London where he controlled robbing and receiving, the gangs undertaking these and punishment of their members.

Horseley Fields Junction is the end of the Wyrley & Essington Canal.

A large tunnel with twin towpaths supports a multistorey carpark on top. Beyond it is a Canal & River Trust depot with barge entry doors in the side on what little remains of a former loop. The basin beyond it is the jewel of the canal, an attractively laid out garden area with benches and narrowboats moored at the top of the 21 lock Wolverhampton Flight. The locks carry on for over 2km right down to Aldersley Junction, with never more than 300m between them.

The flight begins beside a traditional lock keeper's cottage. The former M&B Springfield brewery, Wolverhampton Civic Incinerator, a landscaped former railway line and a network of existing railways are other features. The West Coast Main Line leaves on

a viaduct which crosses over a railway bridge as it, in turn, is crossing the canal with a Pendolino depot adjacent. The flight drops under Oxley Viaduct with its skewed navigation arch, this time taking the Shrewsbury to Wolverhampton line. Beyond the viaduct the transformation is dramatic. The city is left behind. Wolverhampton's horse race course is on the left and beyond it are only trees and a quiet towpath down to Aldersley Junction, for the pleasant appearance of which Friends of the Earth claimed the credit. Although relatively rural in appearance, the Staffordshire & Worcestershire Canal has been extremely busy here in the past, being only 900m from Autherley Junction at the head of the Shropshire Union Canal.



Wolverhampton horse race course is next to the canal.



Aldersley Junction on the Staffordshire & Worcestershire Canal.



The approach to Wolverhampton top lock.

Distance
24km from Gas
Street Basin to
Aldersley Junction

**Navigation
Authority**
Canal & River Trust

Canal Society
Birmingham Canal
Navigations Society
www.bcn society.co.uk

OS 1:50,000 Sheet
(127 Stafford
& Telford)
139 Birmingham
& Wolverhampton

3 Wyrley & Essington Canal

A tortuous line round the contours of the Birmingham Canal Navigations' best scenery

The Wyrley & Essington Canal connected the Birmingham Canal Navigations' Main Line at **Wolverhampton** with the Coventry Canal at Huddlesford, forming the most northerly loop of the Birmingham Canal Navigations and today displaying its most attractive scenery. Almost all of the remaining part is on one level. The canal follows a tortuous line around the contours, earning it the nickname Curly Wyrley, with all the locks positioned on the numerous branches, which served various coalfields.

The line was constructed to Wyrley in 1795 and extended to Brownhills.

It leaves the Birmingham Canal Navigations Main

Line at Horseley Fields Junction. Light traffic on it means that it is remarkably clear except for the waterweeds.

The West Coast Main Line crosses immediately and then the canal goes back a couple of centuries as it passes a constriction caused by what was once a toll island for coal barges in the centre of the canal. Tunnels under the towpath carry former spurs to serve adjacent factories. The contrasts come spasmodically, a few cottages backing onto the canal, tower blocks, a plant yard, the blackened spire at Heath Town and the Jolly Collier.

Wasteland opens up on the right but the left bank



Emerging from the Wyrley & Essington to join the main line at Horseley Fields Junction.



The West Coast Main Line crosses the canal at Horseley Fields Junction.

is in good order with playing fields and grassed areas, a modern church with striking green roofs and a hospital. A 10t stainless steel arch reaches over the canal as a sculpture. The old brick bridge leading up to the hospital has been repaired very obviously and carries a nameplate, as do the other bridges on this canal.

Beyond it, by the Nickelodeon, a substantial lattice bridge, of a pattern to be seen again later, carries the towpath at Wednesfield Junction across the Bentley Canal by a large parking area for such interests as Cineworld and Nando's. This was abandoned as a through route to Bentley in 1961 with the buildings of **Willenhall** having spread over it in recent years. **Wednesfield Junction** also had an island with one of the octagonal tollbooths.

A red sandstone towered church lends dignity to an area where the Royal Tiger and Spread Eagle public houses flank the canal, together with a school. This seems to be a popular exercise area for dogs.

Houses have their gardens backing onto the left bank,



Bridges carry the towpath over factory feeders near Horseley Fields Junction.



A path through the lilies at Harden.

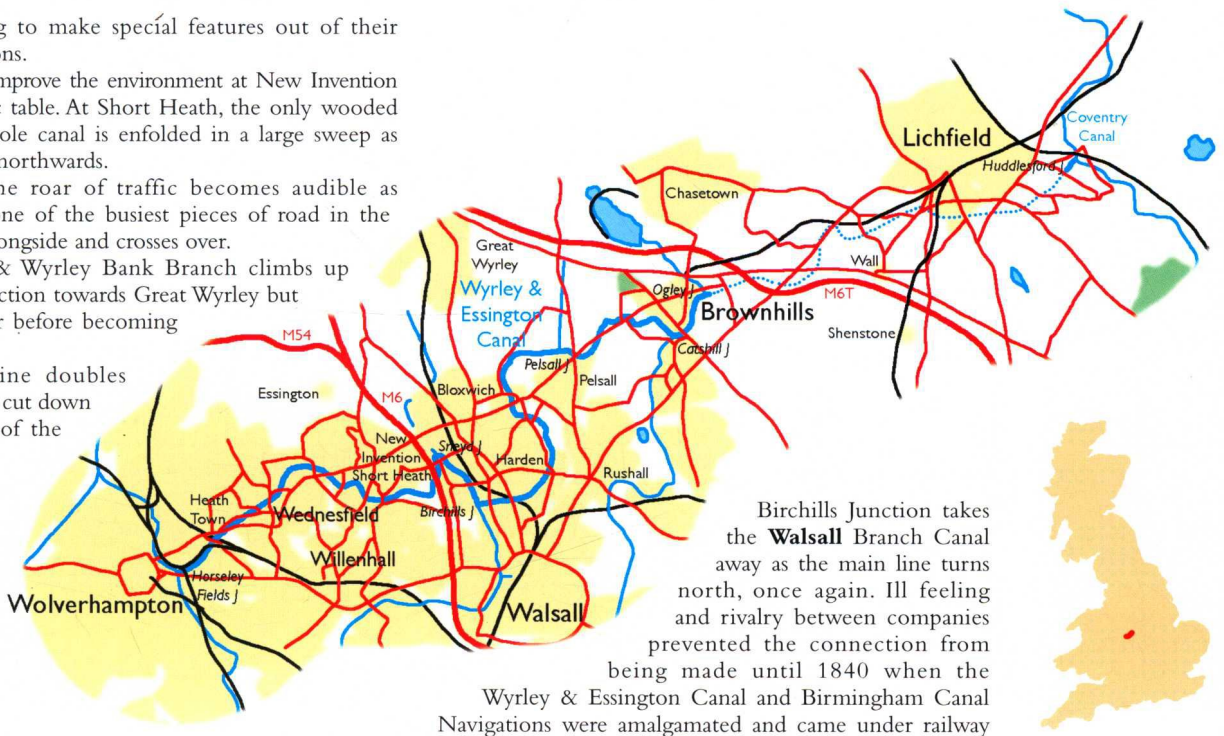
often managing to make special features out of their canalside locations.

Attempts to improve the environment at New Invention include a picnic table. At Short Heath, the only wooded area on the whole canal is enfolded in a large sweep as the route turns northwards.

Gradually, the roar of traffic becomes audible as the M6, here one of the busiest pieces of road in the country, pulls alongside and crosses over.

The Sneyd & Wyrley Bank Branch climbs up from Sneyd Junction towards Great Wyrley but does not get far before becoming derelict.

The main line doubles back on itself to cut down the other side of the valley.



Birchills Junction takes the **Walsall Branch Canal** away as the main line turns north, once again. Ill feeling and rivalry between companies prevented the connection from being made until 1840 when the Wyrley & Essington Canal and Birmingham Canal Navigations were amalgamated and came under railway