

The Staffordshire & Worcestershire Canal (SWC)
and
The Staffordshire & Worcestershire Canal Society (SWCS)

... an introduction to both, together with annotations and historical overview

underlined sections of text – see explanatory notes below main discourse

Prior to the industrial revolution transport had been mostly confined to packhorses and wagons travelling along ancient dirt tracks that were dustbowls in summer or quagmires in winter, and unreliable river navigations that despite rudimentary modifications were still at the mercy of the fluctuating weather for much of the year.

It was not always thus. Two thousand years ago the Romans created a network of roads that were a vital component in their imposition of efficiency, justice and military might. When the Empire eventually succumbed a besieged Rome recalled her troops leaving the indigenous population to their own devices amidst chaotic scenes described by the Venerable Bede: *‘When the Romans departed the British abandoned their cities and fled in disorder. They were driven from their homes by Picts and Scots and sought to avoid starvation by robbery and violence, their internal anarchy adding to the miseries inflicted on them by others.’*

After the Romans had finally retreated their legacy of roads, like their fine cities, decayed. Almost in desperation the Church offered enticements to anyone who would repair the rutted tracks and at the reformation an obligation was placed upon parishes to maintain roads between market towns. Yet at the dawn of the industrial age neither rutted track nor unreliable river could be called upon to play its part. A system of mass transportation was required as a matter of urgency to feed the demands of the new order. It had to be reliable, it had to be efficient and it had to be cheap. But above all it had to be on a huge scale. And thus the scene was set as, with an aura of the faintly unconventional that seems so often to define archetypical British eccentricity, one of the most seismic transport revolutions the world has ever witnessed was heralded by the romantic misfortunes of a sickly young man.

Widely regarded as the inspiration for a frenetic period of waterways construction now referred to as ‘Canal Mania’ the Bridgewater Canal owes its existence to Francis Egerton 3rd Duke of Bridgewater who, following the break-up of his engagement to Lady Elizabeth Hamilton, became something of a misogynist and focussed his energies elsewhere. For the sake of his health and to alleviate the ravages of chronic TB the young Duke had earlier undertaken The Grand Tour and became fascinated with continental waterways. Together with his agent John Gilbert and millwright James Brindley he sought to solve the problem of transporting coal from his father’s mines at Worsley near Manchester by water. The result was a lock-free canal, the first section of which opened in 1761. The Bridgewater Canal proved a fantastic success and other canals rapidly followed.

The name of Brindley was subsequently widely associated with many early canals. It was he who proposed a visionary Grand Cross scheme of interconnecting the rivers Mersey, Humber, Severn and Thames by means of artificial waterways, a scheme that approached fulfilment in 1777 with the completion of the Trent & Mersey Canal.

The **Staffordshire & Worcestershire Canal (SWC)** is the brainchild of the energetic Brindley. It runs for 46½ miles between Great Haywood, where it meets with the Trent & Mersey Canal, and Stourport, where it locks into the River Severn. 31 of its 43 locks raise it some 292 feet from the river to a 10-mile summit between Compton Lock and Gailey before the remaining 12 locks lower the line to Great Haywood Junction.

The canal was built using Brindley's contour method in which the waterway wherever possible followed the natural level or contour of the land. This method kept navigational artefacts such as locks, tunnels and aqueducts to a minimum but did mean that the overall distance travelled was greater than necessary, with corresponding additional costs. Some half a century later the engineer Thomas Telford almost single-handedly redefined canal construction by his brash confidence in taking his canals in as direct a route as possible. Consequently the overall distances travelled were reduced dramatically, as epitomised by his modifications around the Birmingham Canal Navigations where, for example, the distance between Birmingham and Wolverhampton via Brindley's original twisting course was reduced by about seven miles by Telford's 'New Main Line'. Simplistic comparisons between the two great men are, however, not entirely appropriate since the earlier construction was of a time when large centres of population were not so common and the convoluted route allowed outlying settlements access to the new transport medium that they otherwise would not have enjoyed.

Prior to the arrival of the SWC the confluence of the River Stour and the River Severn was denoted by the diminutive hamlet of Lower Mitton. With the advent of the Staffordshire & Worcestershire Canal the hamlet witnessed a dramatic expansion; the burgeoning new development took the name of Stourport after an alehouse in the old village and this was later extended to include reference to both rivers as Stourport On Severn. Stourport is thus one of a handful of towns that owes its very existence to the arrival of a canal.

From the time the canal's enabling Act was passed in May 1766 construction was rapid. Few major obstructions were encountered and the line was complete within six years, opening throughout in 1772. It was an immediate financial success offering a direct route from the northwest to the south via the industrial Midlands, a role it exploited almost undisturbed until the arrival of the Birmingham & Liverpool Junction Canal (now part of the Shropshire Union network) in 1835. The newcomer offered an alternate, more direct, route to the River Mersey from Atherley, where it met with the SWC and the northern section of the SWC beyond Atherley suffered particularly in consequence.

The Staffordshire & Worcestershire Canal Company responded to this with crippling tolls on the short stretch between Atherley and Aldersley, where the line via Wolverhampton accessed the Birmingham Canal Navigations, and it was only the threat of other companies conspiring to build an aqueduct as a by-pass that the Company relaxed its grip. The situation remained unsettled and the threats were repeated over the next few years with the SWC Company inevitably yielding each time.

The power station at Stourport was instrumental in the SWC remaining profitable until well into the 20th Century and a major cargo was coal from the pits at Cannock. The closure of the power station in 1949 was a serious blow and although commercial carrying continued on the Atherley-Aldersley section until the 1960s the canal's trading days were effectively over.

SWC was classified under the Transport Act 1968 as a 'cruiseway' and in 1969 the entire length was declared a Conservation Area. As a result many of the canal's historical artefacts have survived and in some cases undergone substantial improvement. Plans for Stourport have included a major regeneration of the riverside area and some of the ancient canal basins have recently been reclaimed.

Other artefacts are also particularly noteworthy. Bratch Locks are a glorious example of the canal builder's skills and are unique on Britain's waterways. They comprise a set of 3 individual locks that are not a 'staircase' but are set so close together that it is impossible for boats to pass between the locks. The secret of the operation is the side pounds. Tixall Wide, at the northern end, is an idiosyncratic solution to the local landowner's condition that his view must not be blighted by a canal. Clifford Thomas, owner of Tixall Hall (now lost) insisted the canal be disguised so instead the line here more resembles a lake than a channel. The northern end of the summit level is marked by Gailey Roundhouse. Built around the 1800s and formerly used by the lock keeper the example at Gailey is the last of these distinctive buildings to remain intact on the SWC. It is now a shop.

At Pratt's Wharf (Bridge 10A) a single lock once enabled boats to access the River Stour and the Wilden Ironworks. Negotiating the Stour in flood, or 'going down the brook' as the boaters called it, must have been a terrifying experience. The lock closed around 1949.

Stourton Junction sees the Stourbridge Canal spur off from the SWC via four locks on its journey to the Birmingham Canal Navigations. The Town Arm of the Stourbridge Canal is now home to Stourbridge Navigation Trust (SNT) and Fellows, Morton & Clayton Ltd. who run The Black Countryman trip boat.

To the north of Wolverhampton the Hatherton Branch once linked with the Cannock Extension Canal, and hence the Birmingham Canal Navigations, via Churchbridge Locks. It is currently undergoing restoration.

Near Stafford, the River Sow was connected around 1806 via a lock and a short stretch of canal directly into the town of Stafford itself. Long abandoned, there are proposals to restore this stretch. A short distance to the south of the Sow, the Hazelstrine Branch was small section connecting with a brickworks. It is now home to Stafford Boat Club.

The Staffordshire & Worcestershire Canal passes almost exclusively through rural or semi-rural landscape; even when it broaches Wolverhampton it does so by merely skirting around the edges. It is a splendid example of an early canal and is arguably one of the prettiest in the country. This, together with its easy access to the River Severn and the rest of the system, makes it very popular both for boaters and towpath users alike.

It wasn't always quite so popular and **The Staffordshire & Worcestershire Canal Society (SWCS)** was formed by a group of enthusiasts who feared for the continuing integrity of the canal at a time of widescale abandonment of the waterways

After the best part of two centuries as the mainstay of commercial transport, by the 1950s the inland waterways of Great Britain were in a parlous state. Much of the system, including the SWC, lay abandoned or in dereliction and that which remained was but a shadow of its former self.

In 1959, at a time when SWC was threatened with abandonment and closure, SWCS was established *'to encourage the use and development of the Staffordshire & Worcestershire Canal and its adjoining waterways.'* In the intervening decades it has played a major role in many aspects of the waterways revival serving in particular to safeguard, promote and develop the interests of the SWC for the benefit of all. Acting in accordance with its declared remit to also promote its adjoining waterways SWCS was heavily involved with the retention and reopening of the Stourbridge Canal.

Held over 27th-29th May 1967 the reopening was a culmination of some three year's endeavour on the 'Stourbridge 16' Locks by the Staffordshire & Worcestershire Canal Society (SWCS) with assistance of numerous other groups and the co-operation of what was then the British Waterways Board (BWB), later British Waterways (BW). The initiative of co-operation between BWB and volunteers was at that time in its infancy and this restoration is believed to be the first occasion that professional BWB staff and unremunerated volunteers worked together. Certainly it was the model for subsequent restoration schemes and the Stourbridge example established a pattern that continues to this day.

Times change, and from our contemporary and more health-conscious perspective it is perhaps difficult to envisage how back in '67 the festivities were sponsored by a well-known tobacco company. But it would be doubly difficult for anyone below middle age to recall the sorry state that our canals in general, and the Stourbridge Canal in particular, had been permitted - indeed actively encouraged by some - to degenerate. There was even talk of the moribund Town Arm being infilled for a road between Stourbridge and Wordsley. The list of whom we have to thank for reversing this trend reads like a Who's Who but central to these must be the stalwarts of the now-infamous 'Battle of Stourbridge Cut' of five years earlier. The tale of their 'defiant dragline' breaking the mud to permit access to an isolated Town Arm is now the stuff of legend and the moment has been widely acclaimed as the catalyst for the burgeoning nation-wide restoration movement that followed.

The intervening years have seen the Staffordshire & Worcestershire Canal Society, a youthful grouping at the time but soon to celebrate its 50th anniversary, blossom into an organisation of some *gravitas*. Stourbridge Navigation Trust, formed under the auspices of SWCS but now an independent organisation in its own right, has in turn perpetuated the famous name of Fellows, Morton & Clayton Ltd and both now operate from a rejuvenated Bonded Warehouse.

This building, itself a derelict hulk at the eleventh hour of demolition just a couple of generations ago, was saved by SWCS and has since proved a highly successful venue for all manner of meetings and community functions. The recipient of a Civic Trust Award, it was granted Grade 2 listed status in 1980 and for over 20 years has hosted a showcase Open Weekend each October.

The 'Stourbridge 16' Locks, together with important artefacts such as Dadford's Shed which was also saved by the intervention of SWCS, have been transformed from a motley array of derelict eyesores to a busy through-route accessing the famous Delph Locks Conservation Area, the gargantuan Merry Hill Shopping Centre and thence virtually all points on the waterways compass. And all, or mostly, passing through splendid scenery that would stand comparison with just about anywhere else on the inland waterways system. The list of successes goes on and long may it continue to grow. Yet remember this is merely around the immediate area of Stourbridge; just extrapolate these accomplishments across the entire network and one can begin to appreciate the sheer transforming power that was unleashed from this very spot by those visionary campaigners of forty years ago.

The Fens is a jewel in the heart of Pensnett and as SWCS entered the 21st Century it found itself associated with promotion and development of the area. Although not part of the SWC corridor The Fens is inextricably linked with the Stourbridge Canal and hence the Staffordshire & Worcestershire Canal.

SWCS is one of the oldest established and most esteemed canal societies in the country. Whilst many of its members are boat owners SWCS is expressly not a boat club and instead aims to cater for all waterways-orientated tastes. Its affairs are conducted by a democratically elected Committee, every member of which is a volunteer who receives no fiscal remuneration. SWCS continues to foster good relations at the highest levels. The Annual Dinner of 2007 held at the Fox at Stourton, for example, attracted the present BW Chairman Mr. Tony Hales as Guest Speaker whilst at the time of this being compiled (March 2007) Lord Morris of Aberavon is scheduled to unveil a plaque at celebrations marking the 40th anniversary of the reopening of Stourbridge Canal main line on 26th May at Stourton Junction.

Society activities are varied; a monthly meeting at Bradmore near Wolverhampton is open to all and features regular guest speakers on a wide variety of topics. Other activities range from a formal annual dinner to informal social functions such as skittles evenings and outings around GB and beyond. *Broadsheet* is the in-house magazine of the Society. It features correspondence and articles from various sources but is compiled, edited, designed and distributed by Society members. It is circulated free to members every month. www.swcs.org.uk is the official SWCS website. New members of all ages, backgrounds and interests are actively encouraged to join the Society. Membership is deliberately kept low for younger enthusiasts though annual adult and group fees for the whole family are set at less than the cost of trip to the cinema. Details are available either from the Membership Secretary as advertised in *Broadsheet* or via the link and application form on the website www.swcs.org.uk

Explanatory Notes

relating to underlined sections of text

James Brindley (1716-1772)

Born the son of a farm labourer, Brindley rose from a limited education to become one of the great early canal pioneers. He was apprenticed to a millwright and worked on a variety of water-powered mills, accruing talents that were later to prove useful in the world of waterways. It would be incorrect to think of him as illiterate, rather he had little formal education and preferred to work his ideas in his head rather than on paper. It is said that sometimes he would retire to his bed for days on end to pursue a line of thought. He was introduced to the Duke of Bridgewater to work on various projects before turning his attentions to assisting the Duke to transport coal. Following the fantastic success of the Bridgewater Canal, Brindley was a recognised canal expert by the mid-1760s and became so busy that he appointed others and rushed between jobs to supervise them. His involvement with the Trent & Mersey Canal and the incredible Harecastle Tunnel caused him to define the size of boats at around 70ft x 7ft, thereby defining the 'narrowboat' and setting the gauge for much of the Midlands network. He built his canals by the 'contour' method, in which the line of the canal tends to follow the contours of the land. Where navigational structures were required they tended to be on a sizeable scale; his aqueducts for example were typically low, squat rugged affairs lined with puddling clay. He married Anne Henshall late in life and they had two daughters before he died from a combination of exhaustion caused by overwork and diabetes. His legacy is almost 400 miles of canals including the Trent & Mersey (Grand Trunk) Canal, Chesterfield Canal and Staffordshire & Worcestershire Canal.

Bridgewater Canal

Widely considered as the inspiration for a frenetic period of waterways construction now referred to as 'Canal Mania' the Bridgewater Canal was built by Francis Egerton, 3rd Duke of Bridgewater, as a means of transporting coal from his father's mines at Worsley near Manchester. James Brindley, until this time a millwright, became a canal engineer and thus secured his place in history. The result was a lock-free canal eventually extending in total to almost 40 miles. Also known as 'Duke's Cut' (not to be confused with the Duke's Cut Branch of the Oxford Canal) the first section opened in 1761. By 1765 it extended into Manchester, dramatically slashing the cost of coal. Immense capital outlay was quickly countered by high profitability and various branches were added including one that afforded access to the Manchester Ship Canal. Coal from Worsley mines was transported using crude open boats called 'starvationers' owing to their exposed ribs. Proposals to restore Runcorn Locks at the western extremity of the Bridgewater Canal have been under consideration for a number of years. World Heritage Status for the canal is being sought.

Stourport-on-Severn

In what the writer and historian JHB Peel memorably describes as '*an early example of this proliferation, posing as natural regeneration*' the town of Stourport, or more precisely the Gladder Brook a few hundred yards upstream, nowadays denotes the official limit of navigation along the Severn. Swinging past the red sandstone of the curiously named Blackstone Rock just south of Bewdley the Severn meets the Stour at what was once the diminutive hamlet of Lower Mitton.

With the advent of the Staffordshire & Worcestershire canal the hamlet witnessed a dramatic expansion; the burgeoning new development took the name of Stourport after an alehouse in the old village and this was later extended to include reference to both rivers as Stourport On Severn. Much of the *'eczema of chain stores, permanently decrepit fun fair and a litter of power-houses, petrol pumps, factories, coal dumps and rail yards sprawling in sour disorder'* described by Peel have, with the notable exception of the funfair, been displaced throughout the latter stages of the 20th century and his earlier assessment that *'the town has dispensed with its commercial status without yet regaining its former identity'* would henceforth seem destined to become increasingly incongruous as his observations retreat to what is now a distant age. Proposed and actual developments are already redressing the balance, with bold regeneration especially around the river-canal area. And surely a major step to *'regaining former identity'* has been taken by the reclamation of the town's historic basins. These are indeed exciting times for Stourport town and the waterways with which it is inextricably associated. Despite Peel's evident displeasure Stourport continues into the 21st century as a hedonistic haven for thousands of visitors annually especially on balmy sunny afternoons. How very different it must have all appeared two hundred years ago; how much different it may be again in just a handful of years' time. *(Extract from piece by author in Broadsheet, magazine of SWCS, Jan 2006)*

Aqueduct (at Tettenhall)

When the Birmingham & Liverpool Junction Canal (BLJC, later to become part of the Shropshire Union) opened between Atherley and Nantwich in 1835 it was both understandable and predictable that traffic should use this more modern and direct route. In consequence the SWC lost a great deal of trade except for the section between Aldersley, where it connected with the Birmingham Canal Navigations (BCN), and Atherley. The canal company responded by imposing crippling tolls for this short length and so the proprietors of the BCN and BLJC pooled their resources to promote an Act of Parliament for the Tettenhall & Atherley Canal Aqueduct. This was to be a flyover from part-way along the Wolverhampton '21' locks on the BCN, across the SWC and locking down onto the BLJC. The SWC Company was obliged to yield in the face of the threat; the tolls were reduced to an acceptable level and the aqueduct never materialised.

Bratch Locks

Widely considered as Brindley's masterpiece, Bratch Locks are unique and are well known to students of canal architecture. They were originally conceived as a staircase flight of three chambers but water wastage and long delays necessitated them being rebuilt as three singles. At first they appear curiously illogical with the lock gates so close together that it is impossible for boats to negotiate them. The secret is in the side ponds which act as intermediate pounds and boaters should treat each as a separate lock like any other. However it is especially important when locking through that the gates and paddles of each lock are closed before the next ones are operated. There is usually a lock keeper in attendance, especially in summer when the locks can become busy both with traffic and spectators.

Tixall Wide

An idiosyncrasy incorporated into the canal to satisfy a local landowner, Tixall Wide flatters to deceive for although it more resembles the Norfolk Broads than a canal it is in fact heavily silted in parts and boaters deviate off the main channel at their peril. It is nevertheless an extremely attractive section of the canal and was constructed at the insistence of Thomas Clifford of nearby Tixall Hall. He was willing to accept the canal provided it did not spoil his view. One must bear in mind that in those days the canal was a medium of heavy commerce rather than leisure and so his standpoint is perhaps the more understandable, albeit eccentric. Promoters of canals usually did not have the same difficulty as railway engineers in securing land deals, most likely since the landowners were canal company proprietors or shareholders. However in this instance Brindley was forced to accede by redesigning almost a mile of his waterway. The hall is now demolished though parts of the gatehouse remain.

Gailey Roundhouse

Gailey was an important wharf for many years, being close to Telford's A5. It is also where Brindley chose to place his summit level lock and so water supply was a critical consideration. The imposing Roundhouse here was one of several throughout SWC; this is the last one that survives intact. The site of a similar one can be seen at Gothersley. The reason for the round shape is not entirely clear; it is said to have enabled the lock keeper to have a clearer view along the canal but why he should wish to do this from the Roundhouse is questionable since the tollhouse was at the other end of the lock. The example at Gothersley did not even overlook a lock and so the mystery deepens. Roundhouses also feature on the Thames & Severn Canal. It is known the SWCCo took an interest in the T&S, but whatever influence this may have had on the emulation of its roundhouses is lost in the mists of time.

River Stour

The Wilden Ironworks were situated on the lower reaches of the River Stour near Stourport and were served by boats bringing material 'down the brook' via the lock at Pratt's Wharf (Bridge 10A). The material was brought to the canal via the railway line from a station at the top of the hill; the bridge carrying the line is still extant near the Bird In Hand pub. The former rail line is now obscured by housing development but it ran alongside the adjoining arm and carriages would be allowed to roll down the incline before crashing into buffers. The brickwork on which the buffers were mounted can still be seen on the junction of the main line with the arm. The ironworks were owned by the Baldwin family and enjoyed varying degrees of fortune, a situation no doubt linked with the progress of the son and heir Stanley who was elected Prime Minister for three terms from the 1920s. Boat traffic down the Stour via the lock ceased around 1949 and the ironworks closed shortly thereafter.

Stourbridge Canal

This joins with the SWC at the pretty Stourton Junction. Until recent years the Stewponey Roadhouse stood nearby; it has since been demolished to be replaced by housing which means there is now a paucity of pubs between Kinver and Greensforge. The Stourbridge Canal was completed in 1779 and connects with the Birmingham Canal Navigations. By 1950 commercial traffic had all but ceased and it fell into decline. It was subject to much restoration work by SWC in conjunction with BW and reopened in 1967. The Town Arm is now considered a spur off the main line but it was originally the main line linking the SWC with the township of Stourbridge.

The line rising through the 'Stourbridge 16' locks continues to Black Delph Junction where, at the foot of Delph Locks, it meets with the Dudley No. 1 line and thence the BCN.

Stourbridge Navigation Trust (SNT)

Stourbridge Wharf is now the terminus of the Town Arm but until around 1971 this once continued a few hundred yards under the road into what is now the New Mill Race Lane Trading Estate. Had the wharves and spurs survived just another few years then, in more enlightened times, they may possibly have been saved. The current terminus is dominated by the Bonded Warehouse and its offices on the opposite side of Canal Street, home to Stourbridge Navigation Trust (01384 395216) and FMC (see below). The Bonded Warehouse was built around 1799 and is a three-storey building with substantial walls and an unusual, if not unique, rounded end. It was used for holding bonded, or taxable, goods such as tobacco, spirits and tea pending duty being paid. A Grade II listed building since 1980, it was at that time in a sorry state but has since been totally renovated and has won various accolades including a Civic Award. The River Stour runs to the rear of the former stables, adjacent to the offices in Canal Street. It was once navigable at this point and here is believed to be the site of Andrew Yarranton's wharf that was destroyed by floods in the mid-17th Century. The Bonded Warehouse is sub-divided into various function rooms of differing size, all of which are available for hire. There are facilities for boaters on the wharfside.

Fellows, Morton & Clayton Ltd.

In the heady days of canal carrying Fellows, Morton & Clayton were once considered the aristocrats of canal transport. The original Company has long gone but in 1989 the name was acquired and given a new lease of life as FMC Ltd, operating The Black Countryman Trip Boat. This is a full-length, fully enclosed narrowboat that operates from Stourbridge Town Wharf and offers a wide range of packages for boat hirers. Details on 01384 375912

River Sow (Stafford Branch)

In 1806 the River Sow was linked to the canal near Bridge 101 via a single lock and a short section of canalised river. It was navigable for about a mile to its terminus in the centre of Stafford. The navigation was not a great success and it fell into disuse by around the turn of the 20th Century. It subsequently fell into dereliction, though it can still be traced. Plans have been mooted for its possible restoration.

Graham Fisher MBE
Chairman SWCS
January 2008

This article also appeared in *The Blackcountryman* (Summer 2007 Volume 40, edition No. 3, editor@blackcountry society.co.uk) for which many thanks - GF