

The Coventry Canal

Being sent to Coventry can be an enjoyable experience – if you go by boat.

ROGER BUTLER finds out why

As we set off from Coventry, our departure was observed by a fine statue of the famous canal engineer James Brindley, commanding prime position at the wharf of Bishop Street Basin.

But do his efforts on behalf of this canal justify such an accolade? He only held the post of engineer for a short time, having been dismissed for not devoting the project sufficient attention!

Indeed, as one of the 'early starters' in 1769, the Coventry Canal had something of a troubled gestation. It was not completed as we know it today, through to its junction with the Trent & Mersey Canal at Fradley, until 1790. Even then, the Birmingham Canal Navigations had had to come to the rescue by completing a five-mile section from Fazeley to Whittington Brook; meanwhile, the Trent & Mersey engineered the length between Whittington and Fradley.

The five-and-a-half

But all this awaits us later. Leaving the city basin, it's time now to follow Coventry's twists and turns along the 5½ miles towards Hawkesbury Junction. While it is a wholly urban corridor, there's plenty to look out for along the way. Even the pipe bridges and new footbridge by Electric Wharf (site of the city's first power station) provide photographic



above

The striking road
entrance to Coventry
(or 'Bishop Street')
Basin.

below

Lock 5 of the
attractive Atherstone
Flight, just above
Watling Street Bridge.

opportunity, with reflected shapes in the early morning sunshine.

Along the towpath there are interesting plaques relating Coventry's illustrious past, particularly in relation to the motor car industry (Daimler and Coventry Climax); and on the offside above Cash's Lane Bridge (2), there's another symbol industry, Cash's 'One Hundred House', a handsome building formerly with ribbon weaver's cottages on the bottom two stories and an upper storey occupied by looms. At this bridge there's also a fine, rope-scored iron post protecting the bridge parapet and a little further on, tucked in the grass and easily missed, a milestone etched 1/26 – that's as far as Fazeley Junction! (There's another nice one near Stoke Heath Basin, but we didn't spot many more.)

Also look out for the bridge number plate at Red Lane New Bridge. What do you do when you want to write 5a using numbers? You can cut the bottom off a number 8, turn it on its side and place it next to the 5! Although a 'modern' plate, the style of numbering replicates the old cast iron bridge plate numbers, characteristically seen elsewhere on the Coventry.

Since our last trip along here, the 'Sky Blues' have moved to the new Ricoh Stadium situated on the offside above Bridge 8. Otherwise there seems to have been relatively few major changes; and although considerable efforts were made a few years ago to enliven the Coventry Canal corridor with 39 towpath sculptures and paintings, we felt time had rather faded their impact.



An ingenious
solution to bridge
numbering – turn
an '8' on its side and
cut it in half!





Regular re-enhancement would seem to be essential components of such schemes if they are to provide lasting community benefit, and perhaps the time has already come for another make-over.

Sutton Stop

At Longford Bridge (10) the canal widens temporarily, reflecting the time, albeit briefly, when the Coventry had its junction here with the Oxford Canal – but only after the two had run parallel for about a mile!

The situation was rectified long ago, in 1785, with the creation of the ‘new’ junction at Hawkesbury via the six-inch deep lock, nicknamed ‘Sutton Stop’ after the family of long-time toll clerks here. The new housing opposite does little to enhance this famous location – famous, that is, in canal terms – but the toll cottage, pump house, Greyhound Inn with adjacent row of little cottages and the fine junction bridge made by Britannia Foundry in Derby (1837) attract today’s boaters in numbers reminiscent of times past. Unsurprisingly, moorings are popular so you may have to squeeze in!

Here we were passed by motor *Nuneaton* with butty *Brighton* towed on short cross strings, and motor *Jubilee* (built 1927) in Midland Coast Carriers’ livery, loaded with bagged coal. This, together with an unexpected meeting with live-aboard friends and a good meal in the Greyhound – a pub which seems to exude history – made for a very pleasant stopover.

In the 2½ miles between Hawkesbury and Marston Junction, where the Coventry joins the Ashby Canal, the canal largely skirts the town of Bedworth. Just prior to Bridge 13 is the short remnant of the Newdigate Colliery Arm. It’s difficult to imagine now, but a little over 150 years ago, 5½ miles of canals, with no less than 13 locks, were privately developed to exploit coal from pits in this area.

At Marston the canal continues north, in pleasant open countryside now, but not for too long as the

outskirts of Nuneaton are reached. Shortly after Bridge 18 there’s another canal remnant, this time the Griff Hollows Canal, also built by the Newdigate family (1787), to extract coal from their pit just ¾ mile from the canal. Remarkably it remained in use until 1961 and helped the Coventry remain profitable, unusually right through until the middle of the 20th century.

Sadly, Nuneaton seems to have made little attempt to exploit its canal corridor by tempting boaters to moor up. This time, however, we were fortunate not to have to visit the weed hatch to remove polythene, a task which previously always seemed to befall us. In the ‘70s Hugh McKnight wrote of “slow progress for several miles for all types of craft”, but this is no longer the case, and our live-aboard friends told us they always stop at ►



above left

A legacy from carrying days at Coventry Basin.

top

Pleasant moorings in Coventry Basin.

above

James Brindley looks out over the basin – but does he really deserve pride of place here?

“The four miles before Atherstone are **our favourite** on this canal”

left

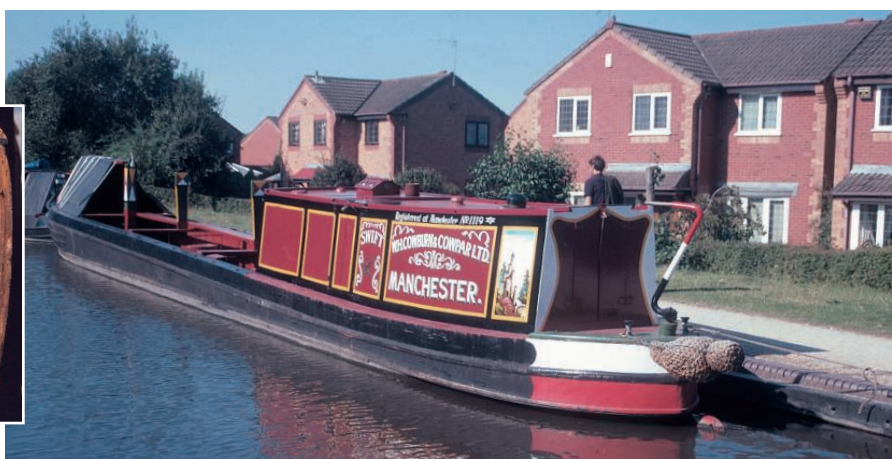
A dramatic sight at Electric Wharf, the former power station site on the ‘five-and-a-half’ into Coventry.

Bridge 20, extolling the virtues of a huge Saturday street market. Some of the gardens bordering the canal exude enormous pride, too. Perhaps George Eliot's birthplace deserves more from us.

Favourite stretch?

The four-mile stretch between Nuneaton and Atherstone is probably our most favoured on the Coventry. The route is now almost exclusively through open countryside with pleasant views from the hillside along which the canal runs, looking out over the valley of the River Anker.

There's a convenient marina (all facilities including pump-out and boat hire) just north of Bridge 27. The only boater facility at BW's Hartshill maintenance yard is a water point, but enjoy a pause here to consider the simple yet satisfying architecture around the dock. Think of the yards at Bulbourne on the Grand Union or Ellesmere on the Welsh Canal and you'll have the idea: handsome buildings with clock tower and weather vane over the dry-dock adjacent to Atherstone Road Bridge (32), the carpenter's workshop and blacksmith's forge, the wharf crane, and Apple Pie Lane Bridge (31) house.



above

**Historic motor boat
Swift in Cowburn &
Cowpar livery, moored
in Fazeley opposite
the BW office at Peel's
Wharf.**

above left

**A sign of times past at
the famous Greyhound
pub, Hawkesbury
Junction.**

left

**The pump-house at
Hawkesbury Junction is
an integral part of the
scene.**

below

**Fazeley Junction – a
shame that the striking
Junction House is
currently boarded up.**



In the background is 'Mount Judd' the curious mountain of waste from the old Judkins quartzite quarry, now recognised by interpretative signboards on the towpath near the picnic benches. One of our favourite moorings is just ½ mile on, after the winding hole. Here, ponies come down to drink and muntjac venture out of the woods at dusk.

100 miles from everywhere

Next stop is Atherstone. Moor before Bridge 41, and a ten minute walk brings you to a choice of shops for provisions including Somerfield's, who offer their customary delivery service back to the boat. Reputedly it's 100 miles from here to Liverpool, London and Lincoln!

Water is available in the winding hole at the top of the locks immediately beyond the 'time capsule' that is A. & R. Rothen's coal yard with its Victorian office. Then it's off down the well cared-for Atherstone Locks (80ft fall), which empty quickly through large bottom gate paddles. The scene at Lock 5 always pleases and it's difficult to beat mooring below Whitley Bridge (47), above Lock 10, for an overnight spot.

Open countryside continues past Grendon Dock near Bradley Green Bridge (48), where there's an opportunity to spot old working boats. *Sunny Valley* and *Greyhound* were there when we passed on our way to Polesworth, famous for the Tudor mansion Pooley Hall, the remains of a 10th Century abbey, and the Lees & Atkins boatyard (closed 1959) which developed a particular, elaborate style of narrowboat decoration in the early 1900s popular with 'Number Ones' (owner boatmen).

At Alvecote there's a large marina (all facilities) and another opportunity to see working boats moored. The next half-mile provides perhaps the last opportunity for a quiet rural mooring, as post-industrial landscaping has created the Alvecote Pools Nature Reserve.

Then we reach urban Tamworth and Glascote, best known in narrowboating circles as the home of Samuel Barlow's, another boatyard famous for its high standard of boat decoration. There have been problems with the bottom gates of the bottom lock of the Glascote pair which have meant considerable delays here at times, but we understand that repair

work is scheduled. Meanwhile, resist the temptation to descend to the top lock into the intervening pound before any boat coming up has opened their top gate; otherwise, you'll end up waiting longer as the bottom lock has to fill more to equalise the levels, while all the time water is leaking out!

Split personality

The Birmingham & Fazeley Canal joins the Coventry at Fazeley, where recent demolition work heralds new development opposite the boarded-up Junction House, and marks the start of that length built by the BCN.

Interestingly, bridge numbers are replaced by bridge names on this stretch, a reminder of this heritage. Because the Coventry never actually assumed ownership of the BCN stretch, the Birmingham & Fazeley Canal may technically be regarded as being 20¾ miles long and not just the 15¼ miles from Farmer's Bridge Junction to Fazeley!

Mooring for the town is just ahead, as is Peel's Wharf, BW's West Midlands offices. Once beyond the motorway it's a pleasant cruise up to Hopwas, another popular spot with a choice of convenient hostelrys for the thirsty or hungry boater. Quieter moorings may be had a little further on near Tamhorn Park Bridge overlooking the Tame Valley, although Hopwas Hays Wood may be off limits if the red flags are flying.

After the pretty road side cottages at Fisherwick and Whittington Bridge, look out for the plaque at Whittington Brook which marks the end of the BCN's interest in the Coventry Canal and cruise on to Huddlesford Junction where the Wyrley & Essington Canal, formerly the link with northern



reaches of the BCN, joins from the west and the Lichfield Canal Cruising Club have their base in the old junction house. This link is under restoration, 'rebranded' as the Lichfield Canal.

For a while now, the junction has been dominated by the extensive engineering works involving the widening of the main West Coast railway line which crosses here, with traffic light warnings on the towpath. North of Huddlesford is the boatyard at Streethay (all facilities), followed by a brief but very close and noisy encounter with the A38 road before the canal dives away to commence the final three miles through to its terminus at Fradley Junction.

Enjoy the pleasant run-up, but be prepared to look for an overnight mooring anywhere after Bridge 91 on the approach to this very popular location which owes its existence solely to the decision taken in the late 1700s to create a route between the Trent & Mersey and the Thames. A water point and swing bridge herald the junction itself with its ➤

above

Passing under the famous bridge at Hawkesbury Junction, made by Derby's Britannia Foundry in 1837 – the Oxford Canal joins here.

"The woods may be off range if the red army flags are flying..."



A plaque at Whittington marks the boundary between the sections run by the Birmingham & Fazeley and the Coventry companies, though both are now often called "the Coventry Canal".

Canal city: Coventry

The five-and-a-half mile cul-de-sac canal into Coventry is comparatively little cruised, and that's a shame – for there are interesting historical features at the basin, and a whole city to visit.

The Y-shaped basin provides comfortable moorings, having been 'rescued' in 1984, and now presents a mixture of old and new, with the superb wooden, canopied warehouses and modern buildings of offices and a few small shops. (The latter hadn't really developed since our last visit, and apart from the Canal Rangers Office, are of little practical relevance to the visiting boater.)

One of the two original weighbridge offices with its weighbridge remains and there's a restored wharf crane enhancing the general scene. The warehouses, the former Canal Manager's House near the bridge and Draper's Fields Bridge (1) itself are all listed buildings and the latter, being quite low and without towpath, lends a certain intimacy to the location. On a practical note there's a sanitary station, DIY pump-out and rubbish disposal area all available before one exits the basin, and a water point immediately outside. Pleasingly, a healthy number of other boaters had felt it worthwhile to visit and stay overnight, all helping to enliven the scene.

To reach the centre of Coventry itself, leave the basin, using the steps down beneath the clock and head for the footbridge which crosses the busy dual carriageway. Walking straight ahead for perhaps ten minutes brings the shopping precincts, Millennium Place, the Transport Museum and, of course, Coventry's cathedrals, the bombed and the new (completed 1962), skilfully juxtaposed – for many not just the physical but the spiritual heart of the city. A little later than in some cities we've visited, the cranes have now arrived and regeneration is underway but, for now, that particular architecture which characterised buildings in the 1960s still dominates.



attractive junction house; the Swan Inn, a favourite with old boatmen; and a former stabling alongside... all some 38 miles and 13 locks from the city which gave the canal its name. From here it's either up the locks towards Preston Brook or down the locks to Shardlow – but that's another story!

above

The BW yard at Hartshill is an unspoilt example of canal company architecture.

right

The moorings at Hopwas are always busy.



COVENTRY CANAL IN BRIEF

■ The Coventry Canal is an enjoyable, varied canal built to narrow dimensions, with comparatively few locks (one major flight at Atherstone, and a small one at Glascote, Tamworth).

■ Part of James Brindley's Grand Cross, it is an essential link in the canals of the Midlands. It is busy throughout, except for the little-cruised – but full of interest – final 5½ miles into Coventry Basin. There are plentiful facilities and canalside pubs throughout.

■ The length between Whittington and Fazeley is historically part of the Birmingham & Fazeley Canal and sometimes still referred to as such.

ITINERARIES

■ The Coventry Canal can be cruised from end to end in around two days. Most boaters will, however, want to take it more slowly and enjoy some of the rural mooring opportunities. The Ashby Canal, a lock-free cul-de-sac which leaves at Marston Junction, makes a particularly worthwhile detour.

■ The canal around the junctions at Hawkesbury, Fazeley and Fradley can be very busy and you may need to allow extra time on summer weekends.

NAVIGATION AUTHORITY

British Waterways West Midlands, 01827 252000

MAXIMUM DIMENSIONS

■ Length 72ft ■ Beam 7ft ■ Headroom 6ft 6in ■ Draught 3ft

MAPS AND GUIDES

■ Nicholson Guide to the Waterways 3: Birmingham and the Heart of England

■ Pearsons Canal Companions: South Midlands

■ GEOprojects Map of the Coventry and Ashby Canals

■ Ordnance Survey Landranger sheets 128 (Derby & Burton-upon-Trent), 139 (Tamworth), 140 (Leicester, Coventry & Rugby)

CANAL SOCIETIES

■ Coventry Canal Society (01788 814319, www.covcanalsoc.org.uk)

■ Inland Waterways Association Lichfield and Warwickshire branches (Head Office: 01923 711114, www.waterways.org.uk)

FURTHER READING

The Coventry Canal was previously covered in the October 2007; January 2007 (pubs); May 2006; October, May and April 2004; August and January 2004 (history); and May 2002 issues of *Waterways World*, among others. Selected articles are available for download from www.waterwaysworld.com.

