

WW GUIDE TO THE

Coventry Canal

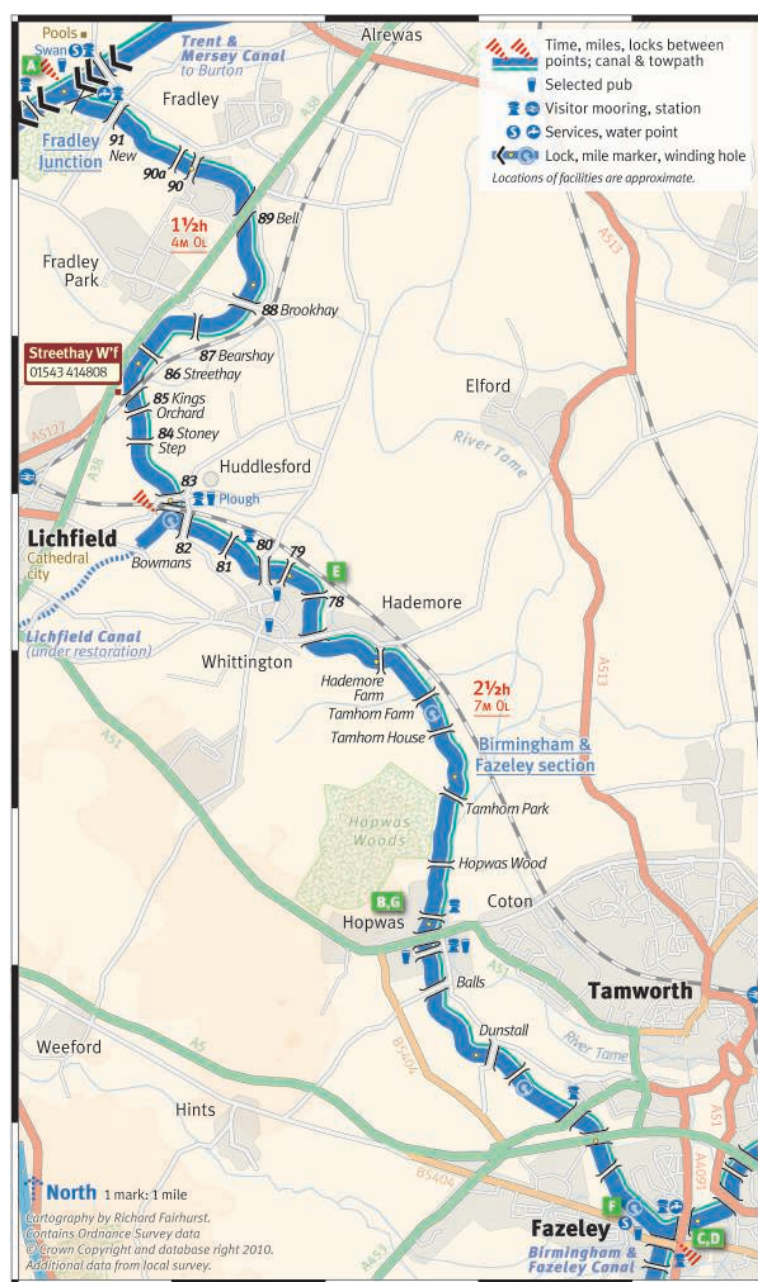
Being sent to Coventry needn't be a hardship – if you go by canal.

RICHARD FAIRHURST cruises through the Heart of England



Waiting to enter Atherstone Top Lock.
ROBIN SMITHETT

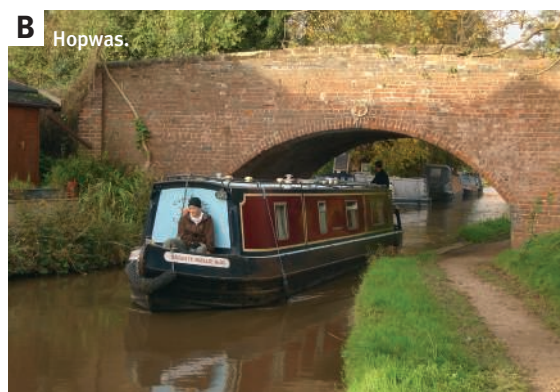
Waterways World June 2010 77



A Fradley Junction.



B Hopwas.



FRADLEY TO FAZELEY

James Brindley and the Coventry Canal have, at last, been reconciled. A statue of the famous engineer stands in Coventry Basin, the terminus of this 38-mile route through the Midlands – a great man surveying his work.

Or so it seems. In 1771, erecting statues was the last thing on the Canal Company's mind: effigies might have been more tempting. Penniless and with only half a canal to their name, they fired Brindley. They never did quite finish the job: the northern seven miles were built for them by other canal companies.

Carriers flocked to the Coventry Canal, though, and it remains a popular cruising waterway today. Rarely dramatic but always appealing, it is one of the Midlands' most relaxing canals, not least by the scarcity of locks – just one flight (the 11 at Atherstone), plus a couple at Glasgote. Once through Atherstone, the lazy boater can enjoy 41 miles of level cruising on the Coventry,

Ashby and Oxford canals, with only one stop-lock to negotiate.

The Coventry Canal begins at **Fradley Junction**, the country's busiest junction for boats and sometimes, it seems, for day-trippers too. New occupants OwnerShips run a useful little shop with their show-boat cannily moored outside; refreshment is on offer from two cafés and, in pride of place, the Swan pub. (The Swan is bigger than you think, with a spacious cellar downstairs, and serves unfussy pub grub plus real ale.)

The Trent & Mersey company built an extended by-wash, largely hidden from view, to feed water directly from Middle Lock to Junction Lock without it escaping to the Coventry. Today Fradley Pool is the centre for a network of nature trails, with newly installed 'sound posts' narrating local history at the touch of a button – WW contributor Harry Arnold being one of the voices heard.

Once you've negotiated the busy locks and double-breasted boats on the Trent & Mersey, the start of the Coventry should be a piece of

cake with only a pedestrian swing-bridge to trouble you. There are good visitor moorings here if you want to explore Fradley. Bear in mind, though, that these first few miles are intensely busy and that the Coventry, as befits a Brindley contour navigation, can be twisty – so keep an eye out around bends.

Fradley is not just a junction, but a historic village, a new development (Fradley South), and a vast industrial depot (Fradley Park) too. The latter discharges a rumbling stream of lorries onto the busy A38, which crosses the Coventry on an incongruous humpback bridge. The road has less of an impact than it does on the poor T&M, but nonetheless it's a few miles before you shake it off.

First comes the long-established boatyard of **Streethay Wharf**. Moor at Bridge 85 or 84, then follow the footpath west to the main road, to catch a bus into the cathedral city of Lichfield, just two miles away. Easily the most attractive place within shouting distance of the



Passing Fazeley Junction.



Still waters at Fazeley.

ROBIN SMITHE



Attractive canalside gardens at Whittington.

Coventry, Lichfield punches above its weight with an attractive pedestrianised centre, much interesting architecture, and a thriving new theatre, plus good pubs and cafés.

Lichfield no longer has an Archbishop, as it did in Anglo-Saxon times, but its sandstone cathedral is imposing enough, crowned by three spires and decorated with an assemblage of carved monarchs and saints. Regular services include traditional Choral Evensong at 5.30pm (3.30pm Sundays, no singing on Wednesday and school holidays). Its setting is postcard perfect with the close to one side, a lake to the other. The medieval cathedral makes a fascinating contrast to the very modern edifice at Coventry.

Tiny **Huddlesford** barely merits even the word 'hamlet', but does have a good food pub (the Plough) and a canal significance belying its size. The Wyrley & Essington Canal left here on its way to the collieries of the Black Country. Renamed the Lichfield Canal, it is under restoration by a Trust whose patience is sorely tested by a never-ending litany of new roads and railways encroaching on the route (see page 62). The first section is still in water, used as the moorings of the Lichfield Cruising Club. Don't be tempted to test *their* patience by "doing the Lichfield Canal".

The West Coast Main Line railway, fresh from annoying boaters on the Trent & Mersey, joins the Coventry here and doesn't really leave until Nuneaton. **Whittington** is a good deal larger



Peel's Wharf, Fazeley.



Sylvan scenery at Hopwas.

than Huddlesford, the canal forming its western boundary past a series of well-kept gardens – a pleasant feature of the whole Coventry Canal. The village has three pubs: for food, we like the Dog Inn in the centre, and so it seems do the people of Lichfield.

Whittington is where the Coventry's curious history is most evident. After the canal company ran out of money in 1771, it stalled at Atherstone until its impatient neighbours (the Birmingham & Fazeley and Trent & Mersey) lost patience. The T&M agreed to build the canal from Fradley to Whittington, and the B&F from Whittington to Fazeley, if the Coventry would finish the job south of there. Between the three companies, the job was finished in 1790, finally linking northern and southern England by waterway.

Newly prosperous, the Coventry company bought the northern section back from the T&M, but the Birmingham & Fazeley (owned by the ever astute BCN) refused to sell. You can walk down from the aqueduct over the little Whittington Brook to see a modern boundary stone marking the junction. The most obvious change, is that the bridges no longer have numbers – but BCN-style names.

It seems a long way from Birmingham, though, as you cruise on the quiet rural stretch past Hopwas Woods. Across the towpath is the River Tame, an important tributary of the Trent which gives its name to both Tamworth and the BCN's Tame Valley Canal. The enticing Hopwas Woods are actually an army firing range, so be careful where you explore!

With its two pubs facing each other across the canal, **Hopwas** is justly popular as the best rural mooring for the next six miles. If you see a mooring spot on your approach, grab it, as mooring on the winding stretch through the village is limited.

Coton, across the Tame, is really a suburb of Tamworth and the sprawl becomes harder to avoid as you cruise onwards. **Fazeley** still has an independent identity, not least as an important canal junction: the Birmingham & Fazeley proper heads southwest from here to Birmingham.

Fazeley Junction is oddly muted, a far cry from busy and brash Fradley. There is no café, and the architecture is in the uncharted territory between authentic and derelict. Dozens of people are drawn to the canal here every day – not to gongoozle, but to work at British Waterways' Central Shires office at Peel's Wharf. (Recent notices quote its location as Evans Croft – not, we presume, in homage to the Chief Executive?) The office can supply cruising information and has useful sanitary facilities. ➔

WALKING AND CYCLING

Reclaiming old industrial land has given the Coventry Canal its unique atmosphere – and also encouraged local councils to create enjoyable waymarked walking routes.

One such is the 2 1/2 mile Quarryman's Walk along the canal from Hartshill towards Nuneaton, perhaps the most historically interesting area (www.quarrymanswalk.co.uk). The final 5 1/2 miles into Coventry, designated the Coventry Canal Greenway, are also rich in historic traces with an excellent series of interpretation boards and interesting sculptures to help you make sense of it all. This section was once the finale of the long-distance Oxford Canal Walk, which has rather fallen into abeyance after various British Waterways reorganisations.

The new North Arden Heritage Trail is a 25-mile circular route that follows the canal from Atherstone to Hartshill, before looping back through the Warwickshire countryside (www.northwarks.gov.uk/ardentrail). At the northern end of the route, Hopwas Woods offer pleasant summer walking so long as you stick



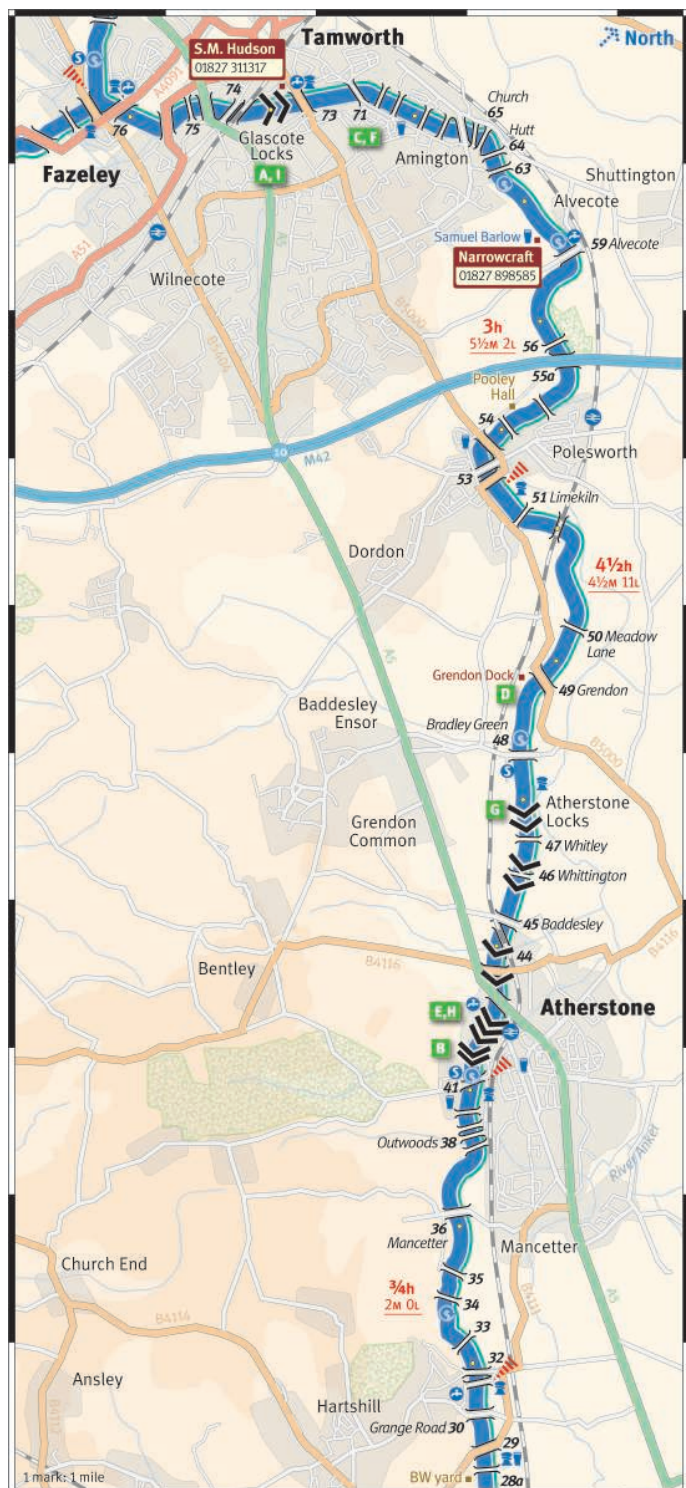
to the designated bridleways and avoid the firing ranges!

The canal towpath is particularly suitable for cycling from Fazeley to Polesworth; from Nuneaton to Bedworth; and from Hawkesbury to Coventry. Elsewhere it can be bumpy and narrow, and you will find it more comfortable to follow country lanes. National Cycle Route 52 follows parts of the towpath, then heads off north from Nuneaton into rural Leicestershire. Route 54 crosses near Fradley and offers a safe cycling route into Lichfield and Burton. (See www.sustrans.org.uk and www.opencyclemap.org for maps.)



A

Approaching Glascote Locks.



FAZELEY TO ATHERSTONE

The moorings at Peel's Wharf are a handy place to rest if you plan to get the bus into Tamworth, but the town has little to detain you and is decidedly behind Lichfield, Atherstone and Coventry on the attraction scale. The Coventry Canal, though, has the best of it, passing a string of well-kept gardens whose owners clearly value their canal frontage.

Before this comes the aqueduct over the River Tame, and the two **Glascote Locks** to lift you out of the valley. The sideponds here, as later on at Atherstone, are sadly out of use.

Glascote Wharf is today the home of Steve Hudson's boatyard and home to several suitably immaculate craft. Then at **Alvecote Marina**, just beyond the town, the new boats from Narrowcraft and the marina residents are usually joined by a handful of traditional craft moored outside the Samuel Barlow pub. Established in 1870, the Barlows fleet grew rapidly to over 100 boats servicing the local collieries from Glascote. Around 25 of its boats survive today.

At Alvecote, the Coventry Canal finally enters into its rural element. It is never wholly natural, with grassed-over spoil heaps and lakes formed by subsidence from mining. This recreated rural landscape even has a mock castle at Pooley Hall, St George's Cross flying proudly above its brick battlements. But this *ersatz* countryside is surprisingly appealing, and gives the canal a character quite distinct from the remoter waterways. There are interesting canalside nature reserves at Hodge Lane and Pooley Fields.

Polesworth was once a mining and pottery village, commemorated by an attractive carved wooden post by the towpath. Between bridges 51 and 52 was a boat-building yard. First occupied by Sephton's, it was latterly owned by Lees & Atkins, boatyard of choice to the Number Ones and renowned for Harry and Isaiah Atkins' decoration and signwriting. Today the village is a handy stop-off with local stores and pubs, a little historic character lent by its ruined abbey and tithe barn.

A lovely unspoilt length follows, the Anker valley extending to the west, rounded hills nudging the canal from the east. Narrowcraft's outpost at Grendon Dock (by bridge 49) is another chance to spy a well-kept collection of working boats.

The rural atmosphere continues at the gentle Atherstone Flight. Its locks are grouped in twos or threes; the pounds between each group give some of the best opportunities for quiet mooring on the

B Leaving Atherstone Top Lock.



ROBIN SMITHETT





whole canal. The locks are well-kept and generally easy to work, if a little slow. Look out for the attractive little footbridge, 47.

Atherstone begins to encroach after the railway bridge and Baddesley Basin. (The town has only recently had its railway service restored after a long hiatus while the line was upgraded.) The buildings beside the lock flight are full of interesting details: look for the side-hatch from where beer was served to boatmen, the old stables, and the modern notice in Polish instructing you to obtain a fishing licence from the Agencje Srodowiska (better known as the Environment Agency). New housing on the offside is less sympathetic but doesn't intrude too much.

A fine scene awaits at the top lock, where you can buy fresh eggs from the lock cottage. Beyond the winding hole is Rothens' coal yard, a superb modern recreation of a traditional canalside yard and still very much working. On the towpath side, a busy corn mill once stood at Minion's Wharf, now remembered only by a streetname.

Atherstone itself is a curious place: a little down-at-heel, but full of character. The main thoroughfare is the Roman Watling Street, fortunately no longer carrying the busy A5. For those loading up with provisions, the Co-op is between here and the canal, near the station.

The heart of the town is the Market Place, set just back from Watling Street. Attractively pedestrianised, it is surrounded by the parish church, some decent pubs – and a couple of second-hand bookshops. These are the survivors of a brave attempt to reinvent Atherstone as a 'booktown', under the tutelage of a controversial American entrepreneur who claimed lineage from Hay-on-Wye. His scheme foundered, but Throckmorton's is an excellent shop regardless.

Atherstone is not particularly rich in eating establishments, and its pubs are a mixed bag. Real ale and cider drinkers will enjoy the pubs around the Market Place, particularly the Angel and the Market Tavern.

Back on the canal, just past Bridge 41 is Wilson & Stafford's closed factory. Atherstone once specialised in felt hats; this was the last such manufacturer in Britain. Mancetter, following on, feels like a suburb of Atherstone, but was a significant Roman settlement beside Watling Street's crossing of the River Anker, and has interesting almshouses and a church.



ROBIN SMITHETT

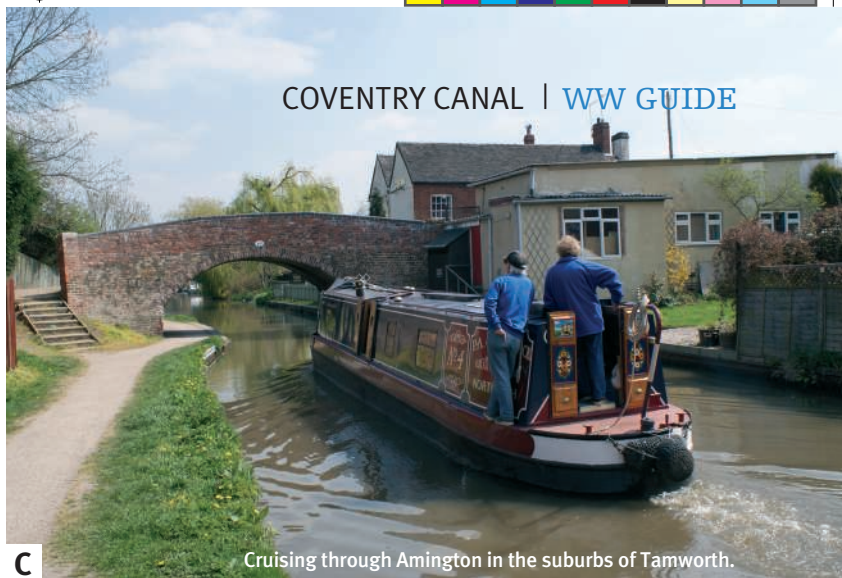
Ascending the locks at Atherstone.



ROBIN SMITHETT

Descending Atherstone Locks.

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C

Cruising through Amington in the suburbs of Tamworth.



D

Grendon Dock.



E

Ascending the locks at Atherstone.



F

Cruising near Amington.



G

Atherstone Bottom Lock.



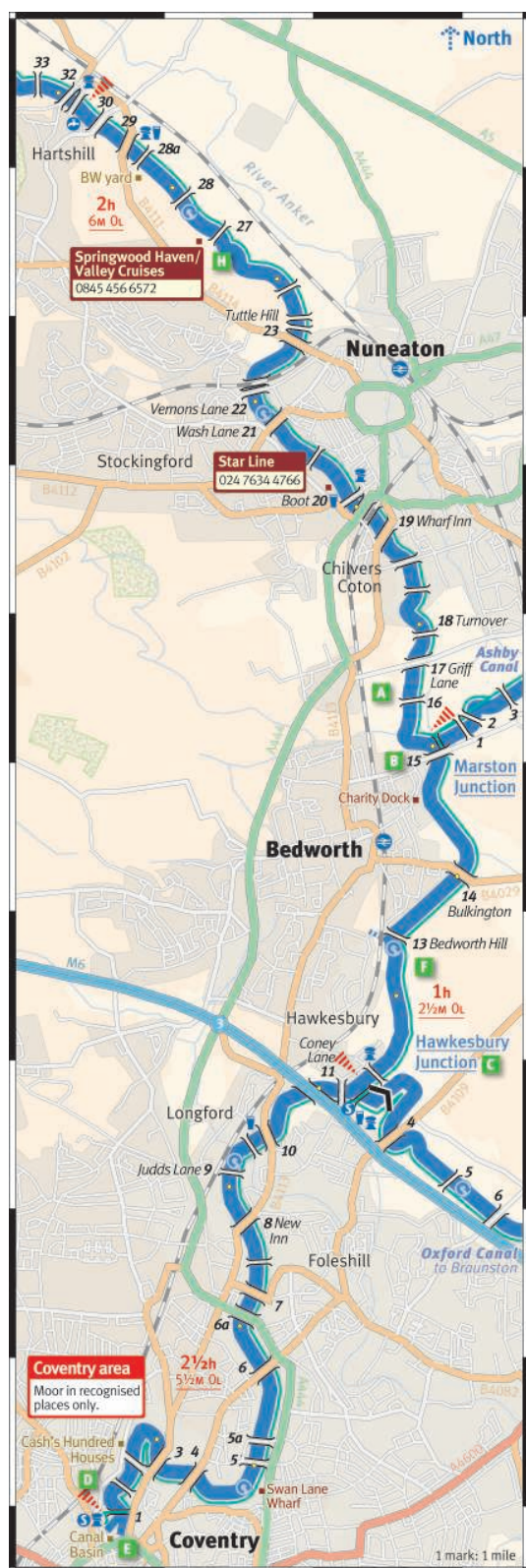
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Glascote Locks.



Arbury, between Nuneaton and Bedworth.

A



ATHERSTONE TO COVENTRY

Once again, the landscape is that of reclaimed industry, artificial ups-and-downs returned to nature. The Ordnance Survey map is littered with 'Quarry (dis)' and 'Pit (dis)'. It may sound bald on paper, but this is a genuinely enjoyable stretch of canal.

British Waterways' **Hartshill Yard** was formerly the workshops of the Coventry Canal Company and the base for its ice-breaking boats. The clock tower draws attention to a superb set of buildings from the 1840s, including an original forge and stables. Though the modern BW workboats look a little out of place, it's reassuring to see an original canal company yard still used for the purpose for which it was intended.

A grassy mountain of spoil looms beyond the yard, as if the Coventry were trying to emulate the Mon & Brec. Quartzite and granite were extensively quarried here until recent years; horses were used until the 1960s, drawing wagons to a railway siding which crosses the canal at Bridge 28a. The canal was used both for transport and to clean the stone. Valley Cruises' hire-fleet at Bridge 27 nestles behind the hills, its smartly turned-out grey and cream boats a frequent sight on these canals.

The approach to **Nuneaton** is pleasantly reminiscent of Hopwas Woods. The town itself stretches out for two miles, although the winding canal course can make it feel longer. The canalside gardens and allotments are neat once again, with tidy fences and plastic swans much in evidence.

The Coventry Canal never gets close to the town centre and so is mercifully spared the ring road tangle that disfigures so many towns near here. Access to the shops and the important railway station is easy from Bridge 21 or Boot Wharf at Bridge 20. The town is best visited on Wednesday or Saturday for its unpretentious market.

At Arbury, south of the town, Sir Roger Newdigate built a curious six-mile network of miniature canals with 40ft x 6ft locks to transport coal around his estate. The canals operated only for a few years in the late 18th and early 19th century, though his Griff Hollows Colliery arm is still evident.

Quarry hillocks and an upgraded towpath lead to **Marston Junction**, where the Ashby Canal heads north. The Ashby is a canal for those who find the gentle Coventry too much like hard work. Entirely lock-free and thoroughly rural, it takes 22 miles to get nowhere in particular. Beyond the junction

bridge you'll see the old stop lock, now ungated, which was the only lock and indeed the only narrow structure on this otherwise broad canal. If your schedule allows, a cruise to Bosworth Field and little Stoke Golding is strongly recommended.

Bedworth is largely hidden from the canal, which skirts the town boundary in a sheltered cutting. Charity Dock is an unreconstructed working boatyard and all the better for it, with historic craft often to be seen here. The Navigation Inn at Bridge 14, a long-standing boaters' favourite with excellent moorings, is now sadly boarded up, its beer garden overgrown. In better condition is a lovingly-tended terraced garden shortly afterwards, perhaps the finest on the canal.

The Newdigate Colliery Arm by Bridge 13 is still in water, though weeded up and obstructed by fallen trees. There are decent towpath moorings nearby, but most boaters will head straight on to **Hawkesbury**, the junction with the Oxford Canal and a honeypot to rival Fradley.

The Oxford Canal was an important trading partner for the Coventry, completing the line to London until the Grand Junction Canal opened. Naturally, the two companies couldn't stand each other, quarrelling about the location of the junction. Bedworth was originally proposed, but that would give coal traffic direct access onto the Oxford without paying Coventry tolls. So the junction was made at Longford, with the canals running parallel for a full mile to maximise their revenue. Eventually sense prevailed and a compromise was made at Hawkesbury.

The superb 1837 cast iron bridge, made by the Britannia Foundry in Derby, bridges the unusual H-shaped junction. On the Oxford side stands the Greyhound, always a popular boaters' pub, where boatman Joe Skinner would for many years regale holiday boaters with colourful tales if encouraged by a pint.

The stop lock has a fall of just six inches, but in high summer, can cause queues out of all proportion. Built principally for the gauging of boats rather than to restrict water loss, it is often known as Sutton Stop after Richard and Henry Sutton, keepers here from 1807 to 1876. Around 1950, coal traffic to the power station here was recorded by local photographer Robert Longden in a series of evocative, unforgettable pictures. Collected together in the book *A Canal People*, they form one of the finest records of post-war canal life.



NAVIGATION NOTES

★ The Coventry Canal is an intriguing mix of rural and urban, passing through the typical Midland towns of Tamworth, Atherstone and Nuneaton on its way to the bustling city of Coventry. Never outstandingly beautiful, the canal nevertheless has some attractive rural sections, not least through Hopwas where it offers fine views down into the Tame valley. The busiest section is that between Fradley and Fazeley junctions, while the 5 1/2-mile section from Hawkesbury Junction to the terminus at Coventry sees comparatively little boat traffic.

DIMENSIONS

★ Length 72ft, beam 7ft, draught 3ft, headroom 6ft 6in

BOATYARDS

	Hire	Repairs	Call-out	Pump-out	Diesel	Chandlery
Streethay Wharf, Lichfield 01543 414808	-	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
S.M. Hudson, Glascote 01827 311317	-	✓	-	-	-	-
Narrowcraft, Alvecote 01827 898585	-	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Springwood Haven, Nuneaton 08454 566572	✓	✓	-	✓	✓	✓
Star Line Boats, Nuneaton 024 7634 4766	-	✓	-	✓	✓	-

NAVIGATION AUTHORITY

★ **British Waterways** Central Shires, 01827 252000 (www.waterscape.com)

WATERWAY SOCIETIES

★ **Coventry Canal Society:** 0116 286 1998 (www.covcanalsoc.org.uk)

★ **Inland Waterways Association** Warwickshire Branch:
01926 497845 (www.waterways.org.uk)

OTHER MAPS AND GUIDES

★ **Nicholsons** Guide to the Waterways 3: Birmingham & the Heart of England

★ **Pearsons' Canal Companion:** South Midlands

★ **Geoprojects** Map of the Coventry and Ashby Canals

★ **Ordnance Survey** Landranger maps 128 (Derby & Burton-on-Trent),
139 (Birmingham & Wolverhampton) and 140 (Leicester, Coventry & Rugby)

Heading north up the Coventry Canal
from Hawkesbury Junction.

ROBIN SMITHETT

Other original buildings clutter the junction, including the engine house which supplied the canal with water from a deep well. Useful facilities (including that rare canalside amenity, a recycling point) make this an excellent place to moor for a while. You can, if you wish, take the bus into Coventry from Hawkesbury itself, and indeed most boaters choose to turn onto the Oxford Canal.

But don't neglect the '5 1/2' – the final miles of the canal to Coventry Basin. Some of the biggest names in British industry once had canalside works here: Daimler and Rover, Courtaulds and Cammell-Laird. The world's first production car and its first man-made fibres were manufactured beside the canal.

Today, like too many urban canals, you are more likely to see a faceless JJB Sports or Matalan 'out of town' barn, turning its back on the water. Yet there is still much of interest on Coventry's 'Town Arm', and the local council has done a sterling job in showcasing the canal through information boards and a varied art trail.

Overnight mooring along the urban section is unlikely to appeal, though there are several permanent

moorings here. Club Line's old base at Swan Lane Wharf sadly no longer hires out boats. We saw a water vole anxiously flitting along the towpath here on our most recent trip – surely unthinkable in the days of heavy industry.

There are traces of canalside works all along, but the finest architecture is to be found in the closing miles. Cash's Hundred Houses are well known, weavers' accommodation built in a long elegant terrace. Its canalside aspect is nothing unusual in modern housing, but must have been quite startling in 1857. The modern Electric Wharf is just as interesting, a series of striking, industrially-inspired apartment blocks on the site of an old power station.

At last, Mr Brindley awaits us at **Coventry Basin**, his statue in the apex of two arms at this attractively restored site. A handful of small businesses line one arm, including the friendly Country Crust Tearooms, with rebuilt wharves along the other. A footbridge takes you safely over the 1960s ring road to the city centre.

No-one is quite sure why "being sent to Coventry" acquired its unfortunate reputation, an unpopular Civil War billet being the most likely explanation. It's not such a bad fate today – especially if you arrive via the Coventry Canal.

COVENTRY

Mention the name Coventry and most people's thoughts turn to the terrible blitz of 14th November 1940, when large areas of the city were devastated by a massive Luftwaffe air raid. The majority of the city's historic buildings were destroyed, and the magnificent cathedral was ravaged by firebombs, leaving only a shell and a spire. Today the ruins stand alongside the 1962 replacement, designated a Worldwide Centre for Reconciliation. A visit to the cathedral and its visitor centre is a deeply moving experience for all but the most hard-hearted observer.

Coventry has plenty of other attractions too, notably the Lady Godiva statue, and a handful of fine medieval buildings along Bayley Lane and Spon Street. The Transport Museum, located in Hales Street, has the largest collection of British-built road vehicles to be found anywhere, whilst the Herbert Art Gallery & Museum on nearby Jordan Well is highly regarded and offers free admission.

But Coventry is, by necessity, a predominantly modern industrial city, perhaps better for shopping than sightseeing. Modern precincts abound, notably in Cathedral Lanes and West Orchards. If it's craft and antique shops you're seeking, head for medieval Spon Street. Meanwhile, the canal basin is home to a number of interesting retail outlets, including a bookshop, engraving specialist, hairdressers and beauty salon.

There are, of course, a plethora of places to eat and drink in the city centre, although you may wish to look no further than the popular Country Crust Tearooms at the canal basin, which offers light lunches and delicious homemade cakes. The unusual Town Wall Tavern on Bond Street is perhaps the most interesting pub, a Victorian survival with a tiny snug and warming food.

For further information on all Coventry's attractions call at the Tourist Information Centre at the Cathedral Ruins, Priory Street (02476 225616) or visit www.visitcoventry.co.uk.