

A Moody Part of Birmingham

Chris's original suggestion for a paddle had been a loop around Loughborough, or something around Nottingham way, but then he rang up and asked if I wouldn't mind doing something a bit closer to home. "The wheel came off my car the other day," he explained. "On the M40. I've had a new one put on now, but I'd rather not journey too far just in case."

He had somewhere in mind. I hadn't heard of it but it sounded idyllic: the River Tame and the Tame Valley canal. My visions of a bucolic bumble were dispelled when he explained where it was: "You know that little triangle of motorway in the West Midlands, where the M5 meets the M6..."

Chris stuck to minor roads, so it took a fair while to get there. When I say "there", I mean the general area. Finding the start and finish points took a bit longer. We'd pulled into a cul-de-sac in Handsworth to look at the A to Z, when a car pulled up alongside. "You must be lost," said the driver. "You wouldn't stop here for any other reason: this is a moody part of Birmingham." He showed us where to go and we found the finish point without too much more trouble and did a recce. The river looked as if it had a decent amount of water in it. After a few wrong turns, we drove to the start point, on the Tame Valley Canal and found that we had a problem. "There's no bl**dy water in it!" said Chris. Luckily, it was only one pound that was empty – a repair was being done on the lock gate. Above the lock was fine. We unloaded the boats and kit and Chris drove off to park at the finish. Walking back probably took him less time than driving there. I was glad to see him as I was keen to get going: although the day was sunny, a keen wind and low temperature were beginning to bite.

The Tame Valley Canal was a late addition to Britain's canal network, being opened in 1844. It was designed as a short cut to avoid a bottleneck at locks in central Birmingham. It's very short at only 8.5 miles, but has a remarkable number of aqueducts, embankments and cuttings along its route.

It's also straight. Very straight. We paddled for nearly three miles without a bend or a lock. It wasn't boring though: there was plenty of variety. Most of the canal is on embankments, and it was quite odd to be paddling along looking down on the roofs of nearby houses. Some of the cuttings through the 200 million year old red sandstone were very deep, and bridges soared high above us. Bricks had been used to shore up the sandstone in the cuttings. The brick pilings looked ramshackle, tottering at odd angles, but they'd been there for 150 years or more.

Bricks had also been used to line the sides of the canal. Get 12 K1s going flat out down there and there would be some very interesting wash! Every so often, we passed a little artificial island in the middle of the canal. These were where the toll houses stood. Now they just sit there, inviting passing kayakers to play silly beggars and hold one-lap-of-the-island races.

After a while the M6 joined us, running parallel to the canal, and the M5 moved away at an angle on the other side. We were now deep inside the motorway triangle. There was a much earlier junction below the rushing cars. At Rushall Junction, the Rushall Canal heads off to the north whilst the Tame Valley Canal continues onward to the west. That this must have been a busy junction in the past is obvious from the state of the iron pillars which protect the corners of the footbridge. These have been deeply scored by countless tow ropes rubbing against them as the horses hauling the boats turned the corner. I've seen rope scores before, but never anything remotely approaching this. Quite astounding. And overhead, the cars and lorries pass by, oblivious.

Fairly soon, on yet another aqueduct, we got out of the boats and portaged down the long flight of steps to the River Tame below. Well, I did. Chris decided to take his boat down the steep grassy slope instead, with predictable results. Sadly, he had control of the camera. The boat just about beat him to the bottom, but it was close.

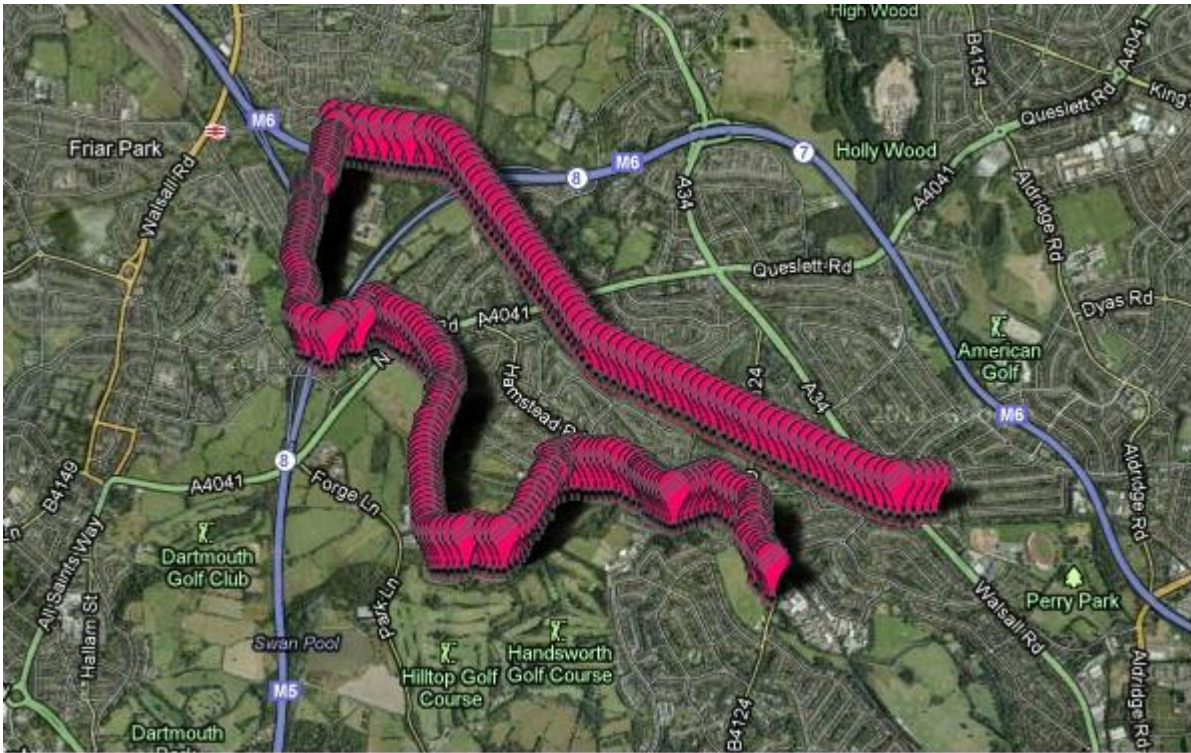
The Tame was a delight. The name Tame means dark, and the river had a reputation in the past for being heavily polluted, but now, if it wasn't for the motorways and graffiti, you could almost imagine that you were in tellytubby land – the river flowed, wide and shallow, through manicured grass banks, reflecting the blue of the sky.

A quick seal launch under a bridge and we were away. We'd been worried that the water level would be too low, but it was just about OK - enough flow to create lots of little rills and rapids, with only a few scrapes on the ground here and there. No real problems apart from a low railway bridge which had to be negotiated carefully.

The river twisted and meandered through pleasant countryside, and it was only the occasional glimpse of a tower block or a motorway flyover that reminded us of where we were. The river ran alongside Sandwell Country Park for a while, and the bird life was plentiful – kingfishers, tufted ducks, coots, a buzzard, wagtails and, to Chris's delight, a bright yellow plastic duck.

All too soon the end was in sight. We passed by the wharf of the abandoned Hamstead Colliery and got out under the bridge by Hamstead railway station. As we strapped the boats onto the car, we were investigated by a one-eyed jack Russell, and engaged in conversation by an inquisitive teenager and a young mum with a toddler. A moody part of Birmingham? Not really.

Dom Murphy





Hamstead Top Lock. The start of the journey.



Ramshackle brick pilings on the Tame Valley Canal.



The incredible rope scores on the iron pillars at Rushall Junction.



Portage down to the River Tame



Seal launching onto the Tame.



Low railway bridge, with a train to prove it.