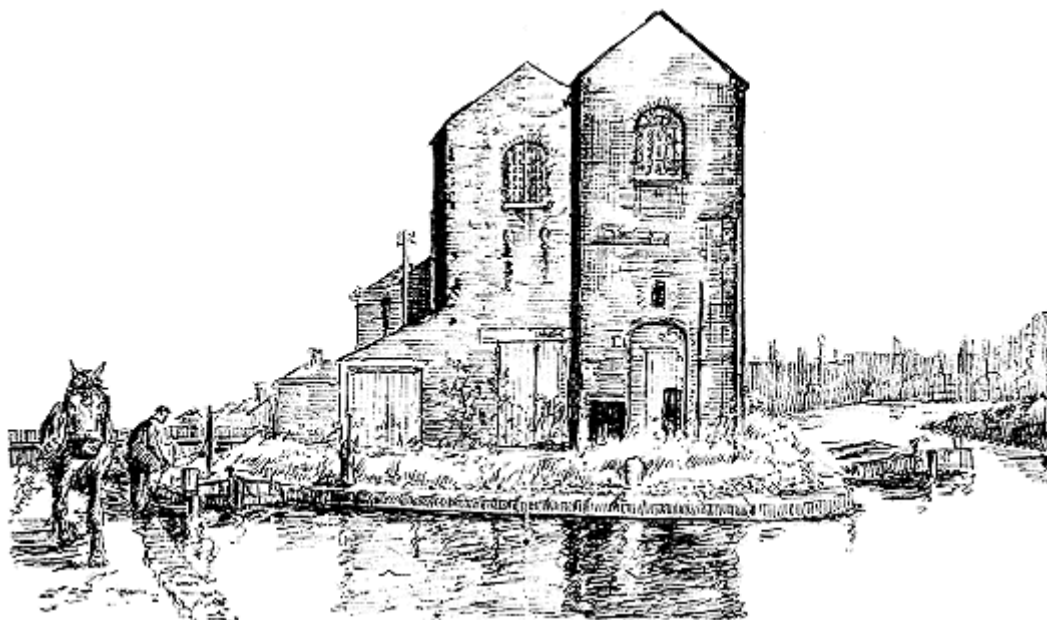


Butties, Beer and Balti.

Come off the M5 at Junction 2 and manage to negotiate the Wall of Death roundabout, and you'll find yourself bombarded by brown signs tempting you toward the Black Country Museum. Whilst this is an excellent day out, and well worth the money, if you happen to have a K2 on the roof and a Chris Jones in the car, there is an alternative (and cheaper) way of exploring the Midlands' industrial heritage – just continue up the road to Oldbury, and park in Engine Street, by the bridge over the delightfully named Titford canal.

Jonesy and I unloaded the boat and surveyed the scene. It was grimly industrial: heavy lorries rattling past on their way to the Tarmac works, a steady drizzle patterning the pools of oil in the gutters and the old pumphouse of the canal standing proudly at the top of Oldbury Locks.



The canal used to be in a bad state of repair, and any boat making it as far as the Navigation pub at Tiford Pools would receive a plaque. We toyed with the idea of paddling up for a pint and trying to claim a plaque for the K2, but as it was just after 9:00a.m., we decided against it and headed off carrying the boat down the flight of locks.

The Birmingham Canal Society, whose HQ is at the pumphouse, have made a good job of restoring the canal. The locks were in good condition, but the surroundings were like a throwback to the 1930s, with strong chemical smells from factories, and flakes of metal scattered on the towpath like tinfoil snowflakes. An old wall bulged out ominously by the get in after the last lock, next to the former HQ of the famous Fellows, Morton and Clayton carrying company. We got in hastily and paddled down to the junction with the Birmingham Canal.

The junction is right underneath the M5, and the motorway follows the path of the canal for over a mile, providing us with the surreal experience of paddling along with a roof over our heads. They like building things on top of things in Birmingham, and at one point, we had a railway bridge above us, the motorway above that, and another canal below us.



Another canal? Time for a bit of history. The original canal was designed by James Brindley, who also designed the Oxford Canal. To save money, his canal followed the contours of the land, and so took a circuitous route into Birmingham. Sadly, maintenance of the canal was expensive, and fifty years later, Thomas Telford was commissioned to improve it. Telford didn't care much for contours, and built a new canal which ploughed a dead straight line, regardless of the terrain. His canal is on a lower level than Brindley's which crosses it on several times on aqueducts.



Brindley's canal was a delight to paddle on – a lovely four-mile stretch without a single lock. Whilst some parts were very industrialised, other bits were almost rural. We were distracted by an aqueduct over Telford's Canal, leading onto the Engine Arm of the canal. (Confused yet? Birmingham is a granny knot of canals with arms, branches and loops all over the place.)

The aqueduct was a thing of beauty: a wonderfully ornate bridge, built by Telford in 1821, and kept in immaculate condition.



The industrial history came thick and fast. Fewer than 100 yards from the aqueduct was the mighty Smethwick pumping station, once used to feed Smethwick Locks. The pump engine, one of the first built by Boulton and Watt, is now in the



Thinktank museum and is still working 200 years later.

Smethwick Locks were grim and grimy; an emphatic contrast to the aqueduct. Filthy banks, water thick with oil and a strong smell of molten metal: we could easily have been back in Victorian times. The nose of the boat dipped into the water as we put it in: it went in white and came out black. About the only sign of nature to be found was the grime-covered thorn that Chris trod on.

As we neared Birmingham, Brindley's canal took ever more extravagant loops, and we went over several cross roads (cross canals?) where Telford's canal cut through it.

The bleak and narrow Soho loop took us past Winston Green Prison: a dank and miserable place in a dank and miserable location. By way of contrast, the Icknield loop led us through what was virtually a floating museum. First came six or seven 1930s cargo butty boats, the



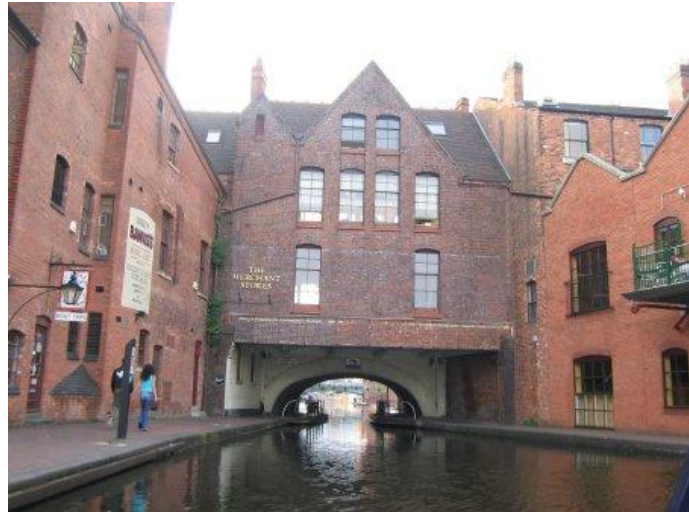
floating equivalent of coal trucks, and then, round the corner, a clinker built iron butty boat, which must have been Victorian. There was no continuous towpath around this loop, so the only way to see these bygones was from the water.

Full of thoughts of the Victorian age, we came out of the loop back onto the main canal and suddenly found ourselves among the spectacular modern



buildings of central Birmingham. It was a real culture shock.

Past the Sea Life Centre and the Indoor Arena, past all the hustle and bustle of the crowds. There's a roundabout where several canals meet. Apparently, it's the centre of the Birmingham canal network. It cried out for, and received a 360° turn.



Under the arch and into Gas Street Basin. "There's a pub somewhere round here called the James Brindley," said Chris. It sounded promising. Unfortunately, the promise was unfulfilled, as the pub turned out to be derelict. The letters TH JA ES BR LEY still stood on the wall. Presumably, there's a shop somewhere nearby called DENIM.

We found another pub. Closed. And another. Same result. Things were looking grim. Then came one of those "pinch me, I'm dreaming" moments. We found a little café, right by the canal. It was licensed, and sold a range of beers from all over the country. Chris chatted up the Polish barmaid, and was allowed some tasters of the beers before settling on the chocolate stout, whilst I hovered down a light ale from Cornwall. The café also served curry. Life was complete. What could be better than a beer and a balti in the middle of Brum?

The journey back, along Telford's Main Line canal, was dead straight and easy. We belted along: it was like travelling on a motorway after pottering along B roads.

There were spectacular bridges, each one of a different design, deep, deep cuttings, tunnels that - get this - canoeists were allowed to paddle through, and strange islands in the middle of the canal, where the toll stations used to be.



Eventually we came across the M5 again. It was hard to miss, as the bridge stanchions were smack in the middle of the canal. Here, we portaged up back onto Brindley's canal, and, cocooned by the motorway overhead, made our way back to the Oldbury Locks. A very satisfying twelve miles.

We're definitely going to do this one again. Anyone fancy a curry?