

Introduction

Hello,

Welcome to this audio tour of the heart of Britain's Canals in Birmingham.

We'll begin our tour today on Salvage Turn Bridge at The Mailbox and finish at The Roundhouse. Along the way we will practise some simple relaxation techniques and take you back in time to when the canal network in Birmingham was a hub of industrial activity. We'll tell you how the canals have become the vibrant destination they are today, as well as explore Birmingham's most famous landmarks.

Our canals and rivers are the perfect places to help you feel calmer, happier and healthier. Even in busy towns and cities, they provide special spaces where you can relax, recharge, or get your body moving.

Whether you're on the canal following this tour or listening along indoors, we hope you enjoy spending time by water today.

Salvage Turn Bridge

We start our tour on Salvage Turn Bridge, over the Worcester & Birmingham Canal, adjacent to the Cube. Take a good look around at the thriving courtyard of the Mailbox. On a warm summer's day, it's full of people relaxing with their friends. The Mailbox is a venue to many up-market retailers, it's also home to BBC Midlands where the much-loved radio programme The Archers is recorded. The Mailbox was built in the year 2000 on the former site of the Royal Mail's main sorting office. Many of the workers used the towpath to get to and from work.

Adjacent to the Mailbox you will spot a huge cube-shaped building. Unsurprisingly, this building is named The Cube and from the top you can enjoy a bird's eye view of Birmingham, Britain's second largest city.

The spot you are standing on now, on Salvage Turn Bridge, was originally called Worcester Turn. It became known as Salvage Turn because it led into the former Birmingham Corporation Salvage Department. The department operated its own fleet of salvage boats on the Birmingham Canal Navigations, or the BCN for short, until 1966.

As we walk down off of the bridge, travelling away from the courtyard, we follow the Worcester & Birmingham Canal towards Gas Street Basin. Notice the many modern buildings on the horizon. No two are the same. During the 19th Century, the canals in this area would have looked very different, and the landscape would have been much more industrial.

Stepping off Salvage turn bridge, notice the large gold structure with geometric patterns a little way in the distance. This is the Library of Birmingham, which is officially Europe's most extensive public library that houses a million printed works. If you were to venture your way to the very top floor of the library, you could also explore the Shakespeare Memorial Room, an original feature from the City's previous Victorian library. This unique room, with its wood panelling and glass cabinets, was moved from the old Birmingham library in its entirety and painstakingly restored.

As our journey takes us along the Worcester & Birmingham Canal, towards Gas Street Basin, it's an excellent opportunity for us to really start to soak up the canal's atmosphere. Pay close attention

and you might see or hear something new. Listen out for the soundtrack of narrowboat engines, gently ticking over as you walk by. Can you hear the ripples of the water, splashing gently against the banks? Take notice of what the weather is like and how it feels on your face. Listen out for canal wildlife and hear the ducks quack as they waddle in front of you. As you take in the view, allow yourself to breathe in for five seconds and slowly breathe out for ten. Repeat this process twice more, and then we will continue with our audio tour.

Gas Street Basin

Continuing on the towpath of the Worcester & Birmingham Canal, you'll begin to see gas style lamps on the side of the towpath. The reason why the basin has the name Gas Street is simply because it was the first street in Birmingham to have gaslight. This marks the point where we are now entering the basin. In front of you is a steeply arched footbridge this is Bar Lock Footbridge. When the Worcester & Birmingham Canal was built in 1795, the Birmingham Canal Navigations refused to allow a connection to the Fazeley Canal. Therefore, all goods had to be transhipped across a thin strip of land, which was called the Worcester Bar. Eventually, in 1815, a stop lock was made with two sets of gates which protected the water supply of each canal but allowed boats to pass through, allowing the two canals to join. The bridge may look old but was built in 1988 replacing the small plank swing bridge. Pause in the basin while we talk you through some of the area's history.

Many of the canals were built in the 1700s and 1800s, and at their height, the Birmingham Canal Navigations stretched for around 170 miles. One of the reasons Birmingham became central to the industrial revolution was down to James Brindley. Initially, he was involved in building the Duke of Bridgewater's Canal, which carried the Duke's coal from the mines to Manchester. This canal was finished in 1761, and most of the engineering work was planned and supervised by James Brindley himself. Brindley was a millwright by trade and one of the most notable engineers of the 18th century. He worked on six canal projects in the Midlands.

Out past the north of the coalfields of West Bromwich and Birmingham, there were towns and cities in need of fuel. These cities relied on packed horse trails with potholes and ruts, heavy traffic caused by slow moving horses and mules, weighed down with the weight of heavy raw materials and finished goods. To speed up the transit of goods some engineering pioneers decided to build a canal in 1769, ensuring a much smoother ride than horse and cart. Where you are standing now, in the basin, is one of the two end points of the old canals. The other one is on New Hall Street.

The canals were the lifeblood of Victorian Birmingham and the Black Country. At their height, they were so busy that gas lighting was installed beside the locks to permit round-the-clock operation. Boats built for the BCN often only had very small cabins or no cabin since the crew lived on land and did not frequently need to stay on the boat overnight, and a near-tidal effect was produced as fleets of narrowboats converged on the Black Country collieries at the same time every day. Today you may occasionally see a few historical narrow boats alongside a wide variety of more modern boats moored here in the basin.

Historically, the area was occupied by factories at the height of Birmingham's industrial period. It was the Old Wharf of the Birmingham Canal, where narrowboats picked up and off-loaded their goods to continue their journey along the extensive waterway network. The area also housed the offices of the BCN Company.

Today, the towpaths around this lovely basin, are lined with bars, pubs and modern buildings. The traditional narrowboats moored here form a unique setting where industrial heritage meets modern-day living.

For example, The Worcester & Birmingham Canal Head Office now a restaurant, is on the left as you reach the Bar Lock, with its toll office and its useful bay window next to it. The head office was built over a short bend in the canal to the ironworks. The archway is still there. Part of it can be seen on the other side of Gas Street Basin, still in water.

Next to the old canal head office were some cottages, followed by two toll offices for the BCN, also with bay windows. The bridge over the bar lock may look old but was built in 1988 replacing the small plank swing bridge. In the wall can be seen the blocked off archway, this is where a canal used to be, and it would continue up straight for around 400 metres, to serve the gas works and iron foundries that were beyond it. The red door above is one of many which can be seen on the BCN. These were installed in the second world war to provide access to water for firefighting. Although this is only one small part of the Worcester & Birmingham Canal, this entire section used to be lined with wharves.

For 170 years, the canal system was bustling with industrial activity. Towards the end of the 19th century, the weight of goods being carried increased, reaching eight and a half million tonnes by 1898. Traffic on the old line was so heavy that there was congestion at the many locks and often a shortage of water. Thomas Telford, a civil engineer, was brought in to resolve these problems by lowering and straightening the canal between Birmingham and Tipton forming the New Main Line. If we were to follow the towpath from the basin you will be able to see the transition from the Worcester & Birmingham Canal to the New Main Line.

Now we are going to leave Gas Street Basin. Carry straight on along the towpath, towards a very narrow tunnel, which you will walk through

Black Sabbath Bridge/Brindley Place

Mind your head as we travel underneath the recently named Black Sabbath Bridge, as we move away from Gas Street Basin and into Brindley Place. The bridge was renamed from Broad Street Bridge in 2019 during the celebration of the Birmingham Canal Navigations' 250th anniversary and to honour Birmingham's legendary heavy metal rockers.

We now arrive in Brindley Place. In 1993 a new development was created, which transformed this area into one of Birmingham's most visited hotspots. Brindley Place has been restored and improved with parks, apartments and many stunning modern buildings along with with shops, restaurants, bars and entertainment. As you walk along, smile and say hello to the people you see on narrowboats gently moving beside you as we draw nearer the International Convention Centre or the ICC for short.

As we walk further into Brindley Place and Birmingham Arena, you will walk underneath a footbridge that links Brindley Place to the ICC, with the Symphony Hall neighbouring it. The ICC holds many events all year round, including major political conferences. The front of the building is covered with blue-tinted windows and white stone cladding. It stands on the site of the Prince of Wales Theatre and Bingley Hall, the world's first purpose-built exhibition hall, which opened in 1850, one year before the Great Exhibition in London.

Old Turn Junction

On our way to the Old Turn Junction, also known as Deep Cutting Junction, you'll walk past a large silvery curved building resting beside the canal on your left. This is the National Sea Life Centre, an aquarium with over 60 displays of freshwater and marine life. Its ocean tank has a capacity of 1,000,000 litres of water and houses giant green sea turtles, blacktip reef sharks and tropical reef fish, with the only fully transparent 360-degree underwater tunnel in the United Kingdom.

Walk up the ramp just beyond the Sea Life Centre towards the bridge with the black and white paint work, which we will cross. As we are walking across this bridge you will get a great view of the building in front of you. This is the Arena Birmingham, the UK's third-largest indoor arena. Stop in the middle of the bridge and take a good look at Old Turn Junction around you. This junction was formed when James Brindley's Contour Canal of 1769 was joined by Thomas Telford's New Main Line and the Birmingham & Fazely Canal, in 1827. Telford's junction provided the significant link between Coventry and Birmingham and thereby connected Birmingham to London via the Oxford Canal.

The Old Turn Junction features an island, which was rebuilt in the 1980s. It was originally much smaller and closer to the old bridge. Constructed in the second world war, large wooden planks or 'stop-planks' were placed between the roundabout and the bank so less water would flood into the railway tunnel below if a bomb breached the canal.

From where you are standing on the bridge, looking ahead of you, you can see the start of the Birmingham & Fazeley Canal and you will see Birmingham's tallest building, the BT Tower.

Turn left as you step off the bridge. You will now walk on up the New Main Line heading out and away from Brindley Place and the Arena.

Before we come to the end of our tour, please give yourself some more time to take in the atmosphere of the canal. Listen and notice the sounds of the water, the song of the birds and the tranquillity of this area, despite being in one of the busiest cities in the country. Notice the surprising amount of foliage along the towpath. This has all been part of the project named 'Wild in Birmingham' where volunteers have been helping us to improve the green corridor along the canal with fruit trees, flower borders, herb gardens, planters and other flowers. The project also aims to improve wildlife habitats with bird and bat boxes and reed planting. This hard work from our volunteers and Trust colleagues has earned the canals in Birmingham the Green Flag Award.

Wrapping around to the right, and passing some moored boats, you will pass under a road bridge and arrive at the Roundhouse. Dating back to 1874, this Grade two listed building was originally used by Birmingham Corporation as stables. Designed by local architect WH Ward, the iconic horseshoe-shaped building quickly became a real landmark in the city. Now, thanks to a National Lottery Heritage Fund grant, we've been working with the National Trust to bring the Roundhouse back to life to create a beautiful space to work, socialise and relax.

Our walk draws to a close here today. Thanks for listening. We hope you've enjoyed it and that we've helped you discover why life is better by water.

To find other exciting ways to enjoy our canals and rivers, visit canalrivertrust.org.uk

