

Rural ribbon of tranquillity



End... or beginning of the walk: Camden Lock.

FOR those used to the open expanses of Hampstead Heath it would be difficult to believe there is another place so close to the city that offers the same feeling of isolation and wildness.

Yet there is a place that offers that tranquillity running right through London – the canal.

Little Venice is one of those places where as soon as you get on to the towpath the world immediately changes from fast, noisy cars and mannerless pedestrians to a peace that forces you to slow down.

This is the canal-effect and it happens whether you are cruising on a narrow boat or just walking.

And while there were few tourists on the most recent day I walked to Camden Lock, it does seem to be a favoured route for runners, and rightly so.

But I was not 30 paces into the walk before I was forced to stop. It is difficult to walk across the old horse bridge and see the Waterside Café, moored up, with tables and chairs on the towpath without backtracking. So my journey that sunny but cool day really began with coffee and cake... and a little rest, acclimatising, really, to the change in pace from city to the almost rural.

Regent's Canal was opened in 1820 in order to take the narrow boats coming down from the north and the Midlands to the London ports, where they could deposit their goods and pick up other cargo for the return trip. It was built by the architect and town planner John Nash.

After the coffee, I recrossed the bridge to the north side, followed the towpath for a short while until it came back up to Blomfield Road, past the permanent moorings. It is then that the canal continues its way through the tunnel and walkers have to take to the hard road – but only for a short time.

Along here you will find Café Laville which straddles the canal over the entrance to the tunnel.

Unfortunately, if you think you were thinking of stopping for a pint along here at the wonderful Crocker's Folly, then you will be disappointed. It has

closed, so all you can do go along Aberdeen Place until you come to the stairs that take you back to the towpath.

Just here are the Lisson Grove moorings are home to a considerable community.

Along here are two wonderful bridges, one that carries the now forgotten River Tyburn over the canal, and the other, the Macclesfield Bridge, commonly known as Blow-up Bridge after the original was totally destroyed when a barge carrying explosives exploded close by.

The first thing you see of the London zoo is the aviary, which stretches into the sky, lulling the poor caged creatures into thinking there may be some way out. It is on the opposite side of the canal to the rest of the zoo, founded in 1826 by Sir Stamford Raffles.

Turn left at the floating Feng Shang Chinese restaurant, and immediately ahead is Camden Lock, the now internationally famous market, which used to be the site of TE Dingwall's timber yard until it closed in 1972.

Where they were once centres of the activity that drove the Industrial Revolution, the canals are now restful places where you can slow down, get the feeling of the rural while being well inside the urban. And the towpaths just go on ... and on. It's a great way to see another Britain.

BARRY REYNOLDS

FACTFILE

❑ You can book a canal holiday with Drifters, a consortium of award winning holiday boat companies by visiting www.drifters.co.uk or calling 08457 626 252. Readers will enjoy a discount of £50 off a part week, £100 off a full week or £250 off two weeks by quoting Castle Wharf Promotions/302

❑ Find other great ways to enjoy the waterways on www.waterscape.com.