

THE INDEPENDENT - June 22nd 2008

Take a barge in Britain's industrial back yard

The grim landscape of the Potteries looks quite different from the deck of a barge.

Ian Herbert takes the scenic route

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It has to be the Slow Movement's ultimate holiday – meandering up the Trent and Mersey Canal on a barge at 4mph while watching commuters belt along the Manchester to London high-speed railway line at close on a ton. The names of the boats we pass tell the story of a fraternity that has found the escape hatch – Dunwurryin, Duntorin.

Our journey starts at the Great Haywood boatyard, 20 miles south of Stoke, where the Staffordshire and Worcestershire meets the Trent and Mersey in what was once the Spaghetti Junction of the canal network. Then we're out in the open, indulging in the endlessly entertaining barge occupation of peering into back gardens.

At Stone, there's the first real flight of locks and the delights of the historic, lockside Star Inn, which affords the chance to eat, and watch others toil over the lock gates. Above Stone, the herons, moorhens and peewits make way for industrial Stoke – the place the T&M was built to serve. There's a real sense of loss at first. Gone is the Shelton Bar steelworks where, until just a decade or so ago, barges passed into the cacophonous fabrication sheds that spanned the canal. The new "industry" is all too visible, built next to the road network now: a gargantuan Sainsbury storage depot.

But at Etruria Junction is a piece of history indeed: the place, named after the Italian pottery district, which was the headquarters of the canal network after Wedgwood persuaded Brindley to lay the canal here. It's easy to picture
drifters.co.uk/cuttings/.../aw0608.htm

headquarters of the canal network after Wedgwood persuaded Brindley to lay the canal here. It's easy to picture the two men – the Jobs and Wozniak of their day – especially after a visit to the Etruscan Bone Mill and museum on the canal, where the grinding down of cattle bone and flint to make Potteries porcelain was – still is – undertaken.

Here, in this industrial heartland, we pass disused factories and kilns, purple splashes of buddleia bursting forth defiantly from the crumbling waterside walls. We are safe, smug and intrepid; urban explorers, discovering the roots of the city that are invisible from the road.

This is not the only unappreciated part of Britain being reopened for recreation by the renaissance of the canals. From Bradford to Birmingham, there are new journeys of discovery, though work has ground to a halt after the funding crisis at the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, which has meant a substantial cut in British Waterways' budget.

At Etruria lock we continue north on the T&M for that point on the map where the canal mysteriously vanishes. It's the two-mile Harecastle Tunnel, hewn out of a hill of the same name. The water is suddenly orange (because of run-offs from ironstone rock inside the hill) and it seems inadvisable to hang around in there. "Just keep her moving. Generally speaking, it's the slower the worse," the tunnel-keeper warns ominously before ushering us in.

There's a formidable "clang" as the door slams shut at the southern end, the fume extractor fan begins its mighty roar and the only reminder of our way out is a pinhole of light, two miles in the distance. In the dark, the children want to know about the "leggers", who propelled boats through by lying on their backs and "walking" against walls.

Is there any industrial heritage "experience" to beat this place?



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