

Out and About

Barging between Brindleys

For this month's Out and About **Dave Martin** takes to the water



Statue of James Brindley, canal engineer, in the Coventry Canal basin.

Coventry canal basin ought to be a hive of activity. It is a collection of new and well-restored buildings around the terminal arms of the Coventry Canal and could be like thriving Gas Street Basin in neighbouring Birmingham, but it is on the wrong side of the inner ring road. Begun in the 1950s this monument to the motor car turned Coventry city centre into one enormous traffic island just like so many other Midland towns and cities blighted by planners prioritising cars over pedestrians. To reach the canal basin from the city centre today your only choice is to climb and cross an unattractive pedestrian footbridge spanning six lanes of speeding traffic which is clearly sufficient discouragement for many.

This is a shame as not only is it worthy of a visit in its own right but it also boasts an excellent bronze statue of the canal engineer James Brindley. Brindley stands larger than life, bending over a desk and looking up towards the 'Number 1' bridge which he designed. Under his right hand is, I guess, his note book and spread across the desk top his design drawing for the bridge itself. His is a muscular physical presence. At first glance the desk appears too flimsy to match the man's vigour but closer inspection reveals it to be not an elegant Georgian drawing room piece but a robust desk made from three planks with single drawer and sturdy legs. It might even be a Georgian architect's desk, the type where the lid can be raised to a variety of angles for precise drawing.

The bewigged Brindley wears an elegant collarless frock coat with three button pockets and great cuffs from which emerge ruffled shirt sleeves. Waistcoat, trousers, silk stockings and fine buckled shoes complete his dress and the sculptor has clearly drawn upon the 1770 portrait of Brindley by

Coventry statue details of face and shoes.



Francis Parsons.¹ Such is the quality of the statue that the embroidered cuffs and the pattern on his brass buttons are precisely delineated. The man inside the clothes though is less elegant, more sturdy – strong hands, broad shoulders and wide furrowed forehead with creases at the eyes from working outdoors. The sculptor, James Walter Butler, says of his work, ‘...there is something that you’ve put into the figure that gives it a life that is other than your own and I think that is an extraordinary thing to be able to do. It’s like a little bit of magic.’ Certainly for me he has worked magic with this statue. It is so alive.

The statue cost £40,000, weighs half a ton and took the sculptor over a year to create. It was commissioned as part of the £1 million Coventry Canal Corridor scheme and supported by National Lottery money and a grant from the Elizabeth Frampton Fund.² The sculptor Siobhan Coppinger also entered two designs for the scheme, etchings of the intended appearance of her sculptures in situ. One proposed a life-size Brindley looking out of an upper storey of the Basin Warehouse or ‘lucam’, a tall structure for loading canal boats from above. The second would have been an identical figure standing on the bridge over the canal at its Hawkesbury Junction with the Oxford Canal. Her design referenced Brindley’s reported practice of retreating into a darkened room to think when confronted by a difficult engineering problem. Her design was not chosen, however.³ Instead James Butler’s statue was unveiled on 18 September 1998.

James Brindley, canal pioneer

Brindley is a fitting figure to be commemorated here as he was

commissioned by the Coventry Canal Company in 1768 as surveyor and engineer. He surveyed the route but did not complete the engineering work. He was dismissed in September 1769. There was a dispute with the Oxford Canal Company, for which he was also engineer, on where the two canals should meet. Brindley’s preferred solution would have reduced the tolls the Coventry could charge. Since canal companies relied upon toll income this was never likely to be popular with canal company directors. Brindley might never have finished the canal anyway as he died just three years later. Nevertheless he was responsible for much of the work including the ‘Number 1’ bridge.

Brindley’s wider achievements also deserve commemoration. He was a pioneering canal builder whose vision of a grand or silver cross – a network of canals linking the four great rivers and ports of the Trent, Mersey, Avon and Thames – was eventually realised and he was involved in building many of the early canals. Not surprisingly then the Coventry Brindley is not the only statue of him; a second stands by the Etruria works of Josiah Wedgwood in Stoke-on-Trent.

What better way to travel to see this second statue than by canal? That is why one sodden September morning I set off under ‘Number 1’ bridge on the narrowboat *Dove Valley* hired from Valley Cruises, a narrowboat company based in the Coventry basin. Ahead of me and my crew 67 miles of canal, 36 locks, two aqueducts and more bridges than you could possibly imagine as we travelled along the Coventry, Birmingham and Fazeley, and Trent and Mersey Canals. For the first part of our journey the canal wound through the city past a mix of the old industry it once

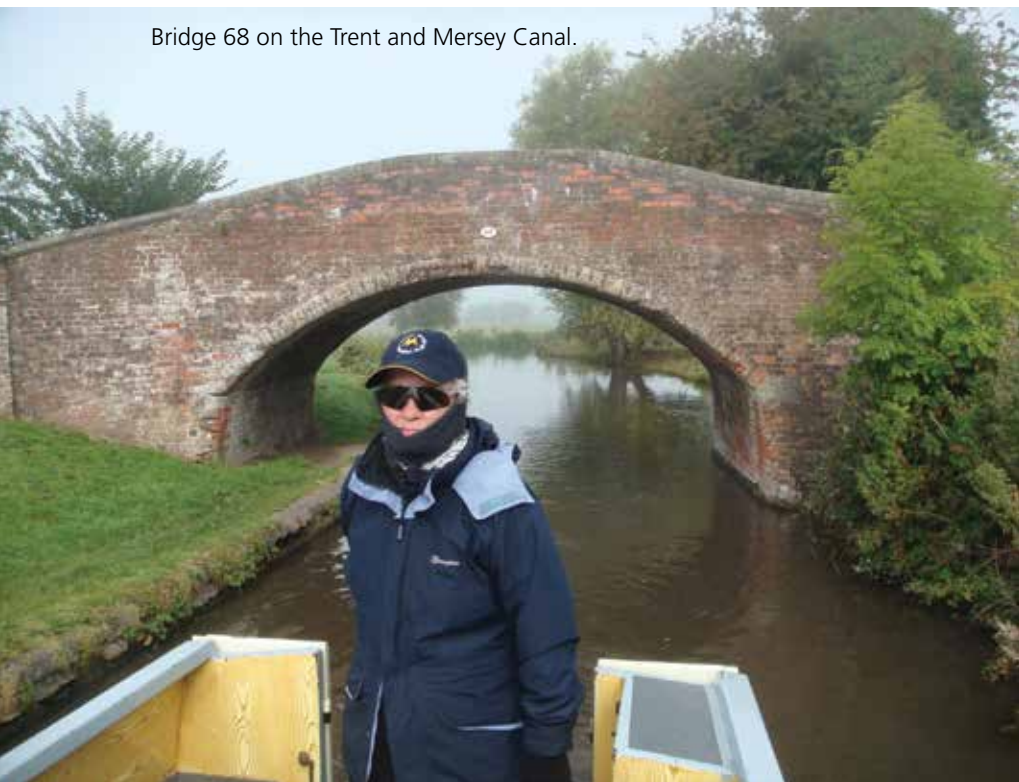
served and new housing developments. This winding progress was to be a constant feature of our journey. To avoid the expense of cuttings and embankments Brindley’s canals followed the contours. Thus tending the tiller you could never relax your concentration, even at just four miles an hour, as a 58-foot narrowboat can quickly take itself where you don’t want it to be.

The second advantage of contour canals is that they minimise the need for locks. Locks were expensive to build, remain time-consuming to use and take water from the higher levels of a canal that has to be replenished. It was not until the second day of our journey that we encountered a lock, 11 of them in fact, the Atherstone Flight. These locks follow the design Brindley developed when he began building the Trent and Mersey Canal in the 1760s. They are narrow canal locks, brick built, 72 feet 7 inches long and 7 feet 6 inches wide with a single upper gate and double-mitre lower gates. These locks were large enough to accommodate the boats used in coal mining (coal being an important canal cargo) and also had the advantage of minimising water loss. Brindley’s design decision determined the dimensions of almost the entire



Lock on the Trent and Mersey Canal.

Bridge 68 on the Trent and Mersey Canal.



On the Trent and Mersey Canal

The Act of Parliament authorising the Trent and Mersey Canal was passed in 1766 and one of its prime movers was the potter Josiah Wedgwood who ceremonially cut the first turf. The canal was ideal to bring in the heavy raw materials and take away the fragile finished goods of his industry. Its route was surveyed by Brindley who was appointed chief engineer. In places his engineering works remain unchanged, such as bridge 68 which we passed beneath just after crossing his aqueduct over the River Trent. The canal, with only the occasional lock, climbs the valley of the River Trent passing Rugeley, Great Haywood and the junction with the Staffordshire and Worcestershire Canal until it reaches Stone. Here I made the decision to walk the final ten miles to Stoke reasoning that this would be quicker than negotiating the 14 remaining locks, which was true, and that the city centre canal might not be that clean, which was untrue. On the canal we had seen coots, ducks, geese and swans but in Stoke-on-Trent we saw a grebe.

canal network and the boats that could ply their trade on it. It also contributed to the later demise of canals when it became uneconomic to operate boats of a limited tonnage.

Descending the 80 feet of the Atherstone Flight introduced me to one of the many pleasures of the canal, the chance conversations with other boat crews going up or down the flight with you, a single meeting for those going the opposite way and a series of meetings with those going the same way. Plus this flight boasted a number of canal volunteers, some of the army of volunteers responsible for restoring the national canal network. These were ready with advice on lock procedures, boat manoeuvring and operating the paddles, which with their iron cogs, gears, racks and ratchets form a 'living' relic of the Industrial Revolution. Their design is unchanged since Brindley's day, simple but effective.

Next afternoon half our crew left, returning to the twenty-first century, but we continued over the following days at a gentler pace. Barging along a canal certainly gives you time to reflect as your world slowly scrolls by although from time to time our route was paralleled by the West Coast Main Line and then modernity in the shape of Pendolino trains tears past you at 125 miles per hour. For the rest of the time we shared the canal with the residential narrow boats moored at its sides and the craft plodding along it, mostly pleasure boats but also a few still-working cargo-carriers and even a hotel narrow boat towing its butty barge. Gradually we settled into the canal's rhythms. As we chugged along anglers watched patiently, cows chewed stolidly and walkers waved cheerfully. The autumn banks were rich in colour - the red, black and purples of blackberries, elderberries, hawthorn berries, rose hips, rowan berries and sloes. In time we left the Coventry Canal at Fradley Junction and, guided by the map of the Trent and Mersey Canal given to us by a friendly passing boat, headed north for the Potteries. Canal maps are a pleasure in themselves. Not only do they show such essentials as where the locks are and where you can turn, moor, take on water and pump out but also they show a little of the area adjoining the canal. They also list and number those myriad bridges that in time became the measure of our progress.

There were plenty of birds around Brindley's statue too. It stands in Etruria, at the junction of the Trent and Mersey with the Caldon Canal, within the communal gardens of a development of sheltered accommodation for old people. A flock of Canada geese have taken up residence there too so I had to cross a carpet of goose guano once I'd persuaded one of the residents to let me past the security systems. Up close this statue of Brindley was a great disappointment.

It was first proposed by Colin Melbourne and Guy Barks who felt that Stoke needed a statue of Brindley because of his importance to local industry. As is usually the case a fundraising committee was set up, in this case the James Brindley Memorial Fund, to erect a statue. The Public Monuments and Sculpture Association website records the

Stoke statue detail – theodolite.



statue as being donated by the sculptor, Colin Melbourne. He did the work locally at the Sir Henry Doulton School of Sculpture.

After the work was sculpted it was sent to London to be cast. The finished bronze was then, most appropriately, barged back on the canal network by the steam powered narrowboat *President* to the Etruria site where it was hoisted into place.⁴ The official unveiling by Lord Hesketh, Under Secretary of the Environment, on 20 July 1990 was reportedly a big event and canal enthusiasts from around the world attended. As is sometimes the case those involved in the fundraising share in Brindley's glory by having their names around the plinth – the individual members of the Brindley Committee, the Caldron and the Trent and Mersey Canal Societies, the Stoke-on-Trent Boat Club, the City of Stoke-on-Trent and British Waterways.

The statue is life-size and set up on a plinth six feet high. This lessens its impact. It makes this Brindley seem smaller, less imposing than the Coventry one. Again Brindley is shown in contemporary eighteenth-century dress – frock coat and waistcoat, cravat at neck and with a slight paunch as in Parson's portrait. In terms of his pose moreover it is more directly based upon that portrait. Brindley chose to be painted with his theodolite in front of his famous engineering feat, the Barton Aqueduct. The statue, however, appears to have been modelled upon the later mezzotint produced by Robert Dunkarton in 1773 from Parson's original work. The technique of the mezzotint means that the image is reversed so that whereas in the original Brindley's left arm is shown resting upon his theodolite, in the mezzotint and in this statue it appears to be his right arm. I do like the incorporation of the theodolite emphasising Brindley the surveyor but for me, unlike the Coventry statue, this one is lifeless, hence my disappointment.

In 2003 there was a proposal to erect a third Brindley by the Droitwich Canal, yet another that he was involved with. The sculptor, John McKenna, depicted his Brindley demonstrating puddling for his navvies. For some Brindley's development of this technique of puddling clay to produce a water tight clay-based material was one of his greatest contributions to canal engineering. The sculptor's maquette looks dynamic but the statue itself has yet to be cast. Its estimated cost of £29,000 was not raised as restoring the Droitwich Canal itself was the priority. For the moment, therefore, I did not need to head back south and turn off

Statue of James Brindley, canal surveyor, at the junction of the Caldron and Trent and Mersey Canals, Etruria, Stoke-on-Trent.



on the Staffordshire and Worcestershire Canal steering a course for Droitwich. Instead I went in search of refreshment and found it in the wonderfully named Holy Inadequate Inn on Etruscan Street.

Further reading

K.R. Fairclough (2004) 'Brindley, James (1716-1772)' in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford: Oxford University Press

Christine Richardson (2004) *James Brindley: canal pioneer*, Burton-on-Trent: Waterways World.

REFERENCES

- ¹ There are two portraits, one held in the National Portrait Gallery and a second in The Potteries Museum and Art Gallery, Stoke-on-Trent.
- ² This foundation donates up to £10,000 a year towards bronze sculptures.
- ³ She is the sculptor of a lovely reclining figure of the reformer and MP Thomas Atwood in Birmingham City Centre.
- ⁴ The steam-powered narrowboat *President* is maintained and operated by volunteers at the Black Country Museum, Dudley.

Dave Martin is a history adviser and author. He is still researching a book on historical statues and you can join him on a tour of Manchester statues at the Annual Conference in May.