

What a scorcher!

For my sins I co-ordinate (I prefer to say hold together) a merry band of retired and semi-retired individuals known at the Hereford History U3A Group. We all enjoy sharing experiences and knowledge of the past in a group setting, keeping our brains active and stimulated and sometimes even having some fun. For the better weather we thought it might be interesting to get out and about. We had a tip off from a U3A member in another Hereford U3A group about an interesting trip she completed during the Herefordshire Heritage Week. It involved a minibus and a couple of Canal Trust volunteers and she made a strong recommendation that it would be interesting trip for the U3A History Group and she left me a name and contact number. Intrigued, I rang this number and spoke to the good Mr Tony Higgins of the Canal Trust.

Next thing I know its 10am on a scorching July morning and the Hereford U3A History Group are in the Car Park of Aylestone Park, waiting, like excitable (75 years old) school kids for a summer day trip out. Tony and Phil gave out a small information pack with map, notes and a print copy of Wayfarer and we were all ears, taking in lots of information about the Canal in Aylestone Park and even asking some nervous amateur and slightly naive early questions such as "Steve, - Where's our Canal Boat?" Seven hours later that question had been well answered after a fantastic tour of the Herefordshire route of the Canal from Hereford to Ledbury.

None of the U3A members had any real previous knowledge of the Herefordshire to Gloucestershire Canal or even canals fullstop, but that made the tour even more interesting. We learnt about canal gradients, locks and water levels. About navvies, engineers, bricks, the shape of bridges and tunnels. About how to spot a Canal building, about how few records have been left of the Canals operations. About the route and how some current property owners are Canal friends and some are not. Friends allowed us into the their gardens to view canal features while other properties we just drove past, without even slowing.

The weather become hotter and hotter and we saw the Herefordshire countryside at its best. At Aylestone Park we observed a hidden tunnel amongst several hundred new affordable houses on the site of a former Victorian tile works, how times have changed. Then onto Merton Meadow, part of which was the basin for the end of the Canal and is now Jewsons. I didn't dare tell Tony that the Canal Street sign for many years had lost its C and its how it stuck in my mind.

Withington Wharf next and first stop was the toilets in the Julian Brown's Furnishings shop for U3A members on water tablets, younger readers have this delight to come in their lives. I later found out Julian is the son of the Brown Furniture family who maybe made classical English Furniture in Hereford when the Canal was still running. The old Canal warehouse buildings and office are still intact and through the ages of time, the Victorian sign proclaiming Salt for sale was just visible which gave a clue to what was transported to the farming communities of Herefordshire, before

there was a TESCOs. Interesting to see a style of building and brick unique to the Canal still clear today, over 140 years since the Canal closed.

Onto to Ledbury and how the railways started to mix with the Canal under the imposing viaduct, which we were told was a Ballard Brothers co-production. Past the newly created Canal route by the side of a recently popped up housing estate, where the Canal is currently a wild flower bed and then onto a much anticipated pub lunch at The Oak in Staplow, A very good choice by Tony.

After Lunch on to the much talked about Ashperton tunnel and Tunnel Cottage. The road and parking became more tricky, but Phil manoeuvred the Minibus perfectly above the Tunnel escarpment. Today its a different sight to the 1840s when it must have looked a HS2 cutting with an army of navvies possibly refreshed on hot days by "Cider Annie". Across to the village cricket pitch which lies on top of the Canal tunnel. I wondered if there is a Tunnel End?

Next to the gem of the tour, and the Skew Bridge at Yarkhill. What effort went into this beautifully engineered brick and stone bridge and for it to be fully used for only 32 years? It almost stands as a grand folly, but deserves to be called one of the seven wonders of Herefordshire. Tony got excited after a conversation with a landowner about another bridge over the Canal at Monkhide and we saw the remains of a Victorian drive/ride thru, where a water mill bordered the Canal and boatman could purchase a loaf as they passed by.

All in all, a very pleasant day for all the U3A History Group, who learnt so much about the Herefordshire to Gloucestershire Canal, as it operated between Ledbury and Hereford. Who ever came up with the idea of the Tour deserves a medal, its a great trip for people who are interested, but know little about the Canal. The surplus from the fees have helped the coffers of the Trust too. Thank you again to Trust Volunteers Tony and Phil who did a great job.

Steve Ramsdale
Hereford U3A History Group.