

Canal Cruise to Walsall Power Station

by

Roy Spencer

As a young lad in the 1940's, living in Lane Head, on the edge of Bentley Common, I watched with interest the building of the new Walsall Power Station at Birchills, to the north of Walsall. Over a period of three to four years, six enormous cooling towers and a building with six tall chimneys appeared on the skyline.

The Power Station started to operate in 1949. It was coal fired, and at that time 'state of the art', burning 450,000 tons of slack coal a year. This vast amount of coal was delivered to the Power Station by road, rail, and canal.

That supplied by canal came mainly from Hilton Main Colliery at Featherstone, transported by mineral railway through Essington to Short Heath canal wharf, where it was loaded into barges by an ancient steam powered crane. These loaded barges were assembled in strings of three or four and towed by tugboat along the Wyrley and Essington canal to the new power station. In those days the canal was quite busy with coal transportation.

During the early 1950s, two of my closest school chums were Tony Barker and John Morris. All three of us lived within 50 yards of Lane Head canal bridge. Our families did not own cars, so our school holiday activities were locally based, the canal being an important attraction for sailing our boats, and fishing, etc. Just before one autumn

half-term school holiday, Tony said his uncle was a boatman on the Wyrley and Essington canal, taking coal from Short Heath wharf to Walsall Power Station. Tony said he could arrange for us to have a ride on his uncle's barge.

We jumped at the opportunity, and at around midday on the agreed day, the three of us waited on the towpath under Lane Head bridge for Tony's uncle's barge to come along. As it came towards us, the barge was steered close to the towpath and the three of us leapt in unison. We landed on the barge in a heap of coal, scrambled onto a cross beam, and sat down to enjoy our journey.



Walsall Power Station in the early '50's. Producing power, but not complete at that time. See footnote

As we left Lane Head the landscape was quite rural. We passed gardens and fields, and then Rough Wood, to the east of Short Heath and now a nature reserve. On this stretch of canal were several disused basins, used to load coal from small local mines many years ago. These old canal basins had long been reclaimed by nature, and had become havens for aquatic plants and interesting wildlife, adding much to the pleasant aspect of this stretch of the canal.

After about three quarters of a mile we reached Oily Goughs fishing pools, a favourite spot where we fished for perch, now also a nature reserve. Oily Gough was a well-known local 'character' who worked as an agent for an oil company supplying factories and garages. Regarded as being somewhat eccentric, he lived in a remote timber-built house which was painted in black and white stripes, approached via a very long drive. His home was affectionately known as 'Humbug Hall'. The house was surrounded by empty rusting oil drums!

In a short while we reached Sneyd canal junction. From here the disused Wyrley Branch canal ran northwards to the coal mines around Landywood and Wyrley.

We turned right, passing the canal maintenance workshops, and gradually the landscape became more industrial. We saw the Bloxwich Zinc Smelting company and Hatherton Foundry (both surrounded by grey slag heaps), and Talbot Stead Tube Mills. In due course we arrived at Birchills canal junction. Here we carried straight on onto the Walsall branch and within a few minutes arrived at our destination, Walsall Power Station.

The loaded barges were detached from the tugboat and moored, prior to being moved into the power station basin for unloading. From there the coal was transferred by conveyor into the storage hopper to feed the boilers.

Having disembarked onto the towpath, the three of us waited whilst the tugboat was turned around and a string of now empty barges attached ready for the return journey. We clambered aboard the last barge and were on our way.

It was late afternoon as we chugged our way back along the canal. By the time we reached Sneyd junction it was dark, cold, and had started to rain.

Our boatman suggested we should go into the small cabin on the stern of the barge, and this we readily agreed to do.

The cabin was about five feet square, with a rough wooden seat along each side. In the centre of the floor was a fire-can made from a small oil drum with holes punched in it, full of burning coal. There was no chimney, only a hole in the cabin roof where a chimney had once been. As a result, the cabin was full of acrid and dangerous fumes.

Whilst accepting that the atmosphere was rather unpleasant, we did not mind as we were warm and dry.

We sat in the cabin for about an hour as our boatman steered us along until he told us that we were approaching Lane Head bridge. We scrambled from the cabin and stood on the edge of the barge. As we passed under the bridge, we thanked our boatman, and bidding him farewell, we leapt onto the towpath.

The barge disappeared into the darkness as we made our separate ways home, it was about 6pm. We were hungry, tired, and covered from head to foot in coal dust, but were very happy having thoroughly enjoyed our cruise to Walsall Power Station.

The End

Editor's Note: The watercolour painting used with Roy Spencer's article was produced by Stanley Parkes, a contributor of several front covers for use by the Crabtree company's magazine 'The Crabtree'.