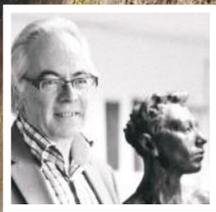




THE ARTS

Grand Union Canal



JOHN BEST, CHAIR
ARTS GATEWAY MK

The view through
Bridge 84

This month I'm looking at quite a large artefact, winding close to thousands of homes and bringing pleasure literally to millions. It's not only a great piece of design in its own right, but it's a canvas on which a huge number of activities and images are hung. It's an oasis of peace and tranquillity, but also the focus of a lot of activity, both human and natural. It is of course the canal network – in our part of the world the Grand Union Canal. Living, sparkling heritage.



Water Eaton Brook parkland and culvert

Brief History

The national canal network goes back to the first navigable waterways – the Roman Fossdyke from Lincoln to the Trent dates to the 15th century. The network gathered pace in the 17th century and 18th century and was one of a handful of elements essential to our (and indeed anybody's) Industrial Revolution. These essentials included mechanical looms, steam power, cities and canals. Without the network of commercial canals built between 1760 and 1840, neither the UK nor the rest of Europe would have industrialised. The first lifeline between London and the Midlands was the Oxford Canal, built between 1770-1790. A generation later it was superseded by the Grand Junction Canal (later part of the Grand Union we know today), completed in 1805. These waterways, compared to unmade roads which preceded them, were the rapid transport of the day. But their heyday was cut short by the arrival of railways from 1830.

Canal construction was pretty brutal – not only in the undiluted physical challenge of digging by hand mile after mile of cutting, embankment, tunnels and bridges, for which we have generations of Irish 'Navigators' to thank. But also the uncompromising way the canals just drove through the landscape, regardless of what was there. One compensation they brought was the myriad of rounded red brick bridges that are so characteristic of our canals, allowing cattle and people to connect between fields. Another legacy was the array of 18th century and 19th century

structures: locks, cottages, spillways, cattle creeps, pump-houses, workshops. Many are no longer in canal-based use, but nearly all remain as structures connecting us to a distant past. And all were designed and crafted.

Landscape

Just as the canals carved up what went before, so subsequent history trod roughly on the canals, not least the collision with George Stevenson's London to Birmingham Railway at Wolverton. By 1950 the whole network faced a serious risk of obliteration. The canals were saved, but only just. In Milton Keynes the Grand Union was not only saved, but two decades later was handsomely dressed in as good a green greatcoat as could be designed, not least with a memorable continuous line of Lombardy poplars along the Broadwalk. To this has been added a treasure trove of nooks and crannies, heroic landscapes, art and artefacts and gorgeous blue-green views, all themselves artefacts of one sort or another, and all populated and enjoyed by boaters, walkers, joggers, ecologists, artists, wildlife, families and neighbourhoods. Our canal heritage is a very broad church.

MK's canalside stretches from Soulbury Three Locks through to Cosgrove Lock, so I started in the south and worked north. I shall single out three memorable bits of landscape. First of all I sought out a peaceful corner of Bletchley, where the greenery around Pinewood Drive flanks the Water Eaton Brook as it flows through Waterhall Park to



Allen Jones' 'Head' looks out over the Grand Union

the River Ouzel. Here the canal strides across by aqueduct along a tree-lined embankment. I judge it a score-draw between landscape and canal.

Five miles to the north we find the piece de résistance of the New Town landscape. The lower end of Campbell Park morphs from landscaped formality, to informal canalside lakeland. This undeveloped end of the Park is shortly to have a burst of 21st century development with homes, jobs, recreation and a marina but will not lose the mix of public art collection, active waterway and Lombardy poplar signal. I think the landscape wins.

Another three miles to the north and west brings us to Great Linford Park, an imposing Manorial estate that once ran down through a tree-lined slope into the Ouse Valley. There are some wonderful fragments of a great landscape, not least the buildings of manor, church, almshouses and arts centre, though much of the 17th century work was obliterated when the canal came. But wait... The Parks Trust has ambitious proposals to reinstate the cascading pools through the woodland and restore the damaged artefacts. The canal's ahead at half-time but the landscape is about to equalise.



Houses

The landscape was there because of houses, big and small, so I want to flag up three canalside houses. Again from south to north, I single out my favourite, the grandest and the most nostalgic. My favourite is the former Development Corporation Manager's house at Tinker's Bridge. The handsome detached property sits very comfortably behind sweeping lawns which have an extensive canal frontage fringed by weeping willow. Great place for the grandchildren to visit – so long as they can swim in an emergency.



Great Linford Manor grandeur

The grandest – by a mile – is Great Linford Manor, sitting at the heart of Great Linford Park, surrounded by artists and boaters but unmistakably noble.

The most nostalgic is Wolverton's Secret Garden where once stood four villas for senior railway managers, proudly overlooking the canal which the railways rendered obsolete. These days it's a lovingly restored and interpreted community garden, named after The Secret Garden by Frances Hodgson Burnett, where children go through a hidden door and discover an overgrown garden that's mystical and magical. It places the visitor truly in the waterways' past, complete with the supposed 'last residents' captured in concrete on a couch and glued to their 1968 telly, depicting the year those houses were demolished.

Artefacts

The canal route is defined by an impressive roster of artefacts, starting with Soulbury Three Locks in the south. As well as the lock flight and pub, there's an imminent lottery-funded historic restoration of Soulbury Pumping Station. The only Lock within Milton Keynes proper is, not surprisingly, at Fenny Lock, also with its pumping station and a swing-bridge, a reminder of how much design went into the canal. The New Town brought some very big engineering to sit on the



Fred Rouse lived here in the early days

canal, including some decidedly unhistoric bridges such as the vast overbridge of the A5, with carriageway, layby, towpath and canal, showing off the brutalist potential of concrete. Not pretty. Other efforts are more agreeable, such as the modern aqueduct over the V6 at New Bradwell, with spillways and modern footbridge; the railway buildings at Wolverton Park now mostly converted to modern uses (though some remain under threat); and the historic Iron Trunk aqueduct over the Great Ouse at Cosgrove. And Cosgrove Lock, the northern end of our water, has the junction with the Buckingham Canal, in the process of a heroic restoration by the Buckingham Canal Society.



Fenny Lock and artefacts

Art

Finally, in addition to all the designed places and artefacts that make up the waterway and its places, I want to point you towards an amazing collection of art along or near the route. One of MK's classic community artists was Bill Billings, who died in 2007 after decades of playful ornamentation of our city, much of it along the canal. I'll start with one of his dinosaurs, now moved within the Lakes estate to a site in The Warren within 300 yards or so of



Classic Bill Billings at Pear Tree Bridge

the canal. There's another, 100 yards from the canal, at Pear Tree Bridge, being actively addressed by a three year old when I visited. MK is covered with playful Bill Billings pieces and the most memorable is the 1986 Wolverton railway mural along the canal, periodically restored to original clarity, most recently in 2011 led by the MK Branch of the Inland Waterways Association.

MK's canalside also has collections to explore: There's an unexpected Community Orchard by Manor Fields with trees and a series of steel cut-out illustrations of transport; The Old Rectory at Pear Tree Bridge used to house an arts community, and there are still one or two pieces remaining as evidence; there's a stunning collection of public art in Campbell Park; The Gyosei Art Trail is rightly popular as a canalside gallery to which I dedicated an entire article not long ago; Great Linford Park not only has art tucked away in nooks and crannies it also has one of MK's most established art communities, the MK Arts Centre; the Secret Garden has a mix of sculpture (another Bill Billings),



Jeremy Turner's seat in the Gyosei Art Trail

mosaics, restoration, furniture, horticulture and interpretation; Wolverton Park has Martin Heron's striking pair of figures I've written about before, representing Wolverton's past and future.

Conclusion

This is quite a list and we've not even touched boat-decoration or water-based performance. When compiled into a single presentation, it adds up to no mean artistic exhibition for MK. And it's all on permanent open view to be seen and recognised for what it is: an artistic and design legacy that captures several centuries of MK's story.

As MK celebrates its 50th year throughout 2017, as MK50, our canalside legacy deserves a place. I'm delighted that the Canal & River Trust and organisations they work with are putting significant resource to celebrate the year, with promotions, performances, new commissions and an events programme culminating in an Illuminated Boat Festival in December. Watch this space, and admire the art and design. ■



NEWS FROM ARTS CENTRAL

In March, as expected, we lost our fifth creative hub space at Clyde House and are consolidating some 50 creatives in our one Arts Central, at Norfolk House. We still have Horncastle Barn used by two artists and the Community Arts Resources Centre used for storing and hiring equipment. We have a small and very temporary sixth space, we're close to agreeing a better seventh and are hungrily looking for projects...

Current programmes include Culture Challenge (artists into schools), Creative Workspace Network (collaboration with other spaces), and Môtus (dance programmes in April and May). Planned programmes include a brand new MK Literary Festival in September, the second MK Arts Week in October and a possible MK Film Festival in October, all if we can get our act and funding together. And we'd like your help on these exciting projects.

Planned exhibitions include Maliheh Zafarnezhad (April/May), followed by Sam Shane and Alan Moore (June/July) at Arts Central. Nature Celebrating Earth (April) and Young Photography call-out 'My MK' (May) at AC@Cornerstone.



Maliheh Zafarnezhad's 'Barrak Dag'