

The Netherton Cut to Coombs Wood

Key:

Bridges [short sung melodies]

Luke Perry's metal sculptures/information boards

Vivian Bird's 'By Lock and Pound' extracts

Interview extracts – Ann Edwards, Tina Gittings, Coombeswood Canal Trust (Jon Jones, Ivor Chambers & Richard Woodward), Sheila Smith, Penny Clover

[Accordion music]

The Netherton Cut to Coombs Wood
an audio trail by Heather Wastie & Sam Frankie Fox
for Alarum Productions

[Music ends on a long chord]

What does the cut mean to you?

Boats and locks

Rosie and Jim

Osses, coal an' 'ard work

Transport, industrial revolution

Brightly coloured ware?

(Ann Edwards) "I've been surrounded by canals *all* the time I was living in Darby End."

Was it somewhere you played, or went to?

(AE) "Ooh NO, me mother wouldn't let me play there in case I fell in and got hurt, and ... and just played in the street. Went for a walk after Chapel on a Sunday night along the canal."

(Tina Gittings) "With all the factories round, very often we had the four o'clock thump from the quarries, [*quiet, building accordion chord with mimicked thump*] the Rowley Quarries, and you could find quiet places, solitude, and you got to sort of make contact with the boat people as well."

[accordion music leading into]

Windmill End Bridge

From Windmill End Bridge to Coombs Wood
on the Dudley No2
ther ay no locks,
the waerter's still
and the factories hum

Windmill End gets its name
from the windmill wot stood
where the railway was built.
Now the railway's gone,
Cobbs Engine House claims the 'ill as its own.

Luke Perry was 'ere
the words on his metal sculptures
guiding us back into history...

The building now standing housed a great steam engine. This pumped water out of Windmill End Colliery. The thirty foot thick coal worked here is one of the reasons the Black Country got its name.

[tinkly harp music]

Windmill Colliery arm went off
Raised cobbles mark the ghost of a railway bridge
There's a thin island where tolls was took
Remains of Cobb's Basin
served Warren's Hall colliery

So what was it like in times gone by?
There's folks who know
There's words to read
Vivian Bird wrote a bostin book
'By Lock and Pound'
He'd never sid the like afore
in the 1950s when he came here

[music fades]

From the jagged teeth of Rowley's quarries that appeared to be closing on houses on the skyline, the haphazard manmade landscape stretched below and around us. Rows of houses, factories, railways, pylons, smoke, gasworks, canal, barren ground, brickworks, and a church on a hilltop. But behind it all were the graceful hill silhouettes of Clent and Walton as yet immune from the assaults of industry.

[accordion music]

Bullfield Bridge – Pap Pap Bridge
[sound of car horn passing over]

[sounds of water running, bird song and calls]

Basins in waerter, remains o' basins...
Basins for breeze ovens, brick and tile works,
Springfield Colliery, rails and inclines
Hailstone quarry where Rowley Rag stone was loaded

Remember the Doulton works
for sanitary ware and sinks -
Clay from Saltwells. Lit by gaslight -

Either side o' the narrers, still their
though Alkali Bridge has gone.
Brick and tile works off to the right,
where wing walls and bridge
are met today by a wire mesh fence
and houses peering through.

Dog Lane Bridge

A little bird tells me to look for sculptures:
One by Luke,
one by generations o' grit filled ropes
mekkin grooves, as years of osses
pulled loaded boats through the bridge 'ole.

At Rowley Stop Narrers,
thers a bloke stood perfectly still
caught in the act
spraying paint on the brick
telling the future about the present
telling the present about the past

This hovel was the toll man's office. He would charge boats for passage by the weight of their load, measuring this with his notched freeboard stick.

Where does graffiti stop and art begin?
If it's good enough for Banksy why not?
A mix of art and history
reflecting the past in the now.

Where boats can turn in the winding 'ole
ther used to be clay pits,
the cut 'ad arms to collieries:
Pennent Hill, Ash Tree

[accordion chords]

Hollis Bridge

A little bird tells me
to imagine boats turning right
into Old Hill Iron Works

The winding ole where boats could turn
- another basin, Pearson Colliery.

Powke Lane Bridge

[closing accordion chord]

(Jon Jones)

“...yeh, the Neptune pub, and that awkward bend where you have to really swing the boat round ...”

(Ivor Chambers)

“Yeh, it 's a bit tight with a pair I tell yer. With 140 foot o' boat it's a bit tight. [Laughter] Absolutely in the last minute yer think yer gunna hit the towpath and then you, at the last minute you have to lock hard over, just a touch o' power and she'll come round and she lines up beautifully.”

[Chuckles]

[tinkly harp music & accordion chords]

Eliza Tinsley 1813 – 1882. A proper Black Country woman, Eliza was widowed in 1851, with 5 kids, but still managed to run her husband's company. Over twenty years she built up his small business to one employing more than four thousand people, making some of the world's longest chains. Still a going concern, the company spans three centuries

[accordion chords]

Garratts Lane Bridge

Tiger Chain Works, Fly Colliery,
Yew Tree Basin...

*When planners sliced through contours
to gouge a straighter, faster way
and built the monstrous Netherton,
the smaller tunnels sighed.*

*The earth itself was shaken
as water wove a path between
the collieries and claypits and
knew the land would slide,*

*that Brickhouse, Warren's Hall and Gawn,
Oldhill, Pearson's, Eagle, Lion
would soon yield to the thump of time –
the clatter would subside.*

[accordion chords]

Totnal Footbridge

Rowley, 1605. Rowley gained notoriety as the hiding place for Robert Wintour, one of the fleeing conspirators of the failed Gunpowder Plot. Caught and charged with high treason, he was hung, drawn and quartered.

Semi-rural landscape of abandoned coal tips
boats transporting coke
from the gasworks to the tube works

Funds from Europe paid for improvements
Europe wanted distance markers in kilometres not miles
And how do you think the public voted?

Right, one and a half mile, Bumble Hole. Half mile, Gorsty Hill, to the left.

Long gone glade ovens
turning out small coke for chain or
nail making shaps
of which there was many.

[Canada geese honking]

Colliery remnants: Waterfall Lane, Blackheath.
Lowes Timber Yard, Midland Railway Wharf.
Another colliery – Haden Hill

[accordion chords]

Waterfall Lane Bridge

A moorhen tells me
to look out for frolicking elephants,
says she'd heard from Eli Adams
that a circus truck
ran away down The Tump
and dumped the animals into the cut.

In the nineteen hundreds, visiting circus's elephants were found frolicking in the canal.

[machinery noises]

Smiths Bridge

Boaters beware! Kamikaze pigeons live here!

[pigeons cooing, bird song]

Well they ay pigeons,
lined up on the parapet
o' the bridge that once went
to Gosty Hill Colliery Arm.

Three birds in a row say:
Watch out for traffic on Station Road,
nip out an' in to the access bridge
that used to lead to the Sportsman and Railway
or was it the Wharf?

[accordion chords]

Wrights Bridge

Railway bridge

The Dudley No 2 canal was once the motorway of Black Country Industry, carrying thousands of boats a year. Built in the 1790's, it has seen the rise and fall of many ways of life and much change, but still carries on connecting people.

[accordion chords]

Gosty Hill Bridge

Thers a black 'ole ahead
[ghostly call]
and the ghostly remains of the boat house
where "George" the tunnel tug was kept.

[sounds of dripping, trickling water from the tunnel roof]

If yo'm on a boat
get ready for Gosty Hill Tunnel
If yo ay, yo'll atter goo up Station Road
wi' the oss

Iss Gosty versus Gorsty

(Richard Woodward) Depends whether you're above or below. The road is Gorsty and the tunnel is Gosty, up above it's written with and R and down below there's no R"

(Ivor Chambers) You look on any old map, very old maps, and it's spelled as Gosty.

(RW) Yeh, and all the tunnel labels are Gosty, but when you go up above ground on the road, then it's Gorsty Hill

Iss quite a pull up Station Road [*breathless from walking uphill*]
and yo wouldn't know
the cut was below...
till yo get to number 171
an yo might wonder woss gooin on!
Thers a huge pepperpot
right in front o' the house.
At Christmas time
yo might see it decked wi' fairy lights.
Yo might be thinking it doh 'alf look daft
Or yo might know it's a ventilation shaft

There's lots o' stories
about the cut and the tunnel below
Here's a few

Vivian Bird in the 1950s:

[sounds of dripping, trickling water from the tunnel roof]

"Twenty-five years ago you had to be a *boatman* on this stretch" said Mr King, the General Canal Foreman who was travelling with us. "It was full of boats." Mr King started work on the canal as a bricklayer's labourer, aged 14 in 1921, when he had to cycle from Walsall to Halesowen daily to work. He came from a canal family - father and grandfather had served before him. To take us through Gosty Hill Tunnel we were joined by Jack Brownhill, another canal character who had worked a tug through the tunnel for twenty-six years, and claimed to have pulled such trains that he's been half a mile away when the last boat cleared the tunnel. His cargoes included steel tubes, coal, chemicals, oils and spelter. Twenty-five years ago a boatman would take a load of twenty-five tons of Rowley roadstone from Rowley Quarries to Birmingham and return as one day's job.

At sight of the portal of Gosty Hill Tunnel I realised the reason for ballasting the boat well down. Would she possibly clear that small hole? I'd been in bigger sewers. We were all rather apprehensive, an apprehension which became a lively fear for the boat as she forced her way into the darkness. I crouched on the foredeck with several others, our hair and ears almost scraping the slimy bricks. We fended her bows off as best we could - no easy task as there was no room to spare. At reduced speed we crept along the 557 yard length for all the world like cruising along a sewer, even to the rather close atmosphere from the warm water which runs in at Stewart & Lloyds. One of our group later described the journey as feeling like being squeezed through a tube of toothpaste.

Dereliction, and campaigns for restoration...

In 1969 Sheila and Alan were entertaining
councillors on board their narrow boat, Laurel
and the locals spotted smoke
coming up through the air shaft.
Called the fire brigade!
Day know it was exhaust from an engine.
Had no idea that once the boat 'ad med it though the tunnel

there was other obstacles to contend with

(Sheila Smith)

And this particular occasion, we just wanted to take the councillors through and show them what it was like the other end and what the basin was like and everything, but entertain them with this meal on the way. Two or three ladies helped me to produce this three course meal. So we were doing grapefruit for starter, and then we did a ham salad for the main meal and then I think it was fruit salad or something like that for pudding. So quite simple really. But we hadn't got much room to sort of prepare all this stuff so we'd got all the grapefruit starters all ready to go on the table, I think they might have been on the table actually, and as we were going along with the councillors all on, we hit something under the water which tipped the boat up sideways and all these grapefruits in their dishes all slid off the table. [laughs]. I can remember standing, we were all standing like this, with our arms out like this. I think actually the cooker went over as well!

An' 'ow did they get through that tunnel
afore ther was engines?

(Ivor Chambers) You walk in the dark – how may steps it is between the 2 beams

inside an empty day boat
pushing on the roof with a wooden shaft

(IC) You walk in the dark

boots on tunnel walls
or walk wi' yer onds

[Sung – 2 female voices with accordion]
Ond over ond, we walk in the dark, leg over leg, ond over ond
[repeating, gradually fading]

Even now boats get stuck.
Even an engine sometimes ay enough.
1930s work boats,
Atlas and Malus know the tunnel well
Atlas has an engine,
Malus is the butty,
connected by a rope,
hundred an' forty foot from end to end

(Ivor Chambers) Well I got Atlas well and truly stuck in there, and I come to a complete standstill in the lowest section possible, and she wouldn't move – she wouldn't go forward, backwards or anythink. And there wasn't enough room to crawl up over the top planks to go and see what the problem was. Thank God I'd got the butty! So I told 'em all to leg the butty back as hard as they could and as the rope tightened up, the snatcher tightened, I then give Atlas a good shot of astern, and we moved about half an inch! Anyway, we pulled the butty back and we did it again, and the next time we moved about an inch and a half. [laughter]

(Jon Jones) Progress then!

(IC) ...and the next time it come free! And what it was, was a great Y-shaped branch had gone across under the bow and jammed each side the tunnel, and Atlas was sitting on it quite happily. If I'd been on my own, just Atlas on her own, I don't know what we woulda done.

We'm all right though ay we?
We'm up above, by the pepperpot.

The top of the 'ill,
some shaller steps,
and the oss path gently sloping down,
yo'll see the tunnel from the other end.

[Industrial hammering and tapping noises]

Boats bursting out o' that opening into light,
noise and activity, a hub of industry,
Stewarts & Lloyds

Marlene and Maureen's grandad
worked on the boats
from when they was pulled by osses,
and talking o' pulling,
he once fetched a young lad out
with his boat 'ook
down by the Sportsman's Bridge

Ken was a draftsman
Jan worked in wages
Frank's dad was a furnace bricklayer,
told him he used to jump in to cool off!

Pete and Adam remember the day
that no-one could find the forklift truck
till somebody spotted its rear axle
poking out from the oily cut.

Roger's got his stepdad's watch.
His name, Len Green, engraved on the back,
a just reward for 45 years –
foreman over the boats

[Sounds of water]

One of the boatmen was called Noah.
Did the works employ him
in case of floods?

Beverley used her mom's old tights,
catching sticklebacks, tiddlers
that had probably swum about
in between the nuts and bolts
and parts of machines that got chucked in

Christine could jump from one side to the other
where it was narrer.
Er couldn't do it now!

Jan and Eileen fed the cats round the factory site.
On Christmas Day the cats'd sit on the gratings, waiting,
feeling the warmth as the steam poured out.

Jane remembers a factory visit
for 'A' level Geography.
In just a few years the whole site
and many jobs had disappeared.

The skeleton brickwork misses its bridges,
the 'odge podge of buildings, busy and noisy.
Now there's little more than clues:
the derelict yard, the launchin' ramps
and just one solitary boat
laden wi' branches. Tree trunks
as close as yo'll get to steel tubes

[Accordion chord]

Coombes footbridge

[Tinkly harp music, accordion tune and chords]

In World War 2 the original bridge was destroyed
to prevent the enemy crossing the cut
Not that that'd a stopped 'em -
the waerter's only 3 feet deep!

Not much further we con goo now.
Coombeswood Colliery basin
A tramway, bringing coal from Hawne Colliery,
giving its name to Hawne Basin,
And when the cut at Mucklow Hill
was in-filled, built over, stanked off
this was the end of the line.

From Stourbridge to Birmingham,

*the old worn route through Windmill End
sucks in its sides at Gosty Hill
then pulls up short. Denied
a passage into Lapal,
it thirsts to stretch to Selly Oak
and onwards into Edgbaston.
Its tears have never dried.*

(Penny Clover) I'm reading from this canal log book, and it's in my father's handwriting.

"October the thirtieth, 1966. We went down the Dudley Canal line No 2 from Windmill Junction to Coombeswood, and then back again" (because its a dead end - at the end is Hawne Basin, but the Stewarts & Lloyd's factory used boats for transporting huge great long steel tubes between the No 1 works and the No 2 works. And this was in 1966.)

"We counted 73 boats including two tugs and one icebreaker called Antarctica at the No 1 Works, and rather more than 20 at the second works. There was one on stocks being repaired and one obviously just repaired. The rumours that Stewarts & Lloyd is discontinuing use of the canal apparently without foundation."

And actually Stewarts & Lloyds closed the following year, but 73 boats, and these were all what they call dumb boats, joey boats, they had no engine, they had no rudder, they were just a basic wooden boat that was used for transporting the tubes, and you'll see quite a few of them around. And when we went yesterday down to Hawne Basin the canal is still very muddy and shallow, and yes you get things round your propellor, we got horrible wire we had to cut off with bolt cutters, and the nice people at the Coombeswood Canal Trust lent us tools for getting wire off our propellor. So yes it's still a bad condition, but the wonderful thing is that Hawne Basin, which was previously semi-derelict, has now been made into a wonderful marina that seems a really nice club down there.

[Sung as before]

*Ond over ond, we walk in the dark, leg over leg, ond over ond
[repeating, gradually fading]*

The Netherton Cut to Coombs Wood, written and narrated by Heather Wastie who also played accordion and sang. Sound design by Sam Frankie Fox who also voiced the bridges. Mixing and mastering by Fox & Rocha. The voices of Ann Edwards, Tina Gittings, Sheila Smith and Penny Clover were recorded during our I Dig Canals project. Special thanks to Coombeswood Canal Trust, represented here by Jon Jones, Ivor Chambers and Richard Woodward. Roger Noons voiced Luke Perry's sculptures and Fabian Hiscock read from Vivian Bird's book 'By Lock and Pound'. Alarum Productions would like to thank everyone who contributed on Twitter, Instagram and Facebook, including the groups 'I remember Blackheath & Rowley Regis' and 'Love the Birmingham Canal Navigations'. Thanks also to the Sedgley Evening Townswomen's Guild, David Cooper, Steve King and Philip Adams. This project is supported by Creative Black Country (as part of Arts Council England's Creative People and Places scheme), Paycare and Black Country Living Museum.

[Closing accordion chord and sounds of dripping water]