

Reminiscences of the Dudley No.2 Line from the 1960's

Written by Nick Bate in May 2021

Set out below are my personal memories of the Dudley No.2 Line Canal between Windmill End Junction (Bumble Hole) and Hawne Basin, Halesowen. They date from the period 1960 – 1968 when I was aged between 9 and 17, and I freely admit that memory can play tricks and some of the recollections might be slightly incorrect. However, I hope that they are mostly correct, although fact-checking after this passage of time can be difficult.

I have prepared this commentary with the stretch of canal in front of me on screen via Google Earth as it appears today. It follows the canal logically from Windmill End to Hawne Basin. My comments are recollections from multiple excursions on foot or by bicycle during the 1960's, and my contemporary observations are added where appropriate.

The canal runs south-east, and the first bridge is Springfield Lane. This was a suicidal spot for driving a car because drivers approaching it from uphill used to race on to the bridge because the road on the downhill side dropped away dramatically, and it gave a thrill. It wasn't so thrilling if you happened to be coming the other way! This bridge is called Bullfield Bridge, and just uphill from the bridge on the left was Bullfield Farm, now commemorated by a residential street of that name in the area. I remember it as a very tumbledown farmstead, surrounded by an orchard-cum-scrapyard.

Moving on, the old industrial site on the right is now a new, large housing development. The cleared industrial buildings were constructed in the 1960's, on the site of even older factories from the Victorian era. I remember the start of construction, because I had never, before or since (I am a Civil Engineer by profession), seen a steam-operated piling hammer in use driving steel bearing-piles into the ground. This was very old-fashioned even at that time.

Along this section of canal there is a sudden narrowing or 'pinch-point' where a bridge has been removed. In the past Doulton's sanitary clayware works lay on both sides of the canal, and this bridge was part of their internal communication. I recall an old map calling it 'Alkali Bridge' and would therefore have reflected part of their industrial process at that location. My Great-Uncle Bill worked for Doulton's for most of his life, at one time hand-loading clay sewer pipes on to the canal boats in one of the arms serving the works.

The canal passes under Doulton Road Bridge, which was long ago, before the arrival of Doulton's, called Dog Lane. I recall on some maps the bridge is actually called Dog Lane Bridge. Incidentally, one of the funniest things I ever saw occurred in Doulton Road. It is a fairly steep hill which had typical terraced housing all along its south side. One of these houses kept pigs in the back yard, and the time had come to send them on their final journey by cattle-truck, which was parked ready to receive them at the front of the house.

Unfortunately there was no easy communication between the front and back of the house. The owner had therefore put down old newspapers on the floor, and men were driving the screaming, rioting pigs actually through the house and on to the ramp of the cattle truck. The pandemonium was something to witness!

The canal then runs southward, skirting the lower end of Brickhouse Estate. As a youngster I attended Brickhouse Primary School, and during lunch breaks a few of us used to sneak off and explore this area which, at the time, contained a lot of industrial dereliction, so it was the ideal kids' playground.

The pedestrian bridge in this area is called Hollis' Bridge. This is presumably after some local factory owner, although I have also heard it referred to as Sissy Bridge which is a complete mystery to me. Two pairs of railway track are still present of the bridge, so it must have once had a heavy industrial use.

On the right before Hollis' Bridge are various industrial buildings extending down to Lower Powke Lane. The buildings are now in multiple occupancy by various companies, but in the 1960's this was the BSR. Birmingham Sound Reproducers was a huge company, and this particular factory was one of many. It was started and run by Daniel McLean McDonald, an extremely dynamic and powerful businessman who would occasionally bring a touch of glamour to the area by arriving in the company's helicopter.

BSR in its heyday made most of the world's auto-changing turntables – according to Wikipedia in 1977 they made 87% of the market, or 250,000 units per week. Whatever make of record player you thought you had bought, it always had a BSR mechanism. These were assembled by an army of locally-employed women; my mother was one of them at various times. The light assembly work on the production line was excruciatingly boring, but the pay was good, so they would put up with it for as long as they could, then move on, but return to it later if money got tight.

Immediately after Hollis' Bridge the towpath goes over another bridge which spanned the entrance to the basin serving Old Hill Ironworks. This was owned by the Hingley family, although what the exact connection is with Hingley's of Netherton I do not know. When we were kids we called these 'the iron sheds' because that is what they were. Nearly all of the machinery had been removed, but the buildings remained. There was the old steam engine house in the middle, with the gaping hole of the flywheel pit to fall into, and the old forge crane was still there, with a chain hanging from it which made an ideal swing.

Just across the road in Lower Powke Lane was what we named 'the tunnel house'. This building once housed the steam-operated blowing engine which supplied the air blast to the adjacent Old Hill Furnaces. There were lots of narrow tunnels for us kids to crawl through, these being the blast air ducts to the furnaces. You can imagine the filthy states which we got in. We did not know what any of these installations were at the time; we were happy enough just to play in them.

Moving on, there is a triangular widening of the canal on the opposite side. This was the basin serving Pearson's Colliery. The next bridge is Powke Lane Bridge, which used to be a hump-backed bridge built with Staffordshire Blue engineering bricks, but was replaced in the 1980's with a concrete-beam bridge. Alongside this bridge is a large Victorian building, nowadays housing a convenience store and a fish-and-chip shop. This used to be The Neptune pub, always known as The Nep, a wonderful local enjoyed by me, my father, and my grandfather before him. It was originally built to serve the canal trade, and I can remember the stables were round the back for the towing horses.

Just a few yards further on you pass under Garratt's Lane Bridge immediately after which, on the opposite side, is the site of the old Rowley Regis Gasworks. No trace of this remains, the site now being occupied by a transport depot with a small garden centre on the corner by the traffic island. It was quite a small installation, and it seems surprising that this could supply gas to the whole neighbourhood. I recall that the company's office was in Birmingham Road, Blackheath.

Following on, the right hand side of the canal is occupied by industrial buildings, but the left side is now a managed area of green and pleasant parkland. This was not the case fifty years ago, when

the whole area was one of industrial dereliction from an earlier age when coal was king. The local mining industry largely collapsed in the 1920's when, as a result of the General Strike, the continuous pumping ceased, causing the mines to flood to the extent that they were not recoverable.

Between here and the next bridge were numerous collieries, bearing idiosyncratic names such as Eagle, Fly, Old Lion, Black Waggon. The 1901 Ordnance Survey map is invaluable in locating all of these. Each had its own canal basin except Black Waggon which was a little more distant on the far side of Wright's Lane; this and the Fly were both served by a private railway which delivered coal from them to The New British Iron Co. at Corngreaves. A basin on the opposite side of the canal served both the Eagle and an inclined plane which ran uphill, crossing Powke Lane just above the cemetery, turned to the right and continued upward to Yewtree Colliery at the top of the hill. As far as I can make out, this alignment was used to create the public footpath Victory Avenue.

The next bridge over the canal is Totnal Bridge, also known as the 'Stepping Bridge', presumably because it is a pedestrian bridge with steps both sides. Totnal Bridge picks up a footpath which descends steeply from the crest of Powke Lane just before it enters Blackheath, runs over the bridge, and continues onward down to Wright's Lane.

Below the bridge the path runs down a shallow valley, which today is a pleasant wooded walk. In past times this area was very out-of-the-way and home to a legendary community. This was Lion Road. It contained two rows of terraced houses, a pub named The Old Lion Inn, and the whole location was, not surprisingly, hard against the Old Lion Colliery. Lion Road's remoteness was assured because although Wright's Lane was only a few yards away it was effectively cut off by the double-track Bumblehole Branch of the Great Western Railway. Directly opposite the end of Lion Road was a footbridge over the line, but the only vehicular access was along a bumpy track which descended to the right from the end of Lion Road for 200 yards along the foot of the railway embankment. It then turned left under a low, narrow bridge below the railway into Wright's Lane.

It is therefore not surprising that the Lion Roaders, as they became known, formed a close-knit self-contained community, with a reputation for not welcoming outsiders. As children we never ventured there because you could be certain of rough-handling by the Lion Road kids. In the early 1970's when the Black Country Bugle was first published, the pseudonymous writer calling himself Aristotle Tump wove a whole series of spooky whimsical fantasies based around this area, in which the fearsome Lion Roaders played a prominent part.

After Totnal Bridge on the right (towpath) side of the canal is the Waterfall Lane Trading Estate. This was the site of Hadenhill (sic) Colliery No.1 Pit with its own basin. Also in this location was 'Barrs Bonk', the enormous pit waste mound formed of the spoil from the mines on that side of the canal. This was cleared in order to build the trading estate.

On the opposite side of the canal was Lowe Brothers Timber Yard where I had a Saturday and holiday job when I was a student. It was a large enterprise under the control of three generations of the Lowe family, and was in its later years absorbed by the even larger Manson group. It is now a pleasant canalside housing development named Manson Drive, although I think it is a pity that the Lowe name is not commemorated somehow because they controlled the site for much longer than did Manson.

After passing below Waterfall Lane Bridge the canal swings to the left around the council depot. This used to be a flooded marl-hole and the site of a mines drainage pumping engine – filled-in and

long gone. This section of canal has four more bridges in close proximity, and forms an interesting landscape in itself. One of these bridges carries the Stourbridge to Birmingham railway just before it enters Blackheath tunnel. This is quite a low bridge, and the road alongside the canal was lowered many years ago to enable single-decker buses to pass under, and it became noticeably lower than the level of the canal. The footbridge before the railway bridge led across to the Sportsman and Railway pub which is long gone, but further details can be found in my article dated 12 June 2016 which was published in the BCB (see below).

Finally, the canal disappears from view as it enters Gorsty Hill Tunnel. Spellings for this vary, as it is locally pronounced 'Gosty Hill', and the tunnel nameplate and canal maps use this spelling, although the name of the road above is 'Gorsty Hill'. On the left hand side of the tunnel portal there used to be a brickwork boathouse which at one time housed an electric tug which hauled boats through the tunnel.

To regain the canal you have to walk up and over Gorsty Hill, and half way up is the remarkable curiosity of a house with part of its front garden and the adjacent footpath being taken up with the blue brick structure of the canal tunnel vent shaft. On the other side of Gorsty Hill the land falls steeply away into Coombes Wood where there is a mixture of managed hilly parkland and industrial/commercial units. This was the site of Stewart and Lloyd's Coombeswood tube works, and when viewed from Gorsty Hill it took the form of a sea of black-painted corrugated iron roofs covering the entire floor of the valley. It seems remarkable that this was all swept away more than thirty years ago; my grandfather worked there all of his life, having a fifty-year framed certificate hanging on his living room wall.

Descending from the hill to the canalside is now like entering a pleasant sylvan glade. This was not the case in the 1960's when a friend and I walked that way; descending the slope down to the towpath was like entering the jaws of hell! This took you actually into the factory, and although it was a right-of-way you were in amongst the noise, smoke and dirt of the works. S&L actually used the canal for internal transport around the works, and it seems inconceivable nowadays that two small boys could be permitted to walk that way.

There is only one bridge along this stretch of canal, a footbridge taking the path over to the opposite side. However, there is a narrowing of the canal at this point indicating that it is the location of an earlier bridge. I read somewhere that there was a bridge in this area, but around 1940 when there was real fear of a German invasion, the army dynamited it to impede the progress of enemy troops.

That boyhood walk was my only visit to this stretch of canal, and I recall that we walked past Hawne basin as far as Mucklow Hill Where the way was barred by a factory yard. My friend and I therefore turned around and walked all the way back to Brickhouse. If our parents had known how far we had roamed they would have gone mad!

Nick Bate, May 2021

Letter published in Black Country Bugle, 12 June 2016

Dear Mr. Editor,

I read with interest John Workman's article in your issue of the 11th. May concerning the Sportsman and Railway Inn, later known as The Wharf, in Station Road, Old Hill. This area still fascinates me, as it remains such a semi-rural enclave in an otherwise very built-up area.

My fondest recollections go back to circa 1970, when the proprietor of the pub was a man named Denis. I think I have spelt it correctly, but although he might have been Denys, his name was definitely not Dennis, and I cannot recall his surname. He was a pleasant, affable man who ran a very good clean basic pub, typical for its time. It was always good fun and conversation in there, and in those days I only ever drank a couple of halves, so I often drove there in my first car, a 1956 Austin A30.

Sadly not long afterwards Denis died, and the pub remained unoccupied and boarded-up for a long time until it was later re-born as The Wharf, with a large dining conservatory added at its east end. As John Workman's article states, the pub's final end was a sad affair. After running for several years it was closed for some considerable time and eventually succumbed to a fire. There are some very poignant photographs on Google Earth showing it in its final derelict state.

There were two ways to approach the 'Sportsman', as it was always colloquially known. The first was over the small bridge crossing the canal directly opposite, and this is still there just a few yards to the west of the railway bridge. This bridge consists of brickwork abutments with steel girders making the span over the water, covered with timber boarding as a running surface (more on that later).

The other approach was, in its way, more unusual. A hundred yards to the north is the residential street Grange Road, which is entered from Waterfall Lane. Before the present houses were built (long before my time) it was known locally as 'Tory Street'. Part-way along Grange Road there is, on its south side, a gap between two of the houses which is slightly wider than similar gaps between the other houses. This was the entrance to a rough track which was the vehicular entrance to the Sportsman. It always surprised friends if I drove then to the pub this way, because it was such an unexpected approach, particularly as between the track and the adjacent council depot there was a small field which contained goats – the last thing you expected in this part of the world. This route via the track from Grange Road and over the canal bridge still serves as a useful pedestrian shortcut between Waterfall Lane and Station Road, although the goats are, of course, long gone.

In Denis' day there was an interesting legal foible to this route. At the end of the track you had to make a left turn into the pub forecourt, which was bordered by a low brick wall with a pair of gateposts forming the entrance. Across this entrance there was a traditional single-bar turnpike barrier, which was always swung back against the wall and locked in the open position. That is until Christmas Day, which was the one day a year when Denis officially closed-off the route. I suppose he chose that day because it is easy to remember. The purpose of this was to make a token closure of the route for the required one day per annum in order to prevent it from becoming a 'de facto' common-law Right of Way.

Let us go back to the canal bridge. One evening I did not feel like driving around Grange Road to get to the Sportsman, so I decided to drive over the bridge. This is accessed by a very steep V-shaped slip-track which throws you on to one side or the other of the bridge, depending on your direction of approach. We approached from the Old Hill direction, and after much creaking and groaning of the timbers below, we arrived on the forecourt of the Sportsman. My mate (who was terrified by the experience) then walked back to the bridge to see exactly what we had just come across when, with a yell, he fell through the boarding.

He avoided a ducking in the canal by grabbing on to the handrail. It appeared that the boarding on the bridge had been renewed over one half of its width but not, by then, on the other half. By pure chance I had come from the direction which sent my car on to the good side, not the rotten side. Another friend told me later that the bridge was officially out of use and dangerous, although there was nothing to tell you of this.

Sometimes I wonder how I survived my youth.

Nick Bate