

Trains and Boats, and Planes

Transport at Bumble Hole and Windmill End, Netherton, over the years

The 1965 popular song “Trains and Boats and Planes” names the three modes of transport whose remains are all in evidence at Windmill End, Netherton, and one of these modes of transport is still in use for recreational purposes. I am not going into any technical or historical detail, as there are many people who know much more than I do about these subjects, but I hope that this article will prompt some responses.

The 1901 Ordnance Survey map (available from Black Country Bugle) is very helpful, as is the 1945 aerial photography on Google Earth, and I have used these as a basis to expand upon my personal recollections. Another interesting source is the YouTube movie (google Rowley Regis Canal) put together by Mike Smith from photographs which he took in 1962. This is around the time when I knew the area well because my friends and I used to play there. Numbers in the following text refer to reference numbers which I have added to an extract from the 1901 OS map.

The first form of transport to arrive was the boats. The canal from Stourton on Brindley’s Staffordshire and Worcestershire canal ran via Stourbridge and through Dudley tunnel to join the Birmingham canal. This route was later extended to the east by other Engineers, beginning with Josiah Clowes in 1794, to become the Dudley No.2 Line running from Parkhead Locks at the south end of Dudley tunnel, through Rowley Regis, Halesowen and Lapal tunnel (behind the present Black Horse pub/restaurant on Manor Way) and onward to Selly Oak, joining the Worcester and Birmingham canal. It was the original Birmingham Bypass, and avoided the queue to go through Dudley tunnel, which could take up to an astonishing two weeks, and was a severe bottleneck.

To avoid the use of locks the new Dudley No.2 Line followed the contours, and at Bumble Hole it took a long loop around the valley to then run southward towards Halesowen, passing below the bridge carrying Dog Lane, nowadays called Doulton Road.

Later improvements followed with the construction of Netherton Tunnel, completed in 1858, finally relieving the paralysing bottleneck of Dudley Tunnel, which had been only slightly improved by the No.2 line to Selly Oak. This was the M1 of canal tunnels, with towpaths both sides and gas lighting, which was later upgraded to electric lighting powered by a small-scale hydro-electric generator. The generator was situated at the Tividale end of the tunnel, and took its driving head of water from the upper level of the canal which crossed the tunnel branch on an aqueduct. The brick hut in which the turbo-generator was housed can still be seen.

In order to provide an easier access to Netherton Tunnel, and to shorten the route, the canal was straightened, cutting off the Bumble Hole loop at its root with a new direct stretch of canal. This was created on a built-up embankment supported by massive brickwork abutments which are a modern-day feature. The Bumble Hole loop therefore immediately became redundant, no doubt much to the relief of the boatmen. The 1901 OS map shows that part of the canal loop had by then been built-over by the Windmillend (sic) Boiler Works, which itself is shown by that time as disused (1). The Bumble Hole loop therefore became merely a dead-end arm of the canal. Interestingly, the map also shows what appears to have been a sub-loop off the Bumble Hole Loop serving Windmillend Colliery, part of the route of which was subsumed by the later construction of the railway (2).

In the 1960’s there was a functioning boatyard actively trading on the Bumble Hole arm, which was the home of “Bumblebee”, the narrow boat which belonged to Rowley Regis Grammar School. I was one of this boat’s crew in the 1960’s, but that is another story. Later there was a nightclub on the site, along with an ornamental windmill, the shell of which still remains (3).

The second transport arrival at Windmill End was the railway. There is a complicated commercial history to the West Midlands railways, but what became known as the ‘Bumble Hole Line’ ultimately came under the control of the Great Western Railway. The structures and fittings along the line were typical Great Western. A particular example of this was the level crossing in Cox’s Lane, Old Hill, which could have been somewhere on a branch line in Somerset were it not for the surrounding houses and factories.

There was no such rusticity at Windmill End. The railway slashed like a sabre across the canal junction with no regard to anything other than pure function, which was understandable at the time. It passed over the tunnel branch of the canal, and then over the Halesowen branch, with two stark, ugly girder bridges dwarfing the cast-iron footbridges. They were high-sided structures coated with bituminous paint, and were so low over the towpaths that you could not ride a bicycle under them, having to dismount and push (4). The Mike Smith photographs show the looming presence of these bridges and the general dereliction of the area in 1962. At that time the ground surfaces were all black pit-waste, the water was polluted, and the iron bridges were corroded and generally dilapidated.

Today the well-preserved and painted footbridges are an attractive focal point, whilst ducks, geese and herons inhabit the area, which is now part of Warrens Hall Park. It is green and pleasant nowadays, in contrast to the stark, post-industrial dereliction which I remember from childhood in the 1960's. The two abutment walls of the bridge over the Netherton Tunnel branch can still be seen, although those for the other bridge over the Halesowen branch, along with Windmill End Halt and the railway embankment southward, have been completely obliterated and no obvious traces remain. Northward, towards Baptist End, the alignment of the railway continues as an attractive tree-lined walk.

Let us go back to 'Trains and Boats and Planes', and the final part of this trilogy. Not, of course, aircraft but the inclined planes that brought the minerals of the Rowley Hills down to the canal for onward transportation all over the country:

These were engineered slopes, set to a fairly constant gradient, carrying tracks upon which trucks were hauled by cable. Some were hauled by a steam engine at the top, whilst others were balanced devices with two trucks on the end of a single cable going round a horizontal pulley at the top. With these the heavier descending truck hauled-up the lighter ascending one. The gravity-driven 'balanced' devices needed a passing-loop halfway, and as this might not necessarily be shown on the map it is unclear which types were in use here.

Going towards Halesowen along the canal from Windmill End Junction, the first of these planes descended to the large, rectangular basin on the north side of the canal. When I was a youngster the basin was a boats' graveyard, crowded with sunken narrow-boats. It has since been cleared of much of this earlier wreckage, and is now a pleasant small lake used by fishermen (5).

On the left i.e. west side of the basin the incline ascended for a distance of only about 300 yards to Warrens Hall Colliery. Close inspection of the map shows that the haulage-way was a twin-track arrangement serving a network of tracks running around the three sides of the basin. The sharpness of the curves suggests that it was a small-scale coal-tub system rather than a truck-based one.

To the left of this route was the unsightly, bleak, pit-waste mound which I knew as "The Blowco" (6). I learned only recently that this name was a corruption of "Blow-Cold Hill", and it still lives up to its name for much of the year, although now it is a pleasant, wooded hillock in summer. Mike Smith's photographs show it as I remember it at that time.

Further along the canal towards Dog Lane Bridge (Doulton Road) were two more inclined planes, of possibly greater interest. These docked one on each side of a small arm of the canal which extended northwards into Doulton's pottery (7).

The plane on the left side of the arm ran up the hill to Knowle Colliery on the uphill side of the Dudley Road at Springfield, just along from the Royal Oak public house. The track crossed Springfield Lane on a bridge, and although I can remember it from childhood I did not know its purpose at that time, thinking that it was just some sort of derelict railway. Springfield Lane had once been very populous with many houses along its north side, but as kids in the 1960's we just enjoyed playing in the derelict properties during the short time interval between vacation and demolition (8).

The other plane, which ascended from the right hand side of the Doulton arm, served Hailstone Quarry. It took a right-hand swerve before it reached Springfield Lane, running onward and upward to enter a short tunnel a short

distance down from Bayley's Post Office to take it under the Dudley Road and up to the quarry itself. My pals and I tried to explore it, but a short distance inside the tunnel a brick wall had been built to block it off (9).

The area has thus come full circle from rural peace, leading into the start of the industrial revolution with the coming of the canals. Industrialisation continued relentlessly, the railways arrived and the landscape was turned into a vast hive of mining, quarrying and general industrial activity. In due course these declined, the railway disappeared, and the area settled into its third phase of post-industrial dereliction which I remember from my childhood. Finally the landscape potential of the area was realised, and it entered its present phase of managed landscape for recreation and conservation, and of the three types of transport only the first one, the canal, remains.

Written by Nick Bate, January 2017 for Black Country Bugle