

# Gigmill Primary School 2021

## 1) How do you expect canals to evolve in the future?

I see a bright future for them for two reasons in particular. First they are now an integral part of our community infrastructure. By that I mean canals are now used for a wide range of purposes other than just boats or fishing. Many towpaths now carry fibre-optic cables, some canals are Sites of Special Scientific Interest, some are used for hydroelectric power generation (I have actually been inside the one at Dudbridge built by Cotswolds Canals Trust); the list is a long one and is a far cry from when they were just used principally for transport. Second, they are part of a wider, more general development of community health and well-being. This is part of Government initiatives for 'well-ness' and canals provide a haven for relaxation, exercise and stress relief. Doctors are now even prescribing something like a walk along a peaceful canal to help counter depression and anxiety, rather than the use of medication. The use of waterways has changed beyond imagination within just a few years; remember it was not so very long ago that there were calls for them to all be filled in because they were no longer of use. Fortunately the restoration movement prevented this happening and, more recently, the transfer of control from the old British Waterways to the new Canal & River Trust in 2012. Learn more about CRT here: <https://canalrivertrust.org.uk/about-us>

## 2) What made the Industrial Revolution so revolutionary?

This is a broad question but essentially it was a period when our country turned on a huge scale – and in quick time – from a rural economy to an industrial one. Small hamlets became large towns and cities as population increased rapidly by birth rate and the influx of people from 'off the land'. We were amongst the first countries to industrialise in this way and we became 'the workshop of the world'. Different parts of the country had their specialities, like cotton mills in the north. Our area attracted heavy industry and manufacturing and it is often said that if something wasn't made in Birmingham and The Black Country then it wasn't made anywhere in the world. The problem is there are no rivers on the Birmingham plateau that could be developed to carry all the raw material in and finished goods out. The canals were the answer, so it can be said that the industrial revolution as we know it would not / could not have been possible without our canals.

## 3) How many canals have you been on?

I don't think there are many that I haven't been on in one way or another. Certainly every single one in this area and many of the others around the rest of the UK. I have variously steered my own boats, steered commercially for others, operated trip boats, canoed or used a coracle. (I used to make coracles at Bewdley Museum). For some years I was review & Special Features Editor for a monthly waterways magazine so I also walked or cycled down some to write about them and take images. I also specialised in derelict waterways that were out of use or maybe didn't even exist any more. I have also visited most of the Scottish and Welsh waterways and spent several years actually working on the restoration of the Montgomery Canal in Wales. I have steered a trip boat around Manhattan in New York USA. In the 1990s I was Publicity Officer for the Lapal Canal Trust near Halesowen, and it was for this work I went for my MBE at Buckingham Palace. And if you click the link you will find my guided walk along the Stourbridge Canal that I completed with the Royal Geographical Society. It was work such as this with them that led to me recently being appointed a Fellow of the Society so I am now also allowed to put 'FRGS' after my name as well as 'MBE', which makes me very proud. So, all of this exploring of canals over the years has been very rewarding to me, both professionally and personally.

<https://www.discoveringbritain.org/activities/west-midlands/walks/stourbridge-canal.html>

## 4) Can a canal boat go on the sea?

Yes, but you really have to know what you are doing and it is certainly not for the inexperienced, so not many people do it. There is a man named Chris who crossed the channel in his (specially adapted) narrowboat to deliver waterways petitions to Brussels. He believed it carried so much more effect if he turned up with a petition about canal restoration in an actual boat, rather than submitting it by post.

### **5) Are new canal boats good for the environment?**

If you are thinking here about pollution, global warming and those sorts of issues then the answer is definitely yes. Boats are increasingly being powered by battery rather than internal combustion engines. At the moment their range is limited but this will improve with battery technology and charge-point infrastructure. There is a man I know, a Professor at the University of Birmingham, who is developing a hydrogen fuel-cell where the discharge is pure water that can go straight into the canal as the boat goes along. There are also aspects on the design of the boat that can, for example, help reduce 'drag' on the hull and thus both reduce its effect on the canal bed and also improve fuel efficiency.

### **6) Do you think locks will be powered by electricity in the future?**

I do indeed; in fact some are already, as are some of the bridges that cross the canal (eg. Shirley lift bridge on the Northern Stratford Canal). The reason for electrification is not only a question of efficiency but also of costs. Manpower to operate locks is not cheap; however, the formation of CRT has seen a huge uptake in volunteers, many of whom help out at locks for no pay. Many of the locks on the 'narrow canals' are operated by the boater and crew but there are some locks, especially on 'commercial' waterways like the River Severn, that merit some sort of attendance for safety reasons in their current form.

### **7) How long did/does it take to build a canal?**

Hmmm ... they vary and there is no specific set time. But I can give you a local example. The Stourbridge Canal took 3 years to build in total, opening in 1779. The sections were built by ostensibly separate companies, a clever ruse by the promoter John 2nd Viscount. The tale is described on page 19 of my book *Jewels on the Cut 2* so I'll skip over that bit here. (see note below). However, it was the case that the long section from Stewponey to Stourbridge Junction took 3 years, whilst the much shorter section from the Junction to Delph also took 3 years. The reason? The longer section is mostly sandstone and easily worked; the shorter section passed through a different substrate and was riddled with coal mines – much harder to build on. The Montgomery Canal is another example; its completion was delayed along the southern section to Newtown by the Napoleonic Wars, so even the best laid plans can be affected by external events.

### **8) How or who inspired you to a life on the canals?**

I am often asked this and always offer the same answer ... as for 'how' then being born and bred in the Black Country (I spent all my life there until I moved to the Welsh border a few years ago) I was surrounded by the things. Love them or hate them, you couldn't be indifferent to them. I just happened to love them and became fascinated with how they were built, who made them and where did they go. In 1966 I went on my first narrowboat trip and was completely 'hooked'. I decided then that when I could I would buy my own narrowboat. I have since owned 5 and steered many more of all shapes and sizes. For around 10 years I was Captain of *Oliver Cromwell*, a huge Mississippi-style paddle-wheeler operating out of Gloucester. Some while after I left she sank and I was very sad for a while that I had lost my ship. Details are here if you would like to know more click the link and scroll down to 'A heartbrekaing tale': <https://grahamfisher.co.uk/bits>

As for 'who' then may parents, naturally, who encouraged me in everything I do. My mom is approaching 90, still lives with me and still supports me in everything. Outside my family then I think someone very influential was a man called Wesley Perrins (look him up on the internet – he is there) whom I met when he visited my school – rather like I do with Gigmill – in the 1960s. I still remember his passion and enthusiasm for everything Black Country and I remember thinking 'I would like to do that' So I did. He was very inspirational, even though I can now barely remember him.

### **9) What was the average 10/11 year old doing in Victorian times?**

If they were part of a canal family living on a boat then not much schooling, for sure! As soon as they were old enough (and 10-11 would certainly be considered old enough for both boys and girls) they would be helping on the boats – probably at that age they would be tending to the horses and general duties; they would not yet be strong enough to steer a fully laden boat. So, through no fault of their own, they lived in harsh condition (in the 19th C laws were introduced to limit the number of adults and children that could legally live in a rear cabin) and they were poorly educated. I have a friend in his 80s now named Joe who still works on the canals.

He was born on a boat and has worked them all his life; he never went to school and so to this day he cannot read or write. Victorian children could receive a rudimentary education for a few hours a week here and there at a canalside Boater's Mission. These were run by charities and philanthropists. If you go to the former mission at Walsall alongside the locks you can see a plaque in the wall where it was opened at the start of the 20th C by a man named Cadbury. If that name sounds familiar, it is the same Cadbury who made the chocolate. The Cadbury family were Quakers and their religion meant they helped others less fortunate. Unfortunately, the missions were often next door to public houses (the one next to the mission at Walsall used to be the New Navigation) so given the choice between a Mission and a Pub next door it is not surprising where the parents tended to end up.

**10) Where is the most picturesque canal system you've seen?**

This is very much a matter of personal choice but one of the prettiest canals you will see is the Montgomery which runs (or used to before it became derelict in 1936) for just under 36 miles from the English border down to Newtown in Wales. It is beautiful, but for different reasons I am also very fond of the Stourbridge Canal. (I have written books about it and kept my boats there for over 25 years).

**11) Where is the longest canal route?**

Ah, there are hundreds of navigable canals that you can use as a 'route' and nowadays 'cruising rings' are very popular with holidaymakers so by this I presume you are asking 'what is the longest canal'. It depends on the country, and also how you view it. In England the Grand Union is claimed to be the longest. Its main line starts in London and ends in Birmingham, stretching for 137 miles with 166 locks. It has arms to places including Leicester, Slough, Aylesbury, Wendover and Northampton. But this is a bit misleading because the Grand Union was originally a series of canals owned by differing companies that all merged together – so is it really just one canal? Now go over to China where you will find the Grand Canal which is said to date back 4000 years in parts. It was originally around 4000 miles long; about 1000 miles are still in use.

**12) Are you aware of any ancestors from the industrial revolution?**

I have never actually checked my own genealogy but I bet there were one or two somewhere along the line; in fact I would be surprised if there weren't. When boats were in their heyday many 'working class' families either had members or relatives involved somewhere on boats. I do know that my father was an engineer and his forebears were mostly factory workers and manual labourers – I was the first one in my family to ever obtain a Degree and my parents supported me because they recalled how rough life was for them when they were my age. This is a most interesting question and I may indeed take a closer look at my own roots.

**13) What inspired you to research canals and the Black Country?**

I think this ties in nicely with my answer to Question 8; I have a passion for the Black Country and am immensely proud of what it has achieved in the past, what it is contributing to our national culture right now and how we must continue this in the future. Although I have studied and worked on canals all over the country and beyond the ones in this area still have a special fascination for me. And there are so many of them!

**14) Who decided that canals should be built in our area and how long did it take to persuade the locals?**

Ah, now, this is a real mixed bag. Until nationalization of the waterways on 1st January 1948 I can think of only 2 canals that were Government-owned; The Royal Military Canal in the south east of England (now a SSSI as I mentioned earlier that some are) and the Caledonian Canal in Scotland that was funded by proceeds of the Forfeited Land Act following the Jacobite revolution. All of the others – and there were lots – were privately owned and served the purposes of their owners. They were created by promoters who were keen to promote their own interests – usually the making of lots of money – and they would need to obtain an 'Enabling Act' through Parliament. Sometimes the adjacent landowners were supportive if it suited their purpose but others would raise fierce objections, especially if the canal threatened the water supply to their mills or the new canal would reduce traffic on their existing canal.

An example of a very clever promoter around here is the aforementioned John 2nd Viscount Dudley & Ward (see Question 7). Many canals, particularly in the Midlands carried coal to fire furnaces but they were also used for everything else from agricultural produce to weapons. I have even seen an old picture of a canal boat being used to deliver small cars.

**15) What is the current value of Wedgwood pottery?**

Antique or modern? The newer items start fairly reasonable for the quality of the product; a shop near me has a bowl for around £40 for example. If you go to the antique stuff then I have seen items at auction going for tens of thousands of pounds.

**16) What was the original piece of glass produced at the glassworks?**

I am not quite sure what is meant by this question but I believe it may be linked to question 15 above. The Portland Vase is a piece of Roman cameo glass that lies in the British Museum. It is priceless. It was replicated in the 19th C in glass at a glass factory in Wordsley when around the same era Wedgwood also made a pottery version. It was replicated again in glass at the Ruskin Centre, Amblecote in 2012. The full story of this is in my book *The 2012 Portland Vase Project*. I hope that answers the 'original piece of glass produced at the glassworks' aspect. Truth is, there have any number of original pieces been produced at our glassworks but The Portland Vase stands out as particularly innovative. (see below)

**Notes:**

I have made reference here to a couple of my books where you will find further information:  
*Jewels on the Cut (II)*. published 2017 (an upgraded edition of version I, published 2010)  
*The 2012 Portland Vase Project .... replication of a masterpiece. published 2012*  
There are copies in your school library.