

Coventry Canal: a towpath arts trail



Three examples of the imaginative artwork and sculpture to be found alongside the towpath in Coventry

Britain's longest outdoor art gallery helps interpret local heritage and canal history

Like so many urban waterways the Coventry Canal combines industrial heritage and recent development with open spaces and areas of nature conservation interest. The nine kilometre length between Coventry Canal Basin and Hawkesbury Junction, where it meets the Oxford Canal, has seen substantial improvements over the last twenty years, including towpath works, access points, signage and regeneration of derelict sites next to the waterway.

A canalside arts trail now compliments these enhancements and the towpath provides the setting for almost 40 installations which have been created by 31 different artists from the UK and overseas. Many of the pieces, which range in scale from small seats to larger than life sculptures, reflect the social and cultural heritage of the canal, and efforts were made to involve local people. Older residents, for example, were invited to share their memories from the days when the canal was a thriving commercial artery.

Specific features include a bronze statue of canal engineer James Brindley and a mosaic map of the canal (both located by the Basin), a heritage marker which celebrates the first car factory in the UK, and a sculpture which commemorates the work of the canal navvies through depiction of the simple tools used by the early canal builders. The old local boating families are represented by a couple of steel sculptures which pay tribute to the people who lived and worked on the barges. Other themes include waterway wildlife - birds and fish - whilst some items are simply designed to bring a smile.

Towpath access points are signalled by a series of tall steel markers, each of which carries a quotation from a local person. These also reflect local history and heritage: "The night of the Blitz, a bomb dropped in the canal – water went all over the houses"; "In the mist the barges would suddenly appear like a monster."

The trail was coordinated by the local Groundwork Trust, Coventry City Council and British Waterways, with private sector representation on a steering group. Arts Lottery funding was secured, matched from other sources, and the whole project took around four years to complete. A colourful guidebook was produced and interpretation panels erected along the way. Thankfully, most of the artworks have proved to be largely resistant to vandalism or abuse.