

ORIGINS OF THE STAFFORD RIVERWAY LINK

The Stafford Riverway Link is the present name of the former Sow Navigation otherwise known as the Stafford Branch of the Staffordshire & Worcestershire Canal.

In the 1990s there was very little information available about the Stafford Branch. In those days, even waterways guide books for boaters and walkers either made no mention of the Branch or just made a passing reference, usually a sentence or two to the effect that Stafford was “formerly connected with the main line of the Staffordshire & Worcestershire Canal by a mile-long branch entered via Baswich Lock” and that the “branch consisted of a canalised section of the River Sow and became derelict during the early 1920s.” Most passing boaters on the main line would fail to notice the unobtrusive overflow weir at Baswich where the Junction had been and those that did notice would know no more than the brief comment in the guide books. Some may have wondered about two very small sections of wall along the towpath (the remains of an abutment wall of a bridge), and the more adventurous may have noticed traces of brickwork (of the basin wall) as they used the public footpath by a hawthorn hedge, while carefully avoiding the cows and cow pats in the field. As for the route of the waterway into Stafford, it was a pleasant, picturesque, forty-minute walk alongside the River Sow, with no obvious tell-tale signs of its former use; there were some bridges to go under and in Stafford the Canal Wharf and channel had long gone. Local people seemed oblivious of Stafford's waterways heritage.

But some people remembered. Experienced boaters would have been aware of three publications which had more information – Hadfield's *Canals of the West Midlands*, Langford's *Towpath Guide to the Staffordshire & Worcestershire Canal* and Bradshaw's 1904 *Canals and Navigable Rivers of England and Wales*.

In the early 1990s the Stafford Branch was sometimes mentioned in the Lounge at Wolverhampton Boat Club by members reminiscing about cruising the Staffordshire & Worcestershire Canal in the 1960s and 1970s, and there was regret that photographs had not been taken.

This talk of a lost navigation inspired a group of enthusiasts to take action and, in conjunction with Stafford Boat Club, a meeting of interested people was held there on 14 February 1997. They concluded that restoration ought to be viable – and compared with other restoration schemes, the route of the Stafford Branch was quite short, only a mile and a half.

Five people attended that inaugural meeting and a committee was formed: the late Keith Boardman from Stafford Boat Club (he offered secretarial help and publicity through his Company) and four from Wolverhampton Boat Club – Bob Bowden (Minutes Secretary), Norman Cooper (Vice Chairperson), David Jones (Chairperson and Research & History) and the late Geoff Walker. The group was originally called the *Stafford Branch Navigation Heritage Trust* and the name, *Stafford Riverway Link*, was adopted in 2003. The first few meetings were at Stafford Boat Club and then at Wolverhampton Boat Club until around 2009 when they reverted to Stafford Boat Club when the group became a Community Interest Company. The acorn had been planted and the rest, as they say, is history.

Further information about the SRL is on the website: www.stafford-riverway-link.co.uk

David Jones, March 2022.
