

THE SERENE STRATFORD

Liveboard boater **Colin Dobson-Fox** relives the recent pleasures of an out-of-season cruise from Birmingham to Bancroft Basin

A misty morning in Lowsonford.

After 16 years of boating, I still anticipate a dramatic change in scenery every time we cruise onto a new waterway. Today is different though. It's only two years since we last made this approach towards King's Norton Junction from Birmingham. It's barely changed in over 200 years, except for the sad sight of the 18th-century Junction House that is now draped in plastic sheeting after being set alight in February 2019.

Entering the north Stratford

My partner Shaun has never made this left turn from King's Norton Junction Bridge onto the north section of the Stratford Canal in one go. His look of determination quickly turns into concentration. The tip of his tongue appears in the corner of his mouth as he moves into reverse gear, a blast on the bow-thruster and an expression of disappointment. Oh, well, maybe next time!

Our destination, the end of the canal at Stratford-upon-Avon, is 25 miles and 55 locks away – 56 if we want to go onto the River Avon.

The Stratford Canal was originally meant to be level with

the Worcester & Birmingham Canal, but it sat 6in higher for many of its early years. King's Norton Stop Lock was built to protect the level. It's said that this cast iron guillotine-gated design is unique, and you can still see the original chains and gearings, although it's somewhat spoiled by the graffiti daubed all over it.

Shaking off Birmingham

A cutting funnels us towards the only tunnel on the canal and a young swan glides ahead of us at the bow, leading us to Brandwood Tunnel. The swan makes a sharp turn at the last second to avoid being drawn into the darkness with us. As our bow disappears into the obscurity of the structure, William Shakespeare looks down from a stone engraving above the portal. Emerging from the east side, it's easy to be fooled into thinking we've moved out of the suburbs and into the countryside, but within seconds a couple of tower blocks appear to remind us that



Preston Bagot.

we're still on the outskirts of Birmingham.

Yardley Wood visitor moorings at Bridge 5 boast a water point, shops and fish & chips within walking distance, and a decent internet signal. But something doesn't feel right and while Shaun is tying off the ropes we see a couple of hooded lads, faces hidden, lurking in the shadows under the bridge, giving our boat the once-over.

A friendly gentleman, wearing the brightest high-visibility jacket I've ever seen, comes over and warns us that we shouldn't stay here for more than a few minutes because "the wrong 'uns will crawl out of the woodwork". We decide not to chance it and slip away from the mooring, the lads under the bridge staring like hunters watching helplessly as their prey escapes.

"Within seconds a couple of tower blocks remind us that we're still on the outskirts of Birmingham"



Passing beneath the M40 motorway on the Lapworth flight.

Rural cruising

Within a mile the suburban sprawl thins out and glimpses of open countryside appear as we cross the River Cole on Major's Green Aqueduct. I smile at Shaun because I know what's around the corner. 'Shirley Drawbridge' always makes me grin because it sounds like the perfect alter-ego for a working-class comedian's drag act. In reality, it is an electronic lift-bridge right next to the Drawbridge pub. It's quiet today but when the sun is out it's a gongoozling hotspot and a great place to moor if you fancy some refreshment.

We duck under Whitlock's End Railway Bridge, which carries the line from Stratford-upon-Avon to Birmingham. The station is just a few minutes walk from here, ideal if you need to nip back to the city. It's a quiet spot too, perfect for mooring overnight if you don't mind the noise of the trains.

Clinging to the southernmost part of the Borough of Solihull is Dickens Heath. This tiny rural hamlet was transformed into an ultra-modern village and opinions are split on the development. As we pass by it reminds me of those apartment blocks you'd see on the Spanish Costas. Lines of balconies, tiled plazas and waterfalls. The only thing missing is the boat pulling a paraglider along the cut, although I doubt they'd be airborne for long at 4mph.

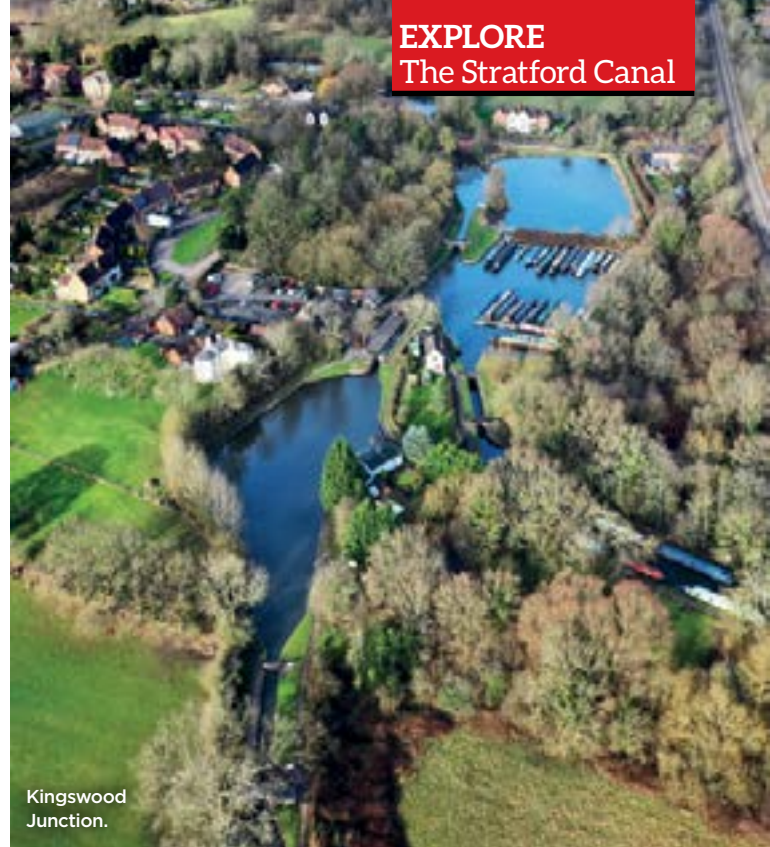
Welcome sustenance

Just after Lady Lane Bridge is the Earlswood Reservoir feeder arm. There's a lovely walk from here up to the three-pools that make up the reservoir, and from a certain angle on the map they look like a pair of denim jeans. No? Just me? It's also comical to watch irate car drivers lose their tempers over who has right of

way on the single lane that runs along the water's edge. Take a flask, some sandwiches and enjoy the bickering.

The towpath here isn't great. Months of rain, walkers, runners, horses and bikers have churned up an ankle-deep thick gloop. We intend mooring near the Blue Bell pub but instead we carry on to tie up just before Dyer's Lane Bridge in Illshaw Heath where the towpath is dry and mouthwateringly close to the canal's famous bakery. We spend far too much in Wedges Bakery by Bridge 20 and gain what feels like twice our bodyweight as we work through huge quantities of fresh bread, cheese, and who knows how many chocolate cream eclairs. My justification is that I am building my strength for the 54 locks down to Stratford-upon-Avon – today's mission is to complete the 26 locks of the Lapworth Flight in one day. But first, one more chocolate eclair...

They say you should warm up before strenuous exercise and the two windlass-operated lift-bridges at Hockley Heath



Kingswood Junction.

do just that. I try counting how many turns it takes to lift each one but a kingfisher distracts me on the first and an impatient lady shouting at me to hurry up makes me lose count on the second. With my arms burning, Lapworth Top Lock is just a few minutes away. Time to burn off those chocolate eclairs!

Lapworth Locks

These single locks aren't too difficult, apart from the heavier bottom gates, and if you need to rest you can take five at Lock 5 to lean on the wall overlooking Lapworth Cricket Club and catch your breath. Around the corner by Lock 7 is Lapworth Turnover Bridge. If you're heading south this will be the first one you see of this design. They're unique to this canal,

with brick sides sprouting cast iron arches that reach across without meeting in the middle to allow the towing lines from horses to pass through the gap. Sadly, not all the bridges further down are in such good condition.

Locks 8 to 14 are positioned in an almost straight line. Perfectly uniform with side pools of reserve water and a hidden abundance of wildlife. At Lock 14 there's another chance to take a break from the locks and walk across to the canal shop and café. Quiet today, it is no doubt buzzing with boaters and gongoozlers in season.

The Old Warwick Road runs alongside the canal here, just before we go under the wonderfully named 'Bird in the Hand Bridge'. Four locks later and that same road passes above



Lapworth South junction.



Ned's Lock and cottage at Lowsonford.

“As our bow disappears into the obscurity of the tunnel, William Shakespeare looks down from a stone engraving”



us shortly before Lapworth North Junction, which, from the air, reminds me of a high-speed railway intersection. A slight starboard lean on the tiller here would divert us to Kingswood Junction and the Grand Union Canal, but I hold steady and we enter Lock 21, taking us into the south junction and boater services. With the tank full and minus two bags of rubbish, we complete the Lapworth 26. Our reward for this herculean effort is the thundering M40, roaring above Lapworth Bottom Lock, drowning out the birdsong from the otherwise peaceful surrounding woodland.

Onto the southern stretch

The southern section of the Stratford Canal is enchanting. The woodland between the M40 and picture-postcard village of Lowsonford reminds me of the magical forests in childhood stories. By the time we get to Rowington Lock 30 the motorway is just distance white noise. There's a sign on the lock advertising a local farm shop. "Beware! Free-Range Hens and Small Boys!" written in chalk.

Lowsonford is my favourite village on this canal. No shops here, just a sprinkle of visitor moorings, a water point and the well-known Fleur de Lys pub that's famous for its pies. We spent a relaxing week here, an excuse to rest after Lapworth Locks, and I'm pretty sure we tried every pie on the menu. Highly recommended!



Mary Arden's house at Wilmcote.

A mile further south is the charmingly named Bucket Lock. I'm assured it's pronounced bucket and not bouquet! The eye-catching lock cottage here is one of many such whitewashed, barrel-roofed buildings along this stretch – the roofs were built using the same wooden frames that formed the arches of the canal's bridges. Next to the cottage, the petite Yarningale Aqueduct crosses a stream that has been following the canal. Walk down the path and you'll see the original 'Horseley Ironwork Co' sign from 1834.

Aqueducts

Passing Warwick Road Bridge at Preston Bagot, the canal resumes its leisurely meander through the Warwickshire countryside for 3 relaxing, lock-

free miles. The peace and quiet is punctuated only by the Anglo Welsh boatyard, where we stop for diesel, and traffic under the aqueduct at Wootton Wawen. There are visitor moorings here if you fancy a walk up to the shopping village, which has a lovely coffee shop, or maybe a pint at the pub around the corner.

The third and longest aqueduct on the Stratford-upon-Avon Canal is Edstone, also known as Bearley Aqueduct. Even though it's the longest cast iron aqueduct in England, it seems to appear from nowhere a few hundred yards after Odd Lock (39). Fourteen brick spans support the canal in a cast iron trough 498ft over the Stratford-to-Birmingham railway. The towpath is level with the bottom of the trough, which



feels a bit weird when a boat passes at shoulder height to you. Beware of the prevailing wind! It pins you against the side and the grating of your steelwork scraping against the iron trough can be a sickening sound, especially if you've just had your blacking done. I won't make that crossing on a windy day again.



Lowsonford.

A drone view of *Silver Fox* passing over Edstone Aqueduct.



Bancroft Basin.

“The southern section of the Stratford Canal is enchanting”

Into Stratford

Two miles of tree-lined, lock-free cruising brings us to Wilmcote, where we moor for the night before our 16 lock descent into Stratford-upon-Avon. There’s a small shop next to the pub and legend has it that Mary Arden, mother of William Shakespeare, lived in the old Tudor House. In

reality, she lived 30 yards down the road at Glebe Farm but keep that to yourself as you quietly smirk at the tourists snapping photos of the wrong house.

Passing Featherbed Bridge, the Wilmcote 11 locks await, and as you descend the flight your physical efforts are rewarded by teasing views of Stratford-upon-

Avon. The landscape changes immediately after passing under the Northern Bypass but rather than the Tudor tourist hotspot you were expecting, business units and terraced housing surround the canal. The rebuilding of Maidenhead Road Bridge saw an awkward-looking metal frame replace the balance beam on Lock 53. Opening it is hard enough, but closing it will make you gurn in ways reminiscent of Geoff Capes pulling a lorry in *Britain's Strongest Man*. Don't give in though as you're close to the reward of Bancroft Basin.

Passing under bridge 69, the spacious, vibrant basin opens out to welcome you. There are floating pontoon moorings (48-

hour), but be careful not tie up against the first couple if you're packing over 50ft, otherwise the turning trip- and restaurant-boats might give you a knock. The basin offers views of Riverside Park and the Royal Shakespeare Theatre. The River Avon, which has additional moorings, is accessible through Lock 56 when the water level is safe. If you need a licence for the Avon, a floating visitor centre is open during high season.

Throughout its recent history, the Stratford-upon-Avon Canal has been threatened with closure on a few occasions and I feel indebted to those who fought to save it. Even though it's not the easiest canal to navigate, it is an absolute treasure.



Sunset in Lowsonford.



Yarningale Aqueduct.