

Shropshire Union Canal

Conservation Area

Reasons for designation

A conservation area is defined by S277 of the Town and Country Planning Act 1971 as an area "of architectural or historic interest the character and appearance of which it is desirable to preserve or enhance". Conservation areas are of many kinds and may vary from historic town and village centres to stately homes and their parklands, or sites of industrial archaeological interest.

The Shropshire Union Canal is considered to be of considerable industrial archaeological significance as the last of the major trunk waterways to be built in the Canal Era of the late 18th and early 19th centuries. It differed from earlier narrowboat canals in taking the most direct line to its destination rather than following the contours of the landscape.

The canal is notable for many pioneering feats of civil engineering: deep rock-cuttings, high embankments, and aqueducts needed to achieve this alignment. These form a pronounced man-made topographical feature in western Staffordshire and their visual and historical contribution to the landscape is worthy of the special protection afforded by conservation area status. The canal, too, retains in the County a considerable number of original bridges, other canalside buildings and features of historic interest worthy of retention and preservation.

The meaning of designation

Designation of a conservation area draws public attention to its architectural and historic interest and emphasises the need for any new development, either within or adjoining the area, to be sympathetic to its character. Local authorities have certain additional powers of control in conservation areas: listed building consent is required for the demolition of most buildings and structures, and written consent is needed for the felling and lopping of all trees above a certain size.

Most of the land in the Shropshire Union Canal Conservation Area is owned by the British Waterways Board. As a statutory undertaker the Board has wide powers of permitted development which exempt it from many aspects of planning control. The Board is, however, recognised to be a responsible land owner, keenly sympathetic to the waterways heritage. Its Waterways Environment Handbook is a model guide to the sensitive treatment of an historic environment.

Nonetheless, land in other ownerships is included both in the Conservation Area and immediately abutting it throughout its length. The purpose of designation is to reinforce the work of the British Waterways Board in protecting the canal and its setting from unsympathetic pressures for change, while allowing it to adapt to meet modern amenity and recreational needs.

Future Action

Designation of a conservation area delineates the architectural or historic interest of an area. This is only a first stage which will be followed up by proposals from both local interests and the local authorities for the preservation and enhancement of the area. Discussions will be held with the British Waterways Board over such matters as towpath clearance, tree felling and planting and the repair and maintenance of canalside buildings and features. Local people, amenity groups, canal users, parish councils and others are invited to come forward with suggestions for schemes which might be carried out for the benefit of the canal and its setting.

Policies for the control of development within or alongside the Conservation Area have been, or will be, set out in the Local Plans prepared by the relevant District Councils. In accordance with previous practice special working arrangements will be established with the British Waterways Board for consultation over development within their permitted development rights.

Shropshire Union Canal - Conservation Area

The Shropshire Union main line canal, originally known as the Birmingham and Liverpool Junction, was built between the years 1827-35 and marked the end of major canal development in Britain. It was also the last major work to be undertaken by its originator and engineer - Thomas Telford.

Linking the Midlands by a direct route to Ellesmere Port on the Mersey it was an attempt by Telford to show that an improved canal could compete with a railway. With the emphasis on speed of conveyance a route was chosen which could allow goods to travel from Birmingham to Liverpool in 45 hours. The trade for which it was constructed comprised of iron (accounting for 36% of the total volume carried in 1836), general merchandise (32.5%), coal and coke (13%), building materials (6%), lime and limestone (12%), road materials, manure etc. (0.5%). In later years under strong railway competition the canal managed to hold some of this trade, primarily iron and coal from Wolverhampton to Liverpool, and established some new trade in the products of the Staffordshire pottery industry, though not enough to substantiate Telford's earlier claims of canal superiority.

Construction of the canal was fraught with difficulties: costs of purchasing the land rose dramatically during the project, obstructive landlords who refused to allow the canal through their land necessitated expensive deviations from the intended route at Shelmore in Staffordshire and Nantwich in Cheshire, and repeated slippages of embankments and cuttings at one stage threatened abandonment. But work continued and on the 2nd March 1835 the first boat navigated the 39 miles from Autherley Junction on the Staffordshire and Worcestershire Canal to the Nantwich basin on the Chester canal.

Throughout the next ten years competition with the railways ensured close working of the Birmingham and Liverpool Junction with neighbouring canals particularly with the Ellesmere and Chester Company. In 1845, the year of 'railway mania' the two companies merged and one year later combined with the Shrewsbury and Montgomery Canals to form the Shropshire Union Railways and Canal Co. The object of the new company was to convert the canal lines to railways but the proposal never seriously materialised thanks largely to the involvement of the London and North Western Railway Co. (L.N.W.R.) who, seeing the Canal Co. as a potential dangerous rival, leased the canals in perpetuity from the Shropshire Union in 1847. The L.N.W.R. were happy to see the main line canal continue to operate and draw trade away from its arch rival the Great Western Railway Co. through whose territory it ran.

The canal continued to work profitably throughout the 19th century and up to the 1914-18 war but from then on went into rapid decline. In 1922 it was, together with the rest of the Shropshire Union network, bought out entirely by the L.N.W.R. The canal remained open despite continual decline and an Act passed in 1944 to close it. Nationalised in 1947 it continued to carry commercial traffic up to the late 60's. Since then, however, the canal has grown in popularity as a pleasure cruising waterway. In 1968 it was declared a 'Cruising Waterway' which assures its maintenance by the British Waterways Board to standards prescribed in the 1968 Transport Act.

Physical Features

The Shropshire Union Canal in Staffordshire extends for some 28 miles from the boundary with Wolverhampton M.B.C. in the south to the boundary with Shropshire just south of Market Drayton in the north.

In contrast to the earlier generation of canals which followed the contours of the landscape for cheapness and ease of construction, the Shropshire Union, as a "modern canal", considered speed of conveyance paramount and thus pursued a course as straight as possible. This was achieved at the expense of costly embankments and cuttings constructed to maintain the level using the then new techniques of 'cut and fill'. (The name deriving from the use of spoil from cuttings to make embankments.)

Of the interesting features along the canal the most common are the 46 bridges which punctuate its length within the Conservation Area. Built either of brick or stone and in the tradition of the Telford era, they display carefully engineered curves, simple robust detailing and fine proportions. Locks where they occur are grouped in convenient flights (the exception is the single lock at Wheaton Aston). All are standard narrow locks deliberately chosen to reduce water requirements and increase the speed of passage for single boats. Other notable examples of canal archaeology include the impressive aqueducts at Shebdon, Shelmore and Tyrley embankments, the handsome cast iron mile posts (nearly all of which survive), the warehouses, maintenance yards and canal cottages at wharves and locks, and the isolated and remote canalside pubs. But it is the embankments and cuttings which form the principal features of the canal: long views down straight heavily wooded cuttings to distant bridges and fine views out over the rolling rural landscape of Staffordshire and Shropshire combine to make the Shropshire Union one of the most scenic and popular cruising canals in the country.

