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WALKING THE WATERWAYS: USING TRAVEL DIARIES TO (RE)STORY THE CANAL

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Figure 1. Can of Carling (lager) at the Hatton Bottom Lock on the Grand Union Canal. Photograph: W. Rupp.

AN ODE TO A CAN OF CARLING

A moment of quiet falls. After miles of blurring traffic noise and train whistles, a shift in the wind sweeps those white sounds away, and an ethereal 'sculpture' (read: a torn nightie, attached to a doll's head, hanging from a tree on the other bank) brings attention back to the sounds of the canalside which are momentarily foregrounded again. Part of this soundscape, almost inaudible, is the clink of aluminium against the lock gate. Suspended in a green ooze, half empty, a can of Carling lager sits black against the water and the fading tar of the wooden lock.

The most constant of companions on the towpath is this can of black and white, and dozens and dozens like it. Carling, it seems, is the drink of choice for users of the waterway. Every now and again, a dog walker, wrapped in expensive fleece, trudges by, either not noticing the cans or turning away, ignoring them. But they are everywhere: litter that will remain long after the walkers, the dogs, the voles, the birds, the reeds, and the very canal itself have gone.

It's easy to discount the can of Carling as it makes its journey along the canal and through the locks. It didn't just appear here. It and its companions were likely purchased in hole-in-the-wall off licences that seem to grow like yellow flag and arrowhead up and down the inland waterways. Perhaps they were brought to the Canalside and consumed, on cold autumn evenings and in long summer twilights, by people that neither the canal builders nor the Canal and River Trust ever thought would be interested in the cut. Those people are here, though, leaving testament to their engagement in piles of cans and the thin metal sheen of trampled containers that build up on corners and against embankments.

However easy it is to ignore the cans, they tell a critical part of the story of the canal. In fact, in many ways, the can is the most authentic artefact of the waterway. Alcohol was long a staple of canal business, and there is a circularity in the fact that one of the most common current sights is the beer can. At some level, this discarded Carling can is a sign of the social decay and staleness that surrounds much of the accessible parts of Britain's canals. But, like some kind of invasive species, the can has found its way throughout the network, including spots (presumably) miles from lager consumers.

The can's carriers cannot be ignored, though. Their stories, the cans, and the canals in which those cans now float all offer a kind of future to the countryside that doesn't fit easily in safe (middle class) notions of space and place. These people—who may be popping up in your mind in black tracksuits with their hoods pulled tight—are not the outsiders or outcasts. They are carving out a kind of canal existence that has a desperate urgency and immediacy. Whereas many other canal users are transitory occupiers of this space—bargees passing on their narrowboats, dogs and their walkers (with their fitness apps), kingfishers with their ever-hungry stomachs—the Carlingers linger. The canal offers an unjudgmental space for them. Often frozen out of public houses, they have made the towpath their pub. With the canals and the can carriers pushed to the edges of more genteel consciousnesses, both have found a foundation with the other.

The moment passes. The wind shifts. Lorries downshifting on the motorway push the faint sounds of the lock away again. Clouds move and the light slants in a slightly different direction; the floating Carling can fades back into the oily sheen of the water. The scene moves on. The can, however, remains.

INTRODUCTION

Our Ode is fiction. As with all folktales, though, there is truth at its core (Shaw, 2021). Canals—once central to trade, industry, and community life—have become a site of increased tourism in recent years (Gehrke, 2019). There has also been a rise in those choosing to live on canals in response to the global pandemic and cost-of-living crisis, or as a counter-cultural means of escape (Bowles, 2022). This sense of subversion is perhaps why canals

are often treated with suspicion, deemed sites of anti-social behaviour (Kaaristo, 2024), ecologically hazardous (Wallace & Wright, 2022), and politically agitational (Shell, 2015). Therefore, canals represent many things—they can be sites for (re)imagination, spaces for reflection, connection, and ecological concern, as well as areas of contention where different values and priorities come into contact.

Given that the canal is, broadly speaking, a space of travel, this project utilised the narrative and artistic potential of travel diaries (Figures 2 and 3) created during three walks along the 'Warwickshire Ring' (a circular route through the core of the canal network in England's former industrial heartland) (Canal & River Trust, 2024). By grounding our work in the lived and envisioned narratives of the canals, we were making efforts to subvert the traditional colonial approach to travel writing, tourism, and hospitality. Instead of viewing landscapes as sites for passive observation or exoticization, these diaries sought to understand and honour the local histories and perspectives embedded within canal spaces.

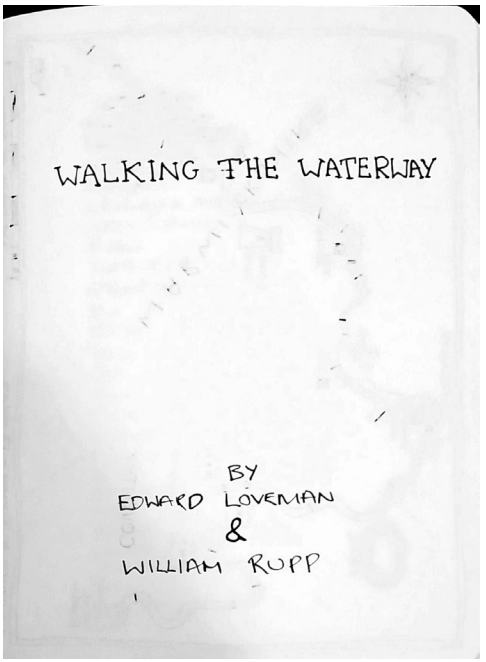


Figure 2. Dr Loveman's Travel Diary.
Image Credit: E. Loveman.

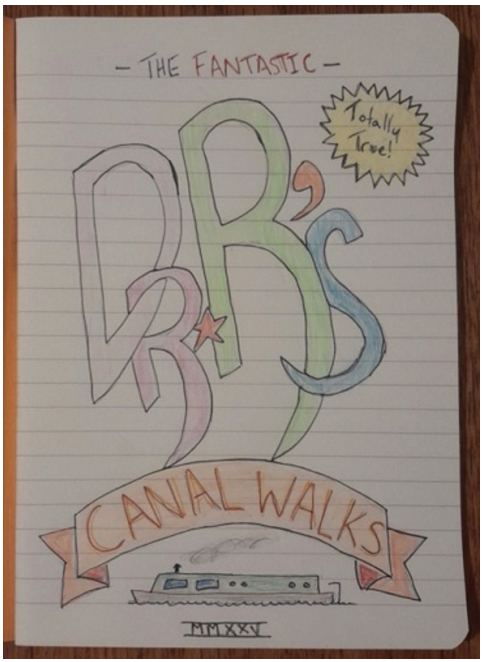


Figure 3. Dr Rupp's Travel Diary.
Image Credit: W. Rupp.

In exploring parts of the canal network in the immediate vicinities of our lives and work, our motivation was to explore questions such as: To what extent can local waterways present an alternative narrative to modern traditions of travel? How might travel diaries be used to (re)story the 'local'? A further, and equally important, question was: What happens when we allow ourselves to sit within the everyday, the 'mundane,' the background? The outcome of this questioning is a depiction of local tourism that offers insights that are potentially true of every such experience, but which are often overlooked and ignored. We suggest that, as much as our daily routines may seem ordinary and lacking in significant choices, they encompass a wide range of human experiences including, as Storey (2014) observes, "the extraordinary, the wonderful, profound sorrow and profound joy, love and sacrifice, politics, and poetics" (p. 2). Therefore, in our own storying of the canal, we hope that this research can, in a small way, (re)produce planetary empathy through (re)thinking and (re)enchanting our immediate surroundings.

In all honesty, we accept that some readers may find moving between complex interdisciplinary academic literature, emotional expression, and our artistic representation 'jarring.' However, we believe that such an approach to this project helps to create a picture of everyday tourism. We argue that this means that you (as the reader) are given the opportunity to 'make sense' of our experience. In this way, you are positioned as observer and participant in our experience, transporting you into these 'mundane' spaces. Our hope is that you find this beneficial, and that it pushes you to reflect on and experience your own locales, especially the waterways within them.

WATERWAYS LIKE NEURONS

At the core of this project lies a sensorial immersion in our local waterway network. Much like neural pathways, a waterway transmits sensory information from the multiple worlds it intersects (Fleming, 2019). This affinity between waterways and the brain/perception should not be understood as simply our own metaphorical interpretation, but as an articulation of the ontological challenges that this project has presented. Water is perceived as a living being by many indigenous ontologies (McGregor et al., 2023); it was central to creation stories in ancient civilisations (Bradley, 2012), and the waterway plays a key role in folklore (Chainey & Winsham, 2021). As Yates et al. (2017) posit, what are the implications of taking "seriously the possibility and politics of a multiplicity of water-related worlds, highlighting multiple water realities and ways of being-with-water, not just different perceptions of our knowledge systems tied to water's (singular) material existence"? (p. 798). We returned regularly to this notion of multiple realities throughout the project as a means of recognition for the many, historically marginalised, understandings of water (Wilson & Inkster, 2018). Recognising these many understandings forms part of this project's attempt to subvert the anthropocentric convention of 'natural' human knowledge production that dominates 'academic' inquiry.

This hegemonic discourse regarding the nature of knowledge and knowing is still rooted in a modern Eurocentric interpretation that requires academics to distinguish, at some level, between the natural (objective) and social (subjective) in designing research (Linton, 2010). This model of existence attaches meanings "to things [that] impose themselves on things, may even be inscribed or embodied in certain things, but are always presumed to be—in the first instance—distinct from things themselves" (Henare et al., 2007, p. 3). In other words, when meaning originates from human interpretation rather than from a thing itself, human knowledge is privileged which results in a form of conceptual ownership. This possessive individualism, at the core of many tourism and hospitality paradigms, places the human as the sole, or at least central, power and knowledge producer. This does not represent the relationality we have felt during our engagement with the waterway. Instead, a more cosmological approach such as that of Salmond and colleagues (2019) comes closer to the way that we came to appreciate the waterway. Put simply, the waterway is a being itself. It has a voice that speaks about real and potential pasts, presents, and futures. Furthermore, it brings into confluence various worlds: human, more-than-human, and otherworldly (Stang, 2014).

CANALS

We are not the first people to discover the allure of either England's inland waterways or travel writing. Indeed, canals have attracted the attention of numerous people thinking and writing about travel (Conder, 2017). They have been of academic interest for decades and factor into all major discussions of British social and economic development from the seventeenth century onwards. They were the great infrastructure project of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and were a significant contributing factor to the Industrial Revolution. Langford, writing in one of the standard histories of England, describes canals and canal building as a kind of phenomenon whose very concept became "quickly absorbed into the Englishman's perception of his own place in the history of progress" (1998, p. 417). Other studies have tempered this opinion somewhat, suggesting that the impact of canals was more regional than national (O'Gorman, 2016). Nevertheless, by the introduction of railways from the 1830s, the canal network in England, Wales, and Scotland had grown to some 4,100 miles (Hadfield, 1981). This meant that,

even if there was a more regional focus for specific canals, they were a national concept with influence and impact on many aspects of life and business for a wide cross-section of society (Burton, 2015). For modern audiences, many of whom may never have looked at or for canals in their area, it can be difficult to appreciate the scope of canals, currently estimated at 2,000 miles (Canal and River Trust, 2012). For comparison, recent UK government data reports England, Wales, and Scotland currently have just under 10,000 miles of railways in what is considered a national and integrated network (Department for Transport, 2023).

The focus on the economic dimension of canals has superseded culture investigations. Towards the end of the Second World War, Rolt (1944) published an account of a canal voyage he had undertaken at a pivotal point in the commercial life of the network. *Narrow Boat* became a best seller and sparked a national post-war conversation about the value of canals and their role in preserving 'traditional' ways of life. Although Rolt's view of the women and men who lived and worked on canals was paternal and, in some ways, patronising, it also sold the value of canals as sites of cultural and environmental importance with vast intrinsic value to the nation (Boughey, 2013). Its publication led directly to the foundation of the Inland Waterways Association, which has been an instrumental advocate for continued preservation of and investment in canals and waterways (Blagrove, 2005).

In the nineteenth century there was considerable concern for the morality of the communities living and working on the canals (Matthews, 2013). The transient nature of canal communities created, at least in the minds of middle-class moralisers, an environment where hygiene took second place to baser influences, desires, and actions (Hanson, 1977). These views were widely held through the Second World War (Smith, 2011). Later analysis has shown that canal communities were no more or less disadvantaged (or immoral) than other groups of workers (Freer, 1992). Yet this negative viewpoint remains influential today.

The UK's canals straddle the divide between genteel tourism and luxury, and deprivation that can often be invisible (Worrall, 2019). Described in one context as "uncomfortable heritagisation," this duality has seen the preservation of infrastructure and the built environment, with less emphasis on folkways and communities based on and around the waterways (Wincott et. al., 2019). Furthermore, public information on the canals currently put out by the Canal and River Trust and the Inland Waterways Association does not engage directly with the waterways' enabling of imperial economics and their connection to very difficult topics such as enslavement. The Canal and River Trust's website, for instance, only has one short article discussing the links between canals and enslavement (Canal and River Trust, 2022). Taken as a whole, then, the cultural development and current sociological position of canals is complex and occasionally problematic, but very vibrant.

TRAVEL WRITING

The study of travel writing is also a deep and rich subject area. In the context of the British press, by the end of the eighteenth century travel writing was a top selling genre (Leask, 2019). Much of the focus of this writing was on subjects beyond the borders of the 'home nations' and tied into a burgeoning interest in understanding Britain's increasingly dominant geopolitical position (Youngs, 2013). A 'rediscovery' of domestic topics of interest from the seventeenth century onwards, promoted considerable attention on the geography, history, and politics of the United Kingdom (Sweet, 2004). Famous accounts of travel within Britain included those written by Daniel Defoe (1724–1727), Thomas Pennant (1750s–1790s), Arthur Young (especially 1760s–1770s), and William Cobbett (1820s), generally holding a political or social agenda (Rogers, 1985). Into the nineteenth century, travelling—and the recording of travels—came to be seen as "important undertaking[s] for the well-educated man or woman who, having made a trip, wished to convey in an artistically pleasing fashion the information he had gleaned" (Batten, 1978). Concerns over the authenticity of travel accounts abounded, with the consensus being, to paraphrase Adams (1980), that travellers were inevitably also travel liars. This did not dampen the public's enthusiasm for such books, and there was an increase in the number of 'gentlemen travellers' publishing accounts of their journeys (Buzard, 1993).

This increased enthusiasm coincided with concerns over who was a 'traveller' and who was a 'tourist.' When travel was largely limited to a select and wealthy few, a distinction of this nature was not overly important. With more and more people travelling (and writing about their experiences), concerns over this difference became acute. Fussell has summarised the reductive nature of tourism, stating that it "requires that you see conventional things, and that you see them in a conventional way" (1987, p. 651). For someone to be an authentic traveller, they needed to possess "notions of movement and individuality" (Hulme & Youngs, 2002, p. 7) that "should manifest some impulse of non-utilitarian pleasure" (Fussell, 1987, p. 21). The only people likely to possess the time for such 'non-utilitarian' pursuits were aristocrats and the few members at the top of the middling classes and the gentry with sufficient wealth to make such journeys (Bohls & Duncan, 2005, p. xvi). Such characterisation of travellers as being genteel has met with sustained criticism, not in the least because such a narrowing of the sample pool leaves aside a sizable range of experiences. As Bohls and Duncan ask, "[d]o sailors, soldiers, servants, slaves, emigrants, exiles, transported convicts, military and diplomatic wives, count as travellers?" (Bohls & Duncan, 2005, p. xvi). In other words, whose voices can qualify as those of authentic travellers?

WALKING THE CANAL

In this project, a travel diary 'method' was used to record our experience of the waterway through multiple mediums. In practical terms, after initial scoping and planning, three 'journeys' were agreed upon that balanced macro and micro approaches to experiencing the canals and their surroundings. This meant completing approximately 18 hours and 35 miles of fieldwork along sections of the 'Warwickshire Ring' in a slow, meandering way that fostered a deliberate sensory engagement with the waterway, and recording information in our diaries as we 'travelled.' Each diary blended visual documentation, personal experience, and reflection on the history, present, and imagined futures of the waterway. There was no set format, or prescription in how we recorded information, but rather an adaptability inherent in the recording that allowed us to (re)present our experience through whichever medium felt most appropriate. This holistic approach offered a means of generating narratives and meant that the diaries themselves began to transcend mere documentation, becoming intricate, tangible artistic objects.

Much like our approach to understanding and experiencing waterways, our decisions have invariably drawn inspiration from existing processes of 'data collecting.' Diary writing, including about travel, is a well-established academic practice (Bartlett & Milligan, 2015; Markwell & Basche, 1998; Schlich & Axhausen, 2003), and is a practice increasingly being adapted to emerging technologies (Allström et al., 2017; Prelipcean et al., 2018). The same can also be said for artistic practices such as painting (Sullivan, 2002), drawing (Theron et al., 2011), and psychogeography (Arnold, 2019). Of course, walking was central to this research, particularly walking methodologies for a more-than-human world (Springgay & Truman, 2017)—walking in a way attuned to a particular place and the rhythms of life within it, privileging non-visual senses to connect oneself to the environment.

THE JOURNEYS

The long one

For the first journey we decided to make a long and 'linear' progress between two pre-defined destinations: from the Coventry Canal Basin to Rugby (Figure 4). The route was nearly 17 miles and followed the canal from the post-industrial centre of Coventry, through the quaint eighteenth-century atmosphere of Hawkesbury Junction, then cutting into the green and greys of rural Warwickshire before connecting with Rugby.

This walk demonstrated the many different worlds the canal intersects and how the waterway might exist in ways beyond those which 'we' may be able to conceive. Therefore, we involved ourselves in a "type of tourism which nurtures a sense of ourselves as one with this planet" (Huijbens, 2021, p. 113). For example, our diaries highlighted

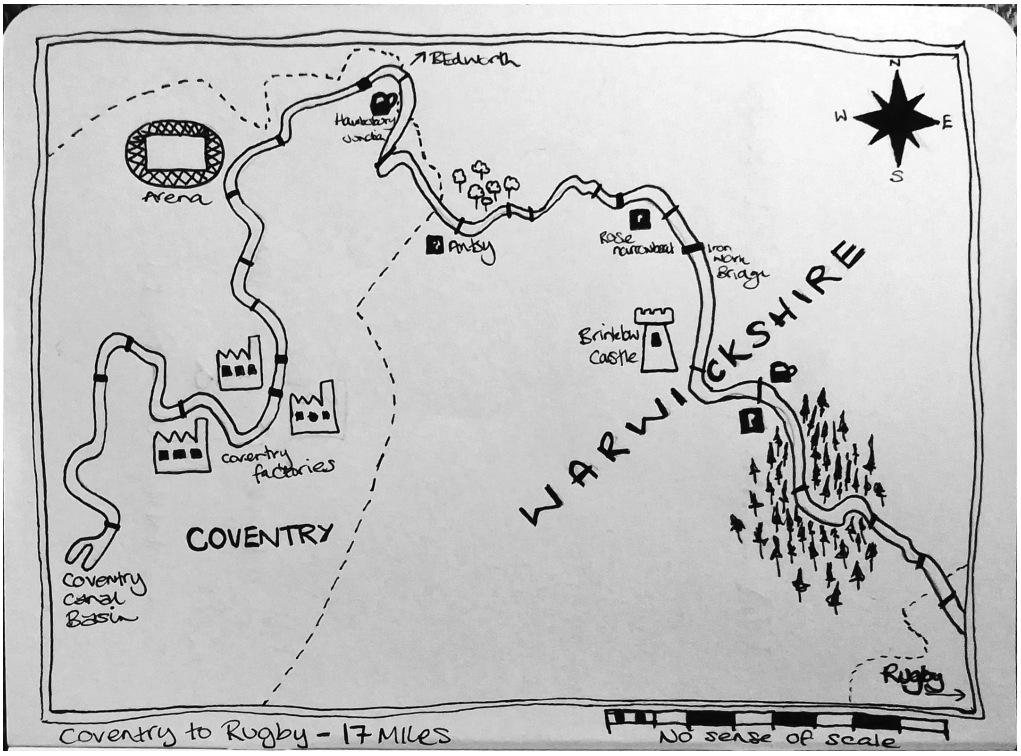


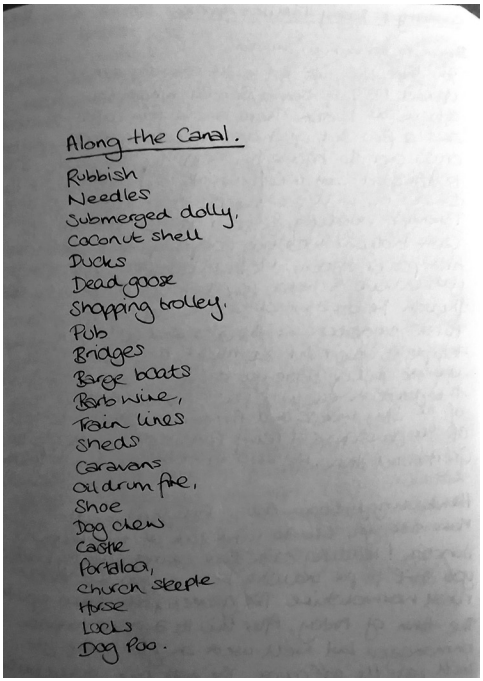
Figure 4. Map of journey one.
Image Credit: E. Loveman.

the sense we had that the canal was 'communicating' with us in a variety of ways (Figures 5 and 6). The waterway has knowledge, and it produces knowledge—regardless of whether 'we' are there to engage with it or not. During this walk, we experienced urban, rural, and environmental knowledge.

A to B

Our experiences in the first journey confirmed for us that travel is more than simply a social phenomenon (Gren & Huijbens, 2012). Rather, we are planetary tourists ourselves (Smith, 2018). For the second journey, then, we began at a set point, but moved forward freely without fixed goals, and with no defined end (Figure 7). Specifically, we started at the bottom of the Hatton Flight locks just west of Warwick and ended in the village of Lapworth, approximately eight miles away (Figure 8). This walk took us about four hours and facilitated a different kind of visualisation. It allowed for more intentional observation and narrowed the focus of 'discovery,' such as when we came across the rebuilding of a lock gate on the Hatton Flight locks. This reconstruction work blended traditional craft, such as the woodwork that went into constructing the massive wooden gate, with modern technology, like the hydraulic cranes used to manoeuvre the gates into place.

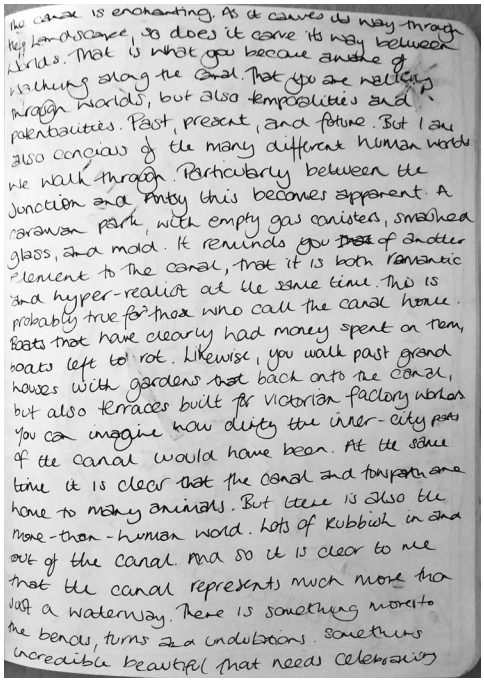
This example of rebuilding was one of several instances on the journeys that highlighted the many existences of the canal, from the human, to the ecological and zoological, to the technological (Figure 9). We perceived the traversing of many different 'existences' as important, conceptually speaking, to tourism, which is so often conceived of as temporally exclusive, involving activities that are time-limited, such as holidays or boat cruises. Even those utilising the canal for an income (Figure 10) 'tour' in a sense, and this emphasised for us the need to approach our immediate surroundings with the sense of wonder that is too often associated only with 'far-off' places.



Along the Canal.

Rubbish
Needles
Submerged dolly,
Coconut shell
Ducks
Dead goose
Shopping trolley,
Pub
Bridges
Barge boats
Barb wire,
Train lines
Sheds
Caravans
Oil drum fire,
Shoe
Dog chew
Castle
Portaloo,
Church steeple
Horse
Locks
Dog Poo.

Figure 5. Poem "Along the Canal."
Image Credit: E. Loveman.



the canal is enchanting. As it carves its way through the landscape, so does it carve its way between worlds. That is what you become aware of watching along the canal. That you are walking through worlds, but also impossibilities and potentialities. Past, present, and future. But I am also conscious of the many different human worlds we walk through. Particularly between the junction and Putley this becomes apparent. A caravan park, with empty gas canisters, smashed glass, and mold. It reminds you that of another element to the canal, that it is both romantic and hyper-realist at the same time. This is probably true for those who call the canal home. Boats that have clearly had money spent on them, boats left to rot. Likewise, you walk past grand houses with gardens that back onto the canal, but also terraces built for Victorian factory workers you can imagine how dusty the inner-city parts of the canal would have been. At the same time it is clear that the canal and towpath are home to many animals. But there is also the more-than-human world. Lots of rubbish in and out of the canal. And so it is clear to me that the canal represents much more than just a waterway. There is something more to the bends, turns and undulations. Something incredibly beautiful that needs celebrating

Figure 6. Recounted tale of walk one.
Image Credit: E. Loveman.

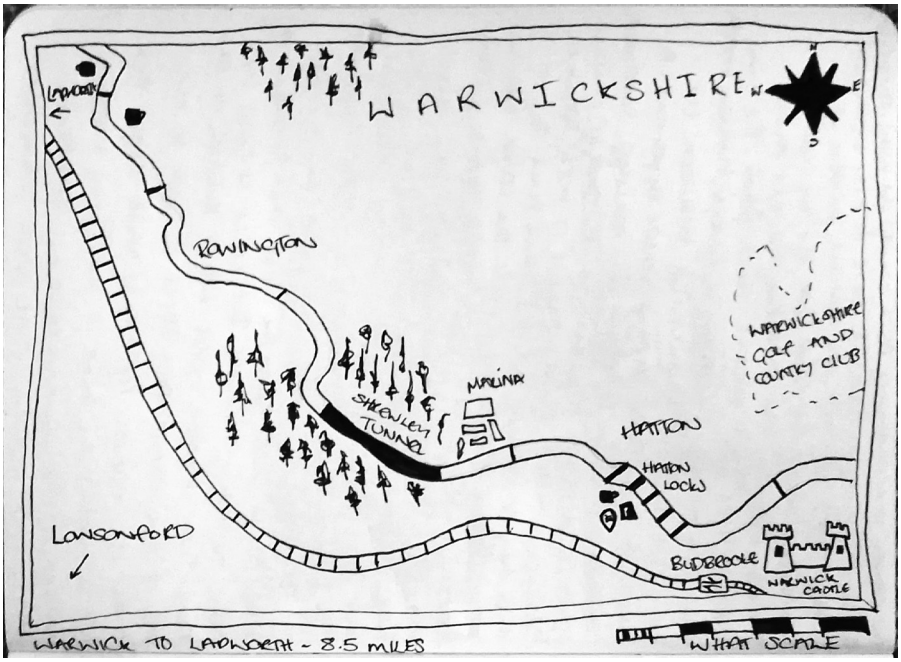


Figure 7. Map of journey two. Image Credit: E. Loveman.

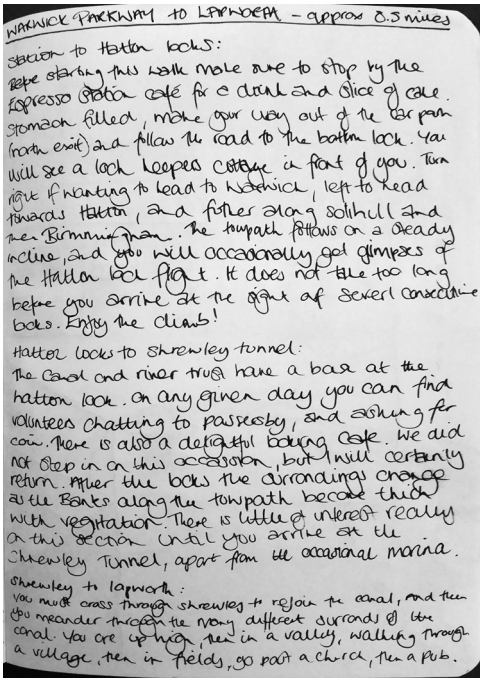


Figure 8. Diary account of walk two.
Image Credit: E. Loveman.

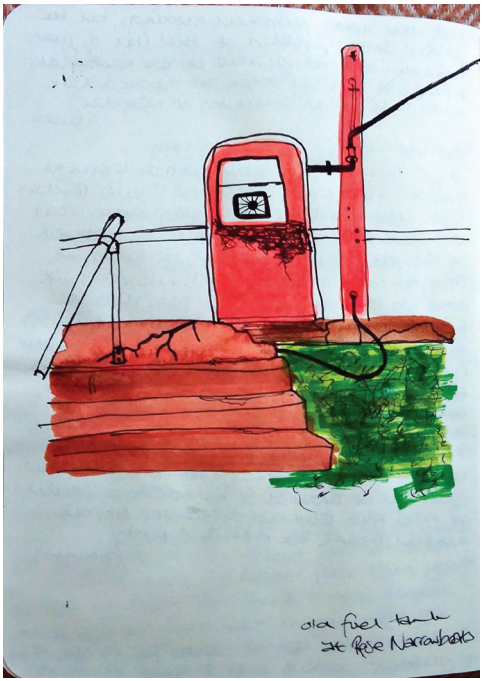


Figure 9. Fuel tank at Rose Narrowboats.
Image Credit: E. Loveman.

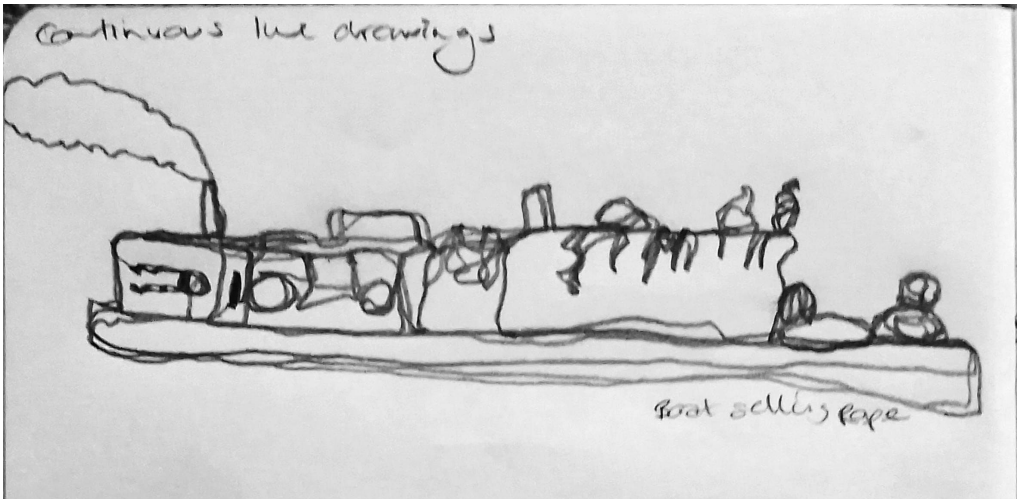


Figure 10. Five-minute continuous line drawings of boats selling rope.
Image Credit: E. Loveman.

Figure 11. Brindley Place, Birmingham, looking west.
Photograph: W. Rupp.

Getting lost and messing around near boats

Our final journey through the centre of Birmingham was reminiscent of what Wordsworth (1807/n.d.) wrote describing London from Westminster bridge: "The river glideth at his own sweet will / Dear God! the very houses seem asleep / And all that mighty heart is lying still!"

Brindley Place, at the heart of this stretch of the Grand Union Canal, is in many ways the antithesis of a source of wonder. Whereas our other two itineraries had physical destinations in mind, here we employed a method closely tied to the mid-twentieth century European situationist movement, and Debord's (1958) concept of a "dérive" (translated as "drift") which described a random, aimless walk through urban environments. This challenged us to consider how our capacity to 'make sense' of existing phenomena, especially if we accept more-than-human agency, might be impossible to know (St. Pierre, 2021). Wandering along Birmingham's canals we were struck by the different levels through which you walk, sometimes above but often below the rest of the city. It was, perhaps, the clearest representation of what it means and how it looks to travel 'through' your own locale (Satchwell et al., 2020).

Figure 12. A lock along the Birmingham and Fazeley Canal, now covered over by urban development in central Birmingham. Photograph: W. Rupp.

TO CONCLUDE

Overall, our journeys highlighted how canals occupy a precarious and fascinating space in the narrative of and arguments about how space and place are valued; and, perhaps more relevantly, whose concepts of such value get amplified. As the climate emergency makes international travel increasingly challenging, those interested in the topics of leisure, tourism, and hospitality must create alternative narratives of what it means to be a tourist. By connecting travel writing with the creative approaches we used to construct our own diary responses, we have hopefully opened a potential model for how to enact this connection to the local anywhere. Ultimately, people who are interested in travel and hospitality must bring the wonder of the 'exotic' to the 'mundane.' Doing so enables all of us access to the extra-ordinary that is just beyond our own doorsteps. For us, the canal walks (re) connected us to our surroundings, and enabled us to engage with transdisciplinary spaces which are, ultimately, accessible to anyone who takes the time to look. To this end, perhaps readers have been encouraged to step outside, seek wonder in the mundane, and 'travel' within their own locales.

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William Rupp (ORCID ID: https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3671-418X) is a historical researcher focusing on travel and identity creation in eighteenth-century Britain. His current writing seeks to reinterpret the creation narrative of the British state to include sub-nationalities. More generally, William has significant interest in travel writing as a means of understanding difference.

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