

Features of the Canal – Number 2 – Berwick Tunnel

Berwick Tunnel is the only tunnel on the S&N. It is 970 yards (or for those who prefer such things, 887 metres) long, although originally planned to be slightly shorter with cuttings, at each end. The tunnel has finely proportioned portals faced with stone, the keystone being inscribed with the date 1797. The tunnel is brick lined and a slight bend meant that it was not possible to see through. Although of reasonable length the tunnel is fairly shallow and it is likely that if the canal had been built a few years later it would have been completely replaced by a cutting.

Berwick was remarkable for being the first tunnel of any significant length to have a towpath built through it. Even this was unique as it was of timber, carried on bearers set in the wall. The waterway of the tunnel was just over 10 feet (3m) wide. With the towpath projecting 3 feet (1m) sufficient room was left for single line passage of boats. Although this would have been a fairly tight fit, the fact that the towpath projected from the wall allowed the full width to be filled with water, thus reducing the resistance to passing boats. Although the engineer of the Shrewsbury Canal, Josiah Clowes, designed the tunnel, the towpath was added at the suggestion of William Reynolds. The towpath did not unfortunately survive long, probably because of lack of maintenance, and was removed in 1819; just 22 years after the canal had opened. Boats were then 'legged' through.

The Shrewsbury Canal was operated, until the Newport Branch opened, entirely by tub boats. Each boat was about 20 feet (6m) long and 6 feet 4 inches (1.9m) wide and carried about 8 tons. They were pulled in trains, a single horse pulling up to 140 tons. They continued to be used after this time, and in 1838 the canal company minute book records "when two trains of Boats shall have entered the Tunnel at the same time the party which shall have first passed the Centre of the Tunnel shall proceed and the other party shall return so as to allow the other to pass where both are laden but when one train is unladen such train shall turn back". As canal historian Charles Hadfield commented, "after a boatman had turned back a loaded train two or three times, his language must have been worth hearing"! It also makes one wonder how disputes had been resolved in the previous 40 years of operation – fisticuffs?

Both portals of the tunnel, although bricked up, can still be seen. The western portal is right beside the road to Preston and the western end can be approached along the canal from the Atcham – Uffington road at Berwick Wharf. The length of canal between the new A5 and the surviving bridge at Berwick Wharf, including the tunnel, is still owned by British Waterways and retains some water.

BW make periodic inspections inside the tunnel which, apart from the ventilation shafts having been pushed in following the disposal the body of a tragic murder victim in the 1960's, is reported to be in good condition.

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