

Report for the October 2015 meeting of the Malvern Civic Society

On Friday 9 October 2015 the final talk at Christ Church took place, where Nigel Jefferies spoke to us about the history of the construction of the Herefordshire and Gloucestershire canal. Nigel has been involved in the restoration of the canal for many years; he told us about the good work that has been carried out since 1983, when a society was formed to try to restore the canal and then from 1992 when the group became the Herefordshire & Gloucestershire Canal Trust.

The reason for the construction of the canal was to ensure access to the River Severn for commercial purposes as a navigable waterway. Including this canal, there were twelve that were linked to the Severn, the second most navigable river in Europe. The canal opened in two phases, in 1798 and 1845 and was one of the last major narrow canals to be built in Britain. It went from the Severn at Over and through Oxenhall Tunnel (one of the longest tunnels in Britain), then through Ledbury and eventually into the heart of Hereford. The stretch from Ledbury to Hereford was built by Stephen Ballard, concluding an almost entirely rural course of thirty-four miles. Stephen Ballard was only twenty-three when he was appointed clerk to the canal company in 1823 and carried out much research to aid his work. In 1845 the cost of completion was £141,436, almost twice the estimate he made. After completion, trade barely improved and the company tried to sell it to one of the railway companies for conversion into a railway. This did not succeed so the company tried to bolster trade as best as it could.

Included in Nigel's talk was a very interesting selection of images of various points alongside the canal, including lock cottages, wharf buildings, bridges and tunnels. We also saw books that had inspired Nigel to develop his interest in the canal, specifically a book by David Bick. He also recommended "Eighteenth Century Britain, 1688 - 1783" by Jeremy Black.

The canal was closed in 1881 to permit the construction of the Ledbury to Gloucester railway. Nigel concluded that the canal was never a financial success and that investors never gained from it. The reason for its lack of success was that Hereford was under-populated and there was not a great deal of industry in the area. When there were dry summers, there was not enough water to operate the canal. Today Herefordshire is dependent on tourism and farming. The canal trust aims, however, to restore this canal completely, which it claims is an ambitious but achievable goal.

Chairman Clive Hooper thanked Nigel for his fascinating talk, which was followed by a useful question and answer session. For more information on the restoration work, for which funds are always required to keep the work going, please see the website: www.h-g-canal.org.uk.

Clive then discussed Civic Society business, confirming, for example, that the society opposes demolition of the old community hospital, and encouraged letters of objection. For more on Civic Society information and events, please

Clive reminded us that from November onwards we move to The Eden Church, near to the Malvern (Spa) Hotel in Grovewood Road. Our next monthly meeting will be the Annual General Meeting on Friday 6 November, the first Friday of the month, at 7.30 pm. The agenda is on the inside cover of the Annual Report, incorporating "Bandstand", issued in October. Membership subscriptions for 2015 - 2016 are now due, details of which are included in the latest information pack.

Denise Preston, Press Officer for Malvern Civic Society
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