

Finding the good

These canals we are travelling are turning out to be like people of wildly different characteristics. Liverpool was like a crazy bunch of excited party goers in part and some down and out toothless old men in others. West Lancashire reminded me of gentle folk who don't like change and keep themselves largely to themselves except when attending mass on Sunday. Moving west and south through Wigan, Leigh, Salford and Stretford was sad, nostalgic, intimidating but also stimulating.

Like meeting a crowd of recalcitrant hooded teenagers but finding amongst them old mine and mill workers with fascinating stories to tell. This menagerie of places and history has finally spat us out through the leafy suburbs of Sale into the most pastoral Cheshire countryside. The gentle cooling breeze brings us a little relief from the unseasonally hot sunshine and the sound of spring birdsong adds to an air of chocolate box English scenery. I feel like I have been at a wild party for the last two weeks, full of the most amazingly

diverse people, loud music, exotic food and finally arrived home in the early hours to a calm, quiet and familiar home and a warm cosy bed.

It probably hasn't been quite what people first imagine when you talk about travelling on a narrow boat. All the marketing material features images like the one below.



Tranquillity, just like in the ads
It's always sunny, the canal is
bordered by weeping willows
kissing the calm and quiet waters
which gently transport a
traditionally painted craft and
her passengers back in time to a
golden age of unhurried
tranquillity.



Early morning idyll

Admittedly, we have had a little bit of that, and we are hoping for a lot more of it over the coming months but the marketeers don't mention that all this idyllic scenery is joined together by large, dirty and sometimes downright ugly bits of urban sprawl. Our journey so far has consisted of rather more of the sprawl and not so much of the neat and tidy but the irony is wonderful. Towns and cities like Liverpool, Wigan and Manchester may owe their very existence to the canals that connect them. For us, they represent fascinating but

often unattractive obstacles that have to be traversed in order to get to the glorious countryside that makes travelling on a narrow boat so relaxing and satisfying. To the great canal engineers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries it was the exact opposite.



Mining and canals went hand in hand

Travelling through some of the industrial landscapes can be depressing, even daunting, with tales of evil drug users lurking under every bridge, just waiting for an easy, slow moving target to rob or simply vandalise. It's easy to become blinkered by this image and to only see the negative. The mindless destruction of the graffiti rather than the artistry and skill it demonstrates. The irresponsible discarding of the ever present bobbing beer bottles and not the fun and laughter of the youngsters who consumed the drinks by the canal because they

had nowhere else to go. The dark, windowless warehouses and factories that tower dark and menacing above the water linger in the mind like nightmares. But there are bright new waterside developments of apartments, bars and restaurants in equal measure that are bringing new life to these old arteries of the industrial revolution. There is positive everywhere if we look hard enough and history and heritage galore.



Out with the old (To be fair this was being saved)



In with the new



Art or vandalism?

We have probably started our journey with a disproportionate share of the dark and dreary but it looks very much from where I am sitting tonight that the balance is going to be redressed over the next few weeks. When the barons of

the industrial revolution had made their fortunes from mining and building canals at the expense of near slave labour they built grand houses in places like Cheshire to retire to away from the filth and poverty of the cities. Now it's our turn to go and have a look at how the other half lived.



Hello Cheshire

All photos by Gill