

## Under the Castle

*The following article, by Vic Smallshire, appeared in 'Navigation' the magazine of The Inland Waterways Association Midlands Branch, in December 1962, Vol.12. No.30. The original photos have been lost and I apologise for the poor quality of reproduction here.*

On my first trip through Dudley Tunnel this year I was accompanied by four mine surveyors and a schoolteacher, all having doubts about its condition. "After all," they said, "it's nearly two hundred years old." I don't honestly think that they ever expected to reach the other end.

After leaving the Birmingham-Wolverhampton canal at Tipton we were not exactly encouraged by the state of the approach canal. It was completely covered with a thick layer of floating weed, wood and tyres, forcing me to stop the engine and paddle to the tunnel mouth which seemed to have the remains of a brick wall deposited in it. However, we got into the tunnel without much trouble and continued to paddle through the first short section (approx. 100 yds) to the first opening, here on both sides of the canal can be seen entrances to the old limestone mines; and on into another short tunnel, and in turn into Castle Mill Basin, which is again surrounded by high cliff faces, in which can be seen several more mine workings.

Here we stopped for a few minutes to start the engine and continued under power for the rest of the journey. Once into the tunnel we passed a junction which leads into the mines and a little further on came to a large ventilation opening incorporated in the cave through which the canal runs. This is the last daylight to be seen for some time. From here on we had only our own lamps, the headlamp on the boat and a flame safety lamp, which we used to test for gas. As we expected, there was not any. Although the tunnel is bricked for most of the way we passed through several caves and stopped in most. Here in the roof can be seen the holes drilled for explosives when the tunnel was being built.

After about twenty minutes there was great excitement when the far end was sighted as a speck of light in the far distance but it was still some time before we got there. In fact it took almost fifty minutes to cover the 1 mile 1,412 yards from end to end. Long before we reached the other end everyone was agreed the tunnel was in excellent condition and could see no grounds for closing it whatsoever. I quote one of the mine surveyors as saying it was "As safe as houses". How safe houses are you can decide for yourself, but people do live in them...

Soon after leaving the tunnel we reached Park Head Locks and jumped out eagerly to operate the appropriate paddle gear, as we had hoped to return through Netherton Tunnel. However to our surprise and disgust, the paddle gear had been removed (by B.T.W.) and so our only way back was through Dudley Tunnel. Fortunately the return journey was not uneventful, for in one of the caves we found a bottle containing a message from a member of a local pot holing club, which he had left there when he went through earlier in the year. This message I am sure changed the future of the tunnel, for we have now joined forces to keep it open as you will hear later.

My second visit to the tunnel was to meet the pot holers who enjoy exploring the adjacent limestone mines, and who by now I knew quite well. On this trip I navigated single handed my 19 ft. cabin cruiser into the branch leading into the mines, and tied up in the cave at what is now the end of the canal, but at one time led into a fantastic canal system.

A week later I took several friends through the tunnel. Once again they all agreed that it was perfectly safe and were somewhat disgusted to hear that it was already closed. When they asked for an explanation, they rejected as ridiculous the feeble excuse for closure as put forward by the transport commission.

It was on this occasion that the photographs were taken and you can see for yourselves the condition of the bricked and unbricked sections of the tunnel. To obtain the photo of the boat the photographer had to balance on a narrow ledge above the water. (The canal at that point was almost 6 ft. deep).

On the inevitable return journey (due to the afore mentioned sabotage on Park Head Locks) I again turned out of the main tunnel into the branch near the Castle Mill end where we tied up the boat in the cavern. (See photograph) Here I met my friends the pot holers, who gave us a most interesting tour around one of the mines, (Known as 144) where we took several more photographs. The one shown is of an underground canal junction showing a bridge leading to a staircase built into the rock, at the side of the staircase can be seen one of the pillars left to support the roof. On completion of our subterranean tour we returned to the boat, on which we travelled under power out of the tunnel and along the approach canal, which by now was quite free of weed due to my previous journeys. I felt quite pleased at navigating that stretch of canal without collecting the usual rubbish around the propeller.

And now the climax. A week later while out pot holing, we discovered a beam of wood about 15 ft. long and 18" square had been fastened across the tunnel mouth. WAR WAS DECLARED. At first we thought that the British Waterways were responsible, but I am afraid I must apologise for jumping to such a ridiculous conclusion. For soon we found out that in the House Of Commons, Mr. Marples had given his assurance that although canals (public highways) would be closed, they would not be obstructed to would-be-boaters. Mr. Marples, being an honest and trustworthy gentleman could not possibly allow such a disaster as blocking a canal especially by his own faithful servants (British transport Waterways).

The following weekend we arrived armed with one cabin cruiser, hacksaw, crowbars, wedges, hammers, block and tackle and many more instruments too numerous to mention. The application of a little brute force in the right places, and in a very short time the obstruction was no more. I think that I should mention a 70 year old local gentleman who after expressing his disgust at the obstruction supplied a substantial amount of the brute force which removed it. In return for his services we took him through to Castle Mill Basin and back, he loved every minute of it, as would millions more – given the chance.

After loading all the equipment into the boat we finally set off into the darkness of the tunnel. Once again we passed the familiar landmarks which by now we knew well, although I still experienced the thrill of plunging into the unknown as when I first went through the tunnel in a small outboard boat several years ago.

It took almost an hour to reach the other end where we were most surprised to find yet another beam of similar dimensions fastened across the tunnel mouth preventing us from getting out. I must admit that this was most unexpected as I considered that the sabotage of Park Head locks sufficient to keep boats out from this end.

We were now faced with a choice of reversing nearly two miles or moving the beam. Needless to say, within minutes the beam was on the way out.

After driving wedges underneath to lift it off the muddy ground and moving it inch by inch with crowbars it finally landed with a glorious splash in the canal in a similar manner to the other accompanied by a loud cheer.

I started the boat, drove out of the tunnel, turned round near Park head Locks and commenced the return journey which was by far the easiest of all. I feel that I must congratulate whoever may be responsible for doing such an excellent job of cleaning out the approach canal, the tunnel, and even removing part of the heap of bricks from the tunnel mouth, making my life so much easier when travelling on my favourite canal. The trouble now is that there are two beams of wood floating around. However, don't let this (or British Transport Waterways) deter you from visiting this fantastic tunnel, and when you come please let me know or write to my pot holing friend John Westwood; 28, Mount Street, Tipton, Staffs.

We will be most pleased to advise you on the present condition of the tunnel, and will meet you on your return journey at either Castle Mill Basin or the junction in the tunnel. We shall take great pleasure in taking you round the mine where you can see for yourself how the limestone was carried direct from the working face by an extensive underground canal system, into the Dudley Tunnel and in turn direct to the iron works by canal. There are also some unique calcite formations to be seen, stalactites, stalagmites, rimstone pools, rare calcite bubbles and some of the best fossils in the country.

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