

the Warwickshire Ring

Four canals combine for this cruise around the Heart of England – and your heart will be in good shape after the exertions of almost 100 locks. **RICHARD FAIRHURST** limbers up

It was about halfway up the Hatton Flight when one of the four crew on our boat turned to me and said: “You know, the reason we chose this route ten years ago – when we were younger, fitter, and had a crew of 12 – is that it has lots of locks.”

In fact, with 93 locks, this circuit east of Birmingham is on a par with many other well-known rings. But few of the other rings lull you into a false sense of security with a little-locked half (the Coventry and north Oxford canals) before the exertions of the Grand Union – and none of the others have the daddy of them all, the Hatton Flight.

The wider Grand Union channel is apparent here, north of Calcutt.

Hartshill Yard on the Coventry – just the right balance between well-kept and working yard.



The Coventry Canal

Unsurprisingly, the lightly locked sections of the ring are very, very busy, the heavily locked parts much less so. We joined the ring near its northernmost point, at Fazeley Junction on the Coventry Canal.

BW's own lockage figures show the north Oxford and the Coventry to be among the most well used on the system, and on a glorious weekend in August, we could well believe it. That said, by arriving at most locks in the early evening – more by coincidence than design – we were lucky to encounter few queues. The longest was at the first locks we encountered, at Glascote, where there were just three boats waiting to go up. The two locks here follow after the aqueduct over the Tame, one of two rivers (the other is the Avon) that you cross twice in this circuit. As with many canals, this route bobs up and down from aqueduct to aqueduct, its flights crossing from one river valley to another.

Nicholsons' guide describes the Coventry Canal around here as “post-industrial”, which is a little harsh. In truth, the canal is rather more attractive than anything which crawls through the suburbs of uncelebrated towns like Tamworth and Nuneaton has any right to be. The West Coast railway is a constant companion, but roads largely keep their distance, and some of the winding, wooded southern sections are genuinely lovely. ➤



Ben Jameson



Best of all is the Atherstone Flight, a gentle, rural 11-lock climb into a rather curious market town. The white-washed house by lock 5 was clearly once a pub, while the lock-keepers' cottage by the top lock is more colourful, if only through the shades of felt-tip pen with which the keeper illustrates weather conditions, advice to boaters, and much more. There are good moorings, and since the early 1980s, the heaps of coal at Rothen's Wharf have given the atmosphere of a true working wharf by the water. The town itself, though, has a sadly run-down feel, its main street lined with charity shops, its pubs uninviting to the casual visitor. (The Market Tavern is well regarded, but doesn't serve food.) 2005 saw an attempt to reinvent Atherstone as a booktown, like Hay-on-Wye: after the acrimonious departure of the promoter, the few remaining booksellers are attempting to rekindle the project, and we wish them luck.

(Incidentally, it was on the Atherstone Flight that we met the purchasers of the Chinese 'Concept Blue' narrowboat, reviewed in February's *WW*. Were they pleased with their boat? Oh yes, they said: built like a tank and fitted out like a yacht.)

Hartshill and Marston Junction are two landmarks on the way south. The former is an appealing BW yard. Formerly the property of the Coventry Canal Company, it is now well kept enough to enhance the canal while still retaining a slightly unkempt, authentic air. Marston Junction is where the cul-de-sac Ashby Canal heads north, for those who want to put off the locks for a few days more.

North Oxford Canal

There is a lock, of course, at Hawkesbury Junction. Only a little one, with a rise of some 6in: but when we passed through, those few inches were causing trouble out of proportion to their usefulness.

Heading south, we could almost breeze straight in, with just one boat in front. Boaters going north were less fortunate. On this Sunday

top left

The famous 180° turn at Hawkesbury Junction: the Oxford Canal is to the left.

top right

Hillmorton Locks, on the Oxford Canal near Rugby – narrow, but paired for maximum efficiency.

right

Rural cruising on the north Oxford Canal, near Stretton.



An historic site at Polesworth.

below

A working boat ascends Glascote Locks on the Coventry Canal.



morning, the wait to pass through the lock was approaching two hours. Some were enjoying the enforced delay, leaving one man on the rope while the rest took in the fascinating site with its cast-iron bridge, engine house and 180° turn. Others were resigned, exasperated even: most seemed to consider it a little early to make the best of a bad lot and retreat to the Greyhound.

The irony, of course, is that Sutton Stop (the popular name for Hawkesbury, after the lock-keepers of the 19th century) is functionally redundant. It was built to stop Coventry Canal water escaping into the Oxford and vice versa, but both have been under the control of British Waterways for 60 years now, and we doubt the West Midlands office dislikes the South-East region *that* much.

These six inches illustrate the challenge of accommodating heavy leisure traffic on the historic canal network. Chaining the gates open might be a solution to the congestion, with minimal engineering required; a little spot-dredging here, shore up a few spill-weirs there.

But who would want to see such an historic artefact taken out of use, changing the scene of so many evocative photographs from the last days of narrowboat carrying? Your answer to that may depend on how many hours you have spent waiting for locks this summer.

Once past Hawkesbury, you can see why so many boats congregate around these parts. This is a delightful canal, more so even than the Coventry. The excesses



of the original winding line was shortened in the 1830s, with black and white Horseley Iron Works bridges erected over the arms and loops created. (One of these, at Cathiron, now leads to a new marina.)

Consequently, the canal now alternates between long straight lengths and occasional bendy bursts, and for some reason, everyone seems to moor on the bends. Rugby is an especially popular spot to tie up. Before this comes Newbold Tunnel, now colourfully, and a little controversially, lit inside: objections were raised to British Waterways spending money on such 'fripperies', though if the five grinning crews coming the other way were any guide, it may now have won the popular vote.



Ben Jameson

The 19th century Oxford Canal improvements also saw Hillmorton Locks paired, one chamber next to the other. This was the Victorians' best answer to congestion, and it still works well today. The area around the locks is another



Ben Jameson

contrasting example of how old commercial sites can survive today: here, with fewer gongoozlers than Hawkesbury, there is no pub, but several canal businesses, craft studios, and a bistro.

Above the locks, we were too late – by days – to see a landmark which had survived for 80 years. The Rugby radio masts transmitted the time signal for the national atomic clock, and rumour has it, instructions to nuclear submarines; in this age of digital communications and competitive tendering, they were taken out of use in April, and demolished in August.

But by contrast, as we continued along the six-mile lock-free pound to Braunston, we noticed an unexpected survivor in a field. Having finally left the shadow of the West Coast Main Line and its swish new Pendolinos, we were now following the Great Central, Britain's closed high-speed line and the great lost hope of railway enthusiasts everywhere. Lonely in a field near Willoughby, by the overgrown

trackbed and its line of trees, stands a forlorn signal, faithfully waiting for the next express to Sheffield. Silhouetted against a summer sunset, it looked melancholy and – were we imagining it? – even a little reproachful.

Braunston to Napton

The trains may no longer call at Braunston & Willoughby, or even nearby Braunston on the Weedon–Warwick line, but surely more people now arrive here by boat than ever did by train.

Braunston is justly famous as the archetypal canal village: locks, bridges and tunnel, pubs and butchers. The junction between the Oxford and (then) Grand Junction canals made it an important trading post for canal carriers; today, its pivotal location on the canal network, with two more junctions (Napton and Norton) within five miles, makes it equally sought-after for leisure moorings. Braunston has not forgotten its past, though, and there are more historic boats – in varying states of repair – clustered here than anywhere else on the system.

The ring route only skirts the village, passing under the twin arches of Braunston Turn then heading west: but do stop and walk back to the first lock, even if all the obvious moorings are taken and (like us) you have to perch on the unpiled length of the 'puddlebanks' embankment.

The five-mile pound from here to Napton Junction is, strictly speaking, still the Oxford Canal. The new Grand Union company paid to improve it in the ➤

- top left
The Two Boats, one of Long Itchington's many pubs.
- top right
Bascote Bottom Lock is the last on the descent to Leamington Spa.
- above
Newbold Tunnel illuminated.
- left
Sunset at Minworth.
- below
Passing hotel boats at Napton Junction – note the 1930s Grand Union bridge.





1930s, installing its distinctive concrete piling, but its entreaties to buy the whole canal (the 'Grand Union Coventry Branch') were rebuffed. Beyond the piling, the landscape is rather more undulating than it has been at any time since Fazeley – a clear warning of the locks to come.

Grand Union to Warwick

The first of these locks are at Calcutt, just after the right-hand turn at Napton Junction. From here through to the outskirts of Birmingham, the canal was broadened in the 1930s, and the magnificent, confident style of the locks is a sight to behold after the narrow confines of the north Oxford.

The canal continues to be extended today, but sideways, into a succession of new marinas: Wigrams Turn Marina at Napton Junction, the enlarged Calcutt Marina, and Ventnor Farm around the next bend. A moorer here has five routes within easy reach, but the Grand Union towards Warwick – our route – seems to be the least popular of them all: so after negotiating a flurry of boats around Calcutt, we found ourselves on our own for the first time since Fazeley.

Maybe the broad locks, once touted as the best way to encourage more traffic, are considered less easy-going than the manageable narrow locks of the Oxford. If true, this is less because they are broad, more that the Grand Union paddle gear is not maintained to its original standard. A shame, as the flight is very pleasantly set, and Long Itchington (at the bottom) is a good place to moor, with more pubs

above left
Hatton Locks, the
'Stairway to Heaven':
21 broad locks climbing
from Warwick and the
Avon valley.

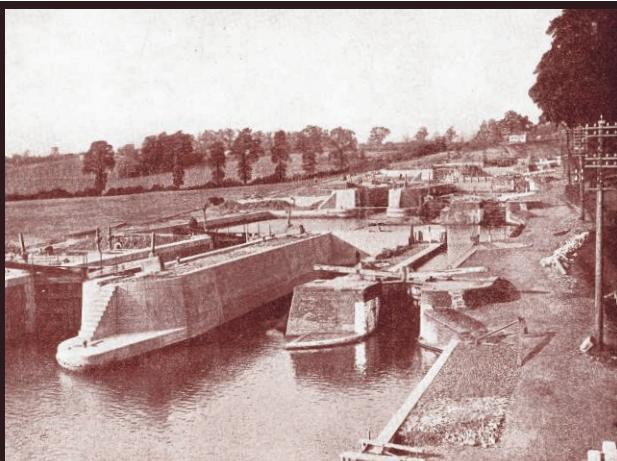
above right
The Grand Union's wide-
beam route from London
to Birmingham ends here
at Samson Road depot,
just before Camp Hill
Locks.

than a settlement this size has any right to expect: two on the canal, three in the village. We settled for the Two Boats, which dates from the 1740s and still serves good ales. The towpath tables give you a good view not only of the boat traffic, but also cyclists on National Cycle Route 41 – a waymarked ride currently under construction, and one which re-emerges onto the canal system rather further south, on the Gloucester & Sharpness towpath.

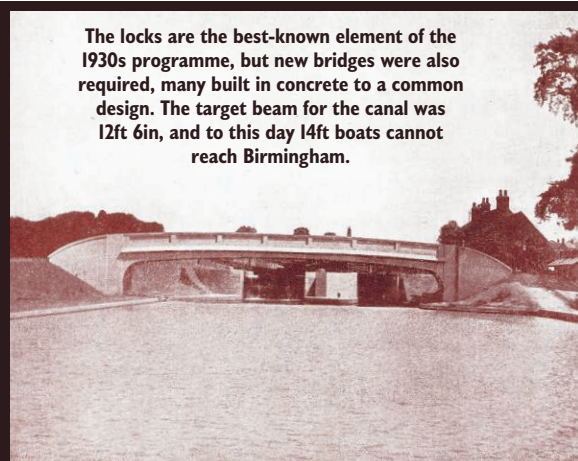
The locks continue sporadically to Leamington Spa, including the Grand Union main line's only staircase at Bascote – where leaky gates can lead to unequal levels, enticing the unwary to ground as they ascend. Where the towpath in Long Itchington was wide and resurfaced, here it is narrow and regularly screened from the canal by reeds and other overgrowth. When the tree cover retreats, the view across to rolling hills is a treat, and if you can find a place to moor up, this is a charming place to spend the night. Radford Semele, a short walk from the bottom lock, has a friendly if unexciting Chef & Brewer food pub. Another short, if rather less authorised walk will take you up to a disused railway viaduct crossing the canal, which we imagine would be a great photographic vantage point – purely hypothetically, you understand.

High tech, 1930s style

When the London-Birmingham canals were amalgamated as the Grand Union in 1929, work began on replacing the narrow locks north of Braunston with broad ones (completed in 1934): this shows Knowle, where six narrow locks were replaced with five broad. Distinctive hydraulic paddle gear formed part of the work. Today, the old locks are still much in evidence, but converted to weirs.



The locks are the best-known element of the 1930s programme, but new bridges were also required, many built in concrete to a common design. The target beam for the canal was 12ft 6in, and to this day 14ft boats cannot reach Birmingham.





above left
Vikings! A party from the Faroe Islands passes through the Curdworth Flight.

above right
Knowle Locks are much less busy than Hatton but possibly the most scenic on the whole route.

Leamington Spa, though less tempting for mooring, has all the services you might need, from Kate Boats' yard to an almost-canalside Tesco where you can buy Shredded Wheat to fortify yourself for Hatton. If you do need an excuse to put off the inevitable for a little longer, Warwick and Leamington Spa could together occupy a day's exploration, and with the frankly extortionate ticket prices at Warwick Castle (£17.95 adults) you would feel cheated if you spent any less time there. For a cheaper, and probably more fun day out, poke around the secondhand bookshops and antique shops, and take a walk by the River Avon – proposed, not yet successfully, as a new navigation from Stratford to the Grand Union.

Hatton and beyond

So – Hatton. The flight is sometimes nicknamed the 'Stairway to Heaven', but opinions differ as to whether this is because the flight lines up with St Mary's Church in Warwick, or a clever coinage by a Led Zeppelin-loving BW marketing officer, or simply a reference to your expected fate at the end of 21 broad locks.

Yes, they are hard work. So share; tie up at the bottom and wait for another boat to come along. A second boat not only halves the work, it removes the difficulty of keeping your boat against the side – always possible if you open the paddles in the right order, of course, but less easy on these GU locks

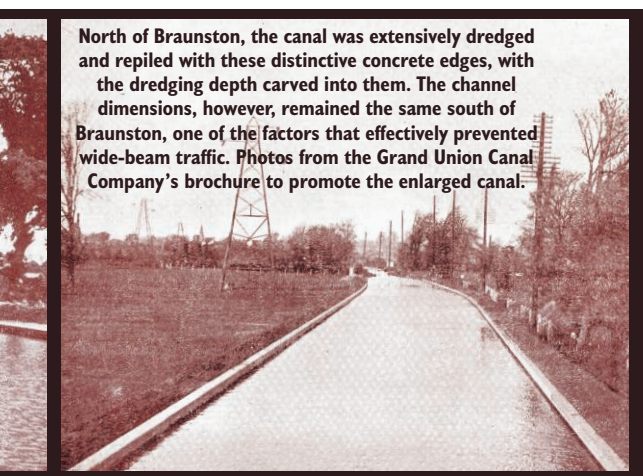
where the bollards are sited front and back for 70ft boats (though there is a grubby chain halfway along). Bring your friends along; setting the next lock ahead makes a vast difference, especially higher up the flight, where the locks are closer together. Take turns at the tiller. If traffic permits, wait in the lock for the next one to be ready. Have your camera to hand; the views get better as you climb the flight. Don't be put off, like the hire-boat crew we saw negotiate the top lock, look down at the next 20 with an expression of sheer panic, and hastily turn round to go back again. And enjoy it; we did.

BW has spruced up the flight in recent years, with a new café below the top lock, a metal dragonfly in a side-pond, a workboat for kids to clamber over on the bank (unkindly described by a fellow crew-member as "the most badly moored BW workboat I've ever seen"), and on-going towpath works as we passed through. The historic canal company workshops here are no longer an important waterway office, but used as conveniently situated central meeting rooms – a bit of a come-down, maybe, but they are still well maintained and nicely set off by a pair of BWB-livery working boats moored outside.

The Waterman pub overlooks the final few locks, and seems an obvious place to top up your own energy banks: but access is easier from the road than the canal, and you may decide just to continue along the lock-free pound to Lapworth, where there are excellent, and popular, moorings. When planning overnight stops, though, do consider Hatton railway station – a mile above the top lock, by bridge 56. This gives easy access back to Warwick and Leamington, and on to Stratford-on-Avon, a few stops down the line. It is also quite an extraordinarily large station for such a small village.

At Lapworth, the Grand Union and Stratford canals 'kiss' and diverge again. Those following the ring have two options: keep going along the Grand Union to Solihull, or follow the northern Stratford to King's Norton. The allure of the Stratford – all split-bridges, deep cuttings and narrow locks – is hard to resist, especially as the route then continues through the heart of Birmingham. Most of those boating north do turn left here. (The Stratford, and Lapworth itself, were covered in August's WW.) ➤

North of Braunston, the canal was extensively dredged and repiled with these distinctive concrete edges, with the dredging depth carved into them. The channel dimensions, however, remained the same south of Braunston, one of the factors that effectively prevented wide-beam traffic. Photos from the Grand Union Canal Company's brochure to promote the enlarged canal.



A floral welcome at Curdworth.





We, however, opted to carry on along the Grand Union. If you are doing the same, do at least moor up and take the short walk to the Stratford. A measure of the junction's picture-postcard quality can be gleaned from the number of amateur watercolourists there, each strategically stationed by one or other of the most appealing views. You can then loop back through the village to the Navigation pub, where a jumbo-size cod and a pint (or two) of Westons proved an excellent way of restoring the calories lost at Hatton. And no, we still haven't worked out where Lapworth starts and Kingswood ends; the latest complication is a sign by the Grand Union that appears to claim the Navigation is actually in *Rowington*. Go figure.

From here on, you are on your own. There are brief flurries of boating activity at the Black Buoy Cruising Club and the day-boat base of Copt Heath Wharf; but compared to Lapworth, let alone the bustle of Braunston and Hillmorton, the last few miles of the Grand Union are astonishingly quiet.

It's not as if the surroundings are unattractive – far from it, with red-brick cottages and unspoilt farmland in the best Midland tradition. Knowle Locks, seemingly far from any settlement, are the highlight: all the Grand Union grandeur of Hatton or Stockton, but no leisure development and many fewer boats. You can easily imagine them 70 years ago, newly rebuilt and waiting for a traffic that never really came.

Birmingham and back

No, it is the stretch through Solihull and Tyseley that dissuades boaters from coming this way. Sometimes it is portrayed as bandit country, sometimes simply as very boring cruising. Our recollection from ten years ago was of a fairly innocent stretch of canal that also happened to be the dumping ground for most of south-east Birmingham's rubbish.

Today, the rubbish, miraculously, appears to have gone. We had nothing around the prop in our journey through Birmingham, and just one fallen tree to dodge. The 'vandals' were almost laughably innocent:

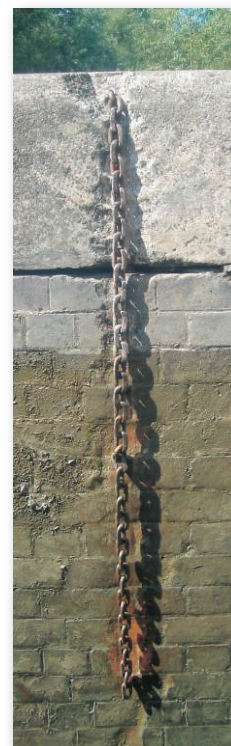
a pair of ten-year-olds who dropped a plastic bottle of mineral water on the roof (we were tempted to call them back and ask if they wanted to wash the rest of it). There was also a bunch of teenagers minding their own business under a bridge, one of whom had the most creative take on vandalism we've yet seen: noticing two of our crew reading the final *Harry Potter*, he yelled out "*Harry Potter!* I've read that," and proceeded to give away the ending. (He can't really have read it – he got it wrong.)

To be fair, the canal through Solihull isn't the most interesting cruise: a deep, tree-lined cutting cocoons you from the streets above. But at Tyseley, the Grand Union takes on that 'Birmingham canal' feel: old industry with bricked-up loading bays, railway viaducts criss-crossing overhead, unexplained narrows and mysterious arms-to-nowhere. Here, the (largely mythical) Grand Union wide boats were expected to discharge their cargo into narrowboats for onward transport, as Camp Hill Locks were never widened.

A right turn at the foot of Camp Hill takes you under an iron bridge, and onto the Birmingham & Warwick Junction Canal. This late (1844) three-mile shortcut, eventually absorbed into the Grand Union, once provided the fastest route through to the Tame Valley Canal. Like the latter, it is now little used, but its five Garrison Locks are the most direct way round the ring if you do not want to stop in central Birmingham. Rather sweetly, BW has tried to make the best of this urban route with a 'Discover Nechells' noticeboard, but the fact that it is protected by a security fence doesn't exactly inspire confidence. We rather liked the Garrison Flight as it is: real BCN-style industry interspersed with viaduct after viaduct, each obeying their own incomprehensible railway geography.

And so to the familiar Birmingham & Fazeley Canal, the last link in the journey. The Cincinnati Machine factory, an urban landmark since the 1970s, was frequently praised for making the most of its canalside location long before it was fashionable: the grassy bank was landscaped, the workers' bridge neatly painted. The factory closed earlier this year, but promisingly, has been acquired by Urban Splash – Manchester-based developers with a good record for thought-provoking, individual designs rather than identikit executive flats.

Oddly, suburban Minworth Locks require anti-vandal keys while the truly urban Garrison and Camp Hill did without. But this is Birmingham's last fling. Before long there are easy rural moorings once again, the Curdworth Flight descends towards Fazeley – where, mercy me, BW has applied some much-needed paddle grease since we came this way last autumn – and to our great amusement, we met a good-natured party of Faroe Islanders on a flotilla of Viking Afloat hire-boats, flags fluttering from the stern. For once, we thought, we might allow them to call it a longboat. 



above
Chains are set into the side of the Grand Union broad locks.

above left
Rural moorings on the north Oxford.

below
The distinctive GU paddle gear.





WARWICKSHIRE RING IN BRIEF

- The Warwickshire Ring is a circular canal route alternating long, lock-free stretches with densely packed flights, and rural sections with significant urban lengths. The ring has more than the usual share of canal landmarks and offers rewarding, if often energetic cruising.
- Though the route is achievable by a crew of two, a larger crew will find the Grand Union's broad locks easier going. All other parts of the route have narrow locks.
- The shortest route follows the Grand Union from Lapworth, through Solihull, to the edge of central Birmingham at Camp Hill. A longer, but more conventionally scenic, detour can be taken by following the Stratford Canal north from Lapworth. This runs (via the Worcester & Birmingham) into Birmingham city centre.

ITINERARIES

Most people hiring from the numerous bases *en route* will devote one week to the route, and indeed, the route is achievable in under a week by a dedicated crew. However, many people will want to take the heavily locked sections from Napton to Birmingham more slowly.

In the summer months, you may want to plan your route so that you arrive at the busy locks on the Coventry and Oxford canals in the morning or evening, to minimise queueing.

An exact itinerary will of course depend on your starting point, but this is a typical eight-day cruise. The energetic could combine days 2 and 3, or 6 and 7; the slower-paced may wish to split day 4. Of the many detours available, the 5½ miles to Coventry Basin, and the Ashby Canal, are obvious choices.

■ Day 1	Fazeley–Atherstone Top	10½M 13L
■ Day 2	Atherstone Top–Stretton Stop	16M 1L
■ Day 3	Stretton Stop–Braunston	15M 3L
■ Day 4	Braunston–Radford Bottom	14½M 23L
■ Day 5	Radford Bottom–Hatton Top	8M 23L

Via Grand Union Canal:

■ Day 6	Hatton Top–Catherine de Barnes	12M 5L
■ Day 7	Catherine de Barnes–Curdworth	15½M 14L
■ Day 8	Curdworth–Fazeley	7M 11L

Via Stratford Canal:

■ Day 6	Hatton Top–Hockley Heath	7½M 18L
■ Day 7	Hockley Heath–Gas Street Basin	16½M 0L
■ Day 8	Gas Street Basin–Curdworth	8½M 27L
■ Day 9	Curdworth–Fazeley	7M 11L

NAVIGATION AUTHORITY

- Oxford Canal (Bridge 9–Napton): British Waterways (South East), 01908 302500
- Other canals: British Waterways (West Midlands), 01827 252000

MAXIMUM DIMENSIONS

- Grand Union Canal: Length 72ft, beam 12ft 6in (locks are 14ft, except Camp Hill and Garrison at 7ft), headroom 6ft 6in.
- Oxford Canal: Length 72ft, beam 7ft, headroom 6ft 6in.
- Stratford-on-Avon Canal: Length 70ft (72ft possible but tight), beam 7ft, headroom 7ft 3in.
- Coventry Canal: Length 72ft, beam 7ft, headroom 6ft 6in.
- Birmingham & Fazeley Canal: Length 71ft 6in, beam 7ft, headroom 6ft 3in.

CANAL SOCIETIES

- Inland Waterways Association Warwickshire, Lichfield and Birmingham branches (head office: 01923 711114, www.waterways.org.uk)
- Coventry Canal Society (01788 814319, www.covcanalsoc.org.uk)

MAPS AND GUIDES

- Nicholson's Guide to the Waterways 3: *Birmingham & the Heart of England*
- Pearsons Canal Companion: *South Midlands*
- Geoprojects maps: *Grand Union 1* (Birmingham to Fenny Stratford); *Coventry & Ashby*; *Oxford*
- Ordnance Survey Landranger sheets 139 (Birmingham), 140 (Leicester, Coventry & Rugby), 151 (Stratford-upon-Avon, Warwick)