

## Visit report: Three Stroudwater Canal Crossings

### Stephen Mills

On a breezy but sunny afternoon of Sunday the 9<sup>th</sup> October, a group of 35 GSIA members gathered for one of the Society's guided walks. Since Covid restrictions have eased, we have finally been able to resume these much-missed activities.

This particular walk was titled 'Three Stroudwater Canal Crossings', and was headed up by our Hon. Secretary, Ray Wilson. It was impractical for the walk to follow a circular route, as we usually try to do, so it involved a combination of exploration on foot and by car.

The meeting point was Fromebridge Mill, close to Junction 13 of the M5 (the Stroud exit). From there, we moved on to St Cyr's church on the outskirts of Stonehouse, where Ray led us to our first visit, the new Ocean Jubilee (rail) Bridge installed over Christmas week last year. The removal of the existing railway embankment that had long blocked traffic on the canal and the construction of the new bridge has moved the canal's re-opening one step nearer. We also heard about the background of 'the Ocean', a widened section of the canal next to the bridge, and how wool was supplied to nearby Bonds Mill via a short adjacent rail siding, then transported on its final leg by boat.



*Enroute to the new Jubilee Ocean Bridge*



***Adjacent to the Jubilee bridge, with the Ocean in the background***

The next stop involved a short drive to Churchend in Eastington. From here, we followed the course of the River Frome, past Meadow Mill, as it meandered towards the M5. The Stroudwater Canal currently ends at Dock Lock in Eastington, the next section leading downstream towards the Bristol Road (A38) having been infilled many years ago (the so-called 'Missing Mile'). Work is underway to reinstate the canal along this stretch, although one major engineering challenge will be to carry it in a channel that will be 'shared' with the Frome where it passes under the motorway.

The canal will consist of a concrete U-shaped channel that will be installed under the existing river opening – one half will accommodate the flow of the river, and the other will be taken up by the new canal channel. The scheme will also involve the construction of new locks needed to provide adequate headroom for boats passing under the bridge. The new section of canal will eventually connect to the existing canal at Westfield Bridge and lock (albeit infilled) that still survive downstream from Dock Lock.

Our final port of call took us back to Fromebridge Mill to visit the impressive innovative arrangement that now takes the canal under the A38 roundabout via two new bridges. We also saw the proposed site for the new Bristol Road lock, decades after the original disappeared beneath road developments associated with the building of the M5.

So ended an interesting walk that took us to several important canal crossings. Each one had a story to tell and it became clear how changes continue to take place, not simply in infrastructure, but also in attitudes towards industrial and heritage assets in general. At each stop, we saw how one generation was reversing decisions made by previous ones, all focused on the eventual re-opening of what was once an important commercial link to Stroud. If all goes according to plan, it will once again become a valuable asset to Stroud and the wider area, but now for leisure purposes, rather than industrial use.

Overall, a most interesting and informative walk – and many thanks to Ray for his usual encyclopaedic knowledge!