



DISCOVERING THE PURTON HULKS

Mark C. Baker explores the ships' graveyard protecting the Gloucester & Sharpness Canal from the tidal waters of the River Severn

The Purton Hulks was somewhere that I was keen to visit as soon as I heard the name. The evocative description 'ships' graveyard' piqued my interest and begged me to go and explore. Some may just see a number of gradually decaying vessels, but this is a very special waterways location, with an intriguing history and lots to offer anyone with an interest in the UK's canal network.

Following my visit, I submitted four of my images to the Canal & River Trust and Future Water Association's Flow Photo competition, one of which was chosen for exhibition at the National Waterways Museums.

The Hulks sit close to one end of the Gloucester & Sharpness Canal, just before Sharpness Docks. The canal, as the name suggests, joins the inland city of Gloucester with Sharpness, covering a distance of 16½ miles. Being a ship canal means it can accommodate craft 210ft-long with a beam of 31ft 5in and draught of 11ft 6in as far as Gloucester Docks. At one time it was both the broadest and deepest canal in the world.

The G&S joins the River Severn

at Sharpness, which then wends its way towards the Bristol Channel. The section of canal just before Sharpness Docks runs very close to and parallel with the river, and erosion meant that there was a very real danger of the canal bank being breached here. Since the only locks are at the extreme ends of the canal, a breach had the potential to put the whole waterway out of action.

THE SHIPS' GRAVEYARD

In 1909, following a collapse of part of the riverbank, various old vessels were run aground or sunk at high tide. These gradually filled with silt and formed the beginnings of an anti-erosion barrier. More vessels were added over time, with the last ones being deposited there in the early 1970s, although the later additions may have been for convenience rather than anything else.

Some of the vessels are now completely buried or their superstructures have decayed away; others have substantial sections exposed to view or sit on top of others that were hulked much earlier. There is a wide range of types, both steel and wooden, as well as some

ferrocement barges.

Several of the hulks are included on the National Register of Historic Vessels. One, *Harriett*, is a scheduled monument. It is the last-known example of a Kennet-built barge, having been constructed in the village of Honey Street, which sits alongside the Kennet & Avon Canal. It was registered in Bristol and worked the city docks. Now surrounded by a low wooden barrier, it's easy to find.

VISITING THE HULKS

If you're not boating towards Sharpness on the G&S, the easiest way



Ferrocement barge - the image exhibited as part of the Flow Photo competition.



Dursley, a 1926 dock lighter.



Harriett - a scheduled monument.



Ada, a Bristol schooner built in 1869.



The 1890s Stroudwater barge, Rockby.

to access the Purton Hulks is to drive to Purton near Berkeley. The village can be accessed via country lanes that connect with the A38, close to the M5.

Opposite the village church of St John the Evangelist, you will find a small CRT car park. A swing-bridge near the entrance gives access to the towpath; turn left and walk in a westerly direction for about 800m. The canal gently curves to the left until it starts to run parallel to the River Severn. It is a grass towpath and is likely to be muddy when wet, so stout shoes are recommended. Keep your eyes peeled for a small path that goes off to the right and brings you to the northern end of the ships' graveyard.

Once you have seen all you want to, it is another mile or so until you are opposite the entrance to Sharpness Docks. On the way you will pass under the remains of the ill-fated Severn Railway Bridge. It was struck by two vessels during thick fog in 1960, leading to a partial collapse. The bridge was subsequently demolished; however, the stone towers for the swing section over the canal remain.

“In 1909, following a collapse of part of the riverbank, various old vessels were run aground or sunk at high tide”



Edith, a 1901 trow once used to carry coal.

Once you reach the entrance to the docks, if you follow the towpath around to the right and start walking through the marina, you can continue for another half mile. On the way you will pass a small marina shop where, if it is open, you will be able to find hot drinks and a small selection of snacks.

I'd recommend 2½ to 3½ hours for a thorough and fairly leisurely exploration of the Hulks and docks.

While you are in the area, you might

want to take the opportunity to visit Slimbridge Wetland Centre, which boasts an extensive collection of rare and endangered wildfowl, accessible from the Gloucester & Sharpness at Shepherd's Patch. Saul Junction, where the G&S crosses an in-water section of the partially restored Stroudwater Navigation, is also a pleasant place with walks aplenty and a visitor centre run by the Cotswold Canals Trust.



Entrance to Sharpness Docks.



Cruising past the remains of the Severn Railway Bridge.



The swing-bridge at Purton.



The unrestored Stroudwater Navigation.