

The Harecastle tunnel

Most of this section is quoted from Appelby's Canal tunnels in England and Wales and Philip Leese's Kidsgrove times on which I could not possibly improve.

Talke's place as centre of transport with as many as twenty teams of mule drivers stopping at the inns was not to last. The first blow was the opening of the Harecastle tunnel, a remarkable feat of engineering by Thomas Telford and James Brindley. Brindley's first^t tunnel was opened in 1777, five years after the engineer's death. It is 2,897 feet long, 8feet 6inches wide, and in use until 1918. The second 'Telford' tunnel, opened in 1827 and is still in use today, it is 2,929 yards long and much wider. The canals orange colour can be attributed to local geology (iron ore) and the canals clay lining , (a technique called puddling) used to stop the water leaking out , rather than any pollution.

James Brindley started work on Harecastle One on 27 June 1766, partly at the urging of local potter Josiah Wedgwood, who needed a safe and cheap means to transport coal to the kilns. 'In the event, the tunnel took eleven years to build, during which time Brindley died and was replaced as chief engineer by his brother in law, Hugh Henshall. Harecastle had presented all manner of problems, including quicksand, hard rock outcrops, springs and even deadly methane gas, as well as resident engineers and contractors taking advantage of the lack of close supervision by the over-

stretched

Brindley.' The tunnel itself was very narrow, much like the mining tunnels at

Worsley, and

during construction side tunnels were dug to exploit seams of coal (which were also arched and bricked to the same height as the



Harecastle I Kidsgrove portal

main tunnel).' One local legend states that there is an underground wharf just within the Kidsgrove entrance to load this coal.

'The public were fascinated by the new tunnel, and pleasure boats cruised through it accompanied by musical bands!'

However, passage by canal for those working on it was slow and often hard. Boats couldn't move in cold winters, when canals froze, or in high summer, when drought lowered the water levels. There was no regular pay of social security and boatmen were only paid for the goods delivered on a tight schedule, with serious delays meaning much hardship for the family on board, a far cry from the relaxing holidays we think of today. The Harecastle tunnel however was often the hardest part of the journey. There was no tow-path for horses to pull the boat through; they were taken over the hill by the road aptly known as Boat Horse Road. The owners of the boat had to leg it through the 1 ¾ mile tunnel. Lying on their back on the top of the boat, they had to push the boat through the tunnel by walking their feet along the roof above their heads. However some pictures show men legging boats along the tunnel's side.

Some men used to offer their services as professional leggers, although none were ever licensed in Kidsgrove and no-man ever gave his occupation as legger on a local census unlike around some other canal tunnels, so perhaps this was a last resort when times were hard. However, 'one man buried in Lawton churchyard, had his address 'Leggers Hut, Limekiln Lane.' The main record we have of leggers come from the Poor Law Board of Guardians. It describes how leggers lived in boat cabins, either permanently moored or actually drawn up the canal bank, and 'though the cabins were a health hazard the Board decided that it 'did not feel called upon to deprive the poor people living in them of their only chance of having a home and a shelter.' They paid two shillings (10p) per week rent, and were obviously amongst the poorest folk.'

A. H. Body gives us one account of



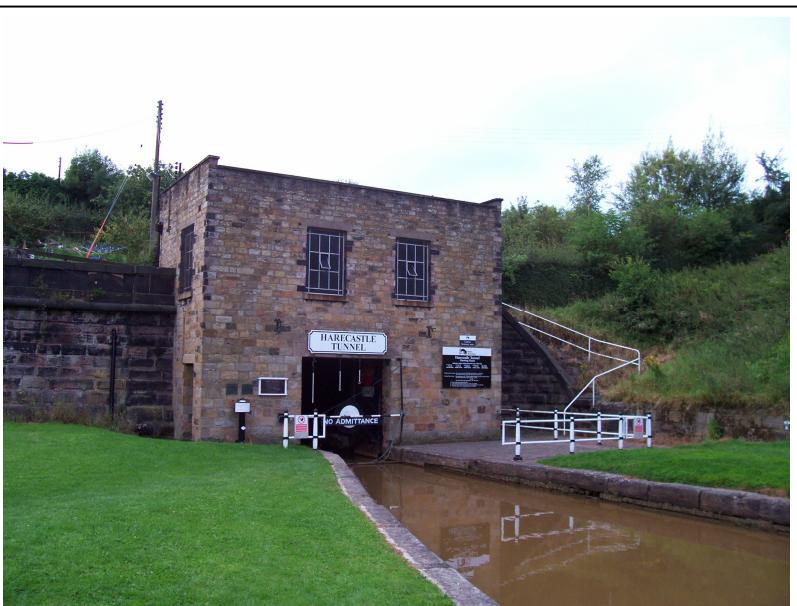
life by an unnamed legger

'We put the boards out on each side of the boat, at the front, and fastened them there. Then we slipped a half sack of corn under us as a cushion, see, and just walked our way along the sides of the tunnel, inside 'Arecastle that is, wearing our feet over each other, lying half-sideways all the time. We just kep' walking. It took about two hours and a half, and very damp it was too.'

This time meant that long queues built up at both ends of the tunnels, particularly as the tunnel was narrow gauge, which meant that north bound boats had to wait until a south bound boat had travelled right through and vice versa.

This bottleneck 'was only resolved by Telford's parallel tunnel in 1827, after which Harecastle I was only used for southbound boats.' Telford had risen to fame after his iron bridge was

Harecastle II Kidsgrove portal



constructed over the river Seven at the town now aptly named after him. During his life he not only built canals, tunnels and a significant part of Ellesmere port and London's St. Katherine's docks, but also 1,000 miles of road and 1,200 bridges and public works.

'In marked contrast to Harecastle I, Thomas

Telford took only two years to build the new tunnel.' One reason was that a small tunnel was dug through to the first, which could then be used to carry out the waste. 'Straighter and more stable than its predecessor, Harecastle II demonstrated the technological progress that had been made since Brindley's time.'

'Once Harecastle II opened in 1827, dual working was introduced. Horses pulled northbound boats through the new tunnel while southbound boats were still legged through the old one. Steam tugs replaced leggers in 1891,' but delays continued until an 'electric tug was introduced in 1904, which consisted of two barges (one with electric motors, the other carrying 18 tons of batteries) pulling themselves along a cable on the canal bed. Later, overhead wires supplied the electricity, but these were removed in 1954.'

'By 1918 subsidence was beginning to take its toll and Harecastle I became increasingly unstable until it was closed by canal authorities. With single-line working returning, Harecastle II's towpath also began to subside, becoming increasingly hazardous to men and horses. The increasing use of self propelled craft allowed the towpath to be removed and a pumping station was built at the south portal with a fan to extract fumes,' which is why a door is drawn across the entrance to the south portal.

'A collapse in 1960 finally sealed the fate of Brindley's tunnel. Today it remains barred and blocked- a picturesque curio beside the busy working tunnel built by Telford.' However, in 1979 'two young canoeists, Jon Goodwin and Robin Winter, who had been in Britain's Olympic canoe team, had made an official and somewhat hair-raising trip through the old canal tunnel, which had not been used for 60 years.' Entering at the Chatterley end nearest Talke the roof was five feet above the water level, although by the time they were 800 yards in it had descended to three foot, making me wonder how leggers managed to cope with needing to gain or loose an extra two feet in the length of their legs.' The water's height also varies with the seasons. 'They found that not all of the tunnel was bricked, and that there were painted markers every 100 yards, allowing the leggers to check their progress. Further in subsidence had made the roof collapse and stalactites had formed. Pictures of this are available at Newcastle Museum

One interesting local theory is that it was originally called the Air Castle in memory of the initial disbelief of locals, and that one of the original signs of the Harecastle pub was a small castle turret upon a cloud.

The second tunnel is still used today, with convoys of barges being pulled through by an electric tug from Sweden, which has a motor at both ends so it does not have to turn around to go back. Boats may use electric power but no gas or flames due to the level of methane- (despite a pumping station and the opening and closing of the tunnel doors) Harecastle Tunnel can still smell unpleasant in summer. The tunnel was originally 18 foot deep, but in places the canal has silted up so much that boats can ground themselves when they try to leave the tunnel. For more information please see Phillip Leese's excellent Kidsgrove's canal, the Trent and Mersey.

The Boggart

'The term 'Kit Crewbucket' has now become accepted slang for a canal ghost, although its precise origin appears to emanate from the northern portals of the tunnels at Harecastle. In Victorian times Kidsgrove was known as Kitcrew, while a 'buggut' was a dialectic term for a ghost (rather similar to the Scottish 'boggle.')

'According to one story, two local men murdered a woman and threw her corpse into the Trent and Mersey canal.' The woman, possibly a dressmaker called Christina Collins, had been hitching a lift on a Pickford canal boat. However, the boatmen were drunk and she most often walked alongside the boat fearing for her life. However, this was not possible when the boat entered the pathless tunnel. She never saw daylight again as soon a couple living in the house above the south portal heard a scream from the tunnel. Both boatmen were convicted of the murder and hanged.

However, this was not the end of the tale for local residents living near the isolated tunnel entrance. 'She now appears to frighten the unwary, manifesting either as a headless body, or in the form of a white horse.' In other accounts she is a banshee, and miners who heard her wails in the night would not go to work the next day fearing that she had predicted their deaths in the frequent pit explosions. More recently, the story featured in an Inspector Morse programme called 'the wench is dead.'

For more information please see Phillip Leese's The Kidsgrove boggart and the black dog, where Phillip debates whether the legend came more from the fictional book the water gipsies, whose author may never even have visited the Talke and Kidsgrove area at all and decided to set the famous murder of Christina Collins in a more 'impressive gloomy surroundings.'