

PADDINGTON BASIN AND LITTLE VENICE WALK

AUGUST 2011

I am a Londoner born and bred - almost a cockney - but had never set foot in the Paddington area. However, a knowledgeable and informative Welshman, Dafydd Wyn Phillips, opened ears and eyes to this fascinating area.

We met at Edgware Road tube station and, after an introduction from Mr Phillips, we quickly moved on to the tranquil oasis of Paddington Green, where we could admire a marble statue of the actress Sarah Siddons at her grave site, and the nearby St Mary's church. It was interesting to learn that we were close to the site of the last thatched house in London.

Back into the sound of traffic but we were soon in the calm of Paddington Basin, the terminus of the Grand Junction Canal. Here we were surrounded by modern buildings, including the M & S headquarters, designed by Richard Rodgers in his typical fashion. The whole of the area has been transformed in five or six years. A member of the group who had worked in the area not so long ago just could not recognize it.

This walk could easily have been called 'In search of four bridges'. The Helix bridge was the first, a giant metal and glass corkscrew which retracts to allow watercraft to pass through. Next, the Rolling bridge, a simple foot bridge which, when activated, transforms itself snake-like into a perfect octagon resembling a hamster wheel. Sadly, this transformation only happens once a week on a Friday! Next came the Station bridge, which provides a space age getaway to Paddington station, with a semi-transparent screen across the canal. Last, but by no means least, we looked at the main road bridge and marvelled at the fact that during its construction the first iron bridge of I K Brunel had been discovered almost intact. This has been removed by English Heritage to be placed I know not where.

Then it was back again to the 21st century with a modern amphitheatre in Sheldon Square with its "pool" constructed on stilts and surrounded by office accommodation, restaurants and bars, but soon we were to tumble upon a tollhouse, which was a reminder of how busy this canal was in its heyday.

Finally, we arrived at Little Venice at Browning's Pool to admire the Georgian architecture alongside the "pool" and wonder who resided in these beautiful buildings. It is here that the Paddington arm of the Grand Union Canal meets the Regent's Canal.

Sadly, the indefatigable Rosemary had to leave us halfway round for an appointment, but with her usual efficiency she had booked a table at the end of our walk for us to lunch at the Grade 1 listed Prince Albert pub, a short stroll from Little Venice.

Thanks once more to Dafydd Wyn Phillips and to Rosemary for a most interesting morning, despite the inclement weather.

George Harding