

The Importance of canals to our local area.

The Black Country owes its rapid industrial growth to the complex network of canals that criss-cross the region. The canal network rapidly grew in the late 18th century and brought many benefits to the towns and cities that it served, throughout the country. The roads of the day were poor and badly maintained, and journey times were long and uncertain due to the conditions of the roads and the weather. Heavy goods were difficult to transport, and the cost of transportation was very high.

The local area had a vast mineral wealth with coal, limestone, and iron ore in abundance. The difficulties of transporting large quantities of raw materials, even to somewhere as close as Birmingham were astronomical. Birmingham badly needed a cheap and reliable source of coal and so the local canal system was conceived as a way of achieving this.

Very large sums of money were required to finance the building of canals, but luckily there were many local businessmen and traders with disposable income, who would willingly invest in such schemes in the hope of getting a large return on their investment.

The canal system certainly lived up to their expectations. Once the Birmingham Canal was in operation the cost of Black Country coal dramatically fell, as large quantities were mined and transported on the new canals.

Vast quantities of limestone were transported from the Dudley and Walsall areas and heavy industries such as iron and steel began to grow, using the canal network to bring-in their raw materials and deliver their finished goods. By 1851 there were no less than 13 coal merchants based on the canal in Wolverhampton alone, and large factories sprung-up on the canal sides. The large quantities of coal, raw materials, and finished goods that were transported on the canals at the time, made the canal companies very wealthy, greatly benefiting their shareholders.

The population of many of the local towns rapidly grew thanks to the employment offered by the new factories, and the cost of some of the items for sale in the shops fell due to large-scale manufacturing and ease of transport. A greater variety of goods could be found in the shops thanks to the reliable transport on the canal network. The large-scale textile and garment manufacturers in Derbyshire, Lancashire and Yorkshire relied on the canals to transport their goods, which could quickly be delivered to the Midlands, reducing the cost of clothing, and increasing the variety that was available in the shops.

The canal network was connected to seaports so that manufacturers could easily export their products and many imported goods were readily available for the first time. The falling cost of coal reduced people's heating bills and the large amount of raw materials and goods that were transported allowed traders in the local towns to easily provide the expanding population with all their needs.

Although principally used to transport goods, canals were also used to transport people, until the arrival of the railways. Passenger boats originally took 4 hours to travel from Wolverhampton to Birmingham, although the travelling time was reduced to 3 hours when Telford's new main line opened.

For many years' canals were the vital arteries of the midlands and remained so until they were overtaken by modern forms of transport and better roads. It is now hard to imagine just what the canals were like in their heyday. Today they are tranquil places for relaxation and enjoyment, but two hundred years ago it was a very different story.

Questions about the text

- 1) What were some of the hinderances that faced towns and cities in the 18th century?
- 2) What is meant by the term '*disposable income*'?
- 3) Find **three benefits** which the canal systems brought to the Black Country.
- 4) Why did the population of local towns grow and what impact did this have on the region?
- 5) How many coal merchants could be found in Wolverhampton by 1851?
- 6) What benefit did the falling cost of coal bring to the towns and cities?
- 7) Why were the canals connected to seaports?
- 8) List two reasons why the canal systems are no longer as prominent in society as they were during the Industrial Revolution.
- 9) How are the canal systems used in modern times now do you suppose?

Extra task

Research more about the canal systems during the Industrial Revolution – what additional information can you find? Consider how you are going to present your information.

You could produce:

A leaflet

Poster

PowerPoint presentation