

**The Train to Work**

**An Observation**

**By Simon A. Perry**

I'm sitting on a train on my way to work - to Birmingham. I usually take the intercity but today, through a number of circumstances, I'm on the local stopper.

The route is pretty depressing. Pulling out of Wolverhampton the train passes a number of old industrial units - Victorian mostly - many still operational. All are blackened and neglected. Their cobbled yards are home to drifts of rubbish that has blown in and lies there uncollected, or in one case to piles of industrial waste waiting to be recycled: lumps of broken tarmac, old wooden pallets, lumps and twists and strips of scrap metal. The blind eyes of windows, so covered in brown grime as to be opaque, stare down on this wasteland.

And then, as the train begins its approach to Coseley, a small irony begins (and which lasts, for the most part, for the remainder of the journey).

The canal, that highway of Victorian industry, begins to run alongside the route. Once this was the path taken by the barges that supplied many of the factories along its banks, the life-blood of the source of the grime and squalor.

Now, however, the canal provides the only respite from the dirt and depression of the industry that surrounds it. Its banks are now well maintained, many of the bricks newly repointed. The towpaths have been repaired and the channels dredged.

The water, once, in this area at least, the home to dead dogs, traffic cones and shopping trolleys is now clean. Rushes grow in places along the banks. Ducks pepper the surface, disappearing under the water to feed before bobbing back up seconds later. Sometimes the growing ripples reveal the hidden presence of a feeding fish.

There are many houses hard against the canal as it nears Coseley. The banks are lined with slabs of 1980s red-brick masonry. Whatever aesthetic value these houses may have had has been lost in the translation from architect's drawing to bricks and mortar - a blot on the design landscape.

But again the canal comes to the rescue. Nestling amongst these bland houses are jewels - a lock-keeper's cottage here, a worker's cottage there. Modern facilities have transformed once mean, cramped workers' dwellings into pretty, well-tended homes. Their individuality and age adding spots of visual pleasure to the lines of uninspiring chuck-em-up-as-quick-as-possible '80s housing.

As I write these words I occasionally look up at the other passengers in the carriage, and I am saddened, for I am the only person looking at, or rather seeing, the world as it passes by.