

# HEATH HOUSES BRANCH OF MONTGOMERY CANAL

Hostel boat  
*Margaret*,  
with *Dane*  
August 1962



Photo  
Waterway  
Images

## Save the Heath Houses Branch (the what?)

**Norman Stainthorp**

A little to the north of the Rednal Warehouse on the Montgomery Canal, past the main line railway bridge, is a swing bridge on the towpath side.

The swing bridge clearly hasn't moved for some time and the canal arm below it seems to vanish into the trees and scrub. This was, however, once the branch to the 'Heath Houses' interchange basin, so named to avoid confusion with the village of Rednal, which was a mile to the east.

The basin was alongside the Shrewsbury & Chester Railway, built in 1844, later part of the Great Western Railway and still operational today.

There were extensive railway sidings alongside the basin to enable goods to be transferred from railway to canal for deliveries to places such as Welshpool and Newtown that had no rail connection until the 1860's - quite late for a railway.

The basin got busier in 1858 when two additional tracks were laid to the north side of the arm leading to the basin to serve the 'Rednal Bone Mill', who produced manure from animal bones. Animal carcasses, (presumably in sacks!), were brought from as far away as Liverpool from where they would have crossed the Mersey in barges, or 'Mersey 'Flats', to Ellesmere Port. They would then be transhipped to narrowboats for onward transmission to Rednal. At the Bone Works, the carcasses would be boiled and stripped of fat which was then reloaded into narrowboats and taken back to Port Sunlight on the Wirral where both animal fats and palm oil were used to make soap.

The return journey from Rednal for the bagged-up fat would have been back to Ellesmere Port by narrowboat, then transhipped to barges for the journey along the Mersey to Port Sunlight's own dock. The remaining bones were then made into fertilizer at Rednal, although some were transhipped to Stoke-on-Trent for use in bone china.

In 1875 part of the premises were rented to a Mr McKie for the manufacture of blasting powder which utilised the same nitrogen that was used for making the fertiliser. The Fertiliser Works now re-named the Rednal Fertiliser Works was by now producing their manure from 'super phosphates' - a more efficient process with the availability of guano from islands off the coast of Peru from the 1870's. The use of the railways, however, was short lived as by 1884 all the railway sidings had been lifted.

The arm then fell into disuse, although traffic by Shropshire Union Company boats, precursors to *Saturn*, continued to unload concentrated sulphuric acid in carboys on the main line, into hand carts which were pushed to the Blasting Powder Works.

This method of unloading must have proved unsatisfactory for both the Canal Company and the factory as a swing bridge, as you see today was installed by the Company in 1902. The arm was then reinstated to allow the mechanical unloading of 'huge quantities of material' from boats directly alongside the works. This must have been a useful back-load for Shropshire Union boats that had delivered cheese and other agricultural products to urban areas such as Manchester. *Saturn*, built in 1906, might well have contributed to this trade.



*Rednal Basin Nature Reserve 1997*

*photo Waterway Images*

With the coming of the First World War

(1914-18) there would have been a huge increase in the demand for explosives, bringing additional traffic to the canal, whilst no doubt causing more efficient premises to be built elsewhere using chemically produced nitrogen instead of guano, with good rail and road connections.

After the War the explosives traffic declined dramatically, contributing to the Shropshire Union Canal Company's decision to cease carrying in 1921. All their boats were of course horse-drawn, built on fly-boat lines as the Montgomery Canal in working days never saw a motor boat.



What of the arm today? - The Bone Mill building survived, (right) and was not demolished until 11 November 1986. The arm and basin are now a Nature Reserve and this picture of the building is in Harry Arnold's book on the Montgomery Canal.

Perhaps one day, when the whole Montgomery Canal main line is re-opened, and environmental and boating considerations are reconciled, perhaps the cry will be heard - 'Restore the Heath Houses Branch'!

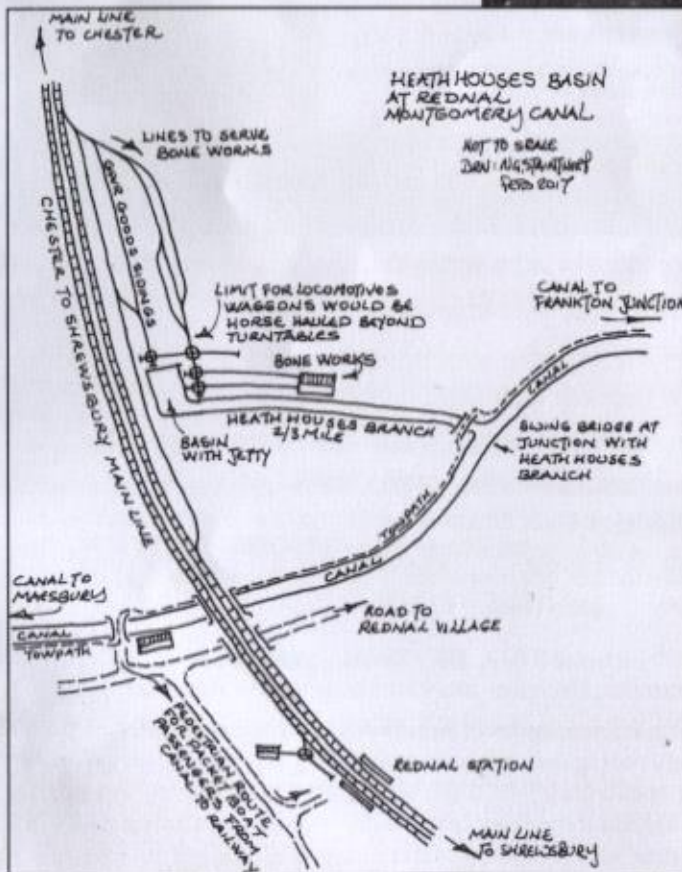


Right - Rednal Basin Bone Mill building 1986

photo Waterway Images

Below - A sketch plan of the full extent of works alongside the Montgomery Canal at Rednal.

Norman Stainthorpe



My thanks for additional information provided by Harry Arnold and Bob Jervis.

For acknowledgements and source material see p.14