



# Rural Enigma

*A look at the chequered history of the Kington, Leominster & Stourport Canal and the recording on film of its contemporary status*

Words: **GRAHAM FISHER** Photography: **IAN GRANT**

WE ALL WORK in our own ways. I have a projects list to which new enquiries are appended to the bottom and eventually work their way to the top. It has been my intention for ages to take a look at the Kington Leominster and Stourport (KLS) Canal and I penned it on my list several years ago but although I had parry-diddled round the edges to make a start somehow I hadn't yet got round to sinking my teeth into it.

So when a colleague told me about a talk being given at some place out in the sticks by some fellow I had never heard of I thought it might be worth a look. By the end of his presentation I was hooked, not only by the intriguing story of probably the most enigmatic canal I have encountered for some time but more by the man who related the tale. And in particular by his quite stunning photographs that made any suggestion of my attempting to emulate them seem both pointless and unattainable in equal

measure.

His name is Ian Grant. More of him and his work in a moment but to start off here's a potted history' of the KLS line together with a few of the urban myths and uncertainties which have spread up around it. The name is variously recorded though either the KLS title used here or the Leominster Canal are the commonest. The suggestion in some texts that 'of Southnet Tunnel there is no trace' is immediately dispelled by Ian's portal shots of same. 'Yes it is difficult to trace but it is nevertheless there' he told me. Conversely abandon any hope of finding the portals of the 3850 yards Pensax tunnel, which, although indicated on several maps, was never constructed.

Anyway, back to the plot. Although the KLS was being built to provide a conduit for agricultural produce to reach the Severn, and thence much of the known world, its primary function was to open up the area to incoming

industrial goods and materials from Birmingham and the Black Country. Immediately upon the line opening the price of coal, the staple fuel for industry, halved in Leominster from 30 shillings (£1.50p) to 15 shillings (75p) per ton.

Of necessity it also had to pass through the south of the Wyre Forest coalfields and to negotiate some hilly country in doing so. The coal trade was seen as essential even though taking the line through Pensax and Abberley was hardly the most economical route to build and with hindsight it would be easy to suggest the venture, surveyed by Thomas Dadford jnr. in 1789, was from the outset hopelessly optimistic.

But with a planned 4 tunnels, one of them over 2 miles long and the 100 yards Newnham tunnel not even mentioned in Dadford's original plans, 3 aqueducts and in excess of 60 locks, a wildly miscalculated budget, a line which was never anywhere near completed and a pool of shareholders who never received a penny dividend it is fair to say the facts

**FIRST PAGE: Railroad track bed to Mamble Pits.**

**RIGHT: Near Newhouse Farm.**

eventually spoke for themselves.

Work commenced in 1791 but despite the grandiose scheme to link Kington with the Severn through 31 miles of waterways only a little over half was completed between Leominster and Southnet wharf. Some work was undertaken between Leominster and Kington but beyond that there was very little further progress. In 1797 a ceremonial sod was cut near Stourport where the canal was due to enter the Severn around Areley Kings but by 1800 financial difficulties prevented further development to Stourport and the existing line of 18 miles was limited to transporting coal from Mamble pits.

An idea to continue to Stourport via tramroad never materialised. For the next quarter of a century the canal company tried to raise the necessary capital but the advent of the railways left little option but to strike a deal with a railway company. After being sold to the Shrewsbury and Hereford Railway



for £12,000.00 the canal was finally closed in 1859 and drained, apparently by the simple expedient of opening up the banks into adjacent streams.

Despite never being completed and subsequently abandoned for almost 150 years there is still much to see along the

line though much is now on private land so the usual caveats about seeking permission apply. Perhaps the most striking feature is the Teme aqueduct, or what remains of it, having been partially destroyed by the army as a training exercise during the last war.





Near Marlbrook the Rea aqueduct is reputed to contain a million bricks. A section of canal nearby was later used for fish-ponds. Tunnel portals, lock chambers, embankments, canal side buildings and wharves can all be traced. And what canal does not have its own ghost story; Southnet tunnel collapsed in 1795 never to be repaired yet it is rumoured that two souls and their boat still lie entombed there.

Let us now bring the story bang up to date and enlarge upon the accompanying photographs. Allow me to introduce you to the man with the camera. Ian Grant is no boater; in fact he won't mind me saying he is not even particularly into canals. But he is very definitely into landscapes. Some years ago whilst working in the landscapes near the KLS he stumbled across a bridge apparently in the middle of nowhere that crossed the river Teme. His investigations led him to the Teme aqueduct and the remains of the line for which he subsequently developed a great affection. 'I saw things which needed capturing for others to continue to be able to see' he told me and over the ensuing years his enquiries have led him to amass a considerable knowledge of the line, its history and its remaining artifacts. Not surprisingly he is considering writing a book.

The talk he gave was supplemented by photographs some of which had been framed for use in an exhibition and when we met at the end of the evening I



**Teme aqueduct.**

suggested his work be presented through the waterways media such that fellow enthusiasts could appreciate them not only as records of an enigmatic waterway but as individual works of art per se.

The equipment he uses to capture these images is itself fascinating and looks like one of those wooden affairs on a stand that you see some-one under a cloth using to take a picture of Wyatt Earp. It is in fact a Japanese rosewood

field camera made by Wista and running 5 inch x 4 inch sheet film. It looks antique but is a youngster at a mere 15 years old. *'I love the control this camera affords me'* said Ian *'and also the high quality image the larger film size produces.'*

Judge for yourself the quality of Ian's work and don't let me influence you in the slightest by telling you about the sumptuous shots he showed me from his portfolios, a selection of which will be going towards the MA in photography for which he is currently studying. The evocative images around my native Black Country bought a bit of a lump to my throat and the atmospheric portraits of some musical heroes of mine captured in action at various concerts were dazzling. *'I undertake commissions of all sorts'* Ian ventured *'anything except weddings and socials.'* He also undertakes exhibitions and is always on the lookout for new venues to show his work. Heritage consultants, promotional people and waterways PR departments take note; his on-line address follows shortly. Ian also sells prints from his wide ranging portfolios of which I have barely touched on here so contact him for more information.

Every now and then someone pops up on the scene who enriches the usual routine of the day and takes the imagination along new lines of possibility. It really was pure serendipity that I met Ian and I would be much surprised if



**Approaching Rea aqueduct.**





Photographer Ian Grant and Wista on assignment at Rea aqueduct.

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The black hole of Putnal Tunnel, south portal.

henceforth the waterways world does not hear more from him.  
In the meantime for those who can't

wait then contact **Ian Grant** direct on [iangrant@lostlabours.co.uk](mailto:iangrant@lostlabours.co.uk) or tap a 'www' in the appropriate place and

browse his website.  
My thanks to Ian for kind permission to reproduce his work. Enjoy !



Near Wooferton, crossed by the Shrewsbury to Hereford railway.