

FARMERS LOCKS TO DUDLEY (MULTIPLE CANALS)

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TRIP TYPE: SOLO CYCLE

OBJECTIVE: TAKE THE TRAIN FROM CRADLEY HEATH TO BIRMINGHAM SNOW HILL. CYCLE FROM FARMERS LOCKS VIA OLD TURN JUNCTION ALONG THE BIRMINGHAM MAINLINE AND WOLVERHAMPTON LEVEL, TICKING OFF VARIOUS LOOPS AND SECTIONS, FINISHING THROUGH NETHERTON TUNNEL AND DUDLEY NO. 2 AND NO. 1 CANALS TO DELPH LOCKS.

DISTANCE: 27 MILES

TIME: 3½ HOURS, 7.8 mph

NICHOLSON: GUIDE 2: pp 38, 39, 42, 43, 133, 137

COSTS: FREE PARKING AT DELPH. TRAIN FROM CRADLEY HEATH TO BIRMINGHAM SNOW HILL £4.70, 4 PER HOUR.

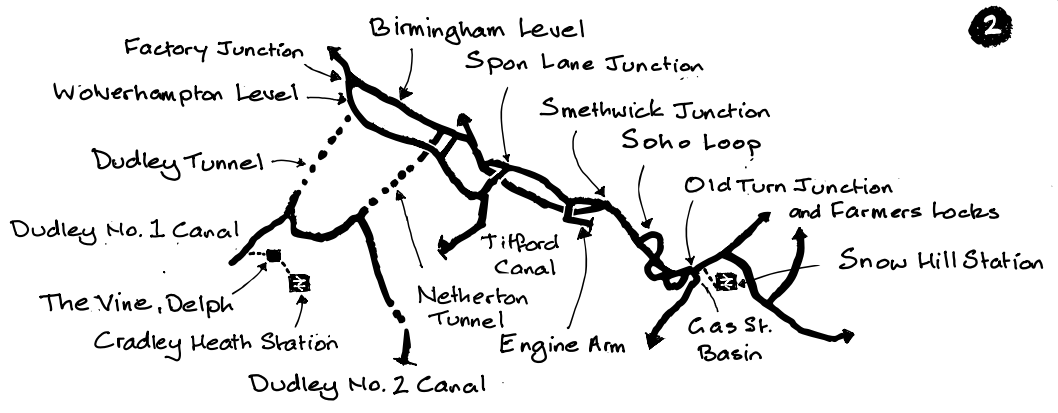
DIFFICULTY: HARD

OVERVIEW: I have categorised the ride as hard purely because of the difficulty of cycling through the Netherton Tunnel. Otherwise it is moderate. Unfortunately it is not easy to avoid the tunnel. Even walking through it presents difficulties due to substantial flooding and potholes.

Although this ride is 'mopping up' a number of sections not covered on other rides, it is a pleasant, varied and interesting ride, with the challenge of the Tunnel towards the end, and your reward is finishing at one of the best traditional pubs in Britain - The Vine at Delph, home of Bathams Brewery. Probably my favourite ride so far.

You will need good lights to navigate Netherton Tunnel, and be prepared to get wet.





1. DELPH TO SMETHWICK JUNCTION (5 MILES CYCLING)

Park at The Vine, Delph Road, Delph, DY5 2SY. There is a large car park, they are happy for you to park, but please contact them before parking as a courtesy. Cycle up Black Horse lane and continue straight over and down (now called Mount Pleasant, then High Street, then Forge lane) to Cradley Heath Station, about 1.2 miles. Take a regular train into Snow Hill, no booking required.

Leaving the main entrance of Birmingham Snow Hill Station turn right, then right again back on yourself and head down Livery Street. This is one way so walk your bike or ride on the pavement. At the roundabout use the underpass to the left, crossing the A4400 Queensway, emerging again on to Livery Street. Continue a short distance then drop down onto the canal at Farmers Locks and head up the locks to Old Tom Junction and the famous roundabout at the centre of the Birmingham canal network.

Turn right at the junction onto the Birmingham Mainline. Cozels Street loop opposite is only navigable for a short distance before an iron gate leading to private moorings blocks the way,



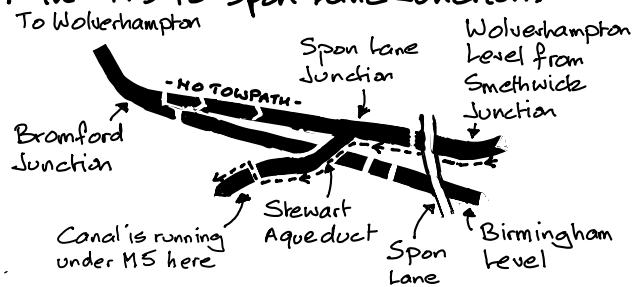
so skip this bit. The Ekfield Port loop has no towpath so miss this out too.

Continue along the Mainline to the Scho loop on the right, where the towpath continues to be metalled and very good. The loop is very pleasant and quiet. There is no access to Hockley Port half way round the loop, as these are private moorings. Emerge again onto the Mainline and continue right to Smethwick Junction with the canal on your left.

2. SMETHWICK JUNCTION TO OLDBURY JUNCTION (4 M)

Cross the pedestrian bridge at Smethwick Junction, then continue on the right-hand side (Wolverhampton level). The towpath is on the left, and is compacted earth and gravel but still quite serviceable for now. After climbing the 3 locks the Engine Arm heads left over an aqueduct (crossing the Birmingham Mainline which is at a lower level). Follow the Engine Arm round to the left and continue about half way along the stretch to the waterways yard, which is gated off. The towpath along this section is earth, rutted with pot-holes and lots of tree roots. Turn around and head back across the aqueduct. Turn left to continue along the Wolverhampton summit level. As the canal heads under the M5 the towpath worsens and is muddy, narrow, sloping and tricky for a while - you may need to walk your bike for 100m, if it is very wet. Continue under the M5 to Spon Lane Junction.

Spon Lane Junction



There is no towpath between Spon Lane Junction and Bramford Junction as the locks take the canal down to the Birmingham Mainline level again. It is blocked off and unmaintained so skip this section (there are steps down by the aqueduct should you need to drop down at this point). Instead, turn left over the Stewart Aqueduct which again crosses the lower Birmingham Mainline.

You soon find yourself again under the rumbling M5. The towpath is on the left initially, ill-defined, narrow and grassy, which turns to dirt and gravel once fully under the motorway. Cross the first footbridge and continue on the right of the canal to Oldbury Junction.

3. TITFORD CANAL (2.6 MILES)

Cross the canal on the newish footbridge to head along the Titford Canal and up the locks. The towpath is better here. Continue to the end at Birchfield Lane A4034, where the feeder channel continues



Warehouses on the Titford Canal

under the road. Returning the way you came you will notice the Tat Bank Branch to your right - this has no towpath and is not navigable. Once back at Oldbury Junction turn left (cross back over the footbridge and double back under the bridge).

4. OLDBURY JUNCTION TO NETHERTON TUNNEL BRANCH VIA FACTORY JUNCTION (6 MILES)

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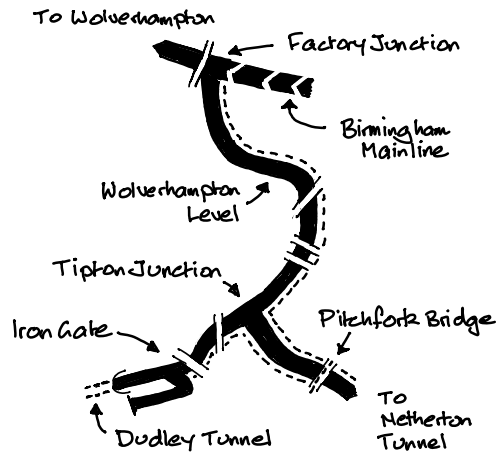
Continuing on the Wolverhampton Level the towpath is compacted earth and gravel, not brilliant but wide and level. The level winds its way parallel with the much straighter Birmingham Mainline half a mile away. The two are connected at the Clower Branch (save this for the Sandwell + Dudley to Penbridge ride). Continue over the Netherton Tunnel Branch which passes underneath (you will return shortly) to Tipton Junction where the Dudley Tunnel (now a bit of a tourist attraction) goes off to the left. Bear right and continue to Factory Junction, where the Birmingham Mainline and Wolverhampton level converge once again.

Turn round and head back to Tipton Junction. Continue left to Pitchfork Bridge - the first bridge you come to once round the bend - cross it and head back

on the opposite side to Tipton Junction. Turn left and head up towards Dudley Tunnel entrance.

Again you are blocked by an iron gate 200m before the tunnel.

Turn around, head back to Pitchfork Bridge, cross it and continue to retrace your steps back to the Tivdale Aqueduct, which crosses the Netherton Tunnel Branch.



5. NETHERTON TUNNEL TO DELPH LOCKS (8 MILES)

Drop down the slope to the canal side house. Continue 200m to the road bridge, cross the canal and head back towards the Netherton Tunnel entrance (there is an iron gate on the side you first dropped down to, so you can't use this towpath).

Turn on your lights. There is a railed footpath all the way through the tunnel. The railings lean inwards or outwards at various points, much of the path is waterlogged, with deep potholes. The path is narrow, and the bend of the tunnel wall/roof means there is not much room to manoeuvre. Gloves are recommended to avoid scraping your knuckles. The tunnel is 2,700m long, and it takes 15 minutes to cycle through, by which time your hands will feel supergloved to your handlebars such is the grip needed to keep in a straight line.

If you decide to walk your bike through, you are going to get very wet feet. Once out, let your eyes adjust to the daylight, continue straight on at the junction (Dudley No. 2 Canal to Halesowen is covered on the Halesowen to Kidderminster ride).

Continue on Dudley No. 2 Canal which bends north to join Dudley No. 1 Canal at Park Head Junction near the Dudley Tunnel south entrance. Turn left (you will do Park Head Locks up to the Dudley Tunnel entrance on the Halesowen to Kidderminster ride).

As you approach Merry Hill Shopping Centre the towpath is much improved, and paved. Continue down Delph locks to the Tenth Lock pub at the foot. The area around this lock can flood at times (I have experienced it while on a narrow boat). Turn left onto Delph Road B4172 and head half a mile up the hill to The Vine (aka Bull + Bladder) for a well earned pint (bitter or mild only) and a bag of scratchings (minimum 4 varieties available).



