

## LENGTHSMAN'S COTTAGE, LOWSONFORD, WARWICKSHIRE

Barrel-roofed cottages are a very rare feature on Britain's canals and the South Stratford canal has one of the best sets to survive. Six were built originally, between Lapworth and Preston Bagot. Landmark's cottage at Lock 31, now known as Lengthsman's Cottage, is the least altered from its original form. It was known first as the Lock House, then more recently simply as Ned's Cottage, after Ned Taylor who lived here for most of his eight decades. We have named it Lengthsman's Cottage after the lengthsman (or often lengthmen) who cared for a 'length' of canal and its towpath. (It also allows us to distinguish between Landmark's other Lock Cottage, at Stoke Pound on the Worcester canal.)

The South Stratford canal was built between 1812 and 1816, to link the river Avon into the main Midland canal network. The northern stretch of the canal came first, between Birmingham and the junction with the Warwick to Birmingham section of the Grand Union at Kingswood, constructed by engineer Josiah Clowes after an Act of Parliament in 1793. This was the great age of canal building, in the years just before steam, when waterways were seen as the transport of the future. Great profits were expected by investors – but the Napoleonic Wars put paid to that, as the country's economy moved onto a war footing. Credit was squeezed and the cost of raw materials soared. By the time the canal reached Hockley Heath in 1796, the budget for the entire route through to Stratford had already almost been spent.

The scheme was in deep financial trouble, but in 1797 a bright local land agent named William James became involved. James re-surveyed the line and a further Act in 1799 enabled more funds to be raised. By 1802, the 18 locks down from the summit at Hockley Heath to Kingswood had been completed and the junction to the Warwick & Birmingham canal accomplished – but then work stalled again. James, however, had a vision of an integrated transport network and did not give up on the idea of linking the canal to the Avon. Backed by credit he had built up on other activities, he bought out other shareholders.

In 1812, he was able to start work on the southern section, under William Whitmore as engineer. James and Whitmore saw that cost control on the northern section had been somewhat lax. They introduced (perfectly serviceable) cost cutting measures, and it is these that give the South Stratford canal its unique character.

Farm lanes were bridged not with brick arches but with prefabricated, cast iron split bridges. These allowed the towrope to pass between the two leaves, the horse walking up and over the narrow bridge, so there was no need for a wider span to take the towpath. Stretches of narrow gauge railway were used to haul bricks and the tons of excavated spoil cheaply and efficiently over soft ground. Locks were reduced to a single narrowboat's width, with single-leaf gates at either end, halving their cost. The cottages built to house the men who would care for the canal were built using the materials and techniques already available for bridge-building – simple rectangular brick boxes spanned by iron ties and brick vaults. The one at Lowsonford does not even have foundations,

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standing simply on the puddle clay used to seal the waterway. The construction cost of each cottage was reduced from £150 to £80, yet snug and durable dwellings were created that have stood the test of time. By 1813, the canal had reached Wootton Wawen, suggesting that Lengthsman's Cottage was built around 1812-3, and in 1816 the long-awaited link with the Avon was achieved. Yet steam came hard on the heels of the canals and their heyday was brief. By the mid-19th century, the waterways were already on the decline, bought up by the new railway companies who cared less for their maintenance than investing in the rail network. By the 1900s, the South Stratford was already a backwater, bypassed by the Grand Union, which lay above a tortuous stretch of locks for those travelling northwards from Stratford. By 1947, when the writers and Inland Waterways Association campaigners L. T. C. Rolt and Robert Aickman applied for passage through the bridge at Lifford Lane, the whole Stratford canal was all but impassable to narrowboats. Then in 1958, Warwickshire County Council applied for a Warrant of Abandonment for the canal, on the grounds that no boat had used it in the past three years. Fortunately, two canoeists were able to provide licenses proving that they had used the canal in that time – and so began a campaign to save it.

In 1960 the National Trust took on the South Stratford and employed a local architect and canal enthusiast, David Hutchings, to oversee its restoration for leisure use. The project became a celebrated example of canal restoration, achieved mainly by non-skilled labour – volunteers, prisoners from Winson Green, Royal Engineers, boys from Borstals, ToCH: all played their part. In 1964, as part of the quartercentenary celebrations of Shakespeare's birth, the South Stratford was re-opened to traffic by Her Majesty the Queen Mother.

Meanwhile, through all these years of decline and rebirth, Ned Taylor had been quietly living in the cottage at Lock 31. Born in 1921, Ned was one of a family of eleven children. The Taylors' tenancy survived the various changes of ownership of the canal in the 20th century, and when in 1992 the National Trust transferred the canal to British Waterways and the cottage to Landmark, we also took on Ned's life tenancy. The National Trust had somewhat modernised the cottage when they took over the canal in 1960, but Ned's needs were modest and so the cottage survived without the larger extensions added to the other barrel-roofed dwellings.

When Ned died in 2005, little more than a refurbishment was needed. Externally, the chimney stack was unstable and so was carefully taken down and rebuilt. Cement render was removed from the rear elevation and replaced with breathable lime render, and the 'eyebrow' beneath the eaves on the canal-side elevation was carefully re-rendered. The lean-tos, holding today's kitchen and bathroom, date back to the 1900s at least; the buttresses were put up in the 1930s. The cottage seems always to have been limewashed at most, rather than entirely rendered. Internally, we kept the original cast iron range, as well as the practical gloss paint finishes of Ned's time and the insulating plasterboard installed to the walls by the National Trust. We re-wired the cottage and fitted a new kitchen, and new night storage and water heaters. The sitting room and rear lobby floors are as we found them and early (those in the bedrooms are new Norfolk pammets and those in the kitchen and entrance lobby are modern quarry tiles as found). New iron casements were made for the windows to match the single surviving original that faces the canal. In Landmark's care, the cottage will continue to play its part in this congenial conjunction of canal, road and village, testimony to William James's exemplary value-engineering.

In 2015, Lengthsman's Cottage is one of five Landmark sites chosen by artist Antony Gormley for an installation called LAND, a collaboration with Landmark in its 50th anniversary year. From May 2015 to May 2016, five different, lifesize representations of a

human figure in cast iron are placed for one year at representing the four compass points - Soddell Bay, Martello Tower, Clavell Tower and on Lundy. Lengthsman's Cottage is the fifth, anchoring the whole installation near the centre of Britain, on a manmade waterway. This quiet site in a Warwickshire village is in marked but complementary contrast with the wide horizons of cliffs and sea at the other four sites. The Canal & River Trust has helped fund this Lowsonford installation.

As Antony Gormley has said, LAND in combination with the Landmark Trust's 50th anniversary is 'an occasion to think and feel the nature of our species, its history and future, and its relationship to the huge biodiversity of living beings that exist on the surface of this extraordinary blue planet.'

*The Landmark Trust is a building preservation charity that rescues historic buildings at risk & lets them for holidays. Lengthsman's Cottage sleeps up to 4 people. To book the building or any other Landmark property for a holiday, please visit [www.landmarktrust.org.uk](http://www.landmarktrust.org.uk)*