

**JAY MASON-BURNS**

---

### **Beneath, a forgotten river flows**

The River Rea isn't a long or particularly famous river, compared to the likes of the Severn, Trent or Humber. It rises in the Waseley Hills to the south of Birmingham, running gently northwards for fourteen miles or so until it is swallowed up by the River Tame near Aston.

I have many fond memories of playing in the Rea with friends and family on its shores through Selly Park. Back in the 70s playing in the Rea wasn't for the faint-hearted, there was all sorts of scrap metal, oil drums and dead fridges dumped in the shallows, but that never stopped us larking about as you do.

Despite its diminutive size the Rea has long held the ability to wreak havoc across the shallow valleys of southern Brum. Its proclivity to flood after heavy rainfall became an issue in the 19th century as industry and housing expanded out of the city into Warwickshire. Culverting rivers has long been standard practice across the country, with many cities choosing to divert their waterways underground, encasing them in concrete or brick, and using them as giant sewers. Work started on the Rea culvert in the 1890s after a series of disastrous floods, and was completed around 1910.

The effect of bricking up and diverting the river below ground level is that it separates us from it, the culvert acting as an almost impenetrable barrier between us and the river. From Cannon Hill Park in Edgbaston the river disappears from view, dropping down over ten feet below ground level, bricked up and fenced off. Most access points along the route from there are from road bridges, where locked doors allow access only during emergencies for the fire service.

However, in Highgate, near the Central Mosque on Belgrave Middleway, there is a forgotten access point to the river. There, under an old sycamore tree I met Wali Taylor, who happily had agreed to accompany me in exploring the culvert. A shallow set of stairs took us down to an opening above the river. I imagine it was originally for workers, tasked with removing rubbish, an old set of posts indicate where a substantial gate used to be. The steps down are very dodgy, lined with years of rubbish and excrement, it is brutally obvious that it's used by local heroin users. It's quite awful, I don't think I've ever seen so many used needles in one place, the worst kind of 'hundreds and thousands'.

A short drop over the edge beneath the steps, three feet or so and you land on the culvert, which is noticeably slippery underfoot. What is immediately noticeable is the sudden hush, we're only a few yards below the thundering rush hour traffic on the Middleway and yet it feels like we're suddenly removed, divided from the city above.

Walking along the culvert from here on is a disorientating experience, there are no landmarks to help get your bearings, no roads to follow, no signs to guide you. At least three times we had to get our phones out to use Google maps to locate where we were in relation to the City above. The steep sides of the culvert separate us utterly from the world above, whilst we walk along the subterranean shoreline. The sides are vertical, sheer and unclimbable, sometimes all you can see beyond is sky. There is no way out, you can only follow the river.

Bridges cross overhead from time to time, carrying roads across, civilization feels tantalizingly close and yet completely removed at the same time. Wali points out the numerous one-way sewer outlets, the pollution down here was once a real problem for the city. Life seems to prosper down here nowadays. Trees and wild flowers proliferate along the sides, caught up in muddy banks, whilst birds and insects caper in the air. The river itself is probably only two or three feet deep for most of the way along, it is quiet and unhurried, like browsing in a library on a Saturday morning. Occasionally the waters darken, stained by something thrown in the shallows, a trolley, a moped, a rusted barbecue. But for the most part, the river is a quiet companion, almost meek.

That's the ever present danger here though, underestimating the river. The scale of the culvert hints at the river's capacity to flood and torrent, a couple of hours of rain and this place will be in utter ferment. It's easy to be distracted by the views on offer as well, belying the dangers below. The banks of the culvert dip down to the water's edge at a gentle but constant angle, whilst every few yards an outlet disgorges a bubbling wash of stuff, oozing filth in a rainbow of dizzying flavours. You absolutely have to pay attention to these washes, your safety depends on it. An unwary footstep in this filth and suddenly, SLIP!

Within fifty yards of our arrival I nearly went down, comically wheeling my arms and legs like a Catherine Wheel as I tried to keep my feet. Thankfully I managed to stay upright, but Wali wasn't so lucky. An almost invisible layer of ooze upended him, his arse sliding rapidly down to the water's edge, his feet up toboggan style, his face a picture of pure what-the-fuck panic. Luckily, I caught hold of his bag, and I was able to drag him back from the brink. Unfortunately, the ooze quickly soaked into his clothes, leaving him with filthy skid-marks courtesy of the Rea.

Down by the riverside the view is predominantly old industrial, relics from a time when Brum really was the workshop of the world. Many sections of land have been cleared around the edges of the culvert, in readiness from re-development, especially along this stretch through Highgate into trendy Digbeth. At ground level you can't see the Rea at all, all views are denied, hidden behind walls and brick façades. Even the land that has been cleared is rigorously fenced off, you cannot get anywhere near the Rea, this is not a path, it is a border we're not meant to cross.

It's not long until we hear the noise of Digbeth, it's a surreal sensation being down here, in the underworld. Here the river snakes through longer sections completely underground, beneath Digbeth High Street and Floodgate Street and further stretches beyond. It's quite a wonder to emerge into the light again, looking up at the Custard Factory and the Bordesley Viaduct from so far beneath, it's a really special and unique view.

We spy a ladder upwards, offering us an unexpected route out of this forgotten underworld into a car park, which means we don't have to walk all the way back out again! We're both suddenly keen to leave, I think we both feel we're not meant to be here. In taking our leave we feel elated, an urban achievement unlocked, we've survived relatively unscathed, skid-marks notwithstanding.

---

© Jay Mason-Burns

11th October 2023