

WALI TAYLOR

As you pass under Saltley Gate, leaving the site of Nechells gas works behind, you pass under rail and road bridges the site of the old Saltley Gasworks. Yes, there were two gasworks within a couple of hundred meters of each other. The site is now occupied by the Smurfit Kappa recycling plant with its clouds of condensate belching from chimneys.

The recycling industry dominates this walk, although Henry Taroni's scrap yard is gone due to HS2: in its place is a huge rust red steel rail bridge. People live on the canal, and at the time of my visit there were two occupied boats and a tented encampment close to yet another recycler.

The River Rea runs alongside the tow path deep in a culvert for the first part of the walk, but before we reach Star City it passes beneath the Grand Union Canal in a tunnel. Star City is a huge white elephant. It was built as the Las Vegas of the West Midlands with cinemas, restaurants and bowling alleys but most of all a huge casino. It had things in its favour: it is in the shadow of Spaghetti Junction so in theory is accessible from much of the UK and has great free parking, but it also has many cons against it as a location. Nechells is not an oasis in the Nevada Desert, it is full of scrap yards and recyclers. If I was looking to get mugged it would be in my three top areas of Birmingham and most of all it is in the shadow of Spaghetti Junction.

Brummies take pride in being able to drive on the country's major motorway interchange with one eye closed but the rest of the UK population are not so confident. It is a place to drive through not to drive to. The casino has long gone and although it still has great parking the multi-storey is closed. It is on the opposite side of the canal from the tow path so there is no access. However, Star City does have a dedicated modern mooring, I guess for the millionaires that never came in their luxury longboats. We can now clearly see Spaghetti Junction, where the canal splits with one branch leading to the city centre and the main line heading north east to Fazeley.
