

From York Way to The Rosemary Branch

This walk marks the 200th anniversary of the opening of the Regent's Canal in 1820. It is part of a series of Islington walks devised by Andrew Clayton that draws on the research of the volunteers that took part in the Listed Islington project. This reviewed and revised the 1600 or so locally listed buildings in the borough.

The walk takes us from the Conservation Area of Regent's Canal West, over the hill along White Lion Street to the Angel, and down Duncan Street to re-join the canal as it emerges at the east facing portal. We end at the Rosemary Branch, scene of the notable 2019 Islington Society annual dinner.

The walk starts at the steps down from the bridge on York Way over the canal. The trusty 390 bus provides convenient access to the tow path on the left-hand side of the canal. The canal was engineered and designed by James Morgan, who was an assistant to the architect John Nash. Neither Morgan nor Nash were experienced canal engineers and there were many financial and technical problems as the canal was built. But it became one of the most successful parts of the British canal system, linking the Grand Union with the Thames at Limehouse.

As you walk along on the left there are **sections of the original retaining wall** constructed when the canal was first built, or shortly after. On the other side of the canal, after King's Place, Battlebridge Basin and Ice Wharf, is **Regent's Wharf**, the most important group of industrial buildings on the Islington section of the canal. This pair of cattle feed mills and warehouses was built by the Thorley company in the late 1800s and early 1900s. They were altered in the 1980s, with additional windows inserted, but they provide a rare glimpse of the industrial power of this part of early 20th century Islington.



Regent's Wharf

Climb up onto Caledonian Road at the next bridge and you can see the west facing portal of the tunnel under Islington in front of you. It is appropriately sinister with heavy rustication in the John Nash style. If you get close enough you can see the light at the other end of the tunnel.

From Caledonian Road make your way up Wynford Road, Rodney Street and Donegal Street to White Lion Street and one of Islington's most interesting pubs, for its history more than for its architecture. This is **The Three Johns, at No. 73 White Lion Street.**

A pub has stood on this corner since the 1780s. The building we see now dates from the very end of the Victorian and the beginning of the Edwardian eras, built for Watney Combe Reid between 1899 and 1901, while the old Queen was dying and Edward VII was coming to the throne. There is some difference of opinion about the origin of the name. The more prosaic account is that the three local men who developed the site in 1781 were all called John. The more interesting is that it was named after John Wilkes, the radical thinker of the 1700s, together with John Horne, a follower of Wilkes, and John Glynne, his lawyer. The Three Johns has also been identified by recent historians as the location for one of the key events in pre-revolutionary Russian history. It was here in August 1903 that Lenin, Trotsky and about 50 other committed agitators, all of course in exile, met to plot the downfall of Tsarist Russia, and disagreed so much that they divided into the Bolsheviks and the Mensheviks, splitting socialism's history for ever. Visiting now, it is hard to see how they all fitted in, let alone split.



The Three Johns

Further towards the Angel, on the corner of Islington High Street, is the old White Lion pub, which gave the street its name. What is now **Nos. 23-25 Islington High Street** was an important cattle drovers' inn on the route to the London meat markets, from at least the 1660s. It was rebuilt in 1714, a date which is recorded on an original panel on the White Lion Street frontage, with the monogram of Henry Penton, owner of the surrounding land. It was then rebuilt again, in 1898, for Eli Perry, victualler, of Oakley Square, Camden Town. This too is recorded on a panel, with the lion motif facing that of 1714. The pub closed in the 1960s and is now a branch of HSBC, a bank. It has adapted well to its new role.

Round the corner to the left is **No. 29 Islington High Street**, a highly ornate Victorian Flemish Baroque building with terra cotta and brick detail crammed into a narrow façade. It was built in 1884 for Alfred Goad, a watchmaker. Goad clearly had money to spend and every floor is a showpiece, including a fine arched balcony on the third floor. At the top, under the crowning scrolled pediment, he displays the monogram AG&S for Alfred Goad & Sons. It's as if Mr. Goad was trying to compete with the new building next door, completed just a few years before. The shopfront has gone but the rest of the building makes up for its loss. You have to risk your life in the middle of the High Street to get the best view.



Alfred Goad's emporium, 29 Islington High Street, centre left.

Further along are **Nos. 31-37 Islington High Street** at first sight a fine late Victorian Baroque Queen Anne revival symmetrical façade, complete with highly elaborate Dutch gables above the central and outer bays. It was originally built as a speculative venture, a group of shops with dwellings above and behind. It had an arched entrance to a yard within. The shopfronts were of polished granite with plate glass windows. The architect was Arthur Vernon, who was active in Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire as well as London in the 1870s and 80s. In 1870 he succeeded his father as land agent to the Earl of Beaconsfield (the former Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli) at Hughendon, Bucks. So, his credentials were very grand indeed. But, and this is a big but, the date inscribed at the top of the facade, just below the central pediment, is 1987. The whole of Nos. 31-37 was rebuilt in 1986/7 as a brick-by-brick facsimile of the original by Greater London Properties. What we see is a reconstruction, not the original building. The bricks have matured well, and it matches with its neighbour at No. 29. But it is still a reconstruction. Islington Council should consider taking it off the local list.

Cross the High Street, and dive down Duncan Street to re-join the canal at the junction with Colebrooke Row. You can look back and see the magnificent east facing portal as the canal emerges from the tunnel. The towpath follows the back gardens of Noel Road with a **retaining wall** made up of panels of fused brick wasters with piers, plinths and coping of pinkish stock brick. There are eighteen panels curling down from Colebrook Row to Danbury Street bridge and supporting the "hanging gardens" of Noel Road. The wall seems to date from the laying out and development of Noel Road rather than the construction of the canal. In an 1837 engraving the wall is lower and only supports a very gentle slope.

Beyond the Danbury Street bridge, you arrive at the complex of canal locks and other structures which are at the heart of Islington's section of the Regent's Canal. The centre piece is **Lock 5**, at the junction with the City Road Basin, a busy spot on the London canal system. The basin superseded Paddington as the main goods distribution point for London, which shows how important the building of the Regent's Canal was. Lock 5 is a working lock with canal boats moored above and below. It retains most of its fittings, though the second parallel chamber is no longer used. The bollards that stretch above and below the lock are original and also locally listed, as are some of the retaining walls.



Lock 5, Regent's Canal.

Carry on along the towpath towards the border with Hackney, to the bridge leading to Baring Street and Southgate Road. Here we find a group of pubs, which must have done a good trade refreshing the thirsty bargees who had just legged their way through the tunnel.



Rosemary Branch public house

The Rosemary Branch public house is an important old pub, built soon after the cutting of the Regent's Canal and the construction of the New North Road in the 1820s. It once housed a music hall, now a theatre. It shares design details on its elevation with the Baring Arms nearby and makes a handsome pair with the Southgate Arms (also locally listed) next door. There must have been plenty of custom from the bargees a few yards away, though the Southgate Arms sadly lost the battle for survival with its grander neighbour in the early 2000s and is now closed. The Rosemary Branch is still going strong, part of an important group of buildings at the junction by the bridge over the Regent's Canal. It is an excellent and convivial end to this anniversary walk.