



Viewpoint

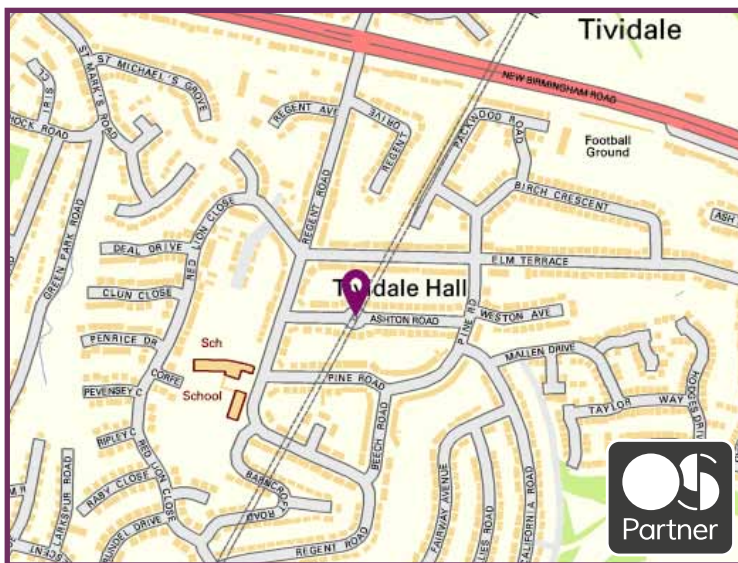
Pass the pepper



Time: 15 mins

Region: West Midlands

Landscape: urban



Location:

Aston Road, Tividale, Oldbury B69 1TW

Grid reference:

SO 96329 90071

Keep an eye out for:

Similar structures nearby in Packwood Road and Regent Road – and can you spot others in the area?

Lined with symmetrical semis and tidy gardens, Aston Road in Tividale looks like many other residential streets throughout Britain. Except halfway along it cars have to navigate an unusual roundabout.

Instead of a typical circle of grass is a large stone pillar, ringed with steel girders and topped with iron mesh. This strange obstacle bursts through the tarmac like a military bunker. But this is no Second World War defence. And it's far too tall for a speed bump. Instead this curious object isn't for road traffic at all.

Why does a quiet Tividale roundabout light up the netherworld?



To begin let's think about why this structure is protected by steel and iron. These barriers prevent people climbing on top of it. Also listen carefully. If you are very lucky you might hear an echoing drone coming from inside.

If we were above this 'Tividale tower' we could look down into a murky channel of water. The occasional droning noise is the sound of boats passing underneath. This surreal situation occurs because Aston Road is one of several suburban streets built over the Netherton Tunnel Branch Canal.

The Netherton Tunnel opened in 1858 to reduce congestion on the Dudley Canal. The existing Dudley Tunnel had become a bottleneck that boats could wait weeks to pass through. The wider Netherton Tunnel acted like a motorway bypass. Its 1¾ mile route runs underneath the edge of Tipton (to the north of here) to Warrens Hall Park (to the south).

Constructing the Netherton Tunnel took three years and began by digging 17 vertical shafts to the same depth. These 2½ metre (8-foot) wide shafts were initially used to plot the tunnel's course. When the tunnel was completed, the shafts were kept in place for another purpose. This spot is where one of them emerges from below ground.

The reason is to ventilate the tunnel. The shafts let fresh air in and help disperse the fumes from boat engines. These days the vents also provide natural light. When the Netherton Tunnel opened it had gas lamps in the roof but it is now unlit. So boats creep under our feet in near darkness

Black Country pepper

This vent has been shortened to create a roundabout but others remain in their original form. They are known as 'pepper pots' after their domed cylinder shape. Though helpful for navigation, boaters aren't always pleased to pass under them. After rain the shafts trickle with ice cold water – a shock in the dark when a drip runs down your neck!

In the 170 years since the Netherton Tunnel was built the land above it has been transformed. The small isolated villages of the Industrial era have grown into large connected towns. Housing developers had to include the shaft vents in their plans. So while some of the 'pepper pots' are still in open spaces, others now stand proud in people's gardens!



Two more 'pepperpots' in nearby Packwood Road and Regent Road