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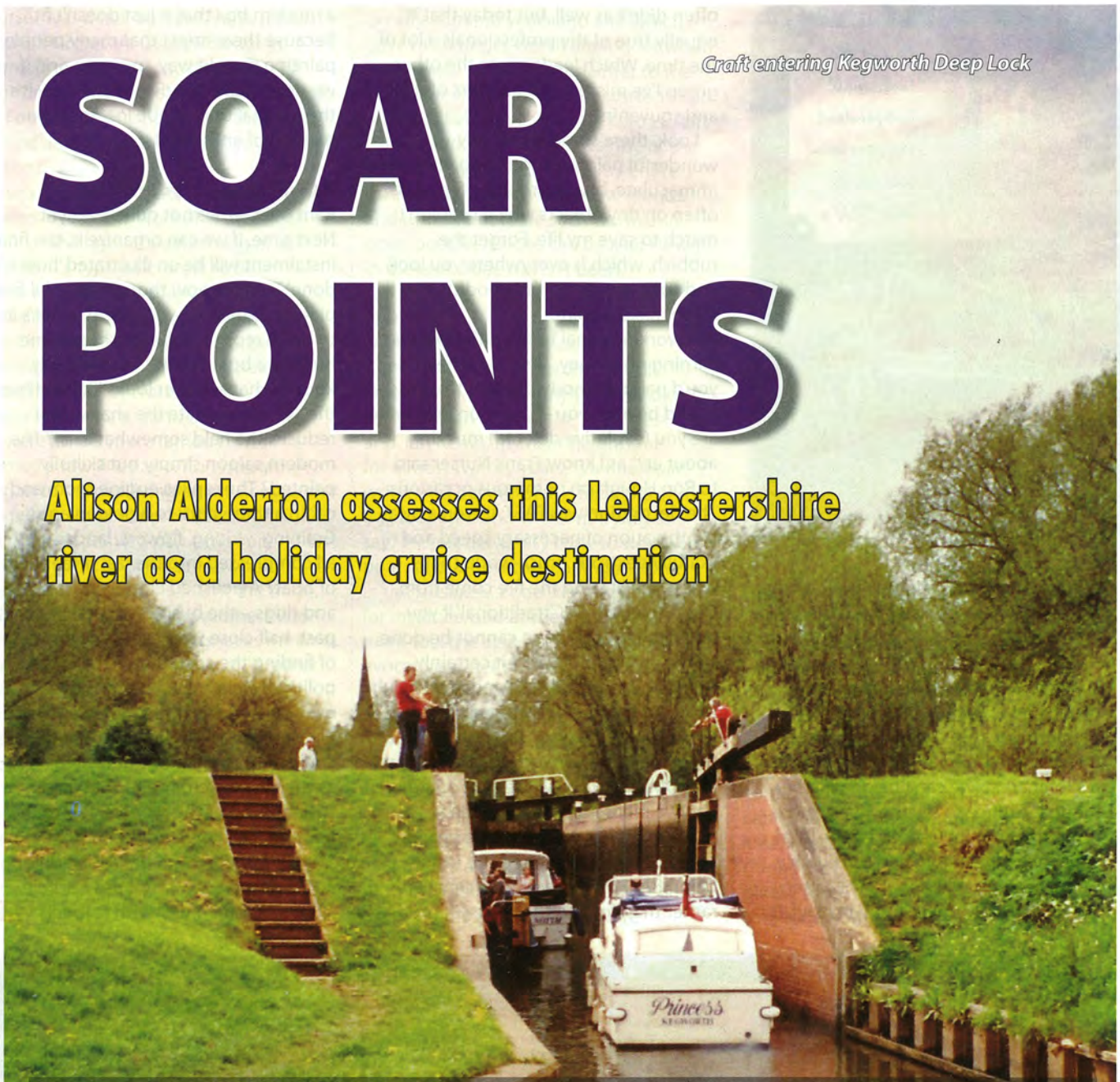
SOAR POINTS

Alison Alderton assesses this Leicestershire river as a holiday cruise destination



Craft entering Kegworth Deep Lock

The River Soar flows some forty miles from Smockington Hollow in Warwickshire to the River Trent below Trent Lock. From Leicester to the Trent it forms part of the Grand Union Canal system. Today the navigation is used by leisure craft but its original intentions were to allow the passage of barges into Leicester in the hope of bringing greater prosperity to the city.

The Soar was once one of the most prosperous river navigations in the whole country carrying coal as its main cargo but with the arrival of the railways freight inevitably declined. Despite a revival in trade following the purchase by The Grand Union Canal Company in 1931, this was only temporary and today there is no trade on the route. The Soar Navigation is often quickly passed through being fitted into circular routes or used as a connection to reach other waterways and is not often thought of as a holiday destination in its own right. This is a shame because stopping to scratch below the surface will reveal that this navigation has more to offer than one might think!

Trent Lock is a busy junction allowing pleasure craft cruising choices between the Erewash Canal, the Sawley Cut and beyond the Trent & Mersey Canal, Cranfleet Cut and the Trent to Nottingham as well as the River Soar and Leicester section of the Grand Union Canal. Entering the River Soar from its confluence with the Trent this waterway immediately takes on a more gentle meandering form than that of the wide expanses of the river it flows into. Passing Thrumpton Weir beneath the wooded slopes of Red Hill, the entrance is bordered by tall willows before passing riverside housing near Redhill Flood Lock beyond which lies Redhill Marine boatyard.

Ratcliffe Lock is watched over by the power station whose large chimneys tower into the sky dwarfing the surroundings and is followed shortly after by Kegworth Shallow Lock. This is another flood lock, so will usually have both sets of gates open but serves as a reminder that this river is at times a wolf in sheep's clothing as it is prone to flooding quickly and sometimes unexpectedly.

Redhill Flood Lock

A tranquil spring morning view of Normanton Church from the River Soar

Dutch Barge Lily with wheelhouse dismantled to allow passage beneath the low bridges on this navigation exits Pilings Flood Lock to rejoin the natural course of the River Soar

Boaters should be aware of this and observe the river gauges and heed the flood warnings to be found along the route. As part of a flood relief scheme both Ratcliffe and Kegworth Deep Lock have been reconstructed with higher lock sides to alleviate the effects of high water. In both cases the old locks can be found close by hidden in the undergrowth their wooden gates still in tact. To visit Kegworth with its pubs and fine church, it is best to moor at Shallow Lock from where it is just one mile to the village centre. Beyond here there is an interesting stretch of river laced with backwaters, weirs and the remains of a water mill with the far bank bordered by the fine gardens of an impressive manor house.

The Devils Elbow is a popular weekend destination for many boaters who enjoy the outdoor surroundings here. There is a large recreation ground so if you have children aboard this is a great place to stop for a game, picnic or barbeque. The village of Sutton Bonington is worth walking into where there is a pub and shop. On the opposite river bank standing on a bluff overlooking the water is Whatton House, whose gardens are open to the public during the summer months. Unfortunately access is not easy but those who reach the Grade II listed building will be rewarded with fifteen acres of spectacular gardens, ponds and parkland. Once through the lock at Zouch you enter a cut which bypasses the river for a short distance. The low foot bridge here means craft with wheelhouses may need to moor up to dissemble them before continuing. Shortly after passing the *Rose & Crown* public house the cut rejoins the main river on the outskirts of Normanton.

Normanton on Soar is a village of fine riverside properties, the water here is wide and bordered on one side by lush meadows where cattle graze and beautifully cared for gardens on the other. Locals make the most of the river and all kinds of water based activities from pedalos to sail boats can be found here. There are moorings for patrons of *The Plough* but otherwise it is difficult to stop, which is a pity as the village is delightful and has many fine buildings of historic value. Further on the countryside begins to retreat as the outskirts of Loughborough are heralded by a traditional brick built accommodation bridge, imposing modern factories and Bishop Meadow Lock.

Loughborough Lock follows with the approach to the town bordered mainly by new housing developments. After passing beneath the old Great Central Railway you need to make a sharp left turn as the route ahead leads into Loughborough Wharf, which is currently closed for regeneration work and marks the end of the Loughborough Navigation. The little known Charnwood Forest Canal was once linked to the Soar near here by a horse drawn tramway. This short seven and a half mile contour canal was connected to several coalmines at its western end by further tramways. It was never profitable due to the three stages of transhipment between tram wagon and barge on each trip just to reach the Soar. Following the disastrous collapse of the Blackbrook Reservoir dam in 1799, which feed the canal with water, many mines closed down and by 1804 the reservoir had been drained and the route abandoned. Today little remains but the keen countryside explorer will find some evidence still exists.

Passing under the next bridge you now enter the Leicester Navigation. At night a chain was suspended across the waterway to prevent boats from using the route without

Gongoozlers gather as a pair of narrow boats pen up in Barrow Deep Lock

The approach to The Navigation public house at Barrow upon Soar

Moorings at Barrow Boating. The tea rooms and surrounding area are a hive of activity during the summer months

Today the navigation is used by leisure craft but its original

paying tolls and despite the original bridge being replaced the current one still carries the name of Chain Bridge. Beyond there is plenty of mooring space for Loughborough. As in any major town or city ensure your craft is secure before leaving it for any length of time. Loughborough is famous for casting church bells and has an interesting Bell Foundry Museum worth visiting. The original Victorian Central Station is the start of the now restored Great Central Railway to Leicester and from here you can take a train ride through eight miles of countryside to the terminus in Birstall on Britain's only main line steam railway, the cause of the canal's demise!

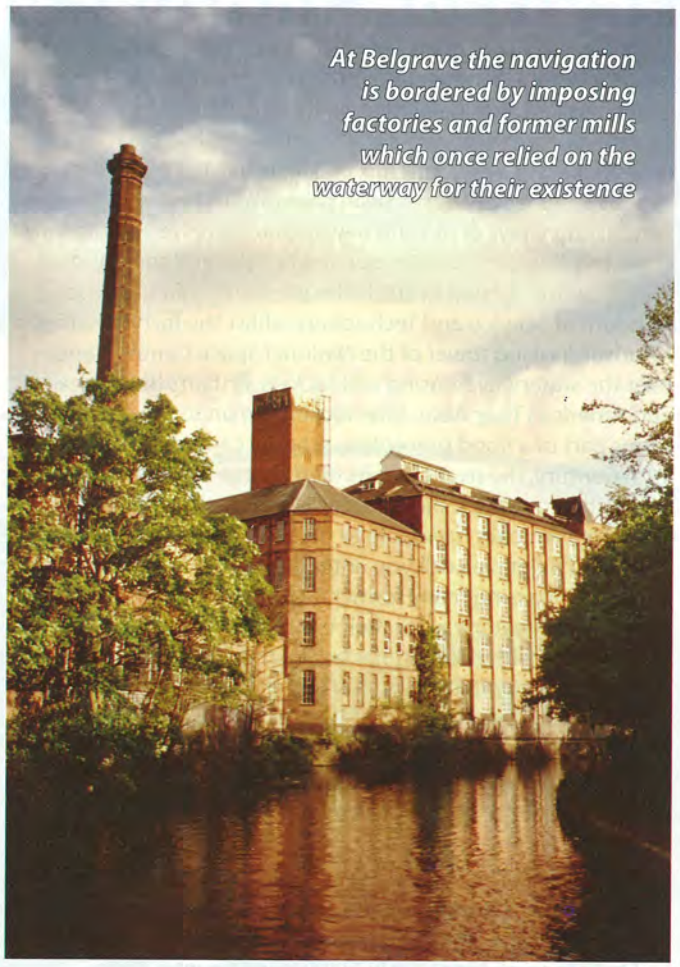
The remainder of the route through Loughborough gently sweeps through urban developments before re-entering the countryside. A new marina development is currently under construction on the approach to Pilings Flood Lock and there is no doubt that when this fully opens for business that it will be popular as the lock and the ensuing river stretch are very pretty indeed despite the noise of the fast trains which run alongside here for a short distance. The river section leads to the village of Barrow and Deep Lock where there is plenty of mooring space. Beyond the lock there are riverside tearooms at Barrow Boating adjacent to the Navigation Inn and bridge. The riverside is often busy here as you can hire a variety of watercraft such as rowing boats, aquabikes and pedaloes.

Between Barrow and Mount Sorrel the river section is often referred to as "The Ganges of the North" as this is one of the few places in the country where Hindu's and Sikh's can scatter the ashes of loved ones. Traditionally families would take the ashes to the River Ganges in India to be scattered but this is not always feasible and with an increasing local Asian community a suitable alternative was needed. Families can now hire narrow boats from nearby Barrow Boating for the religious ceremony which involves placing flowers and coloured powders in the water with the ashes, all of which are harmless to the environment and monitored by the Environment Agency. Should you encounter a ceremony, which can be quite a spectacle then please view from a distance respecting the families involved.

Before reaching Mount Sorrel you pass beneath an impressive but now disused red brick railway bridge bearing the date 1860 in big brash numerals. There are good moorings at Mount Sorrel, however during weekends and summer periods they are quickly taken so plan your visit with this in mind. The small village lays a short stroll from the lock, which is dominated by *The Waterside Inn* public house and gardens. In sunny weather the area thrives with clientele enjoying refreshments along the lock side so be prepared to pass the time with inquisitive strangers and be eyed by Gongoozlers! The village itself is small, stretching along the main road with a good number of shops and takeaways, so if you don't fancy cooking this is a good place to head for an overnight stay. High above the village stands Castle Hill. It is a steep climb to the summit and there are hardly any remains of the former castle to be seen but the views are impressive and the site is today topped with a war memorial constructed out of the local quarried pink granite. At one time the quarry here employed up to six hundred people and granite accounted for over 40% of the goods passing through Mount Sorrel lock. Much of this

A wide-beam entering Mount Sorrel Lock adjacent to which stands the popular Waterside Inn

Thurmaston Lock displays warning signs advising boaters of the flood warning procedures of the river



At Belgrave the navigation is bordered by imposing factories and former mills which once relied on the waterway for their existence

intentions were to allow the passage of barges into Leicester

was transported by barge to London, a journey which took two weeks and the forecourt of Buckingham Palace is constructed out of this very stone. Today the pink granite is still quarried here but on a much smaller scale and is crushed for use mainly as road chippings.

Leaving Mount Sorrel you pass beneath the busy A6 before reaching the peacefulness of more lush water meadows. The river narrows on approach to Sileby Mill and Lock where there are pleasant rural moorings. There has been a mill on this site since 1608 and the present one houses a candlestick business, which is open to the public. There is also a small marina and boat repair yard making this interesting area worth strolling around. Continuing through pleasant countryside you soon approach Cossington Lock. There is not much room here and moorings for the lock are tight. Beyond lies the old mill, now a restaurant, a weir and a picturesque section as you enter the River Wreake for a short distance. The route is very narrow and twisting but charming with overhanging willows and dense vegetation before slightly opening out on the approach to Junction Lock.

As the name suggests this was once an important junction as the entrance to the former Wreake Navigation is situated close by. This river navigation once stretched for fifteen miles to the town of Melton Mowbray, famed for its pork pies with the Oakham Canal making further navigation possible into Rutland. As with so many other waterways these two were unable to compete with the railway system and the canal was closed in 1847 followed by the river navigation in 1877. Today some of the route is still intact and the remains of the first lock lie a short distance from the entrance and are easily accessible on foot by following the former towpath or by canoe. It is hoped that one day this route will be restored and once again opened to craft. Back on the Soar the Old Junction Boatyard again hints at the importance of this area which is today rather sleepy but pleasant. There is water available at the *Hope and Anchor* public house where there are moorings for patrons. The busy A46 crosses the navigation here but the noise is not too intrusive and the pretty surroundings far outweigh any disturbance.

The Watermead Countryside Park has been developed from former gravel and sand workings and is a haven for wildlife. Some remnants of the site's former purpose are still visible in the form of conveyor bridges over the navigation. The whole area is criss-crossed by a network of bridleways, footpaths and cycle routes with some unusual sculptures including a full size replica of a Woolly Mammoth and a lake with figures in it depicting the final scene of Shakespeare's play King Lear. Legends say that the king was buried in a vault beneath the River Soar downstream of Leicester hence the connection. Other activities available at the park include fishing, windsurfing and sail boarding whilst for Twitcher's there are viewing areas with hides. This is also the beginning of "Leicester Riverside", a programme to redevelop and get more people to use the waterside amenities in the area. Leicester City Council has employed Riverside Rangers who work closely with BW and other agencies to help maintain and enhance the area. You may well come into contact with them whilst on your travels as they are often out and about organising events,

supervising rubbish clearance and minimising antisocial use.

Thurmaston Lock, home of MGM Boats, is the last rural outpost before Leicester and is the start of a pleasant stretch which passes Lakeside Marina on its way to Birstall Lock. The route now constantly flows in and out of the natural river course offering a pleasant mix of canal cuts and meandering river to Belgrave Lock and Swan's Nest Weir. There are contrasting views of old and new architecture here in the form of; Abbey Pumping Station opened in 1882 and the National Space Centre opened in 2001. The pumping station houses the Museum of Science and Technology whilst the forty-two metre futuristic looking tower of the National Space Centre looms over the waterway housing real rockets, Britain's Blue Streak and America's Thor Able. After locking up on to the cut, which forms part of a flood prevention scheme carried out in the late 19th Century, the river takes its own course through the city. It is possible to make a short detour along the natural line of the River Soar which is navigable to the road bridge at Abbey Park.

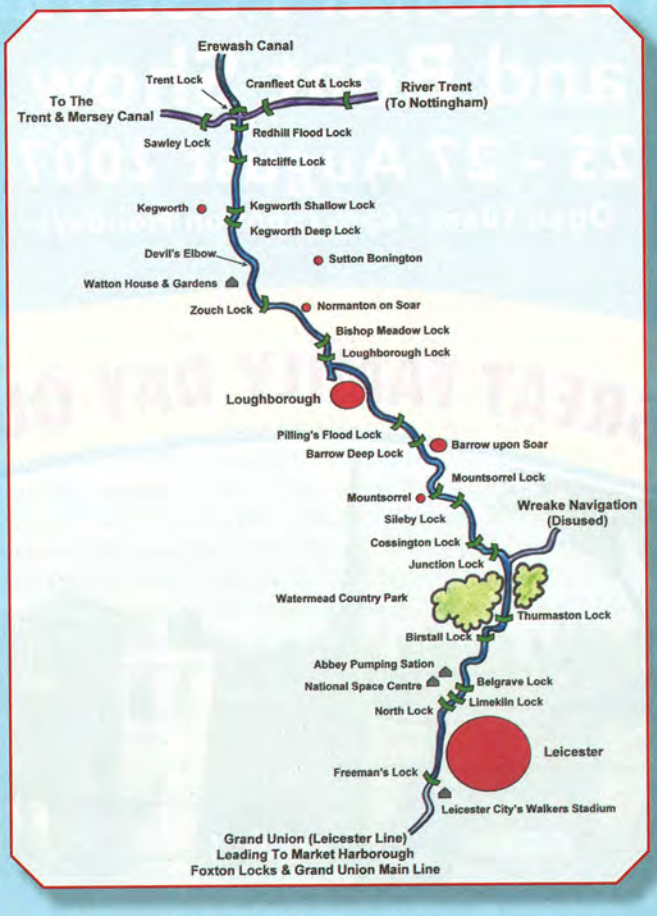
Beyond Belgrave Lock you enter the former industrial heart of the area passing many former factories and mills which once relied on the waterway for their existence. These buildings dealt mainly with the manufacture of textiles and leather enabling the city to thrive in the hosiery and shoe trades and some of the former basins and wharves which served these businesses remain. Belgrave Road is the heart of the local Asian community and it is worth spending time exploring the fascinating shops and wonderful restaurants that surround this area known locally as The Golden Mile.

Limekiln Lock borders Abbey Park, a Victorian park where you can explore the ruins of Leicester's 12th Century Abbey, burial place of Cardinal Wolsey. Memory Lane Wharf formerly one of the busiest industrial areas in Leicester is today in a sad state although there are limited moorings and water available here. Further on past light industrial units North Lock is encountered, known by the locals as Frog Island Lock. Youths occasionally use this lock as a swimming pool, although this is undoubtedly a dangerous practice one cannot help but be impressed by their imaginative use of local facilities. Thankfully with the introduction of the Riverside Rangers this type of activity is diminishing in the area.

A river section follows passing Friar's Mill, crowned with an ornate cupola and reputably the oldest in Leicester, leading towards the city centre and the celebrated West Bridge. Another royal connection is made here but not with King Lear, this time with King Richard III of England whose remains are said to have been thrown in the Soar from the bridge carrying the A47. Almost directly after West Bridge Leicester's so-called Mile Straight begins. There are secure pontoon moorings operated with a BW key at Castle Park for those wishing to explore the city, the heart of which is just a stroll away. Leicester is a vibrant university city and has lots to offer the visitor with an abundance of museums, galleries, theatres, a good selection of shops and many other historical sites.

The tree-lined Mile Straight, which is traversed by several

The secure Castle Moorings near West Bridge, Leicester at the beginning of the Mile Straight and, inset, a statue depicting the last scene from Shakespeare's King Lear in Watermead Country Park



Loughborough Tourist Information, Loughborough Town Hall, Market Place, Loughborough LE11 3EB.
Tel: **01509 218113**.
Leicester Tourist Information, 7–9 Every Street, Town Hall Square, Leicester LE1 6AG. Tel: **0906 294 1113**.

Maps & Guides

GEO Projects Map 4, Grand Union Canal - Leicester Line, Soar Navigation & Erewash Canal
Nicolson Guide to the Waterways No. 3 - Birmingham & theHeart of England

Boat Hire (Day & Holiday)

Barrow Boating, Old Mill Basin, Mill Lane, Barrow on Soar, Leicestershire LE12 8LQ. Tel: **01509 415001**.
Web: **www.barrowboating.co.uk**
Narrow boat Day Hire for up to 12 people, Family Rowing Boats, Hydrobikes, Seacycles and Pedaloes. Please call for prices and availability.

Kegworth Marine, Kingstone Lane, Kegworth, Derby DE74 2FS. Tel: **01509 672300**. Day boat hire available

WAY TO GO!
Fact file on this cruise

Sileby Mill Boatyard, Mill Lane, Sileby, Loughborough, Leicestershire LE12 7NF. Tel: **01509 813583**.
Web: **www.silebymill.co.uk**
Holiday Hire in 4, 6 to 8 and 7 to 8 berth narrow boats, day hire also available. Please call for prices and availability or
E-mail: **enquiries@silebymill.co.uk**

Places of Interest (as mentioned in text)
Whatton House & Gardens, Loughborough, Leicestershire LE12 5BG. Tel: **01509 842268**.
Web: **www.whattonhousegardens.co.uk**
and/or **www.ukattraction.com**
Admission Prices – Adult: £3.00; Child: Free.
Opening Times - March to October, Sunday to Friday 11.00 to 16.00.

The Bell Foundry Works & Musuem, Taylors Eayre & Smith Ltd., The Bell Foundry, Freehold Street, Loughborough, Leicestershire LE11 1AR. Tel: **01509 233414**.
Web: **www.taylorbells.co.uk**
Admission Prices – Adult: £1.50; Child: £1.90; OAP: £1.00.
Opening Times - Tuesday to Friday 10.00 to 12.30 and 13.30 to 16.30. Closed Good Friday, Christmas to New Year. Open some Saturdays & Works Tours are available on Bank Holidays, please call for details.

Great Central Railway, Great Central Road, Loughborough, Leicestershire. Tel: **01509 230726**.
Web: **www.gcrailway.co.uk**
Admission Prices: Please call for further details.
Opening Times - Please call for further details.
Talking Timetable available on Tel: **08708 308289**.

Abbey Pumping Station (Leicester's Museum of Science & Technology), Corporation Road, Leicester LE4 5PX.
Tel: **0116 299 511**. Web: **www.leicestermuseums.ac.uk**
Admission Prices - Free
Opening Times - Monday to Saturday 10.00 to 17.00. Sunday 14.00 to 17.30. Closed Good Friday, Christmas Day & Boxing Day

National Space Centre, Exploration Drive, Leicester LE4 5NS. Tel: **0116 261 0261**. Web: **www.spacecentre.co.uk**
Admission Prices – Adult: £11.00; Child: £9.00; OAP: £9.00
Please call for opening times and special events or
E-mail: **info @spacecentre.co.uk**

ornamental cast iron bridges, is the venue for Leicester's annual Riverside Festival and carries the boater on through the city towards the large unprotected weir at Freeman's Lock. The river widens here forming a huge weir basin, a haven for birds and wildlife in an otherwise manmade environment. Directly opposite stands the impressive Leicester City's Walkers Stadium built on the former site of a huge power station. Much of this area is undergoing major redevelopment works to include riverside apartments and modern office space. This marks the end of the Leicester section of the Soar Navigation and the start of the Old Union Canal opened in 1809 which takes up the route south to Foxton and Market Harborough.

The River Soar is a well-kept secret. It is a route of contrasts and unexpected discoveries waiting to be revealed to those who are inspired enough to look a little deeper and linger a little longer. With its delightful mix of rural villages bordered by lush water meadows and bustling towns it has something that will appeal to everyone. So why not try somewhere different for your next boating holiday come and discover the Soar, you won't be disappointed! C&R