

A city of canals

Birmingham and Amsterdam have many links and share many similarities including their canals.

Canals were Britain's first transport system and underpinned the success of the Industrial Revolution.

The first canal to be built in the area was the Birmingham Canal, built from 1768 to 1772 under the supervision of the great engineer James Brindley.

Birmingham's canals add green space and vibrancy to the city. They are rich in heritage, abundant in wildlife and teeming with activity. Thousands of people take to the towpaths each year on holiday or as part of their everyday lives – for walking the dog, visiting the bars of Brindleyplace or simply for taking time out and watching the boats.

The Worcester & Birmingham Canal carves a green corridor past the university and the leafy streets of Edgbaston to the offices and shops near Broad Street. The Birmingham & Fazeley Canal is a peaceful pathway from New Street Station to St Paul's Square and the ICC.

Between Brindleyplace, Gas Street Basin and Broad Street, Birmingham boasts countless canalside pubs, bars, cafes and restaurants where you can enjoy a quick snack, an evening drink or a romantic dinner a deux.

Calling all chocoholics. The famous Cadbury World offers a great (and tasty) day out for all the family – and any calories accidentally imbibed on the tour can be worked off with a walk along the Worcester & Birmingham Canal afterwards. Elsewhere, the National Sea Life Centre is enduringly popular in the heart of Brindleyplace.

With galleries, historic houses, theatres and canal architecture – you're sure to find an outing to suit in waterside Birmingham. And remember, the best thing about towpath walking is that you'll never take the wrong turning.



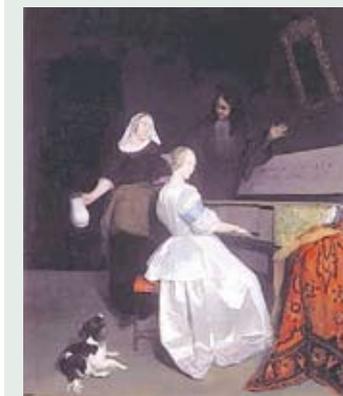
Birmingham boasts countless canalside pubs and eateries enjoying the tranquility of passing canal boats

Birmingham treasures Dutch masterpiece

It is over 120 years since Birmingham Museum & Art Gallery (BMAG) first opened its doors beneath the clock tower on Chamberlain Square and more than half a million objects fill the cabinets and walls of Birmingham's museums.

Here you will find everything from Renaissance masterpieces to 9,000-year-old Middle-Eastern treasures. BMAG is particularly admired for its pre-Raphaelite paintings and drawings – the museum boasts the largest collection in the world.

For a small corner of Holland in the museum, head to the Fine Art Paintings and Sculpture collection, which houses the masterpiece *The Music Lesson* (pictured) (1670-1672) by Jacob Ochtervelt, famed for his pieces highlighting the luxurious interiors and hobbies of the upper class. The *Music Lesson* focuses on issues still relevant to today's audience such as class hierarchy, fidelity and marriage. Other Dutch highlights in the Museum's vast collections include paintings by artists Matthias Stom (or Stomer) and Willem Van de Velde the Younger.



Aspiring chefs turn to the experts to hone their skills

Tom Parker Bowles, British food writer and son of the Duchess of Cornwall, recently declared that the British are a "nation of food voyeurs", happy to watch cookery programmes but reluctant to get out of their armchairs and experiment in the kitchen. The comments instigated a national debate, with many restaurateurs and social commentators keen to point to a renewed interest in the sourcing of produce and the rise in cookery school start-ups.

Birmingham chefs are quick to stress that far from stopping at using cookery books as coffee table ornaments, the amateur cooks in the city have been booking places on specialist schools set up in response to the demand for improving culinary skills.

The swell of cookery classes on offer in Birmingham reflects this trend, with acclaimed chefs such as Andreas Antona, Chef Patron at the Michelin-starred Simpsons Restaurant, opening a cookery school with the aim of teaching Michelin skills to aspiring members of the public.

Jabbar Khan of the Lasan Group of restaurants explains why he founded the Lasan Eatery in Hall Green. "People are keen to find out how to cook their favourite food but find it difficult to fit learning

Cookery schools

Lasan Eatery is on hand to teach students how to make their own curries, biryanis and dosas. Students can enrol in a master class which provides an in-depth hands-on look at Indian cooking. You can select your own dishes alongside some additional ones at the chef's discretion followed by tasting your wares at a lunch that you have cooked yourself. www.lasaneatery.co.uk

Loaf Cookery School is bringing some of the cooking basics back to the heart of England. Courses coming up include festive bread making; featuring the opportu-



Hotel Okura cookery school

nity to make the traditional Kerstol, a Dutch Christmas loaf baked fresh in the school's outdoor wood oven. www.loafonline.co.uk

Simpsons Cookery School offers a Michelin starred learning experience focusing on the modern French cuisine it is famed for. Students get a glimpse behind the scenes as they enjoy cookery demonstrations and a wine-tasting session alongside a three-course lunch in the restaurant. www.simpsonsrestaurant.co.uk

Hotel Okura offers the expertise of a venue that boasts four restaurants and three Michelin stars. From December, students will have the opportunity to learn cuisines from France, Japan and Holland, as well as a wine or sake tasting session with top class sommeliers. www.okura.nl

a new skill into their daily lives. Our students find that the interactive dimension of the class ensures that they get extra information on the ingredients they are using and find it easier to design their own dishes afterwards."

Lasan Eatery has recently expanded its restaurant to cope with the influx of food-lovers keen to get a healthier take on their favourite curry dishes. Khan puts this down to the work the restaurant and cookery school puts into ensuring the mystical element is removed from cooking, meaning that diners are more trusting of the ingredients and methods used. "Our cooking isn't about creating an illusion for customers, it's about showing the

processes behind the dishes and getting people excited about new ingredients and techniques."

Tom Baker, founder of Birmingham's Loaf Cookery School, has first-hand experience of the difficulties many aspiring cooks have. He has launched his classes to bring back forgotten food skills for the urban population of Birmingham – an area he believes has been missing until recently. "Cookery schools are often out in the sticks on a nice country estate, inaccessible to some and not teaching people everyday skills for feeding themselves and their families real food." So what does Baker think about Parker-Bowles' theory? "Britons are the biggest

cookery-book buyers in Europe. We clearly have a passion for good food – there's a growing movement of people in the UK, and in Birmingham, that are eager to reconnect with their heritage; with traditional kitchen skills that their grandmothers practised, and with seasonal, British food."

The hunger to learn to cook is not confined to Birmingham, with preparations underway to open an haute cuisine gastro-school at Hotel Okura, the hub of Michelin star success in Amsterdam. The Hotel Okura Amsterdam has four restaurants; the most decorated are the traditional Japanese eatery Yamazato which has held a Michelin star since

2002 and French restaurant Ciel Bleu which was awarded with two Michelin stars in 2007.

This December, Hotel Okura will open the 'Taste of Okura' culinary centre, a cooking school in the prestigious venue combining the art of gastronomy with wine-tasting lessons.

Tjeerd Blom, formerly of restaurants Greeje (Amsterdam), Aujord'hui and Christophe, has been recruited to head up the new school. So what are his opinions on the public interest in fine dining? "Cooking and top chefs are hot topics at the moment. People want to cook more professionally and with greater variety at home."