

John Robb: I'm John Robb and you're listening to hearmanchester.com, a series of 10 audio portraits exploring the rich and varied history of Manchester from the towpath of the Rochdale Canal that cuts through the heart of one of the greatest cities in the world.

The Rochdale Canal has obviously played a massive part in Manchester's industrial success story, but what's less obvious is that amongst the warehouses and factories, there is a whole swathe of wildlife – if you know where to look.

Where I am at the moment is where the canal opens out into the Castlefield basin and amongst the bars, moored narrow boats and arches of the railway bridge that steeple above me, David Haley leads tours of 'green' Manchester from Deansgate Locks down to Castlefield

David Haley: I've been doing this walk for just over ten years now, and the canals through Manchester have changed dramatically in that period of time, particularly the Rochdale canal which we're on at the moment (because of course there are the Bridgewater canal and Ashton canal that go through Manchester as well). But the Rochdale canal centred as a focus for regeneration, so in fact all the old mills and warehouses that were along the canal edge have now given way to pretty chic bars and nice towpaths and very nice places to cycle and hang out..

JR: *Is that good or bad for wildlife?*

DH: The water particularly in the Rochdale Canal has always been pretty clean and it has now been maintained very well as well, so yes you know there's wildlife coming back. The stuff that I'm interested in doing in the Walk on the Wild Sides is the stuff people can't reach, there's a bit over there just near some pillars which has got some chic bar behind it, but people can't actually get to the towpath along there, so you start to see different species of plantlife coming back.

JR: *What kind of plant life is there?*

DH: Well initially you start to see buddleia and grasses and bits of bushes and stuff like that, then that of course increases insect life, insect life brings birds, and of course little mammals..

JR: *Once I saw a kingfisher down here, which was completely amazing, it's not the sort of thing you expect to see down the canal in the city centre.*

DH: Absolutely. On the River Medlock by the University of Manchester last year I saw a kingfisher there which was completely amazing, and you won't believe it I also saw a salmon.

JR: *A salmon? What kinds of fish are in there? The water looks fairly murky but you say it's quite clean?*

DH: In the canal it's mainly roach and dace and perch, fairly small fish, but it's alive which is the main thing.

JR: *I'm interested to know why people have come to the Rochdale Canal for a walk on the green side.*

VOX: I've come on this walk because I want to think about the city as ecological, not separate from nature. It's a system like any other – aside from human intervention, I think the built environment is surrounded by species that will come whether they're invited or not..

VOX: I've noticed one of the things I pick up on is traces of nature in urban space so I thought it might give me an expanded perspective.

VOX: There does seem to be some coherency in the environment. There are the sharp angles and the water cuts through it. Then there are the older buildings and it's interesting to see how these elements relate to one another and how they can fit together in an environment.

VOX: And the difference there is probably a lot more nature here now than in the industrial revolution in England. And yeah and

the waterway of course as a natural corridor connecting things and that's the best you can try and engineer in the city to keep the natural corridors going through, not cutting them off, is the best the urban ecologist or landscape planner today could hope for.

JR: *The walk took us down the canal under the Albion bridge, past wildlife most of us never have the time to take notice of.*

JR: *We're just walking under a bridge now; normally in winter there'd be huge spider webs looking like they'd been sprayed up by some horror film special effects department and these big massive spiders running round on them.*

DH: When we've done this walk before, yeah, the spiders were like the starring role of that particular walk, they were absolutely amazing - attracted by the lights that are on under the tunnel..

JR: *Also another feature I see down here animal-wise – I see a lot of herons.*

DH: Yeah, herons seem to be on the increase, which is a good thing, and a good sign there are fish around because you don't get heron without fish.

JR: *I remember as a kid if you saw a heron you'd say 'wow a heron' you'd see one every two or three years, now you see one every day down here, they just stand there, they don't even fly off, they're quite tame aren't they?*

DH: Oh yeah absolutely and as I say it's a really good sign generally that there is wildlife around.

JR: *We have two mallards over there.*

DH: Yeah, very common, nice to see them,

JR: *They're always fantastic, because they're common doesn't stop them being exotic:*

DH: Absolutely they're very beautiful birds.

JR: *This is funny they're coming right towards us.*

DH: There's eider ducks sometimes you see down here, obviously swans.

What really interests me is where different bits of wildlife have found their place and habitats within the city infrastructure so what I'm interested in looking at is Manchester as a living organism in its own right.

JR: Well that's fantastically interesting, because I spend a lot of time down here, about once a day I go for a run along the canal, I see lot of nature down here. For me the best thing I ever saw was the kingfisher just down there outside all the bars which is the most unexpected place you'd ever see a kingfisher, so for me it's really interesting to come down here and get a proper guide to fill us in on the nooks and crannies of nature.

If you've enjoyed this programme, why not venture further along the Rochdale Canal and discover more portraits of our magnificent city at hearmanchester.com.