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UNDERGROUND

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.

I've left the Rochdale Canal, following this canal arm up past the fantastic Bridgewater Hall, in front of Manchester Central (formally known as the GMEX), and up on to Deansgate. Above me, the majestic Beetham Tower glistens on the skyline, but its what's below which is really interesting: a subterranean world of tunnels under the feet of the busy workers and shoppers around me. Not any old oik is allowed to go down underground so I feel really privileged that Keith Warrender, who has written the book on the Manchester tunnels, is going to be my guide.

Keith Warrender: This is a canal tunnel that runs from just below the Granada studios to where we are now, which is the Great Northern entertainment complex.

JR: You're going to take us down now to have a look at it. I'm really excited about this.

JR: There are lots of urban myths in Manchester about what goes on beneath the streets, some people think there's a lost city, a whole lost city just below the tarmac, but there's something far more

fascinating than that.

JR: It's incredible, it's like you think it's going to be some pokey rabbit warren, it's enormous.

KW: What we're going through now is the passage that led to the hoist wells where they took the stuff up to the warehouse, so we're now entering the trans-shipment dock, so here when they built the Great Northern warehouse, they enlarged the original tunnel to allow boats to come and moor up here, and you can still see one of the old capstans there where they used to tie up the boats.

JR: What was this section here?

KW: This was during the last war, when they used it as an air raid shelter. They drained it of the water and built loads and loads of toilets.

JR: So was it in use as a canal up to the war or had it been out of use for a few decades by then?

KW: It had been out of use really after 1922.

JR: So during the war how many people would be down here?

KW: Something like 1600 people.

JR: Just in this room?

KW: No, throughout the whole length of the tunnel.

JR: *It's so dark down here, thank God Keith brought the torch, because the ones we brought are rubbish. In the beam of the torch you can see some of the brickwork in the distance, a load of bricks lying on the floor, a totally dark damp room, fantastically spooky, looks amazing, I mean they must have had a hundred words for dark and damp. Was it just a few candles here, that'd be it?*

KW: The tunnels were lit by gaslight actually; they had their own gasometer. Course, people who remember sheltering in this tunnel would have been in their early teens, so there's still quite a few people round who will remember being down here. Here we're standing beneath the goods yard of the old Central Station, so these arches are all associated with those buildings in the goods yard.

JR: *It's like a cathedral.*

KW: Yeah, amazingly high space. We come to these amazing two structures.

JR: *They might look like a chimney, obviously they're not.*

KW: No what they are, are the bases of two hydraulic wagon lifts that went up to the goods

yard in Central Station.

JR: *What kinds of wagons, horse and cart?*

KW: No railway wagons.

JR: *So what did they do, bring a railway wagon down here as well?*

KW: Yes then they could load up on or off onto the canal boats.

JR: *Take it up the station, take it on to Leeds, London or somewhere..*

KW: They'd go up the canal through the canal tunnel up to Manchester docks; they were built around the time of the First World War.

JR: *So they were built and only used them for six years? People think we're super modern now, but nobody would think of building an underground canal network beneath the city. Where you could get train carriages up and down.*

JR: *So Keith, what's the truth about the tunnels? Some people say there's a whole underground city beneath Manchester, walking round here I can well believe that, what else is there down here?*

KW: Yes I've heard the story of there being an underground city, I've never found out where

that might be, nobody's ever been that specific, if they can show me then please do. I'm also told about underground streets but again I've never come across them. The Guardian, which it was codenamed, was a four-and-a-half-mile long tunnel network to provide a secure cable route, a telephone connection between Manchester and some other major English cities in times of nuclear war, and it still exists today, mainly beneath Chinatown, and interestingly enough, when the authorities were building an extension to the city art gallery a few years ago, at the back there, they didn't realise they were actually directly on the route of the old tunnel and they nearly dug into the actual...

JR: *So your job's got a lot of practical use, to stop people digging into holes.*

KW: It was decommissioned in the 1960s, there was only bedroom for 36 people, so down there there's a staff room, there was a war room, where a manager tells me there was a safe and inside the safe there was an envelope with his name on and it said it was only to be opened in the event of war,

JR: *Wow, what was in there?*

KW: Nobody knows..

JR: *"Nobody gets out of here alive..."*

KW: On the wall here was a map of the northwest. The contents of this war room including the safe I'm told one night mysteriously disappeared a few years ago, everything went one night.

JR: *What's this, I see some kind of faint writing on the wall here...*

KW: This is the remains of a poster here, and though the paper's rotted away, the wording itself has sort of imprinted itself on the brickwork, and it's a notice advising people about how they should behave down here.

JR: *What sort of thing is it saying?*

KW: Well, it's not very clear on this one, but there are similar posters elsewhere of a similar nature.

JR: *No spitting and swearing, that kind of thing.*

KW: That's right, there was notably no gambling, no bad language, no drinking, no smoking, all things like that, because of the mixed company.

JR: *It's funny how they say no gambling, when twenty feet up there people were dropping bombs everywhere, that's incredible it should be varnished and kept.*

KW: Yes, and you can just still see today the towpath, but if we just venture here into the these cubicles.

JR: *Oh there's actually an old toilet, still left there, how come they just left one of them? Someone obviously thought, 'Let's just leave one here as a memento'.*

KW: Well I'm glad they did because it gives you an idea of just how grotty it was down here. At this point we're actually standing directly below Deansgate, so here we are below one of the most busy and noisy thoroughfare of the city, and you can't hear a single thing of what's going on above, all you can hear here is the drip drop of the water coming through.

I did the same thing when I first came down if it's any consolation. It's very clear.

But this is as far as we can go – this is as far as we can go because this is the lowest section of the tunnel here, and the water has re-percolated.

JR: *It's pretty incredible, it gives you a whole other sense of the city, I mean going down the canal itself, opens up a completely different vista of the city, you're so used to walking down the roads and seeing the buildings, but when you're down here it's just another real sense of the city, of how large the city is, and all the space down here, it's*

really fascinating, and everywhere you look, just over there's another tunnel going away, the idea they brought train carriages into here it makes you astonished at the Victorian and slightly post Victorian engineering, what they were capable of building in those days. It's just a sense of the scale of it, the idea there were people down here on canal boats, just moving all the goods in and out of the city, it gives you an idea of how industrious the city was and what a powerful industrial city it was as well, it's a really incredible experience being down here, I think it would be great if there was some kind of guided tour or some kind of way the people could come and share this experience.

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.