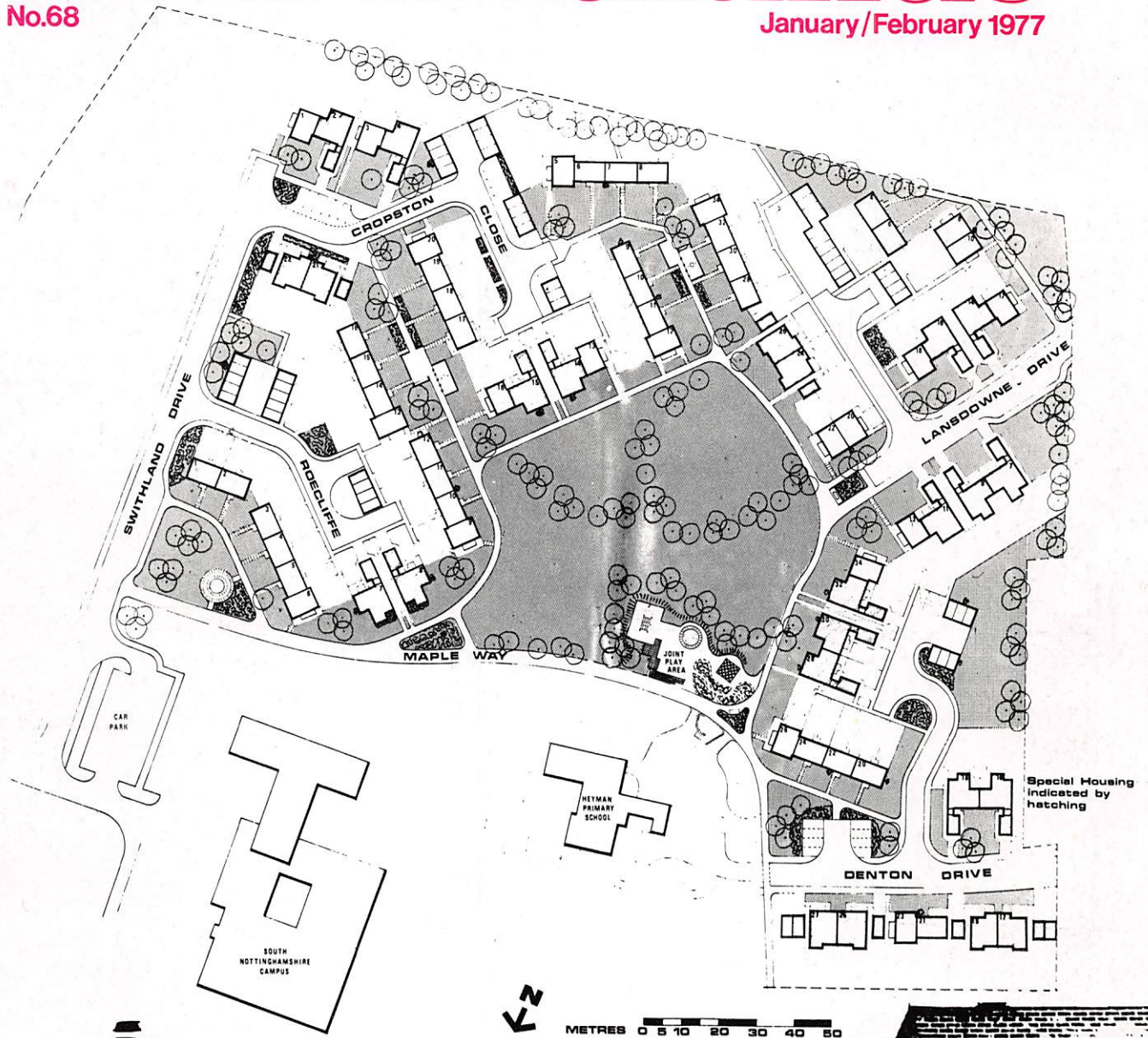


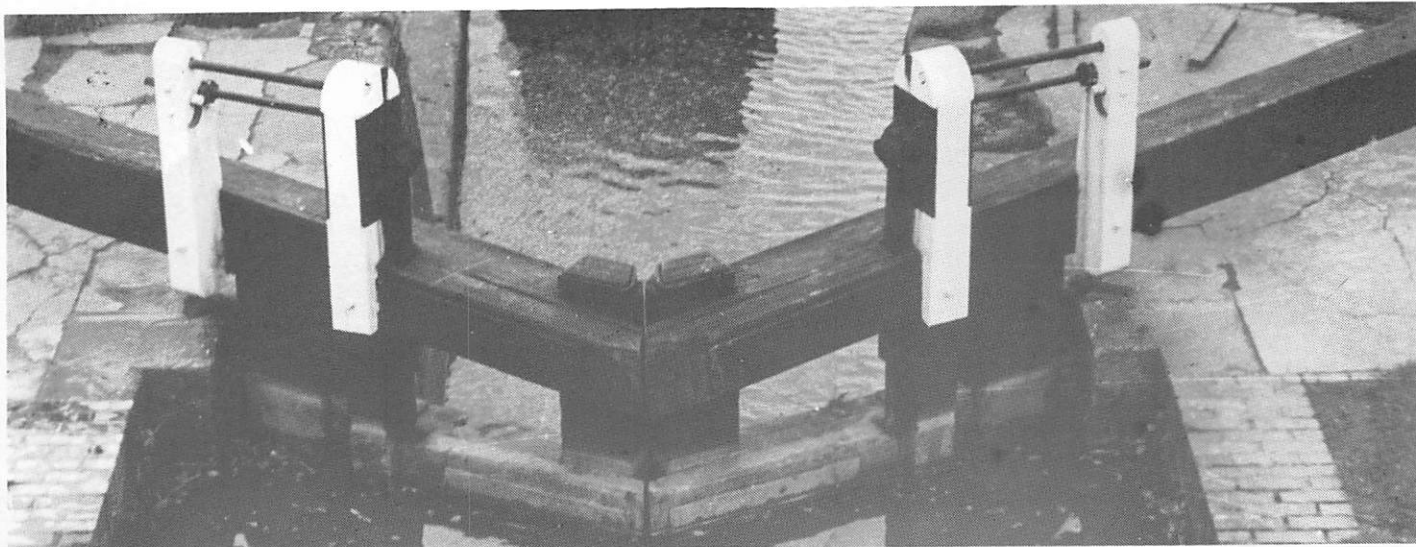
# ARCHITECTURE East Midlands

No.68

January/February 1977



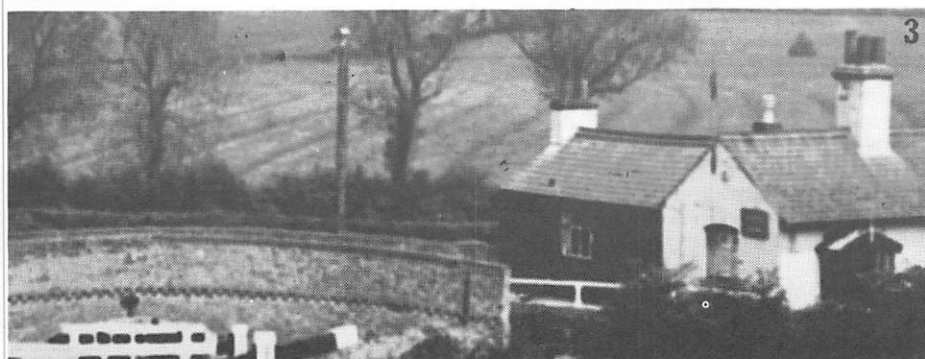




*THE photographs chosen for this article illustrate buildings associated directly with the canal and show something of its changing character as it passes through the county. A few of the many fine industrial buildings which have developed along its banks are shown and the final section considers its present uses.*

## The Grand Union Canal (Leicester branch)

**A SURVEY** of buildings carried out by the Environment Committee of the Leicestershire and Rutland Society of Architects by Jack Bates RIBA, Chairman, Leicestershire and Rutland Society of Architects Environment Committee.



1

### The society's involvement

DURING 1976 the Environment Committee were invited by the Canals and Waterways Study Group (a constituent body of the Leicestershire Environmental Forum) to note and comment on buildings seen from the towpath of the Grand Union Canal as it passes through the county from the Trent in the north, to the border of Northamptonshire in the south.

The study group have been engaged for some time in the preparation of a feasibility study for a regional footpath serving the East Midlands, following the Grand Union Canal towpath from the River Trent, through Leicester and hopefully south to the Great Ouse. The Environment Committee were delighted to be associated with this project and to know that a professional assessment of the built environment was seen as a valuable input for such a feasibility study and could well be used in future publicity material describing this route and associated walks.

Each member of the survey team was asked to survey a stretch of the canal approx. 5 miles in length, to record buildings and settlements on a standard sheet, and to take photographs. Buildings were to consist of structures directly associated with the canal and significant buildings and settlements visible from the towpath or within a distance of approx. ¾ mile. The environment committee are planning a 'canal event' in March/April when it is hoped to arrange an exhibition based on the survey and to introduce one or two distinguished speakers on the canal scene. The present article is an early 'spin off' which it is hoped will create interest.

### Character of the canal

Between the Trent and Leicester, navigation is for the most part by the River Soar, the only appreciable length of cut being through Loughborough. This section of the canal, lying as it does in the shallow sandy gravel of the Soar valley is characterised by wash lands, water meadows, sand and gravel workings and weirs(1). It skirts the craggy granite area

of Charnwood Forest and offers a distant view of the wolds to the east.

With the enclosed vistas of an urban area, the most interesting features of Leicester from the canal are probably the variety of industrial and commercial buildings of the past 150 years, sites of historic interest (2), and the many open spaces visually associated with the canal.

South of the city, the navigation is a man made cut, carved through the clays of south Leicestershire. Here the canal passes between established villages and gives long range views of sweeping country (3) and parkland, scattered with views of distant settlements.

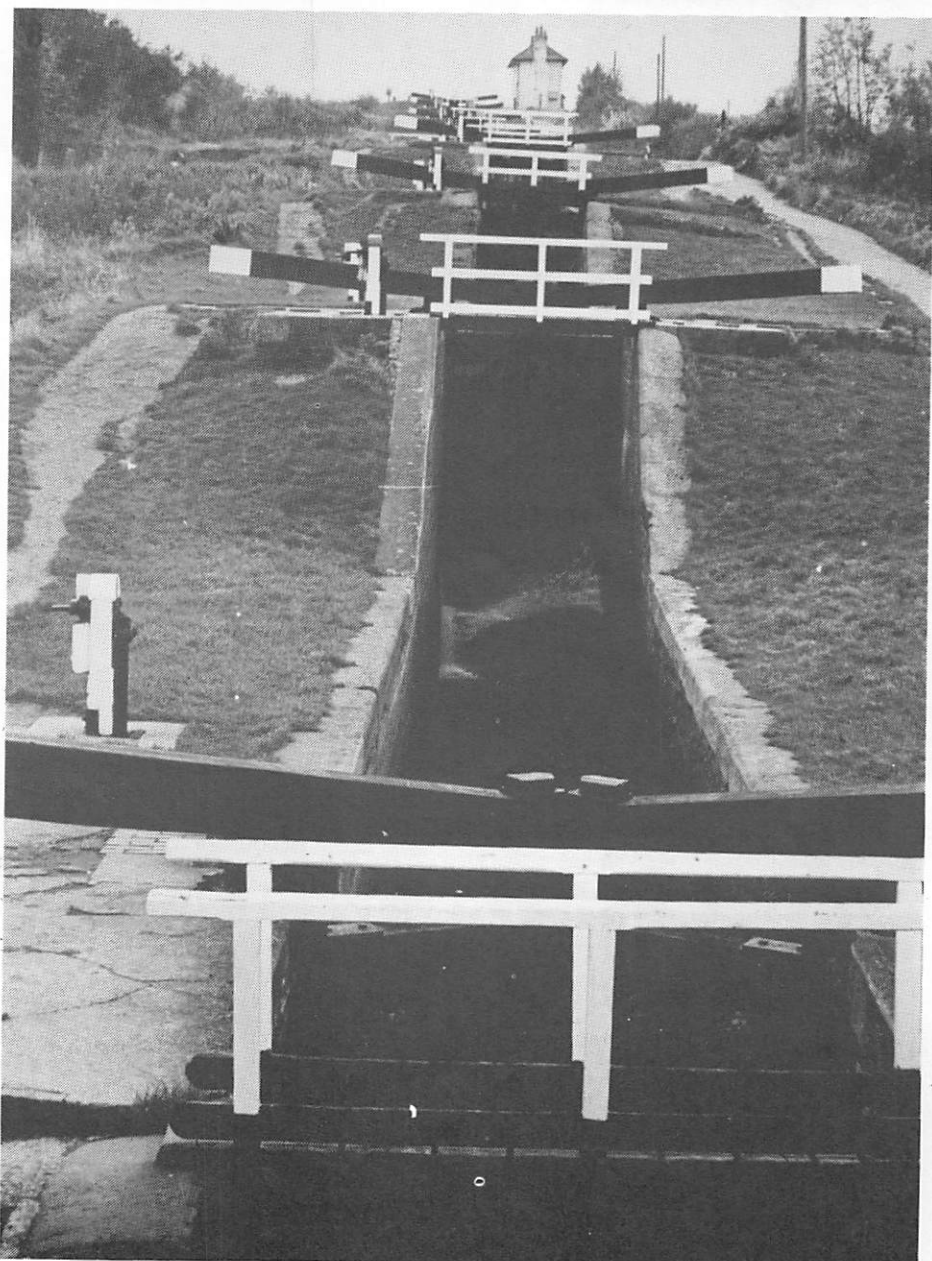
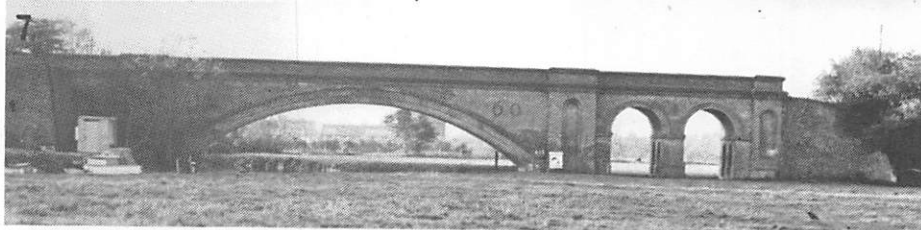
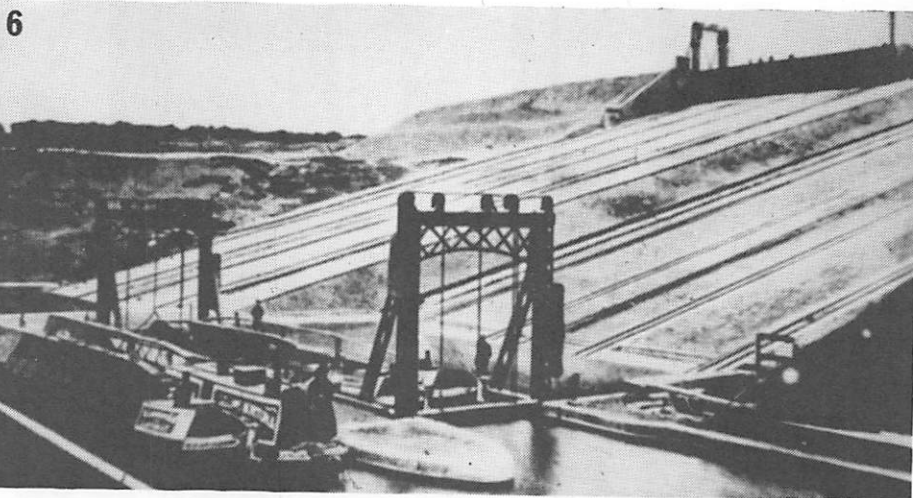
#### History of the canal

The Grand Union Canal in Leicestershire consists of the Loughborough Navigation, the Leicestershire and Northamptonshire Union Canal, and the Grand Union Canal. The Trent provides navigation to the West (Trent and Mersey Canal), the East (Trent Navigation) and into Derbyshire (Erewash Canal). To the South of Leicester, the Grand Union system connects with the Thames at Brentford and provides links with the West Midland canals and with the Wash.

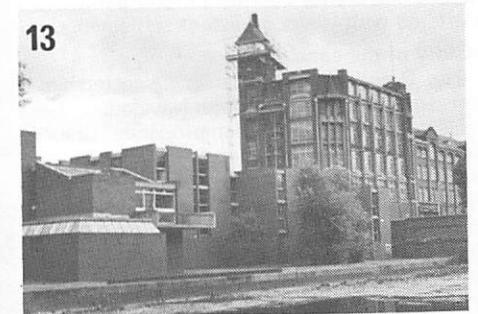
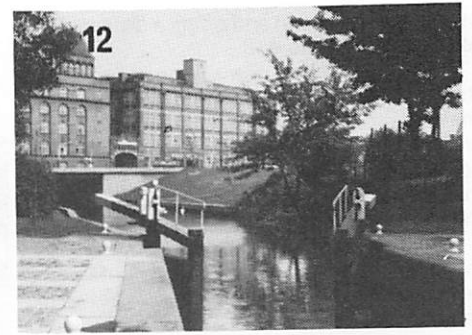
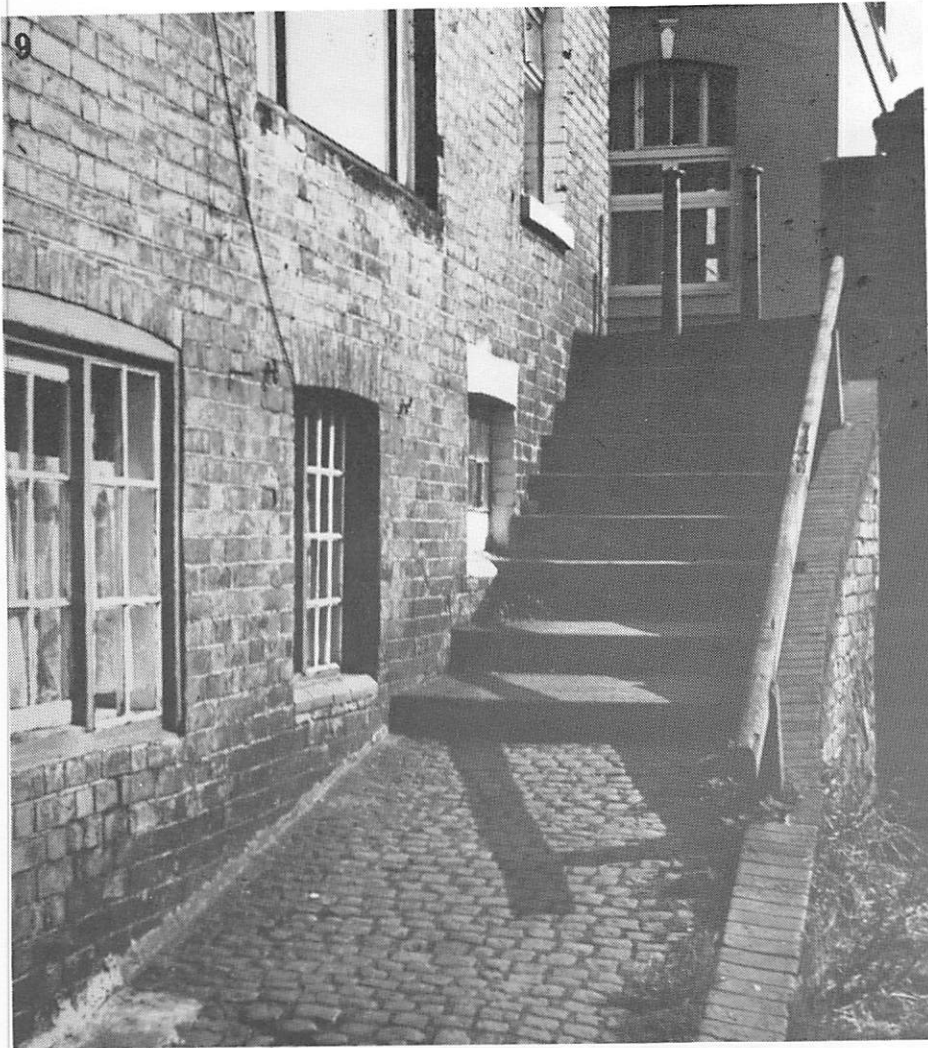
The Loughborough Navigation was formed as a result of a Parliamentary act in 1776, and provided a navigable route by river and cut from the Trent to Loughborough. (4 shows cut approaching Loughborough). It was mainly used for shipping coal from the Derbyshire coalfields via the Erewash Canal to Loughborough.

The demand for cheaper coal in Leicester resulted in the extension of the system following the Act of 1791. Known as the Leicester Navigation, this extension skirted Loughborough to the north and east and terminated at West Bridge in Leicester. Difficulties — mostly with local land owners — hindered the continuation of the system south of Leicester.

It was not until 1814 (after the opening of the Harbrough Arm in 1809) that the newly formed Grand Union Canal Co. had constructed the staircase of locks at Foxton (8) and completed the connection with the Grand Junction Canal in Northamptonshire, thereby linking the Notts. and Derby coalfields







with the Thames and London.

In spite of the passenger traffic which developed between London and Nottingham and the importance of the Belgrave (Memory Lane) public wharves at Leicester (2) the fortunes of the company and the condition of the canal declined during the 19th century. In 1896 it was decided to widen locks at Watford (Northants) and Foxton to enable barge traffic to be operated in an attempt to increase trade. In this same year the Grand Junction Canal Co. (now the owners) decided as an alternative to build an inclined plane lift at Foxton — to be followed by one at Watford at a later date. The Foxton lift was completed in 1900, but closed only 11 years later and was dismantled in the 1920s. The lift at Watford was not built (6 shows the lift in action 70 years ago). (5) is a typical lockkeepers house in the southern part of the system. (7) is a magnificent brick bridge dated 1860 carrying a mineral line at Mountsorrel over the canal and washlands. It is said to be the third longest brick arch span in the country.

#### The urban scene

(9) Steps leading down to the towpath at Loughborough. The building on the left was at one time a canal side pub — The Victoria.

(10) H.T.H. Peck Holdings Ltd (Pex Socks) opposite the Castle Gardens, Leicester. Built by William Flint c.1848. An interesting six storey brick and cast iron factory with brick barrel vaulted floors.

(11) A very dominating building from the canal at Loughborough. Formally a hosiery mill designed by R. C. Sutton of Nottingham in 1893, it is brick with cast iron column and has been occupied by Riker Laboratories since 1953.

(12) Lime Kiln lock, Leicester — looking north. Charles Keene College is to the east (CLASP — not shown). Abbey Park to the west, and to the north the former Wolsey mill of 1923,

now manufacturing plastics.

(13) Halls of Residence of the Leicester Polytechnic, designed by Stephen George when City Architect. Beyond, the Benjamin Russell factory of 1925, architects Fosbrooke and Bedingfield.

(14) Early 19 brick building forming part of a large complex which was originally Cartwright and Warners hosiery mill. Richard Cartwright commenced the manufacture of fine hosiery on this site at Loughborough in 1793.

#### The canal now

In common with most canals, the Grand Union in Leicestershire is somewhat 'down at heel' but nevertheless its use for recreation increases. Boating (15 at Mountsorrel), fishing (16 at Birstall), walking, picnicking (18 at the Foxton parking/picnic area), are popular, as are the canal side pubs (17 Navigation Inn, Barrow). The presence of the river and canal in urban areas has great environmental potential, particularly in Midland towns where there is little natural water. Marinas are developing in many places along its length and the reclamation of disused surface workings has resulted in some instances in the formation of water parks (Wanlip) and water dominated recreation areas (Tucker's Pit, Loughborough). The Leicester City Council are implementing a programme of improvements and enhancements of the River Soar and Canal within their boundaries. Charnwood District Council have prepared an Action Area Plan which as an instrument of policy and control will hopefully have a substantial effect on the environment. In both cases, amenity societies have played an important role. South of Leicester an appreciable length of canal is a local nature reserve and a number of education centres have been established.

#### A final word . . .

A sand and ballast company are carrying gravel by boat from Syston to Thurmaston. This is enabling them to work areas not readily accessible by road and is obviously creating some reduction in heavy road traffic. Six hundred tons a day over the next 10 years has been contracted.

Is this a beginning . . . ?

