



A walk through history with the Severn on one side and boat remains on the other (top). Part of former Stroudwater barge the Dursley (centre). Founder of the Friends of Purton, Paul Barnett looks for clues in identifying the relics (above).

**A** LONG A WINDSWEPT stretch of the River Severn, sea birds stand sentry on fragments of moss-covered timber and disintegrating pipework. Wooden hulks, rotted frames, curved prows and half-sunken keels rise from the earth. Some are woven into the grass, while water laps gently against those lying at the river's edge. The birds' mournful cries add to the landscape's seeming desolation.

This is Purton Ships' Graveyard, the final resting place of vessels that once sailed the rivers and canals of south-west England and the seas beyond. For a mile and a half, near Purton in Gloucestershire, these remnants of Britain's sailing heritage stand testament to the ingenuity of the shipping communities that worked along the Severn.

#### Creating a barrier

Between the city of Gloucester and the port of Sharpness, the Severn, Britain's longest and fastest-flowing river, becomes tidal. With strong currents and unstable sandbanks, it is difficult to navigate and hazardous to shipping. In 1827, this problem was resolved with the opening of the Gloucester and Sharpness Canal, which enabled ships to bypass the worst of the river. From Sharpness, canal and river run side by side up to Purton, before the canal makes its way inland.

By 1905, the canal was handling more than a million tons of cargo every year, and was vital to the regional and national economy. But four years later, it came under threat when the bank of the river collapsed near Purton. "The canal company's chief engineer, AJ Cullis, had to protect his brainchild," says Paul Barnett. A former hydrographic surveyor, Paul has been researching the ships' graveyard for more than 15 years. "Cullis came up with the idea of running old, unwanted boats aground along the bank where it had collapsed. This would slow the river, allowing silt to be deposited, creating a barrier."

The first boats to be beached were redundant Stroudwater barges. Built to navigate the locks and bridges of the nearby Stroudwater Canal, the design of these boats had changed little in more than 100 years. By the early 20th century, they had been superseded by motorised vessels. The 70ft (21m) long barges were towed up the river from Sharpness to reach Purton on the highest tide. This meant they gained enough speed to be rammed onto the foreshore. They were then winched further up the bank to pull clear of the tide. When the water

