

GOLDEN LION STOOD WATCH OVER CANAL



HE looks a little moth-eaten, but Swindon's Golden Lion still stands proudly among the shoppers in the town centre.

His mane and long tail belie the fact that the lion has nearly 200 years of history behind him, even if he hasn't been there all that time.

Today the lion lies atop a large brick plinth in Canal Walk, passed by thousands of people every day.

Roy Cartwright, of the Wilts and Berks Canal Trust, has carefully looked at the history of our lion and it stretches back to a time when, where there are now shops, there would have been a canal.

Back in the late 18th century a pub called the Golden Lion stood just yards from the canal. Nearby was a bridge over the canal, which became known as the Golden Lion Bridge, which was replaced several times during its life.

Above the door of the baselyry sat an ornate lion, which kept watch over all those entering and leaving the building, but this is not the lion you see today in Canal Walk.

Mr Cartwright said: "The lion above the door was taken down in the early 1900s when someone noticed that each time a train went past the lion quivered."

"He was moved into the garden of the pub and then later moved a few feet closer to the canal and surrounded by iron railings."

"Some claimed this was to stop the children from sitting on his back and pulling his ears but I prefer to believe the story that it was to stop the lion from escaping."

During the Second World War the railings were removed for the war effort and in 1956, the Golden Lion pub finally closed its doors for the last time.

During the early 1940s the lion was taken away and put into storage by the council for reasons unknown.

During the year of the Big Freeze in 1963 an official feared that the cold conditions would damage the lion, so they put tarpaulin over him.

But when it was removed several months later, the stone had crumbled, and his ears, nose, and feet all fell off.

When the Brunel Centre was built, it was decided to create a new

PRIDE OF PLACE
Above, the Golden Lion in Canal Walk. And right, at the unveiling in 1978. In the picture are Swindon mayor Alf Bown, Coun John Stevens and artists Carlton Altwood and Gordon Allen



Golden Lion and on February 25 1978, the new Golden Lion was unveiled by Mayor Alf Bown along with a plaque to mark the Queen's Silver Jubilee.

One of the ideas put forward came from a school teacher who wanted to create a time capsule containing all the things the children in his class thought were important at the time.

This capsule was placed underneath the lion.

The new statue originally faced south, but during the development of Canal Walk in 2000, it was moved a few metres south and now faces north east.

Mr Cartwright said: "He has been looking out for us for over 170 years now and will probably be there in another 170 years' time."