The River Severn

The River Severn started life as two rivers. One river had its source in the Welsh mountains near Welshpool and flowed out to the Irish Sea along the Dee Estuary. The other rose near Wolverhampton and flowed through Bridgnorth and on to the Bristol Channel. Then 18,000 years ago the Ice Age spread down as far as Shrewsbury. When it started to melt 15,000 years ago the exit for the river rising near Welshpool was still blocked by ice, as a result a large lake was formed. This has been called Lake Lapworth. To the north of the lake was the ice cap and to the south was the limestone ridge of the Wenlock Edge. Eventually the lake overflowed the ridge cutting a deep groove into the limestone near Ironbridge. This created Ironbridge Gorge. The lake then drained leaving behind the course of the River Severn as we know it today.

The Source

The source of the River Severn as we know it today is high up on the hillsides above Llanidloes in the county of Powys, which is in Wales. The small stream which is the start of the River Severn starts 457 meters above sea level. The valley down which it flows has very steep sides and is 'V' shaped. This has been caused by the fast flowing water of the stream carrying sand and pebbles which have cut into the hill side. All the way down the valley small streams join the original stream and are known as tributaries.

The Flood Plain

When the River Severn reaches flatter ground the water erodes in a different way from how it did on the higher ground. As the river moves down the valley the gravel and stones it is carrying erode the outside banks of the river where the water is fast moving. The gravel and stones are also deposited on the inside where the river is not moving so fast. This creates meanders which eventually make the bottom of the mouth.

The Mouth

When the River Severn gets near to the sea it turns into the Severn Estuary. This part of the river is tidal and has very little power left; the mud and silt it is carrying are deposited as mud banks.

The Ironbridge Gorge

The Gorge at Ironbridge was created 15,000 years ago at the end of the last Ice Age. The water in the lake above Ironbridge, Lake Lapworth, overflowed cutting through the limestone of the Wenlock Edge. This created the gorge. As the river cut into the landscape a variety of raw materials were revealed. These included coal, ironstone, limestone and clay. These were the vital materials used in the industrial processes that led to the industrial revolution.

Transport Down the River Severn

The River Severn not only exposed the raw materials needed in for the industrial processes it provided the means of transporting the raw materials and the finished goods. There were roads but these were mostly in very poor condition. It was very difficult to take carts along them because their surfaces were so bad, so things had to be transported on packhorses. This was very expensive and slow. There was one reasonable road near to Ironbridge but this was in the care of a Turnpike Trust which charged tolls on those who used it. It was therefore quicker and cheaper to use the river.

The industries which relied on the River Severn for transport included coal and ironstone mining at Madeley Court and Blists Hill, brick and tile works at Jackfield and porcelain at Coalport.

There were several types of commercial boats transporting materials and goods on the River Severn. The largest were 80 ton trows and the smaller vessels were wherries of 5 or 6 tons. The larger vessels such as the trows carried iron whilst the smaller boats carried coal.

George Perry made a list of vessels using the River Severn between Welshpool and Gloucester which totalled 376 in 1756. This showed that the river was very busy at this time. It was relatively easy to take the products down stream because the flow of the river helped to carry them down but on then return journey the boats had to compete with the current. Perry records that it cost 10 shillings per ton for freight going down stream from Shrewsbury to Bristol but 15 shillings for the return journey. To move the boats upstream, teams of six to eight men called bow haulers were sometimes used. John Fletcher in 1770 refers to the bow haulers:

"Fastened to their lines as horses to their traces… how they are bathed in sweat and rain."

In 1796 a towpath was built along the river to make it easier for horses to pull the boats, and the number of bow haulers declined.

In the 1770's, the Ironbridge Gorge was the most industrialised area in Europe; yet by 1810 the area was fast declining. In the summer the river was often too shallow to be navigable and meant long waits of weeks and sometimes months before it was deep enough to sail on. In the winter it was often too dangerous to use because of the floods. By 1803, Joseph Plymley was writing:

"Its navigation is very much impeded by the lowness of the water in summer and by floods in winter."

Pollution

Waste from the industrial processes and from the local population all found their way into the River Severn and it became heavily polluted. Not only did the River Severn provide the means of transport for the area it also provided the drinking water. Full of pollution and water born diseases it became a killer as well as a bringer of wealth.

Swimming

It is very dangerous to swim in the River Severn. The stretch of river through Ironbridge is particularly dangerous because of the sudden changes in depth and the strong currents.

Captain Webb

Captain Webb was a very famous swimmer. He was the first man to swim across the English Channel on the 25th of August 1875 in 21 hours and 45 minutes.
He learnt to swim at Ironbridge in the most dangerous part of the river. Unfortunately he was finally drowned trying to swim the Niagara Rapids on the 24th of July 1883.

Floods

The River Severn is very prone to flooding. This is because its source is located in Wales. This is a part of the British Isles that often suffers from very heavy rainfall which rushes off the mountains and down the river. Normal heavy rain does not cause flooding it only happens after heavier or more prolonged rain than usual. Flooding is also caused by fast thawing snow. Ironbridge village has always suffered flooding throughout its history because there is nowhere else for the extra water to go.

In 1998 Ironbridge flooded again. This was caused by a prolonged period of extra heavy rain.