

A 200 year old super highway

Steve Davison explores the Kennet and Avon Canal on a journey from Reading to Bristol

At the height of 'canal mania' in the early 1800s, the Kennet and Avon Canal, which stretches across southern England from Reading to Bristol, formed a super-highway for the transportation of goods ranging from coal and timber to grain and stone, contributing to the late Georgian and early Victorian growth of the south. However, the widespread use of the canal lasted only a few decades before the arrival of Isambard Kingdom Brunel's much faster Great Western Railway.

By the 1950s the canal was in a very poor state, however, plans to abandon it were brushed aside by public support and an army of volunteers set about its gradual restoration, culminating in its reopening by Queen Elizabeth II in 1990. Now this wonderful canal, which celebrated its bicentenary in 2010, forms a multi-faceted jewel for boaters, walkers and wildlife, as it weaves its way through a patchwork of countryside from the rolling chalk contours of the North Wessex Downs to the southern edge of the Cotswolds.

Meandering along the canal takes you on a journey of discovery past numerous historical features, and offers an abundance of peace and tranquillity as well as picturesque villages and vibrant towns and cities.



Looking east up the impressive Caen Hill flight of locks

We start our journey at Reading where the combined canal and River Kennet join the River Thames. It was here, in 1121, that Henry I founded a great abbey, sadly all that remains today are a few sections of flint rubble wall. The town is often known for its 'Three Bs' of beer, bulbs and biscuits, relating to three former industries that originated in the town: Simonds' Brewery; Suttons Seeds; and Huntley & Palmers, which by 1900 had become the largest biscuit manufacturer in the world.

The canal and River Kennet occasionally flow together as we meander westwards to arrive at Newbury. In the late 15th century, Newbury was highly regarded for its cloth and the town's most famous clothier was John Winchcombe, aka 'Jack of Newbury'. With his new-found wealth, he funded the rebuilding of St Nicolas' Church, a fine example of a Perpendicular-style 'wool church'.

Further on, at the western edge of Berkshire, is the market town of Hungerford, the only place in the country that still holds the Hocktide Festival, which relates to the rights of the commoners; the highlight is Tutti Day (second Tuesday after Easter), when the Hocktide Court is held and the Tutti Men visit every house with common rights.

We continue through Wiltshire passing Great Bedwyn, where the rather large Church of St Mary the Virgin houses an impressive monument to Sir John Seymour, father of Jane Seymour who married King Henry VIII in 1536, becoming his third wife. Further west is the world-famous Crofton Pumping Station, built to replenish the water lost each time a boat went through a lock. Although electric pumps are now used, Crofton's magnificent steam-driven beam engines – one of which is the oldest working beam engine in the world – are still used on several occasions throughout the year.

The canal meanders on through the Vale of Pewsey, overlooked by the Alton Barnes White Horse to pass Devizes – home to the Wadworth Brewery – before making a dramatic descent down the Caen Hill flight of locks. Designed by the Scottish civil engineer John Rennie, chief engineer of the Kennet and Avon Canal, the impressive flight of locks was the last part of the canal to be completed; we pass more of Rennie's work when the canal crosses the magnificent aqueducts at Avoncliff and Dundas.

The former wool town of Bradford-on-Avon – where the Saxons drove their carts across the 'broad ford' – is worth exploring. Here, on the medieval Town



The canal at Irish Hill, near Kintbury



Pero's Bridge at the Floating Harbour in Bristol – once a bustling port, now transformed with museums and cafe

Bridge is a weathervane in the shape of a gudgeon (a type of fish) which gives rise to the local saying 'under the fish and over the water'. The nearby tithe barn, once owned by Shaftesbury Abbey, is said to be one of the country's finest examples of a medieval monastic barn.

Finally the canal reaches the City of Bath, a World Heritage Site, whose history stretches back over two millennia. The Romans built a town, Aquae Sulis, and bathing complex around the naturally occurring hot springs and parts of this complex can still be seen today. A stone's throw away from the baths is the 16th-century Bath Abbey, described as the last great Gothic church in England.

The development of the Georgian spa town is mostly attributed to Richard 'Beau' Nash, a celebrated dandy and leader of fashion in 18th-century Britain; to Ralph Allen, onetime postmaster and owner of several Bath stone quarries; and to three architects: John Wood the Elder, who designed the elegant Circus (three curved segments of townhouses); his son, John Wood the Younger, whose most notable masterpiece is the beautiful curving Palladian-styled Royal Crescent; and Robert Adam, who designed the shop-lined Pulteney Bridge.

After leaving Bath, the final leg of the journey follows the River Avon to finish at the statue of Neptune – Roman god of the sea – overlooking the Floating Harbour in the heart of Bristol. Created by impounding (closing off with lock gates) a large area of the tidal River Avon so that ships remained afloat at all times, the Floating Harbour was, for a time, the largest artificially impounded area of water in the world. Following the closure of the commercial harbour in 1975, the area has been transformed, with an eclectic mix of art galleries, museums and cafés occupying the former warehouses. Highlights include Isambard Kingdom Brunel's SS Great Britain which, in 1845, became the first propeller-driven iron-hulled steamship to cross the Atlantic.



Statue of Neptune at Bristol's Floating Harbour marks the end of the walk along the Kennet and Avon Canal