

A SUBTLE NAVIGATION

By Clare Blake

Tiverton Canal

Tread softly when you visit the Grand Western Canal at Tiverton for you are walking in dream territory, a dream that once fired the imaginations of engineers as they envisaged one of the most exciting projects of the 19th century, a concrete waterway that would connect the English and Bristol Channels for the first time.

It was an idea that met with considerable enthusiasm, as passage by sea involved a perilous navigation around the tip of Cornwall. Manmade waterways were an exciting controllable alternative, although it wasn't until 1810 that construction finally began under the direction of the experienced John Rennie who had already worked on the Kennet and Avon and Lancaster Canals.

The new Canal was planned to run from Topsham to Taunton, but, rather surprisingly, work began in the middle at Tiverton where it was hoped that a profitable stone carrying trade could be established.

Rennie, like all canal engineers, faced the tricky conundrum of trying to ensure that his canal should be as level as possible, as any change of incline involved expense incurring devices such as locks and lifts. Rennie succeeded in keeping the whole 11 mile stretch on one level, but his solution of lowering the original planned summit level to avoid locks at Holcombe Rogus probably proved equally expensive as the alternative cuttings and embankment were both difficult to construct and costly to maintain.

The Tiverton section finally opened in 1814, having taken four years to construct at a cost of £220,000, more than the estimate for the whole route from Topsham to Taunton detailed in the original Act of Parliament granted in 1796.

As a result the financially stretched Grand Western Canal Company could not undertake further construction for a considerable time, and it was only in 1831 when other organisations proposed rival canal links that work started once more, this time with James Green, an Exeter engineer at the helm.

By now the original scheme with the link to Topsham had been abandoned, and the Lowdwells – Taunton stretch was designed with economy as the prime consideration.

Green's section incorporated an inclined plane at Wellisford like ones he'd already used on the Bude Canal, and seven vertical boatlifts. He also proposed that the Canal should now be built to accommodate tub boats, four of which could be pulled by a single horse.

However, cutting costs led to unsatisfactory workmanship with faulty lifts and a plane that didn't work. Green repaired the lift faults at his own expense before he was dismissed, but W. A. Provis was employed to deal with the remaining problems including the faulty inclined plane that had to be powered by a steam engine to get it to function adequately.

This used up the Company's remaining funds, and they had to dig deep into their own pockets, and even borrow from the newly appointed engineer, Captain Twisden.

However, by 1838 the Tiverton - Taunton Canal was fully operational and beginning to show some profits. However, a fresh and devastating blow was to strike in the opening of the Bristol and Exeter Railway Tiverton branch line in 1848, ironically formerly one of the Canal's best customers for it was the Canal that transported the construction materials.

A bitter price war raged between railway and Canal until 1864 when the Company reluctantly admitted defeat, leasing the Canal to its successful rival.

The railway soon closed down Green's problematic Lowdwells to Taunton section, but continued to maintain the Tiverton stretch. However, as Canal traffic dwindled, the decision was made to block off the Canal near Halberton where problematic leaks regularly occurred, and by the 1950s it was classified as "fit only for closing down."

Through the 1960s the Canal was a mere vestige of its former self, semi – derelict, and abandoned, but fortunately not filled in. Fortunately, rescue was on the horizon when Devon County Council acted as Prince Charming to the

Canal's Sleeping Beauty, and from 1971 began a programme of restoration that resulted in a beautiful canalside country park for public use.

On approaching the Tiverton Canal Basin, the first thing you notice are the smoothly rising domes of well-preserved limekilns originally constructed in 1829. The kiln's two level system was immensely practical, allowing the feeding of lime and coal to the kilns straight from the barges, and the removal, once burnt, by road. It was certainly a successful enterprise and thousands of tons were burnt annually right up until around 1895.

From here the Canal itself begins, and you cannot help but marvel at this ingenious piece of engineering that takes full advantage of the natural contours of the land.

Distinctive features provide constant interest - old milestones, former wharves, bridges including a number of Grade II listed stone constructions bearing stonemason marks, and cunningly engineered culverts transporting water from one side to the other.

Two particularly striking Canal landmarks are the double arched iron aqueduct built in 1847 forty feet above the former railway line near East Manley, and the Waytown Tunnel near Holcombe Rogus where "leggers" propelled the boat through the tunnel with their feet.

However, it's not just engineering virtuosity that makes the Canal such a fascinating place for it is a wonderful wildlife haven. White waterlilies, arrowhead, and sulphur yellow flag irises add splashes of vivid colour to the surroundings, while bird life includes graceful swans, comical coots and patient watchful herons standing immobile.

Overhead, azure damselflies and brilliant blue and green dragonflies hover and dart, and there are welcome signs that the playful otter is becoming established once again.

The level tow path is ideal for walking or cycling, or you can make a nostalgic journey in a brightly painted barge pulled by a gentle shirehorse, courtesy of **Grand Western Horseboat Company: 01884 253345.**

After your trip, pause for refreshment with a picnic in the Basin, or opt for tasty treats at the **Tea Barge** or the delightful thatched **Canal Tea Rooms (01884 252291)**. Souvenirs are also available from the floating canal shop including wonderfully decorative canalware.

Other Canal based options offered are fishing ([permits from Exe Valley Angling, Tiverton \(01884\) 242275](#)) and boating using your own boat with a valid permit (available from the [Horseboat Company](#) or [Minnows Caravan Site, Sampford Peverell](#) (01884 821770)), or hired rowing and self-drive boats.

However, although the Canal seems full of activity and life, it has been undermined over the years by an enemy far more invasive and insidious than the railway, a slow relentless tide of encroaching silt.

To deal with this the Grand Western Canal [Ranger Service](#) is implementing a programme of effective and sustainable canal management with the aid of funding from Devon County Council and [Mid Devon District Council](#), and a partnership with the Interreg IIIb Crosscut Project, an EU funded scheme.

Solutions to the ongoing silt problem include selective dredging, protective fencing, buffer strips, and, importantly, partnership with local farmers to encourage canal and environmentally friendly agricultural practices.

There seems no doubt that the Grand Western Canal will win this battle also. The Canal is the ultimate survivor, and hopefully will continue to enchant visitors for generations to come, a precious and unique part of our heritage.

FURTHER INFORMATION

**The Grand Western Canal Ranger Service: The Moorings, Canal Hill, Tiverton:
01884 254072**

Tiverton Museum of Mid Devon Life: 01884 256295