

Walk of the month - The Grand Western Canal

This is a lovely peaceful route, often along the towpath, beside this tranquil stretch of waterway through the heart of Devon between Tiverton and the Somerset border. This is a flat, easy, mainly off-road route, and ideal for families with children. There are open views of superb landscape on the way, varying between sheltered woodland and sweeping views of the Blackdown Hills. This route is a one-way walk with the return to Tiverton Parkway station via a bus from Tiverton centre.

The Devon section of the canal was completed in 1814, and rather than using locks, the canal engineer, John Rennie, felt it was more efficient commercially to follow contours and construct embankments and cuttings to make it as flat as possible. The Canal was closed as a commercial waterway in 1925, as the railways took over commercial transport. Restored as a Country Park in 1971, it is now enjoyed by walkers, anglers, cyclists and passengers on boats and a horse-drawn barge run by the Grand Western Horseboat Company. There are picnic areas and pubs along the way

The Grand Western Canal forms part of the West Country Way (NCN3) Cycle Route which runs from Padstow in Cornwall to Bristol, making it possible to also cycle this route.

Fact File

Tiverton itself is served by regular buses from Exeter as well as services from North Devon. Furthermore, for those wishing to arrive by train, Tiverton Parkway is a main stop on the Exeter – Paddington railway line. For timetable details call Traveline on 0871 200 22 33 or visit www.traveline.org.uk.

Route Length: Tiverton Parkway to Tiverton = 7 miles, return by bus.

This route passes near to Knightshayes Court (National Trust - reduced entry for those arriving by foot or by bicycle) and Tiverton Castle.

OS maps:

Explorer (1:25,000) No. 114 Exeter and the Exe Valley; No. 128 Taunton, Blackdown Hills.
Landranger (1:50,000) No. 181 Minehead and the Brendon Hills; No. 192 Exeter, Sidmouth.

The Route

The following directions describe a circular route following the canal towpath using the bus to return to the starting point at Tiverton Parkway Station.

From Tiverton Parkway Station, leave the station along the access road. At the main road turn right and after 30 metres turn left along a track that leads to the Link Road Bridge and a boat-launching slipway. Turn left and follow the towpath through Sampford Peverell.

The stretch of canal from Sampford Peverell to Halberton has excellent views across to the Blackdown Hills, and during late spring and summer is home to important populations of Reed Warblers and Sedge Warblers who nest in the bankside vegetation.

Just before Rock Bridge is Rock House, built around the same time as the canal for Captain John Twisden – the engineer who succeeded James Green in extending the canal to Taunton. The name 'Rock' relates to the fact that the bedrock is very close to the surface at this point, and it was a remarkable achievement for a cutting to be chiselled out by hand through this section by the navvies who built the canal. Equally impressive is the beautiful Oak tree on the offside of the canal near Rock House that has grown to a tremendous size with its roots sprawling over the bedrock.

After passing over Swing embankment with its wonderful views, you pass under Swing Bridge. This is an 'accommodation bridge' built to link up farmer's land that was split by the construction of the canal. Further on through a large cutting is Greenway Bridge.

For the next mile and a quarter, the canal sweeps out on a large loop called the 'Swan's Neck' which keeps the canal on a level contour above Halberton. Beside Milestone 3 are Tiverton Road Car Park and the Dudley Weatherley Jubilee Bridge. This lift bridge was built in 2002 – the Queen's 50th jubilee year - and is named after a well-known local artist who was prominent in the campaign to save the canal back in the 1960's and early 1970's. Sadly Dudley died in 2004, but this elegant lift bridge will help to keep his memory alive for generations to come.

At Crownhill Bridge (also known as Changepath) the towpath crosses the bridge and continues on the opposite side for the rest of the journey to Tiverton. The towpath crosses over an Aqueduct that was built in 1847 as part of the construction of the Bristol and Exeter Railway branch from Tiverton Parkway to Tiverton. Two arches were built to allow for future expansion, but only one line was ever used and this was closed in 1967.

The section from East Manley Bridge to the Basin in Tiverton is where the Horse drawn passenger barge operates twice daily from Easter until the end of October (Tel. 01884 253345 for more information).

For the last mile of the canal, the route passes through a residential area before arriving in the Tiverton Basin where you will find the Tea Gardens, a visitor centre a floating shop and café and public toilets.

From the Basin the route follows Canal Hill down to a mini roundabout and then right, down to Great Western Way. Turn left onto Great Western Way and then right onto Station Lane, this will lead you into Tiverton town centre where you will find a large array of shops, services and parking. A little way along the pedestrianised Fore Street is Phoenix Lane, at the bottom of which you will find the Tourist Information Centre and Tiverton Bus Station.

Buses leave every hour to the station and the journey takes around 20 minutes. Services are less frequent on Sundays, check with the Traveline on 0871 200 22 33 or visit www.traveline.org.uk.

