

# The River Parrett



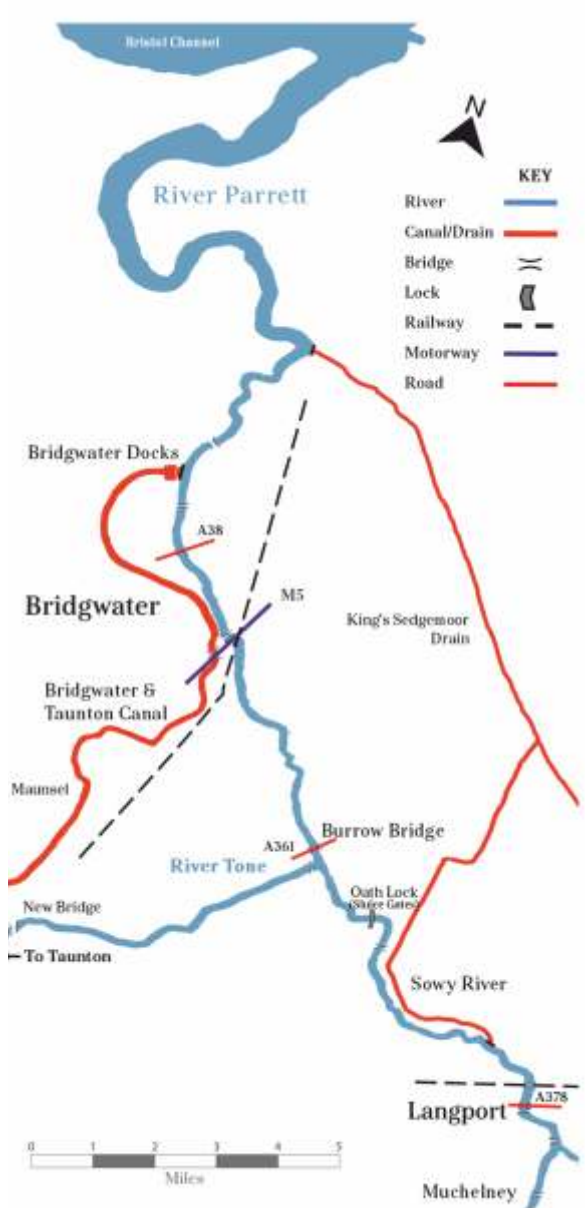
## 1. Source to Sea

The River Parrett, known affectionately by the 'Land of the Summer People' as the 'lifeblood' of their county ironically begins her 37-mile journey 1.76 miles over the border in Dorset! At 181 metres above sea level, 'The Thorney Mills Springs' can be found in the village of Chedington and their presence can be enjoyed with the most spectacular views from the beer garden at the Winyards Gap Inn. The Parrett then weaves and grows as she courses across the county, passing many a Hamstone village and bustling town of South Somerset, on through the Somerset Levels (where she is cherished and cursed in equal measure) before joining the Bristol Channel at Steart.



## 2. History of the river

With the historical nature of people building settlements next to rivers, the River Parrett does not differ and in doing so has created fortunes for many Somerset folk over thousands of years. The fertile nature of the river and its surrounding lands saw local trades of agricultural produce, livestock, cloth and wool all being exported over many generations. Bridgwater was an international trading port from as early as 1200, with the Middle Ages seeing imports of wine from France, and paper and glass



from Italy. Similarly at this time construction of some of the county's churches was taking place and Hamstone quarried from nearby Ham Hill was also transported around the county by this very river.

The 1600s saw the brick and tile industry expand as the rich local alluvial clay soil was used to produce quality products. The Parrett's coastal trade, using ketches (a type of sailing boat) to transport their products brought wealth to the town, the success of which can be seen in the architecture visible today. The 17th century then saw humankind 'play' with the course of the River Parrett. A loop in the river near to Dunball made life very difficult for sailing ships heading for Bridgwater. Apparently, the merchants of Bridgwater funded the cut through the loop because the straightened river would make sailing the 'consistent' wind direction easier.

### **3. Innovation over the years**

Many businesses have been born by their very nature being linked to the River Parrett. Take the development of the 'Bath Brick', the predecessor to what is now commonly known as a scouring pad for cleaning! Fine clay was dredged from the bed of the River Parrett and formed into shape not dissimilar to a house brick in size. By the end of the 19th century, it is believed that 24 million Bath Bricks had been produced in Bridgwater and sold both domestically and internationally.

Also using the watery environment to develop a business was the Bradfords family. Known today for being successful building merchants, their family empire began out in Thorney near Muchelney, where they grew withies (young saplings of the willow tree) in the lands adjacent to the River Parrett. By becoming the UK's largest withy provider, the Bradfords family proudly supplied everything from fishing baskets to ammunition baskets and aircraft seating in the two world wars.

## **4. Commercial Navigation**

Nowadays, the river is tidal inland for 12 miles. Over the years it was navigable for much further but with the development of the road and rail networks the investment into the UK's rivers and waterways has been drastically decreased and even redundant in parts.

At its peak, Bridgwater welcomed huge sailing vessels which would link up to goods being shipped in barges (or flatners) to Langport and on to Ilchester by connecting with the River Yeo.

Similarly, goods were also transported to Taunton by using the River Tone from Stanmoor and from 1827, the Bridgwater and Taunton Canal.

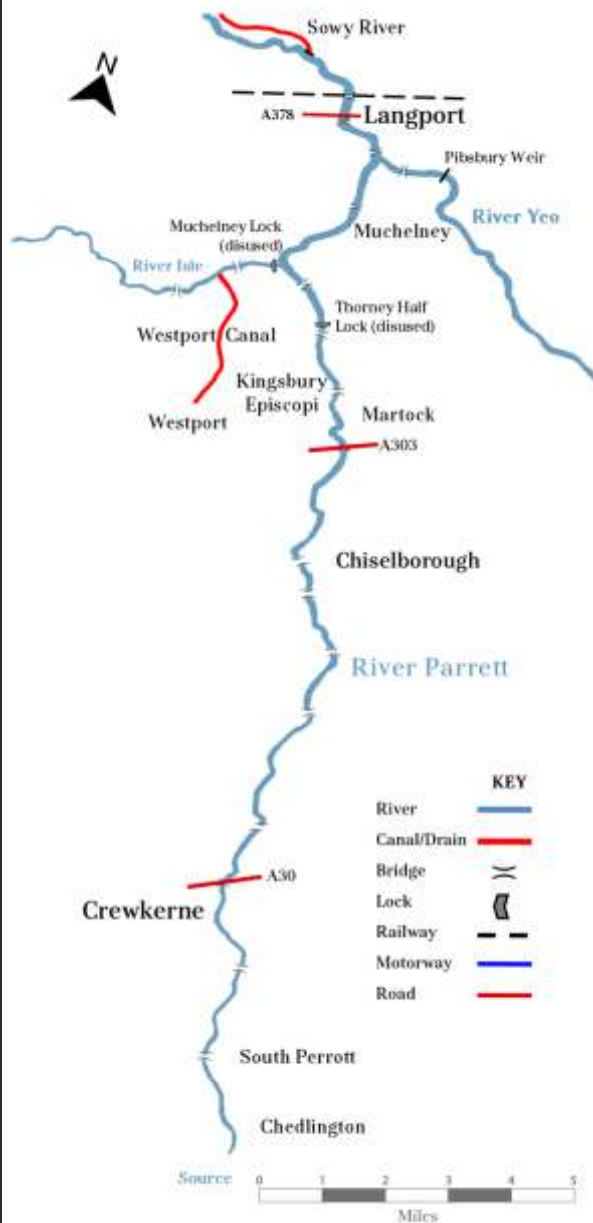
Bridgwater boomed and by 1841 the town docks had been constructed with records stating that 3,600 ships were being welcomed every year. The success, for the Parrett, however was sadly to be short-lived. Within just 10 years the railways were well established and the canal was deemed as bankrupt, with the docks seeing a peak trade in the late 19th century which was never repeated again.

Today, the attention for commercial navigation is turned sporadically to Comwich which in 2023 was key in the delivery of the first nuclear reactor for Hinkley Point C. The reactor first arrived in Britain at Avonmouth Docks before being transported by barge to Comwich Wharf.

Weighing 500 tonnes, the reactor is expected to create the heat needed to make steam for the world's largest turbines and in turn provide low carbon electricity for three million homes.

## **5. Bridgwater Docks**

The IWA welcomed the announcement by Bridgwater Town Development Forum in 2021 that £23.2m was to be awarded from the Government's Towns Fund to Sedgemoor District Council for the regeneration of Bridgwater. More recently it has been revealed that a total of £5.2 million from the overall budget will be spent on rejuvenating the Docks area and of this, £4.2 million will revive the docks specifically, with the remaining £1 million



**KEY**

- River
- Canal/Drain
- Bridge
- Lock
- Railway
- Motorway
- Road



delivering walking and cycling routes to the area. The Grade II listed docks are currently owned by Somerset Council and are in need of huge restoration with numerous elements (including the lock gates and the bascule bridge) needing complete replacement.

The original Basin Bascule Bridge was designed on the same principles as Tower Bridge in London. Made of cast iron and manually operated, it was originally installed in 1841 but was replaced by an electrically-operated replica made of mild steel in 1983. Unfortunately it was subsequently damaged and has been out of use for navigation purposes (other than by small craft) ever since. The news of the investment into the recreation of the Bascule Bridge is a most welcome and much needed addition to the town.



## **6. The Tidal Bore**

Due to its connection to the Bristol Channel, the River Parrett is also influenced by the dramatic tidal range of the River Severn. Holding the title for the second largest tidal range in the world, this funnelling of water between the English and Welsh landmasses means that a surge of water sometimes forces itself upstream. Certain tides at certain times of the year will bring this rising water upstream of the River Parrett too, seeing a mini 'tidal bore' where the river waters flow against their usual direction of travel.

## **7. Flood Watch**

With the Somerset Levels being one of the lowest areas in the UK with an altitude of just 8 metres above sea level, much of the area lies beneath the high-water levels of the spring tide. The levels are renowned for being a geographical area which has suffered severe flooding over the years and in 2014 this area of Somerset experienced the worst floods in living memory. As a result, the Environment Agency and Somerset Council are working together to create a Tidal Barrier Scheme on the River Parrett, to protect Bridgwater and the surrounding communities from flooding. The aim is to reduce tidal flood risk to 11,300 homes and 1,500 businesses by building a tidal barrier on the River Parrett whilst also improving the capacity of the flood banks. It is hoped that the tidal barrier will be completed by 2029.

## **8. Dunball Sluice**

A press release from the government in August 2022 states how one of Somerset's most important tidal defence assets is being refurbished so it can continue to protect Bridgwater, the Somerset Levels and the Moors for the next 25 years. A £4.2 million refurbishment scheme will aim to refurbish mechanical and electrical components in Dunball Sluice which originally came into operation in 1971. This sluice controls flood flows in the King's Sedgemoor Drain (KSD) and the River Sowey, which is also known as the River Parrett Flood Relief Channel.

## **9. Oath Lock**

Oath Lock is today a pair of sluice gates which are closed between April 1st and December 1st thus penning the water upstream of Oath. The original Oath Lock was added when it was realised that the locks at Stanmoor, Langport and Muchelney, with a half-lock at Thorney, would not provide the depth of water specified in the Navigational Act of Parliament of 4 July 1836 (which at the time authorised the building of a navigable waterway from Midwelney to Westport – the River Isle and Westport Canal). Midwelney Lock still exists, although no longer usable and the waterway



through to Westport can only be used by small craft that can be portaged around the lock and other obstructions.

## 10. Recent Investment

If you head to the east bank of the river to the long port of 'Langport' you will see how the River Parrett plays a key part in Somerset's tourism industry. There's a real buzz along the riverbank since the town obtained grants from the EU, South Somerset District Council and the Canoe Foundation in 2019. Together in collaboration with the IWA, Langport Town Council and many 'nautically-minded' locals have now made Langport the destination for recreational fun and sports on the water. The grant ensured that the Cocklemoor riverside area was developed as a family friendly destination, creating idyllic walkways to explore both the river and its environs. In addition, the construction of floating pontoons and canoe steps offers easy access points to the river for those who are keen to swim or paddleboard, whereas the slipway at Huish Bridge now provides the perfect launching opportunity for trailable narrowboats and other craft. There is currently 7.6 miles of water to explore (including connections with 1 mile of the River Yeo and 0.1 mile of the River Isle).



## 11. Recreation on the water

### *For non-tidal access to the River Parrett:*

Trailable narrowboats: Launching from Huish Bridge, Langport TA10 9QP

Canoes, kayaks, paddleboards and swimmers:  
Pontoons can be found at various locations along the riverbank in Langport. Head to **Langport.life** for further information.

### ***For tidal access to the River Parrett:***

It is best to contact the Commodore of Comwich Boat Club (**[combwichboatclub.co.uk](http://combwichboatclub.co.uk)**) who will be able to assist with all requests regarding tide times for the launching of motor boats, sailing, water-skiing and Cornish gig rowing.

## **12. Recreation along the riverbank**

### ***Boat Trips:***

The Duchess of Cocklemoor is a community boat which runs regularly from spring to autumn. You can pre-book trips along the River Parrett which give the perfect opportunity to spot river wildlife. Keep your eyes peeled for otters, kingfishers, herons and the cranes which can often be seen flying along the river. Private hire for up to 12 guests is also available.

**[duchessofcocklemoor.co.uk](http://duchessofcocklemoor.co.uk)**



### ***Cycling:***

The South Somerset 80-mile Cycleway passes through Langport and takes in the quiet lanes of the Somerset Levels. **[visitsouthsomerset.com](http://visitsouthsomerset.com)** National Cycle Route 339 travels from Bridgwater to Langport, where it joins with the South Somerset 80-mile Cycleway.

**[sustrans.org.uk](http://sustrans.org.uk)**

**Bike Hire:** To hire bikes for all the family in Langport by the hour, half day or day. E-bikes also available. **[parretttrailbikes.co.uk](http://parretttrailbikes.co.uk)**

### ***Walking:***

The River Parrett Trail is a 50-mile walking route which follows the river from source to sea. The route can be completed over a weekend or in sections. Downloadable walking guides are available from **[visitsouthsomerset.com](http://visitsouthsomerset.com)**

## 13. Festivals

**Party by the Parrett** Recreation Ground, Kingsbury Episcopi, Martock. Cover Bands from across the South West lead the music at this one-day summer festival by the River Parrett. Follow **Party by the Parrett** on Facebook for ticket information each year.

**Bridgwater Quayside Festival**, Bridgwater Town Centre. Bridgwater Quayside Festival is a free annual festival of events, with street theatre, music, creative arts, sports, art trail, family activities, carnival, dance, digital media and a variety of food, drink and crafts stalls.

**bridgwaterquaysidefestival.co.uk**

**Langport Art Day** Watch artists create artworks all over Langport! Boat trips, kids competitions, musical performances and bar. Follow **The Hanging Gallery** on Facebook.

## 14. Places to visit

### **Muchelney Abbey**

The name ‘Muchelney’ means ‘the great island’ and if you were to turn the clock back to medieval times the Somerset Levels would have been even more prone to flooding than now with a series of small islands, akin to an archipelago, raised above water level.

### **Burrow Mump**

So good they named it twice! Burrow Mump (meaning Hill Hill) is the site of church ruins atop a hill. Akin to Glastonbury Tor, Burrow Mump offers panoramic views across the Somerset Levels where on a clear day you can see the River Parrett weave her way across the county for miles.

### **Somerset Brick and Tile Museum**

Bridgwater bricks, tiles and terracotta goods were exported along the River Parrett. Open on Tuesdays only, you can explore the museum, have coffee and pre-book on to workshops to get creative with clay.

## FURTHER READING

The Canals of South West England - *Charles Hadfield*  
Parrett River Trade - *Geoffrey Body and Roy Gallop*  
The Parrett Navigation - *Geoffrey Body and Roy Gallop*  
Exploring the Parrett and Tone Navigations  
(*Jean Hall and Joy Yates*)

## REFRESHMENTS

**Chedington:** Winyards Gap Inn  
Tel: 01935 891244

**Langport:** many pubs and cafes

**Burrowbridge:** King Alfred Inn  
Tel: 01823 698379

**Huntworth:** The Boat and Anchor  
Tel: 01278 662980

**Bridgwater:** many pubs and cafes

## BOAT TRIPS

**Langport:** [duchessofcockle Moor.co.uk](http://duchessofcockle Moor.co.uk)

## TOURIST INFORMATION

**Langport Information Centre:** 01458 253527

**Bridgwater Tourist Information Centre:** 01278 427692

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This leaflet is one of a series published by the West Country Branch of the Inland Waterways Association to encourage greater use and appreciation of the West Country's canals and rivers.

The IWA is a membership charity that works to protect and restore the country's 7,000 miles of canals and rivers. IWA is a national organisation with a network of volunteers and branches who deploy their expertise and knowledge to work with navigation authorities, government and other organisations. The Association also provides practical and technical support to restoration projects through its expert Waterway Recovery Group.

To find out more visit the IWA website: [www.waterways.org.uk](http://www.waterways.org.uk) or e-mail [iwa@waterways.org.uk](mailto:iwa@waterways.org.uk)



Front Cover: Painting of the River Parrett at Muchelney courtesy of Lucy Hawkins; photographs courtesy of Rachel Mead, except for the photo of the First use of the refurbished slipway at Huish Bridge: Mike Slade and of the Duchess of Cockle Moor: Ian Macnab.

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