

The Rolle Canal

North Devon



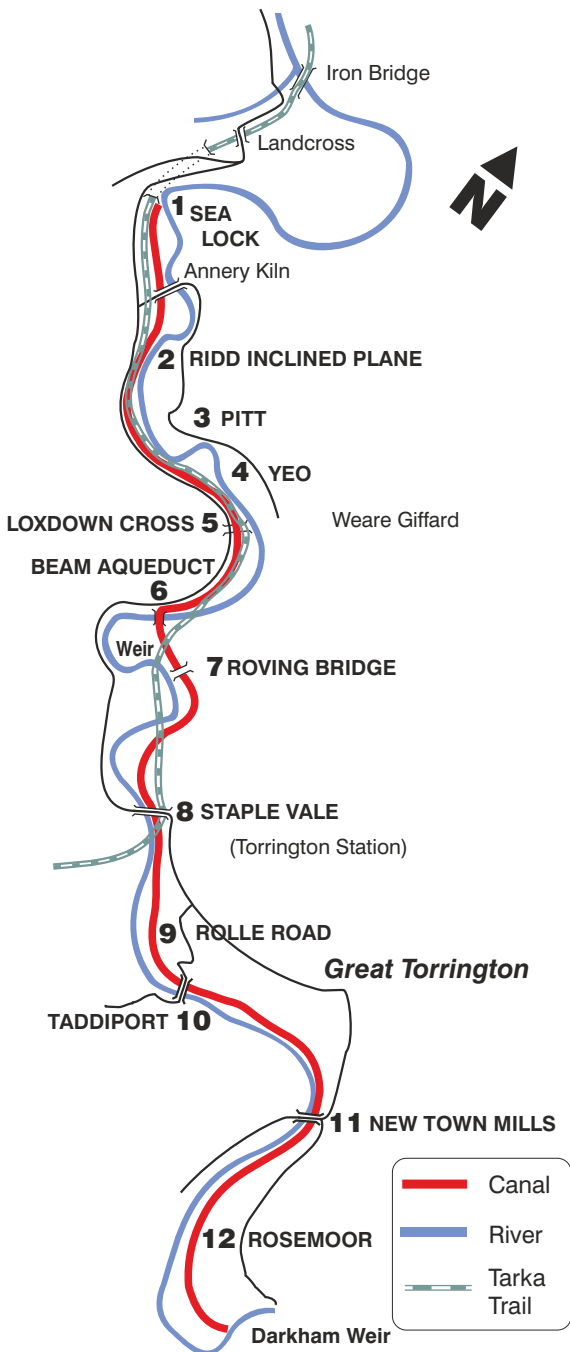
1. Sea Lock



Connecting the Rolle Canal to the River Torridge, this is technically a tidal lock but, ever since construction was completed in 1827, the lock and the shipyard that grew up alongside it, has been known as "Sea Lock" in all its documentation. The site of Sea Lock can be overlooked from a new viewing platform recently constructed thanks to grant funding from Heritage Lottery, which also funded the provision of interpretation boards placed at strategic points along the course of the canal.

The short stretch of canal from the Sea Lock to the Lime Kilns at Annery was a highly industrialised area during, and for some years after, the lifetime of the canal. There were shipyards, potteries, and brick kilns in addition to the lime kilns, and the area was linked to the Annery House and Barton up on the hill to the west by two lanes which probably pre-dated the canal.

Some old maps show an accommodation bridge or footbridge near the southern end of the canal basin, and it is likely that an existing bridge to maintain access over the canal to the lime kilns was enlarged to carry the new road to Weare Giffard when Halfpenny Bridge was built across the Torridge in 1835. Neither of these bridges are in existence today as there is a culverted crossing by the basin and the canal is filled in and absorbed into private gardens where the hump backed road bridge once was. Abandoned after the closure of the canal and virtually lost under a century's accumulation of river silt, the lock and canal basin have been excavated and restored by the present owners and volunteers so that now the renovated upper gates and paddle gear are operational and soon the basin may be in water again.



2. Ridd Inclined Plane

Less than a mile upstream from Sea Lock the canal rises 42 feet up the valley side to its final level which is held all the way to the head weir on the Torridge above Torrington. This elevation was achieved by means of an inclined plane, where the specially designed canal "tub boats" with iron wheels were hauled up the slope on rails, pulled by a chain powered by a water wheel.

The building of the Bideford to Torrington railway in 1873 after the closure of the canal destroyed the incline and the upper canal bed, along with the two bridges giving access from Annery House and the new turnpike road to the Ridd cottages, lime kilns and Hunters Inn. One of these bridges crossed over the canal south of the upper basin to serve the now ruined Inn and cottages and give access to the top of the lime kilns and the eastern abutment of this is still detectable alongside the Tarka trail. The other lane, leading to the Ridd cottages, the base of the kilns and a river wharf, passed under the slope of the inclined plane in what must have amounted to a short stone-lined tunnel, the eastern arch of which is still visible in a surviving stone wall while the tunnel itself has been cut away in the building of the railway.

Some old maps also show an accommodation bridge linking meadows either side of the canal north of the lower canal basin, although nothing remains of that structure and it is not known whether it was a footbridge, swing bridge or stone arch, or indeed whether it was ever actually built. An interpretation board on the Tarka Trail foot/cycle path that follows the line of the old railway gives some indication of the significance of the site. Further excavation, exposure and interpretation is in progress at this location.

3. Pitt

Only some three hundred yards upstream from Ridd is the site of the furthest inland lime kiln served by navigation on the Torridge that being the highest point accessible by river barges on a high tide. It could only have been viable due to the high value of lime for agriculture, and was accessed by farms in the Monkleigh area via a lane over Rendles Down.

This lane also required a bridge over the canal but, while the lane remains as a public footpath terminating at a lay-by on the main road, no sign of the canal crossing or even the kiln itself can be detected today.

4. Yeo

Yeo farm is situated between the canal and the river Torridge mid-way between Ridd and Beam House. The driveway from the Turnpike road, now the A386, to Yeo Farm sloped down fairly steeply as the farm, now just a pair of cottages, was in the valley bottom, while the canal was up close to road level.

The canal bed is relatively intact beside the road for a few hundred yards at this point, but the drive now cuts through it giving no indication of how the crossing was effected when the canal was in operation. It is assumed it would have been a stone archway, but it must have been severely humped to give headroom below, and it is possible there might have been a swing or lift bridge at this point.

5. Loxdown Cross

An important east-west pack-horse trail led down to the Torridge from Monkleigh to cross the river by a ford to Weare Giffard and so on to Barnstaple. This trail came down a narrow side valley and the new Bideford turnpike road made a sharp loop to form a crossroads here while the canal passed over the ancient lane by short 'dry aqueduct', so called because it crossed a road rather than a river as the great Beam Aqueduct does.

When the railway came, it ran alongside the canal and crossed over the lane on a new iron bridge but, in the 1960s, the main road was straightened and employed a reinforced concrete span right on the canal route, totally obliterating the dry aqueduct.

Careful examination of the stone facing of the road bridge reveals that one abutment may well be actually incorporating the original aqueduct masonry. This historic site is easily accessed from the lay-by and picnic site signposted at Loxdown Cross where the old pack-horse trail is still a public highway and has an official road sign indicating the ford ahead across the meadows.

6. Beam Aqueduct

The Beam Aqueduct, the iconic symbol of the Rolle Canal, was built in the grounds of Beam House (the residence of Lord Rolle at the time) and carried the canal across the Torridge valley at a high level, avoiding a long loop of the river where the steep valley side is subject to frequent landslips, and even the present highway suffers frequent maintenance problems.

It was a superb feat of masonry construction, 270 feet long by 22 feet wide with five tall, elegant arches which carried the canal in a clay-lined trough with a pathway each side. As with the rest of the Rolle canal, no engineers drawings are known to exist but it is conjectured that the canal may have been contained in an elm trough bedded in clay lining.



After the canal ceased to trade, the trough was filled in and the aqueduct became the main driveway entrance to Beam House, linking it to the main Bideford-Torrington road and making the old Carriage Drive to the east of the house redundant.



The Aqueduct was referred to as Canal Bridge in Henry Williamson's classic tale of "Tarka the Otter" and it is an iconic feature of "Tarka Country".

7. Roving Bridge

Only 325 yards south of the Aqueduct, behind Beam House, where a wharf served the needs of the residence, an accommodation bridge was built to carry the main carriage drive to the house over the new canal.

Since the towpath needed to cross over from one side of the canal to the other, this bridge was also built to serve as a canal roving bridge and incorporates some characteristics of this special canal architecture. This is the only true canal bridge remaining in existence on the Rolle Canal and its survival is due to its still being in the original ownership and having been restored as a millennium project by Lord Clinton, the successor to Lord Rolle.



Upstream from here the canal skirts the side of Furzebeam Hill, some 32 feet above the river, where it is hewn into the rock face and reduced to its minimum width of less than 6 feet.

There is a project under way to establish a permissive path along the canal from the Tarka Trail behind Beam House, under the roving bridge and around the bottom of Furzebeam Hill to Torrington Commons. This stretch of canal has recently been opened to the public as a permissive footpath, with work provided by volunteers from the Rolle Canal & Northern Devon Waterways Society in conjunction with Clinton Devon Estates and North Devon AONB.

8. Staple Vale

Roads, old and new, river, railway and canal all come together at Staple Vale which was an important centre for the wool trade and manufacturing in the 19th and early 20th centuries and until 1982 was the railway station for Torrington.

The railway station and associated goods yards, and subsequent realignment of the main road, have removed all trace of the canal therefore nothing can be seen of the canal and any bridges where it was crossed by the Bideford Turnpike at Staple Vale, until east of the Tarka Trail/ex-railway viaduct (which was built subsequently to the closure of the canal) some 110 yards further up the valley towards Taddiport.

9. The Rolle Road

The canal route is re-defined upstream of Staple Vale beside the Torridge in the form of the Rolle Road, a broad public walkway leading to Taddiport. This part of the canal's course was unaffected by the railway and is largely intact, except where crossed by roadways at Taddiport, where a derelict milk factory also masks a short section.

This was the site of the canal company's headquarters and the main docks for the town of Torrington. An original Rolle Canal Co. warehouse still stands here at the foot of the hill. Nearly 2 miles of canal bed here forms a broad but often muddy public path around the base of the hill on which Torrington stands.



It was at one time proposed as a toll road to skirt south of the town and is still known as the Rolle Road.

The whole of the canal bed forming the Rolle Road from Staple Vale, via Taddiport, to New Town Mills is now a public footpath and part of Torrington Commons.

10. Taddiport



The road over Taddiport bridge, just before turning up Mill Street, crosses the line of the canal and careful examination of the low stone wall on the east side of the road will reveal the very top of an archway that has become buried through successive building up of the road level over the years. This was the arch that originally carried the road over the canal at this point, and was rescued by the Torrington and District Historical Society at a time when the road was being rebuilt.

A short distance further east along the Rolle Road is the point where a footpath down Castle Hill to Taddiport Bridge crossed the canal on a swing bridge of which a photograph is on record.

The canal is itself now a footpath and the two paths still cross at this point which can also be seen on a more recent photograph, although the whole hillside is now so well covered in trees that no similar photographs can be taken at the present time.

11. New Town Mills

The last bridge over the canal proper, before its terminal basin at the Rosemoor lime kilns, is where the A386 Hatherleigh road crosses the Torridge south of Torrington. Here the main road bridge, which was built more recently than the canal, has an extra arch at its eastern end to allow the canal, which is only a couple of yards above river level, to pass under on its way to the mill pond of Torrington's New Town Mills, now a holiday complex called Orford Lodge. The canal here also served as the leat to supply water to New Town Mills.

Again the canal cannot be recognised as such, and the mill pond is now a lawn, but there is a water wheel still in place, and a hundred yards further on past the car park the canal can again be made out heading into the grounds of Rosemoor Gardens.

12. Rosemoor

The Royal Horticultural Society's property housing the renowned show gardens at Rosemoor also includes the head waters of the Rolle Canal.

The canal tub boats navigated a further 500 yards up the leat from New Town Mills to supply limestone and coal to the Rowes Moor lime kilns sited at the main terminal basin below Rosemoor Gardens. The lime kilns were built to convert imported limestone into agricultural lime for the benefit of the land at Rowes Moor and the surrounding properties.

To the basin, from another mile upstream, a broad mill leat carried water from Darkham Weir, the head weir on the Torridge, to feed the New Town Mills, a small tucking mill and the canal itself. The leat skirted the edge of the valley and was crossed by three small accommodation bridges to enable farmers and cattle to access the water meadows in the valley bottom.

One of these old stone bridges has collapsed and been filled in while the other two are still used for access and are suffering severe damage due to the size and weight of modern farm machinery. Here it would have been possible to navigate onto the Torridge for a short distance, but what means of propulsion was used is not known.

HISTORY OF THE CANAL

In the late eighteenth century, various alternative routes were under consideration for a canal to carry coal and limestone inland from the port of Bideford to improve the productivity of the acidic agricultural land. Eventually John, Lord Rolle, engaged the engineer James Green to build his canal and in 1823 work commenced, cutting a route up the west side of the Torridge valley towards Great Torrington.

Green had just completed work on the Bude Canal where he had successfully used water powered inclined planes and small tub boats to achieve the necessary rise in level so he employed similar methods on the Rolle Canal. Fully operational by early 1827, the Rolle Canal functioned successfully, with better profits than many contemporaries, until it was superseded by the railway in 1871. This success was no doubt largely due to the fact that it carried a range of essential heavy goods with a reliable end use. These included cargoes inward of coal and limestone for fuel and agriculture and outward of clay for pottery and export, timber for shipbuilding, and farm produce to feed the industrial coastal population.

DISTANCES AND ACCESS

Sea Lock is some three miles south of Bideford off the A386 and from there the canal runs for about seven miles to Rosemoor south of Great Torrington.

Most of the features of the canal are on private land and only accessible to the public by special arrangement or on guided walks by the Rolle Canal Society. However the Tarka Trail long distance cycle and walkway is a major tourist route in the district and, since it follows the track of the old railway, provides views of several canal features and follows part of its course.

Sea Lock (at a distance), the Inclined Plane, Aqueduct and Staple Vale can be seen from the Tarka Trail, a total of about five miles from Bideford, and the Rolle Road can be freely walked all the way from Staple Vale to New Town Mills, a distance of about a mile and a half.

The roving bridge and canal bed below Furzebeam Hill are on private ground but links to the Tarka Trail by a permissive right of way.

All the canal from New Town Mills to Darkham Weir is on RHS Rosemoor property and outside the public gardens area, so can only be visited by special arrangement. The Rolle Canal Society usually takes a guided walk there in August each year.

LOCAL CANAL GROUP

Rolle Canal & Northern Devon Waterways Society

www.rollecanalsociety.org

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Tarka Trail

North Devon Biosphere Service

www.northdevonbiosphere.org.uk

FURTHER READING

Lord Rolle's Canal - *Susan Scrutton*

Rolle Canal & The North Devon Limestone Trade -

Barry D Hughes

REFRESHMENTS

Bideford & Torrington:

Many pubs, cafés and restaurants

Weare Giffard:

The Cyder Presse - Tel: 01237 425517

Staple Vale:

Puffing Billy Trading Co. - Tel: 01805 623050

Torrington Cycle Hire - Tel: 01805 622633

Rosemoor Gardens:

Restaurant and Tea Room - Tel: 01805 626810

New Town Mills:

Orford Mill Tea Room - Tel: 01805 622114

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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 6,500 miles of canals and rivers. 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 or e-mail iwa@waterways.org.uk



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