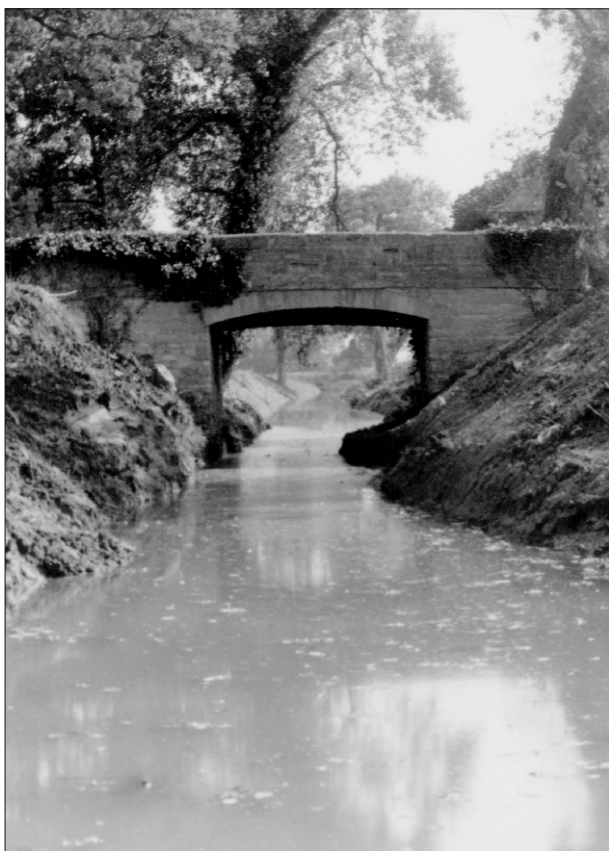


The Grand Western Canal

Lowdells to Taunton



Between Lowdwells and Nynehead, a continuous walk along or close to the course of the Canal can be undertaken.

1. Lowdwells Lock

A short way along the track signposted “Country Park”, the Lock marks the end of the intact length of Canal. Its masonry chamber, clearly showing the gate recesses, measures 54ft by 13ft (big enough to hold four tub-boats) and had a rise of 3.5 ft. A retaining wall has been built across the lock chamber.

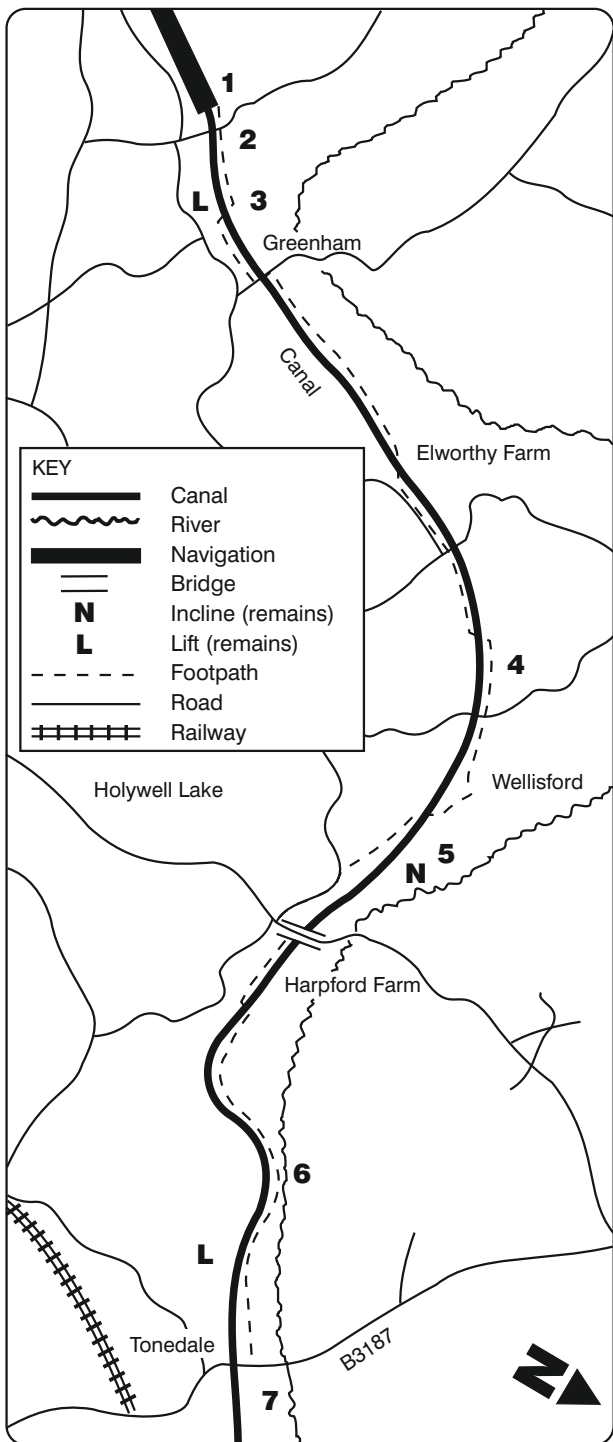
2. Lowdwells Aqueduct

East of the Lock, the dry Canal bed rises on an embankment and was carried over the road by an aqueduct; the overgrown stone abutments on each side can be seen. Take the footpath on the east side of the road, through a metal gate and up to/along the clearly-defined Canal bed.

3. Greenham Lift & Bridge

After about 0.25 mile (and after passing a poultry house on the left), the fenced-off garden of the Greenham lift-keeper's cottage is reached. Skirting round its north-west side, all that remains of the 42ft lift is the steep drop on the north-east side of the garden. When the access road across this slope was cut, only slight traces of parts of the lift could be found. The path crosses the slope to the south end of the fine, stone accommodation bridge and then follows the south side of a water-filled stretch of the Canal.

Crossing the road by Greenham Cottage, the path continues over a stone stile and along the Canal, firstly on the towpath and later along the Canal bed. At Elworthy Farm, the path goes round the south of modern farm buildings, diagonally across a yard and north of a barn, and then along a track to join a minor road. The bed of the Canal is along the north-west side of the road. It is best seen from the avenue leading to Cothay Manor, described by Pevsner as “one of the most perfect smaller English manor houses of the late 15th century”. Continue along the road to Jays Cottage; on its south side, the path goes through a gate to follow 300m of dredged and watered Canal.



4. Elworthy Wellisford

The Canal descends into a cutting (part overgrown and part in water), becomes indistinct and then rises on to an embankment. The path climbs on to the Canal via a stile and continues east towards a bungalow. Some traces of the abutments carrying the Canal over the road can be seen.

Climbing up the bank on the east side of the road, the path rejoins the Canal as its dry bed passes through a cutting, emerging on to a hillside and heading for a group of farm buildings.

The path makes a detour to the north of these buildings, crossing the line of the Canal to their east.

5. Wellisford Incline

Among the buildings are a house (formerly cottages for the incline-keeper and his assistant) and, at right-angles to it, the engine house for the steam engine which provided the motive power for the incline.

Just before joining the track below and east of these buildings, the path crosses the upper part of the incline, the 1 in 1.5 slope of which is clear. The basin at its foot, where boats waited, holds water and is surrounded by trees.

Continuing down the track and road, the Canal's course can be made out on the valley floor.

6. Harpford Bridge - Winsbeer Lift

A stone, arched bridge carries the road over the Canal, the course of which can be seen in the garden of Two Bridges on the west side of the bridge.

From a gate on the road's east side, the footpath follows the Canal's course eastwards; after 0.25 mile, the bed can be distinguished and after passing former quarries, 0.5 mile later, it draws close to the River Tone, where the Canal is supported by a high, stone retaining wall.

A stone wall on the south side of the Canal marks the ruins of the Winsbeer lift-keeper's cottage (used later as a farmhouse); the site of the 18ft lift shows clearly as a distinct break in slope where the canal bed appears to stop (nearly under the overhead cables).

7. Tonedale - Nynehead Aqueduct

Below Winsbeer Lift, there is a short, wet and wooded stretch of Canal, beyond which the path follows the line of the Canal (crossing Back Stream via an aqueduct) to the Wellington/Milverton road. There was a wharf at the road crossing; the houses to the south are named Wharf Cottages. On the road's east side, there is no sign of the Canal but take the waymarked path at the side of the premises of R.W. Gale.

The path joins a track along the line of the Canal to and past the sewage treatment works; about half a mile beyond them, the path drops down into woodland. The dry, embanked Canal bed becomes clear, though overgrown, and the path follows its south bank through a belt of woodland.

After drawing close to the railway, the Canal swings north-eastwards. An impressive, stone-faced aqueduct carries it over a former drive to Nynehead Court; note the iron trough which contained the Canal's water.

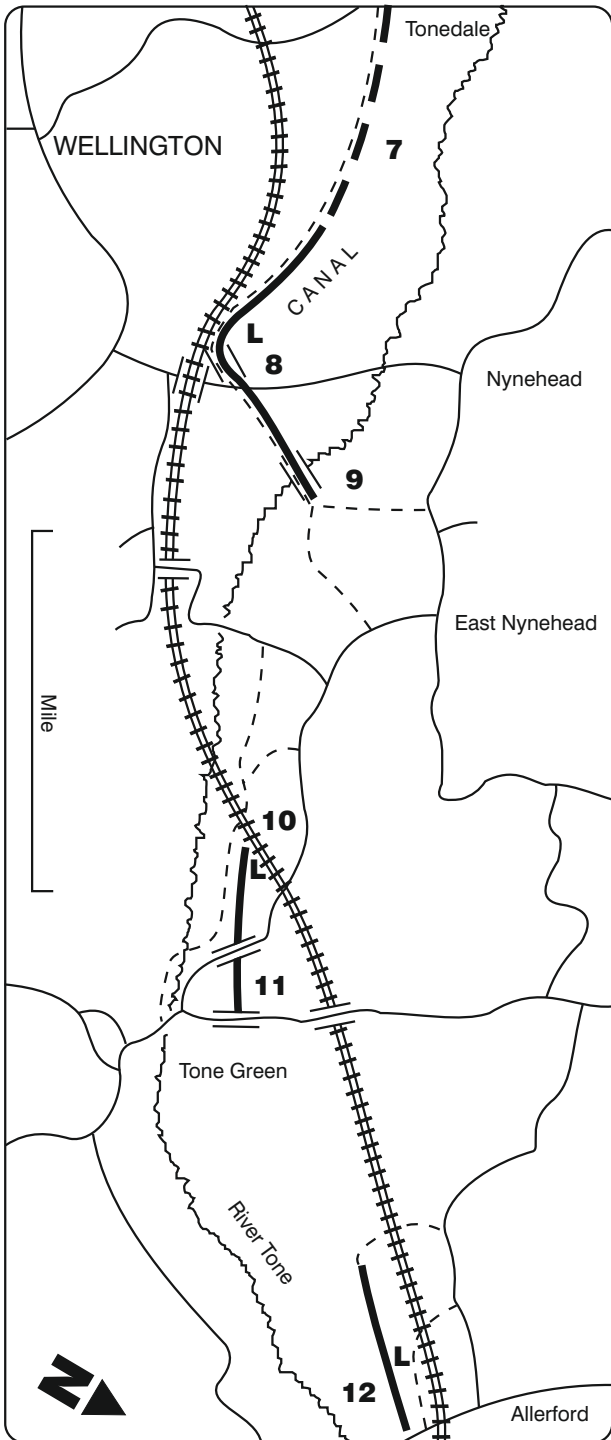
8. Nynehead Lift & Wharf Cottage

Soon after the aqueduct, the Canal bed stops at a precipitous drop which appears on the left of the path. This is the 24ft Nynehead Lift; it is the best-preserved of the lifts and, having descended the path, its masonry chamber becomes clearly visible. Note the arches in the retaining walls and the holes in which the lift's framework was held.

Suspended in the lift were two caissons in which the boats floated. Immediately below the caisson chambers, there were two locks, each with a 3 ft lift. The length of Canal north-east from the lift has been cleared of undergrowth and re-filled with water. At the road crossing there was a wharf where only the Wharf Cottage survives.

9. Tone Aqueduct

Take the path from the north side of the Cottage along the side of the field; on its far side, a wooded area is entered. The Canal bed re-appears, leading to a 30ft-span aqueduct over the river. Some of its stone facing has been lost, but the iron trough is intact the joints of the three sections in which it was made can be seen.



Between Nynehead and Taunton, it is advisable to travel by car to visit each of the described features of the Canal.

10. Trefusis Lift

Take the waymarked paths towards the railway from either south of Clavenger Farm or east of East Nynehead. Close by the railway, only Lift Cottage (for the lift-keeper) remains. Any traces of the lift itself (which had a vertical rise of 38.5ft and was situated immediately north of the railway line) are lost in its garden.

Crossing over the railway (**DO NOT LINGER, HIGH SPEED TRAINS PASSING**), a wooded and wet length of Canal (marked by a line of trees and undergrowth) can be seen running eastwards.

11. Bridges - Trefusis Farm & Tone Green

By Trefusis Farm, the Bradford/Nynehead road crosses the Canal by a wide, stone bridge with a flat arch and iron ribs. Below the bridge and away to the east, the Canal appears virtually intact and water-filled.

The water extends to the bridge north of Tone Green this is also of stone but with a much narrower, circular arch. The house here was formerly four Canal Company cottages; there was a wharf in the southern part of the garden.

12. Allerford Lift

Almost opposite the Victory Inn (near which there was a wharf) and immediately south of the level crossing, a footpath runs westwards, close to the railway. After crossing a stream, a short stretch of water-filled Canal appears to the south. The house on its far side was built some 40 years after the Canal's closure.

At the west end of the water, an overgrown area marks the site of the 19ft Allerford Lift. Its rise is obvious, but its masonry side and end walls have gone only rough rubble remains.

Above the lift, the dry Canal bed is carried on an embankment which can clearly be seen extending westwards across the field.

13. Norton Fitzwarren

The site of the 12.5ft Norton Lift was south of the former railway station (itself south of Taunton Cider), probably at the field boundary south-west of the footbridge. A footpath runs west-east along the line of the Canal, close to the overhead electricity cables.

14. Silk Mills Frieze Hill

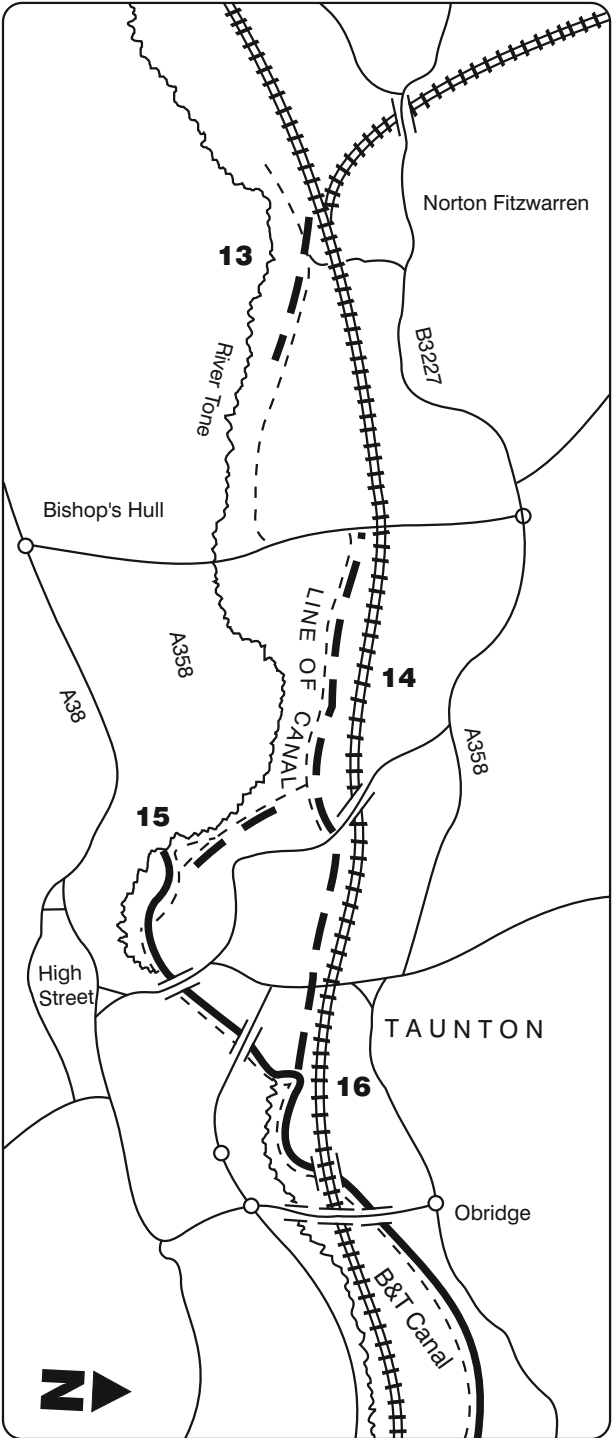
Close to the south side of the railway bridge (previously a level crossing) at Silk Mills, the road used to cross the Canal by a bridge. A footpath eastwards follows the Canal's course which, nearer Staplegrove Road, follows the track between Turner's Allotments and terraces of houses. The path joins Staplegrove Road just south of the railway bridge.

15. "Parliamentary Line"

As originally authorised, the Canal was to have joined the River Tone in the vicinity of French Weir. As part of an Act of 1832 to settle the dispute between the Bridgwater & Taunton Canal Company and the Tone Conservators, such a direct link from the Grand Western at Frieze Hill to the River was cut in 1834. The route is followed by a footpath which runs from Roughmoor Crescent to the French Weir Recreation Ground. The bed of the Canal can be traced where it runs alongside the River, at the back of Weirfield School. It is not certain whether the two Canals were connected; there were two locks along the north-east side of the Recreation Ground.

16. Taunton Lift & Junction with the Bridgwater & Taunton Canal

The course of the Canal east of Staplegrove Road has been obliterated by the railway but, south of Taunton Station, it followed the southern edge of the present goods yard. The 19ft Taunton Lift was situated in the vicinity of Prospect Terrace (north of Canal Road); between this and the Bridgwater & Taunton Canal there was a stop lock. The Grand Western Canal joined the Bridgwater & Taunton on the north side of the brick bridge which spans the tail of the latter's Firepool Lock; the point of entry is marked by a low wall in the side of the Canal.



HISTORY

Various schemes were proposed in the latter half of the eighteenth century for canals between the Bristol and English Channels, thereby avoiding the hazardous journey around the coast via Land's End. None of them was built, but the Grand Western was intended to provide such a link.

In 1796, an Act was passed to construct a canal between Topsham (near Exeter) and Taunton, a distance of some 36 miles. The canal would have two branches from its main line: to Cullompton (two miles) and Tiverton (seven miles). Because of the war with France and economic difficulties, construction of the Canal did not start until 1810.

The 11 miles length along the "main Line" from Lowdwells to Burlescombe and the branch to Tiverton was opened in 1814 and trade in limestone quickly developed. But the cost of construction had been higher than expected, so it was not until after the opening of the Bridgwater & Taunton Canal in 1827 that construction started in 1831 on the 13.5 miles stretch of the main line between Lowdwells and Taunton.

This part was opened in 1838, but the planned link to Topsham was abandoned. Coal and limestone were the main cargoes. Also cut in 1834 was a direct link to the River Tone on the west side of Taunton.

Decline and Closure

The canal enjoyed only a few years' success, because railways arrived just a few years later, soon capturing much of the Canal's trade. In 1853, the Canal was leased to the Great Western Railway, who in 1864 exercised their option to buy the Canal. The railway company closed the Lowdwells to Taunton length of the canal in 1867 and its inclined plane and lifts were dismantled. Some stone traffic survived until 1924 on the Tiverton branch, which was abandoned by the British Transport Commission in 1962. However, this branch was transferred to Devon County Council in 1971; it is still navigable and has been turned into a Country Park. Its towpath offers a continuous canal-side walk from Lowdwells to Tiverton; boat trips and boat hire are available at Tiverton.

GOING UP: INCLINES AND LIFTS

The Grand Western Canal was built with only two locks, at Lowdwells and Taunton (although there were also two on the "Parliamentary Line" to French Weir). Elsewhere, differences in height were overcome by means of an inclined plane and vertical lifts, both of which were cheaper to construct and used less water.

The Incline

The incline was at Wellisford; it had a vertical height of 81ft, a length of 440ft and was double-tracked. On each track ran a wheeled cradle, big enough to hold one 26ft by 6ft6in tub boat. The motive power was planned to be water: a 10 ton bucket of water was suspended in each of two wells.

Water would be added to the uppermost bucket until its weight exceeded the other bucket, cradle and boat, causing it to descend and so raise the cradle and boat. At the bottom, a valve would release the water from the bucket.

The canal's engineer James Green had built a successful similar incline on the Bude Canal, but Wellisford failed to do so and he was sacked. Instead, a steam engine was installed to provide the power.

The Lifts

Two of the country's first workable canal lifts were operated experimentally on the Somersetshire Coal Canal and the Dorset & Somerset Canal in about 1800.

The Grand Western Canal was Britain's only canal successfully to use vertical lifts (apart from the Anderton Lift between the River Weaver and Trent & Mersey Canal, which still survives). Their heights ranged from 12.5ft to 42ft; each one had a masonry chamber which contained two counter-balanced caissons, or tanks of water, supported by chains.

One tub boat could float in each of the caissons, which were operated by simply adding more water to the upper caisson, making it heavier and causing it to descend.

The Grand Western's lifts were not all the same; changes were introduced as experience was gained. As a result, the first six lifts took boats 8.5 minutes to pass. But the last to be built, at Greenham, enabled boats to pass through in just 3 minutes.

REFRESHMENTS

Holcombe Rogus - *Prince of Wales PH*
Holywell Lake - *The Holywell PH*
Langford Budville - *The Martlet Inn PH*
Wellington - *Many pubs and cafes*
Hillfarrance - *The Anchor Inn PH*
Allerford - *Victory Inn PH*
Norton Fitzwarren - *Many pubs and cafes*

TOURIST INFORMATION

The Library, Corporation Street, Taunton
Tel: Taunton (01823 336344)
The Squirrel, Wellington
Tel: Wellington (01823 663379)

FURTHER READING

The Canals of South West England - *Charles Hadfield*
Lost Canals and Waterways of Britain - *Ronald Russell*
The Grand Western Canal - *Helen Harris*
The Buildings of England South and West Somerset
- *Nikolaus Pevsner*
O.S. Explorer 128 & 114
O.S. Landranger 181 & 193

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This leaflet is one of a series being published by IWA West Country Branch to encourage greater use and appreciation of the West Country's canals and rivers. IWA is a national charity, founded in 1946, which cares for our waterways heritage. To find out more or to join, write to: IWA at Unit 16B, Chiltern Court, Asheridge Road, Chesham HP5 2PX.

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