

The Tavistock Canal



THE TAVISTOCK CANAL

This leaflet describes the length of the Tavistock Canal, which is freely accessible. More of the canal (including an inclined plane, the tunnel and various artefacts) can be seen at Morwellham Quay.

1. River Tavy

A few yards below Abbey Bridge, a box by the side of the river contains screens and sluice mechanisms to regulate the outflow of water to the Tavistock Canal. The water disappears under the path and high stone wall, resurfacing in the grounds of The Bedford Hotel. To join the canal, continue along the river and turn right through the wall into the Canal Road car park. The canal is on the opposite side, behind the wooden post and rail fence.

2. The Wharf

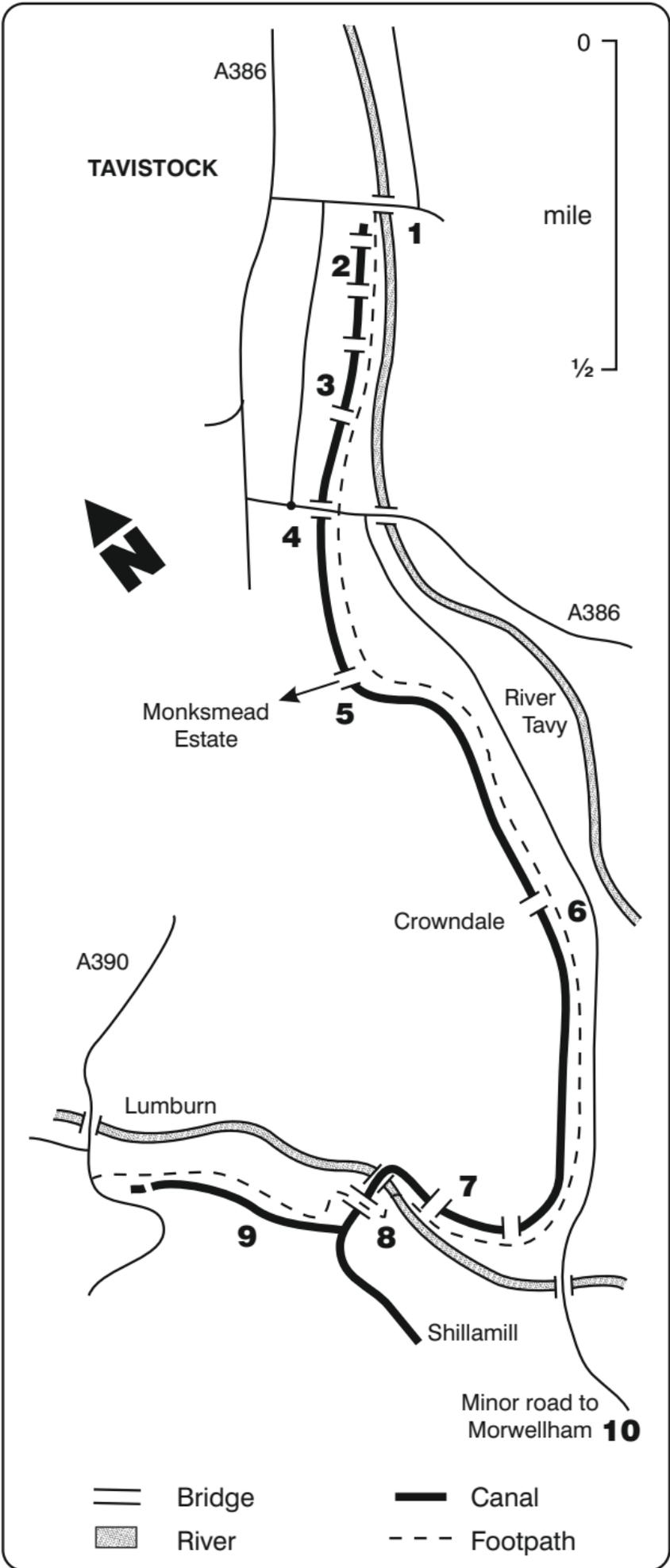
To the left, an attractive group of wharf buildings is reached at the car park entrance/exit. The canal flows under a former canal company building (now a Guide Hall); other ranges of stone buildings cluster around a cobbled quay. One bears a plaque in memory of John Taylor (1779 – 1863), the local engineer who designed the canal. Staying on the south side of the canal, walk towards and round the north side of the Meadowlands Leisure Pool.

3. Jessops Hay

The canal is crossed by a low footbridge and passes through lawns and gardens. Halfway along, there is a modern, shallow arched bridge, shortly after which a metal grating in the towing path edge marks an overflow weir. The canal is raised above the level of the park to the south and continues under a stone road bridge with the inscription “Rebuilt 1903” (some 30 years after the canal’s closure). The road can be busy and visibility can be restricted – cross carefully.

4. Drake's Staue & Fitzord Cottages

Standing in the roundabout, Sir Francis Drake’s statue rises 10ft high and is a bronze by Boehm, unveiled in 1883. It rests on a pedestal of bronze reliefs depicting episodes from Drake’s life. Close by on the north bank of the canal, are the model cottages built for miners in 1862 at the height of the mining boom.



They were also known as “Bedford Cottages”, after the seventh Duke of Bedford who built them. The interpretation board on the towing path also describes the Fitzford Gatehouse (rebuilt 1871) and the Catholic Church (built by the same Duke, in the 1860s).

5. Hills and Valleys

As the canal starts to curve to the left, a new swing footbridge has been installed. This gives access to/from the housing development at Monksmead estate. The canal leaves the school grounds to the south behind and enters the countryside. It curves around the hillside, following the contour. A stile across the towing path precedes a range of stone farm buildings: the central, 2-storey part has two openings onto the towing path, presumably to aid water-borne carriage of goods. The towing path continues along the track. Views open out on both sides – across the fields on the far side of the canal stands the embankment of the disused Tavistock/Bere Alston South Devon Railway.

6. Crowndale Farm

The canal enters a shallow cutting, crossed by a stone arched bridge, dating from the canal's construction. Close by is the site of Crowndale Farm, the alleged birthplace of Sir Francis Drake. The farm itself was demolished in the 1850s and the stone re-used elsewhere. The canal passes through another stretch of woodland, on the hillside high above (but not quite out of sight or smell of) a sewage treatment works and waste disposal site. Turning right into the Lumburn valley and after passing close to a farm, the canal narrows to cross a gully by means of an iron aqueduct.

7. Viaduct and 'Lock'

Beyond a metal gate, there is a good view of the twelve arches of the magnificent, disused Shillamill railway viaduct. The canal proceeds along the tree-lined hillside; the sound of the rushing waters of the Lumburn can be heard from below. After a towing path stile, the canal narrows at a stone-sided 'lock chamber', with a single lock gate crossed by a new lift bridge.

8. Embankment

The canal immediately turns sharp left (ahead is the sluice for an overspill weir) to cross the Lumburn valley on a 60ft high embankment, made from the spoil dug from the canal's 2,540 yd Morwell Down tunnel. An arch in the base of the embankment allows the river to pass underneath. The twin towing paths are joined at the far end by a low bridge. Beyond this bridge, the canal turns left along the opposite side of the valley, but there is no public right of way (private property – South West Hydro Power). This leads to the entrance of the tunnel that takes the water to Morwellham.

9. Millhill Branch

By crossing the bridge and passing through a gate, the path can be followed alongside the abandoned Millhill branch of the canal. Although dammed off, the first few yards contain water that leaks in from the “main line”. Further along the canal bed is dry but remains visible. But the bed becomes gradually more filled in; for the last 200 yards to the main road, all traces of the canal are lost but the track marks its line.

10. Morwellham

The south portal of the tunnel, dated 1803, is situated near the right hand side of the road to Morwellham Quay, just beyond the left turn to Newquay but there is **no** public access.

At Morwellham Quay (entrance charge) a rail leads up alongside the site of the inclined plane to the last section of the canal. Here it follows the towpath to the tunnel entrance where the water from the tunnel is fed to the hydro-electric works by the River Tamar. (The double-tracked inclined plane, worked by a 28-foot diameter waterwheel, used to lower wagons to the quay, 237 feet below).

HISTORY

The 4-mile Tavistock Canal linked Tavistock with the port of Morwellham, on the River Tamar. It was opened in 1817 to carry copper ore from the mines near Tavistock - later it also provided water power. It had one branch to the slate quarries at Millhill (2

miles), which opened in 1819 but was closed in the 1830s.

The tonnage carried was highest in the 1830s and the goods transported included limestone, copper ore and slate. But trade diminished with the ending of mining locally and the arrival of railways. The last commercial traffic was in about 1873, when the canal was sold to the Duke of Bedford. Since the 1930s, it has survived by supplying water to a hydroelectric plant at Morwellham.

TOURIST INFORMATION

Dartmoor National Park Centres

<https://www.dartmoor.gov.uk/enjoy-dartmoor/planning-your-visit/our-visitor-centres>

Bus Services

Lumburn and Tavistock are linked by buses, including Services 79 from Callington and 185 from Bere Alston which operate 5 times or more each day. For fuller details see: <https://www.bustimes.org>

FURTHER READING

The Canals of South West England - *Charles Hadfield*
The Tavistock Canal - *Carolyn Hedges*
Industrial Archaeology of the Tamar Valley - *Frank Booker*

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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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