

Bridgwater & Taunton Canal

and the
River Tone Navigation



1. Bridgwater Docks

The Docks were opened in 1841, when the Bridgwater & Taunton Canal was extended to join the River Parrett via the two basins you see today. High tides in the Parrett were used to maintain high water in the Docks, the water being retained behind the large lock gates. This type of dock is known as a “floating harbour”. From the outer or tidal basin, two locks led to the river. Both the larger, ship lock and the smaller, barge lock are now sealed off. Around the basin are bollards and the sluices which were used to flush silt out of the Dock and into the river. A bascule bridge carries the road to Chilton Trinity across the Dock between the two basins. The original bridge was extensively restored in 1907, and in 1984 was further overhauled. Near the bridge stands one of the Dock's original hand-operated cranes. The inner basin is now empty; boats had to leave it before Canal & River Trust's lease of the basin expired. On its south side stands Ware's Warehouse, dating from 1841; it was derelict until being restored in the 1980s to house residential flats, offices and a pub (the Admiral's Landing). On the opposite, north side of the Dock, where housing now stands, there used to be a large mound called The Mump, formed from the material dug out to create the Docks.

2. Newtown Lock

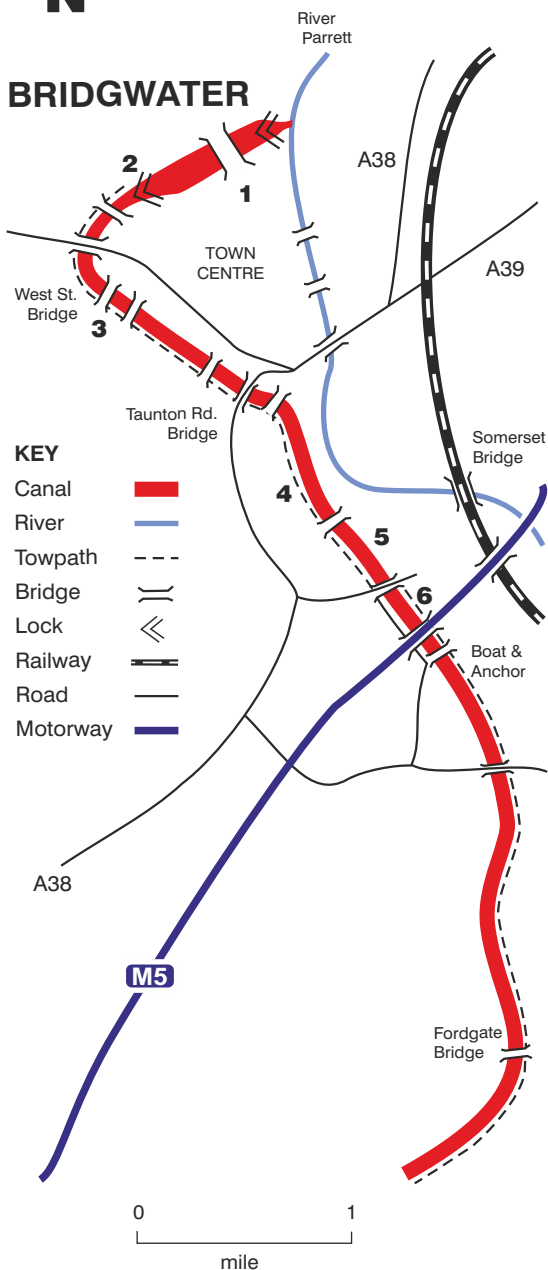
Much of the west end of the basin has been redeveloped with modern housing but Bowering's Mill, which until recently produced animal feed, is a reminder of the Docks' industrial past. The stop lock, which is crossed by a swing footbridge, connects the Dock to the canal. Its gates are kept in the open position. The canal is nowadays the Docks' source of replenishment water. Leaving the lock behind and moving upstream, the towpath swings away from the road and enters a shallow cutting around the west side of the town.

3. Albert Street Cutting

The canal passes under Victoria Road Bridge (considerably extended in 1931) and then, after Wembdon Road Bridge, narrows and squeezes through a cutting with sheer stone walls. It continues under the tunnel-like West Street bridge, beyond which massive wooden buttresses support the high retaining walls, but work is planned to remove these. A pedestrian ramp allows access to the towpath from West Street.



BRIDGWATER



4. Hamp

After passing under Albert Street bridge, the canal emerges to give views of the Quantock hills to the west. A succession of brick bridges (some original, some rebuilt) crosses the canal, which soon draws alongside the River Parrett. The two waterways are separated by a thin neck of land and Hamp weir allows canal water to spill into the river. On the towpath side a flooded clay pit is a reminder of Bridgwater's once flourishing brick industry.

5. Factory Arm

The canal gradually enters rural surroundings and a concrete pillbox on the far side stands close to the original (1827-1841) line of the canal, which joined the River Parrett at Huntworth before the construction of Bridgwater Docks. The old basin has been filled in, but a short detour leads to Somerset Bridge which carries the railway over the river. Constructed in 1904 it replaced an earlier, unsuccessful Brunel design.

6. Swing Bridges

Crossways swing bridge was the first of three swing bridges rebuilt to the original design of such bridges on this waterway. It was decommissioned and removed as part of the new bridge works in 2019, which also saw the towpath from Crossways to Mead's swing bridge relocated to the south-west side of the canal.

The remaining swing bridges are opened manually by boat crews to allow the passage of craft. The Boat & Anchor pub (alongside Mead's swing bridge) offers refreshments. Huntworth Road bridge is an unattractive structure, rebuilt to carry heavy traffic, followed by Fordgate swing bridge. This length is peaceful and typical of the rural setting of much of the route of this canal.

7. Standards and King's Locks

Having been on one level since leaving Bridgwater, the canal is raised about 5½ feet by each of these two locks. They are 54 feet long and 13 feet wide, big enough to take one barge or four small tub-boats. Their brickwork is topped by lias stone and engineering bricks. Of interest are the unusual concrete balance beams on the lock gates which were installed after the First World War. Between the locks is Whites Dairy Bridge, and at Godfrey's corner there used to be a milestone engraved "III 1/2" miles.

8. North Newton

At North Newton, there is another swing bridge. From here, it is just a short walk to the village, where the Harvest Moon pub serves refreshments. The tower of St. Peter's Church rises above the houses and, although rebuilt in 1884, its origin is much older. The Alfred Jewel, a Saxon ornament which is the oldest surviving Crown Jewel, was found here in 1693. It is now in the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, but there is a replica in the church.

Continuing southwards, the canal passes the site of an abandoned swing bridge and then passes under Coxhill bridge, a simple brick structure. Note the metal rubbing strips under the arch, deeply grooved by the ropes of horse-drawn boats. Across the field to the west lies the landscaped parkland of the old Maunsel House.

9. Maunsel and Higher Locks

Each lock again raises the canal by some five and a half feet. Both locks still have a full set of heavy metal counterweights on the paddles or sluices which let water into or out of the lock, a feature which is unique to this canal.

Immediately prior to Maunsel Lock are some visitors' moorings and some moorings belonging to the Somerset Navigators Boat Club.

Alongside the lock is the former lock-keeper's cottage and on the opposite side is the Maunsel Lock Tea Rooms, offering refreshments, souvenirs and public toilets.

A landscaped car park and picnic site is set amongst the trees of a former orchard, close to the bridge at Maunsel Lock, for those wishing to visit this attractive stretch of canal.








Immediately prior to Higher Lock is the Somerset Boat Centre and just after Higher Lock is a winding hole.



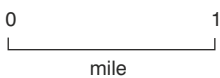
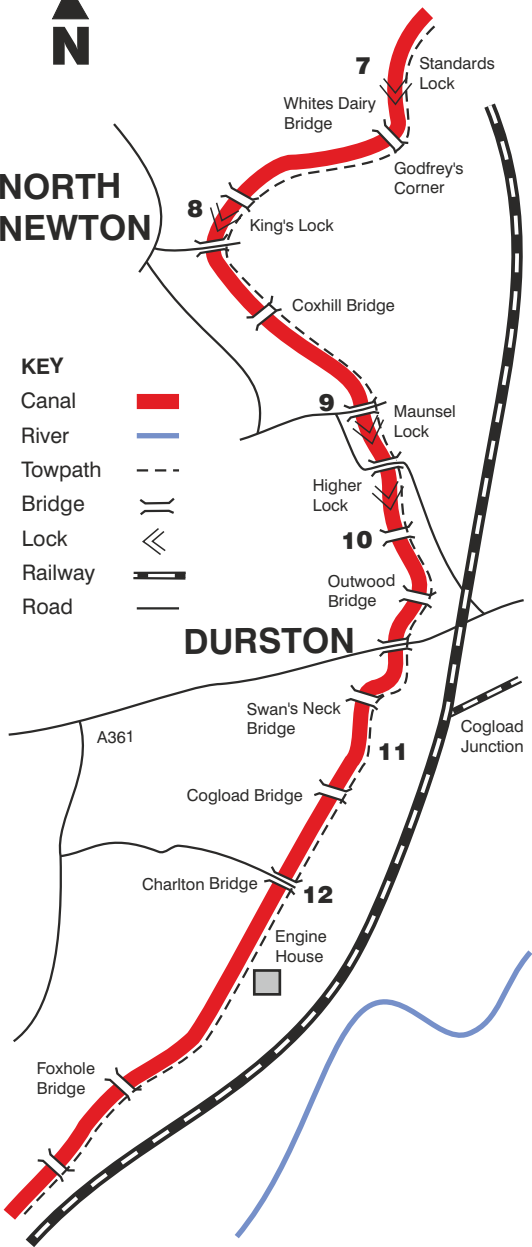


**NORTH
NEWTON**

KEY

- Canal 
- River 
- Towpath 
- Bridge 
- Lock 
- Railway 
- Road 

DURSTON



10. Durston

A plaque on the plinth by the swing bridge at Outwood records the official opening of the bridge in July 1993. At this point, the canal passes close to the location of the long closed Durston station, once an important junction where the railway to Langport and Yeovil left the main line. Beyond the former canal maintenance yard and the cutting under the A361 road bridge, the canal again emerges into open countryside.

11. Cogload Junction

After the next bridge at Swan's Neck, the canal runs close to the main railway lines. The line from Bristol is carried over the direct Taunton-Paddington route by means of a 1930s steel girder bridge.

12. Charlton Engine House

Having passed two more bridges at Cogload and Charlton, the canal passes the former Charlton Engine House. It was built in 1826 to pump water from the River Tone (just 300 yards away) into the canal at a point below the highest lock, in order to provide an additional supply of water. It housed two pumps, powered by a steam-operated beam engine, which was supplied with coal by barge. When working at full capacity, the pumps could raise 120,000 gallons of water per hour and used almost four tons of coal per day. In later years, when the canal fell into disuse, the pumps supplied canal water for pick-up troughs laid between the railway tracks to replenish water for steam locomotives on their journeys to and from the South West. There is a winding hole on the offside of the canal.

13. Creech St. Michael

The canal passes close to the older part of the village, crossing under the main street by means of a brick bridge. A short detour to the south leads to the interesting church of St Michael, which dates in part from the 13th century. A further walk along the road and over the River Tone bridges brings a fine view of the embankment and aqueduct which carried the Chard Canal over the river and flood plain.

14. Chard Canal

The junction between the Chard and Bridgwater & Taunton Canals was south west of Creech St Michael, near where the canal narrows and there is another

concrete pillbox, a reminder of the importance attached to the canal as a defence line in the Second World War. The Chard Canal opened in 1842 but was closed in 1868, making it one of the country's shortest-lived canals. No trace remains of the stop lock or lock-keeper's cottage, but, unusually, the pillbox was built inside what was believed to have been the lock keeper's cottage. The junction area has been improved by Canal & River Trust in recent years and now contains a number of picnic tables on a grassed area and a dipping pond for children to use. The line of the Chard Canal can be seen heading southwards on an embankment supported by buttressed stone walls.

15. Bathpool

Continuing through pleasant farmland, the peace of the canal is interrupted by the sound of traffic over the M5 motorway bridge. Alongside the next brick bridge, there is the attractive Hyde Farm. After passing under the A38 road bridge at Bathpool, the last swing bridge before Taunton is found. There is a car park and picnic site adjacent to the Canal & River Trust office and maintenance yard with Bathpool Marina nearby.

16. Firepool Lock

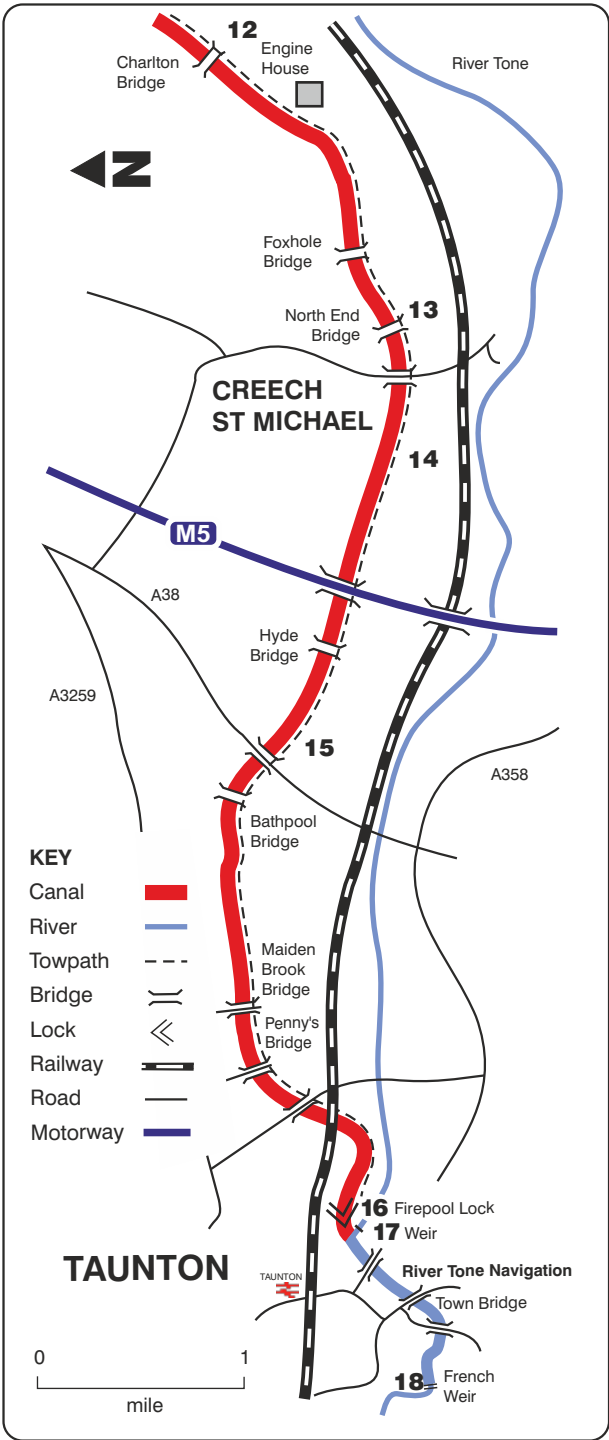
Leaving Bathpool behind, the canal reaches the outskirts of Taunton at Maidenbrook bridge, rebuilt in the early 1990s in a style which is in keeping with the canal. The canal continues along a surprisingly tranquil route into Taunton.

It bears sharp left under a brick bridge and immediately enters the attractive Firepool Lock, which raises it to join the River Tone Navigation.

Note the extra pair of flood gates, designed to stop canal water draining away, when the river is low. Below the lock was a connection to the Grand Western Canal and above the lock a short channel leads to the River Tone Navigation.

17. Limekilns and Canal Junction

From Firepool Lock, a bridge over the River Tone Navigation leads along the river's far bank into Taunton town centre. But, before leaving Firepool Lock, take a look at the nearby tall water tower. This is supported on a brick structure which itself is built on two earlier stone limekilns. The necessary limestone and coal were both carried here by canal boat. The water tower was built to provide the GWR steam engines with water, pumped



from the canal. Immediately next to the canal bridge is the site of the former junction with the Grand Western Canal. This was opened from Taunton to Tiverton in 1838, but the length of the canal in Somerset was closed in 1867.

18. The River Tone Navigation

The River Tone Navigation continues upstream for some 0.8 miles through the centre of Taunton to French Weir. The river through Taunton was widened and straightened in the 1960s following severe flooding in the town. Subsequently, the statutory, but not common law, right of navigation on the River Tone from below Firepool Weir to the River Parrett at Stanmoor was formally extinguished.

For a short distance upstream there are paths on both sides of the river, as it passes the former Cattle Market, the Brewhouse Theatre, re-opened in 2014 and the ground of the long-established and well-renowned Somerset County Cricket Club, just beyond which a pontoon is available for visiting boats.

Town Bridge then crosses the river – in normal conditions there is just sufficient headroom for boats to pass underneath, so care must be taken.

Approaching French Weir the “Parliamentary Cut” originally locked up from the river and headed in a north-westerly direction to Frieze Hill, where it joined the Grand Western Canal. This is immediately followed by French Weir Park, a popular local recreation ground and the venue for the highly successful IWA trailboat rally held in 1992 to celebrate the reopening to navigation of a short section of the Bridgwater & Taunton Canal and the River Tone Navigation.

The river here is a popular fishing location. Shoals in the centre of the river prevent boats from reaching the weir itself.

VOLUNTEER WORK PARTIES

The Inland Waterways Association currently manages a number of regular group volunteer work parties on the canal.

To join IWA volunteers email:

somersetwaterwaysvolunteers@gmail.com or visit

IWA Somerset Waterways Volunteers on Facebook:

https://www.facebook.com/groups/594586037632756/?tn-str=*F

BRIEF HISTORY OF THE CANAL

The Bridgwater & Taunton Canal was opened between Taunton and Huntworth in 1827 and extended to join the new Docks at Bridgwater in 1841, making its total length 14 miles. This extension boosted trade on the canal which, in its heyday, comprised mainly coal, timber and limestone. The goods were carried in barges and in small tub-boats, these latter being able to use the connecting Chard and Grand Western Canals to reach the towns of Ilminster, Chard, Wellington and Tiverton.

However, it was not long before the railway began to compete. The canal was bought by the Great Western Railway in 1867 and its trade gradually declined, the last commercial barge operating in 1907. The canal remained in use as a land drainage and water supply channel, but its swing bridges were immobilised in the Second World War as a defence precaution.

The Inland Waterways Association (IWA) joined in a campaign to get the canal restored and the waterway's value for many kinds of recreation has since been recognised. The canal was restored by British Waterways (now Canal & River Trust), Somerset County Council, Taunton Deane Borough Council and Sedgemoor District Council, with IWA support. It was officially re-opened in June 1994.

BOAT HIRE

Somerset Boat Centre is situated on the side of the canal at Higher Lock, Maunsel and benefits from a quiet countryside setting. A family run business which is passionate about the inland waterways, it offers a range of boats for hire including kayaks, canoes, motor boats and a skippered narrow boat. There is a commitment to providing access to all, which is demonstrated by a fully operational wheelchair accessible boat and a belief in improving standards, being a recognised RYA training centre and having full accreditation by British Canoeing.

See:

www.somersetboatcentre.co.uk
or tel: 07508 959996.

FURTHER READING

The Canals of South West England (*Charles Hadfield*)
By Waterway to Taunton (*Tony Haskell*)
Bridgwater Docks & The River Parrett (*Brian Murless*)

REFRESHMENTS

Bridgwater: many pubs and cafes

Huntworth: The Boat & Anchor
Tel: 01278 662473

North Newton: The Harvest Moon
Tel: 01278 664324

Maunsel Lock: Maunsel Lock Tea Rooms
Tel: 01278 238220

Higher Lock: The Lock Inn at Somerset Boat Centre
Tel: 07508 959996

Creech St Michael: The Bell Inn
Tel: 07927 259015

Bathpool: The New Mill
Tel: 01823 335258

Taunton: many pubs and cafes

TOURIST INFORMATION

Kings Square, Bridgwater TA6 3AR

Tel: 01278 427692

Fore Street, Taunton TA1 1JD

Tel: 01823 340470

Published by the

INLAND WATERWAYS ASSOCIATION © 2024

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 or e-mail iwa@waterways.org.uk



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