

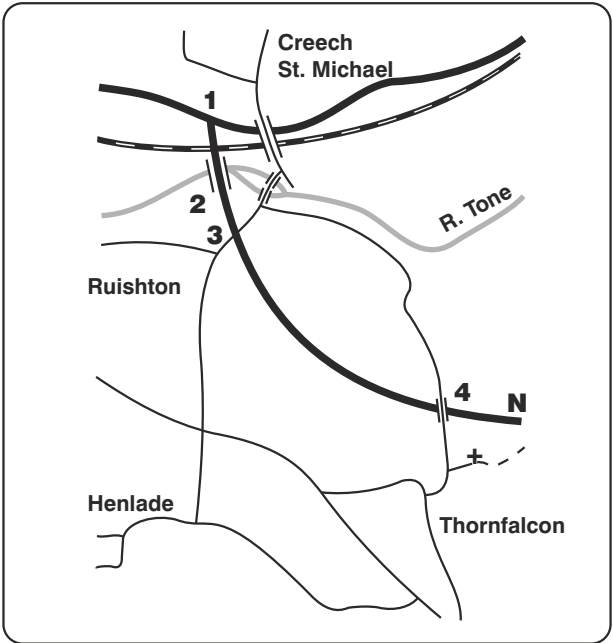
The Chard Canal

Selected Highlights



1. Junction with the Bridgwater and Taunton Canal

A short walk westwards along the Bridgwater & Taunton Canal towpath, from the road bridge in Creech St Michael, lies the former junction with the Chard Canal. No trace remains of the stop lock, but the Second World War pillbox was probably built inside the former lock keeper's cottage. The junction area contains picnic tables and a short in-water section of the Chard Canal. Southwards, buttressed stone walls support the embankment that carried the canal towards the River Tone.



2. River Tone Aqueduct

From the Ruishton road, take the footpath (which is unmarked but leaves the road at the field gate) along the south bank of the newer cut of the River Tone towards a ruined bridge. This is the aqueduct which carried the canal over the River Tone. Although it has lost its parapet, it is an impressive three-arch structure, on sturdy stone piers.

3. Flood Plain Embankment

Continuing southwards, the canal crosses the river's flood plain by means of a lengthy embankment, pierced at intervals by arches to allow the passage of flood water.

Close to the Ruishton road, there is a stone arched culvert; the aqueduct over the road has been lost but traces of its abutments can be seen. The wooded canal embankment extends southwards.

4. Thornfalcon Bridge

Take the Thornfalcon road (from the T-junction close to the River Tone), past a turning to Ham. About 1½ miles beyond this (before reaching Thornfalcon itself) the road crosses the canal by a stone bridge which retains its parapet.

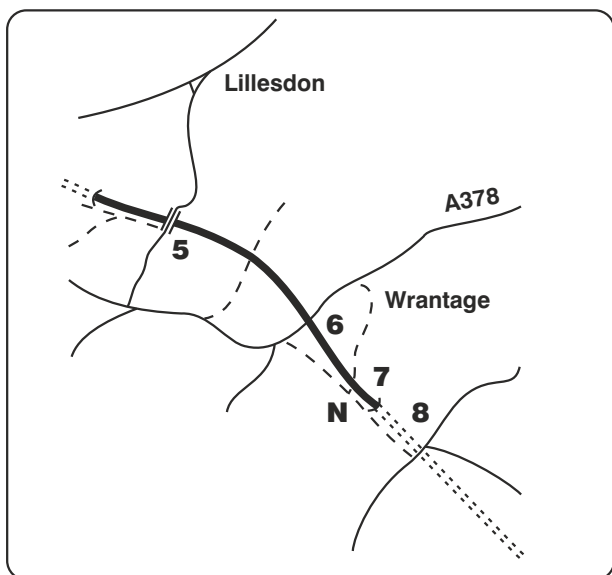
The shallow cutting on the north side is clearly visible, though overgrown; on the south side, it has been filled in. Nearby was the first of the canal's inclined planes, which raised boats by a vertical height of 28 feet.

By taking the trackway eastwards from the church, a stretch of the canal can be seen, its line marked by a strip of woodland.

5. Lillesdon Bridge

The stretch of canal which includes the 314 yards long Lillesdon Tunnel is not publicly accessible.

The canal is next reached at what is probably the best-preserved Chard Canal bridge, which carries the minor road from the A378 via Lillesdon towards North Curry. It retains its parapets and is built of stone; the canal bed and towpath can clearly be seen on its north side.



6. Wrantage Aqueduct and Embankment

The A378 road meets the canal just west of the Canal Inn. Although the aqueduct itself has been lost, the embankment to either side survives, as does the stone-faced abutment on the south side. The farm buildings make use of the convenient embankment. By taking the trackway (which is often particularly muddy) on the south side of the road, you can walk southwards and parallel to the embankment, which can be clearly seen, surmounted by a line of pollarded willows.

7. Wrantage Incline

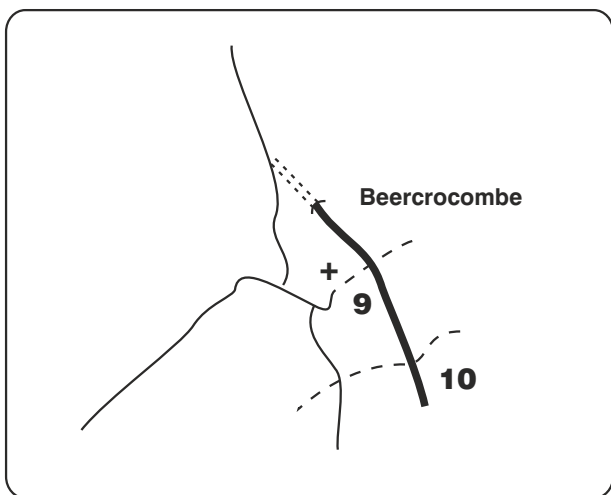
Shortly before reaching a gate and stile, a path branches off north-eastwards via another stile. After crossing a stream, this path reaches the summit of the inclined plane. At its foot lay a canal basin that may just be made out. This was the smallest of the canal's inclines, with a rise of just 27½ft. It was double-tracked, carrying the boats in water-filled caissons.

8. Crimson Hill Tunnel

Returning to the track and crossing over the stile by the gate, the track rises alongside a stretch of the canal which has been partially cleared of undergrowth and leads to the mouth of the Crimson Hill Tunnel.

Its stone northern portal is largely intact and can be seen through the undergrowth, down in the cutting.

One of Britain's longer canal tunnels, it had a length of 1,800 yards and was built in 1834-1839. It is stone lined, with drainage holes in the sides and iron shackles in the roof by which boats could be hauled through. The tunnel is blocked towards its southern end.



9. Beercrocombe Church

From Wrantage, it is a circuitous route along minor roads to Beercrocombe. Here, the canal passes east of the church, from which it can be reached by the footpath which leads from the east side of the church yard.

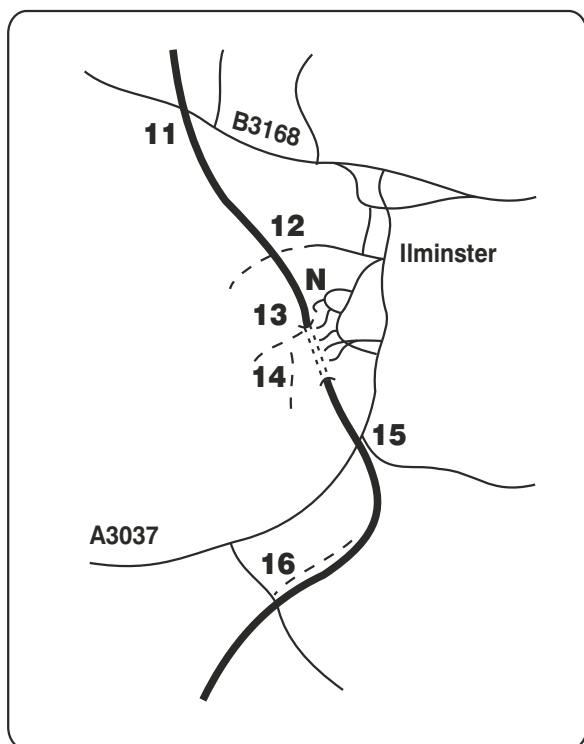
Lying in a cutting, the bed of the canal is heavily overgrown but still contains some water.

10. Beer Mill Farm

From the road south of the church, the line of the canal is clearly marked by a strip of trees across the countryside. Its course can be reached by the track leading to Beer Mill Farm, by which point the canal has risen on to an embankment; the stone facing remains on the south side. Further south, the canal line is covered by the runways of RNAS Merryfield.

11. Minsterstone

Roadworks have obliterated the line of the canal at the B3168 crossing and the former Minsterstone Works which was aligned to the canal. The roundabout covers the site of the bridge which carried the B3168 over the canal. Just to the north of the area covered by the map, an old canal bridge can be found at the end of Green Lane on footpath CH32/20.



12. Ilminster Wharf

Canal Way is a reminder of the canal's importance to Ilminster and, skirting the western edge of the Recreation Ground, a stretch of the canal is in water. It is a popular spot and, at its southern end, brickwork has been uncovered which locates the bottom of Ilminster inclined plane.

13. Ilminster Incline

Ilminster's inclined plane lies behind the houses on the west side of the road named The Incline. Its line can still be seen and is a popular path to the top of the hill. With a height of 82½ft and gradient of 1 in 6, it raised boats up the slopes of Herne Hill. It was double-tracked, with counterbalanced caissons.

14. Ilminster Canal

At the top of the incline, the canal immediately entered a tunnel but, apart from a few courses of bricks at its northern portal, no trace of it now remains. Its length was 300 yards. The tunnel was not part of the original canal plan but it was introduced to reduce the amount of work needed to form the line between the incline and Chard.

15. Dowlish Ford Cottages

The road from Ilminster towards Chard crosses the line of the canal between the turning for Kingstone and the trading estate. The row of cottages on the east side of the road stands on the bed of the canal, which then curves south-westwards.

16. Old Canal Nature Reserve

A cutting and embankment are located in a former nature reserve opposite Newhouse Farm, but there is now no public access. Further south, using footpath CH17/5 from Bere Mills Lane to Knowle Green you can cross a dry section of canal, then re-cross it following Knowle Lane westwards to the old railway line.

17. Chard Reservoir

The beautiful Chard Reservoir stands amid attractive woodland alongside the Chard-Chaffcombe road. To the east of a works depot, the road runs along the reservoir's dam. On the lake side, there are two sluices; on the north side, next to the depot, is the overflow spillway to carry surplus water away. First filled in 1842, the reservoir was the canal's main source of water.








The other end of the reservoir can be reached via Touches Lane (on the south side of Chaffcombe Road). The reservoir and adjoining land are owned by Somerset Council as a nature reserve and country park. Footpaths lead from this lane to the water's edge.

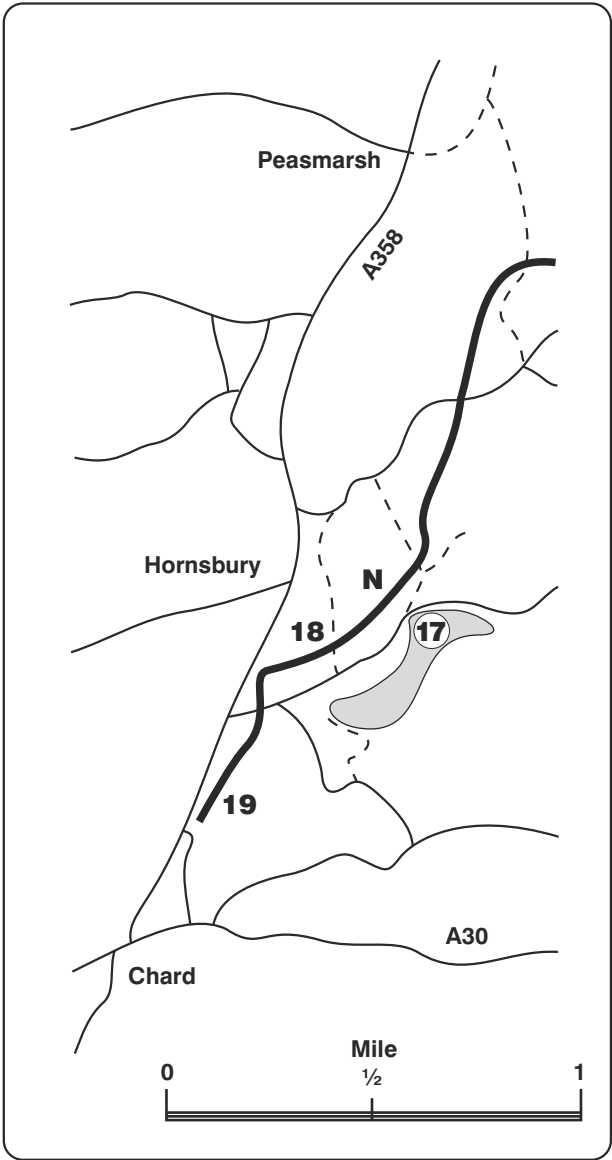
18. Black Bench Drove

This lane leaves the north side of Chaffcombe Road immediately on the Chard side of the bridge over the disused railway. A ditch and water on the east side mark the line of the canal, leading towards the Chard Common Incline. This had a height of 86ft but, unlike the others, it was single-track and powered by a water turbine. On the west side of the track, the canal line is marked only by rough, marshy vegetation.

19. Chard Basin

Little evidence of the canal basin remains. The former Grade II listed warehouses were demolished to make way for a DIY store.

KEY			
Canal		River	
Bridge		Incline	N (Remains of)
Tunnel	 (Or site of)	Road	
Footpath		Railway	



HISTORY

Opened in 1842, the Chard Canal has the distinction of being one of the country's last main line canals to be built. But its closure just 26 years later, in 1868, also makes it one of the shortest-lived waterways.

Between Two Channels

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. A number of these might have passed through Chard, but none came to fruition. It was the opening of the Bridgwater & Taunton Canal in 1827 which provided renewed impetus for attempts to extend navigation to Chard, then a growing town of woollen and lace mills.

A survey of the line was carried out by James Green and the necessary Act of Parliament was passed in 1834. Raising capital for the project proved to be difficult, but construction started in 1835. The engineer appointed to oversee construction was Sydney Hall.

The Lillesdon and Crimson Hill tunnels were completed by 1839 and the canal was formally opened as far south as Ilminster in May 1841. A year later, it was opened through to the basin at Chard. It had cost some £140,000 to construct, compared with the original estimate of £57,000.

Overtaken by the Railway

The canal, in its short heyday, typically carried some 25,000 tons of goods each year, nearly all towards Chard. By far the most important cargo was coal which was distributed to places as far away as Lyme Regis, Sidmouth and Bridport. But, because the canal's construction came so late, it was soon threatened by railways. The Bristol & Exeter Railway had reached Taunton in 1842 and, in 1866, completed its line to Chard. Fearing expansion of the London & South Western Railway, it bought the canal in 1867 and closed it in 1868.

The purchase price was just £5,945. However, many of the canal's interesting remains still survive.

THE CANAL'S INCLINED PLANES

The Chard Canal covered a distance of 13½ miles between Creech St Michael and Chard. On its way, it had to cross three ranges of hills and rise some 230 feet by means of one lock and four inclined planes.

Like many other West Country canals, it was designed for small tub boats, measuring 26ft by 6ft 4in. Also, typically of the engineer James Green, it avoided the use of conventional locks to overcome gradients. Instead, inclined planes were used: these had the advantages of being cheaper to construct and they used less water.

Four inclined planes were built: Thornfalcon, Wrantage, Ilminster and Chard Common, their vertical heights ranging from 27½ft to 86ft. James Green was not appointed as the canal company's engineer; it is thought that Sir William Cubitt was responsible for the inclines' design.

The first three were all double-track; on each parallel track ran a 28½ft by 6ft 9in caisson (a water-filled tank which held one boat) with six wheels. The two caissons were linked by a chain so that they were counterbalanced and moved by the simple means of adding extra water to the upper caisson, increasing its weight and causing it to descend.

Rare Distinctions

Various types of plane had been built successfully in Europe since the 1780s, but the Chard Canal was able to boast the world's first working, caisson-carrying planes.

One of the Chard Canal inclines, though, followed the older pattern of carrying boats "dry", on a wheeled cradle. This incline, at Chard Common, also had only a single track - the only such plane built in Britain. As a result, the motive power to raise or lower the cradle had to be provided by means of a water turbine, which was situated at the foot of the incline.

Some of the inclines are clearly visible today, but their workings have long since disappeared (the machinery was sold in 1869).

FURTHER READING

The Canals of South West England - *Charles Hadfield*
Lost Canals and Waterways of Britain - *Ronald Russell*
Lost Navigation: The Chard Canal - *Gerry Hollington*
in 'Canal & Riverboat', February 1987
Canal Inclines and Lifts - *David Tew*
World Canals - *Charles Hadfield*

TOURIST INFORMATION

The Guildhall, Fore Street, Chard TA20 1PP
Tel: 01460 239567
East Street, Ilminster TA19 0AJ
Tel: 01460 54973
Fore Street, Taunton TA1 1JD
Tel: 01823 340470

REFRESHMENTS

Ashill - Flying Fish. Tel: 01823 480467
Chard - Many pubs and cafes
Creech St Michael - Bell Inn. Tel: 07927 259015
Curry Mallet - Bell Inn. Tel: 01823 802733
Ilminster - Many pubs and cafes
Wrantage - Canal Inn. Tel: 01823 480210

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



Although great care has been taken in preparing this leaflet, no responsibility can be accepted for any errors or their consequences.