

Information pack

Bridgwater and Taunton Canal



Did you know that
Bridgwater used to be
one of the largest ports
in Britain?
Find out more...

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The West Quay at Bridgwater was lined with sailing ships unloading cargoes during the 19th century.

When was Bridgwater a busy port?

Bridgwater has been a port since at least 1348. It was once Britain's fifth largest port. In the 15th century, locally produced woollen cloth was exported to France while fine wines were imported from Bordeaux.

By the 1800s, sailing ships lined the quaysides near Town Bridge and unloaded their cargoes of timber, grain and hides onto small 'lighters' which travelled upstream as far as Langport, Ilminster and Taunton.

What problems did the ships face?

Boats using the River Parrett experienced major problems with the tide and the narrow river. Vessels could only navigate the river at high tide and often got stuck on the mudbanks.

Why was the canal built?

The 23 km (14.5 mile) canal was opened in 1827 to provide a permanent navigable channel between Bridgwater and Taunton.





The floating harbour at Bridgwater Docks enabled ships to load or unload at any stage of the tide.

Why was the canal extended?

The canal originally linked the River Tone at Taunton to the River Parrett near Somerset Bridge, 2 km (one mile) south of Bridgwater.

In 1841 the canal was extended to the newly constructed Bridgwater Docks by digging a deep cutting to the west of the town centre. The docks overcame the problems of unloading ships in the tidal River Parrett.

A coast to coast routeway?

The Bridgwater and Taunton Canal was planned as part of a larger network of canals and rivers linking the Bristol Channel to the south coast, avoiding the hazards facing shipping off the Cornish coast.

New links to a thriving port

A direct route to the south coast became a reality when the Grand Western Canal was built in 1838 linking Taunton with Tiverton and the River Exe. In 1842 the Chard Canal was opened, linking the Bridgwater and Taunton Canal with the River Axe and the south coast at Seaton.



Water from the River Tone enters the canal at Firepool Lock, Taunton. It is pumped to Durlough Reservoir.

The decline of the canal and Bridgwater Docks

During the 19th century, canals faced increasing competition from the railways. In 1866, the canal was sold to the Bristol and Exeter Railway Company and control eventually passed to the Great Western Railway.

As seagoing ships increased in size during the 20th century, Bridgwater Docks went into a steady decline. The docks were finally closed in 1971.

Dad's Army on the defensive?

During the Second World War, the Bridgwater and Taunton Canal, the Chard Canal and the River Axe became a major defensive line in the event of an invasion by Hitler's forces. All the iron bridges were melted down for the war effort and replaced by wooden bridges which could easily be destroyed if the enemy invaded. Pillboxes and tank traps were also built.

A new water supply for Bridgwater

In 1962 the canal began to be used to supply drinking water during dry summer months. Water from the canal is pumped into Durlough Reservoir.



Canoes, kayaks and trail boats can be launched from the new facilities alongside the YMCA in Bridgwater.

Re-development of the canal for recreation

The canal was re-opened for leisure craft in 1989 and the docks have recently been refurbished as a marina. The old canal company warehouse has been converted into a pub and restaurant, and the Admiral's Quay housing development has been built on the opposite side of the dock.

Making waves on the canal

The canal is now a popular destination for boaters enjoying the tranquil surroundings on a narrowboat holiday; and new facilities at the YMCA in Bridgwater have enabled young people to launch canoes and kayaks.

Space walking along the canal towpath

The canal also plays host to the Somerset Space Walk - a scale model of the solar system that runs the length of the canal. The sun (and some of its closest planets) are situated at Maunsel Lock, while more distant planets are placed a realistic distance away. Pluto, for example, can be found on the towpath beside Bridgwater's YMCA - 9.5km (6 miles) away.