

The Oakham Canal

The Oakham Canal was opened in 1802. Connecting with the Melton Mowbray Navigation, and in turn to the Grand Union Canal, the canal allowed coal to be transported to Oakham from the Midlands, and agricultural products to be sent in return. The canal suffered greatly from a lack of water, especially in the summer months. When the canal company proprietors learned of the planned Syston to Peterborough railway, they were quick to enter into discussions with the Midland Railway Company, to whom the canal was eventually sold in 1847. All of the original locks and bridges were removed, and land that was not used by the railway company was sold or reverted back to private ownership.

Despite the canal being disused, and in the hands of multiple private owners for almost 170 years, much of it remains visible in the landscape. Sadly, only a small section of canal between Oakham and Ashwell retains a public footpath, although the canal can be seen in a number of other locations.

The Melton and Oakham Waterways Society (MOWS)

MOWS was formed in 1997. MOWS objectives are to maximise the social, economic, environmental and leisure opportunities from the restoration of the Melton Mowbray Navigation and the preservation of the Oakham Canal.

MOWS supports many interests, including conservation, angling, walking, cycling, boating and local history.

MOWS is actively working to open up more access to the Oakham Canal, and to conserve it for the benefit of the wider community.

Come and join us!



Visit our website at www.meltonwaterways.org.uk and download a membership application form.

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The Melton and Oakham Waterways Society



Registered charity number 1078752



The Oakham Canal Trail

A short 5 mile walk exploring the history of the canal between Oakham and Ashwell



About the walk

The Oakham Canal Trail follows the route of the Oakham Canal for approximately 2½ miles to the north of Oakham. You should start your walk at the car park on Church Street, Oakham. A refreshment stop is suggested at Oakham Enterprise Park, before re-tracing your steps to Oakham. The walk will take between 2½ and 3 hours to complete.

The walk uses public footpaths and minor roads. Public footpaths can be very muddy in winter and after heavy rain. They are not suitable for wheelchairs or pushchairs.



1 Before you begin, a bit of history

Before the canal age, goods were generally moved around the country by river or pack horse train.

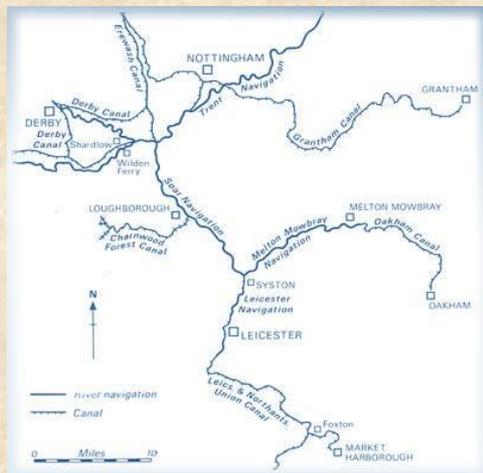
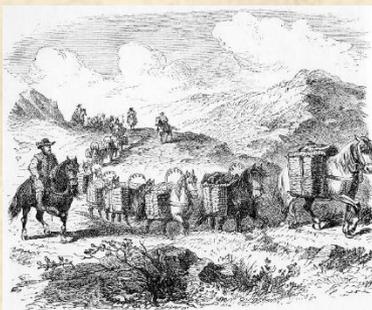
With the coming of the Industrial Revolution, there was a need to move coal to factories and finished goods to the growing towns and cities.

When the Duke of Bridgewater opened his canal between Worsley and Manchester in 1761, 'canal mania' began.

The Duke of Bridgewater was not the first canal builder. The Romans built many canals in Britain, and the Stamford Canal, making the river Welland navigable, was opened in 1670!

Canals were privately financed and required an Act of Parliament for their creation. They also needed the support of powerful landowners whose land has to be acquired for their construction.

The map on the right shows how the Oakham Canal connected to the Melton Mowbray Navigation and on to the wider canal network.



2 Turn to face All Saints Church

All Saints Church in front of you was mentioned in the Domesday Book of 1086. The first church was probably wooden. The first stone church was built in the 13th century, rebuilt in the 14th century, and modified in the 15th century. The church was restored in 1857–58 by Sir George Gilbert Scott. The church is a Grade I listed building.



3 Cross Church Street and turn Left. At the gap in the wall on your right, turn into Cutts Close park

To the right of the entrance to Cutts Close is the original stone Oakham School building, founded in 1584 by Archdeacon Robert Johnson. Oakham School now occupies a large part of the town.

Cutts Close was laid out in Victorian times as a formal park. It was once the outer bailey of Oakham Castle and is of Anglo Saxon origin.



4 Continue on the footpath in front of you, pausing next to the children's playground

The deep depressions in Cutts Close were once a series of fish ponds. Only the great hall of the Norman castle is still standing, surrounded by steep earthworks marking the inner bailey. The hall was built for Walkelin de Ferrers between 1180–90 and is recognised as one of the finest examples of Norman domestic architecture in England. It is the earliest surviving aisled stone hall built in the country, and has been a law court for 800 years. The hall contains over 200 horseshoes given as forfeits to the Lord of the Manor by peers of the realm and royalty. This ancient custom is said to date back to the 12th century.

Cutts Close was once proposed as the location of the terminus of the Oakham Canal. When it was first proposed in 1785, the intention was for it to continue to Stamford.



5 Continue on the foot path in front of you, then take the footpath diagonally off to your left. Pause for a while to look at the castle behind you and to the right and also to read some facts about the canal...

- The Oakham canal runs between Melton Mowbray and Oakham via Stapleford, Teigh / Edmondthorpe, Market Overton, and Ashwell.
- The canal was first surveyed in 1785 by William Jessop, who delegated the work to Robert Whitworth.
- The Oakham Canal Act was not actually passed until 1793.
- The Act allowed £56,000 to be raised from 560 £100 shares.
- 545 shares were issued.
- Many shareholders were local landowners.
- Shares were “called up” in £5 units as construction progressed.
- The canal took 8 years to build (by hand) by up to 120 men.
- The canal opened in stages, and was fully opened on 16th Dec 1802.
- The Oakham end of the canal took 6 months to fill with water - a bad sign and a subject we shall also return to later.
- The total cost of the canal is thought to be £68,000, excluding Oakham Wharf. That’s approximately £100m in today’s money!
- The final canal was 15½ miles long.
- The canal falls from Oakham to Melton Mowbray from 110m - 75m (c350-250’) - approx. 6’ per lock.
- 19 broad locks were installed to maintain the water level. The first lock after leaving Oakham is not reached until Edmondthorpe, almost half way to Melton Mowbray.
- A Bill to try to extend the canal to Stamford was again proposed in 1809 but was not passed.

6 Continue on the path, stopping at the junction of Station Road and Burley Road

Until recently, this stone building in front of you was the Odd House public house. The building is contemporary with the canal operation and the stables can be seen to the rear. The building is now owned by Oakham School.



7 Cross Station Road, then turn right and immediately left onto Ashwell Road. Stop just before the zebra crossing

The two brick semi-detached houses on your left were originally built for employees of the Oakham canal company.

It is possible that a Mr Charles Judd lived here. He once worked the weighing machine at Oakham but absconded with £2 7s 6d!

8 Continue on Ashwell Road until the stone entrance to Oakham School is reached on your left

Oakham School occupies all of the site of the former Oakham canal wharf.

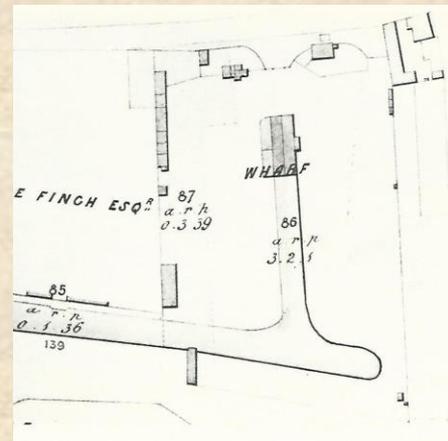
The Queen Elizabeth Theatre in front of you is the original wharf building where goods were once unloaded. A large stone dated ‘1840’ was removed from the building during renovation works showing that it was a late addition to the wharf complex. Originally there was no wharf building here, with goods unloaded directly onto the canal banks.

The entrance you are standing in is also original. It is difficult to imagine the once busy scene when almost all heavy goods arriving at, or leaving, Oakham must have passed on carts or wagons through this entrance.

The main cargos to Oakham were coal, stone and wood. Agricultural produce was sent in reverse. Coal enabled the making of bricks and Oakham’s population almost doubled between 1801 (1,630) and 1841 (2,726). In the 1840’s around 25,000 tons of cargo was transported per annum.

This plan of 1849, clearly shows the two canal company cottages, the curved entrance to the wharf, and the main wharf building (now the theatre) with the distinctive curved corner.

You can also see the former Odd House public house.



Please do not enter Oakham School grounds!

9

Continue further on Ashwell Road, passing the shops on your left, until you reach No. 44

This building (altered since the picture was taken) was once The Boat Inn. It was one of a pair, the other being at the former canal basin in Melton Mowbray.



The inn was located outside the wharf complex.

A Mr John Hinman was the Wharfinger at Oakham and was paid £50 per year in 1838. He was dismissed by the canal company in the same year. When he died in July 1840 he was described as being “of the Boat public house”.

According to census records, the building was converted to a private house sometime between 1881 and 1891.

10

Re-trace your steps back along Ashwell Road towards Oakham, turning right at the Odd House onto Station Road. Continue on Station Road, turning right onto Kilburn Road

Some of the buildings at the junction of Kilburn Road and Station Road are contemporary with the canal operation.

11

Continue on Kilburn Road, stopping at the railings just beyond Oakham School swimming pool

The line of trees that can be seen across the playing fields mark the line of the canal.

A small section of canal remains in water in the grounds of Oakham School and is preserved as a water garden.

12

Continue on Kilburn Road, stopping just prior to the entrance to the allotments, to learn about some of the problems during construction of the Oakham Canal...

Construction of the Oakham canal was not without its problems.

In 1795 Christopher Staveley Jnr (the canal company engineer) was ousted by the canal company. He was replaced in 1797 by Mr William Dunn of Sheffield. As far as we can tell, Mr Dunn had no previous canal building experience.

In 1798 the canal shares were fully called up (20 calls of £5) but the canal was unfinished. Workers were laid off. Attempts are made to raise additional funds but without success.

In 1800 the canal company applied for a further Act. The new Act allowed £30,000 to be raised from the existing shareholders (but no more than £30 each). Those that did not pay would forfeit their shares - 18 did so.

13

Continue on Kilburn Road, passing the entrance to the allotments on your right. Take the footpath to your right, turn immediately right, then right again into the modern housing estate. This is Gilmore Close. Continue on Gilmore Close, turning left at the end onto Schofield Road. Continue on Schofield Road, turning right into Griffiths Close. At the end of the close you will see a footpath to the right of the house in front of you. Proceed along the footpath, pausing at the dip at the bottom

To your left is the southernmost section of surviving canal. The canal bed is owned by Rutland County Council. It marks the start of a MOWS proposed “Green Corridor” linking Oakham to the site of Rocks by Rail, close to the site of the original Cottesmore Wharf.

To your right, the line of the canal was meant to be preserved when the housing estate was built. Sadly, this did not happen, and the open space denoting the original course tapers to a dead end.

14

Turn left up the bank and onto the former canal towpath

This section of canal is a haven for water birds, and children can be regularly seen feeding the ducks. The water is often shallow here and of poor quality.

15 Continue on the former canal towpath until you reach the A606 Oakham Bypass (Burley Park Way). Cross the road carefully. In front of you, you will see an entrance to the field with a well defined path through the woods to the right of the entrance. Pause at the entrance to the woods

You will notice that you now have the canal remains on your right. Originally the towpath was on the opposite bank.

The canal here was once in the grounds of Springfield House where, before the First World War, Lord Londonderry created a water garden complete with a punt. His successor was unable to keep up the maintenance after the property was sold in the 1920s and it gradually fell into decay.

16 Continue on the footpath through the woods, taking care not to trip on the exposed tree roots. Eventually emerge at the edge of the field. Turn right, and continue along the edge of the field until you reach the field boundary

Sadly, the canal has been infilled here. The Oakham Angling Society have long term plans to create a stock pond here.

All the land around this part of Oakham was once owned by the Earl of Winchilsea. In order to gain his support for the Oakham Canal, a special provision was written into the Oakham Canal Act which gave him the right to 2d per ton on coal entering Oakham. This payment was still made by British Railways as successor to the canal company many years later.

17 Continue on the footpath, keeping the hedgerow on your right, until you reach the next field boundary

Ahead of you is one of two dams built after the canal closed to maintain the water level for fishing.

18 Continue on the footpath, up the slight rise, and across the wooden bridge ahead. Continue on the former canal towpath until the next dam is reached on your left

The fishing rights here have been leased to the Oakham Angling Society since its foundation. It is the best-preserved section of canal and is retained largely in its original condition. The Oakham Angling Society have carried out many improvements here over the last few years and have plans for further improvements.

19 Continue on the former canal towpath, exiting through the gate, and stopping at the Langham – Burley Road

A stone bridge known as Gate House Bridge once carried the Langham-Burley road across the canal. All that remains is part of the parapet on the south side.

The bridge has been replaced by a concrete culvert which runs underneath the road.

20 Cross the road carefully and descend the steps on the other side, proceeding through the gate to continue on the former canal towpath

This fishing rights to this section were once leased from the landowner by the Oakham Angling Society but for a number of years it has been neglected. The Society are in the process of re-acquiring it and hope to restore it to a similar condition as the previous section.

Kingfishers and water voles can often be see here.

21 Continue on the former canal, exiting through the gate and up the bank. TAKE EXTREME CARE emerging onto the main Ashwell Road. Turn left and walk a short distance on the grass verge

This was once the site of Turnover Bridge and was so named as the towpath transferred to the opposite bank at this location.

The original arched bridge and sharp bend in the road have long since been removed to improve road safety.

Near to this location an original milepost was found. It is now on display in the Rutland County Museum.

There is now no public access to the canal as it makes its way towards Cottesmore. The canal is partly in water and the line can be seen clearly on satellite images.

MOWS are hoping to be able to get more public access along the line of the canal in the future completing the Green Corridor between Oakham and Rocks by Rail.

22

Carefully cross Ashwell Road, turning right onto the footpath. Continue on the footpath until the Main Gate of Oakham Enterprise Park, formerly HMP Ashwell is reached. Go through the main entrance and turn right to find the Rutland Cake Company for a refreshment stop

Oakham Enterprise Park is the former HM Prison, Ashwell. The prison closed in March 2011. Previously the site was a Second World War US army base, home to part of the 82nd Airborne Division.

23

After your refreshment stop, leave Oakham Enterprise Park, turning right onto Ashwell Road. Carefully cross Ashwell Road and re-trace your steps by entering the public footpath next to the canal. Stop by the gate

As we discovered, the canal flows downhill from Oakham to Melton Mowbray. It is important that the level of water can be maintained in the canal, especially at the higher end.

There were plans to build a reservoir on the land to the west of the Ashwell road. This is shown on Robert Whitworth's original plans, although it was never built.

This seems to have been a major oversight since the summers of 1822, 1825 and 1826 saw the canal suffer from a lack of water and trade is halted.

Several schemes and improvements were proposed but problems persisted and the canal was shut for 5 months in 1844.

This turned out to be bad timing for in September 1844 the Syston to Peterborough railway was first proposed.

24

Continue on the former canal towpath, crossing once more the Langham to Burley Road and stopping at the small car park opposite to learn about the closure of the canal...

A public meeting was held by the Midland Counties Railway in Oakham on 23rd October 1844 to discuss the railway plans.

At the meeting, Lord Harborough, a major canal company shareholder and landowner at Stapleford Park gave notice that no railway surveyors would be permitted on his land. A second public meeting to discuss the plans was scheduled for 13th November 1844 but...

On 12th Nov:

Railway surveyors appear on Lord Harborough's land, using the towpath to avoid claims of trespass.

Mr Todd, (Lord Harborough's gamekeeper), stopped the assistant carrying the measuring chain and produced a pistol.

A fracas ensued - 9 railway surveyors are captured by Todd, put in a cart and taken to the nearest Justice of the Peace.

The JP is not in, so Todd upsets the cart and the men fall to the ground. Summonses are issued for assault at the Melton Police Court.

On 14th Nov:

The railway surveyors return once more, this time with navvies and several "prize fighters" from Nottingham.

Lord Harborough has mustered 30-40 men.

A stand-off ensues at Saxby Bridge, but heavy fighting soon breaks out.

A truce is eventually called and both parties agree not to take further action pending court hearings which have been set for 19th November.

But, on 16th Nov:

The railway party return once more – this time 100 strong.

Lord Harborough's men have barricaded the towpath.

The railway party attack the barricades and commence surveying.

A further fight breaks out and the railwaymen eventually retreat.

Leicester assizes eventually issue imprisonments and fines to both parties

All of this was to little avail because:

In January 1845, The Midland Counties Railway indicates it will consider purchasing the Oakham Canal.

In June 1845, the Act is passed for the Syston & Peterborough Railway.

In April 1846, agreement is reached to sell the canal company for £26,000 and 200 x £40 railway shares.

On 27th July 1846, an Act passed to ratify the sale.

On 29th October 1847, the sale is completed.

In March 1848, the railway opens for goods. This has a dramatic effect on the use of the Oakham Canal.

By 1849, land and assets not required are sold, dismantled or returned to riparian owners.

25

Proceed back through the gate, along the canal towpath, passing the dams on your right, and out into the open fields. This time walk the path directly ahead of you, following the field boundary, and keeping the open fields on your right until you reach the A606, Oakham Bypass

Finally we should consider if the Oakham Canal was a financial success:

Fully paid up shares cost £130 each.

The company struggled financially in the early years, and it wasn't until 1814, 12 years after the canal opened, that the company paid its first dividend of £2.

The total dividends paid per £130 share were £87 (over 50 years!).

Shareholders probably fared poorly in terms of a return on their investment, although boat operators, private wharf operators and landowners probably did rather better.

26

Cross the A606 Oakham Bypass and re-trace your steps along the former canal towpath, turning right into Griffiths Close and left onto Schofield Way. Follow the road round to the right at the end onto Gilmore Close, then take the footpath left and left again onto Kilburn Road. Finally, at the end of Kilburn Road, turn left onto Station Road, crossing at the zebra crossing, before turning right onto Church Street

We hope that this short walk has given you an insight into the history of the canal and its importance to the towns and villages through which it passes.

The Melton & Oakham Waterways Society is currently developing a long distance heritage trail between Melton Mowbray and Syston, following the route of the Melton Mowbray Navigation. For more details about this walk, please see our website at www.meltonwaterways.org.uk

