



A MELTON MARCH

Could the Melton Mowbray Navigation ever be restored? Explore the top 9 miles and decide for yourself, says **Andrew Denny**

In the years of Canal Mania at the end of the 18th century, every market town wanted its own canal or river navigation – and those with a natural river, and thus a water supply, had an obvious head start. Thus it was with Melton Mowbray, home of pork pies, Stilton Cheese and a prosperous merchant class.

The Melton Mowbray Navigation gained its Parliamentary Bill in 1791, was engineered by William Jessop, and opened fully in 1795. Construction was straightforward and, in most ways, conventional.

Fourteen miles long and with 12 locks, its signature feature was its double-arched, brick bridges. Coal was carried to Melton and a series of village wharves on the Wreake Valley, with a sideline in agricultural cargoes, building stone and slate.

The opening of the Oakham Canal in 1802 doubled trade, extending the line through a further 18 locks to the county town of Rutland. Both navigations were profitable until the 1840s, when the railways came. The Oakham Canal sold out early to the railway, closed in 1847 and mostly disappeared.

The Melton struggled on until 1877, when it too closed. But this was a river navigation, not a canal, and thus the route itself remained. It was not until the formation of the Melton & Oakham Waterways Society (MOWS), as late as 1997, that boaters' attention would turn to the River Wreake again.

For 20 years now, not a lot has been done about restoring what is a gorgeously natural route. But the Wreake Valley

Planning your walk



ESSENTIALS

Distance: About 9 miles in total (shorter options are available)

Terrain: Most footpaths cross fields and, as this is a river floodplain, it can be muddy or even waterlogged at times. Walking boots are strongly advised.

Starting point: The layby at Brooksby Bridge or churches along the route where, on non-service days, parking can be available. Brooksby Melton Agricultural College holds open days that permit visitors, although permission should be sought.

Public transport: Buses 128 and 5A run frequently along the Wreake Valley from Leicester to Melton Mowbray.

Much of this walk is part of the **Leicester Round**, a 100-mile circular walk around the county. It includes several miles of canal towpath, including Foxton Locks

and the Ashby Canal at Bosworth. See *The Leicestershire Round: A 100 Mile Circular Walk* (Leicestershire Footpath Association, ISBN: 978-1-5272-0622-9, £9.95).



FOOD & DRINK

The Blue Bell Inn, Hoby

An elegant Everards pub, open 365 days a year, 12noon to 11pm. Fine food and real ale menu, good parking, a skittle alley and even a petanque (boules) pitch.

The Bell Inn, Frisby

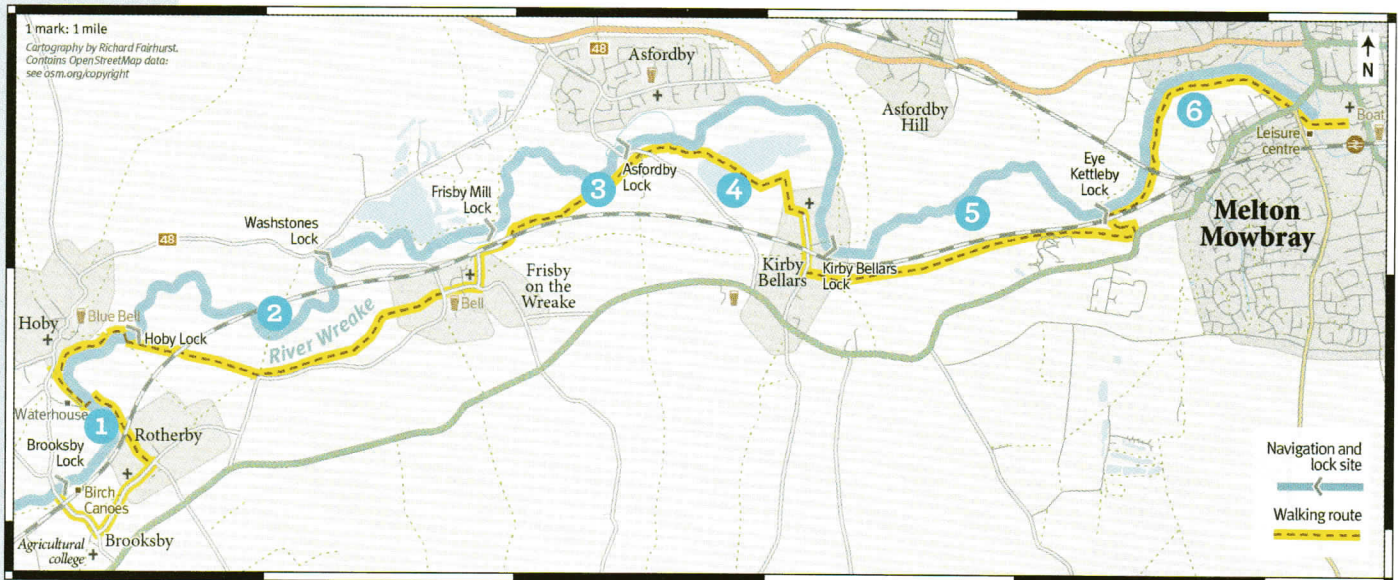
A community pub, closed for a while, but reopened a couple of years ago by a husband-and-wife team. Excellent home-cooked meals and real ales, but check opening times.

The Boat Inn, Melton Mowbray

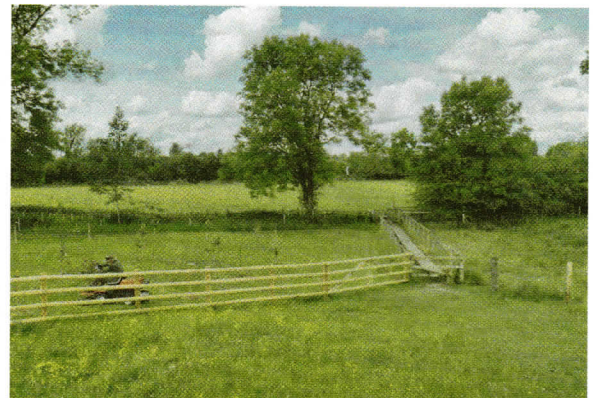
An unpretentious, modestly priced, traditional boozier. Of all the pubs on the route, this is one the working boaters of old might recognise.



As a river, the route of the Melton Navigation remains intact. One problem of any restoration would be the regular flooding the valley endures.



RIGHT: Brooksby Lock – still in good condition, but like all the locks, now has a weir. FAR RIGHT: The 'legacy wood' planted in 2018, with 80 native British tree species.



is still remarkably unspoiled, the route remains, and the dreams live on. Take our 9-mile walk – or just sections between the churches – to experience what the navigation could offer when (or if) it can finally be restored.

THE WALK

1. Brooksby to Hoby 1.5 miles

Start the walk at Brooksby Lock, around halfway up the restoration. There's a handy layby if you want to be dropped off, or catch a bus to the nearby Brooksby Melton Agricultural College.

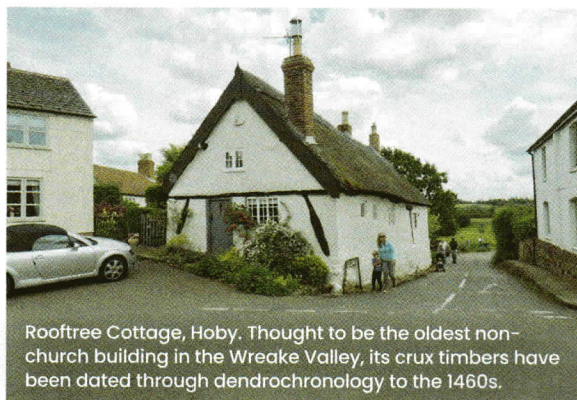
Brooksby was the sixth of the 12 locks on the way to Melton Mowbray, and the chamber is still in good condition. To your right is the old Brooksby railway station building, once a rural stop on the old Syston & Peterborough Railway, now part of the popular Leicester to East Anglia route. The station itself closed in 1961, but the building is still in excellent condition, and preserved as part of the Birch Canoes business (see p77).

The college main building was once the country seat of George Villiers, the Duke of Buckingham, a favourite with King James I, and dates back to at least that era, although it was extensively remodelled in Victorian times.

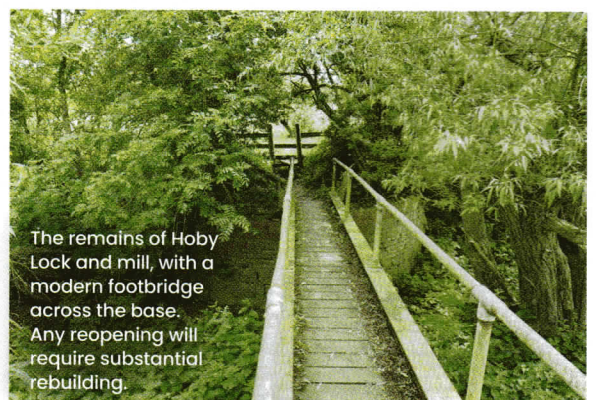
The hall, and the adjacent church, Brooksby St Michael, are the first sighting you'll have of the two vernacular architectural themes of the River Wreake Valley – the local ironstone, which weathers beautifully and looks glorious in the sunset, and Swithland slate, popular for centuries as roofing.

Opposite the college entrance is a cattle grid, making the start of an open road across the field. This is Main Street, the main road through Rotherby. After a quarter-mile you arrive at Rotherby Church, the second of six on the route.

Turn left just before the church and take the footpath down to the next stile. To your left is a brand-new arboretum, planted by the local farmer as recently as 2018 and containing 80 trees representing the native species of the British Isles.



Rooftree Cottage, Hoby. Thought to be the oldest non-church building in the Wreake Valley, its crux timbers have been dated through dendrochronology to the 1460s.



The remains of Hoby Lock and mill, with a modern footbridge across the base. Any reopening will require substantial rebuilding.



ABOVE: Priory Water, created from old gravel pits by the Leicestershire Wildfowlers Association.
 ABOVE RIGHT: Kirby Bellars spire gleams behind the undergrowth.
 RIGHT: Frisby Lock, the best preserved on the navigation.



The trees run alongside an old oxbow lake that was part of the original course of the River Wreake, cut off by the construction of the Syston & Peterborough Railway in the 1840s. To save construction of a bridge, the river channel was recut the other side of the line.

Cross the railway (carefully), and make your way along the riverbank to the traditional brick accommodation bridge. Crossing it, you'll see an interpretation panel describing the history of the navigation. To your right is the Waterhouse, the old toll collection office of the navigation. It was said the toll-keeper raised a chain across the river at night to prevent passage.

Continue straight past the house, taking the left fork of the footpath up the hill to join the road.

The curious house on the corner of Brooksby Road and Hoby Main Street is Rooftree Cottage, and is possibly the oldest non-ecclesiastical building in the Wreake Valley. A cruck-framed building in beautiful condition, its timbers have been ring-dated to at least 500 years ago.

Hoby All Saints Church is just around the corner. If you start your journey here, it's possible to park a car in the quiet, wide main street here.

2. Hoby to Frisby 1.7 miles

Make your way back down the hill via Back Lane opposite the church. Finding the Leicester Round footpath sign at the bottom of the lane, strike out across the fields westwards towards Frisby. You'll pass over the Melton Navigation again at the site of Hoby Lock and mill, both almost vanished, before crossing the railway line, another mile of fields, and finally reaching Frisby, where your next encounter is with the Bell Inn (if arranging a rendezvous with friends, note the potential for confusion with the Blue Bell Inn at Hoby).

Frisby was once a busy stop on the main Melton-to-Leicester road and had three inns. The finest was the old Black Horse coaching inn, still unmistakable in how its three storeys dominate the Main Street; it closed in 1974.

The Bell also closed for a while, but reopened around 18 months ago as a small family-run free house. This accounts for its unusual hours; closed on Mondays and with limited opening at other times, you'll need to plan ahead if you want to call in.

Before you reach the old coaching inn, turn left down Church Lane to visit St Thomas of Canterbury. In the 18th century the rector became notorious for marrying couples with little supporting evidence; for a while, it was said, Frisby rivalled Gretna Green as a destination for eloping couples.

It is here that you'll really start to notice the striking profusion of thin slate gravestones, a feature of Wreake church yards. This is Swithland slate, a tough rock that was mined near Loughborough, possibly since Roman times. Hereabout it is used most noticeably on Leicestershire roofs, but its toughness shows most on these large gravestones, whose inscriptions are still quite clear after over two centuries.

What is particularly striking is how its use for tombstones seems to cease around 1880, just around the time the navigation closed. Were the stones carried upstream from Swithland by barge?

Carry on around Mill Lane to the railway level crossing and see the old mill (mentioned in the Domesday book) and Frisby Lock, the best-preserved on the navigation.



FAR LEFT: Asfordby Lock, nearly vanished in the undergrowth.
 LEFT: Leicestershire Round, a 100-mile footpath ring around the county, adopts the navigation as part of its route. The yellow-topped wayposts easily guide you.



ABOVE CENTRE:
Kirby Lock,
almost vanished
underneath
an infilled lock
approach.
ABOVE RIGHT:
Rhubarb Island,
named from the
large rhubarb-
like plants
spread across
its half-acre.



3: Frisby to Asfordby 1.6 miles

Return across the railway line and follow the yellow Leicester Round signs towards Asfordby. Across the field here you might see the spires of almost all the churches on our walk across the river valley.

You'll reach a bend at Station Lane, which crosses over the bottom of what used to be the Asfordby Lock. It's hidden in the undergrowth and you'll have to hunt it out.

If you want to see Asfordby itself, turn left and continue for a quarter-mile then turn right at Main Street ('Main Street', not 'High Street', is a characteristic of these villages), then another quarter-mile to the church.

Asfordby All Saints is technically in its own parish, but it is of a piece with the Parish of the Upper Wreake churches. All have the same charming weathered ironstone and slate, and it's hard as a stranger to tell them apart.

Opposite lie two suitable watering holes – the Crown Inn, a fairly conventional pub with a value menu and sports TV, and the Horseshoes, a more upmarket place nudging into gastropub territory.

4: Asfordby to Kirby Bellars 1.5 miles

Retrace your steps to the Asfordby Lock you saw (or maybe couldn't see) earlier, and rejoin the navigation, following the now-familiar Leicestershire Round roundels and yellow-topped posts.

You'll rejoin the Wreake (now lazily meandering) through a meadow with grazing cattle, and soon reach Priory Water. This is an old gravel pit that in 1987 was taken over by the Leicestershire Wildfowling Association as a 120-acre nature sanctuary. It has since matured into one of the finest nature reserves in the country.

Follow the causeway across the lake and into the woods at the other end, passing through St John's Nurseries, to reach our last church, Kirby Bellars St Peter's. This is perhaps the glory of the walk, a weathered ironstone edifice that glows golden in the sunset. And once again, with that charming profusion of Victorian slate gravestones.

BOTTOM RIGHT:
The old canal
basin and town
wharf, now
remembered in a
pair of decorative
gates and an
avenue of trees
marking its route.

Birch Canoes

John Clohesy is possibly the most quirky and striking boat-builder in the country. The difference here is that his customers *build their own boat*. They come to stay for several days as holiday guests, live in the chalets he has constructed himself on the premises, and build under his supervision.

It takes three days to construct a Birch Canoe, another day to build a spruce paddle, and you paddle it up and down the river a distance of half a mile and back to test it out.

You can stay longer, and you can even (if no boat-



building holidays are booked) find the chalets on AirBNB.

Until the MMN is restored, this is the only regular boating traffic currently on the river.

Birch Canoes
(01664 434689, birchcanoes.com)



5: Kirby Bellars to Eye Kettleby 1.6 miles

At Kirby's Main Street, just a few yards further on is Washdyke Lane, which leads down to what remains of Kirby Lock (almost nothing) and a depression across the field that was the old lock cut.

You could follow the old navigation here for a mile and cross over the railway line to rejoin the Leicestershire Round, or you can keep on the official Round route.

The latter is a mile of open countryside until your idyll is rudely interrupted by a modern food factory, its unwelcome huge white shed marking the outskirts of Melton Mowbray.

Walk alongside the factory – and some quite uncomfortable terrain – for half a mile before joining the A607, and then immediately doubling back into what was Mill Lane, but is now a modern housing estate. Follow it round to another rail crossing, then across what you will immediately recognise as an original canal bridge – you are back on the navigation at Eye Kettleby, the final lock.

6: Eye Kettleby to Mucky Lane (Melton Mowbray old town wharf) 1.6 miles

A short distance down this track turn right again at the Round sign and cross a metal bridge. This bridges the tail of the old Eye Kettleby lock chamber, which is infilled but believed to be in good condition. The section here is known locally as Rhubarb Island, from the profusion of large-leaved plants grown in the water-rich conditions.

You're now in the last (and more or less navigable) stretch, and it's the treasure of the town. The riverside path continues for a mile and a half, over the very busy A607 (Melton badly needs a bypass!) until the Waterfield Leisure Centre.

Here, an iron footbridge, dated 1894, crosses the river where the canal used to enter Melton Mowbray to terminate at the town wharf.

The wharf was filled-in early on, but an echo of it remains in the avenue of trees that make the final approach to what is still called, for some reason, Mucky Lane. Here, the wharf has been (perhaps mockingly) replaced by a car park. Across Burton Street is the Boat Inn, the final hostelry on our walk, and an establishment that serves to remind us that the town was once busy with boaters. And maybe one day it could be again.

