

WHAT ARE CANALS ?

Canals played an important part in the development of the industrial revolution. They were the motorways of their day. Most of the canals were built as narrow canals taking boats up to a maximum size of 70ft x 7ft, carrying about 35 tons - the same as a modern lorry. However, travelling at 4mph makes narrowboat transportation very uneconomical at present. Nevertheless, in today's leisure age they have uses that are vitally important.

Canals are multifunctional amenities - the primary function of commerce has now been replaced by pleasure boating. Both traditional type narrowboats and the newer fibre glass cruisers are common. Purpose built narrowboats can be up to 70ft x 7ft, have up to 12 berths and can be used as floating caravans. Hire boating is becoming more and more popular. There are more boats on the system NOW than there were at the height of the canal-age.

Less than 25% of the people who enjoy canals do so through power boats - there are canoes and other non-powered craft. There are walkers - the towpaths can provide long distance footpaths. There are 2000 miles of canals, each with its own towpath, though these are not always passable. There are anglers, fishing is the most popular participation sport in the country. Many of the associated structures - bridges, locks, warehouses etc. were built in the late 1700's or the early 1800's, therefore the canal system acts as a living museum. The waterchannel brings an aquatic character to the landscape and it teems with life - boats and marine life can live quite happily together.

Canal Restoration

At the height of the canal age there was about 4000 miles of navigable canal and river. This has now shrunk to about 2000 miles, most of which is administered by British Waterways. Over the last 30 years many miles of canal and river have been brought back to navigable standard, the drive for restoration being led by volunteers. The Southern Stratford Canal was the first restored canal in the 1960's, the Cheshire ring was completed in the 1970's, the Kennet & Avon Canal and Basingstoke Canals were completed in 1990, the Huddersfield Narrow Canal, the Rochdale and Montgomery Canals should be restored before the end of the century.

Third Generation Canal Restoration Schemes and the Wilts & Berks Canal

Attention is now turning to third generation canal schemes such as the Wey & Arun, the Stroudwater, Thames & Severn and the Wilts & Berks. These canals were, in general, abandoned before the days of nationalisation and are politically more difficult than the early restoration schemes, because the canal bed has now reverted to the original owners. The Wilts & Berks Canal bed is now owned by about 200 landowners. However, in spite of the political problems the original line is by far the best route to take. Much of the massive earthworks needed for the canal still remain, for example the half mile embankment south of the Foxham Locks and the deep cutting south of Pewsham Locks. In addition many of the locks still remain and it is much cheaper to restore a lock than build a completely new lock. It was estimated that restoration of Foxham Top Lock (70ft x 7ft) would cost about £5000 (gates extra). Widmead Lock (70ft x 14ft), the last lock on the Kennet & Avon Canal was totally rebuilt, the cost including gates was about £300,000. In addition, in the countryside most of the channel itself still exists, silted, overgrown but still intact.

Revised February 1998

WEST VALE BRANCH

How West Vale Branch started

The West Branch was formed in May 1991 and started with great expectations. The original members were, without exception, total novices in canal restoration, however, they were eager and totally committed to their task. Expert advice forthcoming from the Group was - 'stick to the easy bits first! Leave the difficult bits and structures until you have more experience.'

Our first plan was to restore the Stainswick Lane to the B4000 towpath. The landowner was known to us and when contacted, was keen on the idea. The towpath was still there and although virtually impenetrable with shrubs, brambles and nettles, it was considered possible to reclaim it quickly and easily. It would then make a very pleasant walkway between the two roads to complete a circular route.

Work began in late summer 1991 with a grand 'scrub bash' and tidy up around Shrivensham Arch Bridge. Then in October 1991 we had an unexpected overflow work party from the 'Big Dig' site at Wantage. As complete innocents to canal restoration until then, we had no idea that literally thousands of volunteers from all over the country were available to help us. This enabled us to broaden our horizons speedily and dredging was soon mentioned! If we could raise the money and permissions could be obtained, then we might be able to start in summer 1992, just one year after we began. IN FACT, all went to plan and the work was done.

In 1997 the totally infilled canal was restored. An access road and car park was constructed and the spoil from the canal was used to landscape the site. Two large ponds were dug, ditches cleared and a new culvert beneath the canal was built. A boat slipway is to be built in 1998 and a large number of trees and shrubs will be planted.

The branch has grown in numbers and expertise - we now have a membership of about 60 - some get 'stuck in' to the physical restoration work, whilst others assist with equally important paperwork and fund raising activities, for without cash we cannot hire the essential equipment.

CAN YOU HELP?

If you are interested in any pursuit of the countryside - rambling, angling, observing wildlife, boating, canoeing, etc. or if you are specifically interested in canals and our work - then YOU can help! By becoming a member of the Group you can assist with the planning, organising, physical work, liaison, talks or education. If you become a member, you increase our voice and help funds.

AS A MEMBER: you will receive a regular magazine to keep you up to date with developments; you have a say in identifying and creating amenity areas; you will be helping safeguard the future of the canal.

For membership form please contact:

WEST VALE MEMBERSHIP SECRETARY

[Redacted Name]
[Redacted Address]
[Redacted Contact Info]

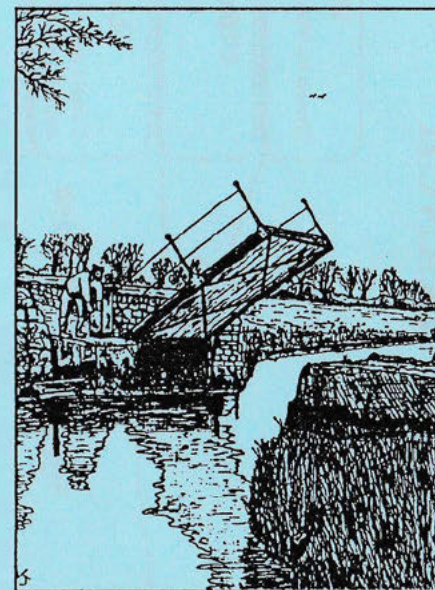


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WEST VALE BRANCH

The Wilts & Berks Canal from South Marston to Uffington



Lift Bridge, near Longcot Top Lock circa 1893
© Wilts & Berks Canal Amenity Group 1993

Parish Contacts;

SOUTH MARSTON

[Redacted Name]
[Redacted Address]

UFFINGTON, WOOLSTONE & BAULKING

[Redacted Name]
[Redacted Address]

1998

WILTS & BERKS CANAL AMENITY GROUP WEST VALE BRANCH

Uffington Loop and Rosay Brook Aqueduct

This very attractive section is still in good condition. Mundy's lift bridge and the aqueduct still remain. Good public right of way from the village and along the canal.

Longcot Bottom Lock

Some remains of the Longcot Bottom Lock can still be seen.

Longcot Section

This section is clear and in water. Some restoration work has taken place here, but further work needs to be carried out in the future. A very attractive area with some public access.

Shrivenham Wharf

Shrivenham Wharf was not only used for the transfer of cargoes but also contained stables with fresh horses to pull the narrow boats. The largest of which were seventy feet long and seven feet wide and carried up to thirty-four tons. The stone wall by the road is the old back wall of the stable. The towpath changed sides over the Arch Bridge, so that it could pass the Longcot Branch which went to the north, without the need for a further bridge. It then crossed back at Longcot Top Lock to pass the Wantage Branch on the south side.

Steppingstones Lane Bridge

A new bridge is required, this will be our first major structural restoration. The work here will begin in 1998

Arch Bridge to Bourton Wharf

This section was heavily and irregularly silted up. Initial dredging work done in 1995 was to enable this section to be drained so that Steppingstones Bridge could be rebuilt. Currently the section is in water held back by a dam near Bourton Wharf. Further dredging is to be done and the towpath stoned between the bridges.

Bourton Wharf

A dam has been built near here to control the water level in the restored section. The Wharfinger's cottage still exists. The canal is now crossed twice by roads. Unfortunately the new culverts are much too small for navigation so the canal will need to be realigned and a new bridge built.

Acorn Railway Bridge

The canal once passed beneath the railway arch but now this stretch is part of the A420. Major re-routing will be needed here.

Uffington Gorse

Owned by Woodland Trust and open to the public.

Uffington Arch Bridge

Completely infilled

Longcot Top Lock

Totally buried, so the condition of this lock is completely unknown.

Great Western Community Forest

The Community Forest project extends to Longcot and incorporates the restored canal.

Tuckmill Aqueduct

There is still a wide stream here, but the aqueduct no longer exists. Scrub clearing and general renovation work has taken place along the stretch towards Stainswick Lane. It is an easy and pleasant walk.

Canalside Park

The canalside park is well on its way to completion. Saplings have been planted, ditches and ponds cleared, paths laid. The slipway has been constructed and the car park is ready for use. There is the wild planting still to be undertaken, hopefully within the year this task can also be accomplished.

Stainswick Lane

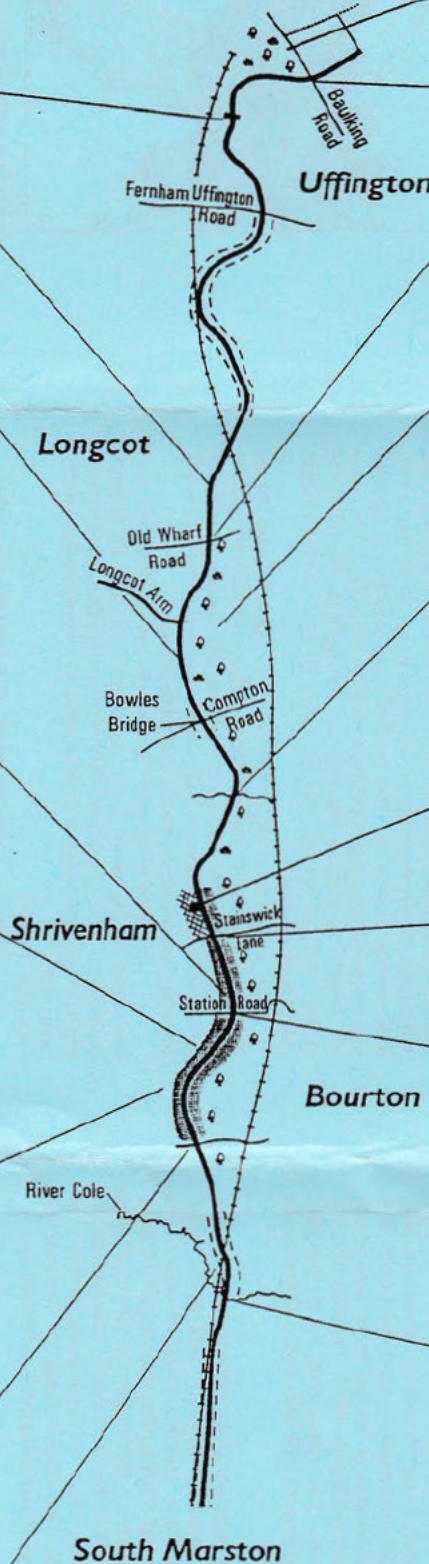
Our very first restoration site. To the west the canal is in water to within 100 yards of the Shrivenham Arch Bridge. A retaining wall will have to be constructed in this area before final dredging can take place. Towpath is stone layered and an easy walk.

Shrivenham Arch Bridge




This bridge on the B4000 is the only original arch bridge still in daily use. It is also a Grade II listed building. 1978 saw the very first Amenity Group work party clearing rubbish and debris from beneath the arch.

River Cole Aqueduct

The aqueduct no longer exists so major structural building work needs to be carried out in this area.



KEY

-  Dredged areas
-  Areas actively being restored
-  Canal completely infilled

WORK PARTY CONTACTS

