

Oxford Canal Heritage Trail Guide

A city walk exploring the cultural and industrial heritage of the Oxford Canal



*Take a walk on a canal in the heart of the City of Oxford
and discover a fascinating world outside of its dreaming spires!*

www.oxfordcanalheritage.org



LOTTERY FUNDED

On the Heritage Trail

The self-guided Oxford Canal Heritage Trail is a linear walk along the Oxford Canal that is approximately three miles (five kms) in total. You can begin either in Pocket Park just inside Hythe Bridge near the centre of Oxford City or at Ball's Bridge in Wolvercote to the north of the city. There is the option of walking past Ball's Bridge up to Duke's Cut to complete the whole Trail although you will have to return to near Balls Bridge to get back into Oxford. However, unless the weather is poor, take your time and, whilst you are walking, imagine the bustle of life on this 200 year old canal when horses pulled working boats full of coal and other cargoes to Oxford. You can still see glimpses of the past as you walk past Victorian suburbs,

a thriving narrowboat community, canal locks, under ancient bridges along a green corridor full of wildlife. On the trail you will learn why the canal was, and continues to be, so important, nationally as well as locally. You will also find out why the canal was built, who built it, who paid for it, and who pays for it now; the uses to which it was first put, how its usefulness has changed overtime, how it could have been lost for ever, and the reasons for its revival.

There is a large scale map of the Heritage Trail at its start in Hythe Bridge Street (Ordnance Survey grid reference SU 508 064) and near the end of the trail at Ball's Bridge in Wolvercote. A copy can also be found at the back of this Trail Guide.

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Access: *The towpath is level and generally well-maintained but all walkers should take care as it may be muddy and is rough and narrow in places. Access for people with mobility problems, using wheelchairs, or pushing pushchairs is available at Hythe Bridge and Balls Bridge but Isis Bridge (location 2) is steep and joining the Trail via Rewley Road (Location 3) may be better but there is a slope down to the towpath. Some exit points at bridges before the end of the Trail are more accessible than others.*

Transport: *There is no public transport back to Oxford direct from Duke's Cut end of the walk, but buses are available from near Balls Bridge in Wolvercote, and near to some of the exit points at bridges along the route.*

Trail Manners: *Walkers have right of way but watch out for cyclists. Please respect all the canal's inhabitants, whether birds, animals, or indeed humans, as we shall be passing by many residential boats on our way.*

Detailed information about Trail access, transport and refreshments is on the website www.oxfordcanalheritage.org

Location 1: **Hythe Bridge**

A new chapter in Oxford's long history

AUDIO
TRACK

1a

Directions 1: *Stand on the flat areas bounded by railings on three sides, where the Oxford Canal towpath meets Hythe Bridge Street (Ordnance Survey grid reference SU 508 064). Look across the road in a south-easterly direction towards the car-park and the green mound of Oxford Castle beyond.*

The car-park you can see is built over the site of a wharf that marked the end of the Oxford Canal which was opened on New Year's Day 1790 taking over 20 years to build in stages as and when funds were raised. In 1792, the Oxford Canal Company, a group of share holders who funded the canal project, realising that this wharf was too small for their needs, bought more land to the left-hand side of the car-park, where Nuffield College now stands. This second wharf was used exclusively for the delivery and storage of coal, while the original wharf (buried under the car park you are looking at) received building materials such as timber, stone, and slate, and manufactured goods such as china and porcelain.

Much of the labour needed to build this final section of the canal was supplied by convicts from the nearby Oxford Castle Prison. The prisoners also built both wharves and warehouses supervised by the prison governor Daniel Harris, a skilled engineer and builder. He also designed the Company's first headquarters, which still stands in New Inn Hall Street, is now part of St Peter's College and home to its Master. The 1829 house bears the Oxford Canal Company Cartouche complete with Britannia, the city arms, St Mary the Virgin, The Radcliffe Camera and a river barge with a mast.



Pocket Park entrance to Heritage Trail

In 1996 Oxford Prison closed its doors for the last time and, together with Castle, the building became an audio-visual heritage attraction, 'Oxford Castle Unlocked', operated by Oxford Preservation Trust. The rest of the vibrant Oxford Castle Quarter contains a hotel, restaurants, art gallery, market square and outdoor theatre space.

Can you see The Duke's Cut public house in the far right-hand corner of the car-park? A 'cut' is another name for a canal. The pub's name, however, is deceiving because the actual Duke's Cut is some three miles away, and marks the end of this walk. The pub was originally called the Queen's Arms and dates from the early 19th century.

In the 1930s both of the Canal Company's wharfs, or basins, were sold to the famous Oxford car manufacturer, William Morris. Nuffield College, one of the newest colleges that make up Oxford University, was built on one of them, taking its name from the title with which Morris was honoured in 1938: Lord Nuffield. The other wharf remains, for the present, a City Council car-park, although the location remains ripe for development, there is a good prospect that parts of the Georgian canal infrastructure will be restored as part of any new design.

Directions 2: *Turn to look at the MAP which shows the full extent of the Oxford Canal Heritage Trail and the ten places of interest which are described in this Guide.*



Location 1: **Hythe Bridge**

A thousand-year-old wharf

AUDIO
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1b

As you stand here at Hythe Bridge, you are looking at the main entrance to the city from the west. A bridge has existed here since the beginning of the thirteenth century straddling a side stream of the River Thames known as the Castle Mill Stream, after a mill that once operated next to Oxford Castle.

The word 'hythe' is old English for a wharf or landing place. It's difficult to imagine what a hive of activity this area once was, as materials such as timber, slate, hay, and Cotswold stone were unloaded here and on the opposite bank for centuries. The stones and timber were brought by boat to build some of the oldest colleges and houses in Oxford.

On the far side of Castle Stream is a long narrow road called Fisher Row that runs the length of the stream. We can see Upper Fisher Row. Fisher Row marks the edge of St Thomas' parish, which historically was the home of many families whose livelihoods depended on both the river and the canal. This parish was the heart of a busy local brewing economy: Brewing not only relied on river barges to bring in raw materials but it also used a lot of water, both for power and to make the beer, so the prevalence of streams in St Thomas' parish made it an ideal location. Many of the streams, and all of the breweries, have now vanished, but from here, looking across the Castle Mill Stream, you can see two reminders of this brewing heritage in the two public houses, one of which still stands.

For nearly two centuries The Oxford Retreat, the pub on the corner of Middle Fisher Row and Hythe Bridge Street, was called The Nag's Head and it was the boating pub of Oxford. Under its roof countless boats were sold, deals were sealed and many men found employment as crew or hauliers. Pubs also played an essential role in the exchange of information –

within the largely uneducated and self-contained community of boatpeople, many of whom could not read or write. The building on the opposite corner of the street, where Upper Fisher Row meets Hythe Bridge Street, which now a house, was also once a pub called The Running Horses. Both pub names – The Nag's Head and The Running Horses – reflect the importance of horses in the days of the working canal boats.

The canal towpath and boats

In fact the path we are walking along is named 'the towpath' because it was once busy with horses towing along canal boats. We will soon walk past a line of residential narrowboats. Boats have been used as permanent homes in Oxford since at least the time of the first national census in 1841, and undoubtedly for a long time before that.



Residential moorings

The moorings along Hythe Bridge Arm were registered as residential moorings in 1989 after years of campaigning by Oxford's boat residents. Whilst working boats and boaters have long gone, the boating community continue to remind visitors of life and work on the canal and the boats are an interesting and colourful part of Oxford life.

Directions 3: *As you begin the walk, the grass on your right is where the canal was cut back after the Second World War. Beyond the circular monument commemorating the bi-centenary of the completion of the Oxford Canal, continue with the Castle Mill Stream on your left and a line of residential narrowboats on your right. Beyond the boats is Worcester College, which formerly owned all the land down to the stream edge before selling the strip along which you are walking to the Canal Company in 1788. Cross the bridge and turn sharp right to access the lockside, minding your head on the low curve of the bottom of the bridge.*

Location 2: Isis Lock

A pivotal location in a national transport network

AUDIO
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2

As you read earlier, the arrival of the canal in 1790 was a cause for great celebration in Oxford. But its completion had a wider national importance too. The canal not only linked Oxford with the coalfields and factories of central England, but it also connected with the River Thames here, putting Oxford on the shortest water route between the Midlands and London. Canalboats loaded with coal and manufactured goods could move onto the Thames or transfer their cargoes to Thames barges at Oxford for the onward journey towards the capital.

Obviously a manmade canal cannot simply flow into a river. A lock was needed to make the transition. The first lock, a simple barrier located near the last stop by Hythe Bridge, proved inadequate, so Daniel Harris, the prison governor, was asked to build a replacement. He selected this location and his convicts had completed it by 1797.



Isis Bridge Picture Credit: Katherine Shock

the Midlands with London was short-lived. The Grand Junction Canal opened between London and Birmingham in 1805. This provided a more direct, faster, and wider route, and although the Oxford Canal Company continued to be profitable right through to the middle of the 20th century, the prime strategic importance of the Oxford Canal began to diminish from that moment. Originally Isis Lock, or Louse Lock as it was more commonly known, was twice the width of the version you see today. This was to enable the wider barges of the river to reach the central wharves. But with the coming of the railway, the interchange between the river and canal continued to reduce, and the decision was made in 1844 to refashion the lock chamber in order to admit only narrowboats. The cast-iron turnover bridge was built at the same time. It bears the number 243, bridge No. 1 being at Longworth, near Coventry, where the canal begins.



The Oxford Canal was one of four original trunk canals which linked the Midlands with four strategic ports: London was one, and the others were Liverpool (via the Trent and Mersey Rivers); Hull (via the Humber); and Bristol (via the Severn). For its first 15 years the Oxford Canal was one of the most important and profitable transport routes in Britain, but the Oxford's pivotal significance in connecting

Directions 4: *Retrace your steps under the bridge – mind your head again! To the left, a short detour across the footbridge which spans the Castle Mill Stream will take you to a wonder of Victorian engineering, a railway swing bridge installed in 1851 to take trains across the Sheepwash Channel, the short stream which connects the Oxford Canal with today's main River Thames. The Oxford Preservation Trust is overseeing the restoration and conservation of this extraordinary reminder of the early railway age. If desired, the main Thames Path can be reached by continuing under the railway.*

To continue on the main Oxford Canal Heritage Trail, walk northwards along the narrow strip of land which is bordered by the Castle Mill Stream on your left and the canal on your right. Before the canal was built, the Stream was the main branch of the River Thames, carrying barges to Hythe Bridge or to the south of the city. The trees here include field maple, wild cherry, alder, crack willow, hawthorn, ash, and elder. Stop at the first bench, opposite the distinctive landmark of St Barnabas Church.

Location 3: Jericho

Oxford's first planned suburb

AUDIO
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3

The land through which this section of canal was dug in 1789 was known as Little and Great Bear Meadows, which ran all the way down to the Castle Mill Stream. The name must derive from the Bear Inn (in central Oxford), as both the pub and the fields here were owned by a family called Furse in the 16th century, and it was the Reverend Peter Wellington Furse from whom the Canal Company purchased the land. When Furse sold all of his remaining meadowland in the 1820s, a coalmerchant called Henry Ward purchased a large plot close to Worcester College, and went on to establish a wharf there. After Henry Ward's death in 1852 his sons William, Henry, and George inherited the land, and in 1868 they sold part of it to the Oxford Canal Company and donated the rest for the construction of St Barnabas Church. Henry Ward had also provided the funds for a floating chapel for boatmen on the Castle Mill Stream near Hythe Bridge. You can learn more about this unusual place of worship on the website: www.oxfordcanalheritage.org.uk. The funds for construction of the church were provided by another major local philanthropist, Thomas Combe, superintendent of the Oxford University Press.

The church was designed in an Italianate style by Sir Arthur Blomfield and opened in 1869. It features in Thomas Hardy's novel *Jude the Obscure*. As a young man, Hardy had worked for Blomfield in London, and his reference in the novel to 'the church of ceremonies' reflects St Barnabas' importance within the Oxford Movement, which attempted to encourage the Church of England to adopt more of the rituals of the Catholic faith.

The poet John Betjeman, who studied in Oxford in the 1920s, was fond of Jericho, and wrote a poem inspired by the church. He was also fond of canals, and on 3 June 1955 he chaired a meeting at Oxford Town Hall at



St Barnabas Church Picture Credit: Valerie Petts

which an association was formed to campaign against the threatened closure of the waterway. Virtually all freight was then transported by road or rail, but the canal's supporters pointed to leisure use as a viable future option, and were proved right. The boat-hire company College Cruisers, a little farther on, perpetuates a commercial activity for which Jericho has been a focus since the 1960s.

In recent years, another famous literary figure, Philip Pullman, has been at the forefront of another well-publicised campaign, this time to retain a boat-repair facility in Jericho. His books *Northern Lights* and *Lyra's Oxford* incorporate an imaginary yet familiar Jericho, where 'the wharves along the waterfront ... were bright with gleaming harness and loud with the clop of hooves and clamour of bargaining'. Regular visitors were 'gyptian families, who lived in canal-boats, came and went with the spring and autumn fairs, and were always good for a fight'.

And fight is what the real boat owners of Oxford had to do, in a figurative sense, as part of a unified resistance of boaters, Jericho residents, and St Barnabas' Church, at two Public Inquiries, in 2005 and 2008. Pullman had a prominent role in both Inquiries, eloquently expressing the hopes of all who cherish the distinctive contribution that the boatyard has made to Jericho. As a result of this collective effort, and strong City Council planning guidelines, future plans for the site includes new boatyard, piazza, sports hall, community centre and housing.



Directions 5: As you continue northwards, notice on the right the end houses on Combe Road, which provides access to College Cruisers. These are the setting for the deaths in 'The Dead of Jericho', the first of Oxford author Colin Dexter's Inspector Morse mysteries to be televised. On the far side of the footbridge which spans the canal there is a potted history of Jericho on a sign to the right of the steps. Just beyond the bridge, we say farewell to the Castle Mill Stream. Stop just before the bridge (No. 242) which carries Walton Well Road over the canal.

Location 4: Walton Well and Lucy's Ironworks

Past industries

AUDIO
TRACK

4

In the 19th century the far bank of the canal, south of Walton Well Road, was a hub of industry. The new flats you can see are owned by W. Lucy & Co one of Oxford's largest residential property landlords. The flats replaced a foundry that the company operated here until 2007. It was a second major source of local employment in Jericho, complementing the Oxford University Press to the south-east. The iron works date from 1825, when William Carter moved his existing foundry from Summertown to here.



Lucy's Foundry Picture Credit: Ruth Walton

at the junction of Walton Well Road and Longworth Road. If you are interested, it can be reached by turning right at the top of the ramp leading up from the canal. Port Meadow can be reached by turning left.

William Carter's ironworks produced agricultural tools, pipes, girders, iron railings, man-hole covers, and lamp-posts. In 1830, the foundry acquired the name 'Eagle Ironworks' under his successor, Charles Grafton. In the 1860s William Lucy took over the firm and it operated as W. Lucy and Co for over 150 years. Lucy's was a well-known landmark in Jericho providing quite a spectacle of heat, light and steam throughout the day and night and continuing production as the canal's industrial past slowly disappeared. Nevertheless although working boats no longer bring coal to a foundry, people in Lucy's new flats, on residential boats and walking over Walton Well Bridge to Port Meadow ensure that the area continues to bustle with life.

Carter undoubtedly saw the advantages of this canalside location for transporting his goods, but metalworking was already evident here: a William Ward was identified as 'a smith at Walton Well Dock' when his son was baptised at St Giles' Church in 1823.

Walton Well Dock was operated by Henry Ward, who is featured in Track 3. Henry built boats here from at least 1819, and his eldest son William continued the business until the 1880s. This William Ward was twice Mayor of Oxford; one of his acts of philanthropy was to provide a drinking fountain



Walton Well Bridge Picture Credit: Olivia Brooks



Directions 6: *Continue under Walton Well Road Bridge (No. 242).*

The extensive gardens of the large houses of Southmoor Road can be seen on your right. This section of the towpath is badly eroded at the time of writing (Spring 2014), and probably too rough for wheelchair use, but improvements are anticipated in the near future.

The alternative is to cross the bridge, follow Walton Well Road to Kingston Road, turn left, walk to the anchor pub and rejoin the Trail at Aristotle Lane (Location 5). Stop just beyond the little humpbacked brick bridge (No. 240) which carries Aristotle Lane over the canal towards Port Meadow.

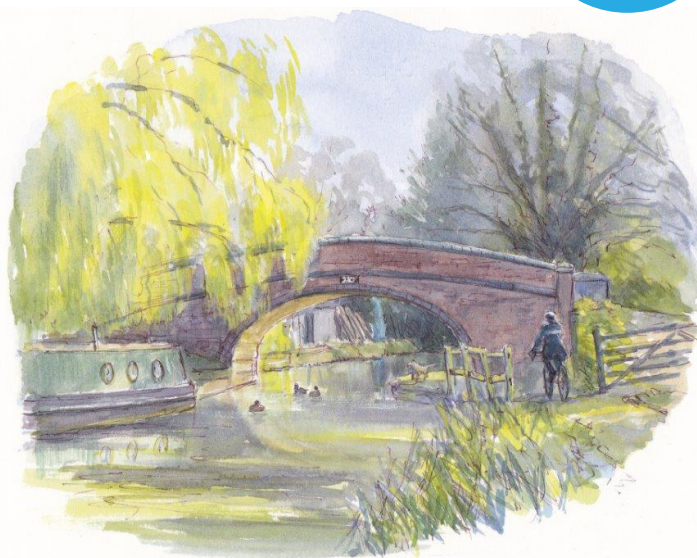
Location 5: Aristotle Bridge

A well, a wharf, a workhouse and a 'watering hole'

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TRACK

5

Observant walkers will have noted that Aristotle Bridge is numbered 240, and the one before, at Walton Well Road, was numbered 242. What happened to 241? It was recorded in the Oxford Canal Company archives as 'the Workhouse Bridge', and was a wooden lift bridge of the kind we shall see later in the walk. As the Canal Company neared the completion of their 20-year project to bring the canal to Oxford, money was tight, and these wooden bridges, at the time used almost exclusively by farmers and their workers, were much cheaper to build than fixed ones made of brick. These lift bridges, also known as drawbridges, are a distinctive feature of the southern Oxford Canal.



Aristotle Bridge Picture Credit: Valerie Petts

The name 'Workhouse Bridge' links it with the City Workhouse, established on Rats and Mice Hill (now Wellington Square) in 1771. Until 1865 the Oxford Board of Guardians, who were responsible for the welfare of the workhouse inmates, managed a small mixed farm on the banks of the canal, on land known as Pepper Hills. This was where the Southmoor Road gardens that you passed now slope down to the water.

Aristotle Bridge is also an interesting name. It derives from a spring or well known as Aristotle Well, now hidden in the cellar of the new house immediately south of the bridge. It was one of several springs lying parallel to the course of the canal, at the bottom of a gravel terrace formed during the Ice Age. We have already passed Walton Well, and Plato's Well once flowed within the grounds of Worcester College, near our first stop.

On the opposite side of the canal, is Hayfield Wharf, which was an important feature of the Oxford Canal from its earliest days. The newspaper *Jackson's Oxford Journal* shows that several kinds of coal were available here when the wharf first

opened in October 1789, and very quickly the site became a focus for other kinds of industrial activity too. A boathouse was erected to the south of the bridge to harbour the Canal Company's own inspection launch in 1790, and a boat-repair yard had been established to the north of the wharf by at least 1802. St John's College had been buying up canal-side plots since the turn of the century. When it advertised a lease on the wharf in 1839, the notice listed – in addition to a dwelling house and four tenements – a covered dock, stables, workshops, sheds, and kilns for the making of bricks, lime, and tiles.

Dolly's Hut

Across the road, where The Anchor public house now stands, there was a hostelry known as Heyfield's Hutt. It was named after William Heyfield, the landlord who had presided over it for well over 50 years when he died there at the age of 90 in 1778. Although the inn was renamed as The Anchor in the 1840s and rebuilt in the 1930s, it was universally known until quite recently as Dolly's Hut, taking the name from another landlord, William Dolley, who kept the house for a quarter of a century from 1852. It was a hostelry popular with canal boatmen for 150 years.



Directions 7: Continue northwards and stop by the Trap Grounds noticeboard, just before the large new brick Frenchay Road bridge (No. 239A), which links new residential developments on either side.

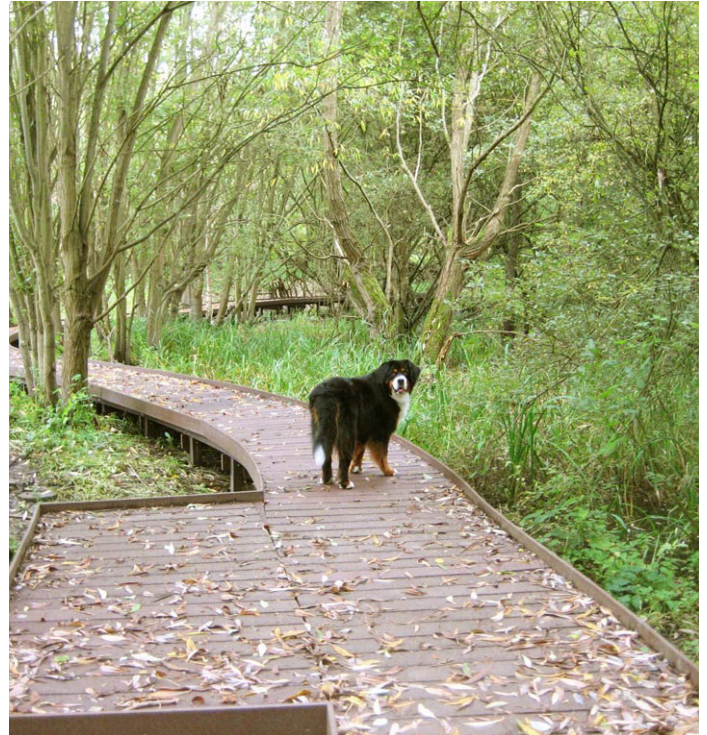
Location 6: **Trap Grounds Local Wildlife Site** *A preserved reserve*

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6

The new bridge is the modern incarnation of an ancient right of way here which dates back to at least medieval times. Then it was known as 'Wycroft Lane', and led to a three-acre property near Port Meadow which included Wyke Meadow. Later the lane became known as 'My Lady's Way', a probable reference to the abbesses of Godstow, who owned much of the land hereabouts for several hundred years. Later it acquired the name Frog Lane, by which it is still known today.

Frog Lane leads due west along the northern edge of the Trap Grounds reed bed, designated as a Local Wildlife Site. This is Oxford's only known breeding site for the water rail, an elusive aquatic bird, and is also host to the largest colony of breeding reed warblers in the city, and the county's only recorded population of the spider *Nesticus cellulanus*. There is also a rare colony of viviparous lizards, and grass-snakes, glow-worms, and slow-worms. Foxes saunter along Frog Lane in broad daylight, and muntjac deer may be glimpsed here in the twilight of summer evenings. Overhead in the big willows, tree-creepers and woodpeckers make their nests in spring. An area of woodland and scrubland beyond the reed bed was saved from development in 2006 after a long community based campaign led by Catherine Robinson, a local historian and author, ended in success in the House of Lords with the site now registered as a Town Green.



The Trap Grounds boardwalk Picture Credit: Diane Wilson

The name 'Trap Grounds' has been in use since at least 1781, when *Jackson's Oxford Journal* announced the auction of 'a Leasehold Estate in the Parish of Wolvercote, called the 'Trap Grounds'. It was once applied to a much more extensive area on the east side of Port Meadow, and may be a corruption of the designation 'Extra Parochial', which denoted exemption from the payment of church tithes. Or the name may record the practice of trapping fish and eels in channels when the river flooded across the Meadow. We shall probably never know.



Directions 8: *As we continue north, passing under another new road bridge (No. 238B, carrying Elizabeth Jennings Way) we reach a wooden lift-bridge (No. 238). As mentioned, this type of hand-operated bridge is a distinctive feature of the Oxford Canal. It was less expensive than a stone or brick bridge, and, because economies were needed as the canal neared completion, the Canal Company chose to build several in this style on the approach to Oxford. Continue past the line of residential boats as far as the point where the canal narrows to reveal the location of another former agricultural lift-bridge.*

Location 7: **Opposite St Edward's School** 'Messing about on boats'

AUDIO
TRACK

7

The playing fields opposite, and the grassland between the canal and the railway, belong to St Edward's School. The school was opened here in 1873. One of its first pupils was Kenneth Grahame, author of *The Wind in the Willows*. Grahame must have seen horse-drawn narrowboats travelling along this stretch of the Oxford Canal, and maybe this inspired the scene where Toad escapes from prison to hitch a ride on a boat: *'Round a bend in the canal came plodding a solitary horse, stooping forward as if in anxious thought. From rope traces attached to his collar stretched a long line, taut, but dipping with his stride, the further part of it dripping pearly drops.'* Toad watches as the boat approaches *'With a pleasant swirl of quiet water at its blunt brow, the barge slid up alongside of him, its gaily painted gunwale level with the towing-path, its sole occupant a big stout woman wearing a linen sun-bonnet, one brawny arm laid along the tiller.'*

Grahame chose to refer to a 'barge' rather than a narrowboat, and perhaps this is a good moment to clarify the difference: barges are wide and flat, and they work on rivers and wide canals such as the Grand Junction between Birmingham and London. The vessels which ply the smaller canals like the Oxford are called narrowboats, which are of a uniform width which enables them to access the entire national canal system. As we saw earlier, Isis Lock, which was originally built for barges, was later reduced in width to accommodate only narrowboats.



St Edwards school playing fields canal side Picture Credit: Maria Parsons

Talking of Kenneth Grahame, his whiskery hero 'Ratty' is no stranger to these parts. Ratty, with his blunt snout, round face, and small neat ears, was not a rat but a water vole. Along this stretch of the canal there still lives a community of these shy creatures, one of only five colonies identified in a survey of all the waterways in Oxford in 1997. Another *Wind in the Willows* character is Otter. Recently, otters too have been seen on the canal indicating lack of pollution in the water. Some sections of the bank are Conservation areas where boat mooring is prohibited to encourage ecological diversity. The residential moorings along this stretch of canal are known as Agenda 21 after an international commitment to local communities and the environment made in Rio in 1992 prompted a unique British Waterways and Oxford Boaters Coop to establish low impact mooring.



Directions 9: Continue under the railway bridge (which carries the line to Bicester), past allotments on your right, and the railway line to Birmingham – once the canal's great rival! – on the left. Beyond the railway, depending on the time of year, you may be able to see the wide expanse of Port Meadow through the trees. The view from the crest of the brick bridge (No. 236) is impressive. Cross the bridge to look at the MAP, positioned just a few feet away, on the edge of Wolvercote Green. **Please note** if you are beginning the Trail at Wolvercote or Duke's Cut and walking from north to south and the city, please read Track 1 which will give you an overview of both the background to the Oxford Canal Heritage Trail and the historical context in which the canal was devised. Then, although awkward, read the guide from back to front!

Location 8: Ball's Bridge, Wolvercote Green

A fatal brawl

AUDIO
TRACK

8

The Plough Inn on Wolvercote Green dates from at least 1812, when John Ball was the landlord. He died in 1840, aged 74, but the brick bridge over the canal is still known as Ball's Bridge in memory of his tenure here.

This was the scene of a dramatic, fatal incident in 1829 involving a member of one of the most prolific and long-established boating families of Oxford, 28-year-old Thomas Beesley. He had been accused of stealing a duck from the common Wolvercote stock on Port Meadow, but just as he was denying it, according to a contemporary account, 'the duck quacked; it was in his pocket'! A fight ensued, which was resumed the same evening, when Beesley and some accomplices moved to stand provocatively on Ball's Bridge. In the ensuing fracas a 16-year-old local boy called John Barrett was fatally wounded when Beesley 'without the slightest provocation,' witnesses said, 'struck him a terrific blow on his head with a bludgeon, which felled him to the ground, and from which he was removed weltering in blood, and totally insensible'. Beesley then fled

across Port Meadow, to be rescued by some friends in a boat. However, he was soon apprehended, and sentenced to fourteen years' transportation for manslaughter.

Life on the canal was inevitably physically demanding and competitive, and there are many stories of disputes between working boatmen being settled by the use of fists. All was usually forgiven and forgotten later over a pint of beer, however: there was no place for grudges in such a close-knit community.

There also used to be a wharf here. By 1930 it was used exclusively by Henry Osborne-King, a corn merchant who supplied hay and straw to be transported to the Midlands. Eventually, even these loads were being moved by rail though: a sign of the economic decline of the canal system, which had begun with the advent of competition from the railways in the 1840s and accelerated during the First World War, when many boatmen were conscripted into military service.

Directions 10: *A little farther north is Wolvercote Lock, overlooked by the bridge (No. 235) which carries the Godstow Road westwards to Port Meadow and Lower Wolvercote. The original bridge was demolished to make way for the present one, which was built in 1849 to span both the canal and the Great Western Railway.*

Leaving the Trail: *There are still two locations on the Heritage Trail, but if you wish to leave here, there is convenient access to buses to Oxford, shops and pubs, and to Port Meadow and Lower Wolvercote. If you do leave the Trail at this point, please read the Closing Summary at the end of this guide.*

To leave the Trail, cross the bridge over the canal and walk towards The Plough, then EITHER turn left into the road called Wolvercote Green and walk as far as the junction with Godstow Road, where there is a bus stop opposite the village hall; OR walk up the road called First Turn into the village, beyond which is Woodstock Road, from where there are frequent buses back into the city.

If you wish to explore beautiful Port Meadow, it is possible to walk back to Oxford (approximately 4 miles) by following the Thames Path. To reach it you will pass by the entrance to Wolvercote Lakes, a haven of biodiversity managed by Oxford Preservation Trust. The Thames Path is accessed just beyond The Trout Inn at Godstow, after passing through Lower Wolvercote, where there is a shop and pubs. The Oxford Canal Heritage Trail is signed from the river at Medley so you can cross Port Meadow and return to Walton Well Bridge should you wish to do so, or continue on the Thames Path towards Botley Road.



Ball's Bridge

8

Location 9: Wolvercote Lock

“Takin’ a look”

AUDIO
TRACK

9

This lock was completely rebuilt in 1846. Nowadays all the locks have steps and a handrail inserted into the sidewall, but this was not the case originally, leading to many tragedies. *Jackson's Oxford Journal* reported the death of an 11-year-old boy in its issue of 22 May 1790, for instance, just months after the opening of the canal. He fell while endeavouring to cross the lock, and drowned before any assistance could be procured. The families who worked on the canals considered themselves very lucky if they had never experienced bereavement by drowning at some point: it was, understandably, an occupational hazard. More jocularly, the boaters' term for falling off the boat was “takin’ a look”.

Above the lock, note the channel designed to take excess water down to the next level when the lock gate is closed. In Oxfordshire dialect it is known as a ‘lasher’, a name used on rivers as well as the canal. As we continue to our final destination, past another section of Agenda 21 residential moorings and two more wooden lift-bridges, brace yourself for a stark reminder of the 21st century when the canal passes beneath first the A34 Oxford ring road and then the A40.

You might like to consider these words from 1944 as you walk, from a book called *Narrow Boat* by L. T. C. Rolt, one of the founders of the Inland Waterways Association, which is a member organisation of the Oxford City Canal Partnership. The IWA campaigned to keep the British canal system open after the Second World War, and is still the main pressure group in the sector:



Wolvercote Lock from Ball's Bridge Picture Credit: Mark Davies

“To step down from some busy thoroughfare on to the quiet tow-path of a canal, even in the heart of a town, is to step backward a hundred years or more and to see things in a different, and perhaps more balanced perspective. The rush of traffic on the road above seems to become the purposeless scurrying of an overturned ant-hill beside the unruffled calm of the water, which even the slow passage of the boats does not disturb.”



Directions 11: *There is an option to leave the Trail here, by taking the steep flight of steps on the left up to the Godstow Road. There is a regular bus service to Oxford from Lower Wolvercote (turn right) or from opposite the village hall (turn left). Alternatively, you can continue past the village hall up to the roundabout, turn right down the Woodstock Road, and cross at the pelican crossing. All buses from here will take you into the city centre.*

Otherwise, continue under the two road bridges and stop where the canal splits in two, near the humpbacked brick bridge (No. 232). There is a bench here, which you might find provides some welcome relief!

Location 10: The Duke's Junction

A second connection to the River Thames

AUDIO
TRACK

10



Duke's Cut Picture Credit: Mark Davies

In 1789, a private channel, or cut, was dug for George, the fourth Duke of Marlborough – the main local landowner and a major shareholder in the Oxford Canal Company – in order to allow narrowboats from the canal to reach his paper mill at Lower Wolvercote. The Duke's Cut extended westwards for 250 yards, linking the canal with Wolvercote Mill Stream, a backwater of the River Thames.

The mill was leased in 1782 to William Jackson, proprietor of the newspaper *Jackson's Oxford Journal*, which is an important source of information about the early days of the canal. Jackson was also a Canal Company shareholder. Although the mill depended originally on water for its power, it began burning coal in 1811. As late as 1856 the Delegates of the Oxford University Press, who had taken over the lease of the mill, bought two horse-drawn narrowboats to bring 100 tons of coal each week from the Moira Colliery in Leicestershire – a round trip of 216 miles.

To the west of the bridge No. 232 is Duke's Cut Lock. It is unusual and ingenious in that it is designed to allow for the variable level of the river water beyond. Usually, the level of the

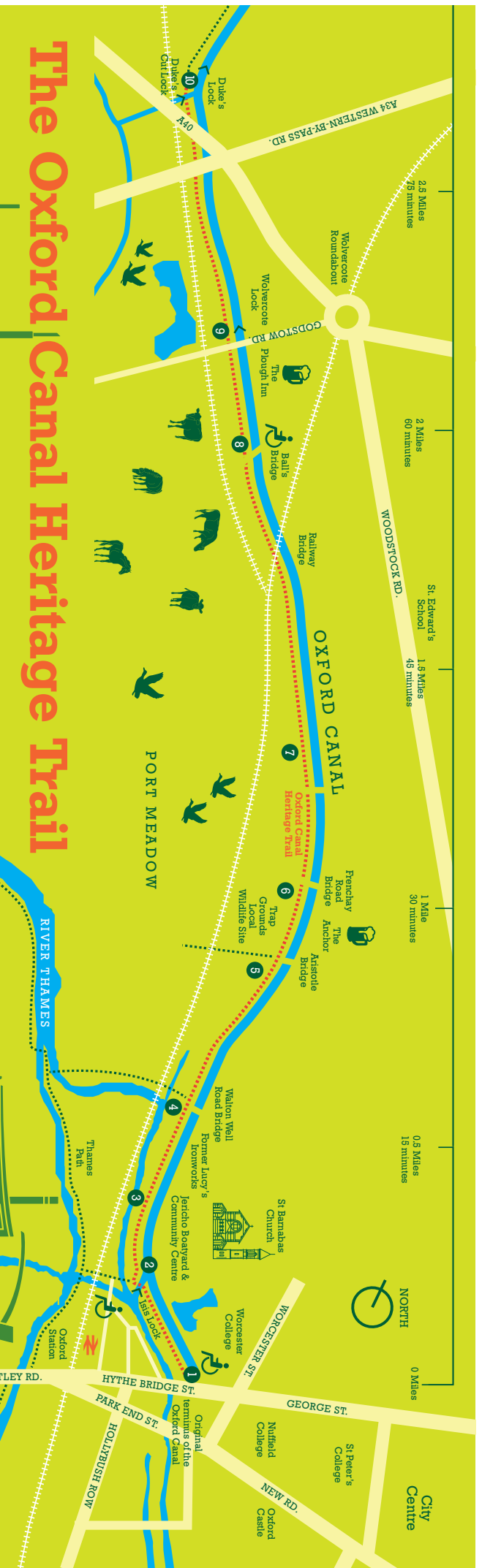
river is lower than that of the canal, but there are occasions when it is higher, and the lock allows for both situations. It is possible to follow the Duke's Cut a little farther on foot, but there is no through route to the Thames Path or to Wolvercote. The mill closed in the 1990s.

A closing summary: You have now walked more or less directly northwards from the city centre for three miles. In addition to learning about the canal and some of the structures along its route we have seen the location of the canal's terminus, many bridges, and several locks. We have seen a landmark church and the remaining active wharves at Hayfield Road and Jericho, passed domestic housing, new and old, and public houses in locations unchanged from the canal's earliest days. We have learned of past industries, of the early importance of convict labour, and the struggle to keep the canal open in the face of competition from first the railway, and then from road transportation.

Finally, we learned something about the living history of the canal, the residential boaters, and the different communities for whom it is socially, culturally, and recreationally important. Small wonder then that threats to the canal have been strongly resisted and that the Oxford City Canal Partnership continues to make the case for the restoration of the canal terminus, near where our walk began. The Oxford Canal is an 18th-century marvel of engineering and its rich heritage justly deserves to be more widely known. In time it is hoped that a signature gateway will provide a distinctive entrance to the canal on Hythe Bridge as befits this industrial gem in the city of dreaming spires!



Directions 12: To return to Oxford by public transport from here, you will need to retrace your steps back to Wolvercote Lock (Location 9) or Ball's Bridge (Location 8) and follow the instructions there.



LOCATIONS

1. Hythe Bridge
2. Isis Lock
3. Jericho
4. Walton Well Bridge
5. Aristotle Bridge
6. The Trap Grounds
7. St Edward's School
8. Ball's Bridge
9. Wolvercote Lock
10. Duke's Cut

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This Guide to the Oxford Canal Heritage Trail is one of the new resources developed as part of the Heritage Lottery funded Oxford Canal Heritage project (2013-2014) to raise the profile of the final 3 mile stretch of the 77 mile Oxford Canal in Oxford. The project worked with local communities to produce more information about the history and natural environment of the Oxford Canal and in particular about its cultural and industrial heritage. Everything is available at www.oxfordcanalheritage.org Why not revisit it after your walk?

Find out more about some of the people and events mentioned in this Trail Guide by visiting the Oxfordshire History Centre in Cowley Oxford www.oxfordshire.gov.uk/cms/public-site/oxfordshire-history-centre and listening to the Oxford Canal Heritage Oral histories of people who lived or worked (or whose families lived or worked) on the Oxford Canal, who currently live on the canal or have strong connections through art, literature, conservation or canal maintenance.

Please make a donation to the Canal and River Trust, a national charity that maintains about 2000 miles of waterways in England and Wales including the Oxford Canal. Text CANAL to 70123 to donate £3 or visit the website www.canalrivertrust.org.uk