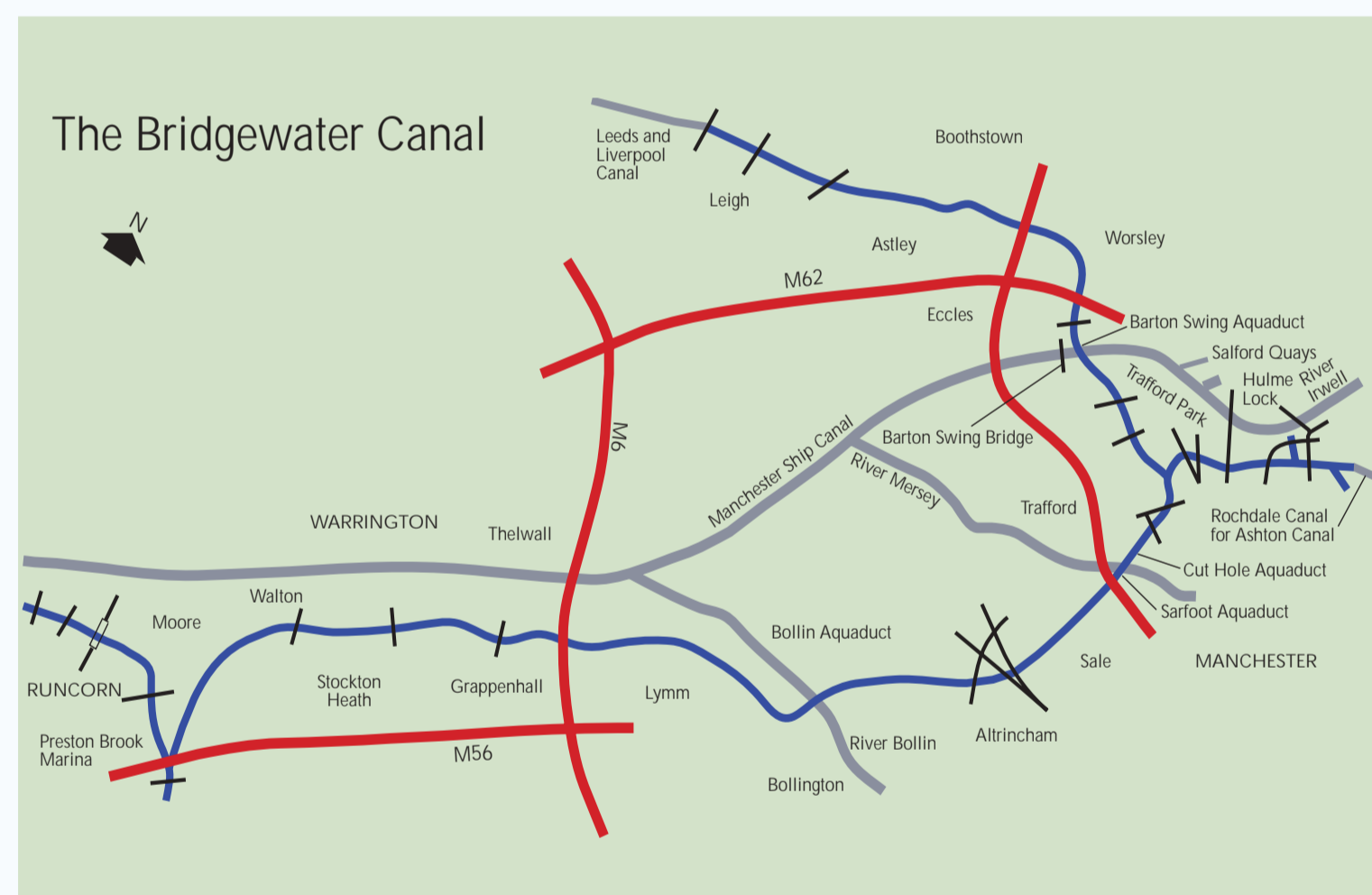


Bridgewater Canal

Introduction

The Bridgewater Canal begins at its junction with the Leeds Liverpool Canal in Leigh and runs eastwards to Manchester. The route then turns south through the city centre before swinging west out into North Cheshire, crossing the Bollin Valley and following the slopes south of The River Mersey as far as Runcorn. The entire route of the canal is still navigable and without the need to negotiate locks – as it maintains the same height above sea level throughout its length (the Bollin Valley is crossed by means of an earth aqueduct).

The full extent of the route described above took over 35 years to complete, but the first section from Worsley to Manchester opened in 1761, so becoming Britain's first 'true' canal (i.e. one which follows its own independent course rather than a 'cut' to improve the navigation of a river). The section through Lymm opened in 1763.



This photograph was taken in ???????? from the point you are standing now. The major change to the view nowadays is the absence of the Bridgewater Arms pub. This was pulled down in ????? and Lymm Youth Club now stands on the same spot.

History and Development

The Bridgewater canal was the work of Francis Egerton - 3rd Duke of Bridgewater, and the engineers John Gilbert and James Brindley.

The Canal was inspired by the Duke's interest in the coal industry and by what he had seen of canals on the continent during his youth. The Duke owned coal mines in Worsley but had difficulty getting his coal to market due to the poor condition of roads at that time, especially in winter. The opening of the Sankey Canal 1757 enabled coal to be transported by boat all the way from St Helens to Liverpool, and from there to ports around the country. This reduced the price of coal to a level at which the Duke of Bridgewater could not hope to compete.

The Duke then, set about digging his own canal, and the first section from Worsley to Castlefield in Manchester opened in 1761 – affording a much more practical and cheaper method of supplying the Manchester coal market.

The next stage was striking out across Cheshire to Runcorn, where access to the Mersey could be gained (via the only locks on the canal). This would enable The Duke to compete on equal terms with St Helens coal but opposition from landowners along the route – particularly Sir Richard Brooke of Norton Priory, meant that this section of the canal was not completed until 1776.

By 1776 though, inland waterways had become recognised as the way forward in commercial transport and by the time the canal reached Preston Brook, The Trent and Mersey Canal was under construction, and the Bridgewater Canal was linked to it. The final leg of the canal, from Worsley to Leigh was constructed in the late 1790s to link in with the Leeds & Liverpool Canal.

Canal Trade

Coal transportation was of course rapidly joined by the transportation of all manner of other goods as inland waterways revolutionised commerce. Canals shaped the development of towns in a way which can often still be seen today. In particular much of the old warehousing in the centre of Manchester can be traced back to the existence of the Bridgewater Canal. More locally, goods transported from Lymm included fustian (a type of cloth), crops and salt. One of the old canal warehouses still remains beyond Oughtrington, 1 1/2 miles east of here. On a rather less savoury note, one of the 'goods' transported to Lymm was nightsoil - a polite phrase for human excrement. In the days before sewer systems were developed, nightsoil was collected from the city, transported along the canal to rural areas and deposited on farmer's fields.



Barges unloading coal at Trafford Power Station.

The latter 18th and early 19th century were the boom years of canal trade. Eventually though their prosperity was threatened by the advent of the railways. This brought about a reversal of roles for those with an interest in canals, as they became the ones to lobby Parliament with their opposition to a new transport network.

However, the infrastructure which had grown up with the canal meant that it was able to exist alongside the railways for many years. In fact commercial traffic continued to use the canal until the 1960's. It was around this time though that the canal began to assume the character it has today, as interest in pleasure cruising began to grow. The first handful of pleasure craft began using the canal in 1952 and the number had grown to 600 by the early seventies. Nowadays well over a thousand pleasure craft are registered on the Bridgewater Canal and plenty of activity can be seen daily, particularly during the summer.

The Canal Today

The 3rd Duke of Bridgewater set up a trust which was to manage the canal following his death (in 1803). In 1874 the canal was sold to the recently formed Bridgewater Navigation Company. Eleven years later, the canal was sold to another newly formed concern, The Manchester Ship Canal Company - who own the canal to this day and manage it in conjunction with the Bridgewater Canal Trust. The Trust is an organisation comprising the Local Authorities through which the Bridgewater Canal passes and the Manchester Ship Canal Company itself. The Trust was formed following a breach of the aqueduct across the Bollin Valley which occurred in August 1971. This may have led to the closure of the canal but the Trust undertook the necessary repair work and the canal became fully navigable again some two years later.

The canal today is an excellent recreational resource with the towpath being a right of way from Runcorn to Altrincham. This forms part of the 'Cheshire Ring' 97 miles of circular navigation and walking comprising the Bridgewater, Rochdale, Ashton, Peak Forest, Macclesfield and Trent & Mersey canals.



The 1971 breach of the Bollin aqueduct. Some idea of the scale of the collapse can be gained from the people in the centre of the photograph.



Mute swans are amongst the variety of wildfowl which can be viewed at close quarters along the Lymm stretch of the Bridgewater Canal.

Locally the canal can be used as a basis for circular walks of varying lengths, particularly in conjunction with the two other long distance routes which pass close by: The Trans Pennine Trail and the Mersey Valley Timberland Trail.

Lymm Heritage Trail

Lymm Heritage Trail is a self-guided trail exploring the built and natural heritage of the village. The route is based on the north/south valley which runs through the village centre (comprising Lymm Dam, The Dingle and Slitten Gorge) and two east/west routes – The Bridgewater Canal and the former Warrington to Altrincham Railway (now part of the Trans Pennine Trail).

The full route is 3 1/2 miles but the trail can be walked in shorter sections if desired. The route is waymarked and route maps can be found on each of the eleven information boards along the trail.

