

THE GRAND WESTERN CANAL CANOE TRAIL

General Information

The Grand Western Canal is no narrow boat or tub-boat canal, but was built for good sized barges. Broad and once deep with solid bridges and culverts, the Grand Western swings through the red earth of the Devon countryside as if it belongs there. The name is reminiscent of the later Great Western Railway.

For eleven miles, the Canal, formed part of an effort to save lives, ships and time lost in rounding Land's End, by providing a means to bring South Wales coal landed at Somerset ports, across Devon to Exeter. It was planned to eventually extend this Canal to form a link between the Exe and the Kennet and Avon, thereby giving an inland waterway route between London and Exeter.

Twenty years after the first section was built, another on a much smaller scale was added to extend the line from Lowdswell, to join the Bridgwater and Taunton Canal at Taunton. This long abandoned addition also included inclined planes and seven vertical lifts.

The present Canal was only a side branch of the main canal, which would have followed a line around Cullompton to meet the Exe Estuary at Topsham. Roughly following along the line now occupied by the M5 Motorway.

The 11 miles of Devon section remains open, despite various threats to its future. The Somerset section was closed in 1867, and is gradually disappearing from the landscape, although sections are now used as a footpath. It maintains a historical interest and has been subject to some archaeological excavations.

The Canal is now designated as a Country Park and is owned by Devon County Council following some regeneration and repair in the 1960s. It is now widely valued for its quiet footpath whilst the leisurely progress of the horse drawn barges is often a welcome change to motorway driving and hectic modern life.

Types of Canoe/kayak

A placid water canal with no locks or portages, the Canal follows the natural contours of the Devon country side and is suitable for any type of canoe or kayak. Although spring fed there is no noticeable current but it is exposed in places and does catch the wind. There is no restriction on the distance and the use of canoe and kayaks is seen to be ecologically sound as their progress helps to aerate the water.

The paddler may choose a journey to suit; - a round trip to a suitable turning point, or a one way trip of varying distance according to the access points with a simple shuttle.

The water is very shallow at some points, especially towards the tunnel area and there is a heavy annual growth of weed. Paddlers are advised to avoid the hot summer months. The Canal is probably at its best in the spring time.

There are 14 points with road access, but not all have space for parking. Often there will be interpretation boards with maps and some local information and detail of local by-laws.

Licences

There is a small charge levied to help with the ongoing maintenance. Tickets are widely available at the Canal Basin, from shops in the villages along the route or direct in advance from Devon County Council, Topsham Rd, Exeter.

Access Points with parking.

1. **Tiverton Canal Basin** SS 957 129 . Public Car Park (paying) with short carry to the waters edge. Here is a grassed picnic areas, lavatories, tea rooms and Canal interpretation area.
2. **Halberton** SS 997 131. Plenty of free parking on the bank as the Canal swings around the golf course in an area known as the Swans Neck.
3. **Sampford Peverell** ST 032 145. In the centre of the Village a car park gives access over a small field to the canal bank. Public Toilets here and good pub with a broad food menu (with its own landing steps). On the right bank after about $\frac{3}{4}$ mile, just before the bridge carrying the N Devon Link Road there is a new landing area. approached via an access toll road from the nearby Minnows Caravan and Camp site.
4. **Fossend Bridge** ST 069 170. The road from Burlescombe to Westleigh crosses here and there is a wharf with some limited parking. Away to the west are the Limestone Quarries, now much more extensive than when the canal was built but none the less all part of the history of the Canal.
5. From **Fossend** the canal is very shallow in a deep cutting. On the west bank you might notice an overgrown chute where quarried stone was let down to canal level. Now the Canal narrows and enters the Waytown Tunnel which carries it underneath the **Hokcombe Rogus** to **Wellington** Road. This area of the Canal often gets blocked with fallen trees but in normal circumstances it is possible to paddle through the tunnel. Quite an interesting experience!
6. The Canal comes to an abrupt end at **Lowdwells** ST 072 175 There is some free parking here but please beware to not obstruct the entrance to the private wharf house.

Further Reading

There is a excellent and widely respected book on the Canal by Helen Harris, reprinted and revised in 1996 by Devon Books. ISBN 0 86114 901 7

The Canal is situated in rural Devon, Tiverton has all the facilities of a small market town with many pubs, restaurants, fish and chip shops etc as well a good local and informative local museum.