



Thames and severn canal

1600 A Mr. Hill and a Mr. Rowland Vaughan published ideas on creating a waterway link from the River Thames to the River Severn. If the plan had gone ahead it would have brought the canal era forward by over 150 years. However, the waterway was never built though the idea was not forgotten. 1610 Thomas Procter published pamphlets in London promoting a link between the Thames and the Severn. He proposed the construction of a link which would give London access to the plentiful coal mines of south east Wales and the Forest of Dean. 1619 The astronomer and mathematician, Henry Briggs, was next to promote the idea of a cross country link and he is often (mistakenly) credited with the first idea of such a route. He did a detailed survey but again nothing was done. His survey was clearly not the same route which the final route was constructed. 1633 It was Mr. Hill (see 1600) who was next to try his luck. This time he even got the personal backing of Charles I and he said he would survey a number of costs being submitted before building would commence. However, it seems that Hill's much talked about plans got no further than his initial pamphlet. 1655 Next came Francis Matthew who had been a support of the Lord Protector's government in a scheme which would connect the Thames and Severn via the Bristol Avon. He got the support and went ahead with a survey. 1656 Matthew reported back to Parliament with the findings of his survey. Like all those who'd gone before him his report centred on the route without any mention of the differences in ground conditions or the problem of water supply. Instead, Matthew tried to win good favour with Cromwell by emphasising the profits that would be gained if the state built and took control of the Royal Family the whole country regained financial confidence and river improvements were being made in many areas. Francis Matthew re-appeared on the scene with a new scheme (on an old theme) which he claimed had the full backing of the King himself. This time the Bill past two readings in Parliament but was then heard of no more. 1664 Three new Bills were put to Parliament (two of them on the same day) proposing a Thames and Severn link but none of these resulted in an Act being obtained. 1668 Francis Matthew was not a man who gave up easily. For a third time he put a Bill forward to build what would have been Britain's first ever completely artificial waterway. Somewhat strangely, Matthew's backer in the House of Lords was the Earl of Bridgewater. Little did anyone know that it would be the Earl's great grandson who would eventually build the country's first ever totally independent artificial waterway nearly 100 years later. attempts in the past. Unfortunately for Matthew his Bill failed to get past the first reading yet again though he still continued with his promotions for a number of years. 1670 Matthew tried once again to raise interest in a cross country water link. This time he proposed an upgrade for the river Avon from Bristol to Malmesbury where a 5 mile artificial cut would link with the Thames at Lechlade. By now he even saw the importance of locks (or saffes) and he included water supply schemes. It seems that Francis Matthew had been born 100 years too early, once again his proposals were turned down and he was never mentioned in canal history again. Over the next hundred years many rivers were upgraded and eventually artificial cuts were opened at various places around the country. One such cut connected the Gloucestershire town of Stroud to the river Severn. 1779 When the Stroudwater Navigation opened the idea of a cross country link towards the River Thames was rekindled. but traders from far away to the north in the Severn Valley. These were the businessmen of Shropshire who transported coal and iron from places like Coalbrookdale and Shrewsbury on the higher reaches of the river. They needed a route to London which could replace pack horses and the often unusable roads. 1783 An Act was finally passed enabling the construction of a canal which would link the River Thames to the River Thames to the River Thames and Thames and Thames are severn. It was to be a broad canal able to take Severn Trows and Thames in this region was often shallow and unnavigable. Flash locks (rather than canal-style pound locks) continued to be used to keep mill owners happy - and barge owners very unhappy. Robert Whitworth did the original survey for the Thames & Severn Canal but Josiah Clowes was employed as Chief Engineer with James Perry as superintendent. The appointment of Clowes probably emphasises the involvement of backers from the iron industry in Shropshire as Clowes was involved in many of the canal projects in that area. As with virtually all canals the main bulk of labourers were professional "navvies" who travelled from canal to canal. However, the Thames & Severn Canal was also built by local men as the route was constructed at a time of high unemployment in Gloucestershire due to a depression in the wool trade. 1786 The canal was opened from the Stroudwater Navigation to Daneway on the west side of the hills took 3 more years to complete. 1788 On July 19th His Royal Highness, King George III, visited the eastern end of the unfinished Sapperton Tunnel. The cutting leading to the tunnel and the junction at Wallbridge in Stroud where the Thames & Severn Canal met the Stroudwater Navigation. 1789 The Thames & Severn Canal opened throughout, running for 30 miles (including a short branch to Cirencester) from the Stroudwater Navigation in Stroud. It was the first of the 3 southern cross-country routes to open, ahead of the Wilts & Berks and Kennet & Avon, but it never came close to the success of the other two waterways. In fact, it has been said that at best the Thames and Severn Canal was no more than a complete failure! Sapperton Tunnel on the summit level was the 3rd longest it ever built in Britain at over 2 miles long but it caused many a headache for the company because it (and some of the locks on the east side of the canal) had been built on an unequal level. This and numerous other problems were mainly caused by very poor workmanship during construction. The contractor, Charles Jones, had often been too drunk to supervise the work. Eventually he had been sacked and replaced by John Nock and Richard Sheppard but this had been done too late and much of the damage had already been done. The canal also suffered badly from water shortages which were made worse by the leakage of up to 3 million gallons a day! This was due to the oolite rock (a porous limestone) which the canal bed had been built on. 1790 Water problems proved to be so bad on the eastern side of Sapperton Tunnel that a pumping station was built at Thames Head to supply the thirsty canal with water from the River Thames. However, the pump took four years to build and canal trade suffered badly throughout this time. the poorly kept river and thus canal traffic never reached its expected volume. As if things weren't bad enough, poor trade was soon turned into very bad trade when a much shorter route between the Midlands and London opened less than one year after the Thames & Severn. Within 12 months of opening, the canal's main reason for being built - as a cross-country link to the capital - was completely lost. The one part of the canal which was well used was its western end between Stroud and Brimscombe and for a while it prospered as a transhipment centre where cargoes would be transferred from Severn trows into Thames barges or narrow boats. Most boats were not pulled by a horse but hauled by gangs of men. Cargoes included wool, buildings were unique to the Thames & to a sole from south Wales and the Black Country and metal products from Shropshire. 1791 Five "dwellings" were built on the canal though these were no ordinary canal cottages. The buildings were unique to the Thames & Severn Canal, they were constructed completely round (like sail-less windmills) and had curved windows to give the occupant an all-round view. Each of the buildings (known as "roundhouses") had 3 storeys with just one room on each floor. These consisted of a stable on the ground, living quarters on the middle floor and a bedroom on top. Although the buildings were very useful in canal terms, they were very unpopular with those who had to live in them. There is even a famous story about a canal employee's bride-to-be who refused to live in one of them unless the company made alterations - amazingly, they did! The house was altered by putting the stable outside and adding a separate kitchen to the ground floor. The design of the roundhouses was dropped after the 5th was completed and more traditional cottages were built thereafter. All 5 roundhouses survive today, amazingly four of them are still used as houses while the fifth is derelict. Coincidentally, the derelict one is the one which the company redesigned for the bride-to-be. 1819 The neighbouring Wilts & Berks Canal company opened a branch named the North Wiltshire Canal which connected the Wilts & Berks Canal to the Thames & Severn Canal at Latton, near Cricklade. This new canal provided a better route for through traffic from the Thames & Severn Canal to the River Thames because it avoided the troublesome upper Thames by joining the river much further downstream at Abingdon. It also opened a route to Swindon and to the Kennet & Avon Canal further south. However, the North Wiltshire Canal was built to narrow dimensions, preventing full sized Thames & Severn barges from making the trip. 1824 The Thames & Severn canal's owners joined forces with the Gloucester & Berkeley Canal and the Stroudwater Navigation in their opposition to a Bill put forward by the newly formed Stroud & Severn Rail Road Company which wanted to build a railway alongside the whole length of the Stroudwater Navigation's route. The Bill was successfully opposed. 1830 During the 1820's and 1830's the Thames & Severn company made of number of modifications to the canal. This included repairs to the pounds which still suffered badly from leakages on the west side of the summit at Sapperton were modified, they had been capable of taking trows up to 90 feet long but these vessels had never been used in any great numbers this far up the route. The locks were shortened to 70 feet (the length of a working narrow boat). This modification saved around 20% of water. 1836 The Thames & Severn Canal put forward a Bill to turn themselves into a railway company. This was brought about when a newly formed company, the Cheltenham & Great Western Union Railway, proposed to build a track running alongside the canal from Cirencester to Stroud. At the same time another railway was proposing to run across the Cotswolds, this was to be - wait for it - the Cheltenham, Oxford And London And Birmingham Union Railway! The C&GWUR lost the battle to run a line alongside the canal but the Thames & Severn also lost the battle to convert itself into a railway. The CO&L&BUR won the day and construction began. 1845 The railway. The CO&L&BUR won the day and construction began. opened, the Thames & Severn Canal began to take in water - so to speak! 1864 The Thames & Severn Canal, now struggling badly due to railway competition, paid out its last dividend to its shareholders. 1866 Faced with more and more proposed railway company. They hoped to link the railways near Oxford to those near Stroud, making use of the ready made tunnel at Sapperton for a single line track. This would have meant draining the canal, cutting off important water supplies used by the Stroudwater Navigation and Gloucester & Berkeley Canal. The Thames & Severn company planned to get around this by piping water from its pump at Thames Head. It is said that the water supply proposal is what cost the Thames & Severn Company their Act of Parliament because there was huge opposition against using Thames water to supply the Severn Valley. 1876 A man named Richard Potter, a former Director of Great Western Railway, began to buy up the shares of the Thames & Severn Canal with the sole intention of gaining control and turning the canal into a railway to provide competition for his former company. He eventually acquired around 80% of Thames & Severn Canal shares. 1881 Potter and the Thames & Severn Canal company (which he now controlled) proposed to build a railway from Cirencester to Stroud which would link with other existing railways. Once again the Stroudwater, Gloucester & Berkeley and Wilts & Berks canals opposed the scheme though Potter strongly urged them to join forces with him. They all refused and Potter was defeated. He was quick to wash his hands of the canal (which he'd never wanted) by selling his shares to the Great Western Railway for a healthy profit. This meant that the canal was safe from being turned into a railway but was now owned by a railway! GWR did not close down the waterway, objections from the neighbouring navigations would have been too strong to get away with that. Instead the railway simply left the canal to decay. Because of this navigation became very difficult so the connecting canals proposed to join forces and lease the canal for 21 years. Great Western Railway agreed to the lease but only at a ridiculous price which the canals could not afford. 1886 After many complaints from neighbouring canals and canal carrying companies the Board of Trade inspected the Thames & Severn Canal. Finding it to be in a very bad state they warned Great Western Railway that work must be carried out immediately to bring the canal up to a reasonable standard. However, GWR ignored the board and nothing was done. 1893 Great Western Railway announced it was to close 26 miles of the Thames & Severn Canal, leaving just 4 miles intact. Local traders, boatmen and even the local councils petitioned MPs. Great Western Railway were stopped from closing the canal on the grounds that there were plenty of people and connecting canal companies willing to keep the route maintained. 1895 Due to all the pressure an Act was passed allowing the setting up of a Thames & Severn Canal Trust comprising mainly of local people with the help of other canal companies such as the Gloucester & Berkeley and even the distant Staffordshire & Worcestershire. The Act included proposals to make the upper Thames easier to navigate but this was never done. So much work needed to be done on the canal that during the following 5 years it was only navigable throughout for 3 months. 1900 The Thames & Severn Canal was taken on by Gloucestershire County Council who (before allowing traffic on it) rebuilt 2½ miles of the summit level to the east of Sapperton Tunnel. The tunnel and the summit level had leaked permanently since the day the canal was built. The approach to the tunnel (King's Reach) was lined with concrete. 1904 The canal was fully re-opened but traffic never recovered even to the level of what had been very low usage in the first place. 1927 After years of little use, ever increasing water supply problems and high maintenance costs all of the canal was closed from the junction into the Thames to Puck Mill Wharf, westwards, down through the Golden Valley to Stroud was also closed and the whole canal was left to become dry and derelict. 1939 Abdela & Mitchell (a boat the valley to Stroud was also closed and the whole canal was left to become dry and derelict. building company) continued to build boats on the canal even after the route was officially closed in 1933. Their yard was at Hope Mill Lock, west of Brimscombe, from where finished craft were delivered by land as there was no way they could sail down the disused canal. This business ceased at the beginning of WW2. 1966 The former busy transhipment port at Brimscombe was demolished to make way for a factory. The basin had a number of original buildings around it and an island in the centre used for keeping important cargo away from would-be thieves. After the demolition only the old wharfinger's house was left standing. A plaque was placed on a wall "commemorating" the site of the basin. By this time the whole canal was overgrown and completely derelict. 1977 The classical eastern portal of Sapperton Tunnel (near Coates) was fully restored. In the years since, the canal restoration trust has run trips into the tunnel though the bore has been completely blocked for many years due to rock falls deep inside. Coates roundhouse, which is situated near to the tunnel, was later rescued from the threat of collapse. 1990 An active effort was made to start restoration work on the whole route which would probably be more popular with tourists than it ever was with traders. The "Stroudwater, Thames and Severn Canal Trust" (later renamed the "Cotswold Canal Trust") began restoring the Thames & Severn Canal and the adjoining Stroudwater Navigation. 1993 One of the most sensitive areas on the whole route is at Daneway where 6 remaining locks climb up to the western side of the summit just before Sapperton. A three year project was begun by the canal trust and the British Trust For Conservation Volunteers (with help from Gloucestershire Wildlife) in which 2 locks would be cleared during each of the following 3 winters. This had become vital because the locks were in danger of being devoured forever by mother nature. Also, the first location to be restored on the eastern side of the canal was Cerney Wick Lock to the north of Cricklade. 1994 A group of volunteers on a project known as "Dig Deep" restored the structure of Boxwell Spring Lock near South Cerney. It took 2 years of volunteers in this area in restoring and maintaining the towpath. 1995 The "Dig Deep" project (run by the Waterway Recovery Group) next turned their efforts on Wildmoorway Lock (just north of Cerney Wick). Work on this lock was also expected to take several years. 1996 In the area which the "Dig Deep" project and other restoration work was taking place, between Cricklade and Cirencester, the busy A419 was to be upgraded right alongside the Thames & Severn's route. The canal trust were very worried that the new road would not accommodate the canal and a public inquiry was set up to look into the problem. As a result of this the Highways Authority were told they must plan their new road with provisions for a canal crossing which would not hamper the canals restoration or obstruct future navigation. This all sounded fine but the inquiry went on to say that the building of the road bridge must be paid for by the canal trust. This would have been an enormous amount of money for the struggling trust to have to bear - motorway bridges do not normally come under a canal society's budget!! A long political battle began which even had government colleagues putting forward contradicting views. The minister for the environment said he was very much in favour of restoring the canal bridge. Meanwhile, over at the western end of the canal the authorities were much more friendly. The Stroud bypass (also part of the A419) was built with navigable bridges and the local council restored a number of old hump backed bridges which had been flattened. The council also agreed to rebuild a bridge on the A46 in the centre of Stroud when they changed the road layout above the canal line. western portal of Sapperton Tunnel was restored to its former glory. The rather plain looking derelict portal was transformed into its original gothic style. By this time many locks along the line had been cleared out and repaired, Wallbridge Upper Lock in the centre of Stroud became the first to be fully restored with gates installed and water flowing through. With the A419 Latton bypass now under construction the canal society were becoming increasingly worried as no settlement had been agreed over the building of a canal bridge. The reason this was surprising is because the surprising is because the surprising move of offering to donate £250,000 towards the building of a canal bridge. bridge would not be in Gloucestershire but in neighbouring Wiltshire. Gloucestershire realised that a fully restored canal would bring them lots of benefit but this was not the first time GCC had come to the canal's rescue. Back in 1900 they bought the whole canal a restored it following GWR's attempts to close the route. Support for the canal's restoration was growing all the time, hundreds of people had written to their local MP and each of the MP's, along with every local authority and the Environment Department pledged their support to the canal. 1997 In May there was a general election and the Conservative Party were ousted from government with the Labour Party taking power for the first time in 18 years. Immediately there was a change for the Thames & Severn Canal with the new government instructing the road contractors to include a navigable culvert showing just how close the canal had come to being blocked. The culvert under the dual-carriageway was to be 100 feet long, with a 12 feet 6 inch waterway width and 4 feet 6 inch towpath. Water depth would be 8 feet 6 inch towpath. Water depth would be 8 feet 6 inch towpath. Water depth would be 8 feet 6 inch towpath. Water depth would be 8 feet 6 inch towpath. Water depth would be 8 feet 6 inch waterway width and 4 feet 6 inch water depth would be 8 feet 6 inch towpath. Water depth would be 8 feet 6 inch water depth would be 8 feet 6 inch waterway width and 4 feet 6 inch water depth would be 8 feet 6 inch water depth water de Navigation at a basin in Stroud. The junction was to the south of the town at Wallbridge just west of the A46 road bridge. I visited this area in 1996 at which time the canal was culverted under the A46. Access to the towpath could be gained from the left side of the bridge (heading west) where there was a gap in a dry-stone wall. A house which the towpath runs alongside was the former Stroudwater Navigation Company HQ. The canal was overgrown when I was here and the towpath was missing in parts but there was plenty of water in the canal. It made a lot of noise as it splashed over Wallbridge Lower Lock which had been converted into a weir. Just beyond the lock on the towpath side (south) is a fenced off area belonging to the local water authority. The land now used as a parking area is the site of Stroud basin. Back at the A46 the canal reappears from the culvert on the east side of the road and passes a short section of derelict land which was being cleared by society members when I was here, just beyond the next road bridge is Wallbridge Upper Lock. Until recently this lock had spent well over 100 years in the shade, hidden below a road bridge had bridge had bridge had bridge below a road bridge which led to a nearby railway yard. In years gone by local people used the bridge as a diving platform and used the lock as a swimming pool! I found the lock to be completely restored with gates and lock beams, the old bridge had been removed. The canal begins its 30 mile unnavigable journey eastwards with a 3 mile stretch into Brimscombe. Until recently leaving Stroud was said to be a dreary walk with the canal full of weeds, factories and garages backing onto the towpath. The factories and garages remain but the canal hand towpath have now been cleared. The Stroud bypass has been built with provision for boats to pass through the canal was still culverted in this area to the east of the town when I was here in 1996. Near the point where the new bypass crosses over is a brand new shopping mall. As the canal route passes under the railway viaduct and over the River Frome. The old A419 is also never far away to the north. The first of 5 locks on route to Brimscombe is Bowbridge Lock which has been dammed to keep water in the pound above it. The River Frome is very close on the north bank though at the lock it disappears under what was once a large mill complex, this has now been converted into houses and flats. Past the lock, in the days before it was damned, the route had reverted to a dry ditch. One of the first jobs the restorers took on (in the mid 1970's) was to dredge this length and re-water it. It is now a very pleasant stretch. The canal curves as it travels to Griffin's Mill Lock and then Jubilee Bridge which was built (in iron) to celebrate Queen Victoria's fiftieth year on the throne in 1887. Ham Mill Lock and bridge come next, it was here in 1933 that the last boat ever to use the canal commercially was unloaded. The bridge at the lock was beautifully restored recently by Gloucester County Council. Bagpath Bridge is next, followed by a gentle south easterly curve towards Hope Mill Lock. This lock has long since been concreted over with buildings and a road on top of it - just one of many major headaches for the restoration trust. The canal route disappears it continues east towards Gough's Orchard Lock near the site of Brimscombe mills. From here into (and through) Brimscombe the route has long since been buried under roads and buildings. Brimscombe was a fairly important port today though there was once a number of buildings here including a weighing machine and a coal store built on an island. Only the wharfinger's cottage and a salt store had survived when the author of my reference book visited the area but I believe even these have now gone. Part of a factory (formerly Benson's - now Fenworth's) was built on the basin though this (I believe) has now been replaced by a car park (also belonging to Fenworth's). There is a small plaque on a wall of the factory commemorating the once busy port. The canal reappears down a small lane between the factory is the site of Bourne Lock which was the furthest lock capable of taking Severn Trows, it has been filled in. The locks from now on are all much smaller than those west of Brimscombe. Near Bourne Lock there is (or was until recent years) a blue door in a wall which is said to be in good condition though all I saw around this area was lots of weeds. The site of Brimscombe railway station is very close by, steam trains used to use the canal by the lock but it has been flattened and the canal is very overgrown. Next, after passing a culvert under the towpath, the route arrives at St. Mary's Lock. The stretch between Beale's and St. Mary's locks is about 1/2 a mile long and the walk is said to be one of the most attractive on the canal though when I saw it (1996) it looked much like any other totally unkempt, weed covered footpath. The railway crosses back overhead and then Ile's Mill Lock is reached. Just past here the route has been wiped out with 4 garages sitting on its filled in bed at the site of Ballinger's Lock. A little further east the route enters Chalford, one of the largest villages in Britain, which has many old buildings and warehouses. In the centre of the village is Chalford Wharf and the first of the 5 roundhouses. This one (during the 1970's) was a museum though it is now a house once again. In front of the roundhouse, on the old wharf is some old sluice gear from Sevill's Mill (which used to be a mile further east). Chalford Mill stands down the embankment from the roundhouse complete with its mill pond - a pretty scene. Nearby is the former company's Arms Inn which was built in the 1400's. East of the wharf was Chapel Lock but it was filled in during 1964 and the canal leaves the canal and runs to the south from now on. A minor road (heading towards Frampton Mansell) runs along the north side of the waterway as it travels up the beautiful Cotswold's Golden Valley. The site of Chalford railway station (on the south side of the canal) is high above Bell Lock which was partly covered by the main road (A419) when it was widened in the 1930's. Before the road was widened in the 1930's. narrow and dangerous even in those days! Past Bell Lock there are now some holiday homes by the canal side where Chalford skittle alley used to stand. Bell Lock and Red Lion Lock were (of course) both named after nearby pubs though Red Lion Lock were (of course) both named after nearby pubs though Red Lion Lock is about 200 yards past its pub which is (and always was) called The New Red Lion Inn. The pub stands sideways-on, the tiny River Frome flows between the pub and the canal and a small footbridge crosses over the river to give access to the towpath. Red Lion Lock bridge is the only such footbridge still standing in the Golden Valley It once carried an ancient track which climbed steeply up either side of the valley though now there is no track and only pleasant gardens use the River Frome as an ornamental feature while more expensive houses stretch up the valley side giving Chalford its image as an English "alpine" village. Alongside Red Lion Lock are a row of small cottages whose front doors open onto the towpath and lock side. The lock itself had been cleared by the man who was contracted to build the lock. As the canal continues up through the Golden Valley, Chalford's narrow old high street continues to run parallel a little way to the north. The canal passes the shrunken pond of Sevill's Mill which once covered the valley floor. This caused the canal to be squeezed onto the valley edge and the railway has a sort of 1/2 viaduct here where it crosses the former mill pond. Around the next bend is Golden Valley Lock which hasn't stood the tests of time as well as some of the others on the route. A building near the lock was once a mill and 2 different pubs but it is now a house. A minor road linking Chalford to the A419 crosses at this point, the area is known as Valley Corner. The next stretch passes the site of Ashmead's Mill which also once stretched across the valley floor, near by is a large Victorian waterworks which was a pumping station supplying water to Chalford and the canal near the tiny road bridge. The fine old Cotswold mill looks more like a large house rather than the traditional (younger) square buildings with large chimneys etc. Bakers Mill was owned by the Twissell family who first made cloth and later ground corn. The Thames & Severn Company bought the adjacent mill pond and some surrounding land and built a small reservoir which is situated beside the canal on its northern bank. The reservoir now looks like a large natural pond and has become a wildlife haven. The area has been described as "idyllic in summer" - I can vouch for this. The pound between Bakers Mill lower & upper locks was one of those which suffered worst from leakages. The canal was fed by Bakers Mill reservoir as well as a number of local springs and this extra water was certainly needed as the section between the next 2 locks (at Puck Mill Lower Lock is followed by Puck Mill Upper Lock which became the eastern terminus of the canal in 1927 when everything past here was closed down. The stretch around Puck Mill is now owned by the canal trust who maintain it as an example to the numerous other private owners on the route. Whitehall Lower Lock follows but there is quite a long pound before the Upper Lock which is actually the bottom lock in the flight of 7 which take the canal up to the 241 feet summit level at Daneway. The 7 derelict locks all come within ½ a mile, the second is Bathurst Meadow Lock and then come Siccaridge Wood Lower, Middle and Upper Locks. All the locks in the flight were shortened in the 1820's from 90 feet to 70 feet to 70 feet to 20%. The upper locks also had side ponds added (on the southern side) which were used as mini reservoirs and can still be seen in the undergrowth. Just before the top lock is the top most side pond which was also used as Daneway Basin. The wharfinger's cottage has been modernised and the winding hole near its entrance has survived. Just above the basin is a road bridge carrying the minor road to Sapperton with the Daneway, up through the beautiful Cotswold's Golden Valley, is as good as canal walking ever gets. The car park of the Daneway Inn is built on the site of the top lock which was immediately beyond the road bridge. Surprisingly, the bridge is a listed building. The Inn was built in 1784 and was previously called the Bricklayer's Arms though prior to 1807 it belonged to the canal and was used as lodgings for canal navvies. The summit level of the canal, now looking overgrown and miserable, swings south eastwards, crosses the River Frome (which has been culverted) and after a few hundred yards passes a derelict tunnel is the 3rd longest on Britain's canal system and took 5 years to construct. It is 14 feet wide for the most part though some parts are only 12 feet wide. Leakage and bad workmanship caused even more. The walls bulged beyond belief as water built up in the soft earth above caused even more. The walls bulged beyond belief as water built up in the soft rock behind them. eastern end. The path above the tunnel can be followed easily by looking out for the line of mounds from the tunnel spoil heaps. Legging through the tunnel spoil heaps. Legging through the tunnel spoil heaps. end, it's facade includes niches intended for statues, one of which was for Father Thames and the other for Madam Sabrina though it is though it is now a pub. Its interior was completely destroyed by fire in 1952 but has been well restored. The tunnel is sign-posted from the Coates to Tarlton road along a track. The section to the tunnel but decided not to repair the leaking stretches further east. Tarlton (road) Bridge is the next structure of note, this had been dammed with wooden stop planks when I was here in 1996 to keep enough water in the tunnel for boat trips. East of the bridge is the next structure of note, this had been dammed with wooden stop planks when I was here in 1996 to keep enough water in the tunnel for boat trips. East of the bridge is the next structure of note, this had been dammed with wooden stop planks when I was here in 1996 to keep enough water in the tunnel for boat trips. Coates roundhouse. This was the roundhouse which the company agreed to alter for the keeper's bride-to-be. The ground floor stable was made into a living room and a kitchen was added. This is the only roundhouse which is now derelict, the staircase to the upper floors has collapsed, and the floors (which were said to be shaky in 1971) have now gone completely. Demonstrating how desperate the canal company were to fill the leaking waterway, the roof of the roundhouse had been rescued from collapse by canal trust volunteers. From what I could tell, they got there just in time. Compared to the beautiful Golden Valley the east side of the canal seems somewhat bleak as the canal runs along a hillside looking weedy and dry. However, there is actually a lot of water under ground hereabouts as it is within ½ a mile of here that the springs emerge to form the River Thames. Not far from Thames Head and close to the canal is the site of the iron-age Trewsbury Fort which more recently has been used as a quarry. Both the River Thames and the Thames & Severn Canal can be reached from Thames Head railway bridge, 3 miles south of Cirencester, on the A433 (the old Roman Foss Way). The canal crossing is just a few hundred yards north of the railway bridge but the A433 has been realigned at the crossing point and the old Thames Head canal bridge is now on a quiet side road leading to some cottages which were once on the main road. The best way to see the bridge is to stand on the new A433 facing west at the crossing point. In effect, if you do this you will be standing about 6 feet above the former water line. The old A433 runs right alongside the new road but at a higher level thus the eastern parapet of the old bridge can easily be seen right in front of you. It has a plaque on it indicating the significance of this seemingly misplaced bridge wall. The new main road is built at the level where the top of the bridge's arch began. If you get very close up to the bridge you can peek through the very top of the arch to the dry canal bed below. The new main road has no bridge, it was built straight over the canal and on the road's eastern side the canal can still be seen just past Thames Head, 200 yards east of the old road bridge. The pump house itself has gone though the keeper's house still stands and is used as a private residence. The canal now winds north eastwards towards Siddington, south of Cirencester. On the way there Smerrill Aqueduct used to cross over the Cirencester to Kemble road (A429) but it was demolished during another road widening scheme many years ago. It was a single-arched structure which - like the rest of the canal - also leaked! The aqueduct was actually part of a huge embankment with a tunnel cut into it for the main road to pass through. A lot of the embankment was demolished during yet another road realignment scheme but this now makes it easier to look at the site as the original main road (which went through the aqueduct) is now a lonely side track. The stonework at the base of the west side of the site there is nothing but open space where the embankment used to continue. It now restarts about 100 yards further east, on the far side of the new realigned A429. The site of the aqueduct is easily detectable near the road junction to Coates though once again you first have to detect the former line of the main road. Between here and Siddington the canal alternates between a dry ditch, a wet ditch and nothing but grassy fields. At one point it runs alongside the minor road from Ewen to Siddington and almost looks like a canal though the water is very shallow and the towpath is well covered by huge trees. Further along the same road the canal crossed from one side to the other but the crossing is now marked only by two gates on either side of the road, each leading into grassy farm fields. The Cirencester Arm left the main line and ran north for about a mile from the junction house at Siddington village. The junction and the top lock of the Siddington fight are now on private land but they can be seen from the hump backed bridge which carries a minor road over the dry lock flight in the centre of Siddington. Immediately north of the junction the Cirencester Arm vanishes beneath a house but the dry line of the arm is filled in with rubbish dumped right next to a notice forbidding the dumping of rubbish! North of this there is a few hundred yards of dry though deep canal bed. Over to the west, across a field, the former Midland & South West Junction Railway ducks down into a cutting. The towpath is said to be clear on this stretch though the canal abruptly disappears under an extension to an industrial estate. The canal's former route passes right through the centre of the Somerfield supermarket which has obliterated all traces. The line of the somer Cotswold District Council offices are alongside the former bridge, the Cotswold Canal Trust now use part of the building as their HQ. Steps lead down the north side of the bridge onto what was once the Cirencester Arm. The current footpath is the former towpath, the canal was on the west side of the path. After a while the canal's route is lost beneath the new A419 bypass and other roads and buildings. At the north end of the arm only the wharf house at Queens Hill remains. The triangular shaped basin was filled in, in 1971. It was situated near Whitworth Road (named after Robert Whitworth who surveyed the Thames via the 4 Siddington Locks. As I have mentioned, the top lock is on private ground but the next two locks are still visible. In fact, they had been cleared of rubbish and weeds not long before I saw them in 1996. The fourth lock will provide an interesting test for the restorers however as the garden of a house has been built on top of it! Eagle-eyed canalcoholics will spot that part of the lock masonry is now part of the garden wall. However, the outside of the wall was previously the inside of the lock. Past the bottom of the flight the towpath has recently (1995) been restored for walkers by the Ramblers Association and the hump backed Cowground Bridge should also have been restored by now. The canal travels on a slight embankment as the towpath opens out and fields can be seen all around. These fields were once water meadows long before the existence of the canal. A little further south are another 3 locks to the north of South Cerney near the minor road to Cirencester. The top lock has a lock keeper's cottage alongside it though the lock itself has been buried. Across the minor road to Cirencester. differing levels giving a clue to the fields former use - but you will only detect this when the grass is short. Somewhere beneath the grass are the 2nd and 3rd South Cerney Locks. At the south end of the field is Northmoor Road (heading east to the A419). the river Churn, passing Boxwell Spring Lock which has been completely transformed from a dirty ditch full of bushes and trees to a fully restored working lock. It was not trees to a fully restored working lock. It was originally built as an after-thought and only changes the level by 3 feet. It was hoped that the level by 3 feet. It was hoped that the level by 3 feet. It was hoped that the level by 3 feet. water supplies. The next lock is Humpback Lock (or Wildmoorway Upper Lock) which certainly didn't help water supplies as it is 11 feet deep! To help this problem a side pond was built which can still be found (carefully) in the undergrowth to the west. Further south (just before the B4696 (Spine Road) is Wildmoorway Lower Lock which also has its own side pond. The Dig Deep project began restoring this lock in 1994. The canal continues - generally south - with the River Churn never far away. In fact, at one point the river comes right to the towpath's edge. At Cerney Wick there is a neat roundhouse - still lived in - beside a lock chamber which has been completely restored by the Dig Deep Project. The minor road to Cerney Wick crosses just past the lock. Another mile brings the canal into Latton and to the site of the former junction with the North Wilts & Berks Canal. As well as the junction there was a basin and a small aqueduct over the churn. A towpath bridge carried the towing horses over the entrance of the narrow North Wilts Branch. Sadly, both the towpath bridge and aqueduct have gone. To south the Thames and Severn Canal continues, still completely dry, heading towards the biggest hurdle in its history. This area may have changed a lot since I was here in 1996 because the new A419 bypass now runs alongside the canal. At the point where the new road crosses over, the canal was planned (by the Conservative Minister of Transport) to be blocked by the building of the new dual-carriageway. Thankfully after years of hard work - and the little matter of a change of government - the new Minister of Transport has ordered the construction of a navigable culvert. In fact, at 100 yards in length it will be more of a tunnel than a bridge. Cricklade Wharf and its wharf house are just 100 yards north of the River Thames Bridge at the end of the high street in Cricklade high street. However, because of the building of the new road I am not sure if this description still applies. The road into Cricklade (itself a one time A419) crosses the canal hear the old wharf. There used to be a lock and other canal buildings at the wharf but the only proof of the canal's existence here now is the flat fronted warehouse standing among farm buildings. The minor road to Kempsford runs roughly parallel to the canal for most of its journey eastwards into Kempsford. Some parts of this stretch of the canal sometimes hold water though other parts have disappeared under ploughed fields. About a mile east of Cricklade, standing among the fields, all alone in the "back of beyond", is an ivy-clad house named Evsey Cottage. In the undergrowth in front of the cottage is Eysey Lock which still has its bottom gates intact and because of this, the pound beyond is still in water. About half way along the Kempsford road is the left turn to Marston Meysey village, just past this junction is a footpath on the right which leads south to Marston Meysey roundhouse. My reference book written in 1971 said the house was in a dilapidated state though it is now fully restored and lived in and has had a large modern building added to it. Consequently it is now on private land and flattened the small embankment that the canal once rode along. At one point Oatlands hump backed bridge has been left standing in the middle of a field doing nothing and going nowhere. At Kempsford the canal passes a wharf with a wharf house similar to the ones at Circncester and Cricklade where the wharfinger's house and a warehouse were uniquely incorporated in a single building. Past the wharf a minor road crosses the canal route and heads south east to the village church. I visited Kempsford in 1996 and located the canal crossing, its bridge has long since gone and the canal has been completely filled in with nicely cut grass stretching east and west marking the narrow route between side walls of gardens. Out in the fields to the east are the Dudgrove pair of locks and at Inglesham is the final lock chamber and the junction with the Upper Thames. At the junction is a picture group of buildings which include the final roundhouse. The junction is fairly isolated and is best reached by walking along the River Thames for about ½ a mile from Lechlade. By doing this you will come to a wooden footbridge over the river, beyond this is a winding hole and the head of navigation for boats on the River Thames. At the winding hole and the inner to spot the top of the final roundhouse but hidden out of site among the buildings is the lock and its hump backed bridge. Because the canal junction and lock are on private ground it is impossible to view them properly. A canal walks book suggests you should cross the Thames then go through a gate and cross a drawbridge over the River Coln and knock on a door to ask if you can take a look around. Well - its up to you - but don't say I sent you! The Thames & Severn Canal Company buildings are now part of a small retail centre. I saw these buildings when I parked in their car park. The only trouble is - at that time I did not know what they were! Note: Since this page was written in 1997 a great deal of work has been done (mostly by volunteers) in clearing the derelict canal and restoring parts of it. However, there is also a strong campaign from local people who are against the re-opening of the canal. Visit the Cotswold Canal Trust website. Back to Top

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