

# The Bridgwater & Taunton Canal

Somerset County Council  
and the  
Inland Waterways Association

## Waterside wildlife

Walking or boating along a canal is an ideal way of seeing nature at close quarters. Common birds on this canal are the moorhen and coot. Moorhens have nearly-black plumage and a red forehead, whereas the similar coot can be distinguished by its distinctive white forehead and bill. Both have large families of up to a dozen chicks. The much larger heron is a stately bird which often stands motionless in shallow water watching for fish or frogs. When disturbed, it takes to the air with slow beats of its grey wings.

Insect life flourishes in summer.

You can often see the colourful bodies of dragonflies and damselflies sparkling in the sun while, on the water's surface, whirligig beetles and pond skaters dart about. Feeding on insects are small animals such as water voles, their presence often given away by a sudden "plop" in the water.



The clean water of the canal supports abundant plant life. Tall reeds overshadow rushes and clumps of yellow flag iris along the edge of the waterway, while the wide, leathery leaves of waterlilies float on the surface. Many different types of weed grow profusely in the water as it becomes warmer in summer.

The canal is generally about 3-4ft deep (0.9-1.2 metres) and is renowned for its excellent fishing. Most coarse species are present – they include roach, pike, perch, carp, bream, tench and small minnows. The pike is the largest of all canal fish and often lurks among reed beds. Usually hidden in the water but sometimes dredged up and dumped with mud on the canal bank are the large shells of fresh water duck mussels.

## Further reading

- The Canals of South West England (Charles Hadfield)
- Bridgwater Docks and the River Parrett (Brian J Murless)
- The Bridgwater and Taunton Canal (C A Buchanan)
- The Chard Canal – Selected Highlights (Inland Waterways Association)
- By Waterway to Taunton, A history of the Bridgwater & Taunton Canal, and River Tone (Tony Haskell)
- The Grand Western Canal (Helen Harris)

## River Parrett Trail

A 50 mile walking Trail which can be enjoyed as a hike over 4 or 5 days or a series of shorter walks. For further information visit the River Parrett Trail website: [www.riverparrett-trail.org.uk](http://www.riverparrett-trail.org.uk)

## Refreshments

Bridgwater	Many pubs and cafes
Huntworth	Boat and Anchor public house
North Newton	Harvest Moon public house
Creech St Michael	Bell Inn public house Riverside public house
Bathpool	Bathpool Inn public house
Taunton	Many pubs and cafes

## Tourist Information

The Library, Taunton  
**Tel.** Taunton (01823) 274785

Town Hall, High Street, Bridgwater  
**Tel.** Bridgwater (01278) 427652

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## 1. Bridgwater Docks

The Docks were opened in 1841, when the Bridgwater and Taunton canal was extended to join the River Parrett via the two basins you see today. High tides in the Parrett were used to maintain high water in the dock, the water being retained behind the large lock gates. This type of dock is known as a 'floating harbour'. From the outer or tidal basin, two locks lead to the river; the ship lock is now sealed off but the smaller, barge lock has been restored. Around the basin are bollards and the sluices which were used to flush silt out of the dock and into the river.

A bascule bridge carries the road to Chilton Trinity across the dock between the two basins. The original bridge was extensively restored in 1907, 1984 and in 2005 the bridge was further overhauled.

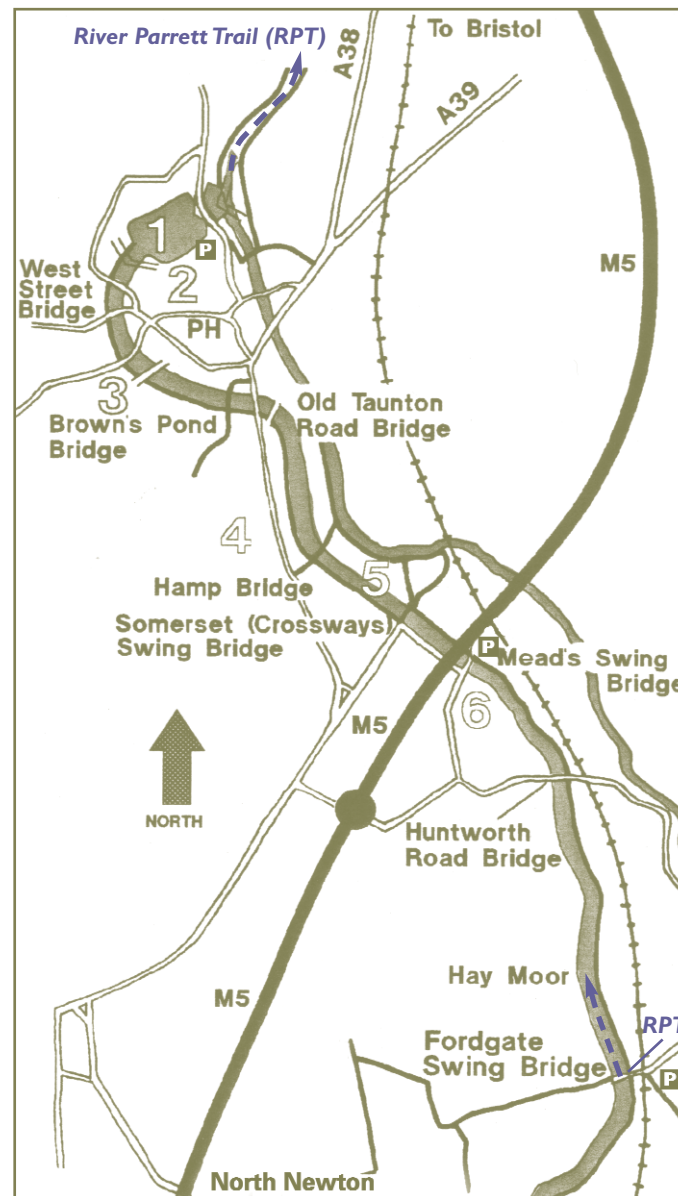
The inner basin is now used as a marina. On its south side stands Ware's Warehouse; dating from 1841, it was derelict until the early 1990s and has now been restored to accommodate residential flats, pub and restaurant, and toilets for boaters. Near the Bascule Bridge stands one of the original hand operated cranes, whilst opposite, on the north bank, where housing now stands, there used to be a large mound called The Mump formed from the material dug out to form the docks.

## 2. Newtown Lock

The once derelict area, towards the western end of the basin, has now been redeveloped with modern housing but the old Bowerings Mill, which produces animal feed, is a reminder of the dock's industrial past. The restored lock, which is crossed by a swing footbridge connects the dock to the canal, the canal being the dock's source of replenishment water. Leaving the Lock behind, the canal towpath swings away from the road and enters into a shallow cutting, around the western side of Bridgwater.

## 3. Albert Street Cutting

The canal passes under Victoria Road Bridge, considerably extended in 1931, and then, after Wembdon Road Bridge, narrows and squeezes through a cutting with sheer stone walls. It then passes under the tunnel-like West Street



Bridge, beyond which massive wooden buttresses support the high retaining walls. A pedestrian ramp allows access to the canal towpath from West Street.

## 4. Hamp

After passing near the YMCA at Albert Street Bridge, the canal emerges to give views of the Quantocks to the west and a succession of brick bridges (some original, some rebuilt) across the canal, which soon draws alongside the River Parrett. The two waterways are separated by only a thin strip of land and Hamp Weir allows canal water to spill into the river. A flooded clay pit on the towpath side is one of many reminders of Bridgwater's once flourishing brick and tile industry.

## 5. Factory Arm

The canal gradually enters more rural surroundings and a concrete pill-box on the far side stands close to the point where the original (1827-1841) line of the canal headed straight for the Parrett at Huntworth before the construction of Bridgwater Dock. The old basin has been filled in, but a short detour leads to Somerset Bridge, carrying the railway over the River Parrett and constructed in 1904 to replace an earlier unsuccessful Brunel design.

## 6. Swing Bridges

Crossways Bridge is the first of three swing bridges in the next few miles of canal which have been rebuilt to replicate the original design of such bridges on this canal. It is operated manually by boat crews to allow the passage of craft. The towpath crosses to the other canal bank at this point and the M5 motorway viaduct dominates the scene. After this, the Boat and Anchor public house (alongside the Mead's swing bridge) offers refreshment. There is a small car park adjacent to the Meads Bridge. The wide section of canal north of the Huntworth Bridge is known as widewater and here smaller craft could turn.

Huntworth Road Bridge is an unattractive structure, rebuilt to carry heavy traffic, gives access to Fordgate swing bridge next to Fordgate Farm and a small car park for fisherman is located here. This length is peaceful and typical of the rural setting of much of the route of this canal.

## 7. Standards and King's Locks

Having been on the level since leaving Bridgwater, the canal is raised about five and a half feet (1.7 metres) by each of these two locks. They are 54ft long (16.5 metres) and 13ft (4 metres) wide, big enough to take one barge or four tub-boats. Their brickwork is topped by lias stone and engineering bricks. Of interest are the concrete balance beams on the lock gates which were installed after the First World War. Between the two locks is White's Dairy Bridge, and at Godfrey's Corner (north of King's Lock) there used to be a milestone engraved "III\_ miles".



## 8. North Newton

At North Newton is another swing bridge. From here a short walk leads to the village. The Harvest Moon public house in the centre of the village serves refreshments. The tower of St Peter's Church rises above the houses and although rebuilt in 1884, its origin is much older. The Alfred Jewel, a Saxon ornament which is the oldest surviving Crown Jewel, was found here in 1693. It is now in the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford.

Continuing southwards, the canal passes the site of an abandoned swing bridge before passing under Coxhill Bridge, a simple brick structure. Note the metal rubbing strips under the arch, deeply grooved by the ropes of horse-drawn boats. Across the fields to the west stands landscaped parkland of old Maunsel House



## 9. Maunsel and Higher Locks

Each lock again raises the canal by some five and a half feet (1.7 metres); Maunsel Lock retains a full set of heavy metal counterweights on the paddles or sluices which let water into or out of the lock, a feature which is unique to this canal. Along-side this lock is a former lock-keeper's cottage. A landscaped car park and picnic site is set amongst the trees of a former orchard, adjacent to the canal at Lower Maunsel, for those wishing to visit this attractive stretch of canal. Teas and light refreshments are available at the centre beside the lock.

## 10. Black Hut

The canal runs along an embankment to another swing bridge; close to this there is a tar-coated timber hut with a fireplace, its lintel being a piece of bridge rail. It was used by workmen who maintained the canal and is an interesting relic from the canal age.

## 11. Durston

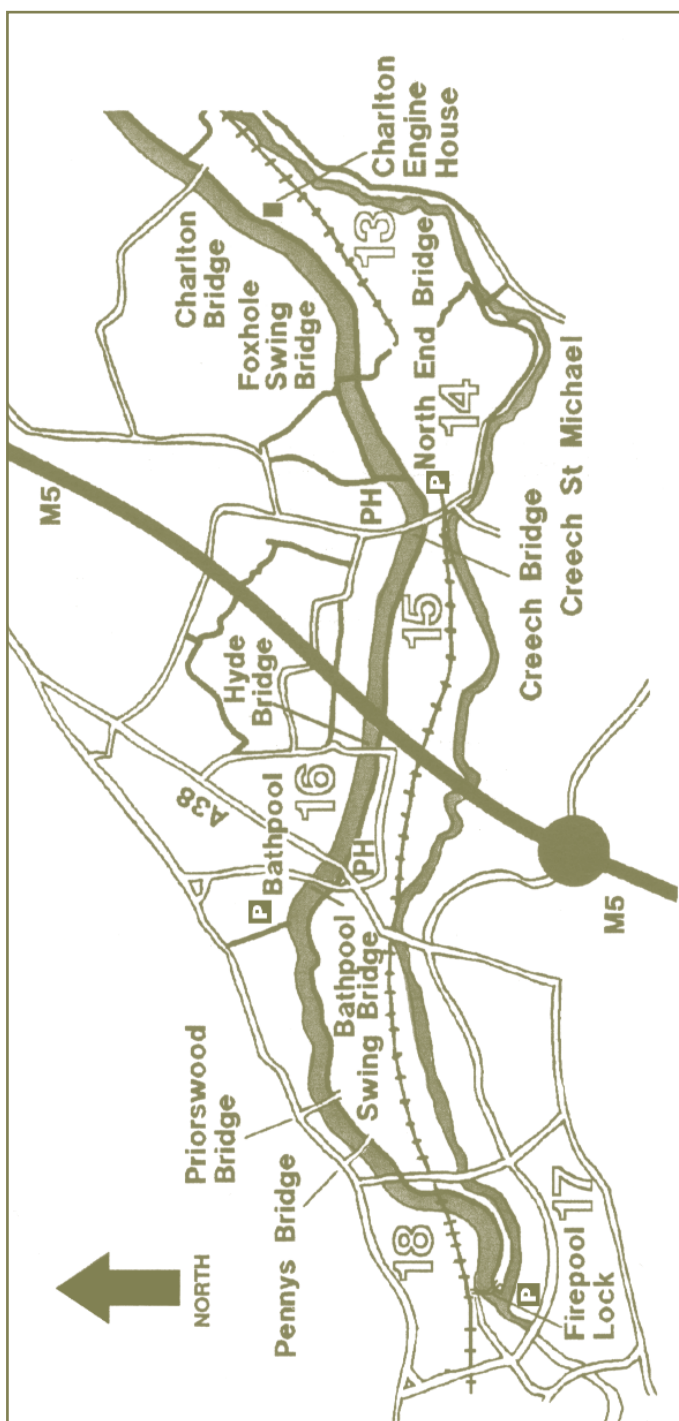
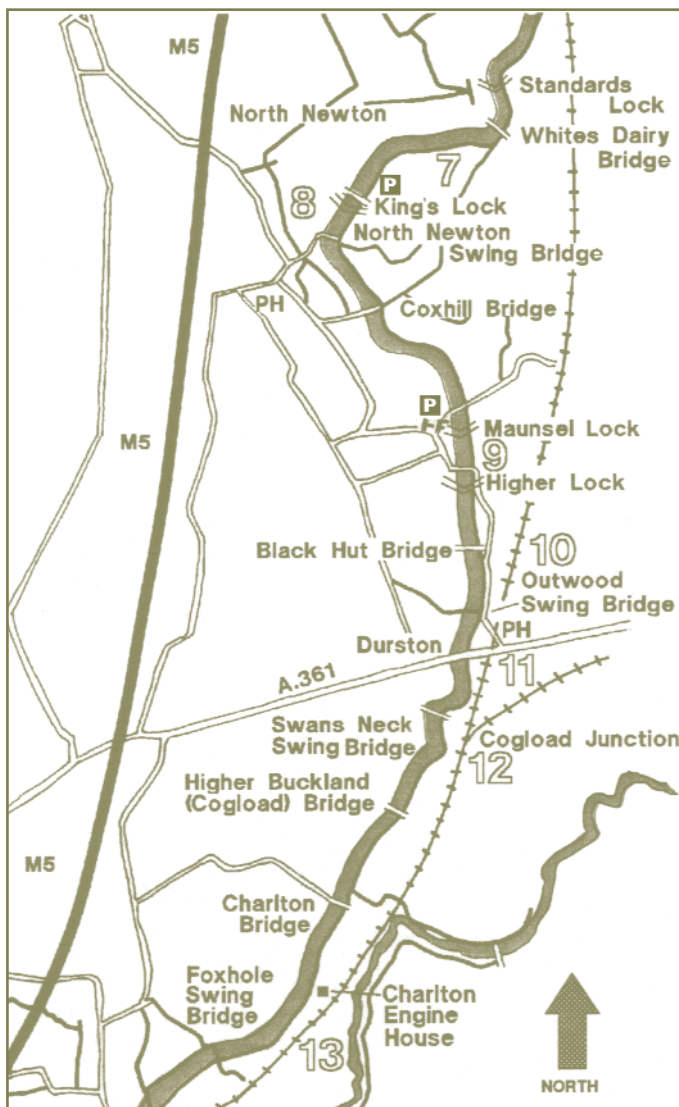
At the swing bridge at Outwood, the canal passes close to the disused Durston Station, once an important junction where the railway to Langport and Yeovil left the main line. Beyond the former canal maintenance yard and the cutting under the main A361 road bridge, the canal again emerges into open countryside.

## 12. Cogload Junction

After the next bridge at Swan's neck, the canal runs close to the main railway lines; the line from Bristol is carried over the direct Taunton-Paddington route by means of a 1930's steel girder bridge.

## 13. Charlton Engine House

Having passed under yet another bridge at Cogload and the brick Charlton Bridge, an Engine House stands next to the canal. Now restored and enlarged as a private house, it was built in 1826 to pump water from the River Tone into the canal at a point above the highest lock to provide additional feed water. It housed steam-powered pumps which in later years, when the canal fell into disuse, supplied canal water for pick-up troughs laid between the railway tracks to replenish water for steam locomotives on their non-stop run between Paddington and Penzance.



## 14. Creech St Michael

The canal passes close to the older part of the village, crossing under the main street by means of a brick bridge attractively clad with Virginia creeper. A short detour to the south leads to the interesting church of St Michael, which dates in part from the 13th Century. A small car park is provided here with access along Vicarage Lane. A further walk along the road and over the River Tone Bridge brings a fine view of the embankment and aqueduct that carried the Chard Canal over the river and flood plain.

## 15. Chard Canal

The junction between the Chard and Bridgwater and Taunton Canals, was south west of Creech St Michael near where there is a narrowing of the canal and close to yet another concrete pill-box, a reminder of the importance attached to the canal as a defence line during the Second World War. The Chard Canal opened in 1842 but was closed in 1868, making it one of the country's shortest-lived canals. No trace remains of its stop lock or lock-keeper's cottage but the line of the Chard Canal can be seen heading southward on an embankment supported by buttressed stone walls.

## 16. Bathpool

Continuing through pleasant farmland, the peace of the canal is interrupted by the sound of continuous traffic over the M5 motorway bridge. Alongside the next brick bridge is the attractive Hyde Farm. After passing under the A38 bridge at Bathpool, the last swing bridge before Taunton is reached, this one carrying pedestrians only. A car park adjacent to the British Waterways Board depot, is well used.

## 17. Firepool Lock

Leaving Bathpool behind, the canal reaches the suburbs of Taunton but its entry to the town remains surprisingly tranquil for most of the way. The canal bears sharp left under a brick bridge and immediately enters the attractively restored Firepool Lock and is raised to join the River Tone. Note the flood gates to stop canal water draining away into the river in times of drought.

## 18. Limekilns and Canal Junction

From Firepool Lock, a footpath over the Tone leads along the river's far bank to Taunton town centre. But, before leaving Firepool, take a look at the nearby tall water tower. This is supported on a brick structure which itself is built upon two earlier stone limekilns. The necessary limestone and coal were both carried here by canal barge. The water tower was built to provide the GWR steam engines with water pumped from the canal, on their way to and from the West Country. Immediately next to the canal bridge is the site of the junction with the Grand Western Canal. This was opened between Taunton and Tiverton in 1838, but most of the canal was closed in 1867.

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### Brief History of the Canal

The Bridgwater and Taunton Canal was opened between Taunton and Huntworth in 1827 and extended to join the new docks at Bridgwater in 1841, making its total length fifteen and a quarter miles (24.5 kms). This extension boosted trade on the canal which, in its heyday, was comprised mainly of coal, timber and limestone. The goods were carried in barges and small tub-boats, these latter being able to use the connecting Chard and Grand Western Canals to reach the towns of Ilminster, Chard, Wellington and Tiverton.

However, it was not long before the railway began to compete. The canal was bought up by the Great Western Railway in 1867 and its trade gradually declined, the last commercial barge operating in 1907. The canal remained in use as a land drainage and water supply channel, but its swing bridges were immobilised in the Second World War as a defence precaution.

The value of the canal for many kinds of recreation has since been recognised and it has been restored by British Waterways Board (its owners), Somerset County Council, Taunton Deane Borough Council and Sedgemoor District Council.