

A Canalside Walk

Paddington to King's Cross

by Martin Sach

As summer dawns, even more people will be getting out on the towpath of the Regent's Canal, on foot, and on cycles. They're not just taking a convenient route; the canal is a great walking route for relaxation and a bit of inner-city peace. But there is more to it than just tranquillity; this is living history and there are reminders all along it of a forgotten age when, incidentally, walking on the towpath was strictly forbidden and trespassers would be prosecuted.

Little Venice near Paddington Station is something of a beauty spot, being the junction of the Grand Junction Canal and the Regent's Canal. These two merged in 1929 to become the Grand Union, in case you're wondering about confusing names. The junction is a wide open area of water known as Browning's Pool after the eponymous poet who lived nearby and is said to have written on the little island in the middle. Just around the corner is Paddington Basin, once a huge terminus (of the Grand Junction) where goods were unloaded into warehouses or carted down the New Road to the east. This canal opened in 1801, linking London rather late to the Midlands by a reasonably direct route. The Regent's, from here going east, was opened to Camden in 1816 and to the Thames at Limehouse in 1820.

As you set off on a stroll you find yourself immediately obliged to divert via a canalside street, for a section of the towpath is now the preserve of the residential boats that have colonised this stretch in modern times. Then comes a more formidable obstacle: Maida Hill Tunnel. It is not very long but swimming through is not recommended so you have to walk over the hill and rejoin the waterway the other side. Here too is a colony of residential boats, exploiting a wide stretch that was once home to a coal-fired power station. The coal, of course, came by boat.



Picture: Mike Paterson.

Little Venice, looking towards the Maida Hill Tunnel

Soon we get to the picturesque part of the canal and this is the section that is plied by passenger trip boats. Three companies offer regular services in summer. The canal passes around Regent's Park, but you cannot see much of the park, because it is in a cutting. Originally, John Nash, the famous architect, wanted to build the canal right through the park. He was a Director of the canal company, and in modern terms, an extraordinarily gifted project manager: a man who got things done. However, his bosses at the Department of Woods and Forests (a kind of early 19th Century Department of the Environment) were not so keen on the idea of rough boatmen passing through the middle of the park. The park was not intended for public leisure but as a beautiful environment for gracious living, for wealthy people who would not like the sight of boats and their working-class crews! Some very fine houses were built, as President Obama can testify: he recently stayed the night in the official residence of the American Ambassador, which one of them has become. So the canal had to go round the edge, in the expensive cutting.



Old keystone near Camden

As you walk through the parkside section you pass the famous "Macclesfield Bridge", named after the Earl of Macclesfield, who was the Chairman of the Company. It is also known as "Blow-Up Bridge" because, early one morning in 1874, a train of three barges, towed by a steam tug and carrying gunpowder to Nottingham, exploded, killing three boatmen and destroying the bridge and a lot more besides. Terrorism is nothing new, and it was thought to be a Fenian outrage at first. Troops were summoned. Birds escaped from damaged aviaries at the London Zoo. The iron columns of the bridge were suitable for re-use but when they rebuilt the bridge they were put back facing the other way. Rope grooves, made by the towing lines of boats, can therefore be seen on both sides of the columns.

As you continue on towards Camden, with Zoo cages on both sides, the canal takes a sharp turn to the left through a bridge alongside St. Mark's Church. There is a Chinese Restaurant on a permanent site, on the stump of what was once a branch canal down to Cumberland Basin. The basin was near Euston Station and was used mainly for agricultural produce. It became disused in the 1930s and was filled in in 1942. Some of the route can be seen today, notably the Gloucester Gate Bridge which bridges nothing today. The Zoo's car park has obliterated the first part of the branch.

As you approach Camden things get a bit more urban, though still leafy. Coming close to the first of three Camden Locks, there is a bridge over the entrance to the little underground basin beneath

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A Canalside Walk (cont.)

the Interchange Building, once used to transfer goods from rail to water. There is a fine Victorian footbridge at a diagonal angle as we come to Hampstead Road Lock. People call this Camden Lock, but in fact none of the three Camden Locks bears that name. The footbridge was built to allow horses to cross over and bypass the basins that were once a big obstruction on the left side. The lock keeper's cottage is now a coffee shop, and indeed all around is the hustle and noise of the Camden Markets. This lock has a past as the site of the failed hydro-pneumatic lock. Designed by the inventor William Congreve, famous for the development of military rockets, the lock had two big tanks in which boats were lifted or allowed to descend. A mechanism moved the two balanced tanks so as to avoid the loss of precious water as when a conventional lock is used. Alas the materials of the day were not up to the task and the lock was a costly failure that had to be scrapped and replaced with the pair of locks that you see today. This was the temporary terminus from 1816 to 1820 which may be the reason why the original bridge here had a decorative keystone, now mounted in the wall beside the later replacement bridge.

There are signs all along the canal of its past. Notice rope marks in many places. The towpath itself is a step-free route, not because the canal builders were mindful of the needs of disabled people but because horses do not climb steps well. Horses pulled boats here until the 1950s.

As you descend under the bridge towards the second of Camden's three locks, you get to see another lock ahead. Hawley lock, like many of the locks on the Regent's Canal, was named after the landowner who gave up his land to make way for the waterway. The canal descends from this to Kentish Town Road lock, in a wide pool that is one of relatively few places where a full-length narrowboat can be turned around. There was once a steam pumping station to your left, built to replenish the water supply on the upper level. Every time a boat passes through a lock, a lock-full of water is lost to the lower level.



Hampstead Road Lock



Typical canalside warehouses.

It was easier and cheaper to build bridges at right angles to existing roads and as there were a few of those in this area the canal twists and turns a bit as we leave Camden Town in the direction of King's Cross. You will notice the reason why shire horses were not the best for some canals. Unless you're rather short you'll have to duck to get under some of these bridges! Imagine being a shire horse trying to do the same. Not all the bridges are original to the canal but some are and have been modified, notably with flat sections added to accommodate electric trams that could not negotiate hump-backed bridges on the street above.

As you turn a curve to the right with a long bridge-free stretch in your sights, you'll see a brick-built former warehouse with blue doors one above the other. It was nothing special as a building but it is typical of an ordinary canalside warehouse; except that such places are no longer common. There was a little wharf beside it, now covered by decking, and you can see the mounting position of a crane that once winched goods from boats into the upper floors.

Modern buildings, some of little architectural merit, line the canal now and we pass the Jubilee Centre on the left, a youth facility. Ahead is an essential feature of British canals, the canalside pub. The Constitution once turned its back on the water, as if to shield its revellers from something nasty, but times have fortunately changed and there is now a garden fence overlooking the towpath where once was a brick wall.

As we walk on to St. Pancras Lock, we see ahead a collection of bridges that carry not only the Midland main railway line from London to Sheffield, but also the line to Paris. The Midland Railway decided to surmount the canal by a bridge, whereas the Great Northern, building its route into King's Cross, chose a subterranean solution to the waterway obstruction. That's why those who walk from King's Cross to St. Pancras stations have to climb a staircase.

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A Canalside Walk (cont.)



Islington Tunnel, west portal.

Emerging from under a high-speed railway we see St. Pancras basin to our right. A former coal and ash basin for the railways, it is now a cruising club and is the longest established leisure boating facility in London. A dry dock was added here in 2000. St. Pancras lock, like the others, is a double lock, with two chambers. Once the canal was so busy that two were needed. Over the water is the lock cottage, dating from the 1890s and also housing another back-pumping steam engine at one time. The water tower stands above the whole scene, like a castle in the air, and is a fine building in the style of St. Pancras Station. It was designed by the same architect and was moved here in 2001, to make way for Eurostar trains. It once supplied water to steam locomotives.

Beyond the lock the towpath rises over a bridge, and falls to the water beside a brick wall. This was once the entrance to a canal basin, that served the many railway buildings and goods facilities that were just to your left. An enormous project of rebuilding and development is taking place here, to create a whole new quarter of London. To the right, however, is tranquillity itself. The Camley Street Natural Park is on the site of a former coal yard and is now a haven for wildlife and an educational attraction. To the left the coal and fish offices of the Great Northern Railway tower above you as you round the curve to pass under York Way.

A more modern monolith is King's Place, the music and arts centre and office building that sits on the corner of York Way and of



Water tower, St Pancras

Battlebridge Basin. This is one of the major basins of the canal and was originally called Horsfall Basin, after its owner. It was formerly surrounded by industrial premises but is now home to the London Canal Museum, in a former ice warehouse, as well as to offices and homes.

You have now reached King's Cross but it would be a shame not to deviate a little to the mouth of Islington Tunnel. This was completed in 1818 and opened in 1820. It was the major work of the engineer James Morgan. The celebrated engineer Thomas Telford made an inspection of this tunnel and pronounced it a perfect job. He was right, because since 1820 it has stood the test of time with relatively little maintenance. A steam tug once pulled boats through the dark hole where horses could not go.



Picture: Mike Paterson.

All images by Martin Sach, except where stated.

About Martin Sach

Martin Sach is Chair of the Trustees at London Canal Museum. The museum tells the story of the London canals and has been developed considerably since it opened in 1992. Martin has been heavily involved in the development process since the late 1990s. www.canalmuseum.org.uk