

March 2013

THE THIRD AGE TRUST



THE UNIVERSITY OF THE THIRD AGE

Canals & Inland Waterways

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Introduction

Groups are essentially of two sorts: studying the history of canals and inland waterways, and walking their towpaths. Of course these are not mutually exclusive. The history of canals is better understood if visits are made to interesting canal sites and the canal museums, and the experience of walking canals is enhanced if one knows something of their history.

Canal history

The traditional approach would be to look at the various eras of canal history:

- Before the canals: river navigations
- The early canals (1755–1790)
- The Canal Mania (1790–1805)
- The Canal Age (1805–1840)
- Competition and decay (1840–1947)
- Revival (1948–).

Another approach would be canals as engineering:

- The choice of route — embankments, cuttings and tunnels
- Going up and down hills — locks, lifts and inclines (and reservoirs)
- Bridges and aqueducts
- Buildings — warehouses, depots, offices.

A third approach would be to look at a particular canal, perhaps attempting to do some original research or a photographic study:

- Why was it built?
- What did it carry?
- What effect did it have on the local communities?

Other aspects for study include:

- Boats
- Boaters
- Contractors and navvies
- The leading people — not just the engineers, but also the local entrepreneurs and investors without whom the canal would never have been built
- How inland waterways have developed abroad. (We didn't invent them, and other countries have long since surpassed our achievements.)
- Waterways and nature.

In practice, it is probably best to decide what emphasis is wanted, but to combine the various aspects. It is important to remember that all history is joined together. Canal history cannot be studied in isolation: it needs some knowledge of economic, technological, social and local history, for example.

Resources

Books:

- ‘Hadfield’s British Canals’ (revised by Joseph Boughey) — the best introduction to canal history
- ‘The Canals of the British Isles’ — thirteen regional histories, most written by Charles Hadfield, published in the 1960s & 1970s; heavy going, but fact-packed and accurate.
- About half of the canals have had a good history written about them. Examples are the Grand Junction (Faulkner), Regent’s (Faulkner), Kennet & Avon (Clew), Wey & Arun (Vine), Thames & Severn (Household), Leeds & Liverpool (Clarke), Worcester & Birmingham (White) and Peak Forest (Boyes & Lamb).
- Several engineers have been the subject of biographies. Particularly to be recommended are those of James Brindley (Richardson), John Smeaton (Skempton), William Jessop (Hadfield & Skempton), Benjamin Outram (Scofield), James Green (George) and Thomas Telford (Burton — but see also ‘Thomas Telford’s Temptation’ by Charles Hadfield).
- For the construction of canals: ‘The Canal Builders’ (Burton).
- For boats: ‘Colours of the Cut’ (Paget-Tomlinson).
- For boaters: ‘The Canal Boatmen 1760–1914’ (Hanson).
- For the women boaters of the Second World War: of the four books my favourite is ‘Maiden’s Trip’ (Smith).
- But for what it was really like to be a boater, the best book I’ve read is ‘Ramlin Rose’ (Stewart) — fiction, but every incident is based on fact.

Magazines:

- The only magazine specialising in waterways history is the misleadingly named ‘NarrowBoat’, published quarterly and available on subscription or from some boatyard chandleries
- The monthly waterways magazine usually have one or two historical articles, though their accuracy varies. My personal preference is for ‘Waterways World’.

Societies:

- The leading transport history society is the Railway & Canal Historical Society. Almost all the main published canal historians are members. Its Journal, published three times a year, always includes articles on waterways.
- Many canals, not just those being restored, have a specialist canal society, the magazines of which often have historical articles.

Research material:

- The National Archives at Kew have a wealth of files on most canal companies
- County archives have the maps deposited when canal companies applied for Acts of Parliament, local papers and much other relevant material
- The Canal & River Trust’s archive at Ellesmere Port has a variety of material

- Most archives have on-line catalogues. A good place to start is the Access to Archives (A2A) site: www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/a2a.

Internet: Much of the content of the internet is unreliable. However, I particularly recommend 'Jim Shead's Waterways Information', <http://www.jim-shead.com/waterways/index.php>.

Speakers: Most local canal societies have someone who specialises in historical matters who would probably be willing to give an introductory talk and to try to answer queries (or at least point you in the direction of the answers). Another source of speakers is the local branch of the Inland Waterways Association.

The most valuable resource is the canal itself. It is essential to visit the key sites and not just hear or read about them.

Towpath walking

Towpaths are ideal for walking by people who are not so young and fit as they once were! They are flat except at the locks, of course, and the surfaces are generally good. In most areas there are pubs every three miles or so, generally selling reasonable food.

The length of the walk can be tailored to suit your group members: about five miles is reasonable for most people.

It's often quite difficult to construct a circular walk because there may be no suitable parallel footpaths, so the best way of exploring canals is to use public transport to get from the finishing point back to the start — or, usually more practicably, to use the public transport first and walk back to the starting point. The over-60s bus passes are a great benefit here.

The starting point may be reached by members using their cars. Alternatively (and much more fun) is to use public transport: trains and buses. Senior Railcards give users a third off the price of rail tickets; these are accepted by virtually every train operator and are usable at any time of day. The GroupSave ticket enables four (or three) people to travel together for the price of two; not every operator issues them and they cannot be used during the morning peak time. (You cannot benefit from both Senior Railcard and GroupSave together.)

For something more ambitious, a long distance walk lasting a few days could be undertaken. For example, the 50-mile canal walk from Newtown to Llangollen includes Chirk and Pontcysyllte Aqueducts. As much of this walk coincides with either the Severn Way or Offa's Dyke long distance paths, there is a chain of bed & breakfasts which specialise in catering for walking groups.

Resources

Towpath guides:

- Pearson's guides — informal in style, these cover most of the canal system

- Nicholson's guides — even more extensive coverage, based on Ordnance Survey maps
- GeoProjects maps — clear and useful maps of the various canals
- Three-volume series 'Canal Walks' by Ray Quinlan — published in the early 1990s and cheaply available via the internet

Other books:

- 'Lost Canals & Waterways of Britain' by Ronald Russell — describes the remains of closed canals; still useful, though now somewhat out of date

Public transport:

- The internet now has details of all bus and train routes and times. There are a number of sites giving them, but a particularly good one is www.TransportDirect.info.
- In some areas the local authorities have prepared leaflets specifically detailing public transport suitable for exploring their canals — the Kennet & Avon Canal is a good example.

Museums

The National Waterways Museum run by the Canal & River Trust has three sites:

- Gloucester Docks — specialises in canal history, with good interactive displays
- Ellesmere Port — specialises in boats
- Stoke Bruerne (Northamptonshire) — smaller, but particularly good on the Grand Union Canal.

The other museum devoted to inland waterways is the London Canal Museum, not far from Kings Cross. Various local museums include canal displays.

The visitor centres at Anderton Lift (near Northwich, Cheshire), the Falkirk Wheel (Falkirk, Scottish Lowlands) and Foxton Locks (near Market Harborough, Leicestershire) have good historical displays.

National subject co-ordinator

The U3A National Subject Adviser is Peter Brown. His contact details are:

- Post: 34 Waterside Drive, Market Drayton, Shropshire TF9 1HU
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- Telephone: 01630 652567

(But be warned: he can be away on his boat for a month at a time, so don't expect a quick reply!)

He is able to advise on:

- Publications
- Research techniques
- Suggestions for walks
- Sources of further information