

Cool canals

Waterway towpaths are level, easy, nature-rich and packed with history – perfect for an engrossing walk.

Words and photos: Philippa Greenwood and Martin O'Callaghan

Walking by water is special. Britain may be an island with windswept miles of well-loved coastal paths, but quietly inland there are over 2,000 miles of lesser-known wild towpath walks. The canals of Britain humbly keep their secrets for those who care to venture on foot and follow the water.

You'll walk amongst forgotten flora and woodlands, meet wildlife, see narrowboats and breathe the balm of water in rustling green solitude; but brace yourself for the thrills of heritage and engineering wonders too.

Towpath trails are never just about walking; you're travelling back in time, treading historic trade routes that ramble defiantly through mountains, over rivers, connecting cities to the remotest countryside and passing through lock flights that climb every contour of Britain.

If you want to, you can stop off and sightsee, linger too long over lunch at a canalside pub, or hop on a boat and cheat for a bit. These water trails are so laid-back, there are no rules and nothing hurries. Every canalscape between Scotland and Cornwall is geographically different, but the water is constant, always refusing to race.

The minute you arrive you'll notice canals are naturally walker-friendly: reluctant heel-draggers, strollers, amblers and blister-bursting rambles have everything in common the minute they slip their be-soaked feet into boots and head off down the towpaths. Dogs can't wait for the freedom of it all and kids have the fascination of boats and water.

In summer, start early and walk 'til dusk, and after a walk on a winter's day, nothing beats toasting your toes over a roaring fire in the quiet hubbub of a canalside inn. Wherever you live, canals are never far away. Just pull on your boots and enjoy the great waterways outdoors.

The Peak Forest Canal

This canal is a brazen trespasser in some of England's hardest walking territory, but the towpath along the Peak Forest Canal is easy underfoot, so you don't have to be an experienced walker.

From the start at Marple Locks, views of the Peak Forest spread before you. Even though the landscape is remote, the canal never lets you feel

lonely. And anyway, cheery northern hellos are flung from passing boats and even the geese honk greetings that you could swear are friendly. Watch out for the herons around these parts too, they're so laid-back they trip you up on the towpath.

Marple Lock flight manages to be both good-looking and fascinating, as

local stonework and history climb the flight with you. It's typical of canals to give you beauty to admire in one breath, and then grab you with fascinating heritage the next.

As well as admiring the locks themselves, near the top of the flight you'll find two tight tunnels carved into the hill at lock 13. This is sightseeing England's real history without 'keep out' barriers, or 'this way' banners.

Walk through the tiny cobblestone tunnel, and you're inside a passage built for the horses that pulled working boats over two hundred years ago.

Don't just carry on walking, though – look harder and you'll discover the second, even tinier, passage hiding by the lock side. It was for the boatmen working the lock and leads down to the bottom gates of the lock. If you get the chance to scramble into that dark spiralling passage and stand alone silently for a while, for that moment, you can live the everyday experience of a boatman in the great days of the 'canal mania'.

As you head off along the canal from Marple Locks, you're walking into a



Lock 22 at Marple Locks. It's a reminder of canals as masterpieces of engineering.



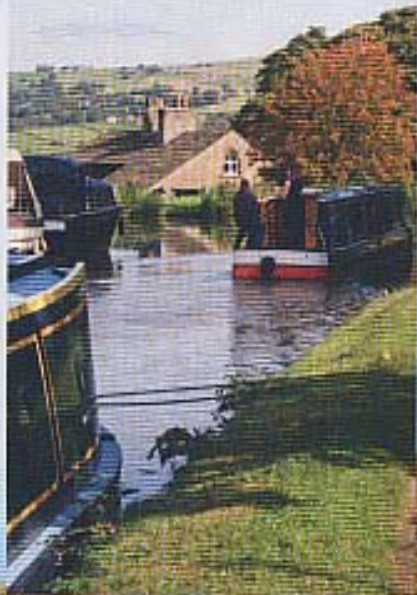
Peak District landscape softened by water. Bridges and leafiness mark the way. At first, heady whiffs of the countryside seep between trees lining the water but after tramping as far as bridge 28, the pong of manure is replaced by probably the sweetest smell on earth.

The smell of your childhood puffs from the Swizzle sweets factory on the canal side. The sugary smell powders on to your tongue and you're a child again, without a care in the world (try not to break into a skip, or get too near the edge of the water, though).

The green miles ahead help you to grow up again, and then as you approach Whaley Bridge, where live-aboard boats occupy long-term moorings, it's hard not to enjoy being secretly nose as you pass (even if you know you shouldn't).

You'll reach the end of the walk with every emotion exhausted, so relax on the edge of the Peak District National Park pottering around Whaley Bridge. Go window shopping, rest your legs in a teashop or pop to the pub. *Wilding*

It's hard not to be nose as you walk past this canal community.



WALK HERE: MARPLE TO WHALEY BRIDGE

Join the towpath just above the aqueduct near Romiley Station, grid ref SJ951901, and walk with canal on your left. Cross the road at bridge 17, and rejoin towpath, this time with canal on your right. Follow the towpath to Whaley Bridge. Distance: 7 miles. Northern Rail runs trains from Marple to Whaley Bridge, with a change at New Mills Newtown. (www.northernrail.org)

HIGHLIGHT OF THE WALK

A flight of 16 locks heads away from Marple through woods towards Marple Aqueduct. Both the lock flight and the aqueduct are Grade I-listed, and the locks are among the deepest in the country, each one rising 13ft. The 300ft-long aqueduct took nearly seven years to complete and stands over 100ft above the River Goyt below.

DID YOU KNOW?

Bugsworth Basin, the original end of the canal, used to be an important busy terminus with boats loading stone brought down from the hills by tramway. It's an interesting detour along what is now the branch line to see the restored basin complex.

FASCINATING FACT

Posssett Bridge, by lock 13, acquired its name because Samuel Oldknow, a local industrialist and promoter of the canal, was anxious that the canal should be finished on time. To spur on the workmen, he had 'ale possetts' (hot milk, ale, bread & spice) made for their breakfast by the nearby Navigation Inn. It must have worked: the canal was completed in time for Oldknow's boat to make the first trip through the locks.

READ MORE

This is an extract from 'Weekend Walks', the new book by Philippa Greenwood and Martine O'Callaghan.

It's a brilliant selection of 20 waterway walks in Britain, ranging from two to 13 miles, and celebrates not just the walks, but the history, wildlife, pubs and teashops along the way. It's written with a real sense of fun, packed with both nice-to-know and need-to-know information, and the walks are easy to follow. As the pair write, "The best canal walks aren't just about walking, they're no-fuss adventures." £12.99, Coolcanals Guides, www.coolcanalsguides.com

