

Canal History

During the industrial revolution of the early 18th Century the transportation of heavy goods and raw materials by road was limited by a poor road network. Cart-horses were the only form of pulling-power and the alternative of movement of loads by river was very limited.

In 1759 the Duke of Bridgewater obtained an Act of Parliament to build the first canal from his coalmines at Worsley to Manchester . James Brindley was employed to build the canal and construction was carried out by gangs of men known as navigators, or "navvies".

Built using just hand tools, the canal tunnelled right into the mines and coal was loaded directly on to the horse-drawn boats. Once it opened it became the wonder of the age - and halved the price of coal in Manchester .

Over the next 30 years numerous canals were built, reaching a peak in 1793 when 20 new canals were authorised by Parliament and boats were also built to transport passengers. However, the introduction of the railways brought an end to the commercial use of the canals and, by the start of the 20th century, many canals closed. Diesel powered boats introduced in the 1930s gave some opportunity for the canals to compete with road transport.

Traffic continued throughout the 1940s and '50s, but was brought to an end as recently as the early 1960s when a severe winter caused the canals to freeze over for nearly three months.

The revival of the canals for pleasure use is largely credited to the book "Narrow Boat" by LTC Rolt, published in 1944. The decision by, amongst others, Rolt and Robert Aickman to form the Inland Waterways Association (IWA) was reportedly spawned just 3 miles from Alvechurch itself, at the top of the Tardebigge lock flight.

TODAY

Today over 6,000 groups of families and friends enjoy the revitalised canal system on one of our hire boats every year. Such is the level of redevelopment that in some cities you could be forgiven for thinking that the canal was originally designed as a leisure feature, rather than the functional transport system that it once was.

Over £84 million has been spent on the canal linking Glasgow with Edinburgh, including the fantastic Falkirk Wheel, opened in 2002. This structure has generated massive interest from both canal lovers and engineering aficionados. In contrast the Victorian Anderton Boat Lift was restored to its former glory and re-opened in 2002 giving access once again from the Trent and Mersey canal to the River Weaver below.

As more people are enjoying cruising the inland waterway network, immense investment in the canal system means that waterways routes and structures are being restored to their former working use to link parts of the country and extend cruising possibilities.

Modern narrowboating is not only one of the most relaxing and rewarding holidays around, it can also be one of the 'greenest'