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## Kennet and Avon Canal

This canal forms part of an 87-mile waterway from Bristol to Reading where it joined the River Thames. The 57-mile canal section links two navigable stretches of rivers, the Avon in the west and the Kennet in the east. The idea of a southern waterway had been mooted as early as the 16th century, but it was not until the early 18th century that the two river stretches were made navigable. Then, in 1788, a “Western Canal” was proposed and following a survey by John Rennie in 1793 the construction of the canal – renamed the Kennet and Avon Canal - began the following year.

The canal took 16 years to build. It was partially opened in 1801 but the Caen Locks at Devizes (**see Caen Locks**) had yet to be built, and as a result goods had to be unloaded at Foxhanger wharf and transported up the hill by a horse-drawn railway. The completion of the locks in 1810 marked the proper opening of the canal. Other major engineering works included the Bruce Tunnel at Burbage (**see Bruce Tunnel**) and the pumping station at Crofton (**see Crofton Beam Engines**). As well as engineers, the construction of canals at the beginning of the Industrial Revolution required an immense pool of manual labour. Known as navigators, this description was colloquially abbreviated to navvies, and the term “navvy” is still used to refer to construction workers.

In its heyday the canal was a commercial success with 60-ton barges, transporting mainly coal and stone, operating along its length. The advent of the Great Western Railway in the 1840s then started to erode much of the canal traffic despite the canal company offering lower tariffs, and by the end of the 1870s the canal was in terminal decline for heavy goods transportation. At the start of the second world war the canal experienced an unexpected new lease of life. With the threat of invasion imminent, it formed the Blue Line, one of a series of planned military defensive lines; a number of pill boxes were built to defend key points and some of these can still be seen. By the end of the war the canal had fallen into complete disrepair and a public inquiry saw no justification in restoring it. Fortunately, this was overtaken by a government white paper, and in 1962 the Kennet and Avon Canal Trust was formed to undertake its restoration.

Restoration was a lengthy process, and it was not until 1990 that the canal was formally reopened by the Queen. Now popular as a leisure facility, it is used by narrow boats, cruisers and canoes. The canal also provides fishing along its length, most of it leased to local angling clubs. An important ecology habitat, it is home to a range of wildlife including birds, dragon flies and water voles.

The Kennet and Avon Canal Museum, located in an old bonded warehouse on Devizes Wharf, provides a history of the canal. There is a pay car park adjacent to the museum.