



Where did the canal go? The end of the water near Stainton, south of Kendal, on the Northern Reaches of the Preston to Kendal canal

THE CANAL TURN

Walking the Cumbrian section of the Preston to Kendal canal, is a rich history lesson, a wildlife showcase - and a great day's walk. **David Craig** is our guide

Pictures by Andrew Rafferty

Through the summery weeks of May it was a parade of fertility. Here a coot sits on a nest built of flag-iris leaves which the birds bite off at water level and knit together on a frail foundation of old fencing or a stump of bush. There a moorhen is brooding four brown eggs among the newly green stems of reed mace and iris

The Cumbrian section of the Preston-Kendal canal, known as the Northern Reaches, begins half a mile north of junction 35 on the M6. At Tewitfield, still just in Lancashire, the waterway is culverted, like a steel clamp on an artery, the first of four such on its remaining length.

When I came to Lancaster in 1964, colleagues at the new university campaigned to have the canal bridged and therefore still connected to the whole British system. No such wisdom won out. Ever since, visionaries have kept up the dream that the waterway



Wildlife haven: Swans at Sheernest Bridge

can be restored all the way to Kendal.

But I doubt that a department of transport or the environment or whatever will spend to raise the motorway or find some other watery way round. And do we need the sort of restoration envisaged in the brochure of 1985 called *The Emerald Queen of All Our Waterways*, which calls for three marinas, restaurant boats, a children's playground, a

'relaxation centre for the elderly', and permission for powered craft?

At first, as you start north along the towpath from Tewitfield, it's hard to talk to a companion above the traffic din, an unending metallic surf on a tarmac shore. Gradually the two ways diverge and the towpath becomes a narrow lane of peace, a perfect blend of the civilised and the half-reclaimed by nature. Mallards paddle in and out of tall reed-beds. A heron glides down to stand in a field like a monument, its back grey as fog, its front chalk-white as a lighthouse. The only mole I have ever seen alive was beside one of the canal locks, soot-black, twitching its nose, helpless out of its element.

From now on the waterway and its path compose a linear park rich in birds and fish, flowers and trees, and just the right number of humans. Last year, when I met two cyclists having a rest and a sandwich on the bank and

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asked them, Were they going far, they told me, John O’Groats. They had started at Land’s End and were having a few miles’ respite from roads and traffic. Three dogs in succession have accompanied my wife and myself on inexhaustibly interesting walks beside the water on this right-of-way which can never be interfered with. It takes you halfway out of the daily social world while keeping you in touch with it.

No boat has been able to come this way (except the occasional canoe) for half a century now, so it takes an old person to recall the traffic that used to ply here. The long barges carried heavy material like coal and timber northward, limestone and gunpowder southward. Twenty years ago Mrs Clarkson, who lived on the canal near Hilderstone, used to come pegging up the road to Burton and she told me how the boatmen heaved off a load of coal for her fire and in exchange picked up a parcel of butter from beside the hedge. One of the last uses of the waterway as a thoroughfare occurred in the early Eighties when it had frozen solid and we saw David Houghton, a plumber and farmer who lived nearby, swinging northward on skates, scoring white arcs on the ice.

Bridge follows bridge, built from 1817-1819 to an elliptical arch designed by James Rennie. The next one north from our latitude at Burton is Braithwaite’s, named after a 19th-century miller and maltster, and the one after that is Sheernest. Between them you can enter almost intimately into a world of birds. Last spring it seemed livelier than ever. Through the summery weeks of May it was a parade of fertility. Here a coot sits on a nest built of flag-iris leaves which the birds bite off at water level and knit together on a frail foundation of old fencing or a stump of bush. There a moorhen is brooding four brown eggs among the newly green stems of reed mace and iris. At Sheernest the mute swans have rebuilt their mattress, four or five feet in diameter, two feet deep. It seems no time since their last family - five cygnets who have only just turned fully white at last - were foraging in the wintry water for their vegetarian food.

This Eden is not really idyllic. Out of the roughly eight fledglings in each brood of mallard, moorhen, and coot, typically about three will survive. At Sheernest last year, as I watched two coots feeding their young, who were swimming up to them to receive



beakfuls of waterweed, there was a swirl and one fledgling was no longer there - taken from below by a pike.

Wild creatures here, as everywhere, have to be watchful. Once, nearby, as I looked into the water on a mirror-calm day with the sun overhead, I saw that the surface was trembling in one place. A creature beneath it came into focus - a moorhen, pointing at me like an arrowhead, paddling to keep position in the gentle current, its eyes open and fixed on me. It looked as much reptilian as avian, and must have been straining to stay submerged with little air left in its lungs. The canal is half-wild now and the wildest thing I



The last bridge: Canal Head



Canal footpath: Natland Mill Beck Lane



Marooned: The bridge, near Larkrigg, Natland



Grand: Hincaster Tunnel, East Portal

ever saw there was on a sweltering August evening 25 years ago. The water was like oiled yellow glass. Out of it an eel rose and skittered along on its tail for two yards before shuddering back into the water.

The place is a sort of wild garden now and British Waterways can only keep canal and towpath clear by constantly pruning hedges, cutting back reed-beds and waterweed with machinery operated from a boat, and occasionally dumping in clay to staunch leaks in the bed. Beyond Sheernest it steers north by east through Garth’s, Duke’s, and Dovehouses Bridges, taking me beyond my own beat until I’m no longer familiar with



Boat trips: The Waterwitch at Crooklands



Change Bridge: For tow-horses to change sides



'Grassy ghost': Horse Park Bridge

each root of larch or ash ridging across the towpath, each muddied place where cows and sheep come down to drink. Having been lifted 70 feet by the eight locks at Tewitfield, the waterway must follow a contour at about 40 metres above sea-level all the way to its terminus at Kendal. There all the glory has gone out of it and its course is hard to find round the backs of factories and yards.

The nearer it is to a road, the more it was once put to heavy use. Near Holme you can see on the east bank the remains of five coking ovens. Here coal was brought, until the railway took over after 1847, to be slow-burned and carried back south as coke for furnaces. North again, near Crooklands, a grassy level between hedge and waterside is all that remains of Wakefield's Wharf. This is the canal end of a horse-drawn tramway which carried gunpowder from the works at Gatebeck and over the canal to Millness, where there is still a depot for fuel (e.g. the coalite which we burn in our stove). All that happens on the canal there now is the embarkation of passengers on the Canal Trust's longboat, the Waterwitch, for a peaceful chug a few hundred yards upstream and downstream. Opposite the old wharf there are always a few curled snow-white feathers lying on the grass where swans haul out to preen.

The canal is perfectly rural from there on northwards. The imposing limestone bridges lead only into fields. For a time the long vista towards Kentmere and Longsleddale is swallowed up by the green drumlin shapes of the hills near Endmoor, which ripple on the skyline like pictures of the Loch Ness monster. Then the canal stops. The water comes to an end.

When Anne and I first reached there, walking from Crooklands, we stood still, dumbfounded, looking at each other in disbelief. It was as though we had been gagged, or like seeing your own arm with no hand at the end of it. The miles of walking beside water had led us into thinking of it as a river, a flowing thing. Of course it has no source, no upwelling. True, this one is fed by the occasional beck, and Killington Lake (beside the M6) was made as a reservoir to replenish it in case of need. In the heaviest rains water running off Farleton Fell has been known to surface violently enough to blow holes in its bed. It remains an engineered watercourse, not a wild one.

Sixty years ago it was subjected to the humiliation known as de-watering. Now it

creeps on across the land as a shallow, grassed-in gully. Rubble has been tipped into it. Its banks (not its bed) have been colonised by hawthorn and ash. The towpath curves on between fields and is then obliterated by the Kendal bypass. Passing under this by a bridge you resume your walk and are confronted by something even more imposing than the lock gateways and docks downstream. The canal-bed runs straight at a hill and bores through it by the Hincaster Tunnel, almost a quarter of a mile long. Masoned parapets 40 feet high sweep up on either side of the entrance - magnificently called the East Portal. It looks exotic, like one of the mausoleums in Highgate Cemetery. At the apex of the arch there is a niche which asks for a plaque or possibly an Athenian bas-relief.

No towpath follows the canal through the hill. The longboats were warped through on hawsers or 'legged' by men planting their feet against the sides. The horses were led over the

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hill by their own path. Field tracks cross it by handsome little 'accommodation' bridges, built to a horseshoe shape. At the crown of the hill the canal is 50 metres below your feet. The London-Glasgow railway had to be threaded through at this point. You pass under it by a bridge almost touching the first accommodation bridge. The pair of them are a perfect example of how taste had changed. In 1817 the canal makers used plain-faced stones. In 1847 the railway makers dressed their stones to look quite fancy, with roughened faces, as in the piers of the viaducts at Ribbleshead and other points on the Settle-Carlisle line. Romantic taste had entered in, via Sir Walter Scott and painters like John Martin, and things were supposed to look natural and rough-hewn. The inner walls of the tunnel were invisible and could be made of mere bricks - four million of them, the biggest brick construction north of the Mersey at that time. John Fletcher engineered this prodigious work and William Crossley was the builder. (Information from the excellent display board put up by the Canal

Trust and Waterway Reclamation.)

The canal keeps trying to re-water itself and you would have to wade to get through the tunnel, which several notices forbid. This doesn't last. It emerges at the West Portal, widens into a turning-pond which is now a marsh, and struggles on northward towards Sedgwick and Natland, roughly following the natural line of the Kent. It is now the merest grassy ghost of itself and vanishes here and there into the earthen contours of the fields. A poignant memorial to its life is Horse Park Bridge, which stands among green fields, utterly marooned and looking a bit surprised at itself, like a folly. The stonework need no longer be maintained and in the crevices under the arch dozens of pipistrelle bats nest - nature making itself at home in what we have discarded.

The effective terminus of the canal is the bridge that takes it across the road in Sedgwick village. Its massive parapets tower above the rooftops. The canal had to come this way, instead of passing by further east, to service the first of John Wakefield's gunpowder works. The shrewd man had started his business in the middle 18th century, just in time to profit from the dawning Industrial Revolution. Sedgwick's gunpowder was used mainly for blasting-cartridges, at a time when explosives from Cumbria were being exported to Spain, Portugal, Peru, Brazil, and the Congo. By the Great War Sedgwick was producing 21 and three-quarter tons a week. The canal bridge rides over the road by a skewed arch (ie not at right angles to the thoroughfare below), which called for special courses of stone to stand up to the twisting stresses. Today the masonry is something to appreciate for its own sake, as we might do with a massive sculpture.

Following the canal enables you to saunter at your ease through a green world which, unlike the motorway, changes with the seasons, as trees leaf and wither and birds hatch and mature and leave their nests. It's a world which survives to one side of the present. Little-used field tracks criss-cross it, birds swim unperturbed by the passing of people and dogs and mountain bikes. Levelled patches mark the sites of bygone industry. Settlements that grew up because of the canal no longer need it and become backwaters or branch out as dormitories for people who work elsewhere. All these are the meaning of the waterway as it splices in and out of other thoroughfares in the one mesh that binds the country.

Life