

Script of London Canal Museum's Audio Tour of the Regent's Canal Towpath from Camden Locks to London Canal Museum

This script is provided primarily for the benefit of people with impaired hearing. The audio tour may be downloaded in MP3 format from www.canalmuseum.org.uk

Introduction

Welcome to the London Canal Museum's audio tour of the Regent's Canal between Camden and Islington tunnel. This walk is wheelchair accessible.

If you are starting from Camden Town tube station, follow the signs to Camden lock. Leaving the station from the right-hand exit as you come up the escalator, turn right and follow the road along until you have passed over the first bridge. Then walk down onto the towpath.

The tour starts at the Hampstead Road Locks, so pause the tour, if necessary, and resume when you are overlooking the lock next to Camden High Street.

The Regent's canal is just over 8 and a half miles long. That's thirteen and a half kilometres, linking the Grand Junction Canal at Paddington to the Thames at Limehouse. Over its length the canal drops 86 feet, or 26 metres, through 12 locks followed by a ship lock.

The canal was built between 1812 and 1820, with a pause in construction from 1815 to 1817 due to funding difficulties. An 1817 government loan of £200,000 was crucial to the building work restarting.

The oblique bridge that you can see down the canal was constructed to take horses across the canal so that they could avoid the basins that used to be here. Basins are branches off the main route, for loading.

Liverpool is 302 miles from here, and you could travel there by continuing along the canal network. Regular boat trips run from here to Little Venice in Paddington, although none will take you quite as far as Liverpool. Some services stop at London Zoo.

Contrary to common belief, there is no Camden lock. Rather, there are three locks that make up Camden Locks. The Hampstead Road locks that you are currently overlooking are the topmost pair of locks on the canal. It reached this point from the West in 1816.

These are the only two-chamber locks in use on our walk. The arrangement allowed

more traffic to pass through at any one time than a single chamber, and also allowed water to be saved by transferring water between the locks. The paddle in the middle of the locks was used by the lock-keeper to achieve this, and allowed him to drain off half of the water from an emptying chamber into the other lock chamber.

Whilst the lock here is of the conventional design, if things had gone to plan, it would have been the first of a series of hydro-pneumatic locks, designed by Colonel William Congreve.

Congreve is now best known for his development of military rockets at the Royal Laboratory at Woolwich Arsenal. The American national anthem refers to the “rockets' red glare”, a reference to the rockets used in the British attack on Fort McHenry in 1814. However he was also an inventor who designed a water saving canal lock. Every time boats used conventional locks the canal had to be topped up at the highest level, and with no plentiful water supply available that incurred a considerable cost to the company. In Congreve's design boats were raised and lowered in two large tanks, or caissons. A system of pressurised air and balancing rams was installed so that relatively little effort would be needed to lift a boat.

Unfortunately for the Colonel, and the Company too, the experimental lock was a costly failure. It simply could not be made to work as planned, for which Congreve blamed the builder. Congreve's lock design was finally abandoned in December 1815 and Congreve was asked to remove the machinery from the site. The locks along the canal were now to be of the traditional design, the workings of which will be explained a little further down the canal.

Back-pumping was the main method of retaining water that was ultimately used. This helped to conserve the 56,000 gallons, or 260 cubic metres, of water that was used every time the water level in the lock was lowered. Water was pumped back up the canal, effectively recycling it. Taking water from the Thames would have been more costly.

Looking up from the lock, the café and Camden information centre used to be the lock-keeper's cottage, and was once home to some of the winding gear for Congreve's lock.

On the same side of the canal, Ice Wharf, a new building, is a good example of how it is now desirable to live by the canals, and that these once-industrial areas are being put to new uses. Just a few decades ago, urban decay and neglected canals were more common.

As you start walking down the canal, to your left, just before the bridge, keep an eye out for the “guilders stone” on your left. The text reads “This Guilders Stone was originally the Key Stone of the old bridge, built 1815, removed 1876.”

Speculation continues as to whether this is a mistake, and should actually say “Builder's Stone” or if it represents a guild. The stone was renovated in the 1990s and the lettering re-cut so an error might have happened then. Nobody really knows for sure what it means or whether it is just a mistake.

This bridge, still called Hampstead Road Bridge after the road's old name, was rebuilt in 1876 with wrought iron girders. It was strengthened around 1903 to take London's new electric trams.

Continue down the canal, keeping an eye out for cyclists and runners. Past the bridge, on your left, you pass one of the Camden markets, which started in the 1970s.

You may see the Jenny Wren or My Fair Lady leisure boats on this stretch of the canal.

Pause the tour until you reach the next lock.

Hawley Lock used to be a double lock like the Hampstead Road locks. It was made single, along with the other locks on this stretch of canal, by putting in weirs, which makes the water supply self-regulating.

It is named after Sir Henry Hawley, whose land the canal went over.

On the opposite side of the canal, keep an eye out for the egg-cup-topped building: it was the original studios for the first commercial breakfast television channel – TVam, having previously been the site of a brewery and then a motor depot. The first programme was broadcast from here on the first of February 1983.

Pause the tour until you reach the next lock.

The area on the left, by Kentish Town Road lock, used to be the site of one of the steam pumping stations along the canal.

This lock seems as good a place as any to explain how locks work.

A normal canal lock is a watertight box built where traffic needs to transfer between vertical levels. At the end of the lock, wooden gates point upstream, allowing water pressure to keep them closed. These are called “mitre gates” and they were invented by Leonardo Da Vinci.

The water level can be raised or lowered by opening or closing sluices.

If a boat is heading downhill but the water in the lock is level with the lower level of the canal, the lock needs to be filled. After that, the gates at the top can be opened, the boat enters, then the gates and sluices close behind it. The sluices at the lower end are now opened, allowing water to pour out. When the water level falls to that of the lower level, the gates can be opened. The reverse process is used to travel uphill.

As mentioned before, this process uses up 56,000 gallons (260 cubic metres) of water.

Pause the tour until you have passed under Kentish Town Bridge

On the other side of the canal, notice the distinctive modern building with its curved metallic façade. It's part of a 1980s development, which included a Sainsbury's supermarket, designed by architect Nicholas Grimshaw. The site previously housed the Aerated Bread Company Bakery.

Pause the tour until you get to the next bridge

The canal twists here because it was cheaper to build bridges at a right angle to the canal, and also to fit with existing and planned roads.

Camden Street Bridge is a good example of the grooves that ropes made in the protective ironwork on the side of the bridge as the horses pulled the barges through. Wet ropes could pick up grit that made them able to wear away even this ironwork.

As you walk through the bridge and continue down the canal, you'll notice how low it is. Shire horses were too tall to work on canals, so boatmen chose smaller, sturdy horses.

The Fleet River passes under the canal between this bridge and the next one; one of London's hidden rivers.

Charles Dickens lived nearby, in 1822, at 16 Boyhem Street, demolished in 1910 to construct a hospital.

The mid-section of Camden Road Bridge, the one in front of you now, as the canal twists to the right, was made flat in order to allow those electric trams to pass over it.

Pause the tour until just before Royal College Street Bridge

On the right-hand side of the canal is Lyme Wharf, a mixed development of offices and apartments built on the site of Devonshire Wharf. This was previously a long established builders merchant's yard and you can catch a glimpse of the old wharf cottage if you look carefully.

Now pass under Royal College Street Bridge, named after the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons. It was originally built of brick, fifteen feet wide, which was enough for a horse and cart. It has since been widened.

Pause the tour until you have rounded the corner

The warehouse on your right, with distinctive blue doors, used to be an animal feed warehouse. Looking up, you can see the remains of the original crane mountings. The doors were mounted one on top of the other to allow sacks to be hoisted to the upper floor. This building is a good example of a typical canalside warehouse. This is Eagle Wharf. To the left of the building used to be a little dock, which has now been covered with decking.

Pause the tour until just before the next bridge

On the other side of the canal, under the bridge, notice the stone in the wall. It was laid by William James Wetenhall, Chairman of the Vestry of St Pancras, on Thursday the 4th of March 1897. A vestry was an early form of local government.

Now pass under Gray's Inn Bridge, which carries its original name, even though the road above is now known as St Pancras Way.

Just past the bridge, on your left, is *The Constitution* pub. It probably wasn't built as a canal pub, but recently it opened up to the canal, and now has a garden that overlooks the water.

Past *The Constitution* pub, on the left, used to be a large estate, owned by William Agar, the staunchest opponent of the canal.

As you stroll down the towpath, listen to the part he played in the story of the Regent's Canal. If you happen to get to the next bridge before this part of the tour has finished, please stop there until it has, as that is where the next section of the tour will begin.

In 1812 William Agar petitioned the House of Lords against the Regent's Canal Bill. He subjected the proposals for a waterway linking Paddington and Limehouse to a thorough questioning in the Lords.

Agar requested that they change the route from going in front of his house, Elm Lodge, to going behind it. But this would have worsened the problems of water supply and entailed a sharp turn in the canal, which would have been difficult to navigate.

The bill ultimately stated that the canal was to be built on the general line that Agar wanted: it was to pass through the north and along the east side of his estate. He was empowered to construct his own wharf and a crane on it as well. But this permission was not guaranteed – he was a leaseholder, and as such the Bishop of London, as the freeholder, would therefore get involved in any agreement between himself and the

Company.

In 1813, Agar protested to the Regent's Canal Company against the entry of workmen to stake out the line of the canal.

Two years later, in April 1815, the Canal Company now had title to the land, but another surveying visit met with a further letter of protest.

A few days later, an attempt to enter the estate again, with workmen, was met by Agar's gardeners and servants barricading the gateway. The workmen were told to use their tools and planks to force their way in. Agar's men withdrew, and the workers began digging.

On the following day, Agar's men resisted the entry of the workers, and the conflict was only halted by the arrival of an officer, who arrested two of the men supervising the workmen. Proceedings against the two men were dropped when the magistrate learned that the Company had purchased and paid for the land being excavated.

In June, a two-day hearing into the work on Agar's estate acquitted one man, but found three others guilty. Agar was awarded £500 of damages, and a second action against the Company by Agar resulted in a further thousand pounds being granted. Taken together, these two payments of compensation represented a sum large enough to gravel the towpath down the whole length of the Regent's Canal. Work on Agar's land therefore had to halt. The Company's troubled financial state had already prevented serious progress elsewhere.

In 1817, the Poor Employment Act was passed by Parliament, to fund projects providing work for the unemployed. The Canal Company successfully applied for a further loan of £200,000, enabling the completion of the canal. Although the Company could now meet the cost of completing the canal, Agar was still very difficult. He took 40 meetings with the Company's lawyer to finalise legal issues, and often turned up to them three hours late.

The Bishop of London disapproved of the compensation to Agar that was proposed in the Bill, and threatened to mobilise the Bench of Bishops against the bill unless it was altered. In the end Agar won the right to choose the course of the canal, provided that the channel could accommodate full length barges.

Early in 1818 the line of the canal through Agar's estate was finally agreed. The line agreed upon was that desired by the company to the south and west of his estate. Perhaps he changed his mind because he was worried that the canal would end up going through his neighbours' land instead, depriving him of his money. More likely,

a greedy man had extracted as much cash as he could get away with.

When naming the locks along the canal, the Company decided to name them after the landowners upon whose land they stood, with the predictable exception of William Agar.

In 1840, Agar's son let out some of the land on the estate to poor people, leading to the creation of a sort of shanty town – dubbed Agar Town. Dickens described it in his 1851 'Household Words'.

It was removed in the 1860s when the Midland Railway Company used the site for its marshalling yards. When these were no longer used, Camden Council created the “Elm Village Estate”, in 1983. The protruding concrete seating area above the towpath was part of this.

Pause the tour until you arrive at the next bridge.

Just before this point you will have passed The Jubilee Centre, with metal gates, grey tower and protruding walkway. It organises activities such as climbing and kayaking both on- and off-site. The other parts of this building, with its distinctive brickwork, are the remains of a hydraulic pumping station that supplied the railway goods yard with its power.

It was near this spot that, in September 1977 the Mayor of Camden, whilst paying an official visit to a canoe club based on a barge, fell in the water wearing his official robes.

Now walk under the bridge. It carries the Midland Main Line railway. St Pancras station was built up to the same level, in order to allow the tracks to cross above the canal, and warehouses and shops were housed beneath the station.

The St Pancras International Station, opened 2007, sends its trains over this bridge on their way to the continent, as well as to Leicester, Nottingham, and Sheffield. The Javelin trains that will be used to transport people to the main site of the 2012 Olympics at Stratford will also pass over this bridge. Parts of the old bridge have been retained for decorative purposes.

As you come out from under the bridge, on your right you can see St Pancras Basin. It was opened in 1870 and was a site of coal chutes, where railway wagons would discharge coal into barges. This area was originally home to many coal yards. St Pancras Basin is now used as the base for the St Pancras Cruising Club, formed in 1958: the first leisure facility on the canal. The shed with the roll-down door contains a dry dock – the only such repair facility in central London, built more recently, in 2000.

Just a little further down the canal is St Pancras lock. Pause the tour until you get there.

The cottage on the far side of the canal was built in 1898 to house a steam pump to pump water back up to the higher level.

Before the cottage was erected, the pump was located in the grassy area on the other side of the canal (right by where you are standing).

If you take a closer look at the bench by the tree, you'll notice the Prince of Wales feathers. The canal was built during the Regency of 1811 to 1820. A Regent is an Acting King or Queen who takes over when the monarch cannot carry out his or her duties. In 1811 George, Prince of Wales became Regent when his father, King George the Third, was mentally ill. The Prince Regent gave permission for his title to be used as the canal's name.

Just behind the cottage is St Pancras water tower. It was built in 1867 for the Midland Railway to provide water for its steam locomotives. It was originally located 300 metres south of its current location, and was moved to its current position in 2001 to make way for the Channel Tunnel Rail Link.

To the left, just below the lock under a towpath bridge, is the bricked-up entrance to a now filled-in basin: the Great Northern Railway coal wharfs.

As the canal turns round to the left, you will see Camley Street Natural Park on the other side. It opened in 1985 as an island of greenery, devoted to recreation and conservation. The site was previously used as a coal depot, from which coal would be distributed locally until the 1960s, and was then abandoned until the London Wildlife Trust and the London Borough of Camden set up the natural park.

On your left, is a wall in which you can see the windows of a line of stables. They used to be used by the railway. There was also a horse hospital on the site.

On your left as you round the corner, high above the canal, are the old coal and fish offices of the Great Northern Railway. After that you will be able to see the remains of a now demolished bridge.

Further away on your right is the site of St Pancras Gasworks, of the Imperial Gas Light and Coke Company. There used to be several large gasholders on this site.

Just in front of you is one of the stop gates on the canal. It is the section that juts in on either side of the canal. They were closed at night during the Second World War to prevent too much flooding of the railway tunnels if the canal was breached by bombing. They would have limited the amount of water that would have flowed onto

the main railway line out of King's Cross, which goes beneath the canal in a tunnel. Fortunately the canal never was breached by bombs during the war.

In the stretch of canal before you reach the next bridge, you pass over the mainline railway from King's Cross station, that goes up to Yorkshire and Scotland, carried in three tunnels. The nearby granary was once connected to the canal.

Pause the tour until you are in front of the next main road bridge.

On your left is a fairly unassuming building. It is a pumping station that uses water to cool electricity cables. Canal towpaths make popular cable routes – there is high voltage wiring underfoot for the entire length of this walk.

Maiden Lane bridge carries the old road name, even though the road is now called York Way. The original name 'Maiden Lane' comes from a corruption of the word 'midden', a dung heap. There would have been many such places with so many horses in use in London, so the corruption is something of a euphemism. This bridge was rebuilt with iron girders in 1850 for access to the railway goods station. In 1999 it was rebuilt again. The metal parapets are copies of the 1850 design.

As you come out from under the bridge, you'll probably first be struck by the new building to your right. This is Kings Place: home to a 420-seat concert hall and a 220 seat flexible performance space, along with galleries, offices, a café and restaurant. It is the headquarters for the London Sinfonietta, the Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment, and the Guardian Newspaper.

Moving your glance leftwards from Kings Place, you will be surveying Battlebridge Basin, also known as Horsfall Basin, after the original landowner. Battlebridge is the old name for the King's Cross area. The legend has it that the battle was between Queen Bodecia and the Roman general Suetonius, in AD 61. The bridge referred to is one over the River Fleet.

Bodecia is allegedly buried under King's Cross Station, although attempts to locate her have been as fruitless as those to find platform 9 ¾. Disappointingly for us, the story is probably a myth.

The name King's Cross came in when a statue of George IV, who died in 1830, was erected in 1835 at a crossroads. The statue was unpopular and was demolished in 1845. The station opened in 1852

Near where you are standing, is a rectangular indentation into the towpath, with a slope down into the water parallel to the towpath. This is a horse ramp. Horse ramps were built to allow horses out of the water if they fell in. They were often built on either side of railway bridges, as horses could be startled by locomotives, and bolt.

The canal company made it clear to boatmen that the horse ramps were not to be used for washing their horses, not that they took much notice.

The building to the side of King's Place in the basin, with cranes still attached, was used for bottling beer.

There used to be a jam factory at the far end of the basin.

The basin was disused in the 1970s, but is now home to 30 or so residential boats, flats, and the London Canal Museum, which used to be an ice storage house.

Carlo Gatti set up his business in 1856. Ice was originally obtained from the canal and nearby ponds, for which a license was required. In 1857 he began importing ice from lakes in Norway, which was transported from the Regent's Canal Dock at Limehouse by horse-drawn boat. Two wells were built here from 1857 onwards along with the building that is now the museum. The wells have been partly excavated and visitors can look down into one of them in the museum. The building was much altered between 1904 and 1906 when the two floors were constructed, one of which was used as stables for the horses used to pull the ice carts. Ice would keep from spring to the next winter. Total wastage was between 30 and 40%.

Key customers were butchers, fishmongers, ice cream makers, medical professionals and large households.

There were many ice warehouses in London, and this is the last survivor. Close to where you started the tour is an even bigger ice well, but it is not accessible to visitors.

The last ice import was in 1921. By then, ice could be made artificially in London and the building ceased to be used for the ice trade in the 1920s.

On the same side of the basin as the Canal Museum used to be a flour mill, a corn and salt warehouse, timber yards, and a stone-working business.

As you continue on down the canal, the sites on your right were once lime kilns. The surviving buildings include a former granary and an animal feed mill.

Pause the tour until you reach the Islington Tunnel, or, if you are short of time, you can leave the canal at the next bridge and walk to the right towards King's Cross station. But listen on if you can, the tunnel is the major engineering work of this canal.

Passing under the final bridge of our tour, you will have had a clear view of the Islington Tunnel. It is 960 yards, or 875 metres, long, 17 ³/₄ feet, or 5.2 metres, wide underground. It has a headroom of 9 ³/₄ feet, or 3 metres. Four million bricks were used in its construction, which started in late 1814 and finished in 1820.

Take a seat by the canal as you listen to the story of the Islington Tunnel.

This tunnel was straight, and a success for its engineer - James Morgan - who only ended up building it because no entrants to the design competition were deemed good enough by the Regent's Canal Company. They were obliged to award a prize, and, to the frustration of canal director John Nash, the famous architect, who organised the competition, the prize money went to a man who admitted that his design was simply a copy of a tunnel that he had previously worked on.

The tunnel was built by dropping 6 vertical shafts, then linking them up. Whilst at first the work proceeded smoothly, problems were soon encountered: the clay proved not to be self-supporting, and water was unexpectedly encountered, necessitating the use of heavy timbers during excavation, the periodic replacement of supports and the use of cement rather than lime mortar, as well as an improved quality of brick to secure the tunnel.

Despite all these precautions, the construction still caused some subsidence damage to the properties above the tunnel. Construction was also delayed by financial difficulties and complications over acquiring land at the eastern end of the tunnel.

In 1817 Thomas Telford, a leading engineer of the day, inspected the tunnel, and reported that it had been “constructed in a perfect manner.”

Once the tunnel was open for traffic, congestion soon became a problem, as the tunnel was a bottleneck. Whilst it was easily wide enough for two narrowboats to pass, this was not the case for barges. From 1822, a man was employed at each end of the tunnel to police the traffic flow. Perhaps they communicated with flags.

At first, barges were moved through the tunnel by manpower alone, as the tunnel had no towpath. The method used was called legging, and involved the boatman fixing himself into position on his boat as stably as he could, and essentially walking along the wall of the tunnel.

In 1826 a steam tug, which pulled itself along a chain on the canal bed, came into service. One penny per ton was charged for use of the boat. The system was usually very effective, although there were sometimes difficulties and accidents, such as in January 1834, when the chain broke, tearing a hole in the tug's side, making it sink.

Whilst the tunnel boat operated throughout the day, it was still possible for boats to pass through during the night by legging. In 1843 John Oliver drowned in a legging accident whilst making such a trip, supposedly because the brickwork needed repair. The canal company refuted this claim, although it was conceded that the surface was often uneven. It is worth remembering that in contrast to many other tunnels, the

Islington tunnel has required relatively little repair work.

In 1921 the chain system was replaced, but just two years later it was back in action. This happened after the smoke and fumes from the self-propelled steam tug that replaced it caused its steerer to fall overboard and drown. The chain system was permanently replaced with a diesel tug from 1927, meaning that the original solution had lasted for one hundred and one years. Archive film of the steam tug is shown in the museum.

You should now retrace your route along the towpath until you pass back under the first bridge. There is a small garden on your right with a path up to the main Caledonian Road. Once you are on the main road, turn right, back over the canal, and then take your first right turning down All Saints Street, named after the Church that used to be on the corner.

Walk down this street, and follow it to the end. Turn left into New Wharf Road and continue a few steps to the London Canal Museum, which opens Tuesdays to Sundays (and also on bank holiday Mondays), from ten in the morning to half past four in the afternoon, with last admission at a quarter to four.

The museum tells the colourful story of London's canals. You can see inside a traditional cabin, look down at the ice well and find out more about the ice trade, and see archive film of the canal that you have walked along. There is also an exhibition about the horses that pulled the boats and the ice carts. Remember that the route you have walked was built for horses: it was only opened up to the public in the 1970s. Another audio tour is available that gives you a guided tour of the museum. It adds to, rather than duplicates, what you will see inside.

We do hope you have enjoyed the walking tour and hope you will also enjoy your visit to the museum.

If you want to continue on to King's Cross Station, continue down this road to the T junction, and turn right. Cross over the road at the traffic lights, and turn left. King's Cross station is now to your right. If you require directions elsewhere, museum staff will be happy to point you in the right direction.

Thank you for listening, and good bye.

Recorded 4th September 2008 at London Canal Museum

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