

CANALS – A BRIEF HISTORY

The great age of the canals began with the construction of the Bridgewater Canal and was the initiative of the third Duke of Bridgewater. The Duke owned coal mines at Worsley North West of Manchester and it was in 1759 after a visit to the early French navigation, the Canal du Midi when the Duke made plans to build his own canal. James Brindley, famous for his work in mills and waterwheels, was employed to construct the canal.

The building was carried out by gangs of men known as navigators, or "navvies". Completed in 1776 the Bridgewater Canal led straight to the mines where the coal was loaded. The price of coal in Manchester fell as this new means of transportation made for cheaper deliveries. A whole network of canals was then created to meet the transportation needs of a newly industrialized country and this brought new wealth to areas such as The Potteries and to the Black Country in the Midlands.

The traditional form of transport on the canals was the narrowboat and these boats were long, narrow and flat bottomed. They would usually consist of a large cargo space with just a small cabin or butty for the crew and their families.

As the narrowboat cabins were very small the owners tried to make them as comfortable as possible and both the interior and exterior surfaces were very colourfully painted with traditional roses and castles.

In the heyday of the canals it took a large number of workers to keep the routes running efficiently, some of the staff responsible for the smooth running of the canal system were lengthsmen, responsible for simple maintenance, lock keepers and toll collectors.

All of these people needed somewhere to live and the lock keeper's cottage was evolved. The design of the cottage had to be functional and this was evident in the design of the traditional lock cottage which, in most cases, was two up and two down and constructed from local materials.

There were many unique features built along the canal network including bridges, tunnels and aqueducts. Bridges came in all shapes and sizes and depending how elaborate they were would determine the wealth of the landowner whose land the canal cut across. One of the greatest constructions was the Pontcysyllte aqueduct on the Llangollen Canal in Wales.

Built by Thomas Telford and William Jessop it spans the Dee Valley and is 1000 feet long and 125 feet high. Tunnels were dug by hand and were built by plotting out the route across the hilltop and then sinking down several shafts.

The Navvies would begin digging at both ends and the idea was of course was that they would meet in the middle, this did not always happen and some canal tunnels have kinks in them. Situated on the Huddersfield Canal the longest, deepest and highest canal tunnel in the country is the Standedge Tunnel it took 16 years to build and is just under three and a half miles long.

The decline of the canals began at the end of the eighteenth with the coming of the railway and when transportation was switching to the faster age of the train. Exhausted from years of neglect and the damage caused by the Second World War the canals soon fell into disrepair.

Today however due to an extensive restoration programme the canals offer a whole new era in the leisure industry. They are now enjoyed by walkers, fisherman, cyclists and of course the narrow boaters. Holidays on the canals are becoming more and more popular and narrowboats are now designed to give the up most comfort and provide for your every need.

Most boats now have all the comforts of the modern home including central heating, TV, fully fitted kitchen (galley) and are powered by quiet and smooth running diesel engines. As more and more people enjoy cruising the waterways then more and more of the canals and their unique structures are being restored to their former working glory.