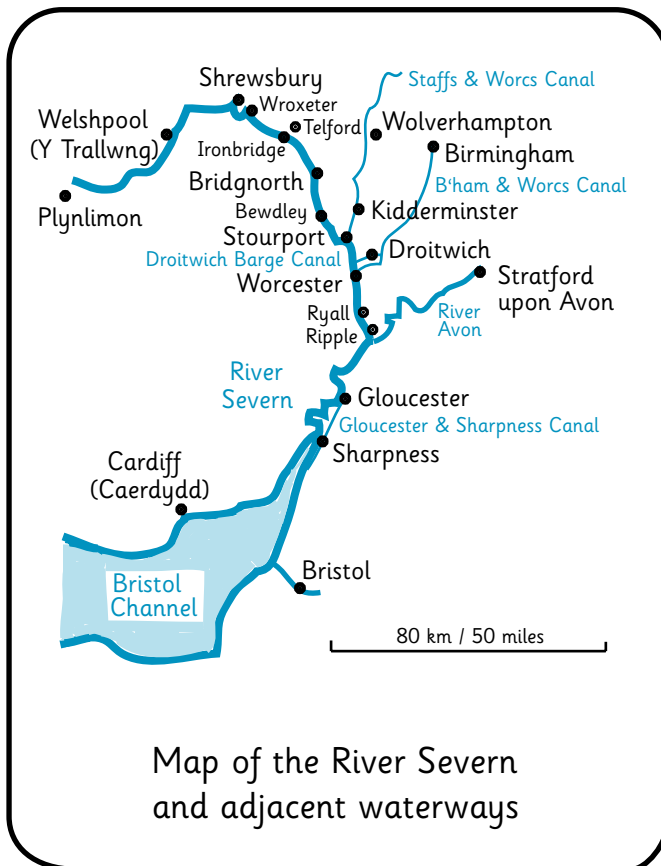




Find out how the longest river in Britain forms an important link in the national network of navigable waterways.

Source sheet A

River Severn



The River Severn is the longest river in Britain. It flows 354 km (220 miles) from the slopes of Plynlimon, high in the Welsh mountains, to the Bristol Channel, where it forms the boundary between England and Wales.

What is the Severn bore?

The lowest part of the river is tidal. It has the second highest tide in the world with a tidal range that can exceed 15 metres (50 feet). The waters of the rising tide are forced rapidly from a wide estuary into the narrow river channel below Gloucester. This funneling effect causes a spectacular metre-high wave, known as the 'Severn bore', to travel upstream at speeds of up to 32 km/hour (20 miles/hour).

Is the River Severn navigable?

Historically, the river was navigable for small boats via Bridgnorth, Ironbridge and Shrewsbury as far as Pool Quay near Welshpool / Y Trallwng. Today, navigation for powered boats is limited to the river below Stourport, though occasionally boats travel upstream to Bewdley.



River Severn at Ironbridge Gorge

When did the river carry cargoes?

The river has been used as a trade route since at least Roman times when goods were carried upstream to the fortress at Wroxeter near Shrewsbury.

Bridgnorth grew during medieval times as a thriving river port, and in 1449, a water baliff was employed to ensure free passage for boats.

In 1664, Prince Rupert ferried two regiments of soldiers downstream to Bridgnorth en route to relieve the siege of Newark!

During the 17th and 18th centuries, the River Severn was one of the busiest rivers in Europe, carrying coal and iron to and from hundreds of furnaces and forges in the Ironbridge Gorge area near Telford.

Why did this trade decline at the end of the 18th century?

By the 1790s, the river had become unreliable for transporting goods. Changes in agricultural methods caused heavy flooding in winter and low water levels in summer. The drainage of many water meadows meant that they no longer acted like a sponge. After heavy rainfall, the water flowed off the land quickly, causing the river to flood. In drier summers, there was no steady trickle of water to maintain the water level in the river.



Holt Lock on the River Severn
between Stourport and Worcester

What happened next?

Towards the end of the 18th century, there was a flurry of canal building. In 1771 the [Droitwich Barge Canal](#) was opened to enable broad-beamed sailing barges to carry Droitwich salt down the river for export overseas.

In 1772 the [Staffordshire and Worcestershire Canal](#) was opened. This linked the Cannock coalfield and growing industrial towns such as Kidderminster and Wolverhampton to the River Severn at Stourport, providing a direct route down the River Severn to the port of Bristol.

In 1791, the [Worcester and Birmingham Canal](#), linking the river at Worcester to the factories of Birmingham and the Black Country, was started. Completed in 1815, it provided a direct export route for goods.

Why was the lower course of the River Severn improved?

By 1790, the proprietors of the [Staffs & Worcs Canal](#) were concerned that the river between Stourport and Worcester was obstructed by sandbanks and was often too shallow for boats. They obtained an Act of Parliament to improve the navigation between Stourport and Worcester, and set about building a series of locks and weirs to improve the navigation.



Barge Lock and Tontine Hotel
at Stourport on Severn

Did trade on the River Severn increase again?

During the 19th century, trade on the lower course of the River Severn increased dramatically as flat-bottomed sailing barges (called 'Severn Trows') took imported cargoes upstream from Bristol docks to Worcester and Stourport, and carried manufactured goods downstream for export.

At Stourport, where cargoes from the wide-beamed Severn Trows were unloaded onto narrowboats before continuing their journey along the [Staffs and Worcs Canal](#), a thriving new town grew up.

In 1827, the [Gloucester and Sharpness Canal](#) was built to enable large, ocean-going ships to reach the new docks at Gloucester. This provided a more reliable route to bypass a dangerous stretch of the lower river.

Why did freight traffic decline in the 20th century?

During the 20th century, river freight traffic declined as more cargoes were moved by large articulated lorries. The last commercial traffic above Worcester was in the 1960s when barges carried petroleum products to an oil storage depot near Stourport.



Cruising the 'Stourport Ring' via the River Severn at Worcester

Is the River Severn used today?

Today, there are six large automated locks on the lower course of the River Severn between Gloucester and Stourport. The locks are used mainly by pleasure craft cruising the River Avon and the River Severn, and by narrowboats completing the 'Stourport Ring' linking the [Staffs & Worcs Canal](#) to the [Worcester & Birmingham Canal](#) via the River Severn.

The 21st century has seen a new growth in [freight traffic](#) on the lower course of the river. 275,000 tonnes of sand and gravel are carried each year from the quarry at Ripple to a distribution centre at Ryall. This saves 27,000 lorry trips per year and helps reduce pollution from diesel fumes.

What other attractions does the river provide?

The river is used for a variety of leisure pursuits. Several rowing clubs use the river near Worcester, while canoeing is popular along the upper reaches in mid-Wales. There are angling clubs along many stretches of the river, while walkers and ramblers make good use of the many riverside paths. There is an abundance of wildlife near the river, with kingfishers and herons providing added interest among the beautiful scenery.