Information pack

Brentford - Grand Union Canal

wild over waterways

The canal at Brentford was like a busy motorway in Victorian times.
Would you like to discover why?

www.wow4water.net

Source sheet A

Brentford - Grand Union Canal

Brentford Dock on the River Thames in 1926. Goods are being loaded onto 'lighters' for export to Egypt.

Why is Brentford an important place for transport?

In the 1700s many new factories were built and towns and cities were growing fast. More canals were needed to speed up the transport of goods to the factories. In 1793 a direct route from London to Birmingham was built - originally called the Grand Junction Canal - now known as the Grand Union Canal.

At Brentford the canal joins up with the River Thames, establishing a transport route from the Midlands both to London and the sea.

Why did Brentford grow so quickly?

Brentford rapidly became an important place where cargoes like timber and steel were transferred from large river boats to narrowboats to continue their journey along the canal. In 1859 the famous engineer Isambard Kingdom Brunel built a railway to Brentford so goods could be transferred from Thames river boats ('lighters') directly onto trains.

Source sheet B

Brentford - Grand Union Canal

A warehouse in Brentford in the 1930s. Narrowboats are waiting to be loaded with cargo.

Brentford gauging locks today. Flats, offices and a hotel are to the right and the old Toll House is on the left.

What was Brentford like in the past?

The area around the canal at Brentford gauging locks - near the High Street - was a busy place until the 1960s. It was filled with wharves and warehouses for unloading and storing all the goods carried along the canal. Boats - loaded up with different cargoes - passed through the locks all day on their journey between London and factories in the Midlands. Most of the old warehouses were demolished in the 1970s. On the River Thames below Thames Lock, there were queues of barges waiting to get onto the canal at high tide.

What is Brentford like today?

There are new blocks of flats, shops, restaurants, offices and a hotel on the land where the warehouses used to be. Leisure boats are moored on the canal and about 1700 boats pass through the locks each year. There is still evidence, however, of how the area used to look when it was a busy transport route. There is an old warehouse near the gauging locks and a timber yard and boatyard near Thames Lock. The old Toll House by the gauging locks is still there!

Source sheet C

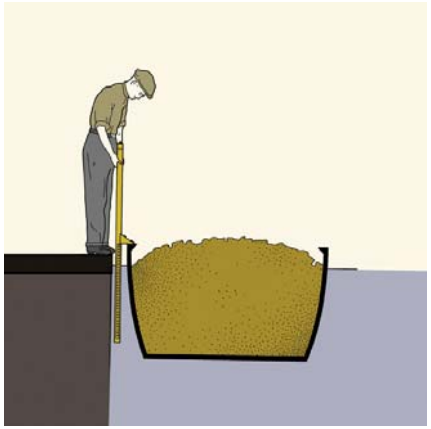
Brentford - Grand Union Canal

What did the toll clerk do?

As boats passed through Brentford gauging locks they were checked to see what weight of cargo they were carrying. The more they carried the higher the 'toll' or fee the boat had to pay to the owners of the canal.

The toll clerk measured how high the boat was 'sitting' out of the water using a gauging rod. This measured the 'dry inches' on the side of the boat and from this he could calculate the toll based on pence per mile for each cargo.

The toll clerk kept a record of every boat and cargo that passed through the gauging locks.



The toll clerk measured how high the boat is in the water using a gauging rod.

Here the toll clerk is gauging the load of a boat in the 1930s. He is holding the gauging rod against the side of a boat while the boatman watches.

Source sheet D

Brentford - Grand Union Canal

Thames Lock today looking towards the Grand Union Canal.

Where does the Grand Union Canal join the River Thames?

Below Brentford gauging locks the Grand Union Canal follows the original winding route of the River Brent as it gets closer to Thames Lock and the River Thames itself.

At Thames Lock the Grand Union Canal joins Brentford Creek - which is the lowest section of the River Brent, linked directly to the River Thames.

Why is Brentford Creek tidal?

The lowest stretch of the River Brent between Thames Lock and the River Thames is tidal because it is nearly at sea level. The water level rises and falls roughly every twelve hours as the tide goes in and out.

At high tide the lock keeper is on duty to help boats pass through the lock between Brentford Creek and the Grand Union Canal.

Source sheet E

Brentford - Grand Union Canal

High tide in March 2006. The water came over the towpath and the boat couldn't get under the bridge.

Low tide at Brentford Creek.
The boats are sitting on the mud.

Why does the tide cause a problem?

The final section of the canal below the gauging locks follows the old course of the River Brent and used to be tidal like the River Thames. When the water level was too low along this stretch the boats were in danger of getting stuck on the mud, so they had to wait until the tide was high enough before starting along this section.

Why was Thames Lock built?

Thames Lock was built in 1802 to keep the water level high enough on this stretch of the canal to allow boats to pass and to reduce delays. A second lock was built in 1962, but boats can still only pass through Thames Lock for two hours either side of high tide.

At low tide there is very little water in Brentford Creek. At very high tides in the spring and autumn the water level sometimes floods the towpath as far up the canal as the gauging locks.

Source sheet F

Brentford - Grand Union Canal

Brentford in the 1930s

1. Barges by the gauging locks

You can see the bridge over the locks and the Toll House.

2. A warehouse in Brentford

Narrowboats are waiting to be loaded with cargo.

3. Waiting at the gauging lock

A boatman and his wife wait to take their boat into the gauging lock.

Source sheet G

Brentford - Grand Union Canal

Brentford in 2001

4. The island by the gauging locks

You can see the old covered warehouses before they were demolished. The new Glaxo SmithKline building is in the distance on the left.

5. The canal by the gauging locks

The area is dominated by old warehouses, scrubland, an abandoned car and lots of rubbish.

6. A view of the gauging locks

You can see the bridge over the locks and the old Toll House.

Source sheet H

Brentford - Grand Union Canal

Brentford today

7. The gauging locks

The Toll House is on the left and there is a new hotel on the right.

8. The last of the old warehouses

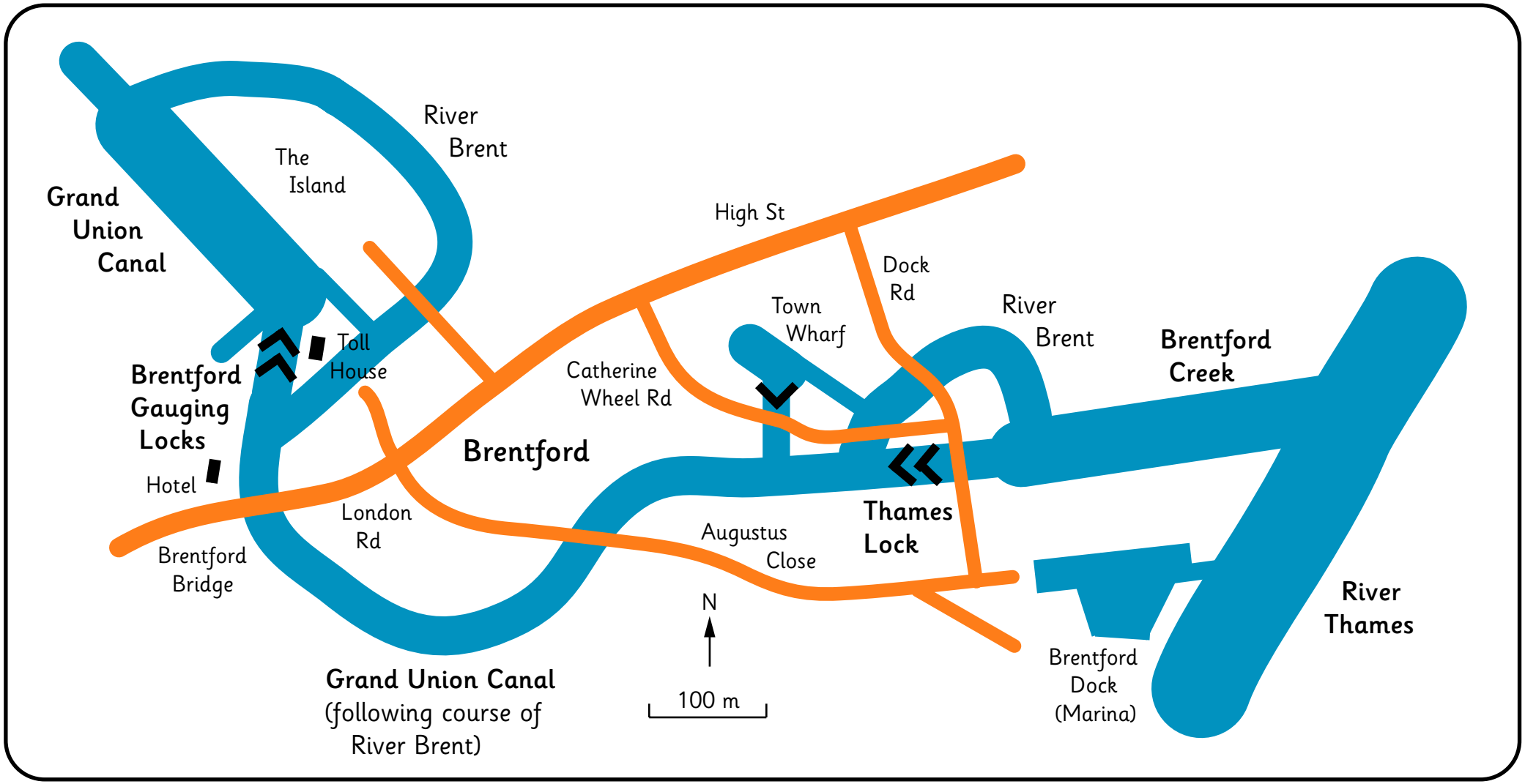
The boats are now used for leisure rather than for carrying cargoes.

9. New apartments on the island

Flats rise up where warehouses and wharves once stood on the island. The Glaxo SmithKline building is in the distance.

Source sheet 1

Brentford - Grand Union Canal



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Source sheet J

Brentford - Grand Union Canal

This map shows the Grand Union Canal as it is today.