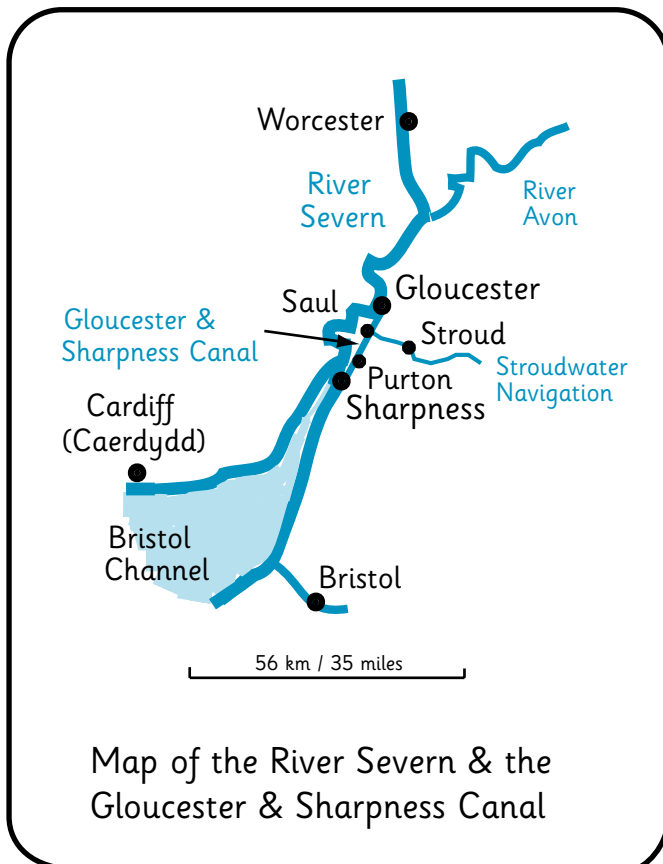




Do you know when and why the first ship canal in the country was built?  
Read on to find out more.



The Gloucester & Sharpness Canal was the country's first ship canal. It is almost 26km (16 miles) long and runs from the docks at Gloucester to the port of Sharpness on the [River Severn](#).

## When and why was it built?

Building began at Gloucester in 1794, but the money ran out in 1799 and work stopped. Eventually, the government stepped in to finance the project in 1819 and the 'Gloucester & Berkeley Canal' (as it was called originally) was finished in 1827. It was built so sea-going ships could reach Gloucester without facing the dangers of the winding, shallow and shifting channel of the tidal River Severn upstream from Sharpness.

## What did it look like in Victorian times?

The Gloucester & Sharpness was the widest and deepest canal in the country when it opened in 1827. You can view some early photographs, maps and documents relating to the canal by visiting the [Virtual Waterways Archive Catalogue](#). (Click on this hyperlink, scroll through the text, then click on the thumbnail pictures underneath.)



Sailing ships moored at Llanthony Quay and Bakers Quay, Gloucester Docks, in 1905

## The rise of Gloucester Docks

The new docks at Gloucester, built to accommodate ocean-going ships, were opened in 1827 at the same time as the canal.

Cargoes unloaded at Gloucester included grain from Ireland and Italy, and timber from Canada and Sweden. Grain was stored in warehouses and processed at flour mills. Timber was sawn into planks for constructing buildings while poplar logs were used to make 'England's Glory' matches. The main export was salt, brought by narrowboat from [Droitwich](#).

## Cadbury's chocolate crumb

During the 20th century, cocoa beans were imported to Cadbury's factory at Frampton-on-Severn. The beans were processed, mixed with sugar and milk and baked. The resulting 'chocolate crumb' was taken by narrowboat to Bourneville, near Birmingham, to be made into chocolate.

## Oil Tankers on the canal

Between the 1930s and 1980s oil tankers brought petrol from the refinery at Avonmouth to the oil terminal at Monk Meadow Dock.



The entrance to Sharpness Dock for sea-going vessels

## The port of Sharpness

When it was opened in 1827, the Gloucester & Sharpness Canal joined the [River Severn](#) just north of Sharpness. There were no cargo-handling facilities here and vessels travelled to Gloucester to unload.

During the 19th century, ships grew longer and deeper. In the 1870s, a new dock was built at Sharpness to accommodate larger ships too big to use the canal. Here, goods were unloaded onto smaller vessels.

## The rise and fall of the Severn Rail Bridge

In the 1870s, a railway bridge was built on piers across the River Severn to bring coal from the Forest of Dean to Sharpness Dock for export. A tragic accident occurred in thick fog in 1960 when two tankers collided with one of the piers and part of the bridge collapsed. The bridge was demolished, but remains of the piers can still be seen at low tide.

## Sharpness Dock today

Sea-going vessels still unload at Sharpness. Two tall grain elevators store imported wheat, while other cargoes include timber, cement and potash.



Former course of the Stroudwater Navigation at Saul Junction

## The Stroudwater Navigation and the London link

At Saul Junction, the Gloucester & Sharpness Canal crossed the line of the Stroudwater Navigation, opened in 1779 to carry coal from the Forest of Dean and the Staffordshire coalfield via the [River Severn](#) to the prosperous woollen mills of Stroud.

In 1789, the Stroudwater Navigation was linked to the Thames & Severn Canal which, in turn, joined the navigable River Thames near Lechlade. With the opening of the Gloucester & Sharpness Canal, this created a new route for narrowboats travelling from the Midlands to London.

## Restoration of the Cotswold Canals

The Thames & Severn Canal was abandoned in the 1930s, and only a short stretch of the Stroudwater Navigation is currently navigable near Saul Junction. The [Cotswold Canals Partnership](#) - which includes the Cotswold Canals Trust, the Gloucestershire Wildlife Trust and local authorities - is currently restoring the Stroudwater Navigation and the Thames & Severn Canal for the benefit of the public.



Gloucester & Sharpness Canal  
near Frampton-on-Severn

## Drinking water for Bristol

The water in the tidal **River Severn** near Bristol is salty. Upstream, however, fresh water from the River Severn enters the Gloucester & Sharpness Canal at Gloucester Docks. The water flows along the canal to Purton, near Sharpness, where approximately 110 million litres (about 24 million gallons) of water is treated each day before being piped to thousands of homes and businesses in the Bristol area.

## The Gloucester & Sharpness Canal today

During the twentieth century, freight traffic along the canal declined as more and more cargoes were moved by large articulated lorries.

Today, the canal is used mainly for leisure pursuits, with anglers, rowers, canoeists and model boat enthusiasts all using the water, while walkers and cyclists enjoy the attractive scenery from the towpath.

Most boats navigating the canal between Sharpness and Gloucester are narrowboats or broad-beamed pleasure cruisers, but occasionally you can still spot sea-going vessels travelling upstream to Gloucester Docks.