

Did you know that there are three canals in the centre of Birmingham? Find out why they were built and how they were improved in the 1820s.





The Birmingham Canal was built by James Brindley in 1769.

## The canal revolution

In 1759 **James Brindley** was hired by the Duke of Bridgewater to build a canal from Worsley, where the duke owned coal mines, to Manchester. On the opening of the canal in 1761 the price of coal in Manchester dropped dramatically.

## Birmingham's first canal

By 1767 businessmen in the Midlands had raised £50,000 for Brindley to build a ten-mile long canal linking Birmingham to the coal mines at Wednesbury. Birmingham's first canal was opened as far as the Newhall Street terminus (near Cambrian Wharf) in 1769. A second arm led to the Paradise Street terminus (near Gas Street Basin). Within a year, coal in Birmingham was a quarter of its previous price.

## New links

In 1772 the Birmingham Canal was extended to Wolverhampton to join the Staffordshire and Worcestershire Canal. This gave Birmingham a direct trading link to the sea via Stourport on the River Severn.



The Birmingham and Fazeley Canal joins the Birmingham Canal at Farmers Bridge Locks.

## A second canal

Several rival companies proposed new canals to link the coal mines in the Walsall area to factories in the West Midlands. In 1787 the Birmingham and Fazeley Canal was built, joining the Birmingham Canal near Cambrian Wharf. The 13 locks at Farmers Bridge were so busy that lights were installed for 24-hour working.

## A new route to the sea

In 1795 the first section of the [Worcester and Birmingham Canal](#) was opened, creating a shorter route to the River Severn. To protect its own trade, the Birmingham Canal Company refused to link up with the new canal. As a result, the canals were separated at the Gas Street Basin by a 2 metre (7 feet) wide barrier known as the “Worcester Bar”. Goods had to be unloaded at the bar and transferred to boats on the other side. It was another 20 years before a stop lock was built into the bar in 1815 allowing boats to sail through.

## BCN is born

In 1794 the Birmingham company changed its name to the Birmingham Canal Navigations Company to reflect the growing network of canals.



Thomas Telford straightened and shortened the Birmingham Canal in the 1820s.

## New Main Line

Brindley's canal of 1769 avoided gradients by following land at the same height in broad loops such as the Oozells Street Loop. In 1824 Thomas Telford drew up dramatic plans to straighten the canal using aqueducts across valleys and cuttings through higher land. The new Birmingham Main Line opened in 1829 and was 5 miles and 5 hours shorter than the original route.

## Big business

The canals were built to transport goods to and from factories in Birmingham. The Old Wharf terminus had over 60 coal merchants, while cement was brought to the Gas Street Basin from quarries in Warwickshire. Other wharfs were built to handle timber, metals, and coal for the gas works on Gas Street. In 1847 John Cadbury moved his tea and cocoa business to the Old Wharf, transferring to Bourneville alongside the [Worcester and Birmingham Canal](#) in 1879.

## Recent changes

Basins on the site of Centenary Square closed and Old Wharf was infilled in 1926. Today canals are used mainly for leisure. Attractive new apartments, offices and leisure facilities have been built near the canals.