

Would you like to discover why the original narrow locks at Hatton were widened in the 1930s? Read on

The canals which make up the Grand Union Canal are:

- Grand Junction Canal
- Leicestershire & Northamptonshire Union Canal
- Warwick & Birmingham Canal
- Warwick and Napton Canal
- Grand Union Canal
- Regent's Canal
- Hertfordshire Union Canal
- Birmingham & Warwick Junction Canal
- Loughborough Navigation
- Erewash Canal
- Leicester Navigation

The Grand Union Canal isn't really one canal at all, but a collection of 11 canals all built at different times by separate canal companies. In 1929, 8 of these canals joined together to form the Grand Union Canal linking Birmingham, Leicester and Nottingham with London.

Why was it built?

During the 18th century, as the Industrial Revolution progressed, towns were keen to be connected to larger cities, coalfields and industrial centres so that trade could expand. Many canals were built to speed up transport.

Some of the early canals followed quite winding routes as the engineers wanted to avoid hills and valleys. The Grand Junction Canal was built to speed up transport between London and Birmingham. It made a short cut between Braunston on the **Oxford Canal** and Brentford west of London on the River Thames. The Grand Junction was completed in 1805 and it was 96 km shorter than using the River Thames and then the Oxford Canal.



The locks at Knowle, Warwickshire are widened in 1932.

The Rise and Fall of the Canal

When the canals opened in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, many different cargoes were carried along them: coal from North Warwickshire, stone from Yorkshire and Derbyshire, glass from Stourbridge, pottery from Staffordshire and imported goods from London. Several branches were built along the Grand Junction Canal to connect towns to the waterway.

In time, the canals were used less and less to transport goods as railways were built across the country. Trains were able to transport goods more quickly and more cheaply than boats. In 1929, in an attempt to compete with the railways, the Grand Junction Canal joined with several other canals to become the Grand Union Canal.

The Grand Junction had been built as a wide canal. However, some parts of the Grand Union Canal were too narrow for wide boats. Sections of this canal were widened but not all of it. It was because of this that the canal was not able to compete with the railways.



The northern terminus of the Grand Union in Birmingham in the 1930s.

Recent history of the Grand Union

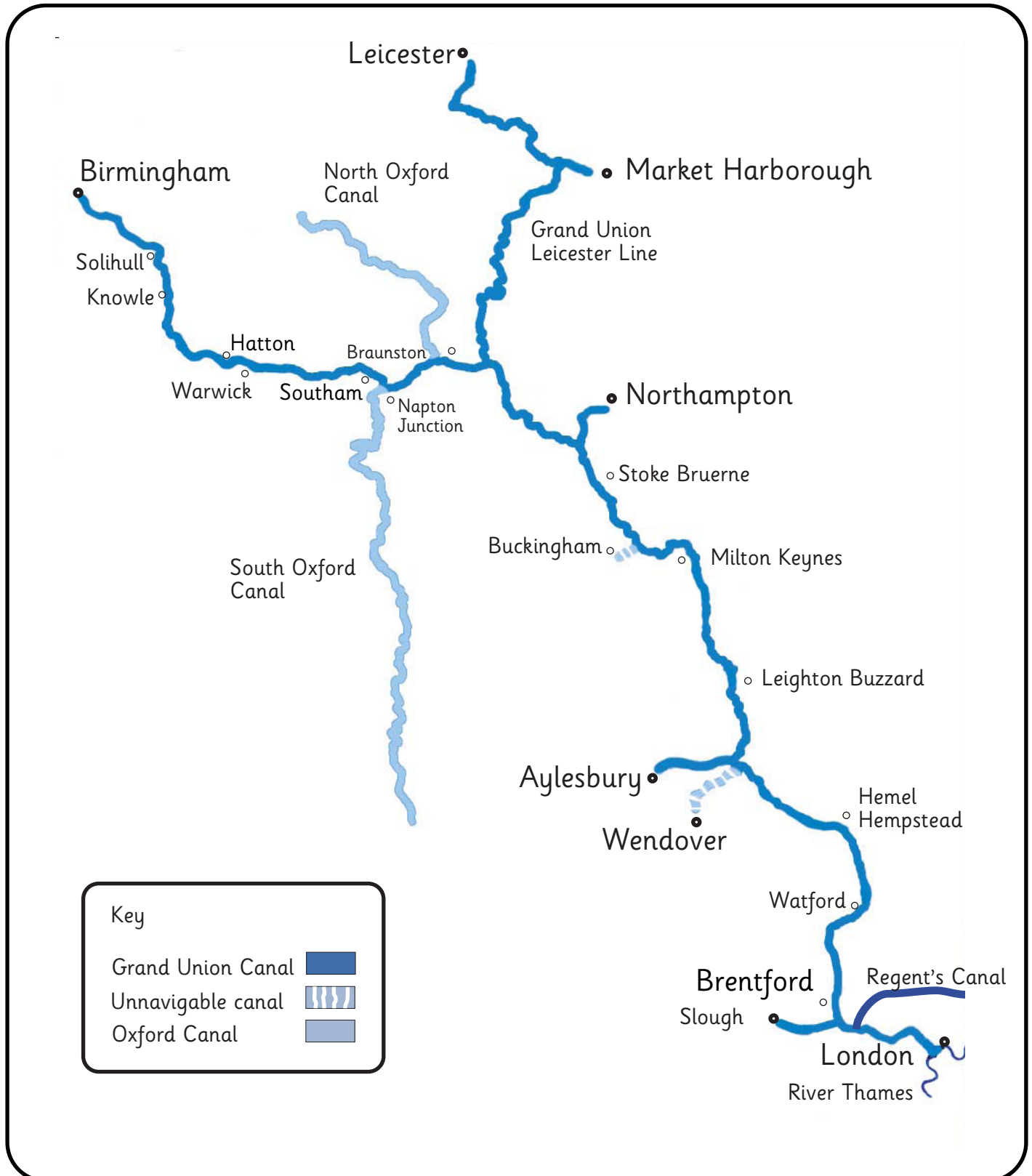
During the Second World War, the Grand Union Canal was an important supply route: it took coal to London and materials for making weapons to Birmingham. Women worked on many of the boats as most of the men were fighting the war.

After the war, trade on the canal declined. Then in the 1950s motorways began to be built taking even more trade. During the winter of 1962/3 the canal suffered even more bad luck when it froze over for 3 months meaning that no boats could use it. The last regular commercial boats to use the canal stopped running in the 1970s.

Today the canal is used mainly for leisure by anglers, boaters, walkers and cyclists. It is possible to walk along the towpath from London all the way to Birmingham - a distance of 236 km.



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





The Duke of Kent opened the new locks on 20 October 1934.

Hatton Locks originally formed part of the Warwick and Birmingham Canal, opened in 1799 to carry coal to Warwick and Leamington Spa. After the Grand Union Canal Company took over in 1929, the locks were widened so larger boats could carry goods more cheaply and compete with the railways. As there was high unemployment, the government gave a large grant to employ over a thousand men to widen the 52 narrow locks along the canal.

Hatton Yard

The canal maintenance yard was built in 1899. The main building is now used as offices and a conference centre. The Carpenters' Workshop is used to teach traditional woodworking and masonry skills so canals and nearby buildings can be repaired using the original techniques.

What goods were carried?

During Victorian times, the canal carried coal, limestone, flour, sugar, tea and tomato puree. The last regular commercial traffic – cement carried from Southam to Birmingham – ceased in 1969, but the canal is now alive with leisure boats.