



Are you interested in learning about Britain's canals?
Read this information to find out about the Oxford Canal.

Source sheet A

Oxford Canal



Boaters take to the water on the Oxford Canal.

The Oxford Canal was one of the first canals to be built in England and for a long time it was one of the most important.

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.

The Oxford Canal was built to carry coal to Banbury, Oxford and the Thames from Coventry's coalfields. Before the building of the canal, Oxford had to get coal from Newcastle-upon-Tyne via the North Sea and the River Thames!

In 1769 an Act of Parliament was granted for the Oxford Canal to be built but it wasn't officially opened until the 1st of January 1790. Within days of the opening, the price of coal in Oxford dropped dramatically.



One of the many curves on the canal.

Where and how was it built?

The Oxford Canal runs from Hawkesbury, near Coventry, to Oxford. It was originally 146 km (nearly 91 miles) long. **James Brindley** was the engineer for the canal and work began on building it in September 1769.

There were problems building the canal from the very beginning. In Coventry there was a dispute with the owners of the **Coventry Canal** about tolls and then financial problems delayed the work. The canal finally reached Oxford in 1789, twenty years after work had begun on it and 17 years after James Brindley's death! The canal cost £307 000 to build. It had 28 locks, 41 fixed bridges of stone or brick and 38 wooden lift bridges.

The Oxford Canal is a contour canal. This means that the canal follows quite a winding route in order to avoid hills and valleys and the building of too many locks, aqueducts or embankments. Most early canals were contour canals and James Brindley was very famous for building them.



This type of iron bridge is common to the Oxford Canal.

Rise and fall of the canal

Within 15 years of the opening of the Oxford Canal it faced competition from the Grand Junction Canal which offered a quicker, shorter route to London.

In the early 1830s the northern section of the Oxford Canal was shortened by about 22 km to 124 km (77 miles) through the building of aqueducts, embankments and cuttings to cross many of the valleys. The shortening of the canal meant that journey times were reduced.

In the 1840s the coming of the railways meant that the number of boats using the canal fell. By the 1950s canal transport had almost ended and the southern section of the canal faced closure. Thanks to the efforts of campaigners, including those from the Inland Waterways Association, the canal remained open.

Today the Oxford Canal is a popular canal and a great leisure resource. It is used by boaters, walkers, cyclists and anglers as well as many animals such as water voles, heron and kingfishers.