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# Lancashire

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# The Lancaster Canal

## – A hidden gem

Andrew Harris explores the past, present and future

Any list of the hidden gems in our region would have the Lancaster Canal at or near the top. It is a gem because it is the only canal in the country which runs for 42 miles without locks, includes beautiful scenery and caters for boaters, walkers, cyclists and wildlife. It is hidden because it is mainly in the countryside where most people cannot see it. This is the story of the Lancaster Canal.

### THE PAST

The final survey for the future Lancaster Canal was completed by John Rennie in 1791. It envisaged a canal running from Kendal in the north to Westhoughton near Wigan in the south. To authorise the work an Act of Parliament was passed the following year, Rennie was appointed Engineer and work started. By 1797 – just 5 years later - the Lune Aqueduct was open and the level canal was navigable from Preston to Tewitfield which is – with the addition of later links to Glasson Dock and the River Ribble – the canal which survives today.

They were ambitious in those days. The canal was quickly connected to the sea via 6 locks and Glasson Dock. In 1813 work started to extend the canal northwards to Kendal and this opened for business in 6 years later. The section south of Preston was less successful. The foundations and stone finish of the aqueduct over the Lune spent money needed for a similar



structure over the Ribble which was never built but a simple tramway was constructed instead. This thrived for a while but closed in 1864 and the length of canal built south of the Ribble was absorbed into the Leeds & Liverpool Canal and is still used today.

The Lancaster Canal was a working navigation – transporting coal northwards to the Kendal Gas Works and Limestone southwards from what many still call Westmorland. These cargoes caused the Lancaster to be known as the ‘Black & White Canal’ but it also carried passengers taking just 10 hours to travel from Preston to Kendal in great comfort compared to coaches. For some years many passengers preferred it to the new railway!

The canal was still not connected to the national canal



network but this was remedied in 2002 when the Ribble Link opened 50% funded by the Millennium Commission. The Link is used by about 200 boats a year but only operates for 90 days April-October, is one-way only each day and has been closed for long periods for dredging, maintenance and repairs.

#### THE PRESENT

Most of the navigable 42 miles of the Lancaster Canal is very scenic. Narrow boat holidays are popular and there are 12 companies which offer such charters. The canal is served by 6 marinas but –

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...transporting coal northwards to the Kendal Gas Works and Limestone southwards from what many still call Westmorland...

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unlike most yachting marinas – there is a wide variety of service and reception. The best are Bridge House (pictured) and Galgate Marinas. The new Barton Grange Marina has tremendous security which prevented your columnist from entering (and a later email request fared no better) whilst Moon Bridge Marina near Woodplumpton has the greatest scope for improvement.

Apart from spectacular scenery there are many other attractions along the length of the canal. Guy's Thatched Hamlet at Bilsborrow offers a good ●●●



combination of quaint shops, pub, restaurant, hotel and a rich choice of events including an Easter Weekend, Teddy Bear's Picnic in April, Cider Festivals throughout the Summer, a Dolce Vita Weekend in June, American events around independence day, the 25th 'Flagship' Oyster Festival in September this year and a Beer Festival in late October. Well worth visiting!

Further north is Th'Owd Tithe Barn which overlooks the Garstang Basin - another favourite 'watering hole'. It is for you if you like the traditional atmosphere of an historic building and artefacts with a rather random farming theme. Your columnist has tested their cuisine for you and recommends it!

A Canalside Craft Centre and Café are located next to Galgate Marina and are interesting and refreshing. They are open 11-3 pm weekdays and 11-4pm weekends and Bank Holidays.

Your next stop could be the middle of Lancaster where you can moor and enjoy this lovely informal City on foot. If you don't like walking the Water Witch is an award-winning pub next to the canal.

Further north again you find Hest

Bank – not to be confused with Hesketh Bank on the River Douglas – where the Hest Bank Inn is a family run pub in this picturesque village; another favourite which is recommended.

Finally, you reach Tewitfield – currently the end of the canal. Here you find a welcoming marina and the 4-star Longlands Inn and Restaurant which compares favourably with any of the venues you may have explored en route. To be enjoyed after your arduous journey at up to 4 miles an hour!

If you are more adventurous you can travel further north – overland – and view the remaining landlocked sections of the Lancaster Canal. Lengths of up to 4 miles are still a canal but access is difficult and water levels can be reduced which caused canal users to protest to the Canal & River Trust – the owners - who seem more interested in the Northern Reaches (beyond Tewitfield) as a conduit than an amenity. Near Crooklands is the narrowboat 'Waterwitch' which is operated by the Lancaster Canal Trust and provides scenic cruises as it sails its lonely passage. For details of Waterwitch trips and local events visit [www.lancastercanaltrust.org.uk](http://www.lancastercanaltrust.org.uk) ●●●



**FAR LEFT:** The Lancaster Canal isn't just for humans. **LEFT:** Boats at Bridge House Marina. **BELOW:** Dredging the upper reaches of the Lancaster Canal. **BOTTOM:** The LCT narrowboat Waterwitch in action.





**Other users: the canal version of Cowes Week!**

### THE FUTURE

The vision of the Lancaster Canal Trust is to restore the northern reaches of the Lancaster Canal to their former glory so far as possible. This is a huge challenge as the M6 crosses the route of the canal at low level at 3 places. Already the Trust have restored much of the route as a wildlife corridor and amenity to be enjoyed. Bridges have been repaired, the canal widened, a section has been landscaped, a new tow-path laid and some of the canal bed has been lined.

Extending the navigable canal north of Tewitfield is a bigger challenge. Undeterred the Trust plan to restore 7 of the locks at Tewitfield and replace the eighth lock beyond the M6 to lower the water level to make it possible for boats to pass under the motorway. This would permit access to the next length of the canal.

The second phase involves a new lock and 4-mile stretch of canal to find a better point to pass under the M6. Thereafter lies the third phase: a 5-mile stretch and another tunnel to reach Crooklands. The funding requirement for this ambitious work is at least as much as the cost of the Ribble Link which opened up 42 miles of canal. Although the Trust cannot match this benefit by miles of canal liberated they are determined and focus on the multiple uses of the corridor they will create. Your columnist was mightily impressed by their commitment; they might well succeed but, sadly, not all the way to Kendal.

Canal restoration supports many modern aspirations such as leisure time, improving our quality of life, caring for wildlife and achieving a better environment for all species. The Lancaster Canal is already a wonderful

amenity which can be enjoyed in many ways afloat or on land. It is hoped that more people will discover this and that all these benefits can be extended beyond Tewitfield so that our 42-mile hidden gem becomes a 56-mile gem which is better known and enjoyed.



**Andrew Harris - mail@andreweharris.co.uk - was director of the Preston Maritime Festivals 1995-99 and supported the Ribble Link.**

**He is pleased to acknowledge the help provided by Frank Sanderson of the Lancaster Canal Trust in the preparation of this feature.**

## **Boat Hire on the Lancaster Canal**

**Arlen Hire Boats:**

[www.arlen-hireboats.co.uk](http://www.arlen-hireboats.co.uk) / 01772 769183

**Blue Bell Narrowboat:**

[www.bluebellnarrowboat.co.uk](http://www.bluebellnarrowboat.co.uk) / 07854 596989

**Bridge House Marina:**

[www.bridgehousemarina.co.uk](http://www.bridgehousemarina.co.uk) / 01995 603207

**Budgie Transport:**

[www.budgettransport.co.uk](http://www.budgettransport.co.uk) / 01524 389410

**Crabtree Narrow Boat Hire:**

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**Ducklings Narrow Boat Hire:**

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**Lancaster Canal Boat Hire:**

[www.lancastercanalboathire.com](http://www.lancastercanalboathire.com) / 01253 356399

**Otters Boat Hire:**

[www.ottersboathire.co.uk](http://www.ottersboathire.co.uk) / 01253 727453

**Pintail Boats:**

[www.pintailboats.co.uk](http://www.pintailboats.co.uk) / 07980 607070

**Snailspace Narrowboat Holidays:**

[www.nailspacenarrowboatholiday.com](http://www.nailspacenarrowboatholiday.com) / 07906 968668

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