

Cruise Guide

Parking in the Dirty Duck car park, we make our way over the 18th Century canal bridge. Pausing on the bridge; restored Lock 17 is to our right, with restored Lock 16 to the left. Beyond this, at the end of the half mile straight, lies the newly restored Lock 15. The image we see below is likely taken from the bridge.

The Dirty Duck building pre dates the canal, and was a shooting lodge before becoming a public house and coal wharf.



Passing Lock 17, the fields on the far side of the canal once accommodated a brickworks. It was here where men, women and children made bricks for the canal. Children, often as young as five years old, would be employed hand making bricks. We sometimes find their finger marks in the bricks during restoration work.

Continuing along the towpath; before the mid 1990s, we would now have to climb a stile and clamber up a steep railway embankment and down the other side, to reach Lock 18 and our boat moorings. This embankment was removed by volunteer labour. The track bed to our left, is now part of Sustrans National Cycle Network Route 15.

Our skipper and crew will introduce themselves at Lock 18. Following their instruction and taking care when boarding the boat, this is where we leave the hustle and bustle of everyday life behind for a while.

We're on the summit level. To reach this spot the canal has climbed 140 feet through 18 locks from the River Trent 28 miles away. It would now be plain sailing for boatmen, women and children in the working days of the canal with their horse drawn boats. Only one swingbridge to open and close before reaching the canal basin in Grantham and their journey's end; a journey which likely included the passage of the perilous River Trent.

When the canal was officially closed in 1936, the Act of Parliament stipulated it must be kept in water for agricultural purposes. Its water could be used for irrigation and for livestock to drink from. Cattle and sheep still drink from the canal today. We will see evidence of this immediately on your right as we leave our mooring.

Brambles along the bank here and marginal reeds provide a rich habitat for wildlife, as we cruise towards our first bridge (62). The field to our right immediately before the bridge has evidence of ridge and furrow – a farming practice coming to an end as the canal was being built in the late 18th Century.

Bridge 62 is one of the very first skew bridges to be built in the country. We'll never know which was first – we could be looking at it! A skew bridge crosses the canal at an angle other than 90 degrees. Notice the brickwork on the underside, where the bricks aren't laid in level courses. The angle in which the underside rendering finishes, gives us a clue to the angle of the brick courses. This rendering needed to be done when the bridge was restored. Look for the slots provided for bat roosts.

Bridge 62 carries the ancient Sewstern Lane over the canal. With origins in the Bronze Age; later a drove road, with drovers sometimes driving their herds from as far away as Scotland, making for lucrative London markets – avoiding tolls at Grantham. We're looking at the first Grantham bypass!

With a little supposition, it's likely this route was taken by 'Gentleman' John Nevison, notorious highwayman, on his fast and furious 200 mile ride from Kent to York in fleeing the scene of a robbery. He knew this area well, being known to frequent that den of iniquity; The Three Queens Inn at the nearby Gorse Lane/Sewstern Lane crossroads. Getting away with it on this occasion, he was later hanged for murder and other offences on the Knavesmire (York Racecourse).

Sounds familiar? The infamous Dick Turpin, again after an epic ride from London to York, 45 years after that of John Nevison's, also met his demise at the end of a rope on the Knavesmire. It's likely both used the Sewstern Lane en route to meet their maker at York. Neither would have paused on Bridge 62 to admire the view. For, even if they'd had time – the canal hadn't been built yet.



Mature Willows, Hawthorn and Blackthorn on the banks, we follow a gentle curve to Casthorpe Bridle Bridge(63), and a shallow cutting. Dubbed the 'Monet Bridge' by some - reminiscent of the bridge in his painting the 'Water Lilly Pond'. This is a significant bridge, being the first to be raised as part of the Grantham Canal Society's restoration programme.

Remember the steep railway embankment we would have had to scramble up and over near Lock 18? The embankment was built around a wooden trestle bridge which was showing signs of stress. The wood for the Bridle Bridge came from the trestle bridge discovered inside this embankment during removal.

Leaving the Bridle Bridge cutting the scene opens out again. Harlaxton Clays Wood on the hillside and another significant bridge lies before us. This time, Casthorpe Road Bridge(64); the first road bridge to be raised to navigable height.

Skirting the hillside we reach Denton Bridge(65), the wharf, slipway and popular picnic spot. Look out for the grooves in the stonework in this bridge, worn by towlines from horse drawn boats many years ago. A reminder of the families who toiled along our canal, bringing coal to the inhabitants and burgeoning industry of Grantham – not forgetting other goods too, which came in and were transported out in profusion.



As we leave Denton Wharf behind, the banks become wooded towards Harlaxton Cutting. Spare a thought for surveyor Hodgkinson; when he reported to the canal company the need for a deep cutting at Harlaxton – he was promptly sacked! Earthworks such as this were costly when it all had to be done by hand. To save time and money, the cutting was only made one boat wide initially. This caused congestion, and was later widened to allow boats to pass.

Before reaching the cutting, we encounter a busy area of canal engineering and some ingenuity. Denton Reservoir lies out of sight to our right. We pass the feeder stream bringing water from the reservoir, also on our right. For something so important, it looks so insignificant – ask the crew to point it out. Almost immediately we see a steel bridge carrying the towpath over the overspill weir – one of several along the canal's length which regulate the level of water in the canal. Under the bed of the canal here, runs Denton Brook/Old Beck. It is this brook which feeds the reservoir, which in turn feeds the canal. Denton Brook doesn't simply run into the reservoir – the reservoir is only allowed to take flood water from the brook. This was innovative thinking by the canal's chief engineer, William Jessop, for he'd already had his bid to build the canal refused once. Denton Brook is a tributary of the River Witham. The Witham's commissioners were having none of it, until Jessop came up with his 'floodwater' scheme. The same thinking was applied to Knipton Reservoir, which also feeds the canal. The Grantham Canal was the first in the country to be fed by floodwater reservoirs.

We've reached Denton Winding Hole, a widened area where full length boats of around 70 feet can turn. In the days of horse drawn boats, boatmen would use the power of the wind to assist in turning. Two hour cruises now begin their unhurried and scenic journey back to Woolsthorpe.



Three and four hour cruises continue their tree lined way towards Harlaxton Cutting. Had the cutting been a little deeper – we might well be approaching a tunnel.

The hump in the towpath to our left, is the parapet of a low level bridge 65a which was put in after the canal had closed. This to facilitate the planned ironstone extraction which never materialised.

The cutting deepens as we reach rebuilt Bridge 66 and Harlaxton Wharf. Harlaxton Wharf was restored by a community group from the village. They sourced funding and organised the restoration. Once a busy coal wharf; following the canal's closure, it became the village 'ashpit'. This small group continue to manage the wharf for its ecology. Over 200 plant species have been recorded – no mean feat on this north facing bank. Four hour cruises take a break here – bring your wild flower guide – see how many you can spot!

Wharf House sits atop the bank. This unusually designed house was built for the wharfinger by the Gregory family who also built Harlaxton Manor and were one of the major investors in the canal. If foliage permits, notice the windows in the corner of the house – so the wharfinger could keep an eye on activity at the wharf.

We continue under Bridge 66 and through the deepest part of the tree lined cutting, passing under Grade 2 listed Vincent's Bridge(67). With the depth of this cutting, there was no need for these bridges to be hump backs!

We reach 'the sandpits', where it is thought sand was dug for the building of Harlaxton Manor. This is where we turn, or in boating jargon – we wind.

We're hoping to do some dredging at the A1 end of the canal, so we can once again reach the moorings there.



Wildlife along the canal

Much will depend upon where we are in the season.

Birds to look out for include: Kingfisher, Heron, Cormorant, Mute Swan, Geese, Mallard Ducks, Moorhens and Coots. Jays, Bullfinches, Goldfinches, Wrens, Robins, Blue and Great Tits, Reed Buntings and a variety of warblers can all be seen or heard. All that's needed is a little luck and an observant eye.

Swifts and Swallows skim the surface taking insects – listen for woodpeckers too!

Looking skywards for circling Buzzards and Red Kites.

Grass Snakes can sometimes be encountered swimming, and even a Red Eared Terrapin has been spotted sun bathing along the summit level.

The canal is noted for its Dragon and Damsel Flies.



We hope you enjoy your cruise with us. The Grantham Canal Society is a purely volunteer organisation. Thank you for supporting us, as we continue to drive the restoration of this fabulous waterway – our ultimate aim is full navigation – connecting Grantham once again to over 2,000 miles of inland waterways.

We look forward to your continued support on this journey.