

# MONMOUTHSHIRE & BRECON CANAL HISTORY



Working boats took four days to do the round trip from Gilwern to Brecon. The boats had small cabins which provided very basic facilities.

Overnight accommodation and stabling was available at farms and inns beside the canal. Pubs opened to serve the men building the canal and later for the men working on it. Look for the pub names that reflect their canal-side location.

You can see across the view points

## Gilwern to Talybont-on-Usk

### Historical information along the the Monmouthshire & Brecon Canal

← Abergavenny - - - A40 - - -

## CRICKHOWELL

## LLANGATTOCK



## Gilwern - Llangattock

## Llangattock

Look out for the Places to Eat leaflet

<< 5.7km / 3.5 miles: walking 1hr 45mins / bike 30 mins >>

<< 7.4km / 4.6 miles: walking 1hr 45mins / bike 30 mins >>

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Gwernva Manor

MONMOUTHSHIRE & BRECON

# CANAL HISTORY

Boats were drawn by ponies, small horses, donkeys or mules rather than by large cart horses. A boatman's horse had to be trained to lean forward - stretching the rope to get the boat moving, as this was very different to pulling a cart on a road.

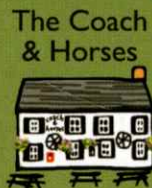
Mons & Brecon canal boats were not as highly decorated as on other canals.

house

Spiteful Inn Bridge



## LLANGYNIDR



Watkins & Bevan Wood Yard

LOCK 64

Private House was Boatman's Arms



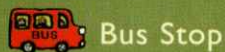
Llangynidr Bridge

The lime kilns in Llangynidr were used as an air raid shelter during WWII

Dyfnant Bridge



Glanusk Park



123 Bridge Numbers

Table Mountain Usk Valley from along the canal.

le

ck - Llangynidr

Llangynidr - Talybont

ng 3hrs / bike 40 mins - >> << 5.6km / 3.4 canal miles: walking 1hr / bike 20mins >>

Ashford Tunnel

Llangynidr Locks



Side Pond

Look for the old stone styles by canal bridges.

Llandetty Hall  
Llandetty church

## Talybont-on-Usk to Gilwern

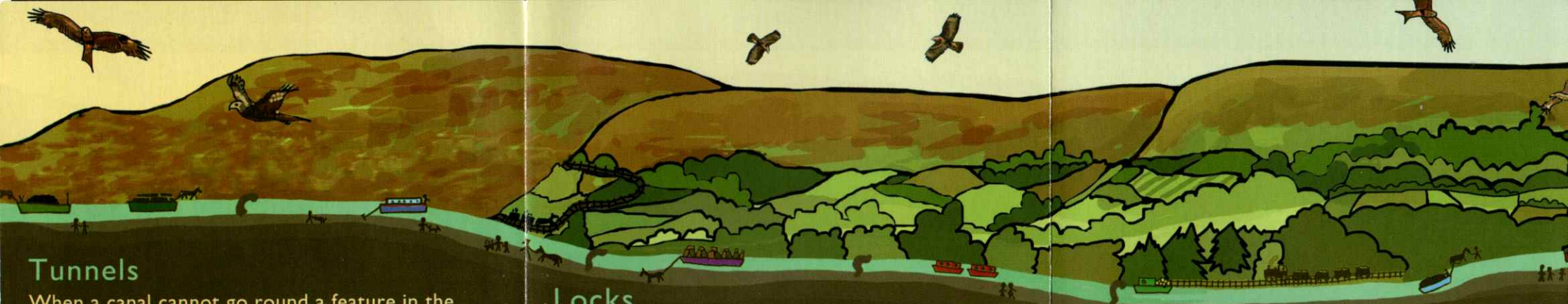
### Historical information along the the Monmouthshire & Brecon Canal

Discover the past from Talybont-on-Usk to Gilwern

Look out for the Brecon to Talybont leaflet

A40

BRECON



## Tunnels

When a canal cannot go round a feature in the landscape, such as a hill, it can go underground. Tunnels made the job of the navvies far more dangerous with loss of life and serious injury a common occurrence (the men who built the Canals were known as navigators or navvies).

There are two tunnels on the Mons & Brecon Canal, the Ashford Tunnel which is 343 metres long and takes 10 minutes to travel and the Cwmbran Tunnel which at only 80 metres is considerably shorter. Boats are equipped with a headlight to help passage through the darkness. Some tunnels on the UK canal system are thousands of metres long and take up to an hour to navigate.

The **Ashford Tunnel** is fairly straight and boats approaching it can see if there is a boat coming the other way. As it is so narrow, boats cannot pass each other in the tunnel and have to take turns in passing through. There is no towpath through the tunnel so the towing horses had to be walked over the top and the boats were worked through manually by 'walking' the walls of the tunnel.

There is a considerable dip close to the southern end where boats come within a few centimetres of the tunnel roof.

The tunnel was restored by British Waterways Board in 1970 and there is a commemorative plaque above the southern portal. There are gauge boards hanging at both entrances to the tunnel. If a boat cannot pass under the board then it cannot pass through the tunnel.

TUNNELS

## Locks

The Monmouthshire & Brecon Canal originally had 69 locks. Five of these are at Llangynidr - numbered 64 to 68. A lock is the method used to convey boats up or down hill in steps.

The locks can raise or lower a boat 3 metres.

The locks on the Mons & Brecon Canal are approximately 2.9 metres x 20 metres (9ft 6 inches x 66 feet). This makes them neither a standard narrow lock nor a wide lock and they have been described as "narrowish" and match the dimensions of the locks on other Welsh canals.

When a boat enters the lock coming up towards Brecon it is trying to 'climb' up 3 metres. The boat comes into the lock and the gates are closed behind it. Water is then allowed to flow into the lock - about 40,000 gallons - which causes the boat to rise up. Once it reaches the level of the next section of the canal the lock gates are opened and the boat can come out. When the Canal was in full commercial use, the locks were in use for 24 hours a day with a 4 minute service.

Between locks 68 and 67 there is a side pond. This pond is connected to the canal by means of a culvert which runs under the towpath. This body of water supplements the short "pond" between these two locks. A length of canal from lock to lock is called a pound whether short or long. In fact the pound between bottom lock 64 and lock 63 at Cwmbran is one of the longest in the country.

LOCKS

## Water Supply

It is sometimes easy to imagine that any canal is simply a water filled ditch but this is not the case. The constant supply and management of water is the most important part of the design of any canal.

Water from the River Usk enters the Canal at Brecon by means of a cast iron pipe which runs under the town and enters the waterway in the Theatre Basin. When the Mons & Brecon Canal was established, the Act of Parliament permitted 20 million gallons of water to be taken from the River Usk each day to feed the Canal.

As the Canal flows south it is fed by man-made feeders and natural streams along its length.

The streams deposit large amounts of stones and silt into the Canal which need to be cleared out at regular intervals.

Water flowing into the Canal also needs a means of escape especially at times of high rainfall. There are weirs on the downhill side of the Canal which allow excess water to flow out of the canal, usually into natural streams.

At Llangynidr there is a 300 metre long feeder which takes water from the River Crawnon into the Canal. This was a vital water source for the Canal while it was being completed all the way to Brecon.

WATER



## Aqueducts

An aqueduct is a type of bridge to carry water. There are a number of aqueducts on the Mons & Brecon Canal to carry it over rivers and streams along the way. The largest is the four-arched aqueduct at Brynich, 4 miles south of Brecon, but these are much smaller constructions which can be travelled over and hardly noticed.

The aqueducts on the Mons & Brecon Canal are all stone built but on other canals they can be cast iron troughs rising high in the air. The towpath continues uninterrupted over the aqueducts so you need to make the effort to look over the side to see their massive construction and remember that most of this stone work is over 200 years old and still working as well as the day it was built!

However they didn't always get it right.

The aqueduct over the Afon Llwyd near Pontypool at the southern end of the canal had to be rebuilt in 1812 before the canal could be opened.

One theory about the construction of the Canal is that each gang of navvies worked on a length of the Canal. When this was completed they moved past other gangs to a new section. To test this theory see if you can recognise the styles of different stone masons at work on the various walls, aqueducts and bridges along the Canal.

## Development of the canal

- 1792 Notice given at a meeting in August of the proposal for a canal.
- 1793 An Act of Parliament was procured in March with capital of £100,000.
- 1793 The first shareholders meeting held in Brecon on 17th May.
- 1796 Cutting of the canal started at Pen Pedair Heol, Nr Gilwern in April.
- 1797 The first section to Llangynidr was opened late in the year.
- 1799 Canal opened to Talybont-on-Usk.
- 1800 Canal opened to Brecon in December.
- 1812 Brecknock & Abergavenny Canal linked with the Monmouthshire Canal. Total cost of construction of whole Canal was over £200,000.
- 1823 Brecon Company's income from the Canal was over £10,000 annually with nearly 87,000 tones of goods transported.
- 1860's Trade from iron and coal transport being lost to the railways.
- 1920 Most commercial trade finished.
- 1933 Last tolls were taken at Llangynidr on 22 February.
- 1952 Rally at Brecon organised by Inland Waterways Association.
- 1960's Pleasure boating began.
- 1968 Restoration started.
- 1970 Canal officially re-opened on 16th October.

## Bridges

The last bridge on the Canal is the Dadford Bridge in the Theatre basin at Brecon, numbered 167, and Cross Keys Bridge at Five Locks Cwmbran, currently the limit of navigation on the canal, is numbered 45.

In between these a few bridges have disappeared over the years but there are many varied styles to look out for along the way. Some are called 'accommodation bridges', built for farmers when their fields were cut in half when the canal was first constructed.

Every bridge has a name, some linked to a local place name or farm name such as Llandetty Bridge, near Llandetty Hall or Pen Pedair Heol Bridge near a farm of the same name. Some have intriguing names like Spiteful Inn Bridge or Snake Bridge. At Panteague Drawbridge, number 128, it used to be possible to raise the bridge but it is now flat decked and so low that there is very little clearance for boats. There are lift bridges along the canal, some manually operated and one electric, this one situated at Talybont-on-Usk. Most bridges are stone built and have a distinctive hump backed shape. Originally, of course, the heaviest traffic over the bridge would have been horse-drawn carts. When steam engines were introduced onto farms, some of the bridges were braced with iron arches to bear the weight; bridge 141 is an example. Now the bridges with main roads over them have been replaced with a much stronger, traffic friendly shape. The Coach and Horses Bridge, number 133, in Llangynidr is a good example of this.