



Tall ships and marshes

Gloucester & Sharpness Canal - Sharpness to Saul Junction

While Horatio Nelson was fighting the Battle of Trafalgar, and Napoleon was losing at Waterloo, the Gloucester & Sharpness Canal was under construction. Legends and truths scramble romantically together on this unsung waterway which, when it opened in 1827, was the world's broadest, deepest canal. Under the guidance of Thomas Telford, it was built as a bypass from the treacherous waters of the River Severn as far as Gloucester. Since Roman times, Gloucester had been an important port, but seafaring vessels that ventured inland too often met their end with the unpredictable sands and tides of the Severn.

With the canal's help, Gloucester became Britain's most inland port where sea vessels could venture incongruously inland, flagging high sails through the rural landscape. Cargoes from around the globe arrived by sailing ship, barge, narrowboat, tanker and steamship.

During the Industrial Revolution, the canal carried grains imported to feed the hungry towns of the Midlands. And in the 20th century, it carried cocoa beans to Cadbury's factory at Frampton on Severn where they were made into chocolate crumb and then sent on narrowboats to Bournville. The canal also played an important role in the economy of the Midlands,

carrying coal from the Forest of Dean.

The towpath is grassy and wide, and this walk is never claustrophobic. In most parts, the views span the river one side and canal water the other. High and low tides change the scene and, if the sun shines, you'll sing all the way. The Gloucester & Sharpness Canal lacks the narrow, winding, quaint charms of some other canals but makes up for it by the straightforward charisma of a waterscape riddled with history. This canal refuses to leave your imagination alone.

One of the walk's highlights is the Purton Hulks: a whispering graveyard of boats that's thought to be one of the largest clusters of historic wooden boats in the world. The first boat was dumped here in 1909. Why? A landslip between the River Severn and the Gloucester & Sharpness near Purton caused the canal to empty its water. And so, to slow down further erosion, for over half a century retired vessels were towed to the river banks and beached. They've wallowed there ever since in the smells of wet sand and grass, been brushed by thistles and had to listen endlessly to reeds. Yet ironically, the beachings fired a fusion of life past and present, for the boats carried on beyond their graves with new purpose.

Years of tides have taken their toll on the beached wrecks, and the landscape has grown in and out of the bones of the boats. Don't just rate this as an outdoor museum of old boats - you have to walk there to know the truth. Tufts of grass sway in silence over still boat carcasses that stand like statues of soldiers in an empty battlefield. It's not eerie, but a spirit unmistakably sweeps the landscape. And whatever the weather, the wind always blows.

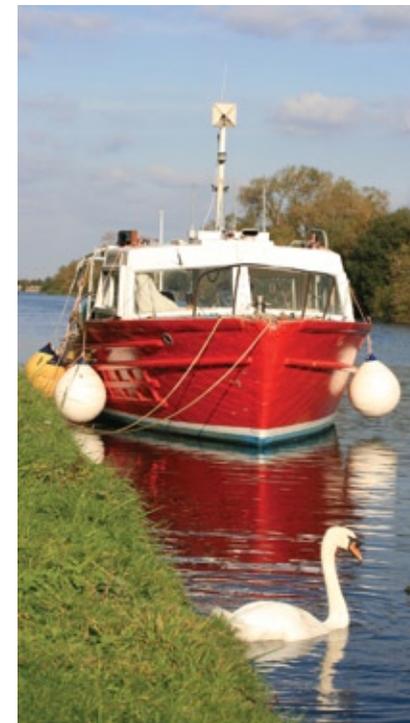
Every way you turn, if you look twice, the water is sending clues about the past. But it's not only heritage that makes this walk fascinating. The canal is a successful cycle of decay, regeneration, transport, industry, tourism and wildlife. This is a 'rubber neck' walk any time of year.





Look out for

Scarcely a few moments from the thrill of Purton, the remains of the Severn Railway Bridge add another story to the journey. The bridge was built in the 1870s to carry trains over both the river and the canal. On the towpath, you pass the Rapunzel-calling tower that once housed the steam engine which created power to open the former swing bridge. Swing bridges are a feature of this canal as they allowed the passage of ships with tall sails. In 1960 two tankers, blinded by fog, collided with one of its piers. The bridge was later demolished and the remains of the columns and the unfortunate tankers can still be spotted on the river bed at low tide.



Don't miss

You could arrive by car, park in the Canal & River Trust car park by the estuary and do no more than watch the tides come in and go back out again. When the tides come in, the drama is quick, but the waiting is always wistful. It's a Turneresque skyline with flat sand swirling in a wash of water and the Severn Bridge faintly in the distance.

Info about ship movements and tides
www.gloucesterharbourtrustees.org.uk



Start:

Sharpness Docks
OS Grid ref: SO667020

Finish:

Saul Junction
OS Grid ref: SO756093

Distance:

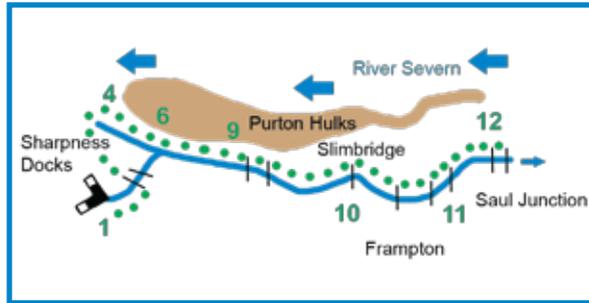
8 miles approx

Terrain:

Easy walking

OS Explorer Map

- 167/OL14



The walk - step by step

1. Start the walk from the picnic area by the huge locks leading from the River Severn into Sharpness Docks. It's worth timing it to see ships making their careful approach with the tide.
2. Follow the path to the right of the docks, along rail tracks which used to carry cargo to and from the ships.
3. After crossing the canal via the swing bridge, take the first turning right, signposted the Severn Way.
4. Take the narrow path to the left of the Vindicatrix monument and follow it until you arrive back at the water. Sharpness Rescue Station stands out with the basin on one side and the River Severn below and beyond.
5. When the water is out, the huge expanse of sand looks like the seaside but the waters of the Severn move in very quickly over this flat area.
6. Past moored boats in the marina arm, you reach a T-junction where the canal heads right to the Docks or left towards Gloucester.
7. Follow the wide grassy towpath round to the left. Beyond the long low wall, the views stretch for miles.
8. The plaque by a round stone tower tells the story of the fate of the old Severn Railway Bridge. At low tide, you can still see some evidence of the tankers which collided with the bridge.
9. Past the first milestone, go off the towpath via one of the small paths towards the River Severn to visit the Purton Hulks 'Boat Graveyard'.
10. Two miles further on, you reach Shepherds Patch, where there's a chance to stop for a cuppa or a pint, or visit Slimbridge Wetland Centre.
11. To detour through the pretty village of Frampton on Severn, take the road or cross the field by Splatt Bridge.
12. Back on the towpath at Fretherne Bridge, follow the towpath towards the busy hub of Saul Junction where the restoration of the Cotswold Canals will one day reopen a link to the Thames.

Where to eat

Pier View Hotel

Sharpness. Overlooks docks.
T:01453 811255

Tudor Arms

Shepherds Patch. Canalside by Patch Bridge.
T:01453 890306 www.thetudorarms.co.uk

Slimbridge Boat Station Café (Black Shed)

Nr.Slimbridge. Canalside near Patch Bridge.
T:01453 899190

The Three Horseshoes

Frampton on Severn. In the village, a short walk from Splatt Bridge.
T:01452 740463

The Bell Inn

Frampton on Severn. On the village green, a short walk from Fretherne Bridge.
T:01452 740346
www.thebellatframpton.co.uk

The Stables Café

Saul Junction. Canalside by Sandfield Bridge.
T:01452 741965 www.thestablescafe.co.uk

Best picnic spot

On the banks of the canal near Patch Bridge.

And more

Choice of other pubs and cafés in surrounding area.

Sharpness Docks

The start of the walk is coincidentally also the start of the Severn Way. The docks are blunt and not meant for tourists, but that adds to the fascination. Old tram rails hide in the grass, chunky chains coil and rust, and what's not functional is ignored.

Bike hire

Slimbridge Boat Station. Canalside near Patch Bridge. T:01453 899190

Where to stay

Canalside B&Bs

Frampton Court Estate Frampton on Severn. Short walk from Fretherne Bridge.
T:01452 740267
www.framptoncourtestate.co.uk

The True Heart

Frampton on Severn. Short walk from canal. T:01452 740504
www.thetrueheart.co.uk

Tythe House

Frampton on Severn. A short walk from Splatt Bridge.
T:01452 740270
www.tythehousebandb.co.uk

Canalside campsites

Tudor Caravan Park 4-pennant (David Bellamy Conservation Award - Gold) Shepherds Patch. Canalside by Patch Bridge.
T:01453 890483
www.tudorcaravanpark.com

Canalside cottages

The Orangery, Frampton Court Estate (see B&Bs)
Tanhouse Farm Cottages 5-star Frampton on Severn. Short walk from Splatt Bridge
T:01452 741072
www.tanhouse-farm.co.uk

Canalside pubs & Inns

Tudor Arms Lodge, Shepherds Patch. Short walk from Patch Bridge T:01453 890306
www.thetudorarms.co.uk
The Bell Inn 4-star Frampton on Severn. Short walk from Fretherne Bridge.
T:01452 740346
www.thebellatframpton.co.uk

And more

Good choice of self-catering, B&B and hotels in the area.
www.cotswolds.com



How to get there

Train info

Nearest train station is Cam & Dursley
National Rail Enquiries T:08457 484950

Bus info

Traveline T:0871 2002233

Parking

Canal & River Trust car park in docks (charge)

Local Tourist info

Gloucester Tourist Information Centre

T:01452 396572 www.cotswolds.com

Canal & River Trust

Use the Canal & River Trust website to find specific local information.

www.canalrivertrust.org.uk

Cotswold Canals Trust

Working for the restoration of the Stroudwater Navigation and Thames & Severn Canal.

T:01453 752568 www.cotswoldcanals.com

Saul Junction Heritage Centre

The centre is run by volunteers and aims to inform visitors about the history of the Stroudwater and Thames & Severn Canals, and re-establishing a navigable link to the Thames.

T:07854 026504 www.cotswoldcanals.com

Slimbridge Wildfowl & Wetlands Trust

The birthplace of modern conservation & home of the Wildfowl & Wetlands Trust attracts thousands of ducks, geese and swans every year, as well as rarer species of flora

and fauna. T:01453 891900 www.wwt.org.uk

Friends of Purton

Working to promote the historical importance and secure the future of the Purton Hulks

T:07833 143231 www.friendsofpurton.org.uk

Boats

Glevum Boat Hire

Slimbridge Boat Station. Day boat hire.

T:01453 899190

Cotswold Canals Trust Boat Trips

Saul Junction. Short cruises on 'Perseverance'.

April to September. Also available for private charter. www.cotswoldcanals.com