

THE CANALS OF NAPTON

In a semi-circle around the village lies the Oxford canal, built , originally to take the coal from Coventry and other commercial traffic to Oxford and from there on to London. Figures dating from the late 17, early 1800's show the amount of traffic moving through Napton and the gradual increase.

YEAR	TOLLS (£)	TONNAGE
1799	841	13
1800	4925	3103
1801	7431	5819
1802	8213	8555
1803	12379	9709

Joining the Oxford Canal to the north of the village is the Napton-Warwick Canal. This section of the canal was originally designed to join the Oxford at Braunston but in 1796 the owners of the Warwick and Braunston wrote to the Oxford seeking assent for the junction to be at Napton instead. The Bill was presented to Parliament in February 1796 and the Royal Assent was received on the 14th May of the same year, from when the Warwick and Braunston became known as the Warwick and Napton.

The canals follow the contours of the land where possible, but in the case of Napton, nine locks are necessary to take boats into and out of the village. One set of locks is situated in the south-western section of the canal and nearby is the farm known as the Folly. In the early days of the canal this was a pub known as The Bull and Butcher and would have been a popular haunt of the boatmen. It was possibly the popularity of this pub which led to the old boatmen saying there were two windmills on the hill when in fact there is only one which they would have used as a landmark for navigation. The horse drawn boats gave way to steam and diesel engines, with the powered boat pulling the butty. From the 1st January 1929, the Warwick and Napton was known as the Grand Union Canal and between 1932 and 1947 a number of improvements were carried out, one such improvement being the dredging of the canal between Napton Junction and Braunston Junction to a uniform depth of 5ft 6ins.

For over a hundred years the canals were a thriving industry but with the advent of the railway and therefore the quicker transportation of goods the commercial traffic on the canal slowly began to disappear.

Mr Taylor worked on the canal in Napton and describes what life was like in the 30's and 40's...

"Coal, sand and cement. They used to go up with coal and come back loaded with cement quite a lot of them. The cement works closed down and then a lot of the trade began to fall away. The boats were taking coal up to Oxford and to Kiddlington and they were having to come back empty, and that's when the decline started. Our link was nine and a half miles. That was the stretch of the canal and nine locks. We used to close each holiday for a week, then we used to do all the major work, replacing gates or fits. That was for three or four days, as long as the work took. Then we used to have block stoppage every Tuesday, to do general repairs and to keep it going. That was when we had plenty of trade, now it's only pleasure-craft."

In the days of the horse drawn boats the Oxford kept large ice breaking boats at Heyford and at Napton which were pulled by ten or more horses, with as many men as possible to rock the boat...

"We used to rock it. There was a stage on top of it, in the middle there was a chain, we used to have it full, eight or nine men each side and you rocked it backwards and forwards. That was the big boat, the small boat you stood either side of it, there was a hand rail along either side, and we used to reckon a horse to an inch of ice and one for the boat. It was twelve or fourteen horses used to pull the boat clean out of the water on top of the ice. We used to break till there was no more ice than there was water. We used to break with the big boat from Napton to Banbury. It used to take all day."

Before the steam and diesel boats began polluting the water Mr and Mrs Taylor remember people swimming in the canal and actually drinking the water...

"By and large I'd say swimming wasn't allowed but they'd take no notice. The water then, when it was all horse boats, you could see the bottom of the canal, it was as clear as crystal. The water was beautiful, we used to drink it. First thing in the morning we'd get a bucket out, yes, we used to make tea with it. It was as clear as crystal."

By the early fifties the decline in the commercial use of the canal was apparent. In 1952 the Southern section, Napton to Oxford, earned only £4726 against an expenditure of £17,215, a loss of £12,489. This disclosure led people to think that the section was in danger of closing but the growth in pleasure craft traffic in the 60's began to compensate for the loss of commercial traffic. This type of holiday has become very popular and it is possible to hire narrow boats at Napton Junction for cruising on both the Oxford and the Grand Union Canals.

The exceptional summer of 1972 and the excessive movement of boats on the canal combined to produce a shortage of water, so much so that the Area Engineer instructed the staff to lock up the section between Napton and Cropredy from August 25th between 18.00hrs and 08.00hrs and then in October this section was closed altogether. In 1974 pumping was resorted to on the Napton flight but this proved very expensive when set against the actual pleasure craft receipts. So thanks to this new use of the waterways the canal survives as an asset to the village rather than the liability it could have become through disuse. It also still provides a small number of villagers an opportunity for employment.

Mark Gordon is the owner of a canal boat hire firm. He has a fleet of thirty six craft and also supplies moorings for passing boats. Although there is still a small amount of commercial traffic on the canal the majority of boats are pleasure craft. Mr Gordon reports a very high interest in the coming season and so far the number of bookings taken is very promising. Canal cruising is not just a hot weather pastime though and boats are hired out throughout the year, even over the Christmas period. Cruising is such a relaxing pastime that it is a very popular way of getting away from the pressures of everyday life.

Another Naptonian who still earns a living from the canal is Mr Esmey Dowling who is canalman on the Napton stretch. One of the jobs he does is assisting pleasure craft in the negotiation of the locks. As well as working on the canal he is very interested in the history of the Oxford canal, and here he tells us a bit about it...

"Canal work - the canal has completely changed.

Originally there was four thousand miles built for transport but sadly, except in the wide ones, the Ayr and Calder, South Yorkshire, Gloucestershire, they're all now used for leisure and pleasure activities. You may get one odd load of coal a year and that is the sum total. The Oxford Canal was started 1770 at Hawksbury, surveyed by James Brindley partly on horseback, partly on foot because at that time there were no Ordnance Survey maps and they had to go round the countryside and eye the land up. With no theodolites or laser beams it was all done by eye. Then they started 1770. 1772 Brindley died. They'd got as far as Brinklow, they'd done $7\frac{1}{2}$ miles. Samuel Simcock took over then and they got to Napton in 1774 and they had to raise £300,000 to get down to Banbury. Another hold up then, money and various other problems and the first load of coal was down to Oxford in January 1790 and then they could go straight down the Thames and onto London. The idea of building canals was the roads were very, very poor and long distances they could come inland on the rivers to bring shipping off sea going vessels onto lighters and barges, some poled by hand. Horses, donkeys and mules were used, as far as I know no oxen were used boat pulling.

The Oxford Canal was originally 91 miles, all dug out by hand. The majority of canals, except the Manchester Ship Canal, were all done by the same. Then they'd got to puddle clay which was a metre thick. The way to get puddle clay, it's got to be put in and wetted or it won't hold water and the way to do that is to get in there with your feet and trample up and down till it's got the texture of plasticine. The modern methods now they run a catterpillar tractor and they've got some special things like sheep's feet on. Then a lot of canals

had their own quarry for the tow paths. The odd tow path wall, bits that broke off were used on the tow path itself. At the start the people didn't live on the boats but with the coming of the railways economics forced them to live on the boats in a narrow boat cabin which was about 6 ft 10 ins wide by about 9 ft 6 ins long. Everything folded up, the kitchen stove was in there. The bed folded up, the table folded, what you sat on folded out for a bed. The last regular run on the Oxford Canal finished in 1966 down at Banbury then it was taken over by the pleasure boats and leisure industry and that's gradually increased. 1985 nine thousand boats at least passed through Napton locks, that's counting both ways. People in the region of at least thirty thousand passing through the outskirts of the village. There are nine locks at Napton, a climb to the summit level at Marston Doles of about fifty six feet. The two biggest enemies on the canals in the trading days were ice in the winter when boats weren't able to go through and it wasn't very good on wooden boats as ice would rip a jagged hole in the boat even if the timbers were three or four inches thick. If all the boats weren't moving the canal company lost revenue because they got paid on ton mileage, that was how they got paid. The other enemy was water shortage in summer. It meant that the boats had to wait for one to come up and another to come down so they could share a turn in the lock to save water. In 1844 they had to cut the branches off the trees for the animals to eat the leaves, it was a very dry summer then. At one time Napton prospered with the canal, the brickworks had three boatloads of coal a week and bricks and tiles went out by boat."