

The Canal at Stoke Prior

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The Birmingham and Worcester Canal passes through Stoke Prior and Wychbold. The canal was intended to create a shorter route for boats between the Severn and Birmingham. Legislation to allow the canal was passed in 1791. The canal route was surveyed by Joseph Clowes and construction was begun in 1792 starting from Gas Street Basin at the Birmingham end. Progress was slow and by 1805 the canal had only reached Tardebigge. Thereafter further money was raised to construct the rest of the canal. Originally it was intended that the canal should be wide enough for broad boats (14 foot) but after Tardebigge in order to save money the width was reduced to that for narrow boats (7 foot). The stretch from Tardebigge to Stoke Prior required the building of a large number of locks – 30 from Tardebigge to Stoke Prior and a further 6 through Stoke Prior. This is one of the longest chain of locks on the whole canal system and raises the canal over 420 feet. Completing the canal on to Worcester was much simpler requiring only 22 more locks to reach the river Severn. The canal opened along its whole length in 1815.

The completed canal was initially busy with barges carrying coal from the midlands coalfields to Gloucester and the south west and chocolate crumb from Gloucester to Cadburys factory in Bourneville. The canal also delivered coal to John Corbett's salt works at Stoke Works while salt and other products were carried from the salt works. However when the railway was built in 1841 traffic on the canal declined and the canal company ceased to be profitable.

Maintaining canals is expensive since lock gates have to be replaced after about 25 years and the brickwork needs constant attention. Walkers along the canal will have noticed that the lock gates at Stoke bottom lock and several other locks along the canal were replaced last year. Nowadays the canal is used by numerous pleasure boats but there is virtually no freight traffic.