

WW GUIDE TO THE NORTH OXFORD CANAL AND ASHBY CANAL



Had enough of locks? Enjoy a relaxing break in the level lands of the East Midlands. Roger M. Butler and Richard Fairhurst leave the windlass behind...



Emerging from
Newbold Tunnel.
ROGER BUTLER

NORTH OXFORD CANAL

YOU CAN HAVE TOO MUCH OF A GOOD THING – not least locks. If your cruising last year included the exertions of, say, Tardebigge, Caen Hill or anywhere in the Pennines, you might be looking for a more relaxing cruise this year.

In that case, head for the Heart of England, in the shape of the northern Oxford Canal and the Ashby Canal. With

just three-and-a-bit locks between them, they offer the easiest cruising on the whole system... but that's not to say they're devoid of interest.

Since 1785, the Oxford Canal has begun at Sutton Stop Lock, Hawkesbury Junction, just outside Coventry. Initially the junction with the Coventry Canal was a mile away at Longford: the two canals ran side-by-side,

just a few yards apart from one another! Apart from the basin at Longford there is now little evidence of this on the ground, but at Hawkesbury the alignment of the Greyhound pub and the wharf cottages gives the game away.

Hawkesbury is one of those iconic canal places, its carrying days memorialised in Robert Longden's outstanding photographic

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collection, *A Canal People* – an essential for any canal bookshelf. Our visit was marked by a chance encounter with Mr Walter Sephton, now in his late 80s, one of ten children whose grandfather was the proprietor of the famous Sephton's boatyard located opposite the junction. The yard was started by Francis Sephton in 1840 and continued right through to the 1930s; there was also a second yard on the Oxford at nearby Tussey's Bridge (4). Mr Sephton continues to live at 14 Sutton Stop, one of the wharf cottages, and recalled 'the old cut' as a child, still in water. He was also related to the Beazleys, the then owners of the Greyhound pub. Today the service block and new wharf occupy some of the land.

The junction itself is spanned by the most handsome cast-iron bridge from the Britannia Foundry, Derby (1837). The building on the 'island' (dated 1909) was once the toll office: it is now an outpost for West Midlands Police. The engine house, located nearby on the Coventry Canal, adds to the ambience, but it is disappointing that the scale and style of new housing (opposite) doesn't. The Greyhound itself remains busy just as it was when people gathered here waiting for orders from the Warwickshire coalfields.

Moorings around the junction are quite extensive, but they are very popular and often extend well south along the Oxford Canal. A seven-day restriction is in force. The little shop and chandlery, once located at the end of the pub, closed several years ago but there are two small shops a short walk beyond. A post by the lock points the way along the Sowe valley footpath.

Leaving behind the forest of high tension cables emanating from the nearby electricity sub-station, we begin a run of about two hours on the 315ft contour to Stretton Stop. The Wyken Arm, below Whiting's Bridge (5), is home now to the Coventry Cruising Club: it once served a colliery. Next comes the village of **Ansty**, rather dominated now by the close proximity of the M6 and M69.

Between Ansty and Stretton the canal passes through a more rural environment with, unusually for the Oxford, a series of cuttings and embankments reflecting the



The classic scene at Hawkesbury Stop Lock.
RICHARD FAIRHURST



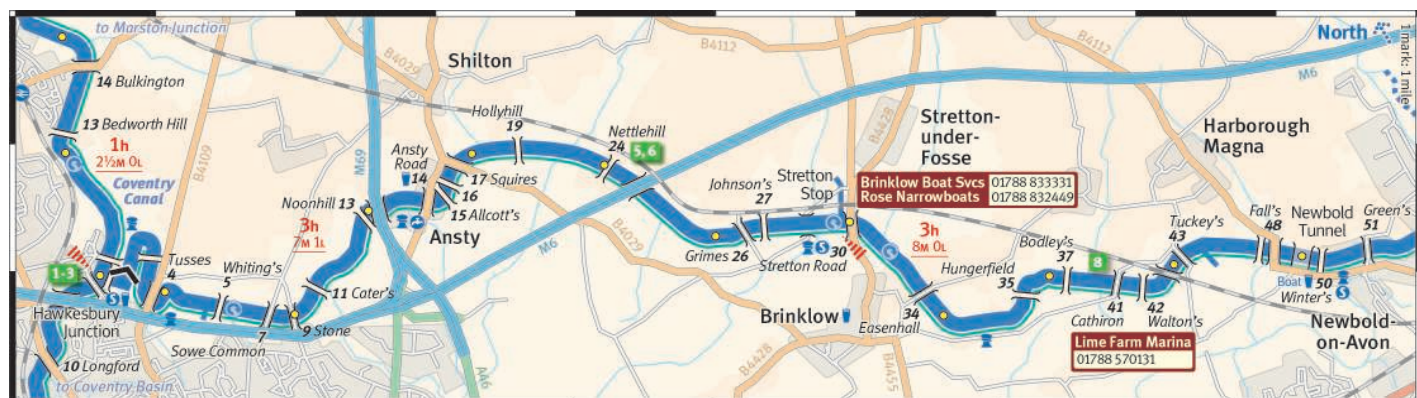
Looking towards modern housing at Hawkesbury.
ROGER BUTLER



The perfect curve of Hawkesbury's towpath bridge.
ROGER BUTLER



Centre paddles, sadly out of use, connect the Hillmorton paired chambers.
RICHARD FAIRHURST





Nettlehill Bridge.
RICHARD FAIRHURST



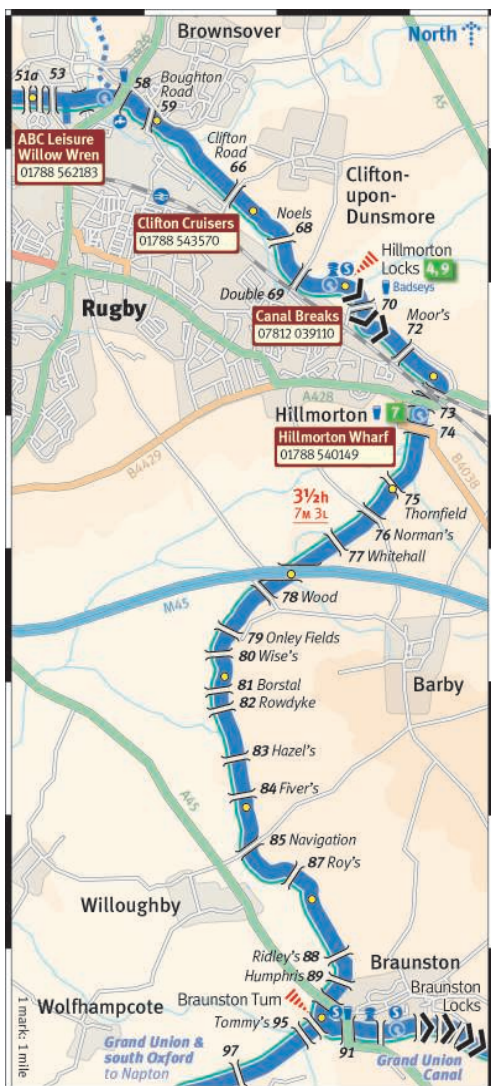
A busy day at
Nettlehill Bridge.
ROGER BUTLER



The Old Royal Oak
at Hillmorton Wharf.
RICHARD FAIRHURST



Cathiron - these
bridges mark the
old, winding route
of the canal.
ROGER BUTLER



later improvements made as some of the original twists and turns were eliminated. The embankment approaching Stretton is shared with the main railway line to Crewe and affords a great opportunity for photographs of narrowboat and train: you'll need to be at the ready as the Virgin Pendolino rushes by, or patient enough to wait for a slower Freightliner!

At **Stretton Stop** be prepared to swing the little footbridge which spans the narrows at the site of the former toll office. Rose Narrowboats has boats for hire and an extensive chandlery. Almost immediately, the Stretton Wharf Arm heads off to the northwest for perhaps $\frac{1}{3}$ of a mile. Exploration on foot via the Fosse Way (Bridge 30), and over the railway, leads to Brinklow Boat Services and pleasantly secretive moorings, the home to some handsome old working boats in the traditional livery of Fellows, Morton & Clayton, Samuel Barlow's, Cowburn & Cowpar, the Grand Union Canal Carrying Company, and BW's blue & yellow.

A little further south the canal crosses Smite Brook on a single arched aqueduct (31) and an embankment, the construction of which effectively obliterated the one-time 12 'Brinklow Arches' here. By way of compensation, enjoy the elegant cast-iron roving bridges from the Horsley Ironworks, Birmingham, which span remnants of the northern Oxford's lost contours including the Brinklow and Fennis Field Arms. Between them there are pleasant moorings at Old Oak Woods, plus a small

car park – an ideal place to meet up with family or friends from 'the bank'.

After roving Bridge 45 over the **Newbold Arm**, next stop for us was just beyond the southern portal of Newbold Tunnel itself. This boasts a towpath to each side, although only that on the right side is now used. The coloured lighting installation, completed relatively recently, might be fitting as part of inner-city canal regeneration, but has proved more controversial in this mostly rural area.

The location of the Boat Inn is the first clue to the former line of the canal here: it once went right past its front door, together with that of the Barley Mow which is situated next door! For further evidence, take a walk along the road up the hill towards St Bidoph's Church on the left, where a faint depression can be seen running across the grass. Continue then across the churchyard and through a footpath gate on the right down into the hollow which leads back to the blocked off portal of the original tunnel, once spookily known to local children as "the devil's cave".

The approach to **Rugby** affords further examples of the early straightening of the northern Oxford. An impressive embankment, complete with aqueducts, carries the canal high over the Swift and Avon, resulting in the formation of yet three further arms: first Rugby Wharf Arm, then the Brownsover and, a little further on, the Clifton Arm. The popularity of moorings west of Bridge 58 probably reflects its proximity to a large

ESSENTIALS

WALKING & CYCLING

The Oxford Canal was marketed as a long-distance walk by British Waterways in the 1990s. Though the project has sadly fallen into abeyance (one for the Canal & River Trust to resurrect?), the canal still makes as enjoyable a walk as ever: and since Newbold Tunnel has a towpath, no diversions are necessary. You can enjoy a one-way walk from Rugby to Hawkesbury, continuing along the Coventry Canal to Bedworth; then catch the return train (hourly) to Coventry, and change there for Rugby.

The northern section of the Ashby Canal is popular with walkers, though public transport is limited. Two of Leicestershire's long-distance walks intersect the towpath: the 35-mile Ivanhoe Way (www.leics.gov.uk/ivanhoeaway) and the more ambitious 100-mile Leicestershire Round. Following the Ivanhoe Way north from Snarestone will take you to Measham and the restored canal at Moira Furnace.

The Ashby towpath is rarely suitable for cycling: even the moderately well-surfaced length through Hinckley is prone to sudden potholes. Happily, National Cycle Route 52 parallels the canal on country lanes for almost its entire length, providing a much-less boneshaking experience while offering frequent glimpses of the Ashby. The route is well signposted (especially on its Leicestershire length) and you can see maps at www.sustrans.org.uk or www.opencyclemap.org. The north Oxford is a little better, but again, planning a route on country lanes will be more enjoyable for most cyclists.

Tesco supermarket a little step down from this bridge, and there's no denying its convenience.

Those suffering from lock withdrawal symptoms have only a little longer to wait now as the three duplicated **Hillmorton Locks** (numbered 2 & 3, 4 & 5 and 6 & 7) are but a mile away. Congestion led to their duplication in 1840 and each of the pairs was linked to the other via a large paddle so enabling the lock alongside to act as a side pond and save water. Some of the gear remains but sadly the paddles are no longer operational.

Isolated from Hillmorton itself by the railway, the locks are pleasantly rural. Together with the group of Oxford Canal Company buildings, the wharf crane and dry dock through Bridge 70, and the former working boat motor *Badsey* moored in front of a popular bistro there, the scene is generally a pleasing one. There are boater services here too and good moorings above the locks which lift the canal by 18ft 6in.

Beyond Blue Haven Marine at Hillmorton Wharf the canal travels in a broadly southerly direction through quiet ancient pastureland with, in places, residual evidence of 'ridge and furrow'. Warm afternoon sunshine enhances the brick-red of the old wharf buildings and stables at Tarry's Bridge 74 and the Oxford Canal Company has left its mark (OCC and back to front!) on old concrete posts near Bridge 78. The M45 crosses here, the single interruption to an otherwise overriding air of tranquillity.

With one or two minor exceptions a broadly flat landscape, with hills rising gently to the east, enabled Brindley to set a relatively straight course towards Braunston. The junction, now at **Braunston Turn**, betrays nothing of the Oxford's original twisting route between here and the nearby village of Wolfhampcote.

Braunston is, if anything, more popular than Hawkesbury: you may prefer to moor back above Bridge 88, where it is markedly less busy than on the length beyond the Turn. There is a pleasant stroll up the footpath from bridge 89 into Braunston village and past All Saints Church with its fine spire which dominates the view hereabouts; the now famous name of Nurser (narrowboat painters) may be found beneath the sail-less windmill there.

Take advantage of the local shops before walking back down the hill to Bridge 1 (Butcher's Bridge) over the Grand Union Canal. Just west is the Stop House, where the northern Oxford Canal once met the Grand Junction Canal at a stop lock, removed in the 1930s. The route the Oxford then took was beneath the handsome bridge which now leads to the marina, and on for some 2½ miles or so before resuming today's line near Bridge 98 at Wolfhampcote – less than a mile beyond the Turn.

It's at nearby Napton that the southern Oxford Canal begins (WW May 2011), unimproved during the 19th century and of a quite difficult character to the north Oxford. There's the small matter of those locks, for example... **Roger Butler**



Hillmorton Locks.
ROGER BUTLER

ASHBY CANAL

WITH JUST THE THREE LOCKS at Hillmorton and Hawkesbury Stop Lock, the north Oxford is far from hard work. But the Ashby is easier cruising still. It was built with just one lock – the stop-lock at Marston Junction – and even that has long been de-gated. As a result, the Ashby is now lock-free. (Well, almost... but we'll come to that later.)

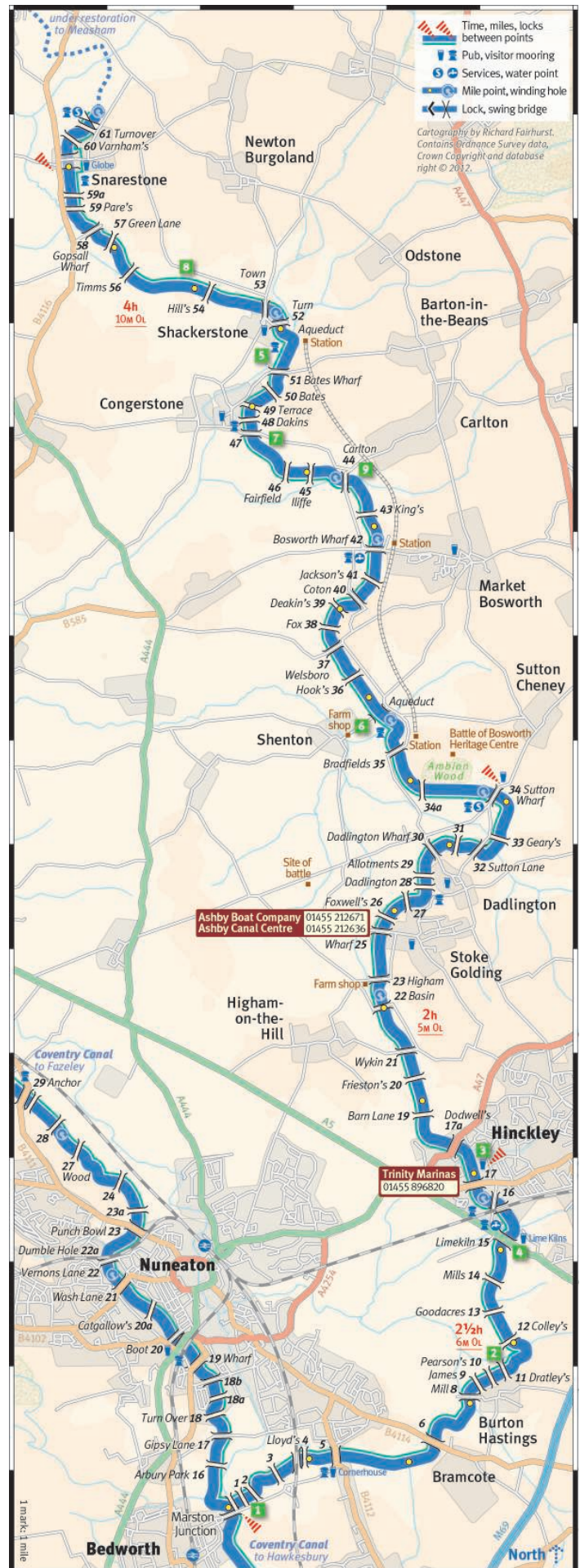
Getting from Hawkesbury Junction to **Marston Junction** requires a 2½-mile, lock-free cruise along the Coventry Canal (WW June 2010), skirting suburban Bedworth. The old stop lock is narrow, as you might expect. But this is the only feature on the canal to be so: unusually for the Midland waterways, it was built to broad standards, with an eye on a northern connection to the Trent & Mersey Canal at Burton. You can, in theory, squeeze two narrowboats through each bridge-hole, but today's boaters prefer to take the cautious option and let oncoming traffic pass.

The Ashby is notorious for its shallowness. Though it's better than it once was, don't be fooled into thinking that its modest 22-mile length will allow you to cruise its whole length in one day. Here, 3mph is an aspiration rather than a likely average speed. If you stick to the centre of the channel your cruise should be stress-free, but take care at corners and when passing other boats.

Note, too, that the towpath is decidedly unmanicured: rough, narrow and often muddy. There is often high vegetation between the path and the canal, but the shallow channel will probably have stopped you from getting close to it anyway!

None of this is intended as a criticism of the canal – quite the opposite. The Ashby is the least spoilt waterway in the Midlands. Almost entirely rural and free of modern development, its character has barely changed in 50 years.

This journey back in time begins slowly. The first five miles, to the outskirts of Hinckley, are akin to the more rural stretches of the Coventry Canal. Cuttings were blasted through rock here to ensure that the canal stayed on the level. The Cornerhouse, by Bridge 5, is a typical Midlands pub with Marstons beers. Rather less typical of the area is Gamecock Barracks just east of Bridge 6, the home of the Queen's Gurkha Signals.



LOOKING FORWARD

➤ TO MEASHAM AND MOIRA

Driving in the old mining district of North-West Leicestershire, on the suburban road from Overseal to Spring Cottage, you may be surprised to pass a Navigation Inn – with a narrowboat on the sign. The navigation in question is the Ashby Canal.

As you cruise the waterway, you may notice that the milepost distances add up to 30, even though today's canal is only 22 miles long. The missing eight miles were closed gradually from 1944, after mining subsidence rendered the canal unmaintainable.

It's ironic, then, that the much-reduced mining industry is now helping the Ashby Canal return to its former glory. UK Coal, the private inheritor of the nationalised mines, is starting work on a new open-cast site outside Measham – and as a sweetener, has pledged £1.3m towards reinstating the canal, plus a new road bridge. Restoration to the edge of Measham is assured, and the home of the boatman's teapot will be accessible by boat once again.

From here, it gets trickier. A new line will be required through Measham itself, following the course of a derelict railway (the continuation of the Battlefield Line), and crossing the High Street on a new aqueduct. Then the canal will need to find a way under the A42 dual carriageway before regaining its original, winding course for two miles.

An engineering challenge, yes, but a worthwhile one – for the would-be terminus of the Ashby Canal has already been restored to great acclaim. The final mile-and-a-half from Donisthorpe is fully navigable, including an all-new lock to counteract the effects of subsidence. The canal finishes by the Conkers visitor centre, but for most boaters, Moira Furnace will be the main draw, a magnificent 200-year old blast furnace beside the canal.

Affluent little **Burton Hastings**, between bridges 8 and 11, is sought after by local commuters who value the proximity to the M69, though the motorway noise is persistent. But this is one of the last intrusions of the modern age: just Hinckley remains before the Ashby plunges into rural isolation.

Limekiln Bridge marks the entrance to **Hinckley**. Next to the bridge, which carries the Roman Watling Street, there's an Ashby Canal Association information box: open it with a BW key to pick up your free leaflets. And given that you've now moored up,

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2



Narrow canal, wide bridges: Bridge 11, Burton Hastings.

3



Trinity Marinas, Hinckley.

4



Lime Kilns, Hinckley.

it would be a shame not to call in at the traditional Lime Kilns pub...

Hinckley has its own short canal arm, the home of the Hinckley Boat Club. Just after Bridge 17 is the large modern Trinity Marina, with chandlery and a Brewer's Fayre pub alongside. The town thrived on the hosiery industry, and is now home to Triumph Motorcycles, whose factory is canalside. French composer Louis Vierne wrote the organ piece 'Les Cloches de Hinckley' in the 1920s, reputedly after the carillon (still operational) and chimes kept him awake all night. The town centre is a mile from the canal, so you're unlikely to suffer the same problem when moored.

Bridge 17A marks the end of Hinckley, and the start of 17 miles of uninterrupted rural cruising. For the first two miles, you may note a disused railway to the west – built in the 1870s, but never operated. Bridge 22 has an attractive and well-kept picnic site, one of several on the canal; then, at the next bridge, the canalside Spinneybank Farm Shop sells everything from ice-cream to goat.

Stoke Golding is a centre of canal activity, home to both the Ashby Boat Co (hire-fleet and services) and Ashby Canal Centre (marina and services). Walk into the village for the post office, stores, Saxon church, and three good pubs: the George & Dragon is our favourite. Henry VII is said to have been crowned just by Bridge 26, shortly after his victory in the Battle of Bosworth in

1485. The canal then takes a winding course past Dadlington, the next village, where the recently reopened pub/restaurant, the Dog & Hedgehog, has attracted good reviews.

Though the appeal of the Ashby is more in its rural air than sight-seeing, the next two miles are the exception. **Sutton Wharf** is a rare modern development, a canalside café with boat trips, outdoor seating and evening meals. The towpath here is busy with walkers making their way up to the Battle of Bosworth Visitor Centre – even though the battle, the climax of the Wars of the Roses, is now thought to have taken place further west (see right). The previously believed site had moorings, but with the field being returned to the farmer, these have now been revoked: still, mooring is easy either near Sutton Wharf or on the embankment beyond.

Those who prefer steam to swords, and horsepower to horse warfare, should head for Shenton Station. This is the southern terminus of the Battlefield Line Railway, a five-mile preserved line that parallels the canal to Shackerstone. Trains run every weekend from March to October (01827 880754).

Shenton Aqueduct takes the canal over a country lane, but it's worth clambering down to ground level to visit the Shenton Farm Shop for possibly the best beef you'll find on the Midlands canals – reasonably priced, too (open Tue, Wed, Sat: 01455

5



Cruising near Shackerstone.

6



Shenton Aqueduct.

7



Accommodation bridges near Congerstone.

8



Sylvan boating approaching Snarestone.

PLACES TO VISIT

➤ THE BATTLE OF... WHERE?

The Battle of Bosworth Heritage Centre is the main sight-seeing draw on the Ashby Canal. There's an interactive exhibition, a café, an assortment of medieval implements, and a striking modern sundial.

There's only one problem... it's not at the battlefield. The canalside Ambion Hill was identified in the 1970s as the probable location of the battle, and the visitor centre duly constructed there. But more recent studies suggested a location two miles to the south-west, confirmed by archaeological finds in 2009 and 2010. Of these, the most eye-catching was a silver brooch bearing a boar design, Richard III's royal emblem.

Should you seek the true Bosworth Field, then, moor at Sutton Wharf and walk two miles west to Fen Lane Farm. The Heritage Centre remains a worthwhile visit, but there's been one unexpected drawback. The previous 'battlefield' was given back to the farmer – who promptly closed the moorings. 01455 290429

www.bosworthbattlefield.com

212247). The picnic site at Bridge 37 is a fine place to moor up and enjoy it.

Market Bosworth town centre is further from the canal than you expect, around one-mile east of the moorings at Bridge 42. This little town is worth the walk, though, with its independent shops and a weekly market on Wednesdays. There are no more shops on the Ashby, so stock up here! The Olde Red Lion is the pick of the pubs; there's also fish and chips, a Chinese takeaway, and a Victorian tea parlour.

The last six miles are, in our opinion, the Ashby's finest hour. The canal takes on a more open, unremittingly rural aspect. Of the 20 bridges, only a handful carry traffic, and only the occasional rattle of a steam train disturbs the peace. Much of this length is a Site of Special Scientific Interest (you might even spot a water vole), so take care not to churn the water unnecessarily.

Shackerstone, the terminus of the Battlefield Line, is a tiny village with a welcoming pub (the Rising Sun). Although there's no shop, you can call Stan and Daphne's village stores in nearby Newton Burgoland, and they'll deliver to the canal (01530 270664; minimum order £20). Look out for the sturdy aqueduct over the River Sence.

A long expanse of moorings precedes a wooded section that lasts almost all the way to **Snarestone**. Though this is the (current) terminus of the Ashby, the waterway is

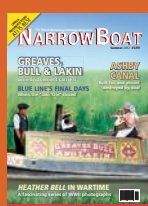
almost unfindable from the village, hidden away in a 250-yard tunnel – the only one on the canal. From the water, however, you'll find it easy to locate the Globe Inn, right above the southern portal of the tunnel.

As you emerge from the northern portal, the end is almost in sight. This short final length, well cared for by the Ashby Canal Association, has a sanitary station, a winding hole and, following recent work, a swing-bridge and slipway. For now, this is as far as you can go: further restoration is required before boats can reach Measham, Moira Furnace and the brand new lock (see page 70).

But the Ashby Canal is delightful as it is. On the return journey, enjoy the enforced slow pace; canal cruising doesn't get more relaxed than this. **Richard Fairhurst**

FURTHER READING

A ten-page historical profile of the Ashby Canal is provided in the current edition of *Waterways World's* sister magazine, *NarrowBoat*, and is available from the WW office priced £5.99. Call 01283 742950 or visit www.narrowboatmagazine.co.uk.



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Looking south from Carlton Bridge 44.

NAVIGATION NOTES

ESSENTIALS

➤ The Ashby Canal and northern Oxford Canal are at the heart of Britain's busiest cruising area. Both canals are popular in busy times, but the small number of locks restricts congestion. The northern section of the Ashby is very rural and facilities are limited.

➤ The Ashby Canal is shallower than average, so you should be careful to stick to the channel and choose your moorings judiciously. If mooring away from recognised visitor sites, moor up slowly, and use piling hooks or chains where possible.

DIMENSIONS

➤ **Ashby Canal:** Length 72ft, beam 7ft (most structures 14ft), draught 2ft 6in, headroom 6ft 6in
 ➤ **Oxford Canal:** Length 72ft, beam 7ft, draught 3ft, headroom 6ft 9in

NAVIGATION AUTHORITIES

➤ **Ashby Canal:** British Waterways Central Shires, 01827 252000
 ➤ **Oxford Canal:** British Waterways South-East, 01908 302500

BOATYARDS

	Hire	Repairs	Call-out	Pump-out	Chandlery	Diesel
ASHBY CANAL						
Ashby Boat Company, Stoke Golding						
01455 212671	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Ashby Canal Centre, Stoke Golding						
01455 212636	-	✓	-	-	✓	-
Trinity Marinas, Hinckley						
01455 896820	-	✓	-	✓	✓	✓
OXFORD CANAL (Hawkesbury-Braunston Turn)						
ABC Leisure, Rugby						
01788 562183	✓	✓	-	✓	✓	✓
Brinklow Boat Services, Stretton-under-Fosse						
01788 833331	-	✓	-	-	-	-
Canal Breaks, Hillmorton						
07812 039110	✓	✓	✓	✓	-	✓
Clifton Cruisers, Clifton-on-Dunsmore						
01788 543570	✓	✓	-	✓	✓	✓
Hillmorton Wharf, Rugby						
01788 540149	-	✓	-	✓	-	✓
Lime Farm Marina, Rugby						
01788 570131	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Rose Narrowboats, Stretton-under-Fosse						
01788 832449	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Willow Wren, Rugby						
01788 562183	✓	✓	✓	✓	-	✓

WATERWAY SOCIETIES

➤ **Ashby Canal Association:** www.ashbycanal.org.uk
 ➤ **IWA Warwickshire and Lichfield branches:** 01494 783453, www.waterways.org.uk

OTHER MAPS AND GUIDES

➤ **Nicholsons Guide to the Waterways 3:** Birmingham & the Heart of England
 ➤ **Heron Maps:** Oxford Canal

➤ **Pearson's Canal Companion:** South Midlands and Warwickshire Ring
 ➤ **Ordnance Survey Landranger** sheet 140 (Leicester, Coventry & Rugby)