

the Canal Towpath Trail

explore

between Chester and Ellesmere Port

A guide to the towpath of the Shropshire Union Canal between Waverton, Chester and Ellesmere Port

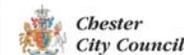
About the Towpath Trail

The towpath along the Shropshire Union Canal between Waverton and Ellesmere Port provides some 25km (15 miles) of walking and cycling. Much of the towpath is also part of the National Cycle Route Network. Whether you are using the whole route or just a small section, a visit will allow you to get close to both history and nature, as well as see the regeneration taking place along the canal's banks. This guide will help you plan your visit and enjoy some of the sights of this historic waterway.

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CultMark UK is a partnership between Chester City Council, The Boat Museum at Ellesmere Port, British Waterways, Cheshire County Council, and Ellesmere Port and Neston Borough Council.

Users are advised to refer to Ordnance Survey maps for detail.



Map base
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Whilst every effort has been made to ensure the accuracy of the information in this guide, Chester City Council cannot accept responsibility for any error or omission which may have occurred in its production.

Using the Towpath

Walkers and cyclists can explore the canal and its heritage using the upgraded towpath. The towpath, a legacy of horsepower, is free of road traffic and, by design, is mostly flat.

As well as healthy exercise, exploration and discovery, visitors can find spots to picnic on the canal's banks or simply sit and watch the world go by. Other pursuits include stopping off at a canalside pub as well as visiting attractions such as The Boat Museum at Ellesmere Port.

The Countryside Code

When visiting the canal please:

- Be safe, plan ahead and follow any signs
- Leave gates and property as you find them
- Protect plants and animals, and take your litter home
- Keep dogs under close control
- Consider other people



For more details visit:

www.countrysideaccess.gov.uk

Please take particular care because of the proximity of the towpath to the deep water of the canal. Also, certain stretches of the trail are relatively remote so take appropriate clothing, a snack and a mobile phone.

For a Cycle Safety Code visit:

www.cheshire.gov.uk

Wheelchair Access Statement:

The towpath is generally suitable for wheelchair users. However, access points to the canal can be limited but include: Egg Bridge (Waverton), Cow Lane Bridge (Chester), Pretty Bridge (Caughall), & The Boat Museum (Ellesmere Port).

In case of any difficulty on the canal call Freephone Canal on 0800 47 999 47.

All users are advised to refer to Ordnance Survey maps for detail (such as Explorer 266).



walking



cycling



watching the world go by



picnicking



strolling

Nature

Wildlife

The canal has become the home to many plants and animals, creating an important wildlife corridor through town and country. So-much-so its entire length in West Cheshire has been designated as an Area of Nature Conservation Value.

As well as mute swans, ducks and moorfowl, there are lots of other species perhaps less obvious to spot. Birds include kingfishers and grey heron. Other wildlife include water voles and dragonflies.

There are large areas where the banks are lined by reed-beds and the towpath by hedges. In the summer you might see reed and sedge warblers in the reeds or throughout the year hear the 'little-bit-of-bread-with-no-cheese' song of the yellow-hammer from canalside bushes.

Geology

The deep canal cutting to the north of Chester has revealed massive cross-bedding structures in the sandstone. These were formed in sand bars in a desert river around 250 million years ago during the Triassic period. Cheshire was then nearer to the equator, but has since moved northwards because of continental drift. The cutting has been designated as a Regionally Important Geodiversity Site.

The Wirral Line runs through the Backford Gap. This valley was formed at the end of the last ice age by water from the melting ice sheets (some 10,000 years ago). It has meant that the canal encounters no major gradients between the Dee and Mersey, so there has been no need for locks along this route.



sandstone bedding



banks and hedgerows



mute swan and cygnet



reed beds



kingfisher*

* image: Bob Glover rspb-images.com

Brief History

The waterways that make up the present Shropshire Union Canal between Chester and Ellesmere Port were created during Britain's 'Canal Age' in the 18th century.

Britain was then in the throws of an industrial revolution. The canals offered a transport solution to poor roads and difficult stretches of river. Using a single horse a canal boat could carry heavy materials and fragile goods over long distances. Special packet boats could move passengers swiftly and comfortably compared to stage coaches.

This stretch of canal was built in two main phases:

- The Chester Canal: constructed in the 1770s between Chester (River Dee) and Nantwich.
- The Ellesmere Canal: built in the 1790s (the period of 'Canal Mania'). The Wirral Line linked Chester with the River Mersey and there were substantial modifications to the connection with the River Dee.

Additional works connected Nantwich to Shropshire and the Welsh Borders and, via Wolverhampton, to the English Midlands.

With the arrival of the railways the canals themselves faced competition. Steam locomotives could pull more wagons and move them faster than any canal boat. During the period of 'Railway Mania' in the 1840s the Shropshire Union was created, uniting various canal systems between Wolverhampton and Ellesmere Port.

Gradual decline set in, becoming particularly evident in the 1920s. Today, however, the canal is undergoing rejuvenation. Its waterway and towpath have become places for leisure and pleasure, its waterside locations as places to live or to set up business.



boat and butty, Chester
1953



Shropshire Union Co. seal
1846



horse and boat, Chester
c1890



Ellesmere Port docks
c1910

*historic images courtesy of
the Waterways Trust Archive,
The Boat Museum at
Ellesmere Port*

Timeline

- 1759** Sankey Canal opened between St Helens and the Mersey: Britain's first modern canal
- 1762** Bridgewater Canal opened - heralding Britain's 'Canal Age'
- 1772** Work begins on Chester Canal
- 1779** Chester Canal extends to Nantwich
- 1786** Early Watt 'rotative' steam engine supplied to Chester canalside mill
- 1793** Ellesmere Canal Act passed
- 1795** Wirral Line joins up with Chester Canal
- 1800** Chester's lead shot tower built next to canal
- 1801** Dee tidal lock constructed
- 1813** Merger between Chester and Ellesmere Canal Companies
- 1835** Nantwich linked to Wolverhampton by Birmingham and Liverpool Canal
- 1840** Railway arrives in Chester
- 1846** Shropshire Union Railways and Canal Company formed
- 1894** Manchester Ship Canal opens
- 1890s** Major growth of Ellesmere Port begins
- 1917** Shropshire Union Co. sells Chester boatyard
- 1921** Shropshire Union Co. ceases carrying operations
- 1922** Shropshire Union taken over by London & North Western Railway
- 1935** First UK fleet of canal hire pleasure boats set up at Christleton
- 1939** Trade on Dee Branch ends
- 1948** Waterways nationalised under British Transport Commission
- 1957** Last regular commercial traffic on canal through Chester
- 1962** British Waterways created by the Transport Act
- 1976** The Boat Museum opened at Ellesmere Port
- 1986** Chester's lead shot tower ceases production
- 2000s** British Waterways makes towpath improvements
- 2000s** General regeneration of the canal corridor

1750

1800

1850

1900

1950

2000

Ellesmere Port and The Boat Museum

Ellesmere Port

Originally called Whitby Wharf or Locks, this port on the Ellesmere Canal soon became known as Ellesmere Port. Ellesmere itself being a town on the canal in Shropshire.

Following the arrival of the canal in the 1790s it developed into a major transshipment complex for both people and goods.

The surrounding town grew after an inland link with the Birmingham area in 1835. However, major growth of Ellesmere Port took place following the opening of the Manchester Ship Canal in 1894.

Boat Museum

Today the museum occupies a large area of the former canal port. It has a designated collection of national importance covering over 5,000 objects and the world's largest floating collection of canal craft.

A variety of exhibitions tell the story of Britain's inland waterways including that of the Shropshire Union Canal, the history of Ellesmere Port and how canal boats were built. Activities also portray the lives of those who worked the waterways and explain practices such as the ornate painting of canal narrowboats.

The museum is home to a working blacksmith's forge and an important waterways archive, plus a café, bookshop and conference facilities.

For more information visit:
www.boatmuseum.org.uk
or call 0151 355 5017.



the upper basin



castles and roses



a tar narrowboat



painted detail



a wide boat

Tower Wharf Area

The layout here dates from the 1790s when the Wirral section of the Ellesmere Canal joined up with the existing Chester Canal. Two branches were constructed - the Main Line (to Ellesmere Port) and the Dee Branch at a lower level (a short section to the River Dee *via* a tidal basin).

Until the arrival of the railway in 1840 a packet service took passengers (by 1801 some 15,000 per year) from Tower Wharf to Ellesmere Port *en route* to Liverpool. The Shropshire Union Company's head office was located at Tower Wharf until the 1920s.

Significant features that can still be seen today include:

Telford's Warehouse

A substantial brick warehouse built in the 1790s and attributed to the Ellesmere Canal Company's engineer, the famous Thomas Telford. 'Shipping holes' allowed boats to pass under the warehouse to assist unloading and loading operations. This building is now used as a bar, restaurant and music venue.

Roving Bridge

This allowed horses to cross from a towpath on one side of the canal to the other. Its design removed the need to unhitch them from their boat.

Taylor's Boatyard

The boatyard that developed here once built and maintained the Shropshire Union Company's carrying fleet. A unique canopied dry dock occupies the junction of the two canal branches. Narrowboats and other craft are still repaired here.



the dee branch



telford's warehouse



the roving bridge



roving bridge number



the dry dock