

Are you interested in learning about Britain's canals?

Read this information to find out the history behind the Worcester and Birmingham Canal.



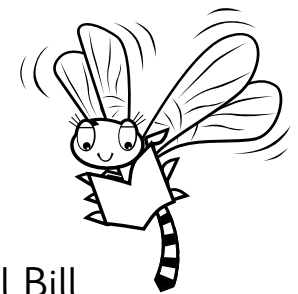
The canal at Worcester.

The Worcester and Birmingham Canal is just over 48 km (30 miles) long and runs from Diglis Basin, Worcester to Gas Street Basin in Birmingham.

## Why was it built?

During the 18th century, as the Industrial Revolution progressed, towns were keen to be connected to larger cities, coalfields and industrial centres so that trade could expand. Many canals were built to speed up transport.

The Worcester and Birmingham Canal Company wanted to build a canal to link the River Severn at Worcester to the factories of Birmingham and the Black Country. The Staffordshire and Worcester Canal already linked Worcester with the Black Country, but the new canal would be 48 km shorter than this. A shorter canal would mean a quicker journey for boats and therefore most boats would use the new route. In 1791, despite opposition from other canal companies, the Worcester and Birmingham Canal Bill was passed.





The last lock on the canal.

## Where and how was it built?

The building of the Worcester and Birmingham Canal suffered many engineering and financial problems. It took 24 years to complete and it cost more than three times the original budget!

Originally the canal was going to be wide enough for barges to use, but this was too expensive, so the canal was only built to be wide enough to carry narrow boats.

Work began on the canal in Birmingham in 1792 and it finally reached Worcester in 1815. During this time, 58 locks had to be built to lift the canal almost 130 metres from the River Severn to the level of the Birmingham canals. Five tunnels were built on the canal, the longest, at Kings Norton, Birmingham, is almost 2.5 km long! A bar was built at Gas Street Basin, Birmingham to stop the canal joining the Birmingham canals and using their water. This meant all goods had to be transhipped across a 2 m wide piece of land. Finally, in 1815, the bar was removed, giving boats access to the Birmingham Canal Navigations.



A boater sails through the countryside.

## The fall and rise of the canal

The Worcester and Birmingham Canal was built to carry freight. When it opened, it carried many goods including coal, salt, limestone and wood. Unfortunately, in the 1840s, the building of railways meant that less freight was carried on the canal.

By the early 1900s the canal became unprofitable although it was still used for freight until the 1960s. The last commercial boats were probably those delivering chocolate crumb to the Cadbury factory at Bournville, Birmingham.

Today the canal is mainly used for pleasure. It is very popular with boaters partly due to the fact that the canal provides links to other waterways such as the Staffordshire and Worcester Canal, the Stratford Canal and the Droitwich Canals. Anglers, cyclists and walkers also enjoy the canal's peaceful environment as does a wide range of wildlife. Tardebigge, 22.5 km from Birmingham, boasts the longest narrow lock flight in the country.