



# The Wilts & Berks Canal

*& wildlife corridor*

## *A Walk along The Lost Waterway of Melksham*

This wharf was once a busy canalside settlement where, before the railway and a decent road system had emerged, grain for the Melksham mills was brought in, together with coal for the town from the Somerset coalfields. Unfortunately all signs of the canal have been destroyed, including the wharf house, which stood next to the bridge. Carefully cross the road and look down onto the canal line, now the garden of 'Withleigh' (a private house) built in 1927 on the site of a smithy which served the canal. Here you can see the steps, which lead down to the canal towing path. The footpath here was closed in about 1948 and diverted to create Hardie Walk.

### **Melksham Wharf to Gallows Bridge**

Almost opposite the entrance to Wharf Court is Hardie Walk – take this path to Milton Avenue. Turn right here and then left into Sangster Avenue – the canal is now on your left in the back gardens of the houses along this road.

At Pembroke Road turn left and just past the small electric substation building look back into the gardens on the left, you will be able to see the tree/hedgerow which was the towpath hedge. Originally the hedge was planted as hawthorn, a strong and cheap method of fencing. It was roughly around this spot that Gallows Bridge footbridge stood (5).

### **Gallows Bridge to Lowbourn Bridge**

Turn right into Ruskin Avenue and walk northwards past the residential home Brookside on your right – built directly on the line of the canal (6). Just before you reach the army cadet centre take the footpath to your right but stop before you come to the end of the tall wire fence on your left – here a few trees mark the old line. The land enclosed within the fence is part of the large embankment that took the canal 110 ft above Clackers Brook (7). It was around this point that the '2 miles to Semington' milestone would have stood. As you follow the path around to the left you will cross the brook below at the base of the embankment. The face of its box ashlar culvert has survived well.

The canal continues northwards in the form of gardens however, so you must detour to the right following the concrete path between the flats in Hampshire Place and take the narrow path leading to Sandridge Road (8). Turn left here and at the junction with Forest Road you will see the bridge parapet ahead of you. This parapet formed the north wall of Lowbourn Road bridge (9) and now remains as the most significant structure to survive in Melksham. Work was carried out by the Canal Trust to repair the parapet and approach wall in 1995.

### **Lowbourn Bridge to Forest Lock**

Again the canal along here has been lost to gardens, however the towpath hedge remains. To retrace the line walk along Forest Road and left into Murray Walk – the canal is straight ahead of you where the road meets the field. It was at this point that the canal was spanned by a lift bridge (10), operated in a drawbridge fashion. Recent investigations have revealed that a high level trestle bridge was built from the canal at this point to the former Spencers factory (now housing) at Beanacre Road to provide a direct route for the workers at the engineering works. The bridge ran high above the flood plain on iron supports and the earth embankments, which still stand today. Back at Murray Walk road rejoin the narrow towpath which runs high on an embankment from the fields to the left. This short stretch takes you to Awdry Avenue where the entire embankment has been filled in and grassed over.

Follow the embankment past Bowmans Court and Loxley Close and straight over the minor road leading to Methuen Avenue and along the path through the houses. Cross another minor road and follow the hedge on your left behind the garages to the field, and the end of this trail. About 150 metres ahead is the site of Melksham Forest Lock (11) which raised the canal nine feet from the three mile pound through Melksham. The lock cottage (12), which stood to the left of the lock, was demolished in 1961. Access to the cottage was only via the towing path.

*The aim of the Wilts & Berks Canal Trust is to restore the canal to a navigable state from the 'Jubilee Junction' with The Thames near Abingdon to the Kennet & Avon near Melksham via the Vale of the White Horse and Swindon. A major branch will also be restored along the proposed Cricklade Country Way north from Swindon to a new junction with the Thames & Severn Canal at Eysey. A new route has been proposed to link the Kennet & Avon Canal at Semington with Melksham; details can be found on the website.*

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The Wilts & Berks Canal was built between 1795 and 1810 linking the Kennet & Avon Canal (originally the Western Canal) at Semington near Melksham to Abingdon on the Thames in Berkshire. Branches connected Chippenham, Calne, Longcot and Wantage to the main line and freight included coal, corn, stone, iron, timber, lime and chalk. The North Wilts branch from Swindon to the Thames & Severn Canal at Latton (near Cricklade) was completed in 1819. When the Wilts & Berks was built Melksham had a population of just over 5,000 and the village of Swindon a mere 1,000.

The canal was finally abandoned by Act of Parliament in 1914. Some building has taken place on the line of the canal but much of it still exists in the form of lock and bridge remains, embankments, towpaths, hedgerows and ditches. In canalside towns and villages many roads and building names mark this era and there is strong support for restoring this significant piece of our transport heritage.

## The Walk

### Towpath to Melksham Wharf

Begin your walk at the Southern end of Melksham at the West End Inn, (Hungry Horse), Semington Road. Opposite the West End Inn (once West End Farm) is Waverley Gardens and you will find a footpath halfway along the north side of the road (1) – this was the canal towing path. Just to the South is the site of West End Farm bridge, and Drinkwater House, home to John Lewington, canal carrier and boatman.

The canal itself was on the right-hand side of the towpath and is now incorporated into the gardens of the houses in Kenilworth Gardens. The red brick wall on your left is built from a similar type of clay brick that was used on the canal. The bricks were baked in purpose - built kilns along the route of the canal and were larger than normal bricks to avoid tax and to speed up building - 700 W & B bricks were equivalent to 1000 statute bricks.

Follow the path until you reach the electricity substation on your left (2). The houses on this side were built during the canal's lifetime and can be seen in old photographs of Melksham Wharf. The towpath ahead comes to a dead end at the site of the wharf – so take the path to the right and turn left into Kenilworth Gardens. Follow the road around Warwick Crescent and turn left at the junction with the busy Spa Road. (3).

Looking ahead you will see a hump in the road – this is the site of Spa Road bridge (lowered in 1924) which carried the main Devizes to Melksham road over the canal. As you approach the 'bridge' you will see a housing development to your right which

is on the site of the rope factory owned by Charles Maggs (4). The road is aptly named Rope Walk. Ropes up to a quarter of a mile long were produced at this canal side factory and transported on the canal to Abingdon on the Thames and beyond. Charles Maggs also founded Wiltshire United Dairies, the first to develop condensed milk.

As you reach the brow of the 'bridge' you will see Wharf Court on your left, a large development of flats, standing on the site of Melksham Wharf.

### Melksham Canal Trail

Approximately 1 hours walk at a generous pace

