

WW GUIDE

to the south Oxford Canal

Bookended by bustling Braunston and the dreaming spires of Oxford, this is one of Britain's finest rural canals.

Roger Butler cruises south...

The classic view of Napton
Locks: this is lock 9.
ROBIN SMITHETT

BRAUNSTON TO BANBURY

In football commentator's parlance, the Oxford Canal is truly "a game of two halves". The 'north Oxford' runs from Hawkesbury Junction, near Coventry, to the Stop House at Braunston – a distance of some 21½ miles. The 'south Oxford' carries on right through to Oxford, around 53 miles with no less than 38 locks.

Its first 5½ miles, to Napton Junction, are shared with the Grand Union Canal. Improvements made in the 1930s by the Grand Union Canal Company gave it a GU character, but in fact the Oxford Canal Company never gave up title to this stretch. This is still recognised today in the signs along the towpath which declare 'Oxford Canal Walk'.

Situated between two major junctions, and with a number of large marinas in the vicinity, this stretch is invariably busy. But its gently winding course through some beautiful, peaceful countryside, together with some excellent rural moorings, makes this a length to be savoured and not rushed. If you should choose to sit out on a warm summer's evening you will be treated to a degree of quietness which must be relatively rare now in the heart of England.

At **Napton Junction**, the Grand Union strides away to the West Midlands beneath the distinctive 1930s Junction Bridge. Our course is to the south past Wigrams Turn Marina, the moorings and hire boats of Napton Narrowboats and on around Napton-on-the-Hill, with its landmark windmill on the top, to the foot of the Napton flight of nine locks.

There are a few locations around the canal network where delays are to be anticipated, if not expected, and this is one! But consolation comes by the way of some outstanding views across the gently rolling countryside. The main services are at the bottom of the flight, with another water point at the top. The Engine House Arm, off to the left on the ascent, now provides long term moorings. It was once used by boats bringing coal to the



Approaching Claydon Top Lock.

pump house engine which lifted water back up to the summit section.

The final two locks at the top of the flight are at **Marston Doles**. The juxtaposition of lock, bridge, cottage, former warehouse and stabling, all in warm terracotta-coloured brick, make for a satisfying scene.

This heralds the start of the uninterrupted 11 miles of the Oxford's summit pound. As the crow flies, it is less than half that between here and the beginning of the descent at Claydon. But this is Brindley at his most unhurried. From Bridge 129 to Bridge 132 is a 1½-mile detour around Wormleighton Hill, although these bridges are barely 600 yards apart on the ground!

The Oxford is never generous of depth, but the going is generally much better now than in the past. The passage is most pleasant when perched up on the cabin top, drifting quietly along on a sunny summer's afternoon. There's not even a tunnel to negotiate now; the two at **Fenny Compton** were opened out in the late 1860s. The banks of the

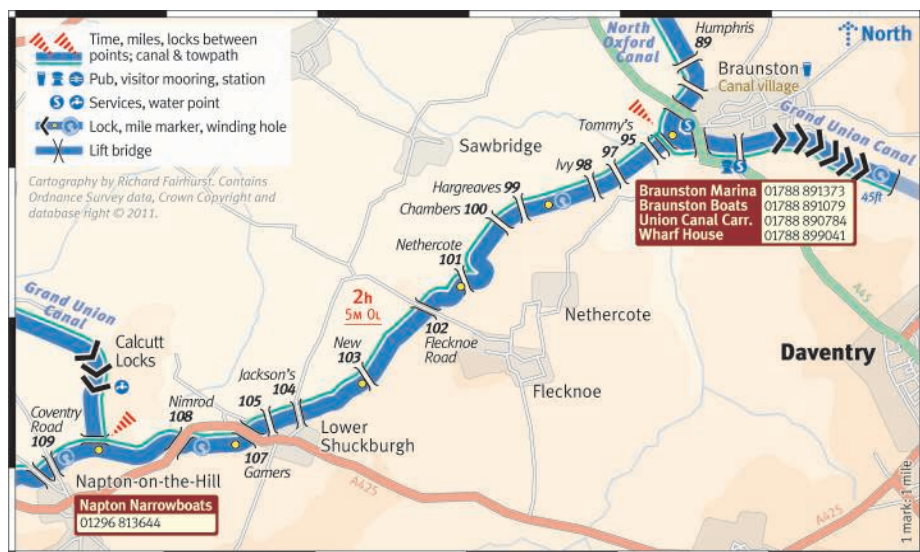
HISTORY

Commenced in the north following an Act of Parliament in 1769 and initially engineered by James Brindley, the Oxford Canal had only reached Napton by 1775. A second Act was required to raise more money in order to complete the canal to the Thames in 1790, under the supervision of Robert Whitworth. It enjoyed a monopoly of traffic for just 15 years before the Grand Junction Canal, from the Midlands to London, was completed in 1805. Then the gloves were off.

With the coming of the GJC journey time assumed greater significance. The winding nature of the pioneering Oxford Canal soon became a liability. Further Acts paved the way for the canal to be shortened with the eradication of numerous twists and turns, though these improvements were mostly on the northern section – which lost almost 14 miles by as early as 1834. The 91 miles to Oxford became 77½.

The southern section retains its winding character, though, particularly along the summit level. It remains a classic example of an 18th century contour canal. It shares part of its course with the River Cherwell; the original intention to utilise the river right through Banbury was ruled out by Brindley.

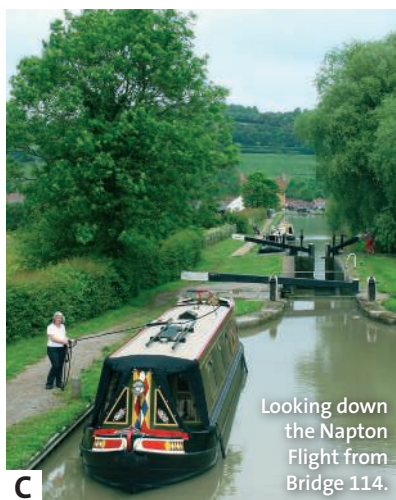
The short ¼-mile Dukes Cut to the Thames above Oxford, with just one lock, was completed privately in 1789 by the Duke of Marlborough (owner of Blenheim Palace). The canal company made the city centre connection via the Sheepwash Channel, a backwater of the Thames, and Isis (or Louse) Lock a few years later.





A hire-boat from the Rose fleet leaving Hardwick Lock.

B



Looking down the Napton Flight from Bridge 114.

C



Claydon Lock 19.

D

resultant cutting, still known as Fenny Tunnel, are now adorned in the spring by an abundance of wildflowers. Fenny Compton Marina offers all services but not on Mondays, an increasingly common practice it seems, so it always pays to check ahead.

At the disused railway bridge south of Bridge 139, we interrupted our cruise to look at the spillway and impressive expanse of **Wormleighton Reservoir**. One of three built to feed the Summit pound, it is close to where Warwickshire seamlessly becomes Oxfordshire, just a mile from the start of the canal's descent into the Cherwell valley. Bridge 141, Boundary Lift Bridge marks the spot! This is the first of many of the lift bridges (drawbridges) which so characterise the Oxford: they were simple to construct, were an inexpensive way of bridging the canal when money was short, and are now the bane of the single-handed boater's life. We, however, would miss them!

The descent starts at **Claydon Top Lock**, one of five locks which sit comfortably in the landscape with an attractive grouping of red-brick former Canal Company buildings. Old stables are adjacent to the second lock. For a long time rather forlorn, they are now renovated and making a lovely home.

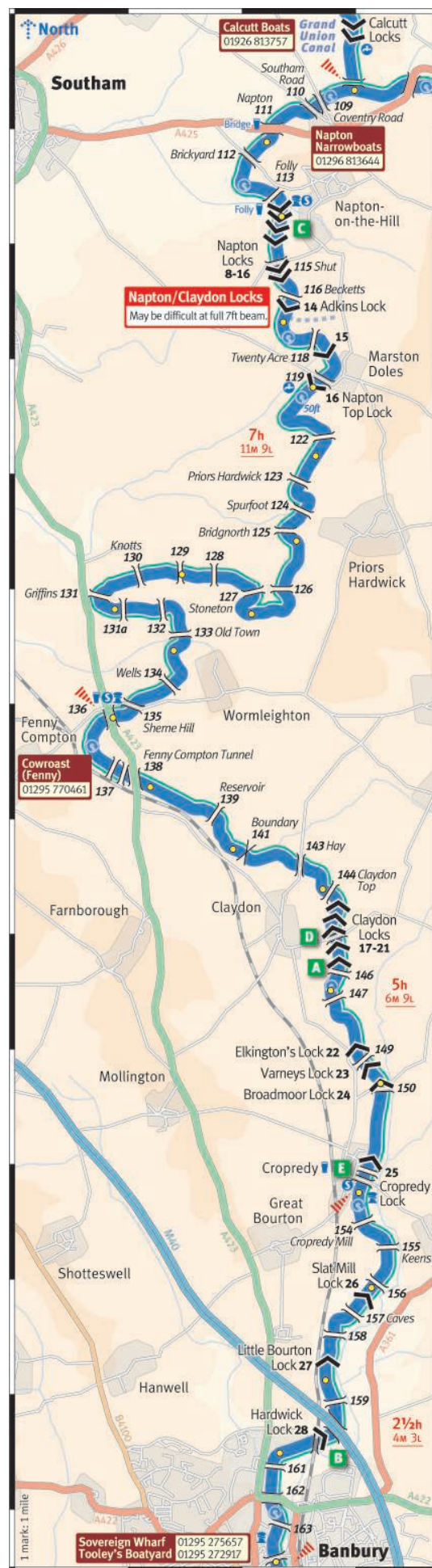
Three further locks, Elkington's, Varney's and Broadmoor lower the canal to the ¼-mile pound above the ever

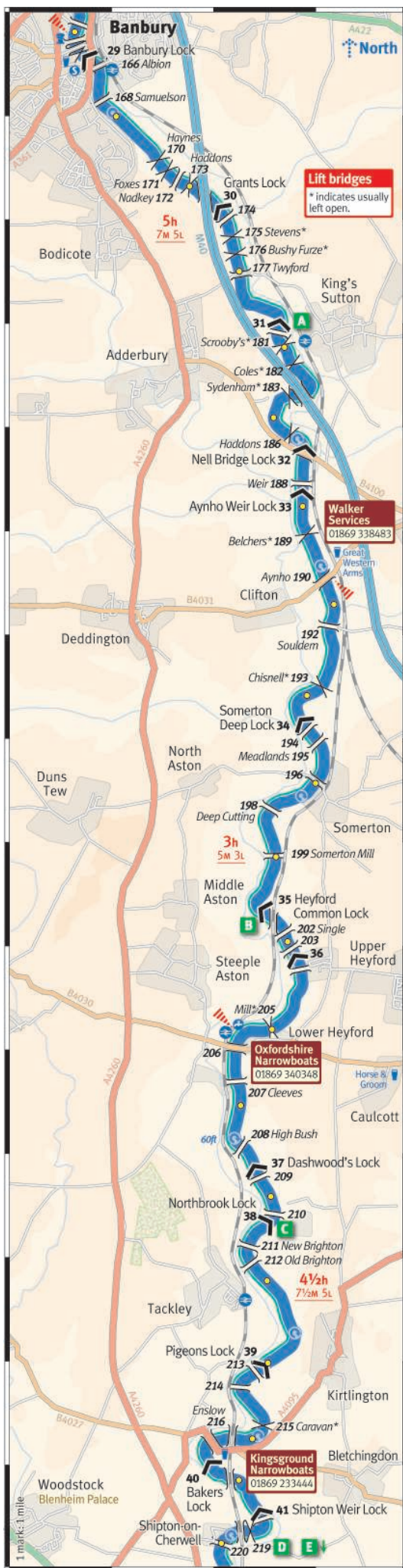
popular Cropredy Lock (25) and Wharf. If there's a spot free above the lock, take the opportunity. If you're doubly lucky then the family of nuthatches may be active in the trees opposite, as they were when we stopped! There are a few more mooring spots between the lock and wharf bridge but below here is the winding hole, services and long-term moorings extending for some distance.

The popularity of **Cropredy** reflects the presence of the useful Bridge Stores, two attractive pubs, the mill over the Cherwell which joins us here and the warm honeyed stone and thatch of this quintessentially English village – perfect for an evening stroll. Some will know of Cropredy because of the famous battle here in 1644; others for Fairport Convention's high summer folk festival.



E





BANBURY TO THRUPP

Just four miles and another three locks, Slat Mill, Bourton and Hardwick, lower the canal 22ft to Oxfordshire's second town, **Banbury**.

Banbury is famous for its cross (no longer the original), the 'fine lady on a white horse' or at least her statue and, for canal people, Tooley's Boatyard. A historic yard in its own right, it was from here that Tom Rolt set off on *Cressy* for the voyage chronicled in his book *Narrow Boat* – which sparked the 20th century canal revival.

The boatyard, much redeveloped, now forms the focus of a museum near the helpful Tourist Information Centre. We particularly enjoyed a visit to the neo-classical St Michael's Church with a fine interior, and strolling through the town past the former Corn Factors building on the way to the street market in the Horsefair. Don't forget the Banbury cakes made to that special recipe! All the big stores are here too, of course, and the shock of the canalside regeneration carried out some years ago now seems to have mellowed. Those needing a supermarket will find a Tesco north of the town centre (near the A423 bridge), or a Morrison's south of it.

Leaving Cropredy in the morning will see you at Banbury in around 2½ hours to arrive mid-morning, a good time to take advantage of one of the popular moorings situated along both sides of the canal between Tom Rolt Bridge and Banbury Lock. They are currently limited to 48 hours, which seems more sensible than the '24 hours only' when we were last here. Somewhat less reasonably, however, there's no return for 28 days, making it difficult for those with limited time to enjoy an out-and-back cruise of the Oxford.

There are other moorings below the lock (and the services), but until a much mooted redevelopment takes place, these are less inviting. Indeed, the exit south from Banbury leaves a little to be desired but it's not long before rurality returns.

For the next half dozen miles the M40 has sadly, since 1990, shared the valley. It crosses

the canal above Grants Lock and again at Coles Lift Bridge (182), and its distant traffic drone may reduce the star rating of the otherwise perfect mooring. But scenically there's much to admire, no less so than at **King's Sutton** or Taver's Lock where the lockside cottage and the former company blacksmith's shop, sit agreeably. There is a useful railway station here, and the pleasant village is a short walk up the hill. Incidentally have you noticed that since Banbury the bottom lock gates have been single and not, as more usually, mitred pairs? This was another early cost-saving measure.

After Nell's Bridge Lock then comes the interesting **Aynho Weir Lock**. Although nominally just a one foot fall, it is diamond shaped – not so much to accommodate several boats, but more for a sufficient volume of water to balance the much deeper Somerton Lock (12ft) which comes next. Is it the River Cherwell crossing from left to right immediately above the lock which creates unexpected 'eddies' as the lock slowly empties or fills? It certainly is responsible for an interesting approach when the river's in spate, although the run-off is fortunately well fendered with timber rubbing strakes.

A mile below it is the useful boatyard at **Aynho**, with canopied wharf buildings and all services. Now that the motorway is behind you, you can finally find that peaceful rural mooring – just back from Somerton Deep Lock, below Chisnell Lift Bridge (193). If you've been counting you'll know that's the 11th lift bridge since Banbury, although a number will have been chained up in the open position. There are still more to come!

Arguably, between Somerton and the Heyfords, the Oxford Canal is at its best as it meanders down the valley with the Cherwell always close at hand and lovely views across the water meadows with pollarded willow and quietly grazing cattle. All is peaceful now since the US Air Force base at Upper Heyford has closed (1993).



B Heyford Common Lock.



C Northbrook Lock.

We chose to moor, not at the remote Heyford Common Lock, but below Allen's Lock, for lunch and exploration on foot. Here, a track affords easy access to the village road, past the pretty church, with its cemetery and poignant military straight rows of grave stones and on up past thatched stone cottages with pretty gardens full of flower, to the Barley Mow. This is now the sole remaining pub in the village: its neighbour, along with the shop, closed when the American airmen returned home. The manor house and handsome stone tithe barn are best seen from the canal when underway again towards Mill Lift Bridge (205), interestingly made in steel not wood. Mr Pearson in his guide to the canal claims this was in order to take the weight of the miller's traction engine – an explanation so appealing it must be true!

Lower Heyford brings a bustle of activity associated with the hire base there, with all facilities including a welcoming and popular café. There is then something of a change, as the Oxford begins to thread its way along a pleasantly wooded stretch via Dashwood and Northbrook locks to peaceful, informal overnight mooring half a mile below Old Brighton Bridge (212).

Pigeon's Lock, quite close to but remote from the villages of Tackley and Kirtlington (accessible via a gravel track), is the last before reaching the **Rock of Gibraltar**! That's actually the name of the pub at Enslow, once an important wharf where cement from a nearby factory, now largely hidden in the woods, was brought by boat to be transhipped to rail.

Baker's Lock brings the canal to that stretch shared with the Cherwell. On reflection, perhaps this is the Oxford at its best: deep, clear water beneath the hull, a handsome footbridge arching over the river as it joins from the right and a meandering mile between banks lined with rush and lily through to Shipton Weir Lock. The warning signs remind though that the journey may not always be placid and tranquil. As on



Lift bridges are common – this is Bridge 219.

any other river after heavy rain with 'fresh' running, a healthy respect and a degree of caution is called for.

Shipton Weir Lock itself, with a fall of around 2½ft, is idyllically situated – another of diamond shape capable of taking more than one craft. The footbridge over the tail is ideal for the photographer.

Picturesque views of the churches at Hampton Grey and Shipton-on-Cherwell, and a wide now occupied by boats of the Canal Cruising Club, precede our arrival at **Thrupp**. Boaters' facilities are on the offside of the winding hole (for pump-out, obtain the card from the club's mooring officer). Here the canal turns through a right-angle beneath Aubrey's Lift Bridge (221); the visitor moorings are along the towpath now on the right. The road over the bridge leads to the former BW yard, two attractive thatched cottages and now 'Annie's', a popular tearooms. Our arrival coincided with trials of the bridge following the very recent installation of electrically operated hydraulics to raise and lower it. The frequency of boat passages at this location will demand a high degree of reliability. Here's hoping!

Two pubs, the Boat at the far end of the attractive row of canalside cottages, and the Jolly Boatman a little further on, help to ensure the popularity of the Thrupp visitor moorings – some with a 48-hour limit, others seven days. The latter are sought after by those wishing to take advantage of convenient buses to the supermarket in Kidlington, or to visit nearby Blenheim Palace (3 miles) – or indeed the many attractions of Oxford if not boating on down.



Canalside cottages at Thrupp.

WALKING & CYCLING

The Oxford Canal Walk was the first waymarked canal walk in the country, established by BW in the 1990s. Though the initiative has rather been neglected in recent years, it's a terrific idea – putting the towpath on a par with the well-known National Trails and other long-distance footpaths.

You'll still see many signs along the route with a colourful, mock-canal design, pointing you to Oxford in one direction and Coventry in the other. Walks between Oxford and Banbury are particularly easy, with railway stations along the way at Tackley (a signposted walk up a wide track), Lower Heyford (canalside), and King's Sutton. Disappointingly, although the railway stays within reach for several miles, the stations dry up north of Banbury; but if you're moored up and fancy a stroll, there are fine off-piste walking opportunities around Wormleighton, Marston Doles and Napton.

Although British Waterways permits you to cycle the Oxford Canal towpath, generally you wouldn't want to. It is mostly narrow and bumpy; only the section in Oxford city itself is at all tolerable on a bike. From Oxford to Banbury, the cyclist's best bet is to follow Sustrans' National Cycle Route 5 on quiet lanes – set to be linked to the centre of Banbury by a new canal bridge and towpath improvements. Cycle hire is available at Oxfordshire Narrowboats' Lower Heyford base.

KIDLINGTON TO OXFORD

After Thrupp, the character of the Oxford subtly begins to change again. Between Roundham and Kidlington Green Locks, the suburbs of Kidlington start to encroach and lengthy linear moorings dictate the pace of passage. Immediately below Duke's Lock (or Shuttleworth's Lock, now designated 44A), there's a decision to be made - turn right into Duke's Cut to the Thames or continue straight on via the 'back door' into Oxford along the canal.

The former, the short **Duke's Cut**, initially somewhat overgrown and unprepossessing, rises through the single Duke's Cut Lock (44B). This once had paired gates which enabled operation whether the river level was above or below that in the cut. This is no longer necessary with today's river level controls, but the recess for the extra gate remains.

Now that you are entering Environment Agency waters a Thames licence is, of course, required. This can be bought in advance, or purchased upon arrival at the first lock. If you head south on the Thames, then a lovely, winding river mile immediately sets the mood, bringing you to Kings Lock and offering the opportunity to complete the Oxford Ring anticlockwise via the famous Trout Inn at Godstow Bridge, Godstow Lock, Port Meadow, The Perch at Binsey, the Sheepwash Channel and up through Isis Lock back onto the canal - a very pleasant seven-mile round trip!

If you opt to continue directly into Oxford along the canal, then there's a little more work to be done. First are the two lift bridges 233 and 234, with a reputation for being hard to lift; it's probably best to deploy the biggest and strongest member of the crew. After Wolvercote Lock (45) and a linear mooring community, there is just one final lift bridge, usually to be found open. The two former lift bridges after this have now been replaced by fixed overbridges.

Once with a poor reputation, this stretch into Oxford has much improved over recent years with some new-build and attractive gardens of now fashionable Victorian houses sloping down to the water on the offside. A convenient service block (no pump-out) has been provided en route near Bridge 238. Several sections have been designated as conservation areas, where mooring is prohibited, to help 'green' the corridor - and protect the water voles!

There are suitable visitor moorings north of Isis Lock near to College Cruisers' hire base, opposite St Barnabas Church and the former boatyard at **Jericho**. Here, appropriately enough, a battle has been fought (with celebrity backing) to retain the dock facilities here in the face of development proposals. High boards and bare concrete hard-standing are not what

either side sought, and the debate rattles on. Meanwhile the towpath carries a seemingly constant stream of students and dons on foot and on bicycle, all, it appears, late for lectures!

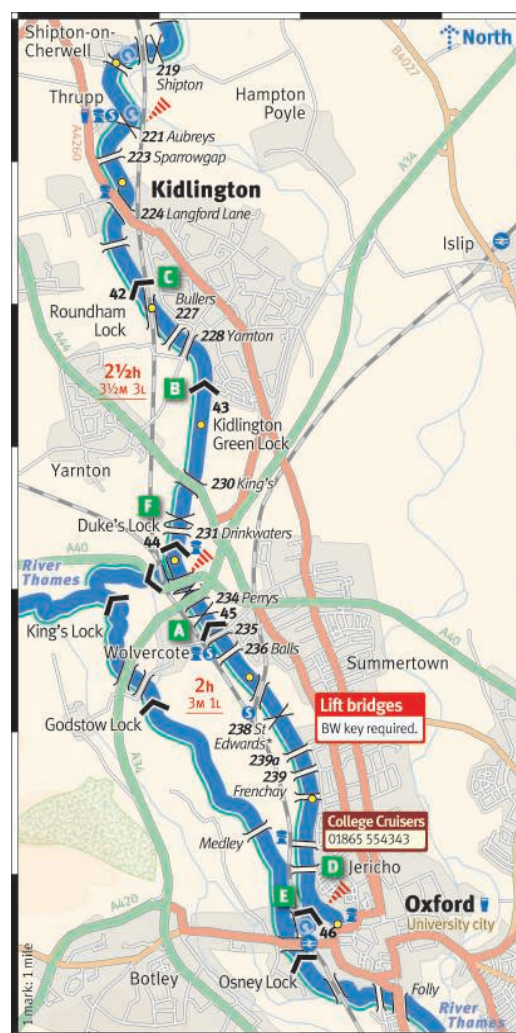
The canal continues beyond here to the attractive Isis Lock on the right and situated amongst the trees. Until the mid 19th century, the lock was of wide-beam dimensions, enabling barges to trade up to the basin. To the left, the canal carries on for a few hundred yards before ending tamely, and prematurely, at Hythe Bridge Street. There are no visitor moorings here now, just a few permanently moored boats, and no winding hole. Boats up to 50ft can wind above the lock, but longer boats must drop down through the lock and wind below.

The canal once ended at Hythe Bridge Basin, with Worcester Street and New Road Wharves beyond the bridge. Regrettably, the basin was filled in by Nuffield College in the 1930s and 40s, and the (recently named) Duke's Cut pub now looks rather lonely across the car park! Local enthusiasts have long campaigned for the basin to be reinstated, but to no avail yet.

Those with a Thames licence may choose to carry on through the lock and Castle Mill Stream below, to the Sheepwash Channel, once a backwater of the Thames. Here you will find the now listed rusting remains of the windlass operated railway swing bridge, complete with track, which once crossed this narrow channel. It was operated by the signaller who was summoned by the boater via a dedicated bridge-side telephone. Reportedly last used in 1984, the bridge was officially decommissioned the following year (*WW* June 1985).

Turning left onto the Thames at the watery crossroads known as Four Rivers, you soon pass under **Osney Bridge** - where there are excellent visitor moorings to the right, above Osney Lock. The bridge is relatively low (7ft 6in) and is the one which effectively dictates the air draught of boats heading to the Upper Thames, maintaining the quietness of the upper reaches.

A third alternative for mooring in Oxford is to continue through Osney Lock and cruise on to and beneath Folly Bridge (built in the 1820s), where Salter Brothers' tripboats are based. This area of Oxford is known as Grandpont, and below here you can join the interesting variety of wide and narrowbeam craft which share moorings in the attractive location opposite Christchurch Meadow. A convenient 15-minute walk takes you back over Folly Bridge, along St Aldates and into the city. From here, too, you're perfectly placed to complete the Oxford Ring in a clockwise direction up the Thames and back onto the Oxford Canal via Duke's Cut.





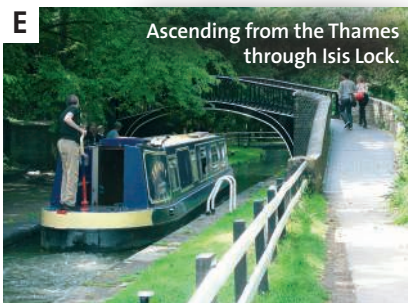
Kidlington Green Lock.

B



Roundham Lock.

C



Ascending from the Thames through Isis Lock.

E



St Barnabas' Church and Jericho Boatyard.

D



The attractive Duke's Lock, just above Duke's Cut.

F

The Bridge of Sighs.



OXFORD

Since the 13th century, Oxford's reputation has been founded on its university colleges. Most are open to visitors, although some make a small charge for you to stroll round their quadrangles, 'chill' in their cloisters and generally imbibe the environment of academia.

Visit the Carfax Tower, too, and the Sheldonian Theatre, of architecturally ground breaking design by Sir Christopher Wren and where graduates are now awarded their degrees. Stairs lead from the wonderful auditorium with its painted ceiling, up to the floor of the cupola (dome) supported on an impressive complex of massive oak beams and from where the various landmarks can be spotted, perhaps using the 360° compass guide available to satisfy even the most inquisitive. The phrase 'dreaming spires' acquires its full connotation from up here!

Aficionados of Morse and Lewis will want to tour the locations made famous in Colin Dexter's novels. These are probably best spotted when strolling the bustling streets and alleys which crisscross the centre - the White Horse, the Randolph Hotel, the Turf Tavern, Blackwell's Bookshop... the list could go on. The *Oxford of Inspector Morse* by Anthony Richards is available to help (published by Philip Atwell for £4, and available, of course, in Blackwells bookshop - an emporium perhaps rivalled only by Foyles in London).

Oxford has countless cafés and sandwich shops, but the Covered Market should be first call for fresh, though expensive, specialist food. Take a breath here before an afternoon, or much longer, in the world famous Ashmolean Museum (no charge), the Museum of Modern Art, the Museum of Oxford, the University Botanic Gardens, or...

If in danger of architectural and intellectual overload, you can pause to enjoy the uncertain efforts of novice punters on the Cherwell from Magdalen Bridge, or by taking a table at the Head of the River by the water's edge at Folly Bridge, to watch the manoeuvres of the Salter Brothers steamers preparing to transport another party of happy trippers, just as they have for the last 130 years. Or just sit back and be chauffeured around the city on an open-topped bus, with their hugely well-informed guides.

A PINT AT EACH END

There's probably only one issue that might polarise the *WW* readership more than "which is the best pub in Braunston?", and that's the old pump-out/cassette question. But suffice it to say you'll never go thirsty. The canalside **Boathouse*** is a large Marston's establishment with two-for-one meals. **The Admiral Nelson***, beside the locks on the Grand Union, has had its ups-and-downs in recent years. **The Old Plough**, in the village centre, has good beer, a friendly welcome and warming home-cooked food. **The Wheatsheaf**, on the village green, is a locals' pub with real ale, live music and even a Chinese takeaway. We wouldn't presume to rank one above the other...

As befits a university town, there's a pub around every corner in Oxford – many of them excellent. Gourmets will appreciate the canalside **Anchor*** (by Bridge 240), serving



excellent food from local suppliers yet still preserving the character of a real pub. The newly revived **Duke's Cut** by the old Worcester Street canal basin is a clean and cosy pub with Brakspears ales. And don't miss the tiny **White Horse** on Broad Street, the always packed **Turf Tavern** nearby, the **Jericho Tavern** where Radiohead played their first gig, the **Eagle & Child** (St Giles) beloved of Tolkien and C.S. Lewis...

NAVIGATION NOTES

- ★ The Oxford Canal runs from Hawkesbury Junction, near Coventry, to Oxford. It is informally split into the 'north Oxford' and 'south Oxford' at Braunston. The section from Braunston Turn to Napton Junction is shared with the Grand Union Canal; elsewhere the canal is narrowbeam.
- ★ Extensive marina development makes the canal very busy in the Braunston/Napton area. South of Napton, though still busy, the canal retains its original winding course and offers unhurried cruising. It is almost entirely rural, with pleasant passages through Banbury and into Oxford itself.
- ★ From Banbury to Oxford, lift-bridges slow progress (though many are left in the upright position), and those approaching Oxford can be particularly heavy. Historic practice was to use a 'Banbury stick' to prop the bridge open.

DIMENSIONS

- ★ Length 72ft, beam 7ft, draught 2ft 9in, headroom 6ft

BOATYARDS

	Hire	Repairs	Pump-out	Diesel	Chandlery
Braunston Boats 01788 891079	-	✓	-	-	-
Braunston Marina 01788 891373	-	✓	✓	✓	✓
Union Canal Carriers, Braunston 01788 890784	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Wharf House Narrowboats, Braunston 01788 899041	-	-	-	-	✓
Napton Narrowboats 01926 813644	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Cowroast Marinas, Fenny Compton 01295 770461	-	✓	✓	✓	✓
Sovereign Wharf, Banbury 01295 275657	-	-	✓	✓	-
Tooley's Boatyard, Banbury 01295 272917	day	✓	✓	✓	✓
Walker Services, Aynho 01869 338483	-	✓	✓	✓	✓
Oxfordshire Narrowboats, Lower Heyford 01869 340348	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Kingsground Narrowboats, Enslow 01869 233444	-	✓	✓	✓	-
College Cruisers, Oxford 01865 554343	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

NAVIGATION AUTHORITIES

- ★ **British Waterways (South East):** 01908 302500

WATERWAY SOCIETIES

- ★ **IWA Oxfordshire Branch:** 01494 783453

OTHER MAPS AND GUIDES

- ★ **Nicholsons Guide:** 1 – Grand Union, Oxford and the South-East
- ★ **Ordnance Survey Landranger:** 151 (Stratford-upon-Avon and Warwick) and 164 (Oxford and Chipping Norton)
- ★ **Pearsons Canal Companion:** Oxford and Grand Union
- ★ **GeoProjects:** Map of the Oxford Canal

BEST of the rest

The Bridge, Napton*: Attractive canalside pub with comfortable sofas. Good value food in the large restaurant. Look out for the water buffalo burgers...

The Folly, Napton*: Traditional, slightly eccentric pub at the bottom of the flight with real ale, pub grub and a roaring fire. Don't miss the canal shop next door where you can buy water buffalo steak!

Wharf Inn, Fenny Compton*: Proper canalside pub with well-kept beer; burgers a speciality. Excellent canal shop on the premises, well stocked with provisions and including a handy launderette.

Red Lion, Cropredy: Unspoilt thatched pub, mentioned by Tom Rolt in *Narrow Boat*, with superb steaks and Sunday roast. Hook Norton ales and themed food nights.

Brasenose Arms, Cropredy: Another fine country pub, featured on the cover of Fairport Convention's *Nine*. More upmarket than it once was but still with good beer and live music.

Ye Olde Reindeer, Banbury: Banbury has comparatively few good pubs (especially since the closure of the late lamented Woolpack); the Reindeer, on the pedestrianised Parsons Street, is the best of the lot. Hook Norton ales (of course) and lunchtime food. Cromwell once stayed here and the wood-panelled Globe Room looks little changed.

Great Western Arms, Aynho*: The railway gives this fine Hook Norton house its name and a selection of memorabilia, but it's right by the canal, too. Recently refurbished, it has characterful but affordable food, a blazing fire and a real country feel.

Kizzies, Lower Heyford*: This remarkable canalside bistro/restaurant/greasy spoon, part of the Oxfordshire Narrowboats base, does excellent food during the day and a fine selection of bottled ale and cider. Who could resist a fry-up called 'Jamie Oliver's Nightmare'? Popular with walkers, cyclists and boaters alike.

Rock of Gibraltar, Enslow*: Cheerful pub with the perfect canalside garden and warming, honest food.

Boat Inn, Thrupp*: Classic waterside pub in this tiny canal village with Greene King beers.

Jolly Boatman, Thrupp*: At the southern end of the village. Boater-friendly and more down-to-earth than the Boat, it has greatly improved recently.