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**T**ake Britain's longest wide-beam canal, its dreamiest, most intimate narrow beam waterway and the finest section of its premier river navigation, and what do you have? The Thames Ring, a 244-mile, 173-lock circuit around central southern England and the South Midlands. As rings go it is, in the immortal words of Tina Turner, simply the best. All you need is three to six weeks at your disposal, a boat (or a very stout pair of walking boots!), plus of course your *WW* guide, and you're in business...

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Leaving one of the locks  
at Dudswell on the  
Grand Union Canal.



All photos by Robin Smithett  
unless otherwise credited.

## WW Guide to the **THAMES RING**

DISTANCE **244 MILES** | LOCKS **173** | MAX DIMENSIONS **72FT X 6FT 10IN**

DURATION **3-6 WEEKS CRUISING TIME**

*(According to taste: relaxed holiday or intense boating adventure)*

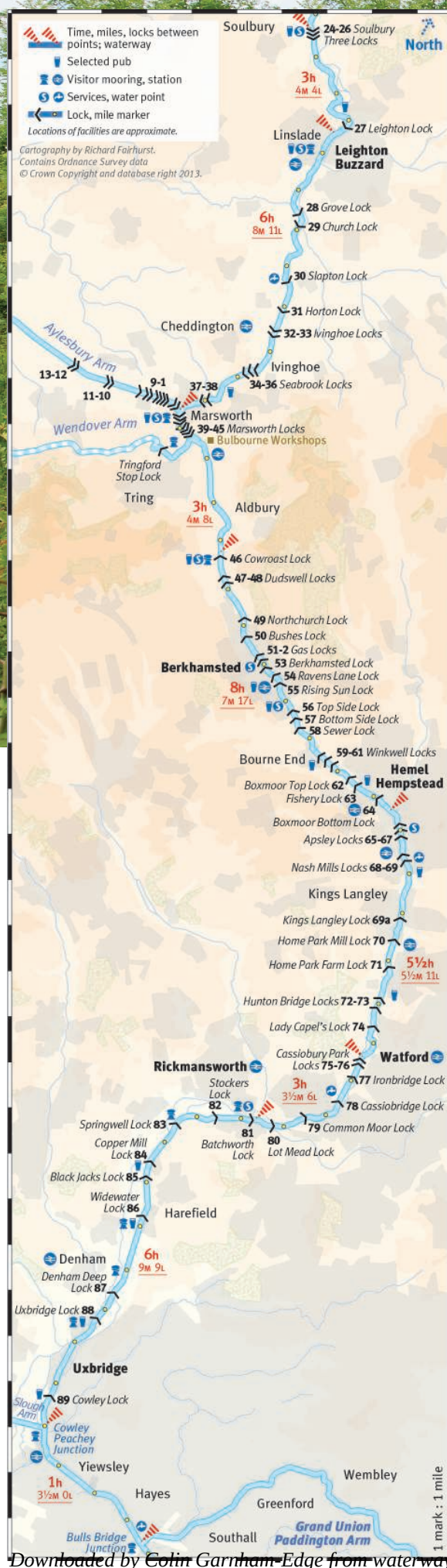
If you only do one major cruising ring in your life, make it this one. **Keith Goss** sets off on a voyage of discovery...

*Downloaded by Colin Garnham-Edge from [waterwaysworld.com](http://waterwaysworld.com)*





# Brentford to Braunston Junction



## Brentford to Braunston Junction

93 miles | 101 locks | 1-2 weeks

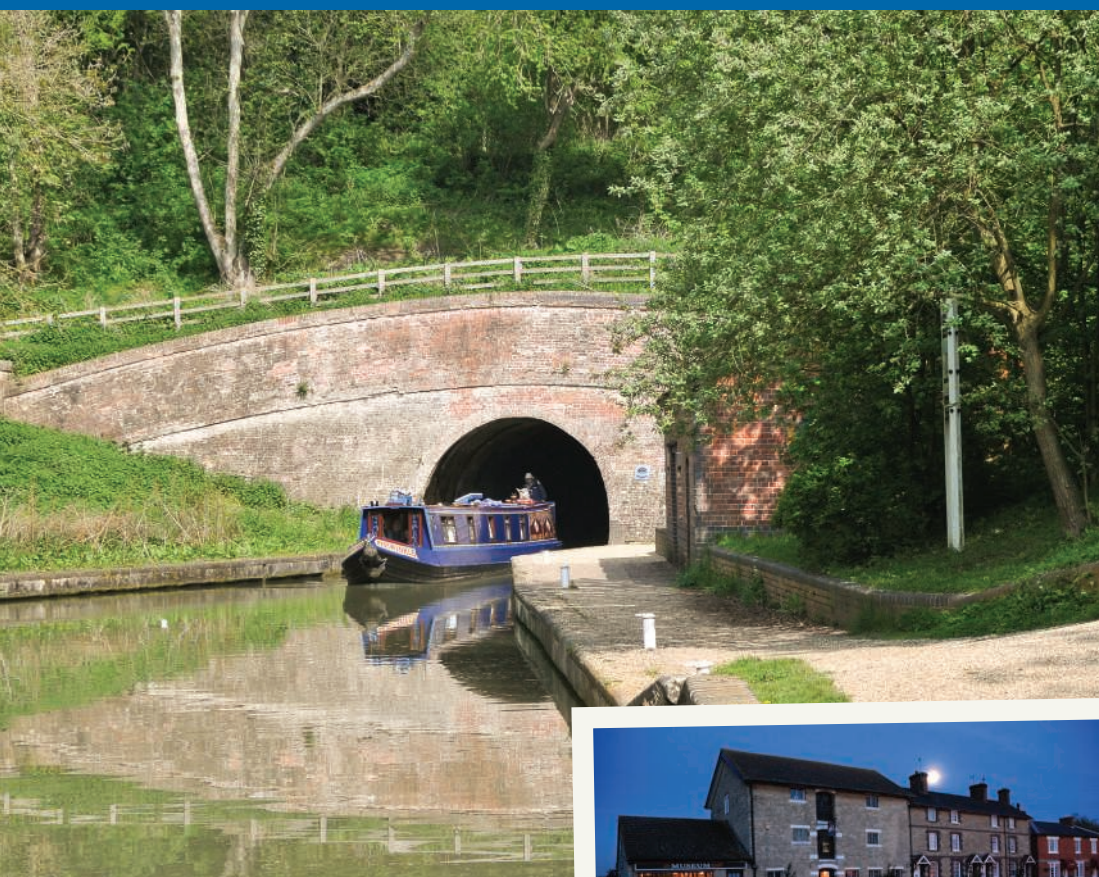
We start at **Brentford**, meeting point of the Grand Union Canal and the River Thames. Perceived by the uninitiated as part of London's sprawl, Brentford (Middlesex) is very much a town in its own right. Vestiges of its past remain in some narrow byways off the Market Place, while its football team still struts its stuff at Griffin Park. The canalside environment is pleasing to the eye, with a pair of Thames Locks and the duplicated Gauging Locks introducing the boater coming off the river to the joys of the GU.

Playing hopscotch with the M4 and A4, the canal heads north-west, traversing a densely urban landscape. Bulls Bridge Junction (with the Paddington Arm) and Cowley Peachey Junction (turn left for Slough) come along in quick succession, offering diversion opportunities for those with time at their disposal. **Uxbridge** has a proud history, being a Parliamentary garrison town during the Civil War, and the command centre for the RAF during the Battle of Britain. Today it has its own university (Brunel) and Piccadilly Line terminus, opened in 1933. It's a good place to drop anchor for a while with adequate public moorings being generally available (not overnight).

Denham Country Park introduces a rural theme – and how welcome it is after the lengthy passage through suburban Middlesex. A series of locks, many overlooked by flooded gravel pits, brings you to Rickmansworth, a typical Home Counties town exuding genteel affluence from every pore. Cassiobury Park, on the outskirts of **Watford**, is one of the loveliest parks in England, and the Grand Union has the good fortune to glide through its wooded slopes. It is, perhaps, what makes life in Watford worth living; Elton John and Watford FC notwithstanding.

A succession of towns punctuates your steady progress through Hertfordshire: Kings Langley, Apsley, Hemel Hempstead and **Berkhamsted**. The latter is by far the nicest and you'll be beguiled into staying for a while, however tight your cruising schedule. There is a wealth of history to absorb, the town's most famous citizens including Geoffrey Chaucer, Thomas Becket and, more recently, Graham Greene. The locks are relentless, as you make your way up to the Tring Summit. Canal arms are like London buses hereabouts: you don't encounter one for ages and then two come along





LEFT: Cruising at Bugbrooke on the Grand Union Canal. ABOVE: Emerging from Blisworth Tunnel. RIGHT: Stoke Bruerne.



## Stoke Bruerne

Perhaps the most famous canal village in the land, Stoke Bruerne sits amid scintillating countryside, perched atop a flight of seven immaculately maintained locks. It is often said that the canal serves as the main street, where the popular Boat Inn faces across the water to a row of red-brick and stone cottages, together with the renowned Canal Museum which is housed in an old corn mill.

Day-trippers flock here in droves at weekends, but Stoke Bruerne holds its head up high and retains its dignity; visit during the week if you can to experience this magical showpiece village at its best.

at once. Both the Aylesbury and (partly navigable) Wendover arms are well worthy of exploration.

The Grand Union is a big chunky brute of a canal. Everything is, appropriately, on a grand scale: locks, bridges, cuttings and embankments. The views are grand too, especially around Pitstone Wharf where the Dunstable Downs loom up on the eastern horizon. Whatever your preconceptions of the GU, you'll have to admit it is unexpectedly pretty at times.

No-one would accuse **Milton Keynes** of being pretty. The canal only skirts its eastern periphery and comparatively few boaters bother to walk or catch a bus into its soulless centre – a curious place, perhaps, for the fledgling Canal & River Trust to set up shop. Crossing the county boundary from Bucks into Northants, you come to one of the Grand Union's brightest stars: **Stoke Bruerne**. Sitting demurely at the top of a flight of seven locks, it is a picture postcard canal village and worthy of a prolonged stay (see above).

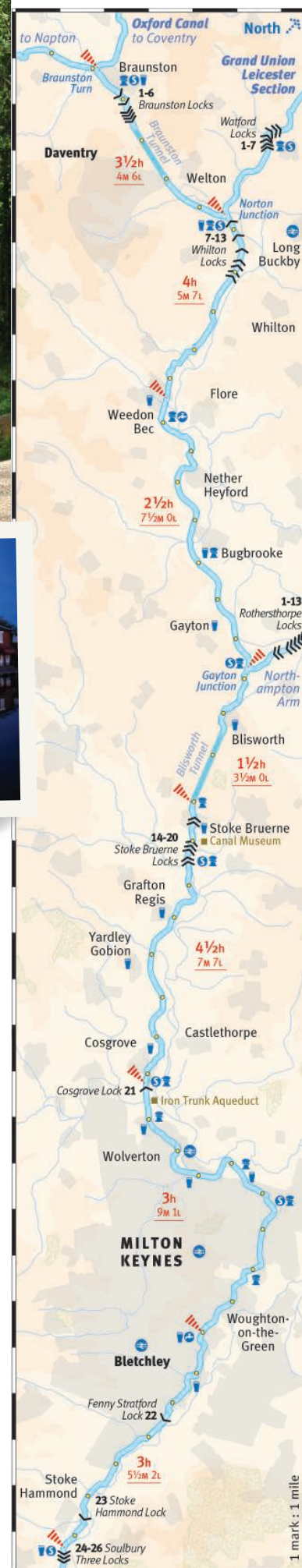
Another highlight follows hot on the heels of Stoke Bruerne – Blisworth Tunnel. At 3,065 yards, it is one of the longest tunnels on the network.

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1970s/early '80s, it is wide enough for narrowboats to pass each other, and it is normally just possible to see one end from the other i.e. there is always light at the end of the tunnel. If only life were like that...

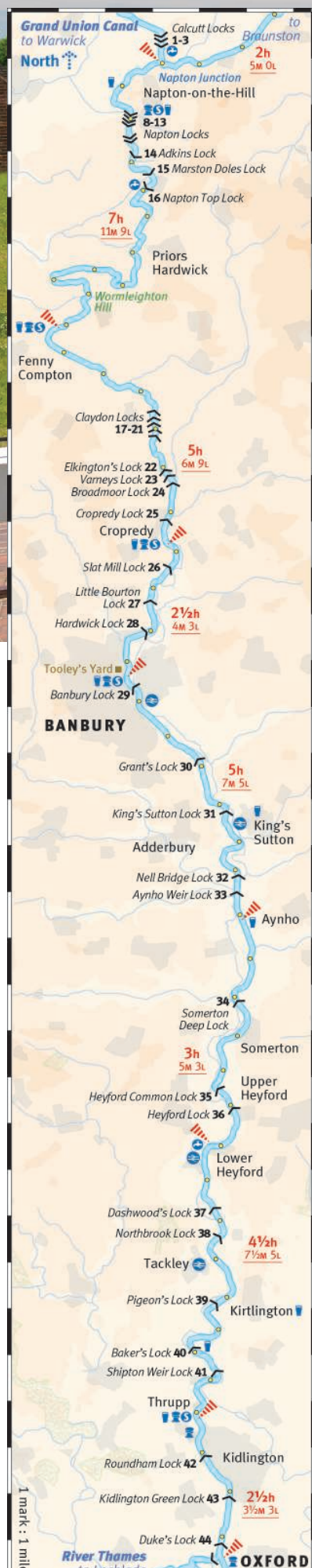
The miles are flying by now, although it may not feel like it, for the locks keep on coming. Beyond Gayton Junction, where the Northampton Arm gives access to the Nene, you are sandwiched between the M1 and West Coast main line railway for the climb up Buckby Locks to Norton Junction. The Leicester Section looks inviting (and we'll be back there in the June WW when we cover the East Midlands Ring) but for now we stick to the GU's Main Line.

Gently rolling hills accompany you as you head west, before diving into Braunston Tunnel (2,042 yards) and descending six locks to arrive at **Braunston**. The village itself sits quiet and aloof on a low ridge, while the canalside settlement hooches, with a hire base and busy marina generating lots of activity. It almost recalls the days of yesteryear, when this was the epicentre of commercial carrying, with such companies as Pickfords, Fellows, Morton & Clayton, Samuel Barlow, Willow Wren and Blue Line all having their headquarters here.





# Braunston Junction to Oxford



## Braunston Junction to Oxford

53 miles | 37 locks | 1 week

The Grand Union and Oxford canals share the 'track' between Braunston and Napton. It's a delectable length of canal, traversing a remote and silent landscape. The waterway is rarely silent, however, this being the heart of 'marina land' where a plethora of large mooring basins has sprung up in recent years. Avoid weekends if you want a quiet life.

**Napton Junction** was known to working boatmen as Wigrams Turn. Here the Oxford Canal meanders off to join the Thames, some 46 miles away. And what glorious miles they are, every last one of them. A classic example of an 18th century contour canal, the Southern Oxford provides a stark contrast with the business-like Grand Union – and it never fails to enchant.

The seven narrow-beam locks of the Napton flight lift the canal up to the winding summit level. For 11 miles the waterway jinks and weaves through the landscape like Lionel Messi tormenting the opposition defence. As the bucolic North Warwickshire crow flies, the distance is a mere five miles – but who's in a hurry? This is canal boating at its best – relax, unwind and savour it to the full!

Claydon's five locks, plus three further isolated chambers, bring you to **Cropredy**, the 'Queen of the Oxford Canal'. All the ingredients are here for the perfect canal village: an old toll office and manager's house, former coal wharf, good visitor moorings north of the lock and two convivial pubs. There's history too (a famous 1644 Civil War



Quiet waters on the Oxford Canal south of the Heyfords.





**LEFT:** Ascending the Claydon flight on the Oxford Canal. **ABOVE:** Working through the locks at Napton. **RIGHT:** Folly Bridge, Oxford.

## Oxford

Unlike Cambridge, Oxford doesn't turn its best face to the river – nor to the canal for that matter. But don't give up on it too easily, for this is a city rich in history and culture.

Start your exploration at the Carfax, the crossroads in the centre of town. The streets west (Queen Street) and north (Cornmarket) of here are uninspiring shopping thoroughfares, but things get more interesting when you walk east along "The High". Lined with colleges, this is the heart of the world-famous university. The side streets to the south (especially Merton Street) are more evocative still, while to the north you'll find the curious Radcliffe Camera and the Bodleian Library. Walking past these will take you to Broad Street, another Oxford highlight.

You should try to visit the Covered Market, situated between Cornmarket and The High, while another must-see lies nearby: the Ashmolean Museum, packed with antiquities, art and archaeology. You can finish your tour by heading north up Walton Street to Jericho, a good place to eat or catch an art-house film.



battle), while most folk music fans will know that Fairport Convention performs here every August at the renowned Cropredy Festival.

Just when you're thinking that the South Oxford must be a waterway hand-crafted in heaven, the M40 noisily gatecrashes the party, criss-crossing the canal three times in just a few miles. And **Banbury** – once cruelly described as a 'boil on the bum' of the Oxford Canal – doesn't overly endear itself either, although its shopping and commercial facilities will doubtless prove useful to many Thames Ring travellers.

Re-affirming its rural credentials, the Oxford Canal journeys through a succession of pretty villages, including Aynho and the two Heyfords: Upper and Lower. The infant River Cherwell comes alongside, playfully escorting you on your southbound journey. Does **Thrupp** seem familiar, even if you've never ventured this way before? Possibly, for it featured in the Inspector Morse tale *The Riddle of the Third Mile*; notwithstanding the acting talents of John Thaw and Kevin

Whateley, the canalside village, with its iconic lift-bridge, was clearly the star of the show.

All too soon, **Oxford's** somewhat bland northern suburbs reach out to engulf the canal. Two routes lead to the Thames. Plan A is to continue past allotments, playing fields and non-descript housing to the heart of the city where, just before the terminus, you descend through Louse Lock into the Sheepwash Channel which disgorges you into the river close to Oxford railway station.

Duke's Cut offers a far more edifying introduction to the Royal River which you join above King's Lock. After so many miles of 'innocuous' canal cruising, you should respect the weirs here and at Godstow, just downstream. And so to Port Meadow where horses, sheep and cows graze contentedly against the magical backdrop of Oxford's dreaming spires. What an introduction to the Thames! Can it get any better than this? Moor below Osney Bridge while you explore the city – and don't rush, this is one of the highlights of the entire Thames Ring.

## PRACTICALITIES

### Can I do the Thames Ring in a wide-beam?

Sadly no, the Oxford Canal section of the cruise is for narrowboats only.

### Can I do it in a 70ft boat?

Yes, without let or hindrance.

### What licences will I need?

Most of the Ring is on Canal & River Trust waters, but you'll also require a licence for the Thames (administered by the Environment Agency), which is covered by the joint CRT/EA Gold Licence.

### Do I need to book?

Only for Thames Locks at Brentford which should be booked in advance on 020 8568 2779 (see Navigating the tidal Thames overleaf).

### What precautions should I take?

Anchor and lifejackets are essential for the Thames, plus a VHF radio or fully charged mobile phone for the Tideway (but see Navigating the tidal Thames). Some form of mechanical trouble cannot be ruled out on an extended cruise such as this, so consider signing up with River Canal Rescue or similar recovery/repair service prior to setting off.

## NAVIGATING THE TIDAL THAMES

Passage between Teddington and Brentford takes approximately one and a quarter hours. Ideally you should pass through Teddington Lock 30 minutes before high water, and certainly no more than 30 minutes after, to utilise the ebb tide. In the opposite direction you should leave Brentford some two hours before high water to travel with the flow. Teddington Lock may be contacted on 020 8940 8723.

Thames Locks at Brentford are open only at specific states of the tide and should be booked 24 hours in advance on 020 8568 2779. The IWA produces a Thames Tideway Guide which costs 50p including postage. Call for a copy on 01494 783453.

You should always wear lifejackets on the tideway. Make sure your anchor is to hand and ideally a life ring too. Port of London Authority regulations stipulate all craft over 45ft must carry a VHF radio and listen on Channel 14, but narrowboats travelling between Teddington and Brentford may use a mobile phone to report to London VTS when setting off and arriving (020 8855 0315).

Two orange lights mark the navigation arch at each bridge, and Richmond Half-Tide Lock is beside the southern bank.





KEITH GOSS



## Oxford to Brentford

98 miles | 35 locks | 1 week

Although it has to concede second best to the glories of the Cam at Cambridge, Oxford's river (historically referred to here as the Isis) is full of interest. Folly Bridge is the focal point. The adjoining Head of the River pub attracts students, tourists and locals alike, but more significantly, this is the home of Salter Bros, famed operators of Thames steamers for over 150 years. A short distance downstream you renew acquaintance with your old friend the Cherwell – beware of novice punters and rowers coming at you from all angles!

So this is the mighty Thames, so revered in poetry and prose down the ages. It provides a culture shock after the shabby chic (sometimes just shabby) of the Canal & River Trust waterways you've become accustomed to on the journey so far. Beautifully-kept locks await you, such as that at Iffley, electrically operated and generally manned, although 'self-service' is available at certain times – look out for the blue signs. **Abingdon** is a welcoming port of call, with free meadowside moorings, good pubs and restaurants, and a splendid little museum lurking within County Hall in the Market Place.

Words can scarcely convey the beauty of the Middle Thames, notably the Sinodun and Dykes Hills at Dorchester, the Goring Gap, graceful Beale Park and the extensive water meadows at Pangbourne. And

there is the succession of genteel towns and villages: Wallingford, Goring, Whitchurch, Henley and Marlow. All will tempt you with their pleasant moorings and beguile you into spending copious amounts of time and money in their sophisticated shops, inns and restaurants. Sophisticated may not be an adjective too often ascribed to **Reading**, but this is perhaps the place to attend to such mundane activities as buying the groceries for the rest of the trip.

The Thames is at its most ostentatious and regal best below Marlow. World-famous tourist attractions – Windsor Castle, Eton College, Hampton Court Palace – line its banks. How can you possibly fit them all into your schedule? Stoke Bruerne, Blisworth Tunnel and Buckby Locks, back on the 'earthy' GU, suddenly seem to belong to a different world. Cliveden Reach is said by many to be the finest on the river. Dense beechwoods rise sheer from the water, crowned by the impressive bulk of Cliveden House, scene of the Profumo scandal (with Christine Keeler) in 1963. It brought down the Conservative government a year later.

Nothing can bring you down though, surrounded by such grace and elegance. At **Teddington Lock** the Thames goes tidal. There are in fact three locks: the Barge Lock (650ft x 24ft 9in), Old or Launch Lock (178ft x 24ft 4in) and Skiff Lock (49ft x 5ft 10in). In your humble





**LEFT:** Delectable Thames backwater at Whitchurch. **ABOVE:** Day's Lock. **RIGHT:** Popular pub at Sandford. **BELOW:** Abingdon's attractive waterfront.



Boulter's Lock.

KEITH GOSS

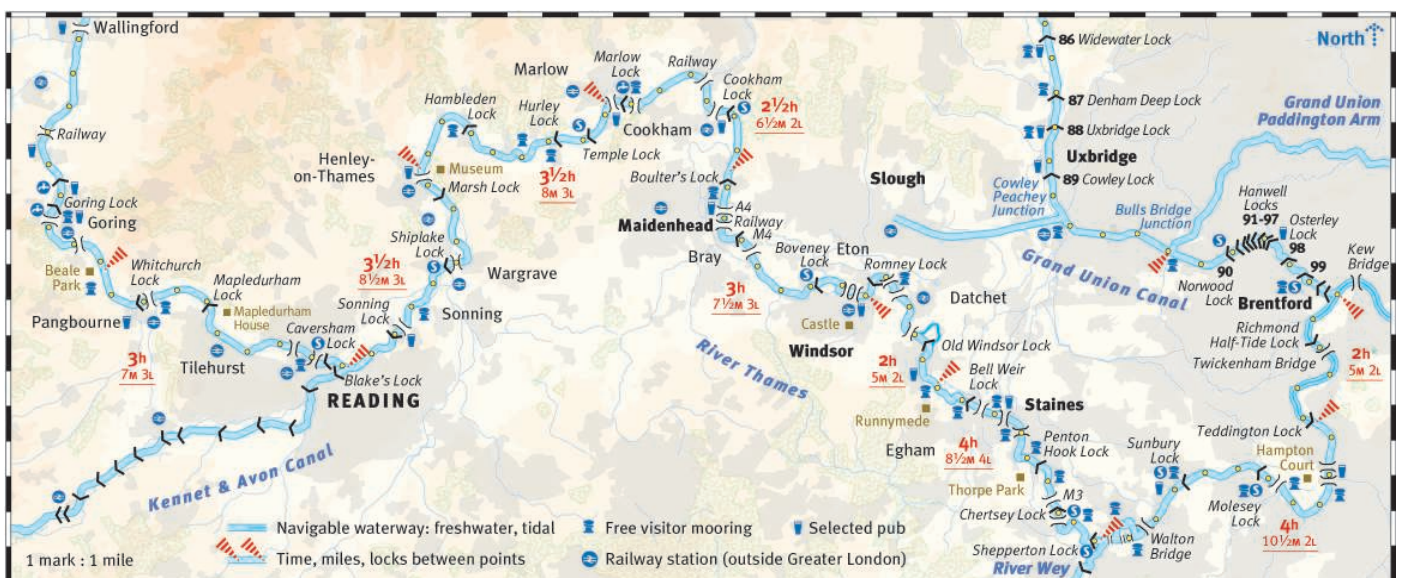


narrowboat or cruiser you will normally use the Old Lock, though if approaching from downstream, an illuminated arrow will show you which to use. The locks are manned 24 hours a day.

A new and exciting chapter of your epic Thames Ring has begun – you're on the Tideway! But there is nothing to fear provided you are well prepared. (See below for essential boating advice.)

With its stately bridge and immaculate waterfront, **Richmond** is quite the loveliest town on the lower river; but probably best appreciated by mooring above Teddington Lock and catching the train. Richmond Half-Tide Lock is under the control of the Port of London Authority and serves to maintain a minimum depth of 5ft 9in in the reach up to Teddington. Two hours after high water, sluices are lowered into the river to create this depth, remaining in place until two hours before the next high water. During this period all craft must use the lock, which, like Teddington, is manned all day, every day.

With a final flourish, you breeze majestically past Kew Gardens and Syon House to arrive at Brentford and the reliable old Grand Union Canal. Phew, what a cruise! Time to relax and savour the achievement, check your engine and plan your next trip. Perhaps just a gentle 'poodle' up the Ashby Canal as a recovery...



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## Navigation Notes

# The Thames Ring

● The Grand Union (especially north of Gayton Junction) and South Oxford canals are among the busiest on the network, with congestion commonplace in the summer months. The Thames, by contrast, is much quieter today than in the 1980s, although it too can be busy with trip boats, canoes and rowing boats in peak summer.

● The speed limit on the non-tidal Thames is 5mph and is regularly enforced.

● On the Thames, yellow or red boards will be displayed at locks under 'strong stream conditions'. Head for a safe mooring when yellow boards are out, and don't venture out at all when red boards are displayed. Consult [www.environment-agency.gov.uk/riverthamesconditions](http://www.environment-agency.gov.uk/riverthamesconditions).

● Thames banks are privately owned and mooring is generally only at designated locations. Most towns and villages offer good moorings (charges may apply), as do many riverside pubs – for patrons only. Meanwhile, towpath mooring is freely available

for mooring on the Grand Union and Oxford canals.

### Navigation Authority

#### Environment Agency:

03708 506506

(website as left)

#### Canal & River Trust:

03030 404040,

([www.canalrivertrust.org.uk](http://www.canalrivertrust.org.uk))

### Dimensions

#### Grand Union Canal,

#### Brentford to Braunston

**Junction:** Length 72ft, beam 12ft 6in, draught 3ft 6in, headroom 7ft 6in

#### Oxford Canal, Braunston

**Junction to Oxford:** Length 72ft, beam 6ft 10in, draught 2ft 9in, headroom 6ft

#### River Thames, Oxford to

**Brentford:** Length 120ft, beam 17ft 3in, draught 4ft, headroom 7ft 6in

### Other Maps & Guides

#### Nicholsons Guides to

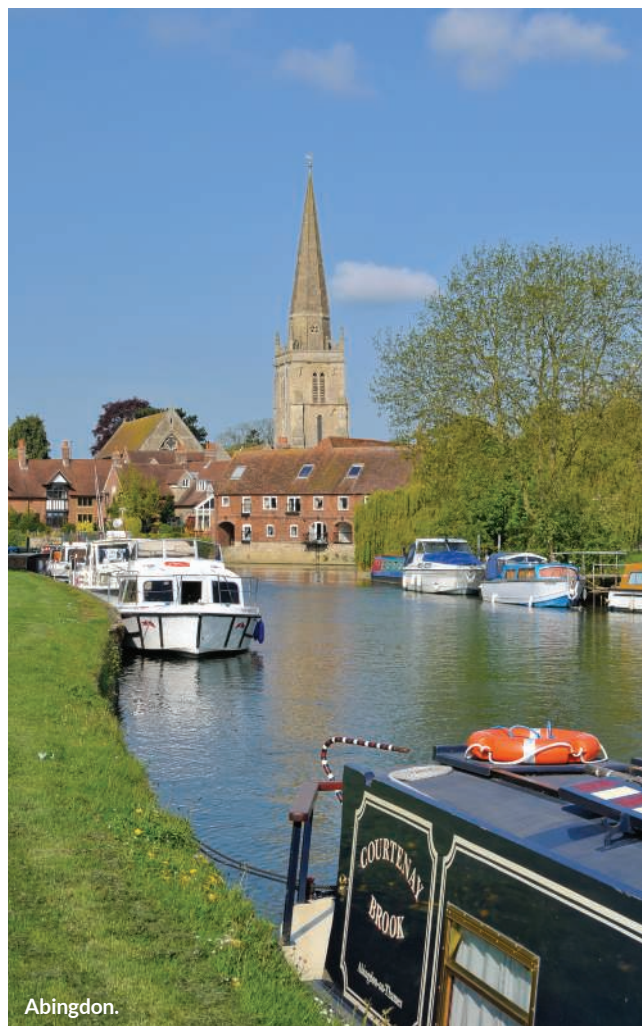
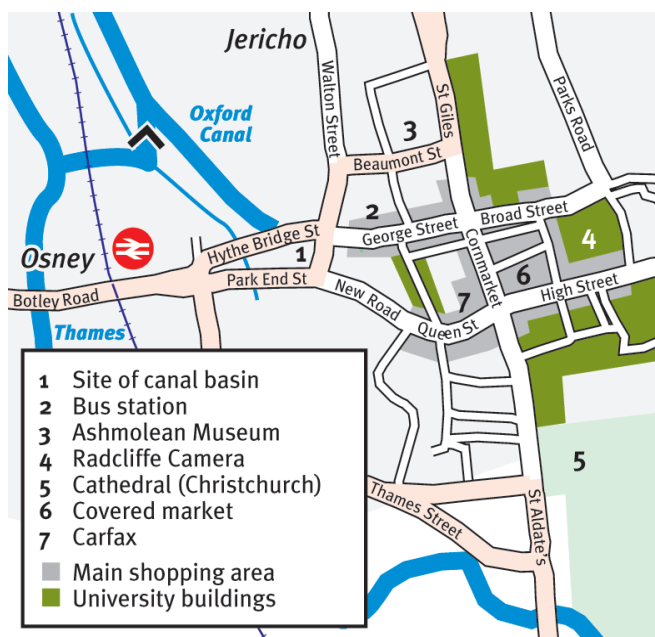
the Waterways: 1 & 7

#### Pearsons Canal Companions:

Oxford & Grand Union & Kennet & Avon, River Thames

**The River Thames Book** by Chris Cove-Smith (Imray)

### Oxford overview



Abingdon.

### WALKING... AND RUNNING

The Thames Ring represents a perfect challenge for experienced long-distance walkers who would probably expect to cover the distance in three weeks with a series of carefully planned stops along the way. Are you perhaps a runner as well as waterway enthusiast? Then why not sign up for the Thames Ring Ultra Race, which takes place on 3rd July this year. It's hard-core stuff though, certainly not for lightweights; the winning time is normally in the region of 75 hours! Best get training if you're interested. ([www.tra-uk.org/thames-ring](http://www.tra-uk.org/thames-ring)).

Lesser mortals will probably happily settle for walking sections of the Thames Path, a National Trail opened in 1996. It follows the river for 184 miles from its source near Kemble in Gloucestershire to the Thames Flood Barrier at Woolwich in London. There are several good guidebooks, including the *Thames Path National Trail Guide* by David Sharp and the *Thames Path Companion* – both available from the National Trails Office ([www.nationaltrail.co.uk](http://www.nationaltrail.co.uk)).