

Tavistock HERITAGE TRAILS

TRAIL 3: The Tavistock Canal



*This easy, level walk explores the history of the countryside and industrial archaeology as it follows a section of the canal through farmland and attractive woodland. The route is close to the water filled canal and is narrow and muddy in places beyond **stop 4**. It may not be suitable for users with pushchairs, wheelchairs and mobility scooters. The walk is approximately 2½ miles each way.*

Tavistock's Commercial Link to the World

The Tavistock Canal was constructed between 1803 and 1817 to transport copper and other mineral ores from mines on West Dartmoor and around Tavistock to the port of Morwellham on the River Tamar. From there, copper ore was shipped to Swansea where there were abundant supplies of the necessary coal and limestone for smelting.

The canal was also used to import raw materials for local industry and agriculture, such as coal, iron, timber and fertilizers, as well as luxury goods including wines, spirits, chinaware and

fabrics. For over 40 years the canal was the commercial artery that linked West Devon's communities, mines, quarries, foundries and farms to the wider world.

The canal builders were led by highly skilled mining engineers who found ingenious solutions to the geographical and technical challenges they faced. John Taylor, who surveyed the canal's 4½ mile route and managed the work until he moved on to new ventures in 1811, became one of the leading industrial pioneers of his age with business interests across the globe.



The walk starts on the wharf by the bridge on Canal Road. You will find other walking instructions in italics like this message.

1. The Wharf

The canal starts near Abbey Bridge where a first wharf was built. A second, on which you are standing, was constructed between 1816 and 1818 by the canal's main promoters, Gill and Company. Near the river they erected a large lime kiln despite opposition from the Duke of Bedford's agent who was concerned

about noxious fumes. It was supplied with coal and limestone by a plateway, an early form of railway. Surviving buildings include the coal warehouse with high doors beside the canal, the slate hung Canal Company office, a granary/warehouse and the Gill and Co. office, which is now the Friends' Meeting House.




Cross the bridge over the canal but be alert for traffic. Immediately after the bridge, turn left and follow the footpath beside the canal. When you reach the footbridge, recross the canal, turn right and continue along the canal past the Meadowlands Leisure Centre and into the park.

TRAIL 3: The Tavistock Canal

2. The Meadows

In the late 19th century the Meadows Pleasure Ground was created on 'Jessops Hay Meadow' where cattle had been grazed. After a 40 year campaign for better public access the Duke of Bedford leased, and in 1911 sold, the land to the Urban District Council which improved paths and seating.

 *Walk along the canal to the end of the park. Just before the gate follow the path left and then right through the pedestrian underpass. Turn right to join the canal towpath. From here the rest of your route runs alongside the canal.*

3. Fitzford

Fitzford was the home of the notoriously violent Fitz family from the 15th to early 17th centuries. The crenelated gatehouse on the other side of the canal was moved here in 1871 after their ruined mansion was demolished. According to legend Lady Mary Howard, Sir John Fitz's daughter, has

In 1933 new trees and shrubs were planted and the bandstand and shelters erected. Before World War One the Council also converted the former Frog Meadow on the other side of the canal into the Recreation Ground with a pavilion and facilities for bowling, croquet and tennis.

been doomed since the 17th century to ride every night in a ghostly carriage to Okehampton Castle as punishment for poisoning her husbands. The statue of Sir Francis Drake by the Austrian sculptor Joseph Edgar Boehm was paid for by the Duke of Bedford and erected in 1883.

4. Fitzford Cottages and Church

The Fitzford cottages, which have a date stone from 1862, were among the 300 workers' dwellings built for the 7th and 8th Dukes of Bedford. The church was designed by Henry Clutton and reflected the Victorian fashion for Italian style architecture. When it opened in 1867 local mines were exhausted or closing

due to foreign competition. Many of the families the church was intended to serve emigrated to new mining districts in Australia, North America and South Africa. The church closed in 1914. After a second unsuccessful attempt to create a viable congregation, the Anglican Church sold the building to the Roman Catholic Church in 1952.

5. Crowndale Wood

The mainly broadleaf woodland was probably planted by the Bedford estate in the mid to late 19th century for aesthetic reasons. Below the towpath you can see the waste tips which were created when the canal was cut into the hillside and by quarrying. The canal was designed to drop one foot per mile creating a current which

speeded up the journey from Tavistock to Morwellham. The world's first wrought iron boats were launched on the canal on Easter Monday 1811. Carrying up to 8 tons, they were linked together in threes and pulled by one or two horses with a steersman in each boat.

6. Crowndale Farm

Crowndale is recorded as a hamlet with corn mill in the 13th century. Sir Francis Drake was born here in about 1540. Crowndale is one of many 19th century model farms for which the Bedford estate was nationally renowned. Efficiency was maximised by grouping buildings around a courtyard at the centre of which was a dung pit.

The long stable block runs along the canal towpath. Machinery in the threshing barn beyond it was driven by a waterwheel. A complex network of leats carried water from the canal to power up to 50 waterwheels on farms and mines during the canal's lifetime.

7. Wheal Crowndale

Beyond the farm on both sides of the canal are the overgrown remains of the early 19th century Wheal Crowndale. Wheal is a local word for mine. John Taylor invented an ore crushing machine here called the 'Cornish Rolls' which was mass produced for mines across the world. Crowndale produced mainly copper. Note the

blue staining under the bridge over the canal. Records also show that a smelting house processed tin from this and other local mines. One of the founding aims of the Canal Company was to prospect and exploit mineral deposits along the route.

8. Shillamill

Look out for the cast iron trough aqueduct which has carried the canal since 1839. It was manufactured by Gill and Co at their Tavistock Iron Works which also produced the boats. The path below the canal was once the road to Bere Alston. The viaduct over the Lumburn valley was built in 1889 for the London and South Western

Railway which ran to London from Plymouth via Tavistock, Lydford and Exeter. On the opposite side of the valley the canal runs through a 1½ mile tunnel under Morwell Down. Beyond the tunnel it was connected to the Morwellham quays by an inclined railway.

TRAIL 3: The Tavistock Canal

9. Lumburn

The lock, which has replica timberwork, had a gate at each end. As the water level does not fall significantly, it may have been required to correct a surveying error or to control the flow because the engineers feared leakage from the aqueduct ahead. The aqueduct is 60 feet above the Lumburn valley on an embankment. At the far

end of the aqueduct there is a footbridge over the canal. The track on the far side follows the line of the 2 mile branch canal to the Mill Hill slate quarries. Known as the Collateral Cut, it opened in 1819 but was later replaced by a railway because the water supply was unreliable.

A Changing Landscape...

When the Tavistock Canal Company was launched in 1803 copper prices were high due to the Napoleonic war. Shareholders anticipated substantial profits from tolls and the exploitation of mineral reserves. However, the cost of building rose from an estimated £40,000 to around £68,000, and by the time the canal opened prices had slumped in a peacetime depression.

While the annual tonnage of cargoes reached five figures every year except one between 1819 and 1865, profits were always modest. By the late

1860s the decline of mining and competition from the Great Western Railway, which had reached Tavistock in 1859, made the canal unprofitable and maintenance was increasingly neglected. Traffic stopped by the end of the decade and the canal officially closed in 1873 when it was transferred to the Bedford estate. Since 1933 water from the canal has powered a hydro-electric station at Morwellham that continues to supply the national grid.



The walk ends at the locked gate across the towpath. Return to Tavistock by the way you came.

Acknowledgement

For a comprehensive study of the canal which has informed the text for this walk see Robert Waterhouse, *The Tavistock Canal: Its History and Archaeology* (Trevithick Society, 2017).