1 A Brief History

A journey is always more rewarding if you know something of the history of the places you are to visit. For those who want an exhaustive history of the canal, Kenneth Clew's book, *The Kennet & Avon Canal*, first published in 1968, and revised in 1973, remains the most thorough work. It is not, however, an easy read. A much more approachable history, by Warren Berry, Curator of the Kennet & Avon Canal Trust Museum in Devizes, was published in 2009, bringing the story up to date. This chapter in no way sets out to compete with either of those books. It is intended as a brief history to give you a broad picture of what you will be looking at as you travel along the canal. More detailed history will be given at the relevant points in later chapters.

The idea of a waterway linking Bristol with London had been around for a very long time. Anyone wishing to ship goods across the country had either to entrust their merchandise to jolting carts or pack animals on the deplorable roads or risk a dangerous journey around Land's End and up the English Channel. In addition to storms, shipwrecks and other maritime dangers, England was frequently at war with its European neighbours, who regarded loaded merchant ships as legitimate prizes. Even those who did not envisage a cross-country route were demanding that the Bristol Avon be made navigable as far upstream as possible.

For a variety of reasons, all these schemes came to nothing. About 1626, Henry Briggs of Merton College, Oxford pointed out that the headwaters of the Avon and the Thames were only about three miles apart near Malmesbury in Wiltshire. It would not take much effort to unite them. Briggs' early death and the advent of the Civil War silenced these ideas for a while, but a friend of Briggs called Francis Mathew revived the scheme. After the restoration of the monarchy in 1660, several attempts were made to push this and similar ideas through parliament, but all to no avail.

Similar fates befell the various schemes to make the Avon navigable as far as Bath, despite a plaintive plea from Bath Corporation that it was needed because road transport from Bristol was difficult and expensive 'by reason of rockie and mountaynous waies'. The opposition to all these schemes was just too strong.

Above: The Lower Bristol Road, Bath about 1800, showing pack animals, their saddles heaped high with goods, struggling along the rutted road, while a coach comes the other way. On the left, the sail of a boat on the Avon Navigation can be seen in the distance.

Opposite: The restoration of the canal in the late 1970s and 1980s revived scenes that would have familiar to the navigators who built it almost two centuries earlier. This photograph was taken near Avoncliff in December 1976.

It may seem odd that there was opposition to these plans, given that Wiltshire and Berkshire had no coal, whereas Gloucestershire and Somerset were well-supplied with it. Bristol was also an important port where highly desirable goods were imported into the country. But that was part of the problem. There were too many powerful people with vested interests in maintaining the status quo, especially landowners and farmers. The last thing they wanted was to see cheap imported goods driving down prices. Even mine owners in the Somerset coalfield were against it, fearing the import of Shropshire coal, apparently lacking the vision to see that it could be used to export their coal to the neighbouring coal-starved counties.

Another source of opposition was mill-owners. There were many kinds of mill on the Avon – some for grinding corn, others, known locally as tucking mills, for fulling cloth. The millers certainly had no wish to see the river made navigable, in case it reduced the flow to their waterwheels. So, although an act was passed in 1712 to make the Avon navigable as far as Bath, nothing happened. Goods continued to be bumped along in lumbering carts or on the backs of pack animals.

It was a group of people in Reading who seized the initiative. It was not, as it turned out, a popular move with many in Reading. Reading's history as an inland port begins with the monks of Reading Abbey. They created wharfs on the River Kennet and its tributary, the Holy Brook. Even after the dissolution of the monasteries in 1539, Reading continued to be a bustling, industrial town. After the wool trade – its first main source of income – declined, other industries took its place. Pin, wire and nail making were all established by the early seventeenth century. Gun Street is named after the gunsmiths. One of the most important industries was brick and tile making and there was also a large corn market. The last thing many traders in Reading wanted was change.

But others had been casting envious eyes on Reading's prosperity. Newbury's townsfolk, further upstream on the Kennet, saw no reason why some of this wealth should not come to them, and towns as far afield as Trowbridge and Bradford on Avon in Wiltshire supported them. By 1715, an Act of Parliament had been passed to allow the Kennet to be made navigable, despite the protests of Reading. However, three years passed, and the merchants of Reading must have been about to breathe a sigh of relief. The first engineers were incompetent, and hardly anything had been achieved. Work had to be completed by 1721 and time was running out.

The company decided to call in John Hore of Newbury; they also managed to get a two-year extension to the deadline. Hore realised the easiest way was to canalise the most meandering sections of the river; eventually, of the 18½ miles of the navigation, only seven were actually along

This early photograph of a turf-sided lock shows how they appeared by the mid-nineteenth century, after they were widened to take Newbury barges. Today only Garston Lock, of which this may be a picture, gives any idea of what it was like to use such a lock.

the river. Locks were also required, and, with no water supply problems to worry about, Hore designed these with timber supports below the water and turf sides above, This meant that they were cheaper, and quicker to construct. The navigation opened within the time limit set for it.

Reading was outraged. Barge-owners received death threats, boats and their crews were pelted with mud, and at one point, in 1720, while work was still in progress, a mob, led by Robert Blake, Mayor of Reading, set out to destroy what had been achieved so far. Eventually, however, Reading realised that, far from robbing it of business, the navigation attracted more trade. Yet for a long time the Kennet Navigation did not flourish as it should. Matters improved when Lady Forbes, widow of one of the early proprietors, with a shrewd business brain, took a keen interest in the navigation. But its fortunes still fluctuated until the Page family took an active hand in its management from about 1760 onwards.

It is, perhaps, surprising that Bath lagged behind in making the River Avon navigable, but, as we have seen, there were many powerful voices raised against it. Eventually, however, they were outgunned when a consortium including the Duke of Beaufort, John Hobbs of Bristol, a wealthy deal merchant, and Ralph Allen took on the enterprise in 1724.

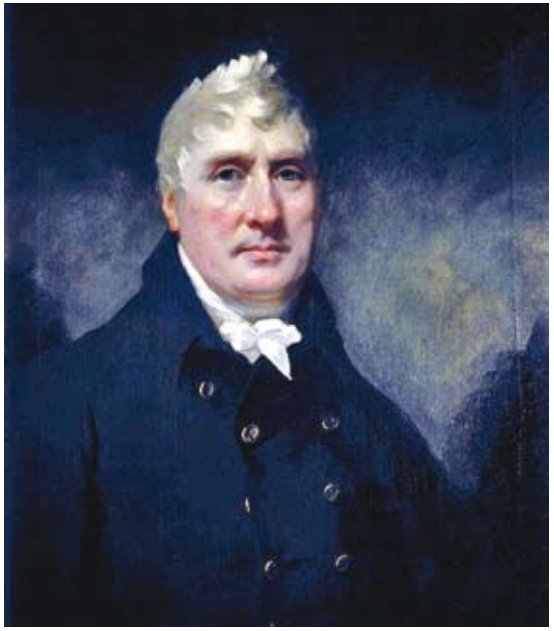
Allen is often thought of as a benign, kindly character, thanks partly to being associated with Fielding's Squire Allworthy in *Tom Jones*. It was an image that he was probably happy to foster. Tigers like people to think they are pussy-cats – it puts those who deal with them off their guard. And in reality Allen was a tiger, a ruthless operator, who, with the help of the architect John Wood, broke the power of the stonemasons in Bath, and who manipulated the political activities of Bath Corporation for years.

With men like these on board, the result was inevitable – in December 1727 the first cargoes arrived in Bath. The speed and economy with which the Avon Navigation had been built was partly due to the fact there was no horse-towing path – boats were man-hauled. It was not all plain sailing – in 1738, Saltford Lock was blown up and the culprits were widely thought to have been Somerset coal miners, since a threatening letter promised more such attacks if transporting coal by water did not cease. Eventually, matters settled down. The navigation, in fact, proved beneficial to the local collieries and a tramway was built from the South Gloucestershire coalfields to a wharf on the River Avon.

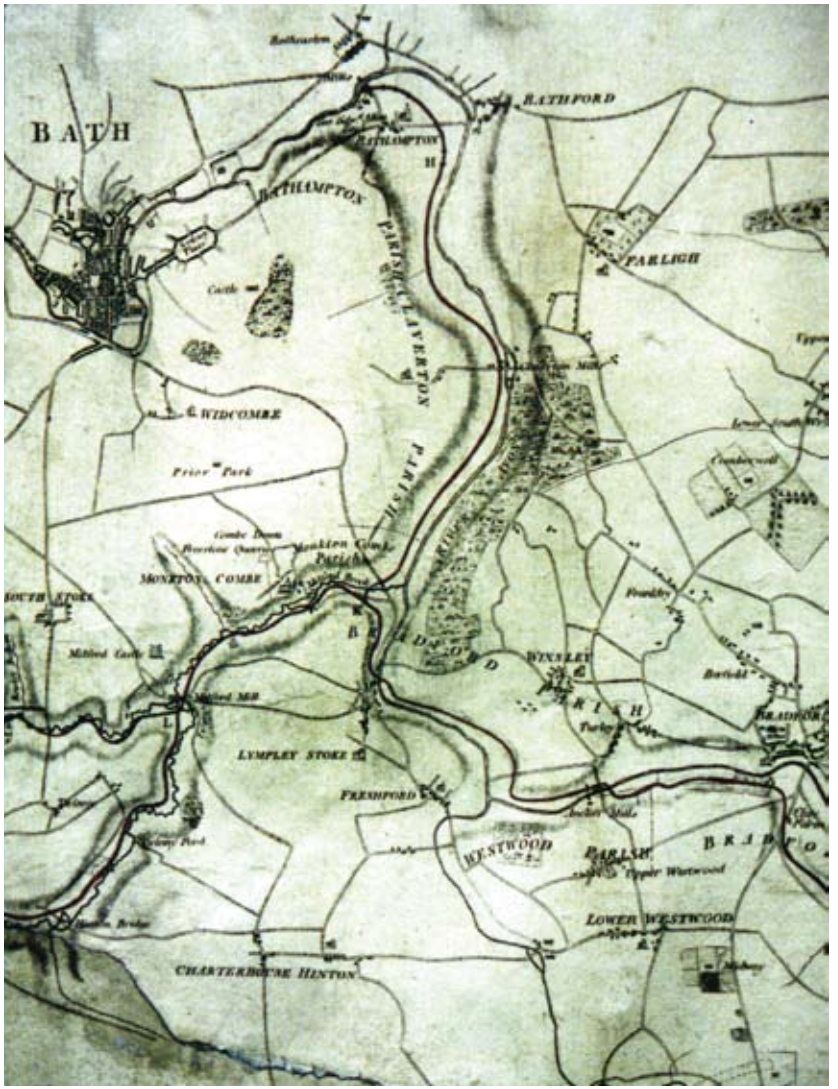
The Avon Navigation officially terminated upstream at the weir below Pulteney Bridge in Bath. Most boats, however, moored downstream of the Old Bridge, seen here in the late eighteenth century. A variety of craft can be seen, with goods stacked up on Broad Quay on the left.

A campaign for a Western Canal, using one or both of the navigations, began in 1788, when a group led by Charles Dundas, who lived at Kintbury, mooted the idea at a series of meetings. The 29-year old John Rennie was appointed engineer – a surprising choice, since at that time he had little experience of canals, but one that would link his name forever with this form of transport.

Over the next few years there were various proposals, but eventually, in April 1794, the Kennet & Avon Canal Act received Royal Assent. Four canals were proposed to link with it. Two – the Somersetshire Coal Canal and the Wilts & Berks Canal – were built, while one – the Dorset & Somerset Canal – was begun but not completed. Progress was slow and costs rose constantly. Rennie is often admired for his use of Bath stone, most notably in his aqueducts. In fact he had no wish to use it, preferring the more reliable brick, but many of the landowners were quarry-owners too, and this was to sweeten them and encourage them



Portrait of John Rennie, painted by Sir Henry Raeburn in 1810.



This map shows the original route planned into Bath, joining the River Avon at Bathampton. The Somersetshire Coal Canal, with its two branches – to Timsbury and Radstock – can be seen branching off the Kennet & Avon north of Limpley Stoke.

The planned Bath and Bristol canal, whose route through Bath is shown on this plan, was originally going to avoid Sydney Gardens. Instead of continuing the canal to Bristol, however, a cut down to the Avon at Widcombe – sketched in on this plan – was adopted.

This plan shows the route finally adopted at Sydney Gardens, with the 'New Canal' cutting through the north-east end.

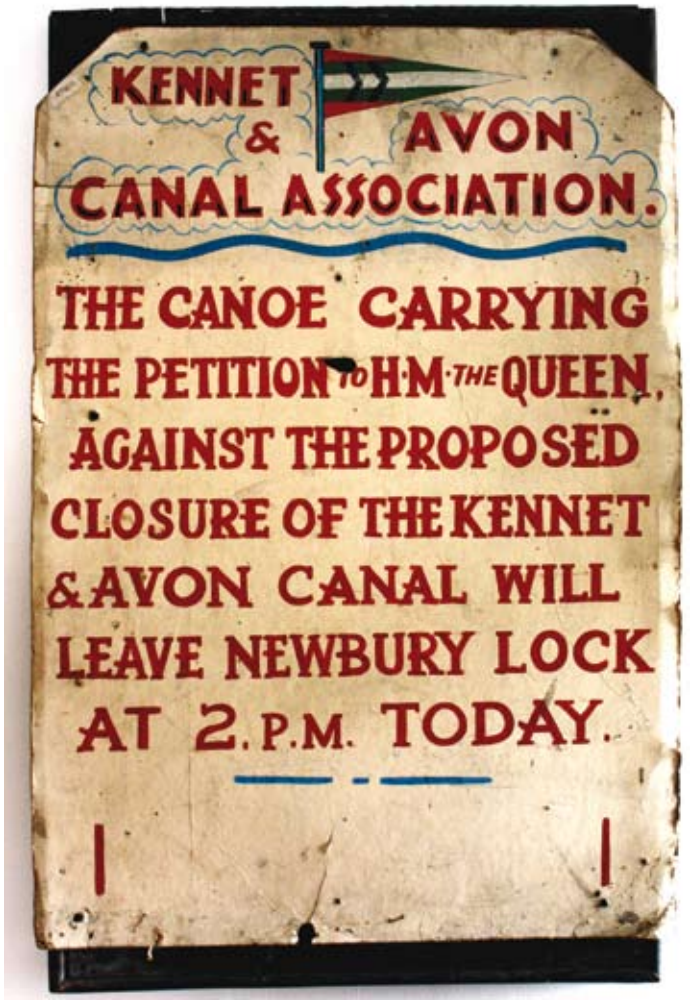
to be customers when the canal opened. Unfortunately, the stone was often of poor quality, and had to be replaced in locks, bridges and aqueducts. The canal bed also leaked and had to be relined. The cost of fencing rose. Mills had to be purchased to avoid annual charges for water rights. Costs of material and labour rose due to inflation caused by the Napoleonic Wars.

The middle section of the canal needed more lining than expected. Debts were outstanding to the Company. The geology caused problems in the Limpley Stoke Valley, seven acres subsiding as work began at Bradford on Avon. The first plan had been for the canal to join the River Avon at Bathampton, but then a Bath to Bristol Canal was proposed, avoiding the twists and turns of the Avon Navigation. Work proceeded, thus incurring expense at Bath when the proprietors of Sydney Gardens demanded 2,000 guineas to allow the canal through. They also demanded ornamental bridges 'in the manner of the Chinese'. It must have been very galling for the Canal Company to see the canal subsequently advertised as an attraction.

Nevertheless, the eastern and western ends slowly grew longer and began to look as though they might finally meet. As each section opened, it came into use so that when work began on the final obstacle, the great flight of locks at Caen Hill, a tramway was built down the towpath to enable goods to travel along the canal while the locks and their accompanying side-pounds were carved out of the hillside. The work was finally completed in December 1810, and on the 28th of that month a barge loaded with freestone ascended the flight. There were no celebrations. It had all taken so long and cost so much more than first thought. Before work had even started the projected cost rose by over £100,000 to £336,365, but the final cost was about £1 million.

Once open, however, it proved successful, paying reasonable dividends (about 2½ to 3%) to shareholders. Goods carried on it included building materials of various kinds, ashes (used for mortar), metals such as iron, tin, copper and brass, and foodstuffs such as fruit, sugar, tea, and biscuits. On one occasion a French packet carrying linen drapery came up from London, and travelled down the canal to Bristol. The most important cargo was coal, and it was undoubtedly the owners of the Somerset coalfields who were the most important customers of the Kennet & Avon. Without the short Somersetshire Coal Canal, which, despite its length, was one of the most successful canals on the entire waterway system, the K&A would have struggled. On the other hand, it was thanks to the canal that the coalfields flourished, with new markets open to them. For a time the waterways revolutionised transport. By and large, the canals carried goods rather than visitors, but passengers were not neglected. Craft such as the Scotch Boat, which ran from Bath to Bradford on Avon, provided a smooth, regular and surprisingly quick service. A string band was provided as entertainment.

However, it was not long before the writing was on the wall. Railways were evolving from the simple, horse-drawn tramways of the past into a more efficient and faster form of transport than had ever been seen before. At first, the canal companies dismissed the threat of the steam-powered locomotives that hauled trains on the new rail-roads. In 1824 a prospectus was published proposing a railway between London and Bristol, and Mr. Blackwell, the K&A Canal Company's engineer, was sent north 'to see the operation of several Rail Roads and Locomotive Engines now in work and to report his opinion and observations thereon'. He happily stated that 'there are limits to their powers, which are nearly approached.'



A poster printed by the K&A Trust in 1956 to advertise the departure of the canoe carrying the petition.

Less than twenty years later, the GWR line between Bristol and London opened. As the railway network spread, many canals were bought up by railway companies and converted to trackbeds – they had the advantage of being level. Locally, this was the case in 1903, when the GWR acquired the Somersetshire Coal Canal and turned it into the Camerton & Limpley Stoke Railway. However, although the GWR purchased the K&A in 1852, it remained a canal. The canal company had battled against the railway, undercutting its charges to the point where trade actually began to pick up. Unfortunately, due to the drastic reduction in tolls, income continued to drop, and eventually the K&ACC was forced to sell out to the GWR. It stipulated in the contract, however, that the railway company should maintain the canal and keep it navigable. Rather surprisingly the directors agreed to this, but after a time it became apparent that the intention was that the canal should quietly wither away. Traffic was not encouraged, and ice-breaking was stopped just before the winter of 1857, resulting in boats being frozen in. Tolls rose, and even pleasure boats were discouraged.

Eventually some traders, notably the Gerrish family, began to take the GWR to court, with some success, and two Acts of Parliament, in 1873 and 1888, stressed that where railway companies owned canals, it was in the public interest that they should maintain them. With the nationalisation of the railways, further efforts were made to close the canal, but it simply would not die. Pressure groups like the K&A Trust were formed, sometimes using surprising methods of protest. In January 1956, a petition carrying 20,000 signatures was addressed to the queen. It left Bristol on a cutter called *Foam* and then transferred to a canoe, which was paddled from Bath to Thames Ditton. Here, the canoe and its contents were transferred to a Maid

Appealing for volunteers: May 1971.

Line cruiser and taken to Westminster, where the Minister for Transport received it on behalf of Her Majesty.

At last, the establishment's opposition to saving the canal cracked and work began. After many years of effort, negotiations with councils, quangos, unions and other interested parties, the Kennet & Avon Trust's dream came true on 8th August 1990, when the Queen re-opened the canal. In 1994, a cargo of Bath stone once again travelled down the K&A on a narrowboat, 200 years after the whole project had begun.

2 Getting There: A Walkers', Cyclists' and Boaters' Guide

It might surprise some people to think that you need a guide to explore a canal. The obvious rule would seem to be: start at one end, keep going until you reach the other end, then stop. Sadly, life isn't as simple as that. Even walkers need to be alert to make sure that they are on the towpath and not a path made by anglers, which may end up being a dead end in the middle of a field. Boaters – as all experienced boaters know – need to check for stoppages, availability of moorings, restrictions on lock usage and so on. So here are a few tips for getting the best out of the canal.

You will notice this guide is not for motorists. That is because using your car is the least efficient way of visiting the Kennet & Avon. Parking is often restricted, and you may end up walking quite a distance before you even get to the canal. However, if you want to explore short sections, then Bradford on Avon, Devizes, and Hungerford all have large car parks close to the canal. All offer walks of variety, with scenic and historic points of interest, and all three towns are interesting to explore in their own right. There is also parking in Newbury at the old wharf, but this is expensive if you are planning to walk all day. As we will see, the canal is particularly well served by public transport, and if you want to explore short sections, then bus or rail is advised. See below, in the walkers' section, for details of this. There are, of course, attractions along the canal, such as Crofton Pumping Station, and many pubs, which have their own parking.

The first tip for all users is to visit a website called *www.waterscape.com*. It is run by British Waterways, and is invaluable for anyone wanting to explore Britain's waterways. It has descriptions of circular walks, maps, canal and towpath closures. For boaters, it lists useful information such as chandleries, marinas, moorings, and where you can pump out and take on water. It can, however, be somewhat optimistic – some of the pubs and restaurants that it lists along the K&A, for example, are a considerable distance from the canal.

Cyclists

Waterscape is very enthusiastic about cyclists using the Kennet & Avon towpath, but cycling is not the ideal way to discover the canal. At *www.waterscape.com/canals-and-rivers/kennet-and-avon-canal/cycling* you can download the map of the National Cycle Route. Although the route sticks fairly closely to the waterway, and the climbs are mainly gentle, a quick inspection shows quite long sections where the cycle route leaves the canal, as the towpath is described as unsuitable. If you have a mountain bike, then you would be able to press on, but most cyclists prefer to stick to the National Route, as the going can be difficult where the

path goes through fields. This means that cyclists miss some picturesque parts of the canal. The same web page also offers some short cycle rides, with details of public transport – for more details of rail transport, see the walkers' section, below.

Cyclists should watch out for walkers – please ring your bell if you are approaching from behind, and remember many people may have small children and dogs with them. Where the path is wide and in good condition, there may also be wheelchair users – in fact, with the advent of trail wheelchairs, you may even come across them where you might not be expecting them. Anglers frequently leave gear on the towpath, or may lift their rods over the path. Most mooring ropes are clear of the towpath, but again, there may be clutter on the path as you pass boats where people are living – and many people now live along the canal. So you need to have your wits about you.

On some occasions you may have to get off and walk. Near Woolhampton there is a stretch of the path which is in private hands, and the owners insist that cyclists dismount. Many of the bridges are low, and you should get off to go under them. Not only will this save you from bumping your head, but the approaches along the path to nearly all the stone or brick-built bridges are such that pedestrians coming the other way do not see you until the last moment. If you swoop under a bridge without giving any warning, you may meet walkers coming the other way at a point where your only option to avoid a collision will be to go into the canal.

Between Kintbury and Newbury, you may come across the Kennet Horse Boat Company's barge, *Kennet Valley*. The horses which pull this are gentle and friendly, but they are quite large and take up a lot of path. At least stop to let them go by. And, of course, they do leave their calling cards on the towpath, so if you see the horse, you know what else to watch out for.

Finally, an unwanted hazard is motorcyclists. They are not supposed to be on the towpath – a fact of which they are well aware – but particularly near Burghfield there are occasionally some young men who find it entertaining to ride up and down the path at high speed. This is bad enough for walkers, but at least walkers can jump out of the way. Cyclists are more at risk, so listen out for the sound of trail bikes and be aware that they may be coming in your direction.

Wheelchair Users

The Waterscape website is sadly lacking in information for wheelchair users, which is a pity as some sections of the towpath are ideal for wheelchairs. The National Cycle Route map can offer some guidance, however. Where the route leaves the canal, then the going for wheelchairs will also be difficult, and the map gives possible routes round obstructions.

There are some additional hazards. At Bath, for example, where you might expect wheelchair-friendly access, the road crossing at Bathwick Hill presents you with steps on one side,

and a steep ramp with pitched setts – giving a very bumpy ride – on the other. The only way round this, if heading east, is to avoid the canal from Widcombe and gain access from Beckford Road, north of Sydney Gardens. After that, you are on the wide section which runs all the way to Devizes. Your only hazards then are the long climb at Caen Hill, some steep climbs to roving bridges – where the towpath crosses from one side to the other – and narrow sections of the path under bridges, which take the chair's wheels worryingly close to the edge.

Another wide section runs from Reading to Marsh Benham, including a pleasant canalside walk through Newbury. These two wide sections were developed with help from Sustrans for cyclists, and the path is fairly even, giving a comfortable ride. Some of the footbridges, however, although ramped, are quite long and steep. You need to check your access points. Most bridges carrying footpaths and roads give pedestrian access, but many are unsuitable for wheelchairs, and in some cases, even for pushchairs with small children. For standard wheelchairs, other sections are far more problematic, with the path going through fields or narrowing to the width of a normal footpath. For those with trail wheelchairs, who are determined to see as much of the canal as possible, perhaps the best course of action is to visit the Kennet & Avon Canal Trust website, *www.katrust.org*, which gives contact details for the seven local branches which can give detailed advice on accessibility.

Boaters

Seeing the K&A from a boat is perhaps the most enjoyable way of travelling, and, if you've never done it before, will bring you closer to understanding the way of life along the canal. As the canal can take boats up to 12 feet (3.7m) wide (14 feet (4.3m) between Reading and Newbury), you will find barges as well as narrowboats, including some picturesque Dutch barges.

There are many ways of enjoying a waterborne journey on the canal. There are several trip boats, some run by the Kennet & Avon Canal Trust and others by commercial marinas. The Kennet Horse Boat Company says that you can 'choose between the slow meandering of the motor barge and the sedate drifting of the horse-drawn barge'. If you have never travelled on a horse-drawn boat, this is an experience not to be missed. The gentle footfall of the horse along the path and the ripple of the water beneath the bow are the only sounds to be heard, and make us realise how noisy our modern world is by comparison with the past.

This and other companies offer day boat hire for those wishing to get the feel of doing it themselves on the canal before embarking on a full holiday. However, remember there is a speed limit of 4mph on the canal– your hirer will not thank you if he is bombarded with irate phone calls from anglers and other boaters if you ignore the limit.

Canoeing is another option, but unless you are a member of the BCU you will need a licence (as all boat owners do). There are many canoe clubs along the canal,

and canoes can be hired from the Bath & Dundas Canal Company, at Brassknocker Basin.

Those planning a trip in a boat will find a guide to the canal on the Kennet & Avon pages of the Waterscape website, but, although it is smartly presented, there is a more detailed boaters' guide on the same website, which is regularly updated. It has information on everything you need to know, from services and facilities, stoppages, moorings and maps to navigational guidance. Because the canal incorporates two river navigations, there are often currents, some of them quite fierce when you are near a weir – the guide advises you on these. However, you will not find it under the Kennet & Avon pages, but under Boaters' Guides on the home page.

However, if you are prepared to spend a few pounds, there is a much better guide available. Without doubt, the best guide for boaters is by Niall Allsop, who once lived on a narrowboat on the canal. Called *The Kennet & Avon Canal – A User's Guide*, it was last published in 1999, so some of the information is out of date, but by and large it is invaluable. It can be obtained from Millstream Books of Bath.

Moorings may well be an issue during busy summer periods. At the end of a long summer's day, you may find yourself having to moor some distance from a village pub, so you should be well-stocked up with food and drink. Mooring in the centre of Reading may be hazardous – some boaters have woken up to find that they have been quietly cast adrift overnight. This does not seem to happen in Bath, but if you are nervous, there are secure moorings at the Bath Marina on the River Avon. This marina also has laundry facilities.

Although a canal holiday is in many ways very restful, parts of it can be hard work. Regular boaters know that shifting swing bridges can be heavy going – some boat owners even carry a crowbar. On one stretch between Seend and Semington, where there are a lot of swing bridges, it is easier for a crew member to swing the bridges and walk on to the next one rather than keep climbing aboard. Flights of locks need teamwork if you are going to negotiate them without long delays. So at least some of your crew need to be fit.

Some locks are notorious. Widcombe Deep Lock needs care, especially when descending. People have come to grief when the back of the boat has stuck on the cill of the lock and no one has noticed until the boat was already tipping alarmingly. Hungerford Marsh Lock has a swing bridge passing over it, which needs to be swung out of the way first – unless you want to decapitate your steersman. Then there is the flight of locks at Caen Hill – 16 close together and 29 spread over two miles. As the balance beams are all at different heights, your crew will find that after tackling this, they will probably ache from their shoulders down to their knees, but they should also have a sense of achievement at having worked their way up one of the seven wonders of the waterways (according to Robert Aickman, co-founder of the Inland Waterways Association).

Boats can be hired at various places along the canal. Beginners should be given full instruction by hirers before

setting out – if you are not confident, don't be afraid to ask questions. The Bruce Trust has four boats which are specially adapted so that the disabled, disadvantaged and elderly can also enjoy a self-catering holiday afloat. And here's one final tip to those new to waterways. As all regular boaters will know, you should always have more than one windlass. That's the giant spanner you need for opening the paddles at locks. You will look very silly if you lose your only windlass overboard.

And finally … walkers

This is the way most people are going to explore the Kennet & Avon Canal, whether they take it in short stretches or walk the full 87 miles. Although it does not have the same atmosphere as travelling along in a boat, it does allow you – provided you haven't set yourself impossible schedules – to stop and talk to the many people you will meet as you travel along.

If you just want to tackle short stretches, then where the canal passes through Wiltshire you may be able to use the Connect2Wiltshire bus service to get you to your starting point. Call 08456 525255 to book a place, having first checked the number of the bus stop where you want to board. For people walking either end of the canal, there are rail services covering the sections from Keynsham to Trowbridge, and from Reading to Pewsey.

If walking it in one go, you can carry everything and simply walk, stopping along the way overnight – although you will need to plan your stops carefully. However, one easy way, which means you don't need to carry so much, is to use two centres. I would recommend Hungerford and Bath. There are regular train services between Reading and Hungerford, stopping at Theale, Aldermaston, Midgham (for Woolhampton), Thatcham, Newbury and Kintbury. In the other direction, the train runs from Hungerford to

Bedwyn. To reach or return from Pewsey, you will need to go to Newbury and change. Between Pewsey and Devizes there is no train service. However, a regular bus service, First bus 271/272/273, runs every hour between Devizes and Bath. Once based at Bath, it's back to the train, with stations at Trowbridge, Bradford on Avon, Avoncliff (a request stop) and Freshford to the east of Bath, and Oldfield Park and Keynsham to the west. If ending your walk along the canal at Hanham, the western end, you will have to walk back to Keynsham Station to pick up the train, unless you plan to walk on into Bristol along the Avon Walkway.

Before setting out, you could also consider whether you really want to walk the whole canal. Remember, it does not finish at Bath – the Avon Walkway continues to Hanham, with Bristol another six miles further on. If you are interested in industrial history, or if you simply want the pleasure of saying you've walked the whole 87 miles from Reading to Hanham, then do it, but be aware that not all of it is beautiful countryside. Reading itself is an interesting town, but the canal runs past some uninspired modern architecture,

through a busy modern shopping centre and under flyovers and motorways. Being a canal, it served industry, and some industrial buildings still border it. If a peaceful walk through delightful scenery is what you are after, then you might prefer to start (assuming you are travelling east to west) at Theale, and end at Bath. That is not to say that parts of the River Avon walk are not lovely – they are – but having joined the River Avon at Bath, you are faced with a walk past such delights as Homebase, the council tip, an industrial estate and the site of the old gasworks before you reach open fields again. From Theale to Bath is a walk of nearly 70 miles, so still quite an achievement if you haven't walked long distances before.

If it is your first attempt at long-distance walking, make sure you have comfortable footwear. Proper walking boots or shoes are not a luxury but a necessity if you are walking far, especially if you are doing it day after day. Have sticking plasters to give quick attention to any blisters. If the weather is hot, take sun protection cream – if it's changeable, make sure you have some reliable waterproof clothing and a waterproof rucksack.

Even though following the canal should be straightforward, you will need maps if you are going to make diversions from the canal, and to find out where the stations are. There are new walkway routes on the River Avon, and these are marked on the latest Ordnance Survey maps. If you can get your hands on copies of Nicholas Hammond's two Kennet & Avon Waterway maps, first published in 1969 and 1975, you will find that his detailed charts mean you can work out exactly where you are, how fast you are walking – the route is measured in miles and chains – and what the next feature, such as a bridge or aqueduct, is. It shows when the towpath changes sides, which is where you can come to grief if you follow the wrong path. Even though they are out of date, since new bridges have been added, they are still invaluable companions to have on your walk. It would be nice to think that updated versions will one day be published.

Finally, whatever you do, take your time. It is strange and rather sad that people should congratulate themselves on walking the canal as quickly as possible. They must be

A timeless scene: near Bathampton, April 1990

missing so much. The pace of life along a canal is slow. Allow time to chat with people. Watch the flora and fauna. Notice how the landscape changes as you travel. Your enjoyment of the journey will be enhanced if you spend time exploring some of the canalside towns, or attractions such as the pumping stations at Crofton and Claverton, if they are open. There are some very good pubs by or near the canal, some serving excellent food.

With those thoughts, let us now begin a journey in time along this Queen of Waters, the Kennet & Avon Canal.