

London Canal Museum: The Capital's Waterways Then And Now

By: Karen Dabrowska

The London Canal Museum has an ideal location: Regent's Canal a stone's throw from King's Cross Station. Look out of the window in the main display hall and you will see a variety of boats moored next to the building which tells the history of London's waterways.



Buildings on
the banks of
Regent's canal

History comes alive in the various displays: there is a recreated stable and horse power exhibition as well as a real boat. The Victorian's had an amazing trade in natural ice which they imported

from Norway. In fact the museum is housed in a former ice warehouse built in about 1862 for Carlo Gatti, the famous ice-cream maker and features the history of the ice trade and ice cream as well as the canals. A vast ice well has been preserved.

On the first floor is an archive film as well as historic photos of Britain's canals with a detailed description of the waterways then and now.

The museum's website points out

that in the history of canals, Britain was not a pioneer. The Chinese can claim that the Grand Canal of China was one of the first, in the tenth century, although even earlier examples existed in that country. The earliest canals were connected with natural rivers, either as short extensions or improvements to them. The difference between a natural river, and a wholly man-made canal is clear, but in between are many variations of river improvement



London's famous long boats

London's Little Venice



and extension so it is difficult to be precise about which navigation can claim to be the first canal!

The familiar pound lock which is in use today in Britain is said to have been invented by Chhiao Wei-Yo, in 983, in China, although the mitre gate, an important part of the canal lock today, is credited to Leonardo Da Vinci. (1452 – 1519). In Britain the Romans built the Fossdyke from Lincoln to the River Trent, for drainage and for navigation and also the Caer Dyke

around AD 50. A notable waterway completed in 1566 was the Exeter Canal which bypassed part of a river to make navigation easier. This had the first pound locks in Britain, equipped with lifting, vertical gates. The mitre gate, which has V shaped gates held together by the water pressure, was introduced in the UK on the River Lee, at Waltham Abbey. Some other early British canals are an improved section of the River Welland in Lincolnshire, built

The museum's logo



Duke of Bridgewater



of Parliament to amend and extend the scheme. Completed in 1776 the Bridgewater Canal was the catalyst that started half a century of canal building. Brindley had built an aqueduct which was regarded as a remarkable achievement, and there were tunnels right into the mines at Worsley where the coal was loaded. The price of coal in Manchester fell as the new means of transport made cheap deliveries

possible.

Next there followed a number of long distance navigations, with Brindley as the leading canal engineer of his time. He largely built the so-called «Grand Cross» of canals which linked the four great river basins of Britain, the Severn, Mersey, Humber, and the Thames, the latter being reached from 1790 via the Oxford Canal, lengthy route to London from the

north. There were two concentrated periods of canal building, from 1759 to the early 1770's and from 1789 to almost the end of the eighteenth century.

The American War of Independence separated the two periods. London and the south east did not feature much in the first period. Canals were built to serve the heavy industry of the north and midlands and while London had industry and the country's major port, it did

not have coal mines and the surrounding south east of England was mainly agricultural.

It was not until 1793 that an Act was passed to authorise the Grand Junction Canal from Braunston on the Oxford Canal, to Brentford on the river Thames west of London. London was not joined directly to the national canal network until 1801 with the opening of the Paddington Arm of the Grand Junction Canal.

Limehouse cut





After a visit to the museum why not enjoy one of London's most famous canals, The Regents Canal? From the River Thames at Limehouse to Paddington the nine-mile Regents Canal is one of the best-kept secrets in the capital. Largely hidden behind buildings, the line sneaks its way through a rich collage of urban landscapes. It starts at Little Venice a colourful combination of boats and scenery at the junction between the

Regents Canal and the Paddington Arm. At Regents Park, it passes the famous zoo in a fine example of an city canal line. After the bustle of Camden Market and the quieter reaches through north-east London, the line ends at Limehouse Basin a well-heeled basin containing boats of all shapes and sizes. Along the way are several tunnels, city basins, and an astonishing variety of waterside architecture.