

Each had his personal “wing”, a wooden board that would be fixed projecting out from the foredeck. Lying on his side or back he, together with a colleague or the captain on the other side, slowly walked the boat through against the tunnel wall. It was back-breaking work (a fully laden boat could weigh up to 30 tons) and frequently dangerous, especially when having to deal with an oncoming boat. One passage could take several hours. He would be paid little for his pains, in the mid C19th perhaps a shilling (5p) for a laden boat and 9d (less than 4p) if empty. They became redundant when a steam tunnel-tug was introduced but this became redundant itself when boats were fitted with diesel engines.

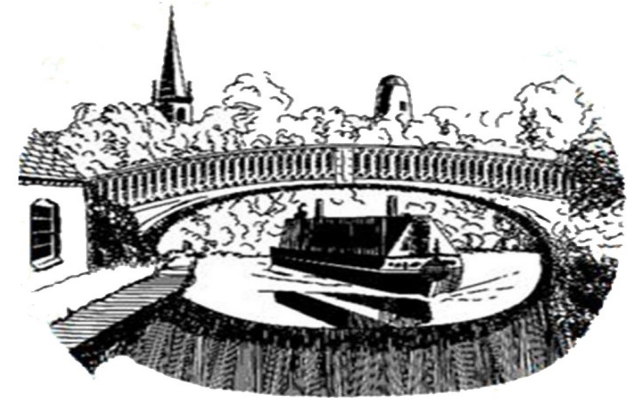
The horse path follows the line of the tunnel which is 2042 yards long (1867 m). The view to the right is spoiled by the awful, green-field Daventry housing developments. You pass several brick-topped ventilation shafts. The tunnel wasn't built by just digging in from the sides of the hill. Shafts were sunk and men, lowered down in baskets, would dig out in both directions and hope to meet up with others coming from the next shaft! They were usually fairly accurate but there are slight wiggles in the tunnel where adjustments had to be made. There is one very marked S-bend for which the engineer was fined. Conditions for the tunnellers were bad and dangerous; there would have been many serious injuries although only one fatality was recorded here, low for this activity. After completion some shafts were filled in and others left to vent any dangerous gases such as methane. Take care crossing the busy A361 and go straight on, past another shaft and then down to the canal.

After rejoining the towpath you pass along a wooded tunnel cutting which opens out to pleasant views to the left. Out of sight to your right is a large reservoir in Daventry Country Park constructed to feed the canal; absolutely essential as the lock operations at Braunston and Buckby, either side of this short summit level, would soon empty the cut otherwise.

Immediately through bridge no.10 is the turn for Leicester at Norton Junction. This line, which linked the Grand Junction with the Leicester Canal, was originally called the Grand Union and is still referred to as the “Old Union” by grizzled boaters. Stay on the right hand towpath, even if you have to open some small gates, past long term moorings until you come to the New Inn by Buckby top lock fronting the A5 and where you can gongoozle (canal expression for staring at boats especially at locks), grab a decent pint and some reasonable grub before retracing your steps to Braunston. Unfortunately there are no viable alternative footpaths available.

AW/2010

# Walks from Braunston Marina

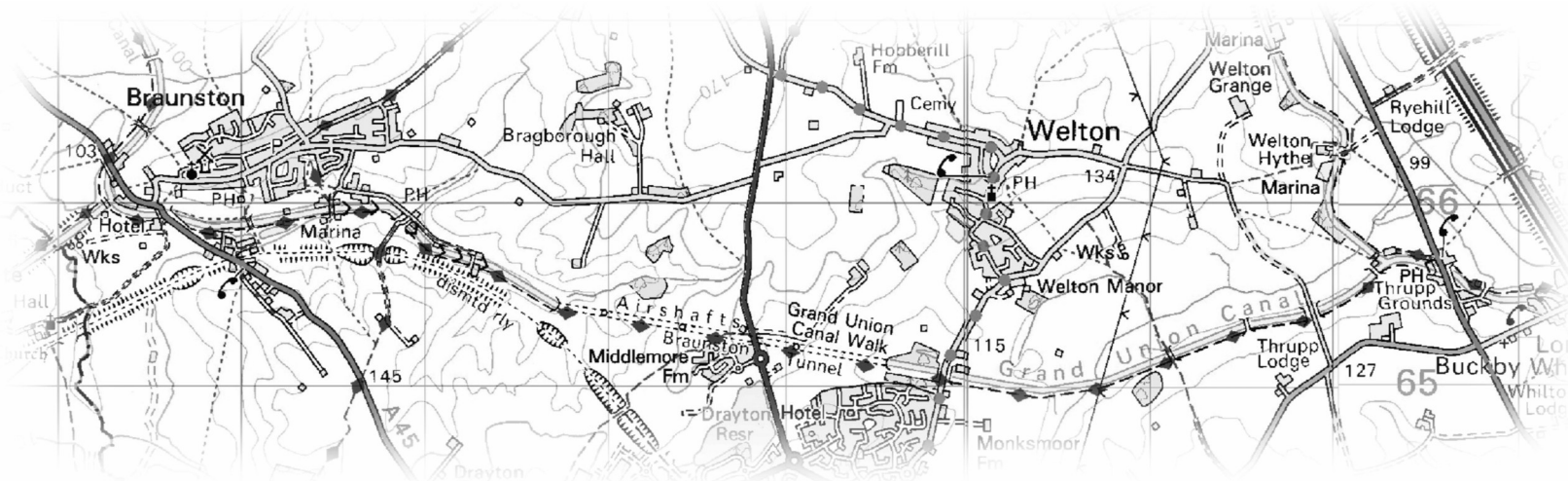


## No. 4

### Up the locks & over the tunnel to the New Inn at Norton Junction

Return trip c.10 miles, a very easy 3 ½ hours stroll  
mainly along the towpath

The local soil is mainly heavy clay and conditions can be a bit muddy  
so do wear boots or stout shoes



The Oxford Canal came to Braunston in 1778, winding along the foothills from Napton, under the road and through what is now the marina's business arm, turning sharp left at the entrance, curving round Braunston hill and then north to join the Coventry canal. 1797 saw the arrival of the Grand Junction Canal, a much shorter and quicker route from London; this joined the Oxford outside the marina entrance and pinched much of the Southern Oxford's business. To make itself more competitive the Oxford carried out a straightening programme and in 1834 its new, quicker route formed a new junction half a mile away at Braunston Turn. The canals here now are as they were then. This walk will take you up the old 'Junction, over the tunnel, to the New Inn by Buckby top lock at Norton Junction. This forms part of the long distance Grand Union Canal Walk and is way-marked as such.

From the marina entrance (noting the superb Horsley iron bridge), turn right down the towpath towards "Butchers Bridge". This is brick-built in the pleasing style typical of canals of the period and used by Canal & River Trust as their logo. The towpath swings in under the arch and the "bridge'ole" (i.e. the width of water under the arch) is 16-17 feet, enough for a wide-beam boat or two narrowboats "breasted-up" (tied together side by side) to pass through. In the very busy horse-drawn days the tow ropes sawed deep cuts into the bridge sides, especially on bends, compromising their stability. To prevent this, iron fenders were affixed but even these could end up so grooved they look like garden rakes. Keep an eye out on this walk and you will see some good examples.

Immediately on the left after the bridge is a large depression in the hillside, the site of a clay pit and works that made bricks mainly for lining out Braunston Tunnel when it was being built (3 bricks thick for 1¼ miles is a hell of a lot of bricks!). Go over the timber ladder bridge. On your right is a pumping station (disused) with the date in the tall chimney.

Maintaining water supply for lock operation was expensive and the Grand Junction Company didn't want to gift it to the Oxford Canal just ahead, so they collected it in side ponds (now the marina moorings) and pumped it back to above the top lock. This pump-house replaced the original one.

Boat building, repairs and fitting is carried out at Bottom Lock and there is an old dry dock beside it. The original canal engineer lived in the first house alongside the lock and The Boat Shop next door sells traditionally painted canal ware and, more importantly, ice creams!

You now go up a flight of 6 locks which descend from the tunnel summit level, the route following the old Braugborough stream which originally helped erode the valley; the canal neatly taking its water to assist with the lock operations. The quaint, old lock-keeper's cottage by Lock 2 has the overflow channel running through it. The Admiral Nelson pub was converted from a cow barn long ago for the canal trade and now many a passing leisure boat cannot resist the pub's obvious charms. Look out for the black apparition that haunts the pub and adjoining house. Another pub used to be on the left at top lock, the present Anchor House is named after it. In its canal heyday Braunston, only a small village, had 18 pubs: it wouldn't have the four there are now but for the leisure boaters passing through.

You now enter the tunnel cutting and there are the remains of an old wharf on the off-side. The towpath can get wet and muddy here so take care. To the left of the tunnel entrance you can see the remains of a big landslip which a few years ago partially blocked the entrance and prohibited the passage of wide-beam craft.

As with nearly all tunnels there is no towpath so horses would be unhitched here and led over to the other side. There would be "leggers" hanging around the entrance hoping to be employed by a boat captain.