

Continue along the cutting, past the ruined abutments of what was the bridge carrying the Great Central. Where the cutting ends, the Puddlebanks starts; “puddle” presumably referring to the specially compacted clay used to give the cut a waterproof and flexible lining. Built when the Oxford Canal was ‘straightened’ to make their route quicker (they were losing the London trade to the much faster Grand Junction), it was quite a major engineering feat at the time although it is difficult to appreciate it from the towpath. To the right are the two lost villages and St Peters. All around, the mediæval “ridge and furrow” field workings can still be seen. Ahead is the landmark crocketted spire of All Saints and the capped-off windmill behind.

The next bridge is unusual but not quite unique. It is two bridges in one; one half is to accommodate the owner of the land either side, the other is a “roving” bridge allowing a boat horse to go from one side of the canal to the other and to still keep towing without having to be unhitched (the design neatly avoids the ‘dog on a lead round the wrong side of the lamppost’ situation). You can cross over here if you want or go straight on, there’s little difference.

Ahead is definitely a unique sight - the famous double-arched cast-iron towpath bridge over Braunston Turn (canal junctions are always called ‘turns’). Prefabricated to a standard design and supplied “off the peg”, they were dirt-cheap at the time compared to the construction and time costs of building a traditional stone or brick bridge *in situ*. And how elegantly beautiful they still look after almost 200 years. (Note also the bridge at the marina entrance).

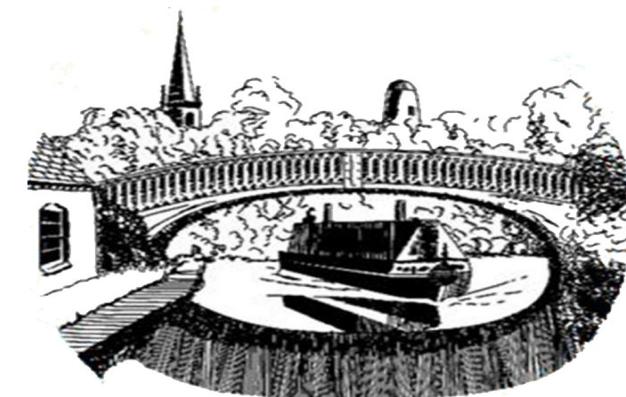
You’re nearly home. Turn right at the junction, past mainly long-term moorings, The Boathouse (on the wrong side unfortunately!), Braunston Manor and the Stop House. You are back to where you started. Hope you still have enough energy left to climb the hill to the Old Plough to sink a well-earned pint! (Dogs welcome in the bar).

AW/2010

An interesting and illustrated brief history of St Peter’s Church and Wolfhampcote village is at: www.bigfarm.co.uk/wolfhampcote.htm, the website of the farmer at Wolfhampcote Hall.

If you’d like to learn more about Braunston, the marina shop stocks David Blagrove’s “At the Heart of the Waterways” a profusely illustrated history of the canals at Braunston, in hardback at the heavily discounted price of £4.95.

Walks from Braunston Marina



No. 1

Wolfhampcote - Puddlebanks & Braunston Turn

A short stroll through some local history

c. 2 ½ miles, an ‘easy’ 1¼ hours
longer if you stop off at St Peter’s Church

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

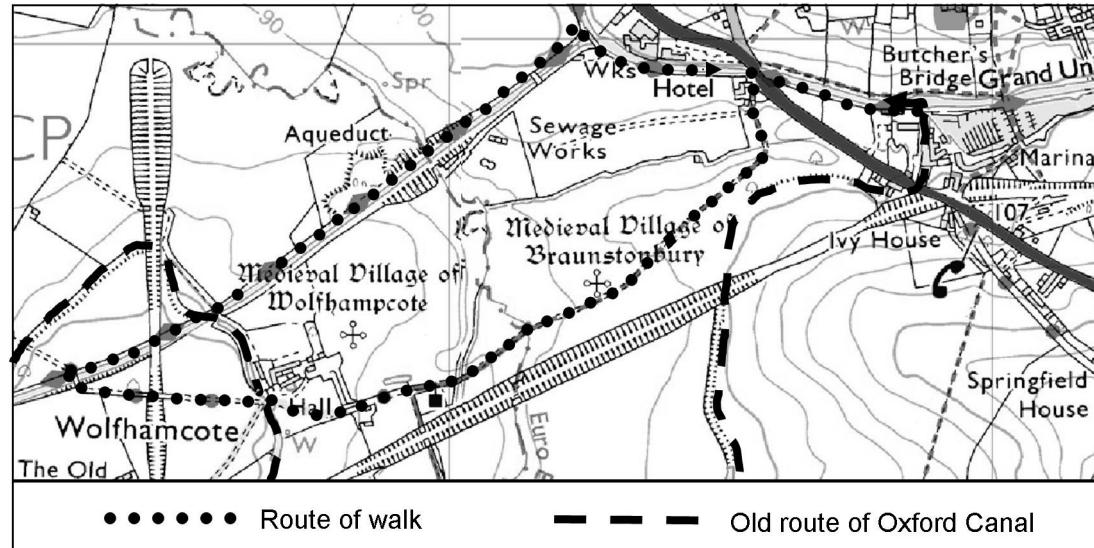
From the Marina go out to the canal, turn left, past The Stop House, the point for collecting tolls where the Grand Junction Canal met the old route of the Oxford Canal but now Canal & River Trust offices. To avoid crossing the main road, go under the road bridge and immediately leave the canal on the left.

Turn right down the tarmac track, past 2 houses. The large stone house used to be the Castle Inn, an early boatman's pub, but the publican set up the New Castle across the canal. It changed its name to The Rose and Castle, The Boatman, then The Mill House and in 2009 it became The Boathouse.

Cross the cattle grid and go straight on, ignoring the track to the right (unless you want to inspect Braunston's sewage!), and continue up the rough, gravelled track. Don't worry, any cattle are used to people but if there are calves about it's better to give them a wide berth. To the left you can see the slight banking showing the old route of the extravagantly winding Oxford Canal (the dashed line on the map).

Just ahead, the 'lumpy' ground to the right marks the site of the mediæval village of Braunstonbury. It was 'lost' hundreds of years ago not, it is believed, due to plague or enclosure but simply because it became economically unviable, the land was hard to work and often waterlogged; poverty-stricken villagers, like many around the country, just drifted off to the towns and cities to seek a better life and the village just died. You are free to wander around the site.

On the left, the large embankment marks the route of the Leamington to Daventry railway, closed in the 1960's. You then cross a small bridge over the River Leam, the boundary between Warwickshire and Northamptonshire. To the right there's a second large, lumpy patch of ground which was Wolfhampcote; yet another lost village. The slight ditches mark where the paths went between the hovels and you can clearly see the moat ditch, no longer fed by the Leam, that surrounded the manor house. Beyond the site is the imposing embankment and aqueduct over the Leam carrying the canal. This is "The Puddlebanks"



which you will shortly be walking along.

The C14th St Peter's church, with only 3 habitations left, somehow managed to keep going until about 45 years ago when it closed. Stripped by thieves and badly damaged by vandals, the Friends of Friendless Churches took it under their wing and it is now in usable condition. Still consecrated, it has no vicar and no services are held apart from a delightful, very rustic, candle-lit (there's no electricity) winter festival organised by villagers.

It is held at 4pm the second Saturday in December. Carols are interspersed with poems, humorous monologues, instrumentals; whatever the village volunteers want to do. It finishes at the Old Plough with mulled wine, hot mince pies and a Christmas sing-a-long. A lovely start to Christmas so mark your diary for this year! People 'in the know' come from all over the country for this; It's usually packed out - standing room only for late-comers. Bring a candle and dress warmly!

Past the church on the left are the ruinous remains of the mediæval tithe barn. The owners of the next house are key-holders to St Peters and you can ask for them if you would like to see the interior. There are some interesting, crudely carved pews as old as the church.

Beyond the cattle grid you come to a meeting of various ways. Acutely to the right is the C17th Wolfhampcote Hall, the farmhouse to all the land you are walking over and reputedly built of materials swiped from the ancient Manor House. Right and left are open sections of the old Oxford Canal line, still in water, and you are standing on the short tunnel between them. A metalled road goes off left. You continue straight on, up the track, over a bridge crossing the line of another disappeared railway; this one was the Great Central (Manchester, Nottingham, Leicester, London) until Beeching axed it.

You then come to a blue brick bridge over the canal, known locally as Ivy Bridge. Cross it, over the stile and go down the steep steps on the left to the towpath. You turn left here but the path to the right is a super place for picking sloes to steep in your gin.