

The Cromford Canal



*Great Northern Basin
Langley Mill*

Walking Britain's Heritage

History and Full Walk

Almost 200 years ago William Jessop, in partnership with Benjamin Outram, took on the engineering of his first major canal, The Cromford, in Derbyshire.

In 1788 it had been decided that a new link to Manchester and the North West would be advantageous, and the first stage would be a canal from Langley Mill on the Erewash canal to Cromford, a distance of 14 $\frac{3}{4}$ miles. August 24, 1789 saw the first meeting of the Cromford Canal Co. which was held at The Old Bath Inn, Matlock Bath, and among its shareholders were Sir Richard Arkwright of cotton mill fame, Philip Gell, local lead mine owner, the Beresfords, and the Jessop family, all of whom had connections with industry and mining.

Richard Arkwright was born in Preston, Lancashire in 1732, the thirteenth child of a tailor. He was apprenticed to a barber and practised the trade in Bolton. In 1769 he invented a machine for spinning cotton, which, since it was powered by water, became known as the Waterframe. Arkwright's first mill at Cromford(1) was built in 1771 and the whole mill site was finished by 1791. At the same time, he developed Cromford into one of the first industrial villages, including workers' cottages, a market place and a lock-up. Arkwright's Mill, with its powered machinery and large workforce, became the model for others throughout Britain and abroad, earning Arkwright the title "Father of the Factory Systems". Arkwright was knighted in 1786 and became High Sheriff of Derbyshire in 1787. He amassed a large personal fortune and started to build himself a country house, Willersley Castle, before his death in 1792.

Jessop and Outram were appointed as engineers, and they soon encountered difficulties.

These ranged from contractors walking off the job, to major defects in two of the aqueducts, at Bullbridge over the Amber, and across the Derwent near Cromford.

There is also evidence to suggest that a lot of friction existed between Sir Richard Arkwright and the other shareholders. Although it is considered he brought prosperity to Cromford it would appear that he may not, after all, have been such a benefactor of the canal as history seems to portray.

The canal was finally completed in 1794 and was built in two gauges. The broad gauge ran from Langley Mill to the eastern end of Butterley tunnel with fourteen broad locks. The narrow gauge went from the western end of the tunnel and was lock free to Cromford.

This 3,000 yard narrow gauge tunnel (without a tow-path) was another source of trouble, and a collapse in 1900 caused its total closure.

However, traffic continued on both sides, carrying mainly coal and limestone, and despite its early problems and controversies the canal proved to be both busy and profitable. The waterway was finally abandoned in 1944 and since then many changes have taken place.

Cromford Bullbridge (5 miles)

From Cromford the canal passes through beautiful countryside, with meadows to the left and wooded hillside to the right. After a quarter of a mile it begins to share a deepening valley with the River Derwent and the old Buxton and Manchester Derby railway line; these are constant companions for several miles.

A wood and a gentle sweep to the right brings a swing bridge and a collection of buildings into view (2).

This is High Peak Junction, which joined the Cromford with a branch of the Peak Forest at Whaley Bridge not by canal, but by railway opened in 1831 and engineered by William Jessop's son, Josiah thereby completing the NW link. This railway, the Cromford & High Peak, consisted of a number of rope worked inclines and the steepest locomotive worked gradient of any British railway, the 1 in 14 Hopton incline. Following closure in 1967 the route became the popular High Peak Trail.

A quarter of a mile further on is the end of the restored section, and within 200 yds three interesting features appear. The first is the fully restored, and working, Leawood pump house, built for the purpose of lifting water from the River Derwent to supplement the canals supply. Second is the Leawood Aqueduct carrying the canal over the river via a single 80ft span, and this, along with the pump house, is now a listed structure. Third, and last, at the end of the aqueduct and to the left, is the 550 yd Leawood Branch (see Walk A).

Lea Hurst, Florence Nightingale's summer residence, is close by and can be visited on certain open days. The mainline carries on through thickly wooded countryside. The channel is reedy and weed choked but the towpath is in excellent condition.

A short cast iron aqueduct takes the canal over the railway. This, along with the river and the road, lie below and to the right all the way to Ambergate. At Ambergate the canal ends abruptly, the line having been cut by the construction of a huge, modern gas pipeline complex, (3) on the site of Ambergate Lime Kilns. However, the waterway can be regained at Bullbridge by taking a footpath either above or below the gas works.

Bullbridge Ironville (5 miles)

At this point the canal left the Derwent Valley and entered the Amber Valley. It passed over the River Amber, the Derby Leeds railway, and the A610 Ripley road via the Bullbridge aqueduct(4).

A wharf area at the western end of this aqueduct served the limekilns and was the terminus for a tramway from quarries at Crich, now the home of the Crich Tramway Village.

Sadly, the aqueduct was blown up in 1968 to make way for a road widening scheme. A great pity, as this was a fine example of a 150ft cast iron trough used to span the railway.

To traverse this piece today entails scrambling down a steep bank, crossing the railway by an unguarded foot crossing, over the road, and another scramble up the bank behind the Chapel. It may sound a daunting prospect, but to continue following this excursion into history is well worth it.

The towpath and the canal are now much overgrown, and midway between Sawmills and Ladygrove the line has again been served by a minor road. Passing by Ladygrove the canal bed has been turned into allotments, and from here to Buckland Hollow has been filled in. Emerging from a short tunnel(5) you catch sight of a pub that is called The Excavator. The canal veered sharply to the right here, went under a bridge that carried the Pye Bridge to Ambergate railway (the same railway that now forms the Midland Railway Trusts Museum line), and across open fields to the intriguingly named Starvehimvalley Bridge. A wharf at this place connected the canal by tramway to Heage colliery.

The route of the canal now follows walk B, to the western portal of Butterley Tunnel(6). The path turns to the left and runs parallel with the A38, passing beneath it 300yds further on. It then crosses the road and continues alongside The Midland Railway Trusts railway line, which runs from Hammersmith, through their working museum and stations at Butterley and Swanwick Junction, to Pye Bridge. At Butterley reservoir, built to serve the canal, the path goes over the railway line and around the edge of the reservoir the tunnel passes beneath it. Turning left, at the end of the reservoir, you walk alongside the famous Butterley Company works(7).

This was founded in 1790 by Jessop, Outram, Beresford, and Wright, and is still in production today. Among its many outstanding achievements the company were awarded the prestigious contract to supply the iron work for the Vauxhall Bridge over the River Thames in 1814. Sadly, this was also the year in which Jessop died at the age of 70.

The path proceeds by the end of the works and along a private road. After ¾ mile the guarded top of a tunnel airshaft can be seen in a field to the left. The road now passes over a disused mineral railway line. Shortly after this point, as the road bends to the left, the Butterley Tunnel runs underneath it.

Follow the road to Golden Valley(8). The canal continues on the right by a 200yd walk at the side of the Newlands Inn(9), which takes you to the eastern portal of Butterley Tunnel. Although almost hidden by overhanging trees and dense undergrowth, it is worth going to see.

Through Golden Valley and past a row of delightfully restored cottages the canal is in water, albeit shallow, until reaching Codnor Park Reservoir again, purposely built for the cut. The towpath here is known locally as the path between two waters, but the canal is just a reedy depression to the right.

At the end of the reservoir the path goes across a new metal bridge. Immediately beyond this is the entrance bridge of the filled in Pinxton Branch(10).

Ironville Langley Mill (3 miles)

The main line now passes through Ironville, a community that was built for ironworks and collieries of the area which Bartholemews Gazetteer of 1901 lists as being amongst the most extensive and important in the Kingdom.

Here, the first of the six remaining locks can be seen. These were stone built lock chambers, but now they are gateless, gearless, and in various states of decay.

After swinging to the right the canal becomes progressively more weed choked, and within half a mile disappears completely at the remains of a railway viaduct and embankment (11), the route of a connection between the Midland Railway and the Great Northern Railway. Unlike many such connections in the area, this branch was used by several express freight trains in the early part of the century.

From here, through Stoneyford, to Langley Bridge there is little sign of the Cromford left, although it is possible to follow the coping stones of the canal wall. To the west scrub and silver birch has taken over the site of Codnor Park Forge(12) while to the east you can see over the River Erewash and wetlands, including a copse of mature willow further south towards Brinsley Flash, an area of water produced by the effects of mining subsidence, which attracts many migrating bird species, particularly in winter.

On reaching a house (with boarding kennels, 13) at the end of Stoneyford Lane, across the fields. The main Nottingham Sheffield ex L.M.S. railway runs along a stone embankment to the west, while the Erewash flows to the east; beyond this ran the Great Northern railway Pinxton branch, closed in 1962 and since obliterated by opencast mining parts of the trackbed surprisingly survive near Brinsley Flash. The bridge abutments of the canal viaduct over the river remain in site. Cross over the river via the footbridge(14), past Aldercar Flash and across the old Brinsley Lane.

Follow the bottom of the A610 embankment with Pitt Hill to the east; this was formed from Moorgreen colliery tip, the last working mine in the area, closed in 1986, on exhaustion of reserves.

Cross under the A610, alongside the course of the mineral railway branch to Moorgreen(15). Further South you can see the Langley Mill Basin, which has been restored in recent years by the Langley Mill Boat Company and Erewash Preservation Society in several stretches.

The basin was once the bustling heart of the canal and rail transport system and is now home and moorings for many canal boats.

20 coal seams outcropped on the surface in this part of the Erewash valley, in an area known as the Riddings anticline. Virtually all the Lower Coal Measures and many of the Middle Coal Measures surface, the closest being only 5yds from Beggarlee wharf. In recent years much of these coal reserves have been worked by opencast methods, reclaiming much derelict land following the closure of the worked out mines and their rail systems.

Proceed across the grassland toward the river (this area can be quite boggy). Cross the rewash to the footpath which leads eventually to the A608 by the side of the Midlands Public House. You can head back up to the basin for a rest and refreshment at the Great Northern Inn.

From Langley Mill to Ambergate the future holds huge promise of improvement, and requires protection and at least as much interest as the Ambergate to Cromford section has generated.

Even today the towpath is well used forming part of many possible 'round trip' walks, and having a railway station within a mile of either end makes the entire stretch easily walkable in a day. The bonus of always pleasant, often beautiful, scenery as well as a remarkable history makes it well worth a visit.



THE TRAIL

The trail begins at Cromford wharf, half a mile off the A6, and gives the opportunity to follow closely the route of the Cromford Canal by car to its junction with the Erewash Canal at Langley Mill. Three short walks are suggested along parts of the canal that still contain features of interest, as well as a visit to the Great Northern Basin at Langley Mill. Although each walk is short there is the chance to extend Walks A and C by continuing further along the canal before returning to the starting point.

The numbers refer to locations on the map. Before setting off from Cromford wharf car park take a look at the canal side buildings and the nearby Arkwright mills. Turn right out of the car park and then, after almost 1 mile, turn right into the High Peak Junction car park.

WALK A

(Walking time approx. 20 minutes)

Leave the car park (1) by a footpath diagonally opposite the road entrance. Cross the River Derwent, then the Matlock to Derby railway line and arrive at High Peak Junction on the Cromford Canal. Across the canal swing bridge may be seen the former workshops of the High Peak Railway(2), now converted to Information Centre, museum, toilets, etc. Behind the buildings two railway vehicles mark the start of the High Peak Trail to Parsley Hay, some 17 miles away. Our way lies to the left (If The canal has been crossed to visit the High Peak buildings the track may be followed on that side of the canal as there is a cross-over bridge further along). The next group of buildings (3) by the canal formed a warehouse and transhipment shed where goods from the canal could be transferred to the High Peak Railway and vice versa. The tall chimney to the left marks the site of Lea Wood Pumphouse (4). This was built in 1849 to raise water from the River Derwent into the canal and, following restoration, is set to work during various summer weekends. Once across the Wigwell aqueduct (5) over the River Derwent the tow-path continues for the next 4 miles to Ambergate. This scenic stretch may be followed for a short while if time allows, otherwise Walk A now turns to the left by a ruined lengthman's cottage and follows the Lea Wood branch (6) towards Lea Mills.

The Nightingale family, of which Florence was a later descendant, were responsible for the building of this branch and for the textile and lead smelting interests in the area (see Florence Nightingale Trail in this series). Apart from some paving stones and the metal circle of a crane base little remains to be seen at the terminus of this short branch (7). A path to the left leads back to the road where another left turn returns us to the car park.

Turn right out of the car park and right again at the next junction up the hill to Holloway. On reaching the top of the hill and immediately after the Yew Tree Inn car park, take a right turn signposted Whatstandwell. The road falls steeply into the Derwent Valley and soon we are running parallel to the canal one field away on our right. Beyond the hamlet of Robin Hood the road runs through a wooded area close to the former Whatstandwell stone quarries, which provided important traffic for the canal. At the road junction turn right over the canal bridge, then left along the A6. Between here and Ambergate canal, railway, road and river jostle for space in the narrow valley. Turn left on the A610 at Ambergate, then in a little over a mile at Bullbridge turn left on the Crich road. Almost immediately turn right on Drovers Way and stop. Ahead may be seen the remains of the embankment which carried the canal over the River Amber, railway and road. The bridge leads to the ruins of the Butterley Company Limeworks, sited here to take full advantage of the easy transportation offered by the canal. Return to the A610 road and turn left. The road formerly passed under the canal here via a narrow bridge controlled by traffic lights. The canal now runs on our right and at a slightly higher level. In about 2 miles soon after the junction at Buckland Hollow by the Excavator Restaurant take a right turn signposted Lower Hartshay (only).

Drive for approximately one mile and park by the canal bridge before the Gate Inn.

WALK B

(walking time approx. 25 minutes, plus further 20 minutes for optional walk to tunnel)

Join the canal and walk to the right along the tow-path. Nearing the point where the canal bed has been filled in the remains of an iron narrowboat (8) will be seen rising out of the vegetation.

A turn to the left and walk in front of the houses will avoid the next field if it is too muddy. Cross the lane and follow the footpath, which keeps to the line of the canal. After three fields part of the canal has been restored and enlarged to form a fishing pool.

Turn to the right alongside a fine example of a stone bridge (9), typical of many along the Cromford Canal. Pass through a small gate and follow a path which soon becomes a farm track leading to the road.

Turn right and return to the car. Before driving off it is possible, if time allows, to walk the canal in the opposite direction as far as the entrance to Butterley Tunnel (10).

To do so, take a tarmac path (signposted) Pentrich) and cross the field to the busy A610 road. Cross over, turn right and in a few yards take a concrete track leading off to the left. Pass to the right of a fence, over a stile, and follow the canal path to the tunnel (11). The stone front was covered over when the A38 road was built and the canal water now flows through a concrete pipe. Return to the stile and, either return the same way, or take a more strenuous route by mounting the flight of steps and turning right for a few yards to a paving slab under the metal crash barrier. Step over, cross the road, and descend a similar flight of steps to the canal path, then back to the car.

In order to continue the trail it will be necessary to return to your car and return to the A610 road. Go right and in half a mile at the A38 roundabout take the second left (A610 Nottingham). As the road curves over the second bridge the works of the Butterley Company are to the left. They are actually built over the canal tunnel and at one time shafts descended to the canal for the loading and unloading of boats. Next to the left, amongst the modern buildings of the County Police Headquarters, may be seen Butterley Hall, once the home of Benjamin Outram, canal engineer and co-founder of the Butterley Company. Drive round three small traffic Islands and in a further mile take a left turn (Brittain drive) on to the Codnor Gate Industrial Estate. Take the first right (High Holborn Road) the left at the next junction. Follow this road for another mile, then take a right turn opposite a former church. Two parking areas are available off to the left, take the second one at the far end of the reservoir (11). Care is needed when entering and leaving.

WALK C

(Walking time approx. 25 minutes)

Turn left along the tow-path towards Golden Valley. Cross the metal footbridge at the start of a restored section which reaches as far as the eastern entrance to the Butterley Tunnel (12). It is necessary to follow a steep path over the road as the original bridge was removed in a road improvement programme. The tunnel entrance is now guarded by a metal grid and shows evidence of much silting. A cascade to the right brings in water from the former Butterley Park reservoir, but this has now been drained and the bed forms part of a Country Park alongside the Midland Railways Trust's steam operated line.

Returning to the road, turn left at the stile by the Newlands Inn and then cross the road to enter the houses of Golden Valley (13). These houses have either been rebuilt completely or extensively renovated, and the oldest date back to the beginnings of the Butterley Company in the 1790's. Once past the houses, the canal tow path is re-joined and a return made to the car parks.

Instead of rejoining your car, cross the metal footbridge and view the work done in connection with the flood prevention scheme. A solitary stone bridge (14) marks where the Pinxton branch joined the canal main line (this branch has been completely filled in apart from the last half mile into the restored Pinxton basin). Alongside this bridge the canal entered the top lock and began its passage through Ironville model village and the industrial landscape, both creations of the Butterley Company. Today the bed has become very overgrown. Even so, the chambers of the many locks are still visible. The walk by the canal may be continued for a further one and a half miles until the filled-in section is reached or, if time is pressing, a return to the car made in order to reach the final stop at Langley Mill.

We now have to retrace part of our drive so turn right out of the car park, then left opposite the former church and drive into Codnor Village.

Rejoin the A610 road and immediately turn left at the traffic lights. Soon after the end of the dual carriageway section the valley, its course taking it under the present road near to the bend and then under a lattice bridge seen on the right, now used by the re-aligned river.

Leave at the next junction (A608) and take the third exit (A608 Heanor). In about 200 yards make a right turn on to an industrial estate road and park.

Walk down the main road past the Great Northern Inn and the canal basin is on the right.

Usually, many boats are to be found here and show what a colourful scene waterways once presented, and still do, in many parts of the country.

The excellent conditions of the Erewash Canal as it leaves the basin should be noted and serves as a reminder of what the Cromford Canal would have been at its peak when boats loaded with stone from Whatstandwell went to build Immingham Docks on Humberside, and iron from Butterley went to help in the construction of the Caledonian Canal across Scotland.

This completes the trail on the Cromford Canal so return to your car for the journey home.

Cromford may be reached by returning along the A610 to Ambergate and then turning right onto the A6.

- by bus and train -

The canal is accessible by public transport at many points along its length. The full walk can be divided into sections and buses or trains used to return to your starting point.

Cromford is served by regular trains and service R32 buses from Derby and Matlock. Transpeak buses also run from Manchester and Nottingham, and service 140 runs from Alfreton. Trains and Transpeak buses also stop at **Whatstandwell** and **Ambergate**.

Ambergate, Bullbridge & Lower Hartshay are linked by 123/124 buses (Derby-Belper-Ripley-Heanor-Derby).

Butterley has regular links by services 242/243/245 to Derby, Ripley, Alfreton, Mansfield and Chesterfield.

Golden Valley has service 330 from Alfreton that continues via Heanor to **Langley Mill**.

Ironville is served by R13 (Alfreton Eastwood Nottingham) as well as the 148 from Ripley via **Butterley**.

Langley Mill has trains from Chesterfield, Alfreton and Nottingham. All buses passing the canal basin link Heanor and Eastwood, running onto Derby (120/125). Nottingham (R11), Ripley (R11/127), Alfreton via **Golden Valley** (330).

Details of all bus and rail services in and around Amber Valley are published in the Mid South Derbyshire Timetable, including detailed maps. It is available from local libraries, Amber Valley Town Centre Bureaux and Ripley Tourist Information Centre or by post (1.20 including postage) from:

Public Transport Unit, Derbyshire County Council, Chatsworth Hall, FREEPOST, Matlock, DE4 9BR.

For the latest details of times of bus routes call DERBYSHIRE BUSLINE on Derby (01332) 292200.