

KEY FACTS

- A canal is a man-made waterway constructed to allow the passage of boats or ships inland .
- The modern canal system was mainly built in the 18th century and early 19th century because the Industrial Revolution demanded an economic and reliable way to transport goods and commodities in large quantities. Canals were the motorways of the 18th century!
- Canals need to be level. Where there is a hill to be climbed, canals use locks to move boats up or down hill.
- A lock is a section of canal or river that is closed off by gates which control the water level so that boats can be raised or lowered as they pass through it.

ANCIENT CANALS

- The oldest known canals were irrigation canals, built in Mesopotamia circa 4000 BC, in what is now Iraq and Syria.
- Between about 520 and 510 BC Darius I built the first canal for transport in Egypt linking the Nile and the Red Sea.

SCOTLAND'S CANALS

Scotland has five historic canals:

- ◇ the Forth & Clyde, from Grangemouth to Bowling, opened 1790
- ◇ The Monkland, from Glasgow to Woodhall, opened in 1793 (no longer navigable)
- ◇ The Crinan, from Crinan to Ardrishaig, opened 1801
- ◇ The Union, from Falkirk to Edinburgh, opened 1822
- ◇ The Caledonian, from Corpach to Clachnaharry, opened in 1822

THE FORTH & CLYDE CANAL

- runs from Grangemouth in the east to Bowling in the west; a distance of 56 km (34.5 miles)
- is the world's first man-made sea-to-sea ship canal, started in 1768 and costing £330,000 to build
- was opened in 1790, closed to navigation on Hogmanay 1962/63 and reopened in 2001 as a part of the Millennium Link project, restored at a cost of £84.5 million
- has 39 locks in working order
- is 2.43m (8 feet) deep and 17.06m (56 feet) wide
- the highest point is near Kilsyth and the canal is fed from a purpose-built reservoir at Banton Loch

QUICKFIRE QUESTIONS!

WHY WAS THE CANAL BUILT?

It was built to join the Firth of Clyde on the west coast to the Firth of Forth on the east. Building a canal through the narrowest part of Scotland meant avoiding the risky and time-consuming sail around the north coast.

HOW LONG DID IT TAKE TO BUILD?

The Forth & Clyde Canal was constructed between 1768 and 1790. Work stopped in 1777 due to a lack of money, but started again in 1785. The canal was closed in 1963 when the rights of navigation were extinguished by parliament, but reopened in 2001 as part of Britain's largest ever canal restoration project.

WHO USED THE CANAL?

Joining with the Monkland and Union Canals, a whole lowland waterway network was created. Cargoes of timber, coal, clay and sand were transported along the canal, and there was also a regular passenger service. The advent of steam brought paddle steamers and puffers to the canal.

WHO USES THE CANAL TODAY?

Yachts, cruisers, narrowboats, holidaymakers, canal societies, walkers, runners, cyclists can all be seen enjoying the Forth & Clyde Canal today.

ANY QUESTIONS? CONTACT ME!

Gemma Wild, Canal Officer – Cultural Heritage, Scottish Waterways Trust
07795 315434 | gemma@scottishwaterwaystrust.org.uk

SCOTLAND'S CANALS

A true feat of 18th century engineering and determination, Scotland's canals are an important representation of our country's proud industrial heritage, representing the people who built the canal network across Scotland, the communities that grew up on their banks, and the industry that was supported by them.

From the Caledonian Canal in the north to the Crinan in the west and the Forth & Clyde, Monkland and Union Canals running west to east throughout the central belt, all five of Scotland's remaining canals are designated as Scheduled Ancient Monuments. The estate that Scottish Canals looks after also includes over 100 listed buildings, artefacts and archival material. There is a real need to restore and protect this important national collection today, and to develop a new generation of people who can be the canal's protectors of the future.

Before the 18th century rivers served as a means of transport, but being irregular in width and depth they could be inconvenient for inland transport and there was no formal road system. Canals were built to overcome these problems and create an inland transport system for commercial and trade purposes. Canals ended the situation in which heavy materials could only be moved short distances or where navigable river or coastlines happened to be available.

Scottish transport and industry relied on seaborne rather than river navigation. In the 18th and 19th centuries our canals provided new links with coastal centres, improving access to supplies of raw materials such as coal, iron-ore, stone and agricultural produce. Places like Grangemouth and Maryhill in Glasgow were also once brand new 'canal-towns'.

Mainly, Scotland's canals made cheap coal widely available. Inland coalfields expanded massively and the supply of coal powered the Industrial Revolution of the 18th and 19th centuries.

FORTH & CLYDE CANAL

The first major canal to be built in Scotland, the Forth and Clyde was an ambitious project to build a coast-to-coast ship canal across central Scotland. A route to link the Firths of Forth and Clyde by canal had been raised on several occasions. After much debate and deliberation over different schemes, construction of the privately owned Forth & Clyde Canal was approved by an Act of Parliament in March 1768.

Work began on its construction in June when the governor of the Canal Company dug the first spade-full of earth at the eastern sea lock just west of Bo'Ness. Over the years settlement grew up around the sea lock, developing into the town of Grangemouth.

The 35-mile long canal was designed to serve as a trade route between east and west, carrying coal and other commercial goods between Scotland's towns and cities. It was to be large enough for seagoing vessels to develop links with trade in Europe and America.

In 1775 work had to stop just north of Glasgow due to a lack of funds. Dissatisfied with this, city merchants from Glasgow sought funding to build a branch of the canal into the city, and this was achieved by 1777. Finally, in 1785, government money forfeited from the Jacobite Estates became available. The canal could then continue its journey to the River Clyde at Bowling.

Rise and fall

The progress of steam power and the growth of railways in the 19th century were difficult competition, and soon both freight and passengers were converting to rail. The canal was bought by the Caledonian Railway in 1867 (as a condition of buying the Port of Grangemouth). It remained under railway management until 1948 when it was taken over by the state under the British Transport Commission.

During WW1 the Firth of Forth was closed to commercial shipping, severely impacting trade on the canal. After the war the canal as a trade route never fully recovered and its fortunes waned. Dwindling use and the march of rail and road meant that the canal became disused and derelict. Rights of navigation were extinguished by Parliament on 31st December 1962.

The canal reborn

In 2001 the canal was triumphantly re-opened as part of the £83.5m Millennium Link project - the largest canal restoration anywhere in Britain. The project incorporated the construction of the iconic Falkirk Wheel. When opened in June 2002 the Wheel reconnected the Forth & Clyde and Union Canals for the first time in over 70 years.