

WALK ABOUT BOSWORTH

4. LOCKED DOWN...

Easy, level going mainly, canal towpath can be very muddy in parts.

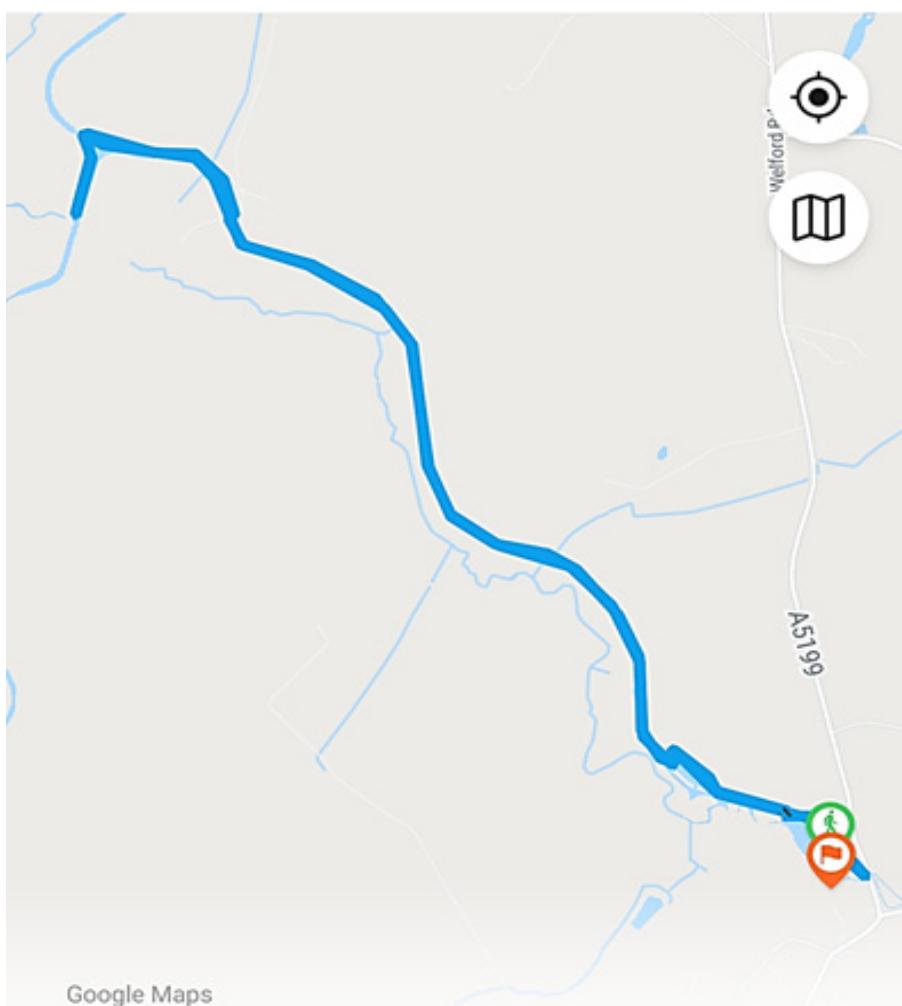
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* 28% 13:44

← Outdoor walk



Route Pace Charts Details



3.97 mi

21/01/2021, 11:16

Duration

01:55:42

Avg pace

29'08"

Calories

233 kcal



4. Locked down...

This walk starts and ends at Welford Wharf.

[There is limited parking in the Canal & River Trust visitors' car park to the rear of the pub - please park considerately]

Mainly easy going, though the canal towpath can be very muddy and narrow in parts. 3.97miles (6.35km)

Looking back at the Wharf Inn, take stock...

The castellated 'battlements' of the pub building give it something of an air of grandeur in this setting. Originally called The George Inn, much of the building we see today dates back to when the canal here was opened by the Grand Junction Canal Company in 1814, when the extensive outbuildings would have supported local trade and the exchange of goods. The wharf area would have been a hive of activity with limestone arriving from Derbyshire along with coal from the Derbyshire, north Leicestershire and Nottinghamshire coalfields to fuel the lime kilns. The kilns, which supplied burnt lime for the building trade and as agricultural fertiliser, remained in operation into the 1930s and the brickwork of several of the seven 'ovens' can still be seen adjacent to the dock. The wharf also supported a thriving coal yard, with huge stacks of lump coal for domestic use piled along the canal bank. For many years the Gilbert family were licensees of the inn and operators of the wharf, from where Mary Gilbert operated a pair of narrowboats, the *Gwen Mary* and the *Julia*, named after her daughters, carrying coal and limestone. The small building to your right was the original stabling for the boat horses that pulled the narrowboats.

Today a busy marina and boat yard occupies the extended basin at the canal terminus, catering for the needs of visiting pleasure craft.

Step forward towards the road, with the pub on your left

To your right, beyond the pub garden you will see a wooden bridge. This crosses the river Avon, which here forms the boundary between Leicestershire and Northamptonshire - the whole wharf area itself being firmly in Husbands Bosworth! This is the mighty Avon that wends its way through Shakespeare's Stratford and onward to the Bristol Channel, having risen a couple of miles away in Naseby parish.

Do not cross the bridge for the other side is Northamptonshire and '*there be dragons...*' Retrace your steps back through the pub car park and towards the canal.

Like a finger the canal reaches desperately towards the pub - alas, denied the last few steps to the bar... This is the terminus of the Welford Arm of the Grand Union Canal, built from the start as a navigable feeder to deliver water to the canal from the Sulby, Welford and Naseby reservoirs. Water from the reservoirs is directed through a covered culvert under the pub carpark into the 'finger tip' of the dock.

The two storey dock building here was an interchange warehouse for goods, latterly used as a store and mess

room by Canal & River Trust workers, it also dates from early years of the canal. The canal's proximity to the important turnpike road here is not random - off-loaded goods could be transported onward directly from the canal-side on the well-maintained roadways.

The Welford Arm fell into disuse as canal trade declined after World War II and lay quite derelict and impassable for over 20 years until its re-opening in 1969 following much work by British Waterways and the Old Union Canals Society.



Leaving the wharf buildings make your way along the towpath

Follow the hard track to the moorer's car park and then continue along the narrower towpath around the periphery of the marina, admiring the diversity of the moored craft, their bright colour schemes and flowery sign writing. Canal boats were traditionally brightly decorated, perhaps as a legacy of the boating fraternity's Romany origins.

Following the path around the basin you will soon arrive at Welford Lock. The lock raises the water by 3' 6" (1.66m) from the Grand Union Canal level - the short pound between the lock and Welford terminus is the highest pound on the whole of the Grand Union system.

If you are lucky you may be treated to a boat passing through the lock... The technology of the lock and lock procedure is so simple, robust and reliable that this scene is completely unchanged in over two hundred years. Where will your *iPad* be in 200 years time?

Cross over the lock tail on the over-bridge

Look over the fence to the side of the lock. The strange earthworks, scrubby bushes and brick footings reveal the site of Welford Mill. An under-shot water wheel was fed by a long race from the river Avon. Quite when the mill was lost is itself lost in time but the lone 'sentinel' balance beam post here marks site of a lift bridge that once crossed the canal serving the mill. The green lane leading down to this crossing from the main road is still known as Mill Lane.



Continue along the towpath

Note that the towpath for the next couple of hundred yards here is wider than normal, and flat... This was for access to the fields. Early maps indicate that Naseby Mill was situated in this area - corn from Naseby parish being brought to their own mill, rather than 'sharing' the mill of another parish, that would probably have been working to capacity with their own harvest.

The six acres of the water meadows between the canal and the river Avon here are Bosworth Charity lands, bequeathed to the parish by Thomas Blakesley of Stoney Stanton in the 1720, the rent to provide '*...one shilling a week to be distributed every Sunday as a penny loaf to 12 poor people that faithfully attended Church.*' The Charity continues today at modern values, distributed by trustees to those living alone and retired in the parish.

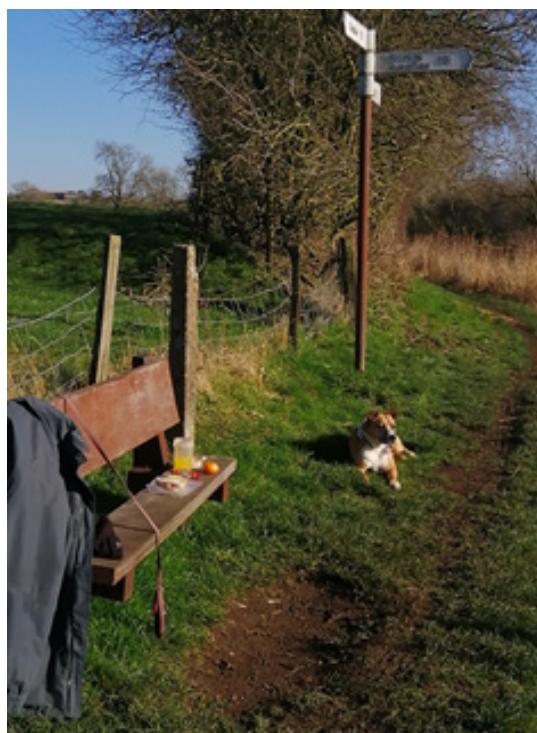
A short distance further on note the wooden over-bridge. This modern bridge replaced an earlier 'accommodation' bridge, built at the time of the canal to accommodate the severance of land belonging to a

single owner. Not a public right of way, this is now the bridge to nowhere, as the land is no longer in the same ownership, a situation typical of the heritage legacies that the waterways authorities sometimes have to comply with.

After a little further Bosworth Mill Farm comes into view on your left. A mill on this site was noted in the Domesday survey in 1089. The mill building, much altered and now a private dwelling (and somewhat subsumed by the extensive modern farm buildings), was milling up to the early 1950s. Traces of the long mill-race that fed water from the river Avon are clearly evident in the pasture below the canal.

Climb up from the canal at the bridge

Cross the bridge and go through the hand gate back down to the canal. You will note that the towpath has now moved to the other bank of the canal. This bridge is a 'turn-over' bridge in that it takes the path across to the other side. Usually this is to accommodate a different landowner, or in this case, to better accommodate passage of the junction. In other places it is has been suggested that changing the towing side evened out the strain on the horse as it towed the boats.



An interesting observation is that towpaths in general are more often than not on the south or west side of the canal, effectively shading the boat horse in its endeavours and protecting it (and the modern-day walker...) from the sun or the prevailing weather!

Soon you come to the junction of the Welford Arm and the main line of the Grand Union Canal Leicester Section.

Pause a while on the conveniently sited bench and look down the line of the canal

The bench was installed by The Old Unions Canal Society, one of a series of benches and moorings installed over the years by the Society along the Leicester Section. Behind you are the footings of the Arm House, a canal lengthsman's cottage, a simple and functional cottage, typical of most of the canal company's buildings.



The cottage had no connection to services, water or electricity, nor access other than by water, and was demolished in the 1960s.

The long straight before you is a great embankment crossing the valley of the river Avon, which pierces the embankment through a brick-lined aqueduct. Vast amounts of material would have been needed to built this monumental structure and it is a tribute to the canal surveyor's skills that ensured that excess material from the cutting and tunnel nearby at Bosworth was just enough to construct the embankment.

Take the path up from the canal side, over the stile

Cross over the bridge, noting how it has been 'saddled' with concrete to strengthen it for modern traffic - the original weight limit being 3 tons. Hop over the stile to the canal again on the other side. Follow the towpath along the embankment. The canal here was dammed off and emptied about 20 years ago, and re-lined with a concrete trough to reinforce it when the integrity of the structure was threatened by badger activity. About half way along the straight the Canal & River Trust have recently installed steps down to the aqueduct, for inspection and maintenance. The aqueduct and river mark the county boundary between Leicestershire and Northamptonshire.

At this point our Walk returns the way whence it came...

An alternative return would be to follow the Mary Gilbert Walk - carry on to bridge 40 and follow the waymark signs back to Welford - but, beware, you will be straying into Northamptonshire and may need an assortment of coloured beads and pieces of broken glass to trade with the natives...

Retrace your steps back to the Arm and head back towards Welford. Soon you get back to the bridge 1, the

turnover bridge with Mill Farm buildings on the high ground, opposite Bosworth Mill.

The bridge, brick-arched with a substantial coped brick parapet, is typical of most of the bridges built by the Grand Junction Canal Company. The whole canal was built nominally to a wide beam specification of 14 foot navigable width, but the narrow locks at both ends of the pound at Watford and Foxton meant that wide barges were never able to access this section. A boat lift opened at Foxton in 1899, to allow the passage of wide beam barges, was never a commercial success and a similar lift planned for Watford was never built. Incidentally, wide beam boats, typically over 12 foot wide, are called 'barges'; whilst their 'thin'

sisters, such as those that we see today - of 7 foot beam - are called 'narrowboats'!

A deep seam of gravel, a vast post-Ice Age riverbed, carries through Bosworth parish diagonally from Bosworth Hall, beneath the canal in this area to outcrop over the border in Northamptonshire. In the 1950s a series of electrically pumped wells in the ground rising up from the canal offside here drew water from the aquifer held within these gravel beds and the water was piped to Market Harborough.

Later, when commercial mineral excavation in the Bosworth gravel beds here was approaching the canal 'corridor' extraction was brought to a halt for fear of compromising the integrity of the canal. A proposal to



excavate mineral on the Northamptonshire side and convey it on a clackity conveyor over the canal, and more than a mile back to the Bosworth Quarry processing plant, was mercifully shelved.

A little further on, the farm on the hillside is Glebe Farm. Now in private ownership, glebe land was an area of church land that was owned in freehold for the benefit of the rector of the parish or supported the incumbent by rent or profit accrued therefrom. Much glebe land was sold off by the Church during the Depression years following the Great War, when it was difficult to find tenants for the farms.

Soon we are back at the lock

At the head of the lock, beside the overflow weir is a way marked public footpath that leads across the fields to Welford village and makes a pleasant diversion across the low-lying water meadows, especially in summer.

Rest a while on the bench installed by The Old Union Canal Society and Husbands Bosworth Parish Council to mark the 50th anniversary of the re-opening of the Welford Arm in May 1969.

Pause here and study the workings of the lock. A boat can only enter or leave a lock if the water levels are equal on either side of the lock gate. A system of paddles, or sluices allow the boater to adjust the lock water level by letting water in or out, as required. Once in the lock the boater can then either raise or lower his boat by letting water in or letting it out. In common mythology it was Leonardo da Vinci who came up with the idea of the mitre lock gate - previously navigators had relied on a slow and cumbersome system of removable dams.



The towpath diverts around the marina

This 'new' marina was created in the remains of a former clay pit and brickworks. When the marina was opened an over-bridge took the towpath over the marina connection to the main canal but in recent years the bridge fell into disrepair and was removed on safety grounds. The track around the moorings was opened to allow continued towpath access.



Soon we are back at the wharf area. Pause a while and study the maps and drawing in the interpretative 'pagoda'. You will see that there are a number of circular walks, ranging from two to eight miles from this spot, which can be downloaded at:

www.wharfinnwelford.co.uk

Alongside the pagoda is a cast steel weight, inscribed '10 cwt.' (0.453 tonnes) This is a gauging weight used by the canal company to estimate the loading of a boat for toll purposes. A number of weights would be lowered (carefully...) into the boat and the amount that the boat 'sank' measured as each was loaded. The measurements

would be logged and recorded in a ledger specific to each vessel - a long-winded operation to compute the tonnage carried, which had to be done for every vessel that was likely to use that part of the canal system. Whenever a boat came to a toll office - usually where the jurisdiction transferred from one canal company to another - the free-board was measured, checked against the company's records, then the appropriate toll charge based on the tonnage would be levied and the vessel allowed to pass. Carrying up to 20 tons each, when previously most traffic was conveyed by horse and cart carrying only three tons, narrowboats were truly the juggernauts of their era!

The complicated and fragmented toll system was eventually abandoned in 1948 when much of the canal and navigable rivers network was nationalised and brought under a single waterways authority.

At the side of the dock is the site of the lime kilns, where the limestone and coal was burnt. An interpretative sign explains the technicalities of the operation!

Now, at the end of your journey you may feel that you have earned a little refreshment...

Check out *Tottie's Teas*, serving wholesome, homemade snacks and teas from the old canal buildings. For a more substantial repast *The Wharf Inn* has a licensed bar, serves hot and cold meals throughout the day, and also provides accommodation. (Tel: 01858 575075)