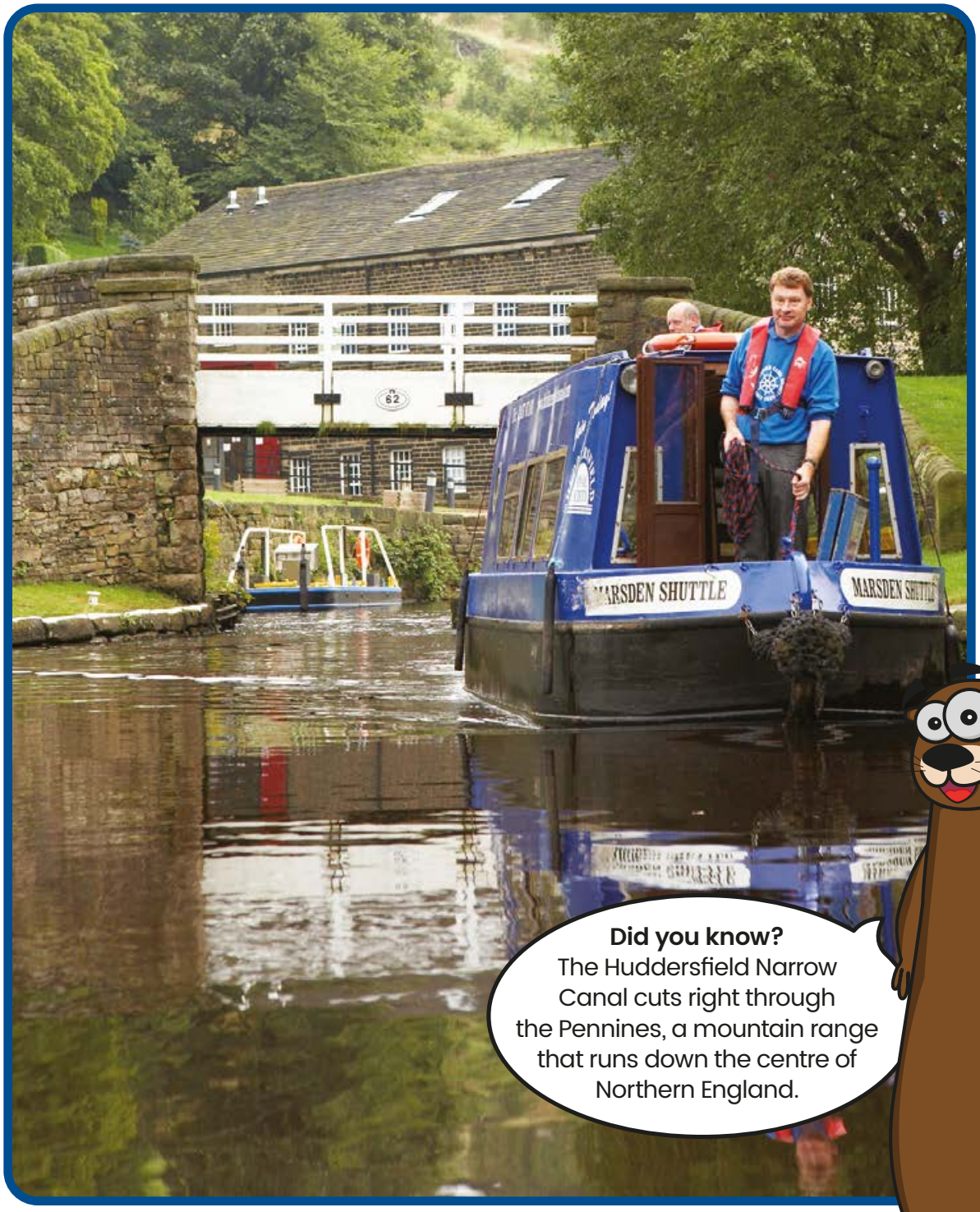
Canal & River Trust

Explorers

Huddersfield Narrow Canal Fact File



Did you know?
The Huddersfield Narrow Canal cuts right through the Pennines, a mountain range that runs down the centre of Northern England.

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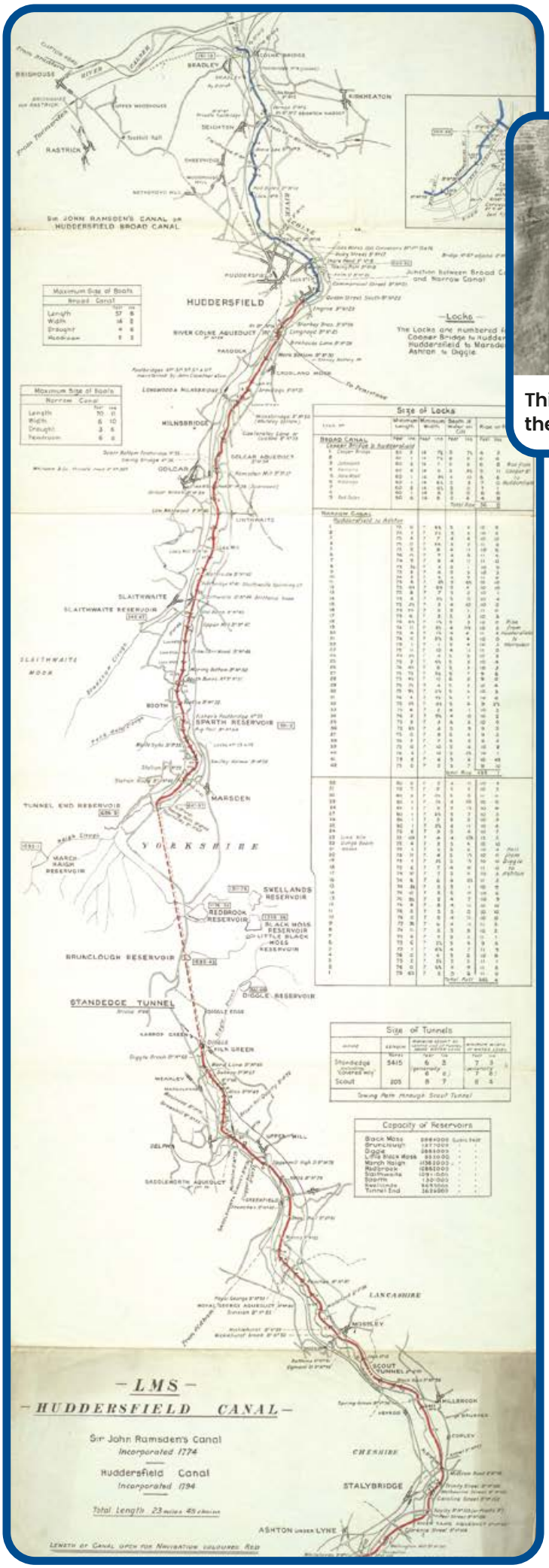


Map of the Huddersfield Narrow Canal.

This picture was taken in Huddersfield. What do you think the path next to the canal was for?

Timeline

1794 Work starts on building the canal.

1797 The first section of canal is finished and opened.

1810 First boat passes through Standedge Tunnel.

1811 The Huddersfield Narrow Canal officially opens.

1833 Official leggers hired to work in the tunnel.

1845 Canal joins with Huddersfield Railway Co.

1847 Canal and Railway Company taken over by the London & North Western Railway Company.

1921 Last working boat goes through Standedge Tunnel.

1944 Canal abandoned by Act of Parliament.

1951 Most of the locks are removed and replaced with concrete weirs.

1974 Huddersfield Canal Society formed to restore the canal.

2001 After years of surveys, fundraising, hard work and meetings, the canal is brought back to life. Once again boats can navigate the whole 20 mile length of the canal.

2001 Standedge Tunnel and visitor centre are officially opened.

A Canal through the Pennines

When the idea for a canal crossing the Pennines was thought up, it must have seemed a strange idea to many people. In order to travel up or down hill by boat locks are needed.

However, demand for a canal to link the east and west of the country was so great that 3 were eventually built across this bleak and difficult land. One of these the Rochdale Canal was already up and running by the time the Huddersfield Narrow Canal was built. It took a less complicated although longer route.

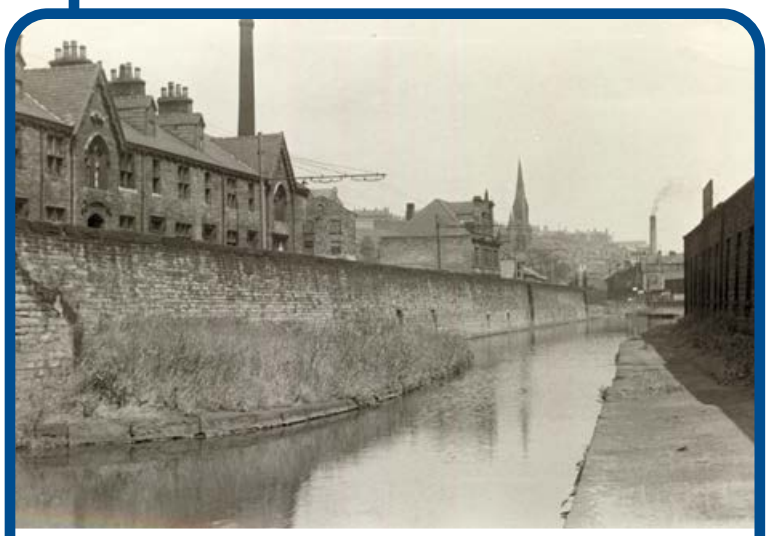
For the Huddersfield Narrow Canal to succeed it had to offer a shorter route. This meant building it straight through the mountains using a tunnel but these were expensive to build and took a lot of engineering skill. The Huddersfield Narrow Canal is 20 miles long, with 74 locks to take boats up and over the Pennines. Standedge Tunnel is 3 miles long – the longest and deepest and highest tunnel in the United Kingdom.

Why not visit Standedge Tunnel and have a look at the longest tunnel in Britain yourself?

Why was a canal needed?

In the 1700s Huddersfield was growing in importance as a centre for making woollen cloth. About one third of all English wool production was located in the Pennines and much of the cloth was shipped abroad through the ports of Liverpool and Hull. The factory owners needed a cheap and reliable way of transporting their goods to the ports. Other canals had proved it was an good way to move cargo and provided an excellent solution for towns that did not have navigable rivers - ones deep enough to sail along by boat.

The Huddersfield Narrow Canal joined up existing canals to connect the seaports of Liverpool and Hull by the shortest route. Wool could be carried to the factories and cloth out to the ports to be sent abroad. Other goods transported were coal, corn and stone, especially limestone.



Why do you think it was a good idea to build new factories and warehouses right next to the canal?

Tunnel End Reservoir

It was hard to keep the canal topped up with water so reservoirs were built to store water up in the hills.

Building the canal

Building began in 1794 – not a good year to start as England was at war with France and taxes were put up to fund the war. There was not much spare money to pay for such a difficult canal project. Taxes continued to rise and bad crops meant life was difficult.

Then Standedge Tunnel took much longer to build than expected and the canal company almost ran out of money. The canal at either side of the tunnel opened early but this was only used by local businesses and so generated little income. Finally the tunnel was completed and opened in 1811 with many important guests present.

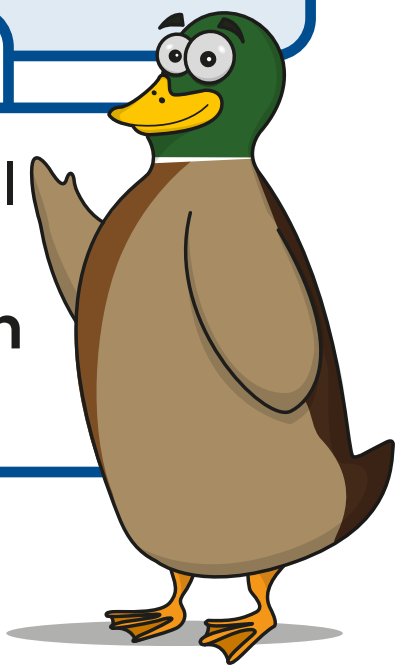
Fascinating Facts

It has **74** locks, **10** reservoirs and **5** aqueducts.

The canal is **19** miles = **34km** long.

The **total** cost of the canal and tunnel was £402,653, which is about **£20 million** in today's money.

At its highest point it **196m** above sea level.



Always remember to stay **SAFE** near water - **S**tay **A**way **F**rom the **E**dge.

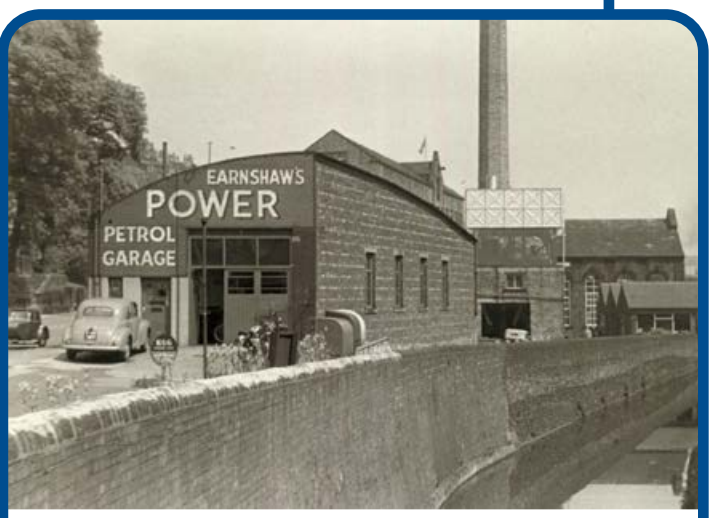
So was the canal a success?

At first trade on the canal was slow. The war with France meant sending goods to other countries was difficult and expensive. The Rochdale Canal was completed in 1804 and was being used before the Huddersfield Narrow Canal opened. Although it was a longer route, it was easier for boaters as they did not have to take their boats through the Standedge Tunnel.

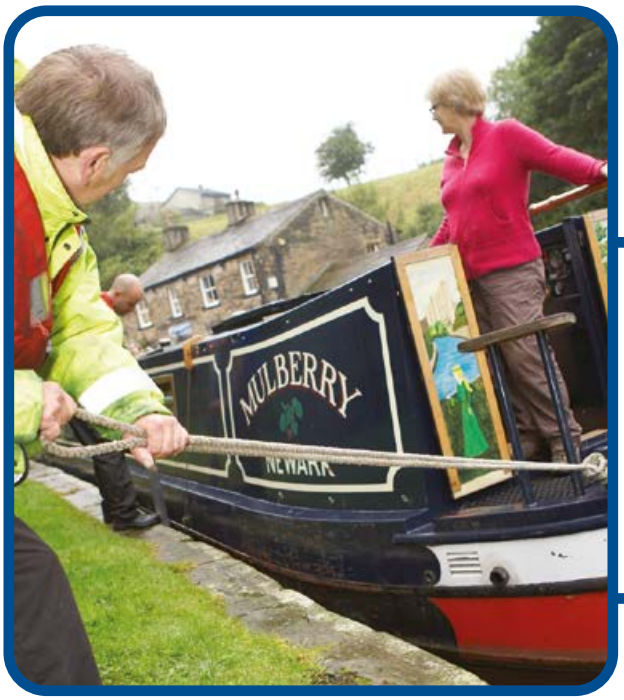
By the 1830s things began to settle down and business was going well. The canal company was able to pay off some of the money it owed. The canal was used as a quick route through the Pennines and the canal company even employed leggers (people to push the boats through with their legs) to speed up getting boats through the tunnel.

Unfortunately things didn't stay this way for long as the building of railways provided a quicker way to transport goods. The weather was also a problem with the canal being closed several times due to drought and ice.

In 1921 the last working boat went through Standedge Tunnel and by 1938 the canal was no longer being maintained; it was closed 6 years later. Soon bridges were lowered or removed and some sections of the canal were built over and destroyed completely.



This is a photo of Huddersfield. Can you spot any clues to work out when it was taken?



Boats on the Huddersfield Narrow Canal

Boats using narrow canals are usually around 70 feet (21 metres) long by 7 feet (2.1 metres) wide. However, many of the narrow boats on the Huddersfield Narrow Canal were built to be only around 57 feet (17.5 metres) long so they would fit into the locks on nearby canals.

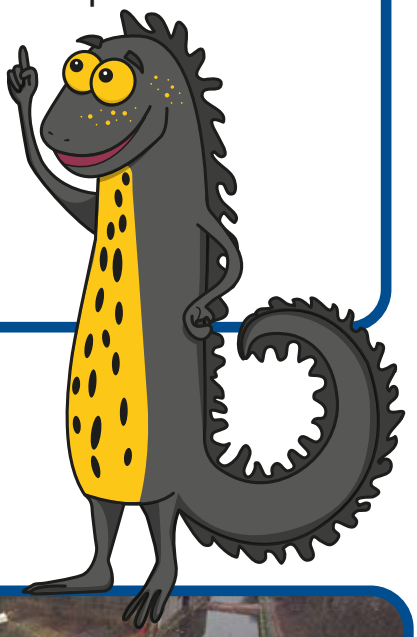
People on the Huddersfield Narrow Canal

We don't know a lot about the people who worked on building the canal. One family we do know something about are the Bourne family; John, his wife Betty, and their son Thomas. John moved to the area to work on the canal. He worked as a miner in the tunnel and then later became the first Superintendent of the tunnel. It is thought that Betty supervised one of water engines used to take rubble out of the construction shafts used to build the tunnel. When the tunnel was finished, they moved into Tunnel End Cottage which was much nicer than their wooden hut they lived in while the tunnel was being built.

> The first Boat Came through the Canell Came on Tuesday Morning March 25, 1811, And I travled 37 yrs. Withen 8 dayes, Backwards and Forwards 4 Times a Day Sundays an All unless the Canall Was Stopt and Carid Many Thousands of Money over and Never Was a Penny Short Nor Longer in my hands than is help.

A letter written by Thomas Bourne

Thomas Bourne, at just 12 years old, became a traffic regulator. This meant seeing the boats into the tunnel and then walking across the moor to see them out of the other end. He must have gone through a lot of boots in his time!



So what happened to the canal?

In 1974 the Huddersfield Canal Society was formed, a group of enthusiasts determined to restore the canal to its former glory. Despite the huge size of the task they began to build support and the group grew. Surveys of the area were done, money raised and the restoration of the canal began.

Silt was removed from the tunnel and although some parts were in good repair, there were several areas that had collapsed and needed rebuilding.

Eventually in 2001 the canal, including Standedge Tunnel was reopened, along with a visitor centre and boats could once again cross the Pennines on the Huddersfield Narrow Canal.

How do you think the equipment the engineers used to restore the canal was different from the tools that were used to make it?

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