

Birmingham Canal Navigations

FACT FILE



Today, the BCN has 100 miles of navigable canals

Cool canals

Birmingham Canal Navigations (BCN) is a knotty network of canals linking towns and country together. At its centre, Gas Street Basin is busy with boaters, walkers and cyclists. But there are also secret branch canals just waiting to be explored!



The BCN is one of the most complicated canal networks in the world!

This fact file is designed to help you with homework and other projects.

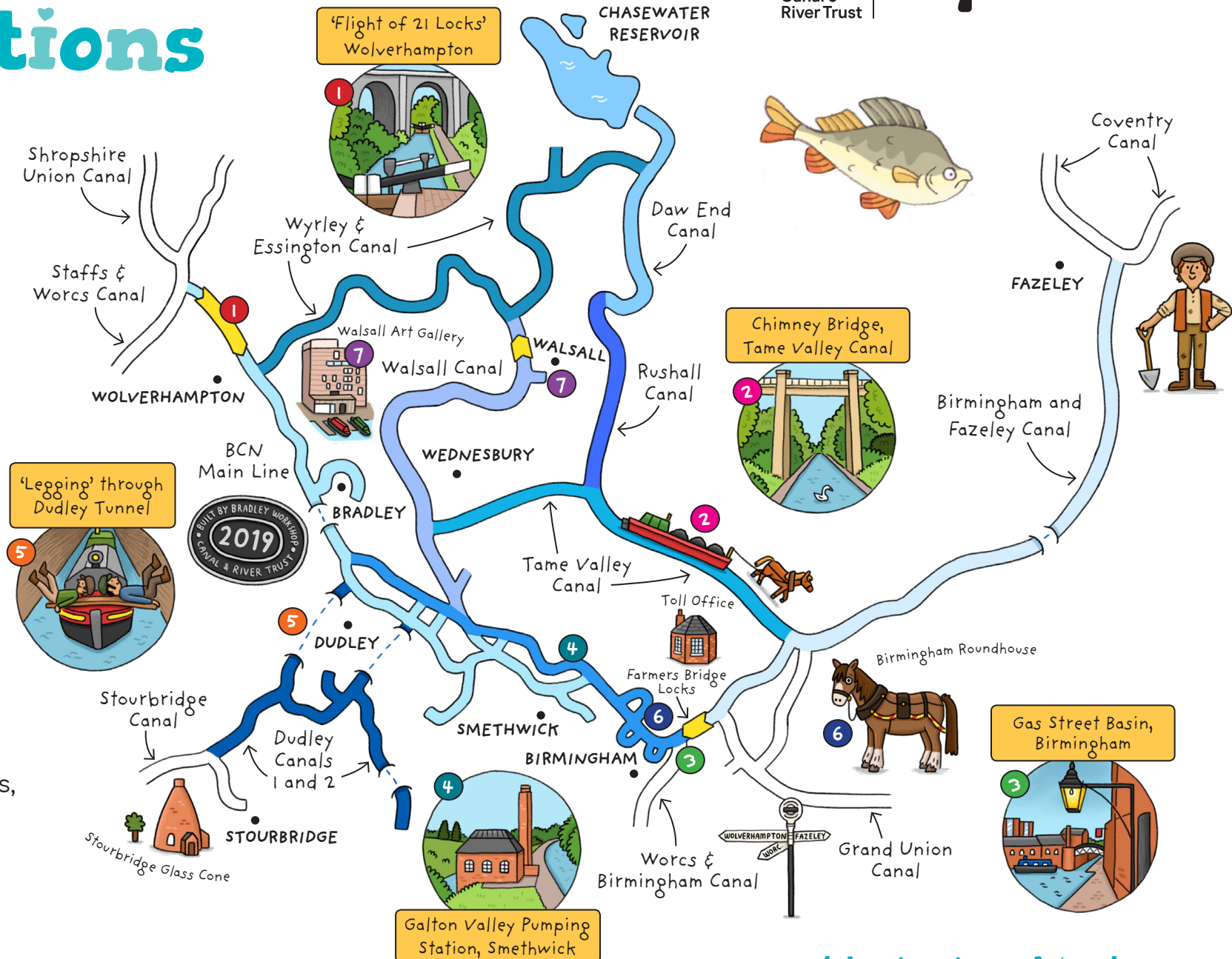
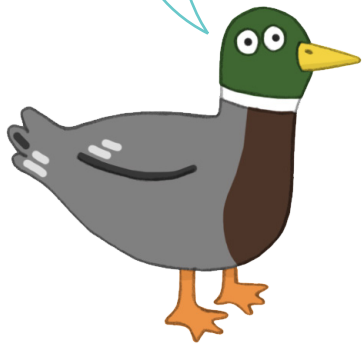
It will help you:

- Find out who built the BCN
- Discover all about your local canal
- See where it goes



Birmingham Canal Navigations

Which is your nearest canal? What's it called?



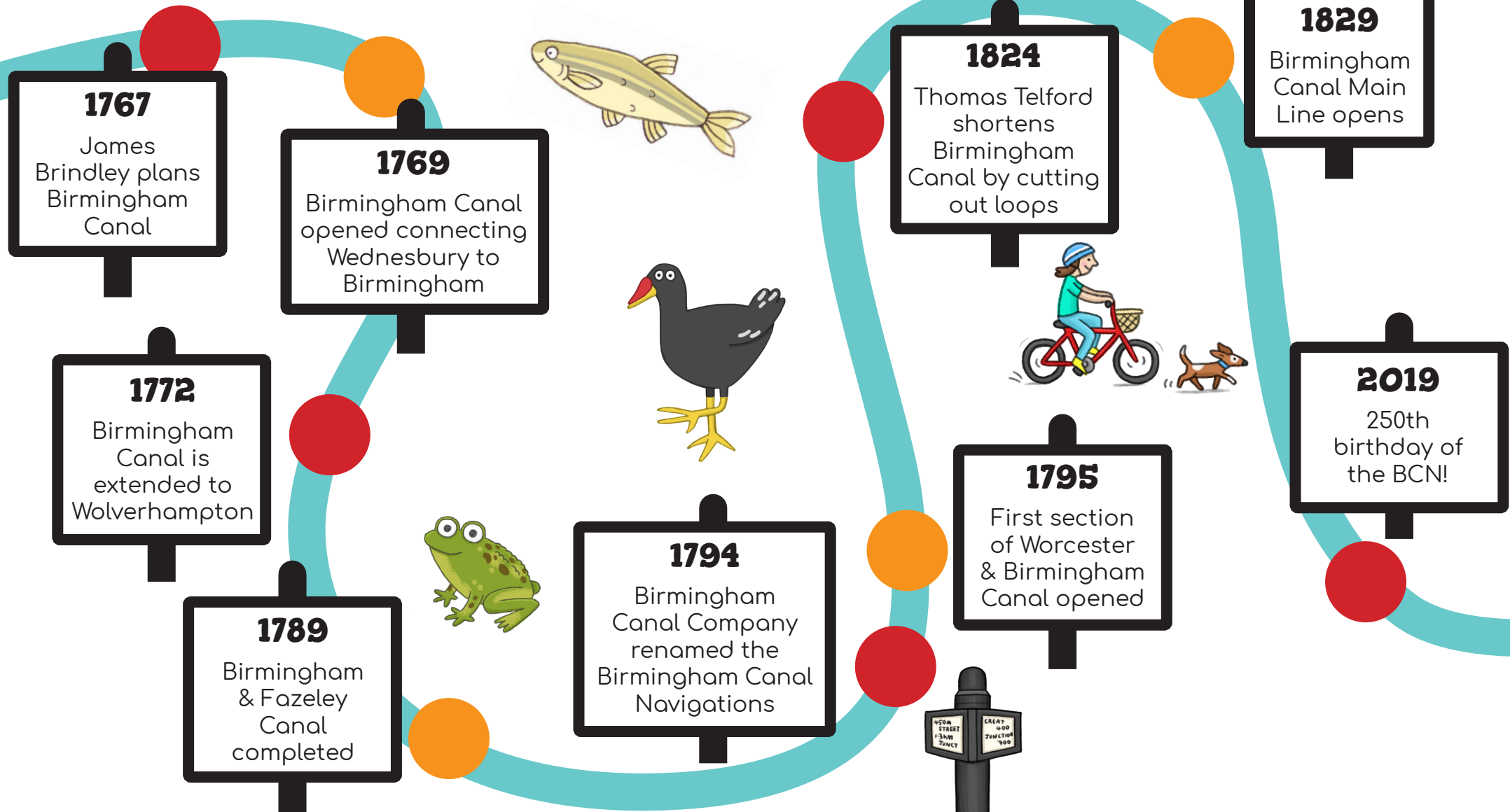
A powerhouse

Two hundred years ago, at the height of its importance, the BCN had 160 miles (257 km) of canals, 206 locks, 17 pumping stations, 7 tunnels and 6 reservoirs.





What Happened When

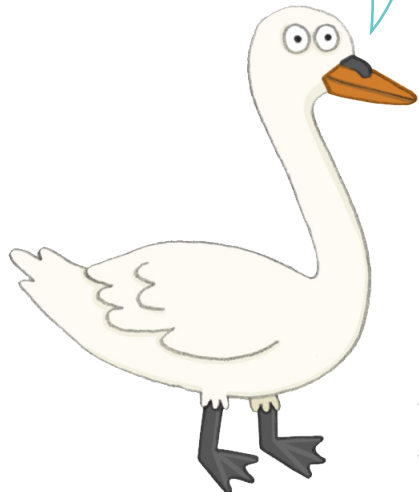


Birmingham's first canal

In 1767, businessmen in the Midlands raised money to build a ten-mile-long canal linking the coal mines in Wednesbury to Birmingham. They knew that if coal could be delivered quickly and cheaply by canal into the centre of Birmingham they would make lots of money!

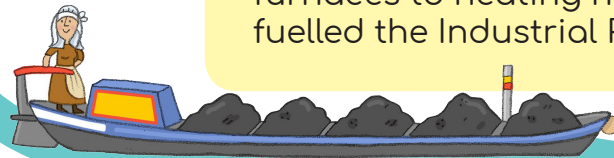


James Brindley planned the canal to follow the natural contours of the land. Tunnels and locks were expensive



Success!

The Birmingham Canal did so well it was extended to Wolverhampton where it joined the Staffordshire & Worcestershire Canal. Now Birmingham had a direct trading link to the River Severn via Stourport, and the seaports of Bristol and Gloucester.



King coal

In the 1700s, coal was used to run everything from machines and furnaces to heating homes. It fuelled the Industrial Revolution!



A packhorse could carry about 140kg. A canal boat towed by one horse could pull 25 tonnes. No contest!

Potholes and puddles

Before canals were built, goods were delivered by packhorse. The roads were so bad it was slow and hard going.



Now our goods can be imported and exported abroad much more easily





Rivals!

It wasn't long before rival canal companies planned new canals to link coal mines near Walsall to factories in the West Midlands.

Birmingham's second canal

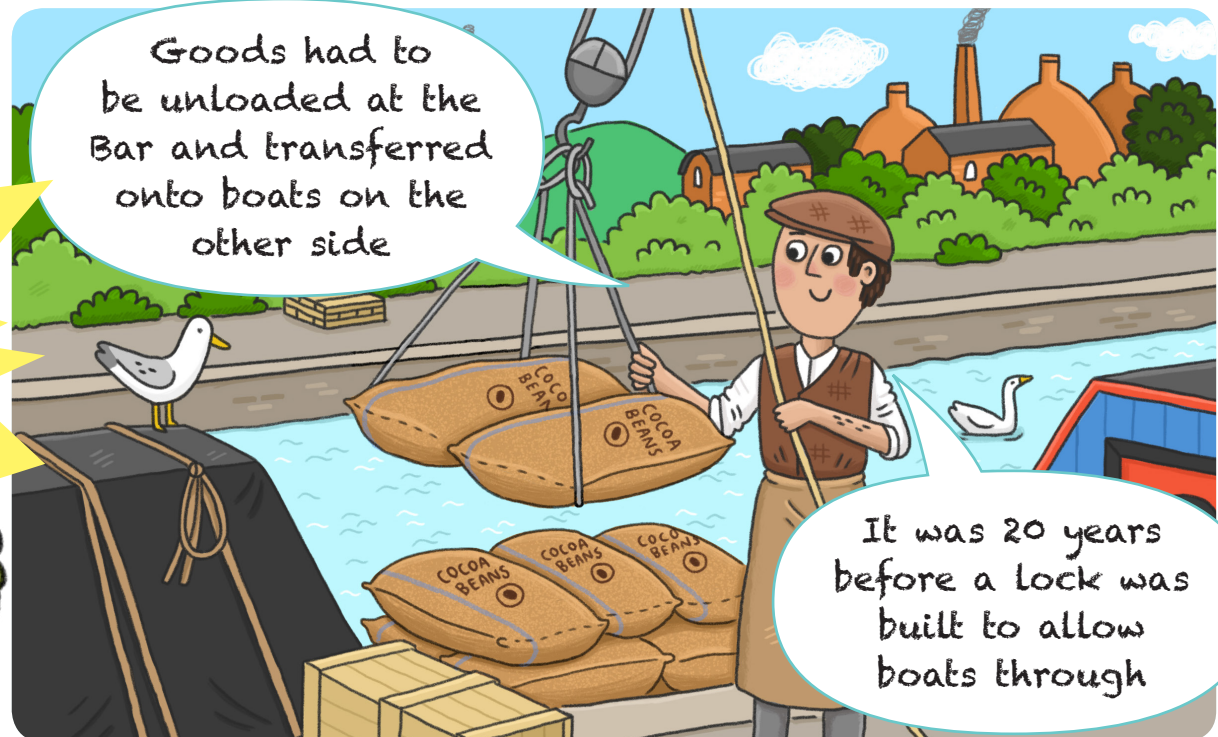
In 1787, John Smeaton, built the Birmingham & Fazeley Canal. It linked the Coventry Canal to the Birmingham Canal and provided a connection to London.

The 13 Farmers Bridge Locks on the Birmingham & Fazeley were so busy they operated around the clock. Fights often broke out when boaters were forced to wait their turn.



A new route to the sea

In 1795, the first section of the Worcester & Birmingham Canal was opened. It was a shorter route to the River Severn and the sea. To protect its own trade, the Birmingham Canal Company refused to join the new canal. The Worcester Bar was built to separate the two rival canals at Gas Street Basin.



Birmingham's third canal

In 1824, Thomas Telford drew up plans to straighten the Birmingham Canal. He cut through hills and built embankments of earth to cross valleys. It was renamed the Birmingham Canal Main Line.

Cargo

Bulky goods such as coal were loaded and unloaded onto wharves. Perishable goods such as spices and tea were stored in warehouses.

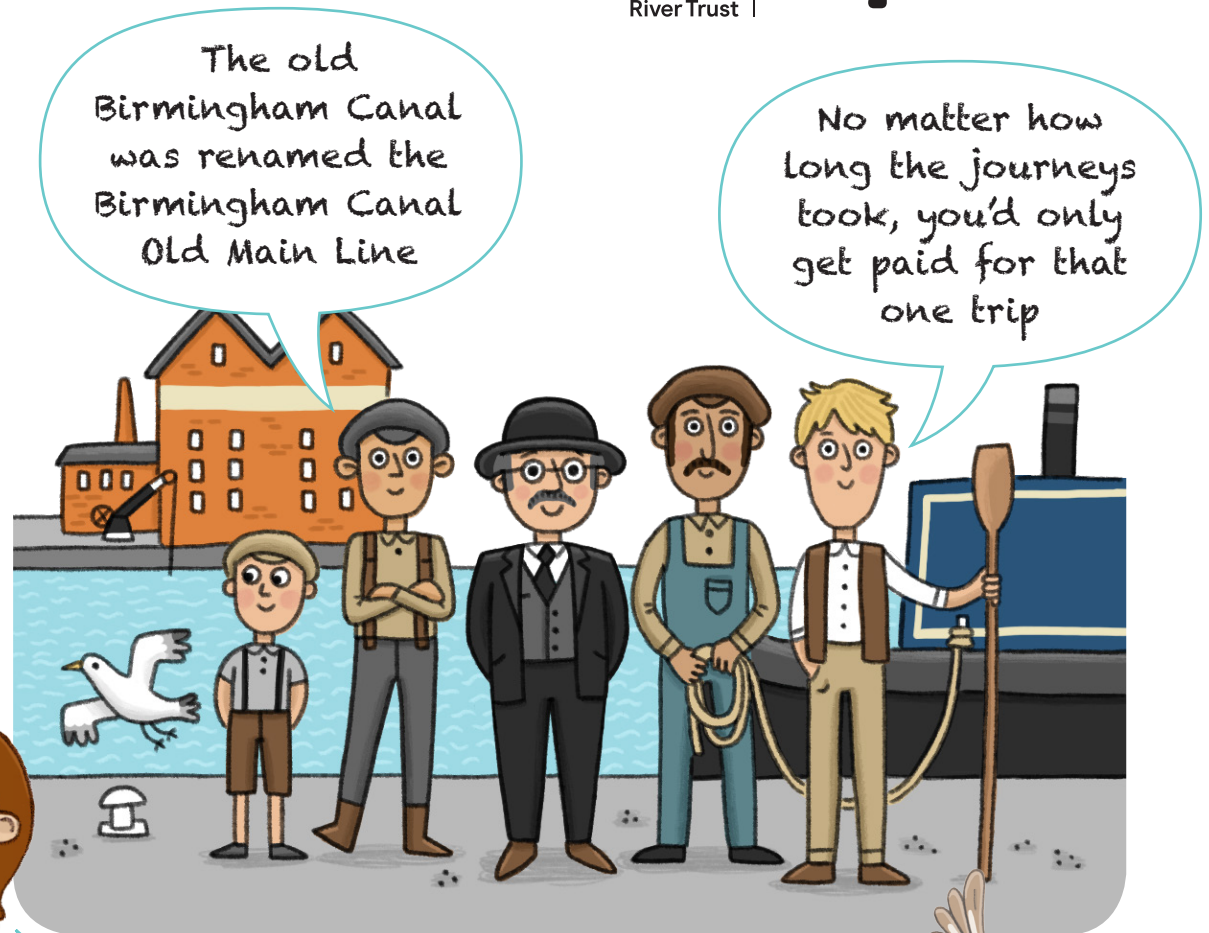


Chocolate!

John Cadbury stored tea and cocoa in Birmingham warehouses. Later he moved his business to Bournville on the Worcester & Birmingham Canal.

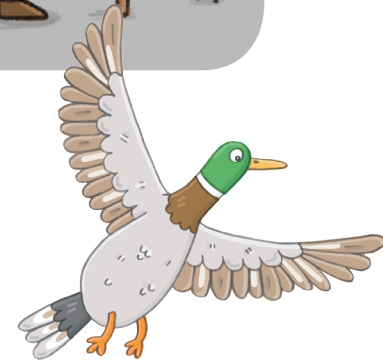


That's where Cadbury World is today. Yippee!



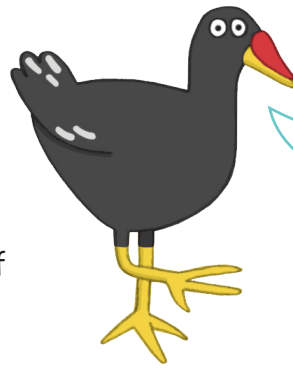
The birth of the BCN

As other companies built canals such as the Wyrley & Essington Canal, they all became one company known as the BCN.



Building canals

James Brindley, Thomas Telford and John Smeaton, the greatest canal engineers of their day, planned the canals. But teams of men called navvies built them. It was hard and dangerous work.



'Navy'
is short for
navigators



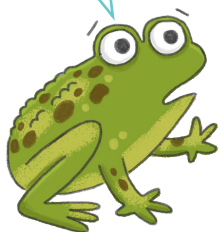
Bad accidents
killed many of
my mates



Tools of the trade

There were no machines - navvies used just picks, spades and muscle power to dig through hills, valleys and hard rock.

Phew!



Without us
you wouldn't
have canals!

These are
the BCN canals
we built



Birmingham & Fazeley Canal
Birmingham Canal Main Line
Birmingham Canal Old Main Line
Daw End Branch Canal
Dudley No. 1 Canal

Dudley No. 2 Canal
Rushall Canal
Tame Valley Canal
Walsall Canal
Wyrely & Essington Canal

Roads and railways

In the twentieth century, it became much cheaper to transport goods by road or rail. The noisy wharves and busy canals were abandoned. Interesting canal buildings and fantastic engineering achievements became derelict.



Hot property

Property developers knew that many people loved to live and work by water and converted old warehouses into new offices and homes.



Explorers

Help at hand

Then, just after the Second World War people began to realise that an important part of our history was being lost. They formed groups and gradually cleared all the rubbish and weeds, mended canal banks and rebuilt locks.



Today, school children often help keep canals clear of rubbish for everyone to enjoy.

I like spotting the wildlife

The Canal & River Trust owns and manages the BCN today

People often say that Birmingham has more canals than Venice - one of Europe's most beautiful cities!



Want to know more about your canal?

Book a FREE trip for your school or group to the BCN, led by our fantastic team of Explorers Education Volunteers!

Visit canalrivertrust.org.uk/explorers to find out more and download other learning resources.