

A Tale of Two Canals

MAGAZINE

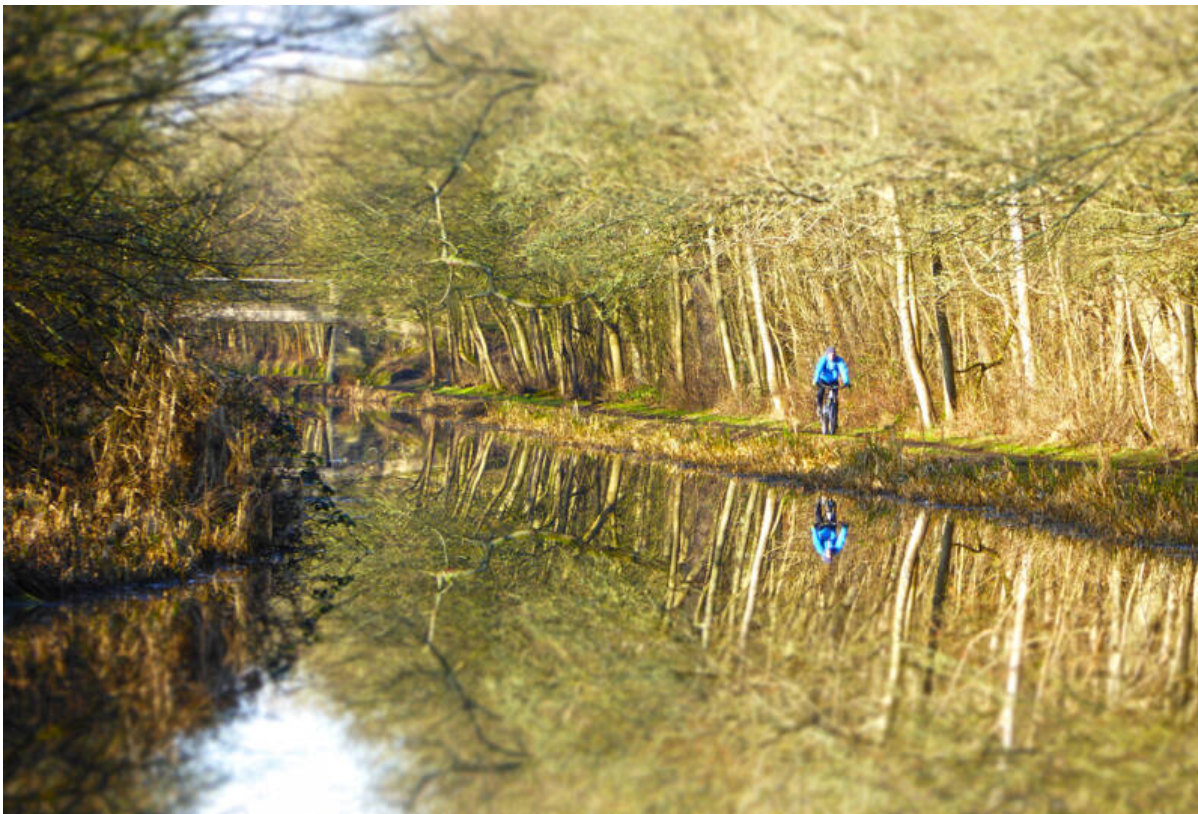
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<https://www.walkhighlands.co.uk/news/a-tale-of-two-canal/>



If I set you the challenge of walking or cycling between Edinburgh and Glasgow, how much poring over maps would you do to find the best route? You'd want it to be as pleasant as possible of course, so you'd probably want to avoid roads, avoid complicated navigation problems and, assuming that you ARE off-road, be as certain as you can be that the paths would be in reasonable condition.

You'll probably lose a few weeks of your life pondering this one so let me save you the bother by asking.....would it occur to you to simply use the canals?



The Union Canal at Winchburgh

For the first few years that I lived in Edinburgh that answer would have been a firm 'no', as I wasn't aware the two cities were connected by water. I was barely aware of the Union Canal until I moved from Roseburn to Gorgie, and even then I only ever used it as a lovely means of walking into town via its final 1.8km. I had no idea what would happen if I headed west instead of east. Where on earth did it go?

I knew it went SOMEWHERE because there were always plenty of people heading west on the towpath, but curiosity never really got the better of me, not even when I worked in a canal-side office at Wester Hailes for three whole years. For reasons I still can't fathom, in all that time it never occurred to me that I could cycle to and from work along the canal every day rather than being stuck in smelly traffic on Calder Road, and so I foolishly remained in ignorance of the other 51km of useful Union Canal towpath to my west. Isn't hindsight marvellous?

But yep it's true, you can indeed walk or cycle from central Edinburgh out through West Lothian and Falkirk to the Union Canal's end at the Falkirk Wheel. There you can seamlessly join the Forth & Clyde Canal, and then it's 38km along the towpaths to Glasgow. In all, **90km end-to-end**, and most impressively of all it's almost entirely traffic-free! In a land as densely populated as Scotland's Central Belt, that's quite remarkable really, and an incredible resource for recreation and active travel.

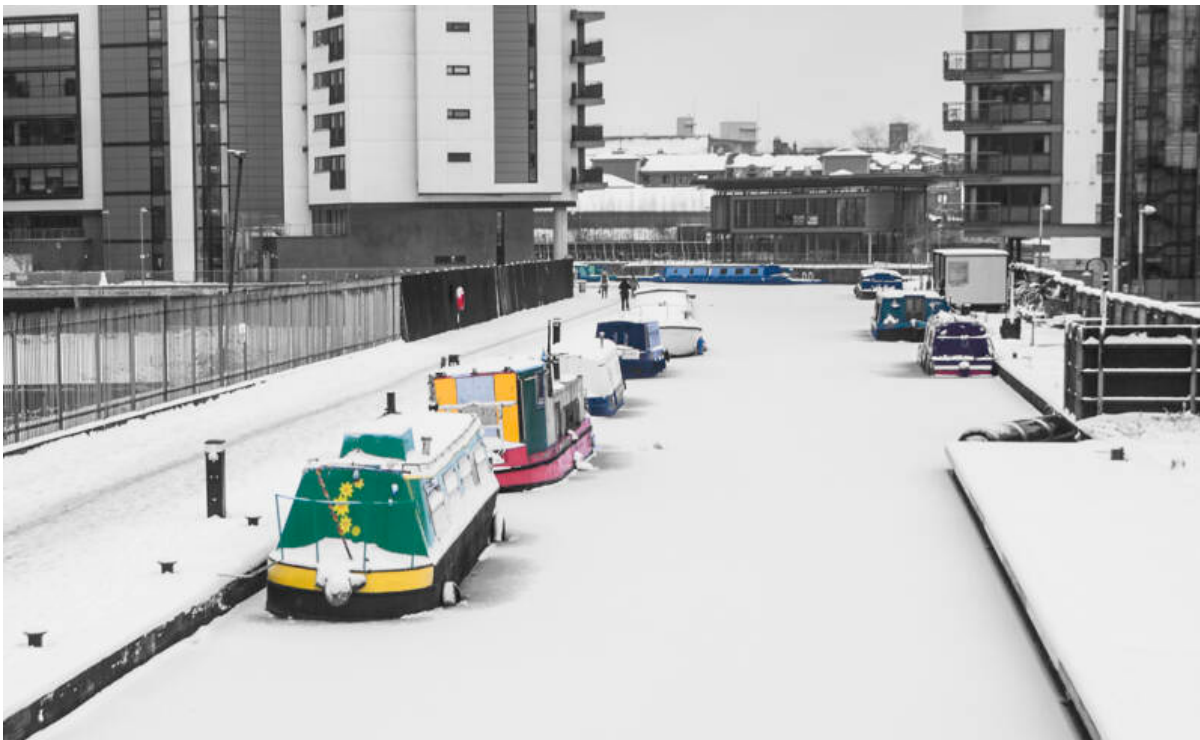
Necessity breeds invention

Of course, the canals weren't conceived as a far-sighted act of benevolence to give future Scots nice places to relax, commute along and live alongside. No, they were commercial endeavours, designed to facilitate trade and industry.

Roads had been adequate for the kinds of pre-industrial industries that could be transported by horse and cart, but by the mid 18th century the weight and volume of new mineral resources, coupled with the exponential growth in industrial demand, meant that roads were never going to be up to the task.

Most were unsurfaced dirt tracks that could turn to mud after rain, although as we all know, it hardly ever rains in Scotland. On the road, a horse could pull a tonne of coal but on a canal towpath it could pull 50 times that weight. Plus, the journey along a canal was silky smooth compared to the bumpy 'will my goods even survive this journey?' lottery of the roads.

Necessity breeds invention, and few things are as 'necessary' as profit. Scotland therefore saw an unprecedented drive to overhaul its water-borne transport network in the mid 18th to early 19th centuries, either by creating shortcuts to make travel and trade easier and quicker (such as at [Crinan](#) and along the [Great Glen](#)), or to connect vital resources with their markets. The Monkland Canal, for example, was constructed purely to transport coal direct from source to Glasgow.



Edinburgh's

Lochrin Basin during the 2009 freeze

Construction of the [Forth & Clyde Canal](#) started in 1768, with the intent of linking the two great Firths and, in so doing, save sea-going vessels from the long and uncertain journey around Scotland's perilous coastline.

Having opened in 1790 as the world's first sea-to-sea canal, it runs 35 miles from Grangemouth on the Forth, to Bowling on the Clyde. It has a height gain of 47 metres and its 15-mile 'summit', located between Maryhill and Cumbernauld, is attained by 20 locks on the Forth side and 19 on the Clyde side.

The [Union Canal](#) opened three decades later in 1822, and was conceived as a means of getting coal and building stone right into Edinburgh. Unlike most other canals, the use of locks was avoided by sticking to the 73m contour for its entire length, save for a flight of 11 locks at Camelon where it had to descend 35 metres to link with the Forth & Clyde.

The canals were enormously successful. Not just for trade but also for passengers. It might seem a sedate and quaint mode of transport to us now, but back in their day the canals were the highways of the age. In

the early 1830s, a unique horse-towed express service between Johnstone and Port Eglinton on the Glasgow, Paisley and Johnstone Canal was apparently carrying more than 300,000 passengers a year into the city at a racy 10mph!

However, canals flourished only relatively briefly in transport terms. In 1825, just three years after the Union Canal opened, the world's first public passenger railway to be powered by steam (the Stockton & Darlington) opened in England. While the early railways initially intersected canals for mutual benefit, the latter were nonetheless living on borrowed time thereafter.

The Fall and the Rise

The Edinburgh-Glasgow railway opened in 1842 and the Union Canal was immediately sidelined, not least because the railway followed the canal for much of its length. Passenger services ceased almost immediately and commercial transport declined after that. The Forth & Clyde fared a little better, with pleasure cruises and coast-to-coast transits continuing into the 20th Century, although as sea-faring vessels got bigger and could no longer fit through the channel, its importance waned.

In 1933 the locks linking the Union with the Forth & Clyde were removed and filled-in, but the arrival of post-war roads was the final nail in the coffin for the two canals, with whole sections in-filled and sacrificed to road building. Both were formally closed to navigation by 1965 and, thereafter, like many of Britain's canals they fell into disrepair and neglect, becoming overgrown, dirty and choked with weeds and.....no doubt....bicycles.

Thankfully, in the same way that disused railways were repurposed as cycle paths, and Forestry Commission war-chest plantations became important for recreation, the canals experienced a similar rebirth. That rebirth might seem a complete no-brainer to us now but it was far from certain. It required hard-fought campaigning by dedicated individuals who saw the canals' potential.



Canal tech

from different eras, at either end of the Union Canal.

The massively ambitious Millennium Link project restored lost sections, built new bridges, and restored the Forth & Clyde sea-to-sea connection in 2001. The next year, the remarkable Falkirk Wheel opened and linked the two canals for the first time in 70 years.

Glasgow's Port Dundas spur reopened in 2006, and in 2015 Falkirk's [Helix development](#) initiated regeneration between the Wheel and the Forth via new sea locks and the imposing Kelpies. Countless other regeneration projects have followed since then, with still more in the pipeline.

True, this is Scotland of course so it's not always pretty. A walk along a post-industrial canal is arguably a truer and more insightful look into the heart of a country than you'll get in any guidebook. But because the canals have been there for 200+ years there's a long list of historic sites and curiosities to see from the canals themselves, or via surprisingly short walks just off them: aqueducts; shale bings; nature reserves; historic towns; Roman ruins; giant horse heads; and a 630m long tunnel to name but a few.

We also have the canal network to thank for some of our favourite beauty spots, well away from the canals themselves. This is because canals lose water quickly through evaporation, leakage etc and therefore need constant replenishing via a series of rivers and culverts fed by reservoirs, many of which were built especially for the purpose of feeding canals.



Top: Walking

out along the Forth & Clyde Canal at Twechar, and walking back along Antonine Wall.

Bottom: Cobbinshaw Reservoir, and racing makeshift rafts at Almondell

The [Crinan Canal](#) alone has ten reservoirs supplying it from neighbouring Knapdale. The Forth and Clyde has five: Birkenburn in the Kilsyth Hills and nearby Banton Loch, which directly supply the canal summit; and the trio of Hillend Reservoir, Black Loch and Lily Loch out by Caldercruix.

Cobbinshaw Reservoir on the West Lothian / South Lanarkshire border was built to supply the Union Canal, which it still does via Murieston Water and the River Almond. In fact my workplace (Almondell and Calderwood Country Park) is home to the Union Canal feeder, which diverts water out of the River Almond and then carries it 3km along a manufactured channel to the Union Canal at the [Lin's Mill Aqueduct](#). At one point the feeder actually crosses the River Almond via an iron aqueduct, which doubles as a pedestrian bridge, and I have fond ranger memories of getting 16 kids to make and race homemade rafts along the feeder's steady but sedate flow.

NATURAL IMPORTANCE

It's hard to overstate the canal network's importance for nature, especially when you include the many reservoirs such as Cobbinshaw, which is now a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) for its wildfowl.

The canals themselves are, naturally, a haven for wildlife, especially where they pass through what are otherwise intensively-managed or highly-urbanised environments. And not just in the water itself, but also along the green edges.

These days the talk in conservation is of connecting fragmented habitats together, and the canals do just that, especially on the non-towpath sides where vegetation is often unmanaged and undisturbed. The result is invaluable ribbons of green and blue stretching unhindered across the landscape, linking other green / blue spaces together and providing essential space, refuge and food for a bewildering diversity of species.



Blue and green ribbons, beneath the shale bings of West Lothian

21 species of fish inhabit the canal network, and there are 315 plant species on the Forth and Clyde alone. Bats, birds, water voles, insects, they all have a home here including rare and protected species like the marsh fritillary butterfly and black throated diver. Otters too of course, and if you haven't already seen the baby otter footage filmed by a passer-by in Fountainbridge last year, then be sure to look it up. It's adorable!

Getting out and about

The two canals offer good cycling options, although given their popularity, the occasionally narrow towpaths and the poor sightlines under old bridges, you should expect to only trundle sedately rather than power along. A bell is an essential bit of canal kit, but you're still likely to have to occasionally hop off your bike to pass other people (especially on narrow aqueducts).

Glasgow, Edinburgh and Falkirk are all well served by trains, so you could easily cycle one way on either of the canals and then get the train back again, or vice versa. And as we have already seen, you're never far from a railway station on the canal, so there are always good escape options for cutting journeys short.

There are enough large towns with accommodation options that you could walk between Glasgow and Edinburgh in a leisurely few days, but just because the two cities are linked by one long pathway doesn't mean you have to do all of it. And if like me, you don't really want to do 'there and back' walks along linear features, there are countless paths and bridges that intersect the canals, meaning that all kinds of inventive walking or cycling loops can be done.

A bespoke favourite loop of mine starts at the Canal Centre in Linlithgow, goes west along the Union Canal as far as the River Avon, and then doubles back to Linlithgow via the River Avon Heritage Trail and the lagoon at Kettilstoun Mains.

It's about 10km and, save for about 90 metres, is completely traffic-free. But the best part is that I get to see the Avon Aqueduct, and I do love an aqueduct! There's something unnatural and beguiling about water flowing over water, and at 247 metres this aqueduct is the second longest in the UK (after Pontcysyllte at Llangollen) and the highest in Scotland. It's a particularly beautiful vista from up there too, towering as it does over an unusually wooded corner of West Lothian.



The Avon

Aqueduct. My favourite feature!

I did [another great loop](#) not so long ago with Inverclyde Ramblers, starting at Auchinstarry Marina near Kilsyth, and then heading out along the Forth & Clyde Canal to Twechar. We left the canal at that point and came back over Bar Hill, taking-in the Roman fort remains, and then followed one of the most impressive sections of the Antonine Wall back to Auchinstarry.

If you prefer a bit of urban exploration, you could incorporate the canals into loops in our two biggest cities. A unique exploration of the city of Glasgow can be done by using the walkways alongside the [Rivers Clyde and Kelvin](#), and then heading back into town via the Forth & Clyde Canal's Glasgow Spur to Port Dundas.

Similarly in Edinburgh you can explore the city by way of the Union Canal, walking from its Fountainbridge terminus to the Slateford Aqueduct, then following the [Water of Leith Walkway](#) to Stockbridge before leaving the river and cutting up through the New Town back into the city centre. Both loops offer unfamiliar takes on familiar cities, and I guarantee that you'll find something interesting and unexpected along the way.

Spending time alongside water can be relaxing and soothing in a way that other habitats and environments just aren't, but there's something about a canal's lazy stillness that slows you down still further. Not always physically perhaps, but certainly mentally. It always amazed me just how serene and quiet it was along the Union Canal in Edinburgh, even when I was hemmed in by a sandstone canyon of tenements. With calming water at my side, wildlife in abundance, and security from nearby traffic, the bustle of the modern world could easily fall away.

Their usage may well have changed in 200 years, but the canals' legacy is undeniable. The fact that you're able to walk tens of miles between and through our largest cities without interruption, is remarkable. And given their benefits to biodiversity, society, and both our mental and physical wellbeing, even in this modern day & age the post-industrial canal is one of those things that if it didn't exist, we'd have to invent it.

Necessity indeed!

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