



FLOATING HOLIDAYS

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FOUR COUNTIES RING ROUTE GUIDE

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INTRODUCTION



Four Counties Ring. Spanning the counties of Shropshire, Staffordshire, Cheshire & The West Midlands gives the Four Counties Ring it's literal name. As you can imagine, taking in such different locales, this route features some unique canal related locations such as The Potteries, stunning countryside scenery, The Harecastle Tunnel & much more!

ATTRACTIONS



This route has something for everyone, featuring views across the open plains of the Cheshire countryside, energetic lock wheeling up “Heartbreak Hill” (with the route in total including 94 locks), the fabulous Harecastle Tunnel. As well as several superb places worth a stop including The Potteries Museums & Factories (Etruria Museum, National Garden Festival & Historic Stoke-On-Trent), Shrugborough Hall, Gailey Round House, Market Drayton & Nantwich Village, The Caldon Canal (time permitting), Stoke City Football Club & The junction of the Llangollen Canal at Barbridge before returning down the Middlewich Arm of the Shropshire Union Canal to return to base at Middlewich Top Wharf.

After a short cruise from our base, and a couple of locks, Heartbreak Hill presents the first real challenge of your boating mettle on this route. The canal climbs to its summit via a section of locks that are close to one another and come in quick succession. Once at the top you are rewarded with some excellent views of the surrounding area and a few lovely pubs to stop at in Kidsgrove at Hardingswood Junction including The Red Bull, Canal Tavern & The Blue Bell Inn.

Once you arrive in Kidsgrove the canal water turns a dark brown orange colour, some say this is due to the pollution from the potteries industries in the area over many years. Another theory is that it is due to the ground’s high content of iron ore and the canal bed’s lining of clay.

The Harecastle Tunnel presents the next major feature on the route. Around 1.5 miles long the tunnel is operated by Canal and River Trust (CRT) staff and you will need to take a short briefing before proceeding and follow the instructions of the staff (see the navigational notes with regards transit times). Also known as the “Scarecastle” Tunnel as it is a 45 minute journey through a dark and wet aperture. Do look out for some spooky ancient graffiti on the walls as you make the journey too!

ATTRACTIONS



After exiting the tunnel you continue a short distance before West Port Lake which has some good visitor facilities for boaters and some nearby shops if you need to stock up on provisions.

At Etruria junction you take the right hand lock to proceed along your journey. If you have adequate time then a detour onto the Caldon Canal – left hand lock – is worth considering and you can find out more information on the route and features of the Caldon Canal on our dedicated page. Etruria is also the location of Festival Park where there is a Waterworld & multi-plex cinema.

Stoke-On-Trent is still very much an active centre of pottery even today. Although it is no longer the main employer and industry in the town, it is still a going concern of the area. Some of the pottery factories are actually open to the public to explore, and it is well worth a stop, especially Wedgwood, Bone Mill at Etruria Museum. Here there is so much to learn about many of the things we take for granted today, such as the art and science behind making those objects we use everyday but with little thought for how they came to be.

Great Haywood is a lovely town to explore and stock up on new supplies, there is a post office, atm, shop, pub, pharmacist and a doctors. The canal here is on the fringes of Shugborough Hall. A National Trust managed estate with grounds to explore as well as the country mansion. Tea rooms, play grounds and a zip line are also available for the more thrill seeking visitors.

ATTRACTIONS



At Tixall Wide the canal bursts into life in a dramatic expansive wide area. The nearby Tixall Hall was demolished in the early 20th century, however the hall did host Mary, Queen of Scots as a “guest” before she met her grisly end. The reason for the inexplicably wide nature of the canal in this area is due to the owner of the land and hall when the canal was built, being decidedly against a water borne motorway crossing his land and spoiling the view. So he insisted upon it beign made so wide so that it looked like a lovely lake from the house. The Elizabethan gatehouse can still be seen today from the canal when passing Tixall Wide.

Gailey Round House is a striking looking building as you go along the canal, currently a small shop with the nearby lock keepers cottage a private dwelling. The area here is steeped in history and was involved in the early transformation of the canals from commercial carrying to that of a pleasure craft boating nature.

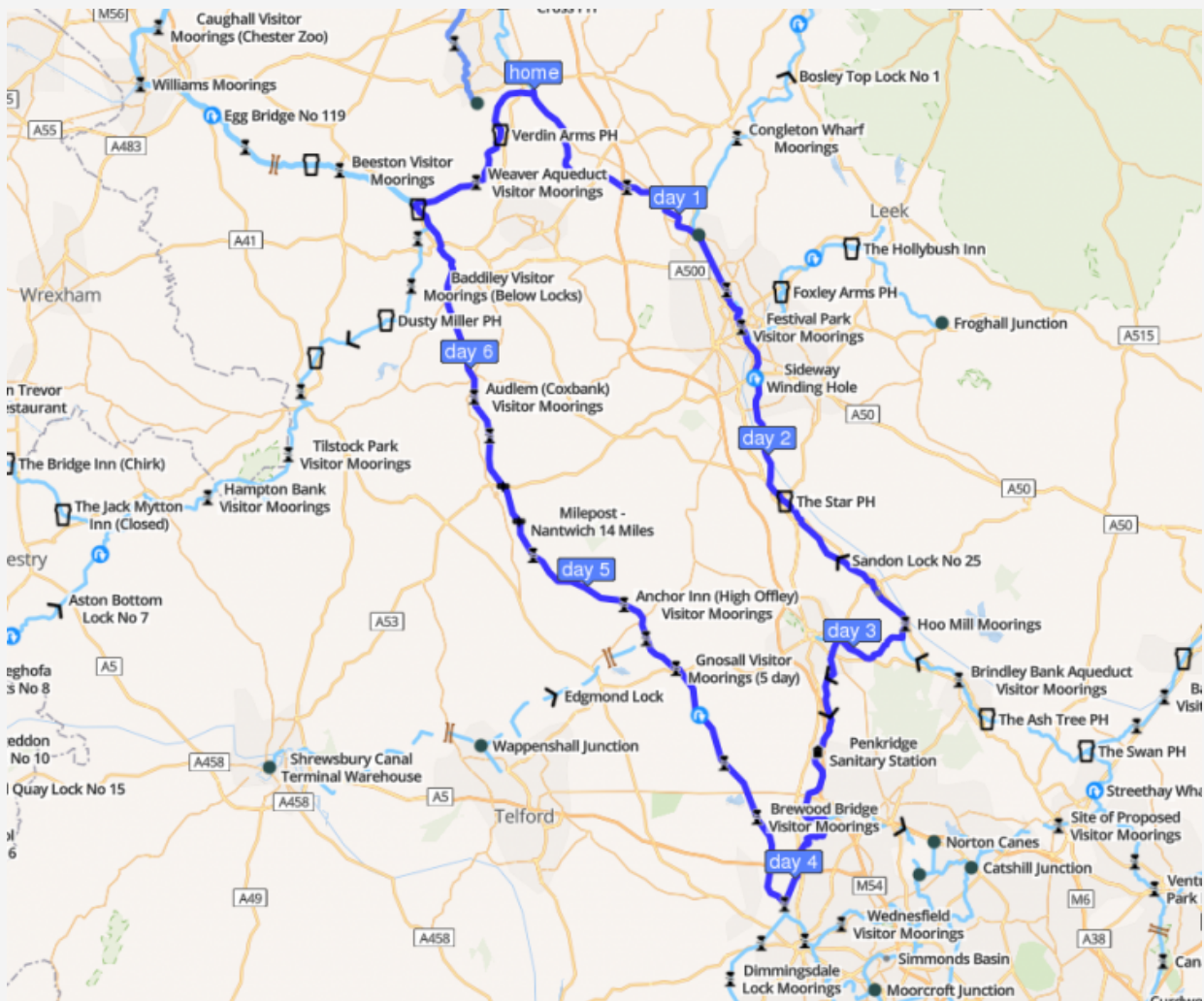
Here after the countryside opens up into vast expanses with views over the Cheshire plains to one side and the majestic Welsh hills and mountains on the other as you wind your way towards the canal’s junction with the Llangollen Canal which eventually leads across the Pontcysyllte Aqueduct, one of the wonders of the canal system. Worth a detour if you have an extra week you are able to add to your itinerary.

There are many lovely quintessential English villages along the Shropshire Union Canal Main Line. A fine example being Market Drayton. Local folk lore says the town is the home and birth place of gingerbread, with several purveyors claiming the history and invention of the sweat treat and to be the creator of the best gingerbread. So lots of samples obviously need to be taken to make up your own mind! This town also has lots of interesting timber clad buildings reminiscent of the Tudor / Stuart era.

ROUTE DETAILS

110 MILES, 2 FURLONGS, 94 LOCKS, 37 SMALL AQUEDUCTS, 2 TUNNELS (HARECASTLE TUNNEL (2919 YARDS LONG) AND COWLEY TUNNEL (81 YARDS LONG)) – A TOTAL OF 1 MILE, 5¾ FURLONGS UNDERGROUND.

TOTAL CRUISING TIME 60 HOURS, 53 MINUTES WHICH IS 6 DAYS, 6 HOURS AND 53 MINUTES AT 9 HOURS PER DAY.



ROUTE DETAILS

Departing from our Middlewich base and heading south along the Trent and Mersey Canal, there are a couple of locks which are a good distance apart and you weave your way out of the town and into the countryside before approaching the first challenge along this route, Heartbreak Hill. Aptly named as the canal here climbs to its summit via 31 locks over 12 miles.

After completing Heartbreak Hill you reach Kidsgrove and the entrance to Harecastle Tunnel. Follow the CRT staff briefing and make sure you are well prepared for the tunnel passage in advance so that you can complete this part of your journey smoothly. We will ensure you are fully aware of tunnel procedures before you leave during your narrowboat induction.

From here you continue through to Etruria Junction and Stoke-On-Trent, at the junction the canal bears left for the Caldon or right to continue along your route via a Stoke Top Lock. From here there is a long distance of cruising with few lock obstacles before reaching Great Haywood Junction after around 16 miles.

From Great Haywood Junction you take a sharp right turn at 90 degrees to join the Staffordshire and Worcester Canal. Along this stretch the canal winds and weaves its way past Tixall Wide, Shugborough Hall and Gailey Round House and towards the end of the stretch you then start to descend to the Shropshire Union Junction at Atherley, via sets of locks that come in handfuls of 2 to 4 or 5.

At Atherley Junction you make an almost hairpin turn to the right to join the Shropshire Union Canal. This stretch of canal is one of the last to be built during the great era of canal building. It benefits from the greater knowledge of civil engineering of the time compared to the earlier canals and is straighter with less locks to impede progress. You will have little lock wheeling to do until you reach Audlem near Market Drayton. From there on its further easy cruising up to the junction of the Middlewich Arm, where you turn right at Barbridge and head for home over another area of picturesque scenery and lovely countryside.

At the end of the Middlewich branch you descend Wardle lock and turn left where you will go under the bridge dead ahead and find your back at base.



NAVIGATION NOTES

- Tetton Bridge
- Beware of the change in bridge profile when heading south.
- Wheelock Botto Lock No 66
- Towpath side lock appears intact but is closed.
- Wheelock Lock No 61
- The towpath-side lock is open, but marked as “narrow” and unsuitable for boats with a beam of over 6’10”
- Lower Thurlwood Lock No 54
- The towpath side lock is narrow and not suitable for boats with a beam of over 6’10”
- Church Lawton Bottom Lock No 48
- The lock opposite the towpath side is apparently intact but closed.
- Red Bull Lock No 45
- Offside lock is not operational due to paddle problems.
- Harecastle Tunnel Opening Times
- Spring & Autumn – 8am to 5pm (last arrival for guaranteed passage 3pm)
- Summer – 8am to 6pm (last arrival for guaranteed passage 4pm)
- Winter – check Canal and River Trust Website
- Stoke Top Lock No 40
- A Canal and River Trust handcuff key is needed to open this lock.
- Newcastle Road Bridge No 115
- Low headroom at this bridge!
- Teddesley Road Basin (Penkridge)
- This is a private basin which belongs to Teddesley Boat Co. The owners live in the house opposite, so don’t get caught using it.
- Filance Lock No 37
- Please be aware that due to a new bulge in the chamber wall the lock width has been reduced slightly and may pose a hazard to some wider boats. The new minimum dimension is approximately 2.14m which is only just over 7ft.
- Gailey Wharf
- One of the water-points here does not have a standard 3/4" BSP male connector, so you may have to use one of the others if you don’t have an adaptor.
- High Bridge No 39
- Due to the way the canal bends there is restricted visibility through the bridge as you approach in either direction.
- Tyrley Bottom Lock No 7
- The pound between the 4th and 5th locks at the Tyrley flight can be challenging:
 - 1) There are no lock landings in either direction.
 - 2) There is a very strong by wash from lock 4 into the pound, which can pin a boat on to the offside wall.
 - 3) There is a lip or ledge between the centre of the channel and the towpath. It is impossible to come alongside the towpath.
 - 4) Trying to pass a boat in the opposite direction, or “hover” in the pound is tricky due to the strength of the bywash and a bad idea for the less experienced boater. It is best to have your next lock at your level, with the gate open, before leaving the lock that you are in.