

FOXTON LOCKS

ON THE GRAND UNION CANAL

DISCOVERY TRAIL



- Foxton Locks, near Market Harborough, Leicestershire

Once upon a hillside...

In partnership with



Supported by
The National Lottery
through the Heritage Lottery Fund



east midlands tourism





Enjoying a family picnic beside the locks.

Welcome to Foxton Locks

Explore a place brimming with heritage!
See elegant brick bridges, a steep staircase of locks, the old canal company stables, lock keeper's cottage and the remains of a gigantic boat lift.

Meet characters from Foxton's past and hear about the real Foxton, once a place of daily toil for working boat families; a place where great engineering minds and hard working hands have transformed the landscape.

Its not all heritage that remains here at Foxton Locks, there's flourishing wildlife, beautiful countryside views and gentle strolls all waiting to be discovered. You may wish to relax and enjoy a drink and bite to eat in one of the cafe's or bar's.

The grand opening of the boat lift 10th July 1900.





Mr. Jacques and family posing next to a working boat passing through the locks during a visit to Foxton.

Locks, lifts and leisure time

First came the locks built between 1810 and 1814 as part of the original Grand Union Canal. This was an important trade route between the Midlands and the South.

In 1900 came the boat lift. This was a bold but ultimately failed attempt to save the fortunes of a canal which was by this time struggling to compete with the railways.

As canal trade gave way to road and rail people started to discover a new use for the canal for leisure and pleasure.

The most recent chapter in Foxton's history has been the restoration of its historic features and provision of new paths and facilities for the thousands of people like you who visit each year.

Restoring the canal upper arm with heavy machinery, quite a contrast to its original construction with picks and shovels. This photograph show the stop gates being installed in the upper arm.

The viewing platform is a dramatic addition to the visitor experience that offers a bird's eye view of the inclined plane.



The new super highways

Canals are the 18th and 19th century equivalent of the motorway, and canal boats rather like the lorries that nowadays transport every sort of provision to keep our shops, industries and economy going.

The Grand Union Canal, of which Foxton is part, represents one link in a vast network of inland waterways which once stretched to some 2000 miles.

Most canals were cut before mechanical tools were invented. Thousands of navies dug channels from one end of the country to the other, using only spades, picks and barrows and helped by horses.

Early canals usually followed the contours, since it was easier and cheaper to go round a hill rather than through or over it. However, as speed became more important, canals were cut straighter, which often meant constructing long flights of locks, aqueducts and tunnels to overcome natural obstacles.



A Grand Junction Canal Company Mileage Post.



“A lot of us do diggin’, but we got all sorts among us: brick layers, carpenters, stone masons, blacksmiths, carters and we even got Cornish tin miners ‘en all to help with them tunnels.”

Tom, navy, 1810.

All cargoes great and small

Up until the mid 1930s, horses were still widely used to pull working boats heavily laden with cargoes. The canals were used to transport everything from coal, iron and agricultural fertiliser to everyday food items such as beer, flour, milk and cabbages. They even transported London Underground iron tunnel roof segments.

The Gilbert working boat family, from Welford.

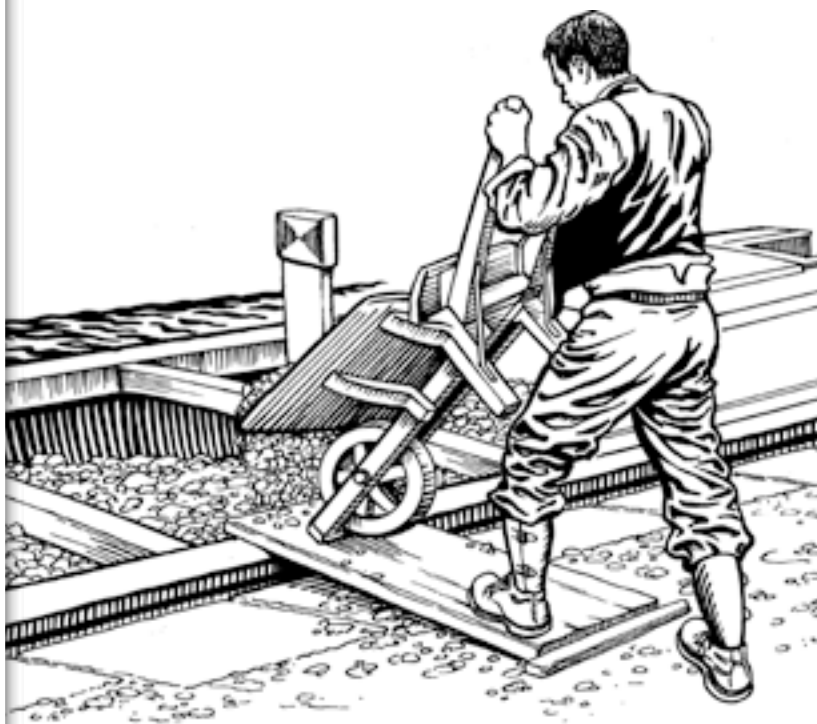


In the canal's heyday 50 or 60 working boats a day, most of them horse-drawn, worked their way through Foxton Locks between the busy industrial Midlands, London and the South.

From Steam to Diesel

In the late 1890s steam boats started to appear on the Grand Union Canal. Though faster than horse-drawn boats, the large boilers and coal needed to run them took up valuable space meaning they couldn't carry as much cargo. They were generally used to carry perishables and other items that needed quick delivery.

It was the more efficient diesel engine that eventually replaced the horse.



Getting' to Foxton we know we got a bit of a wait to get down this lot o' locks 'fore we can get on our way to Leicester. Mind you it's a good chance to catch up on towpath gossip. With so many boats still on the canal, its still a proper bottleneck 'ere.

Lily, boatwoman, 1940s.

A staircase of locks

Rather than going the long way around the steep hill at Foxton, canal engineer Benjamin Bevin designed two sets of five narrow staircase locks to raise and lower boats the 75ft between the lower level Leicester Line and the summit of the Grand Union Canal.

The flight of locks here is often referred to as a 'staircase' because the bottom gates of one lock are also the top gates of the lock below.

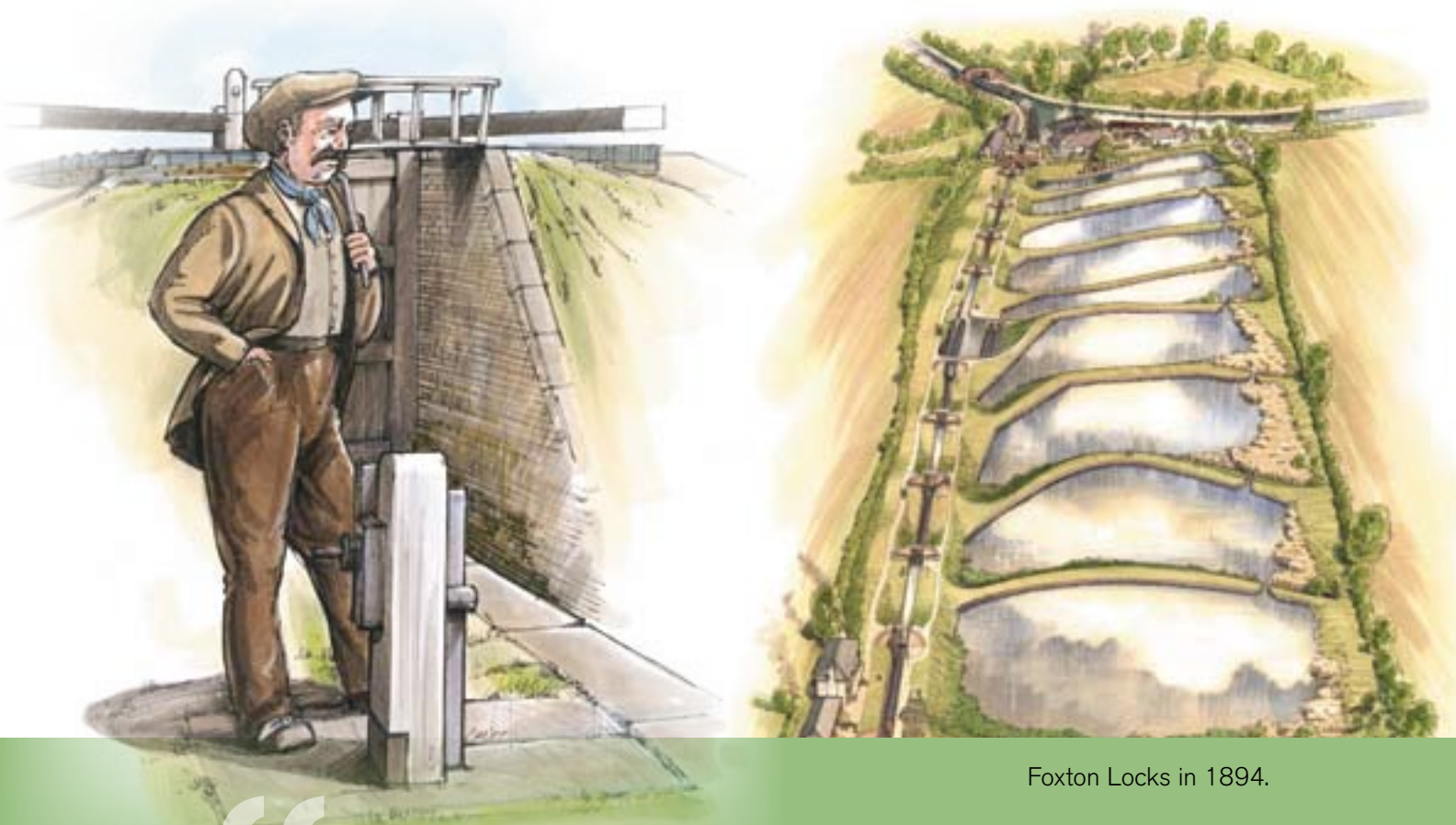
Not just pretty ponds

To ensure sufficient water to keep boats moving through the locks great storage

reservoirs, or side ponds, were built alongside the locks. Before the boat lift was built, these ponds were even bigger than the ones you see today.

A real bottleneck

Skilled boaters could work their way through the locks in forty-five minutes, or less, assuming no hold ups! But with canal trade booming, Foxton Locks became a real bottleneck thanks to the one and only passing place midway up the hill. The narrow 7ft wide locks also prevented wider boats, or barges, from using the canal. Meanwhile railways were offering faster and more efficient transport!



Foxton Locks in 1894.

“Got to be up bright ‘an early. Them workin’ boats start comin’ through well before seven! Mostly I leave ‘em to it – they know what their doin’, even the kids. Mind you sometimes I’ll get the lock ready for ‘em and give ‘em an ‘and.”

Jack Cryer, Lock keeper, 1890s.

A magnificent boat lift

In 1894 the Grand Junction Canal Company took over the running of the old Grand Union Canal. In the face of increased competition from road and rail transport, the canal company turned to engineer Gordon Cale Thomas to come up with a brave new solution that would bypass the bottleneck of the locks and allow bigger, wider barges, with their increased load carrying capacity, to use the canal.

Narrow boats and barges

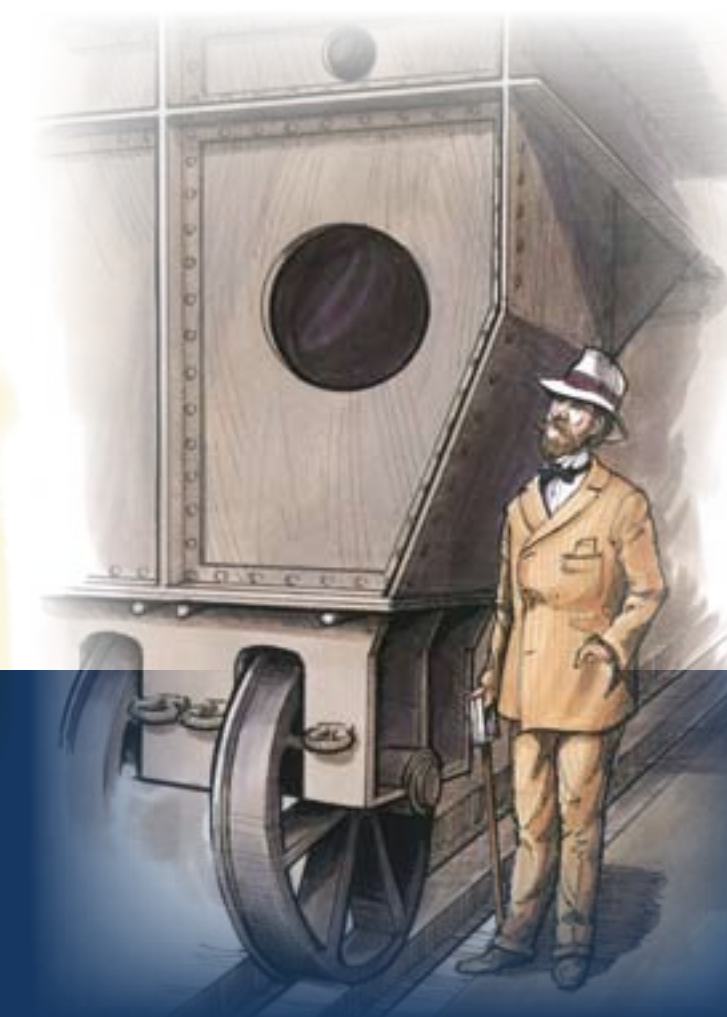
The decision was taken to build an inclined plane counter-balanced lift. Its two huge tanks could each hold two narrow boats, or one wider barge. The lift opened on the 10th of July 1900.

At the time, barges could not use the Grand Junction Canal because of the narrow locks at Foxton and Watford Gap. Although the lift by-passed Foxton locks, the failure to widen the locks at Watford Gap meant that there was no increase in barge traffic. The Lift closed in 1911.

A tank full of water

Once boats were inside the giant metal tanks, or caissons, the guillotine gates closed, trapping a tank full of water. A huge winding drum at the top of the slope reeled in the thick steel cable attached to the upward moving tank, whilst at the same time letting out the cable attached to the descending tank. All of this was powered by a 25 horsepower steam engine.

Foxton Inclined Plane Boat Lift.



“A boat lift it had to be, or more specifically an inclined plane counter-balanced lift which can accommodate two boats up and two down at the same time (if boats are of the traditional narrow variety) or one up, one down if 10ft wide barges.”
Gordon Cale Thomas, Boat Lift Engineer, 1900.

Foxton Locks Discovery Trail

Trail length:
approx. 1.5 mile /
2.4 km

The majority
of the route is
wheelchair accessible.



Foxton Canal Museum & Foxton Inclined Plane Trust (FIPT)

Open every day in summer 10am – 5pm
Winter opening – Saturday to
Wednesday (subject to staff availability).
Please ring for details.
Tel: 0116 279 2657
www.fipt.org.uk

Foxton Locks Inn

Tel: 0116 279 1515

Top Lock Coffee Stop

Situated inside the top lock cottage
Open everyday in summer 9am – 5pm
Winter opening - weekends and
school holidays 9am – 4pm.
Tel: 07764 152988

Foxton Boat Services

Boat trips, Bridge 61 pub & shop
Tel: 0116 279 2285
www.foxtonboats.co.uk

Foxton Locks Address

Foxton Locks
Gumley Road
Foxton
Leicestershire, LE16 7RA

For more information

British Waterways
510 – 524 Elder House
Elder Gate
Central Milton Keynes
MK9 1BW
Tel: 01908 302 500
Enquiries.southeast@britishwaterways.co.uk
www.waterscape.com

Wild Over Waterways (WOW)

For education resources and fun activities
for kids visit www.wow4water.net
Always remember to stay **SAFE** near
water – **Stay Away From the Edge**.

Foxton Locks Discovery Trail

There's so much to see and do at Foxton Locks


One of the best ways to see everything is to follow the Discovery Trail, a 1.5 mile / 2.4 km route around the site.












Look out for the arrows set into the towpath and on signs, they will guide you around the site.

The majority of the route is wheelchair accessible.



Audio downloads

Listen in on the lives of some of the people who worked on the canal here at Foxton by downloading MP3 files from the Waterscape website: www.waterscape.com Load them onto your personal media player or phone ready for the next time you visit Foxton. Look out for the numbered audio symbols like this  on signs around Foxton Locks.

KEY	
	Information
	Parking
	Toilets
	Disabled toilets
	Disabled access
	Picnic area
	Refreshments
	Shop
	Viewpoint
	Pub
	Boat trips



▶ **Top lock cottage** – where the Cryer family once lived. It is still the lock keeper's office and home to the 'Coffee Stop'. Meet old Jack Cryer and hear his tales from times gone by.



▶ **The brick building** that now houses the museum was once the boiler house for the steam engine that powered the boat lift. Visit the museum to see a working model of the lift.



▶ **The Boat Lift** only operated for ten years, but what a grand sight it was! Take time to visit the viewing platform for a bird's eye view across its impressive remains.





▶ **The daily grind of hooves**

on rough towpaths meant farriers were kept busy changing shoes roughly every couple of weeks.



▶ **The stables** at Foxton

top lock were once home to Dolly and other hard working canal company horses.



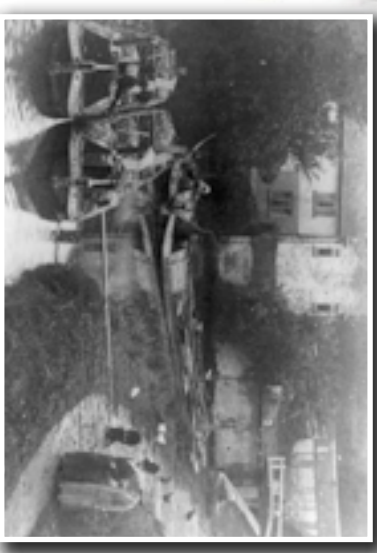
“By measuring how low a boat sits in the water with my gauging stick I can tell the weight the boat is carrying and charge accordingly”.

John Fixby Bently,
Toll Keeper, 1894.



▶ **A working pair of boats**

steaming towards Leicester. Although quicker than horse-drawn boats, steam boats could not carry as much cargo, due to their large boiler and coal store.



▶ **Boat trips** run from

outside the Bridge 61 pub. Working boats once sat below bottom lock waiting their turn to climb the steep staircase.



Up and down the locks went the boats and the families who worked them. How many boats can you count passing through Foxton Locks today?

“I’m Moorhen Megs, and lay lots of eggs – Ten little chicks get up to some tricks! Then the whole brood is calling for food. I feed them on weeds, snails, spiders and seeds.”



“I’m just his wife, a trouble and strife, Doing the work – there’s no time to shirk. Minding the kids and polishing the lids, And taking the tiller – I don’t get no siller.”

Wild at heart

From darting dragonflies and diving kingfishers to elusive otters and friendly ducks, the side ponds of the lock flight, and canal beyond, are havens for all sorts of wildlife. For a peaceful spot overlooking one of the side ponds visit the wildlife arbour. Look out for the carvings of some of Foxton’s special and unusual wildlife residents.

Daily toil

Life onboard a working boat was hard. Occasionally there would come light relief, like catching up on the towpath gossip whilst queuing to pass through the locks at Foxton. Why not visit Foxton Canal Museum where amongst other things you can peek inside the cabin of a traditional butty boat? Could you imagine living and working with your whole family in such a small space?

“I’m Walter Wade, a lengthsmen to trade Tending the path to avoid any wrath, Clearing out silt, in case the gates tilt. It takes all my strength to manage this length.”

Keeping the locks

On a busy day you will often see the lock keepers helping boaters, some of whom have never worked their way through a staircase of locks. Find out more about the job of the lock keepers today by visiting www.waterscape.com and downloading the MP3 audio file. Visit top lock cottage and find out from Jack Cryer what life was like as a lock keeper here in the past.

“I’m Nobody’s Fool, a hard working mule Hauling a line from five until nine. Five o’clock dawn til sunshine has gone. A boatman’s best friend? Right up till the end.”

Dolly and Co.

Before engines were invented, boats were horse-drawn. In fact, horses were used for much more than their pulling power. Find out what Dolly, and other horses like her, got up to on the canal here at Foxton by visiting the top lock stables. Can you match the labels to the artefacts on display?