

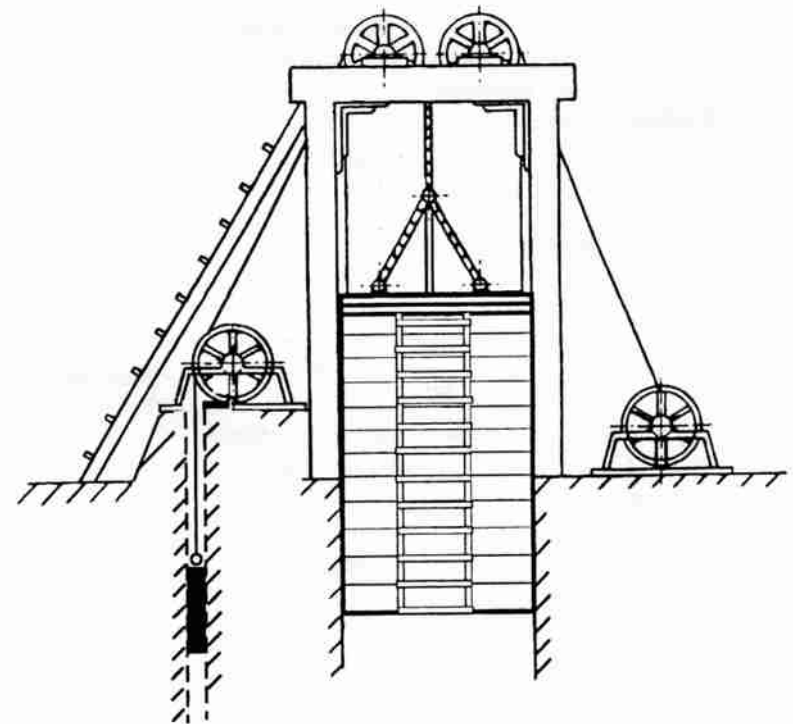
# THE SHREWSBURY & NEWPORT CANAL



*A filled-in lock near Newport*

## THE NEW CHALLENGE

# THE SHREWSBURY & NEWPORT CANAL



## THE CHALLENGE TO RESTORATION

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**SHROPSHIRE UNION  
CANAL SOCIETY LTD.**

## Introducing the S & N

The Shropshire Union Canal is one of our busiest inland waterways. Each year thousands of boats of all types cruise its pleasant route – sometimes high upon embankments revealing views across the pastoral countryside of Shropshire or Cheshire and sometimes through deep, steep sided cuttings hewn in a bygone age, through solid rock.

In the southern section, one of the most beautiful spots is Norbury Junction. Few boaters, particularly those who are using the canal for the first time, can resist mooring up for a while, perhaps to visit the souvenir shop or to re-stock their galley. Perhaps a lunch at the canalside pub or just simply to walk around and take a photograph from one of the two attractive bridges.

The more observant will notice that the bridge crossing the short arm off to the west is boldly proclaiming "No. 1", suggesting that it is the first of many. Well, this certainly used to be the case. because here is the beginning of the Shrewsbury and Newport Canal, which at one time began a descent through seventeen locks here, on its scenic route through to Shrewsbury and the River Severn. In fact, anyone who takes a short walk under the bridge and along the towpath will, within a couple of hundred yards or so, reach the first and only remaining working lock of this long flight. It is now used as a dry dock by the flourishing boat hire company based at Norbury Junction, but close inspection at the far end soon reveals that it was once a lock offering through passage to working boats. From this point westwards the canal is now entirely derelict. In fact, parts have totally disappeared, having been ploughed up or returned to pasture. Sadly, boats can never again cruise this country route, heading towards the historic town of Shrewsbury.

Never?

But what if the canal was restored?

A daunting task, yes, but there is a group of enthusiasts who think that restoration is possible.

And "restoration" is what this booklet is all about!

## Firstly, let us look back .....

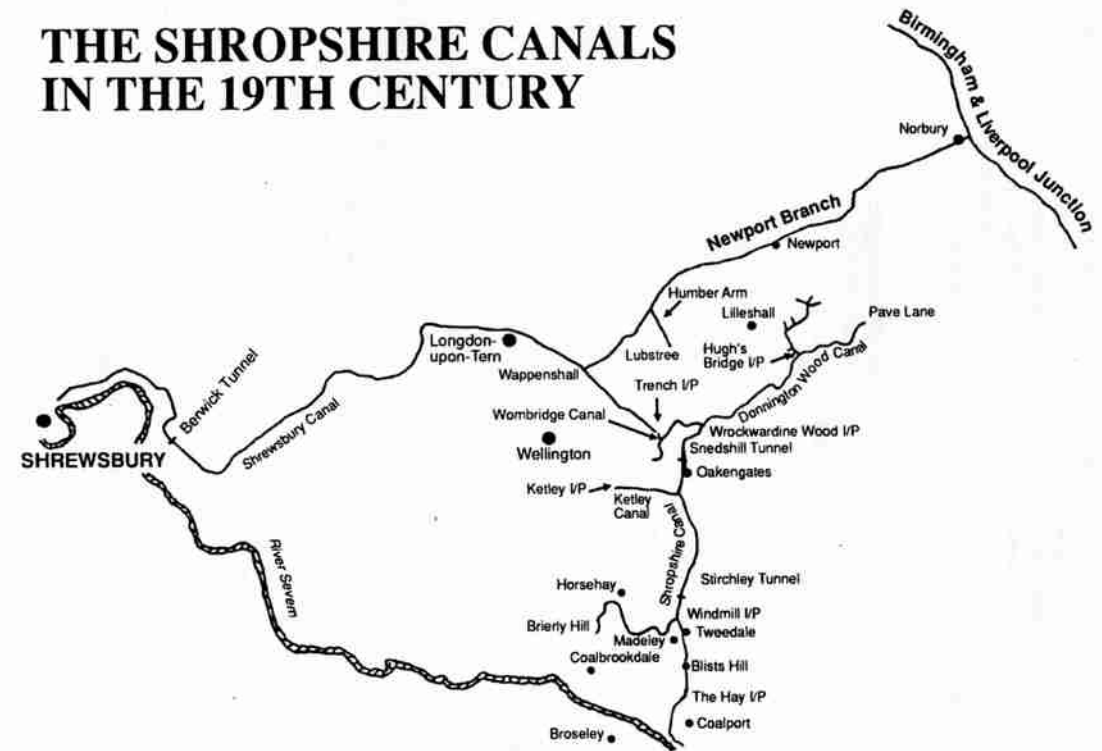
These days, with fast motorways and well maintained trunk roads allowing goods to speed on their way in 38 tonne truck loads, it is difficult for us to imagine that a canal, with its horsedrawn boats, could ever have been a viable form of transport. But, in an age when most roads were nothing more than cart tracks with poor rutted surfaces and main highways required the payment of a toll, the passage of commodities by canal boat was a very attractive proposition. Slow, yes, by today's standards but not in 1797, the year that the Shrewsbury Canal was completed.

This canal, which we know now as the **Shrewsbury & Newport**, began at Castle Foregate in Shrewsbury and ran for 17 miles through the Shropshire countryside, via Wappenshall, to join up with the existing canal system through the inclined plane at Trench.

The network of canals which existed in the area at that time had been built from about the 1760's through to the end of the eighteenth century and was extensively used to move mainly coal, iron and limestone. The wealthy industrialists of the time, such as Lord Gower who built the Donnington Wood Canal and William Reynolds the ironmaster of Ketley who cut the Wombridge Canal and the Ketley Canal, were quick to see the value of linking with Shrewsbury.

Many of the ironworks owners joined forces with Reynolds to build the Shropshire Canal and Reynolds was to be the joint engineer with William Clowes. Long before the venture reached its conclusion, Clowes died and early in 1795 Thomas Telford was appointed in his place. Quite soon after his appointment, Telford wrote ".... I have just recommended an iron aqueduct....". This was to cross the River Tern at Longdon. It is a modest structure but is, without doubt, the earliest substantial iron aqueduct ever built and is generally regarded as the prototype for Telford's masterpiece which he later built at Pontcysyllte.

## THE SHROPSHIRE CANALS IN THE 19TH CENTURY



His design was cast at the Ketley works of William Reynolds in 1796 and is perhaps the most famous of the canal's many interesting features. It has been described as an "unhandsome but workmanlike structure" fitted on the stone abutments of a previous aqueduct which had been swept away by floods. Anyway, you can decide upon this for yourself because it still stands, rather sadly, all alone in a field.

Because of the fact that the canal was built over high and rugged ground and over old coal mines – indeed over coal mines which were still being used – Telford concluded, in essence, that if you could build a canal here, you could build one anywhere.

The canal has several other interesting features. At Berwick a tunnel was dug. It was special in that it was the first major tunnel to have a towpath built through it, thereby cutting out the need for the strenuous, not to say dangerous, practice of "legging" the boats through.

The locks were also different from what we now think of as conventional in that they had guillotine gates which were counterbalanced by weights which originally hung over the canal but which were later modified to suspend in pits adjacent to the lock chamber.

Other structural features included the three arched stone aqueduct which crossed the River Roden near Rodington but, unfortunately, this is no more. The terminus warehouses in Shrewsbury, now called the Buttermarket, are also interesting and largely intact. At Shrewsbury, the canal did not connect directly with the River Severn, but platforms were built out over the water which allowed goods such as coal to be fed by chutes directly from the wharf into the river barges below.

In the late 1790's most of the major towns in England had been linked by either a navigable river or a canal, making the movement of the Industrial Revolution's raw materials and finished goods much quicker, cheaper and safer than had previously been possible.

In the early 1800's Telford was building his Birmingham & Liverpool Junction Canal, passing through Norbury and with this main line only a few miles away from the Shrewsbury Canal, it seemed only logical to create a link between the two. So, the Newport branch was built and completed in 1835. This branch was only 10 miles long, running from Wappenshall to Norbury, but had 23 locks to be negotiated – seventeen of them in one flight up to the "Main Line". It is this route, from Norbury via Newport, Wappenshall, Longdon-upon-Tern to Shrewsbury that is the concern of this restoration project.



So by 1835 it was possible to navigate from Norbury Junction to Shrewsbury. Unfortunately, not by boats of the 'standard' narrowboat dimensions however because after Wappenshall, although the locks were 70' long they were only 6'4" wide. Nevertheless, the canal was busy in its early years with both narrowboats and tub boats moving goods.

But there were two threats looming over the horizon. Threats which were, in due course, to bring about the decline and ultimate closure of all the canals in the area – except for the Shropshire Union main line.

The first threat was the working out of the coal reserves. Because industry was booming and making heavy demands upon energy supplies – mainly coal – some of the earlier pits had become exhausted. Newer, more modern pits, were only being sunk where there was a large, reliable reserve of coal and so the mines in the south Shropshire area were not considered worthy of updating. Consequently, industrial activity slowed down and ironworks ceased production, causing the canals to be less widely used.

The other major threat was the coming of the railways. These promised the delivery of larger loads at higher speeds and, therefore, lower prices. Soon a network was built throughout the country. This was perhaps the most influential factor in bringing about the abandonment of canals – not only the Shrewsbury & Newport, but many canals throughout the country.

As part of the strategy used by the railway companies to obtain the traffic which was normally carried on the canals, they would buy up the canal companies – together with the trade – and then allow the waterways to fall into disrepair so that finally they had to be abandoned. The Shrewsbury & Newport Canal was bought out by the Shropshire Union Railway and Canal Company in 1846.

The canal continued trading and did quite well, although steadily declining, until 1921, but that year the Trench Inclined Plane was closed and the following year the basin at Shrewsbury was abandoned. About ten years later, in 1931, commercial traffic ceased altogether. The old London, Midland & Scottish Railway Company (L.M.S.) who had by then become the owners gave up the canal, together with the Newport branch, in 1944.

Much of the canal was subsequently sold into private ownership and without a corporate body to monitor its condition it began to fall into ruin. Parts were deliberately destroyed, in particular the locks at Norbury, while in many places it has completely disappeared as a watercourse.



*Canal Cottage at Eyton – Recently Renovated*

## Where to see the Canal now .....

The canal has not been properly used for over 40 years and in that time, as has been said, much of it has disappeared – but not all of it by any means. Seeking out the remains can be quite an adventure. The real enthusiast should go armed with an ordnance survey map – preferably an old one as this may show features which do not appear on current editions. If you are just out for a day's drive at the weekend, however, there is still plenty to see without donning heavy boots and thornproofs and struggling through to bramble guarded towing paths.

Referring to the map on the centre pages will help you to locate the following ten selected places where you can see the canal now.

1. Perhaps the easiest spot to find is the **Junction at Norbury**. For about 200 metres it is still in water, in fact it is the only part that is still regularly navigated by boats as it leads to a dry-dock which is used by a hire boat company. Although gated under bridge No. 1 and marked "Private", authorised persons can walk this length quite easily as the towing path is in good condition. Access to the dry dock – which used to be a lock – can usually be gained by asking permission and it is worth a visit.

There is plenty to see at Norbury Junction.

Boats a'plenty and a café, shop and pub. Also British Waterways have a maintenance yard here. If you look westwards across the fields, you can also see bridge No. 2 standing all alone astride nothing more than grass.

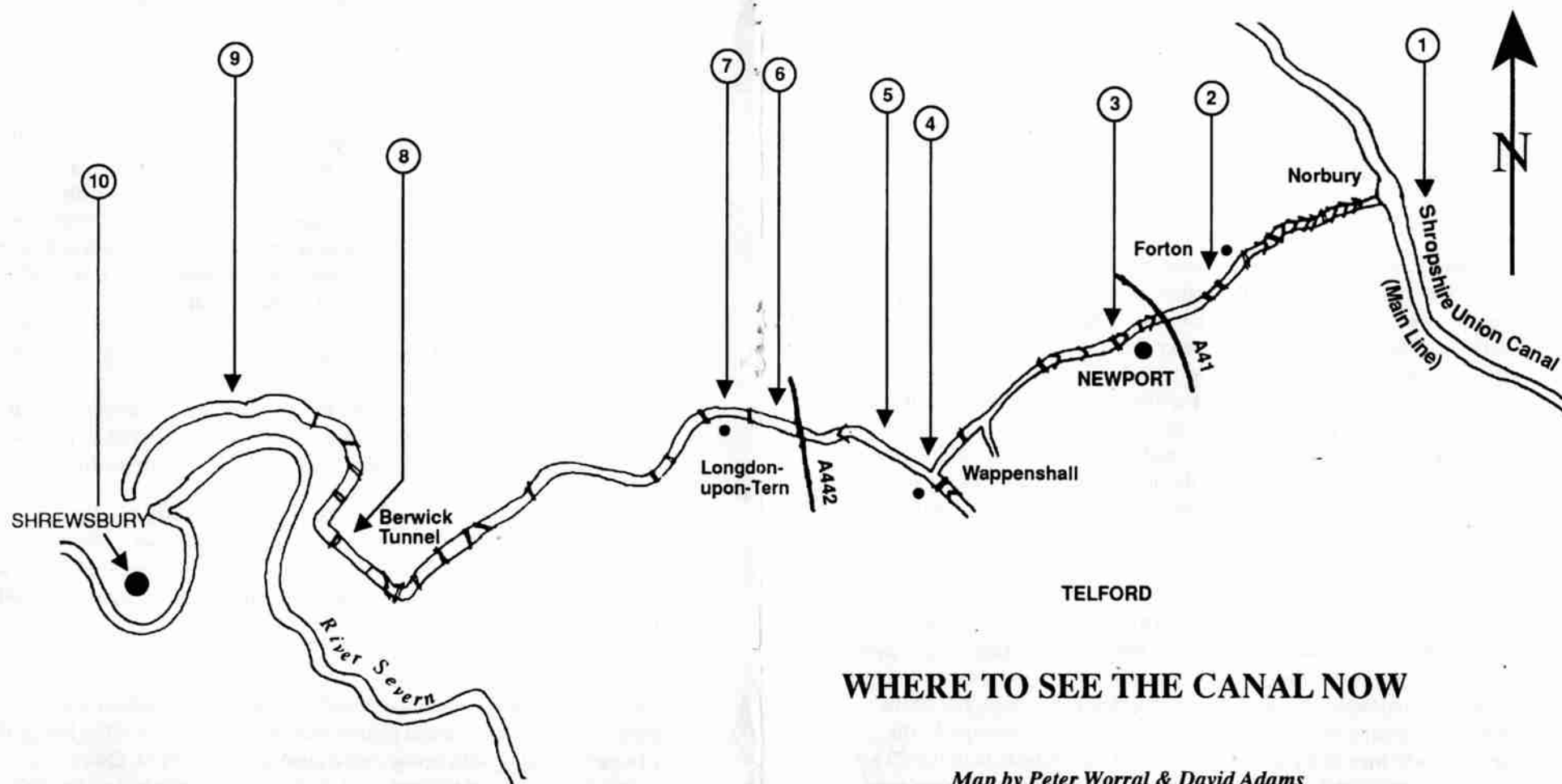
Find Norbury by taking the Stafford road (A518) out of Newport and turning left at Gnosall or, alternatively, use the Eccleshall road (A519) from Newport and turn right after about 4 miles. It is well signposted. If you are cruising the Shropshire Union main line canal then the mileposts will tell you how far it is.

2. The skew bridge at **Forton** is a "must" for the canal enthusiast who is interested in the decline and resurrection of old waterways. The bridge is in a beautiful setting with gently rising open land all around. Quiet, too, except for the song of the birds and the cry of the peacock. Yes, that call you hear but can't identify is surely a peacock. As you look across the fields the church is prominent, and just as attractive is the three storey house with



# THE SHREWSBURY & NEWPORT CANAL

ITS ROUTE FROM SHREWSBURY TO NORBURY JUNCTION



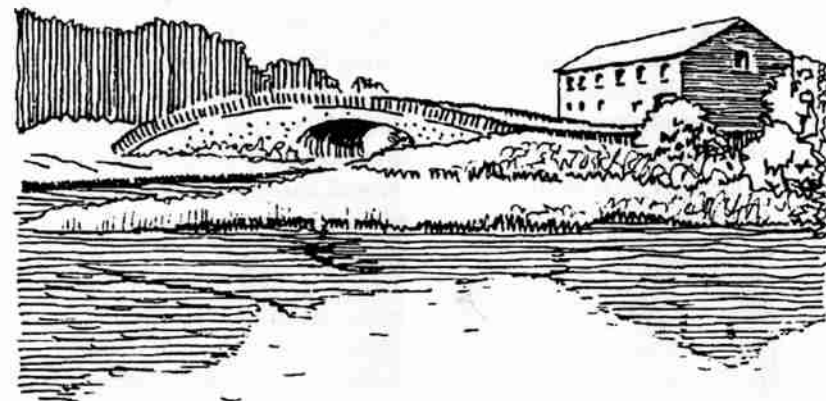
small paned latticed windows. But what of the bridge? Ah, a real gem of canal architecture, built at an acute angle over the canal and still in first class condition. The stonework is of a very high quality and the ironwork is still in place. With a little imagination you can easily visualise water under the arch but, alas, this is something for the future. Just yards away, the bridge which carries the road over the adjacent river also carries the canal in a combined aqueduct cum viaduct. This delightful spot is easily reached – just a hundred yards or so off the A519 at Forton, near Newport.

3. Another good spot is on the northern edge of Newport, Shropshire. Within sight of the church tower, Newport town bridge crosses a capped and culverted lock. But there is a small car park right by the canal and access is very easy.

Newport Town Council have been very sympathetic to the environs of the canal and have attempted to maintain it as a tourist feature. At this point you can see lock winding gear still in place. The towpath is walkable in both directions, with the canal in water, though not necessarily very deep. A photogenic stretch, with the winding hole adjacent to the car park making a very attractive scene. About 400 metres to the west – turn left along the canal – is a cascaded lock, in fact the one shown on the front of this booklet. Here you can also see a traditional lock cottage of the type seen frequently on Telford's canals and this in very good condition. Local anglers make good use of this section and help to keep the canal in good order.

4. About seven miles south west of Newport you will find a most appealing spot. Called **Wappenshall Junction** it is where the Newport Branch joins with the former Shrewsbury Canal. It is so quiet here that you could be back in the nineteenth century. But in Wappenshall village, just off the A442, look around and you will see what is obviously a towpath. The undergrowth may be a problem but it is just a short walk to bridge 21 – a graceful bridge which carried the towpath. The bridge was in very good condition, long and beautifully curved, and there is water here. However in 1989 major cracks appeared in this listed bridge and Shropshire County Council are in the process of restoring it.

You will, of course, remember to bring your camera won't you? Just alongside is an old warehouse which has a "tunnel" running through it so that loading and unloading could be carried out under cover. In Wappenshall itself you can also see the first bridge of the Trench arm. It now has virtually no headroom and there is a picture of it on the back cover of this booklet. The old basin is currently a heavy goods yard in private ownership.

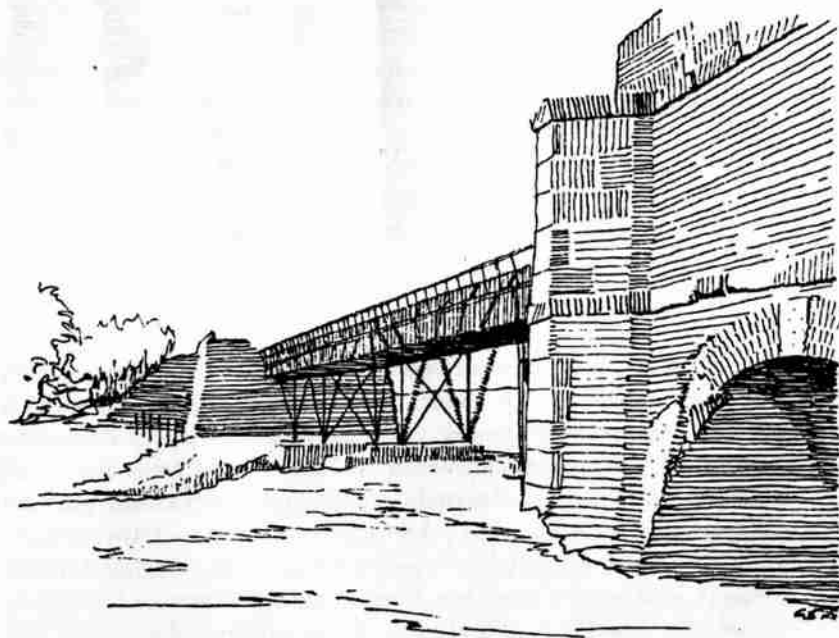


5. The village of Eaton upon the Weald Moors still has traces of two bridges and a lock but not much of the actual canal remains. Eaton lower lock is still there but it is on private ground so that, in order to see its guillotine lock mechanism, permission must be sought. Near here the canal line has been converted into a storm water drain by digging it out to a much greater depth.



6. Look on your map for "Long Lane". This is where the A442 road crosses the line of the canal and if you are travelling north then to your right you will find "Bridge 22". It is in very good condition, with the arch being built of blue bricks and the parapet having an unusual chequered design, made up of red and blue bricks laid alternately. Here the canal is in water. To the left of the A442 you can see where a road has been lowered across the bed of the canal.

7. All of our canals have features which are considered to be vital elements in our national heritage, but the gem of gems in terms of canal monuments on the Shrewsbury to Newport route must surely be the cast iron aqueduct at Longdon-upon-Tern. This is the world's oldest cast iron aqueduct which is still in existence. It stands proudly – but empty of water – in a field and is clearly visible from the main road. Access is possible, but, even from a distance, there is no mistaking its importance. The brick and stone abutments at each end have arches and are still in reasonable condition. Whichever sections of the canal you seek out, do not miss this aqueduct – it is a prize amongst the many interesting features of the canal.



8. **Berwick Tunnel.** This is the only tunnel on the canal and was one of the first to be built complete with a towing path. At the moment it is considered to be in a dangerous condition and the portals at both ends are bricked up for safety reasons. However, it is worth seeking out.

The northern end is not immediately obvious – you can literally drive within twenty yards of it and not see it. But look carefully at your map and take the road to Preston village and look carefully for a house called Tunnel Cottage. Stop there and ask where the tunnel is. The man who lives there will gladly show you. In fact, it is just across the road past a farm gate and a few yards through the undergrowth. Here it is strongly recommended that you wear substantial shoes and clothing as you will have to struggle through brambles and nettles to get sight of the water and the tunnel entrance. The more adventurous should be able to get near the water and the tunnel entrance but, when the trees are in full leaf, there is not much light down there, making photography a bit tricky.

9. Just north of the canal terminus, situated between the A49 and the railway, is a very interesting and historic building called the **Maltings**. This was the very first building in the world to be built around an iron framework. Just behind it, look over the wall and you can see the overgrown route of the canal. The A49 road crosses the canal line several times in this area and, in parts, a pathway has been opened so that it is possible to walk the canal route. Although not much of the canal is visible, the old hedgerow gives it away!

10. Howard Street Warehouse is close to the centre of Shrewsbury. There has never been a direct connection between the Shrewsbury & Newport Canal and the River Severn on the east side of the town. Perhaps there might be in the future but, for now, if you find the railway station then right alongside it you will find the warehouse, but it is now called "The Buttermarket" – a bar and nightclub. An adjacent car park is built over what used to be the terminus basin. If you catch the Manager of the Buttermarket in the right mood he may just show you the loading bays underneath the dance floor. Well worth seeing.

The places mentioned above are perhaps the main areas of interest on this very interesting canal, but there are lots of others. When you have seen some, you will want to see more.

There we are then. The Shrewsbury & Newport Canal is deeply rooted in the industrial and agricultural past of the area. It transported supplies of coal to ironworks and finished metal products to engineering sites.

The Shropshire Union Canal Society is very keen to see the line of the canal preserved and brought back to life. The Society would welcome your views.

## The new challenge

The worst situation would be that what remains of the canal should be destroyed, as some parts already have, in order that supposedly more useful things can be done with the ground – a new supermarket, DIY shed, car park or factory farm perhaps. Heaven forbid that that should happen to this link with the industrial past.



The first part of the 20th Century was a story of decline and neglect culminating in abandonment of the Newport branch in 1944. In the late 1960's the Shrewsbury & Newport Canal Society was formed with the intention of promoting the restoration of the canal. But lack of local support and with BWB selling off the canal piecemeal, the project fell into abeyance and the Shrewsbury & Newport Canal Society became the Shropshire Union Canal Society and turned its attentions to the Montgomery Canal. With this project nearer completion, and the advent of the "green revolution" the Shrewsbury & Newport Canal becomes a possible restoration project again.

## Can success be achieved?

Well it all depends what is accepted as "success". Remember, we are not dealing with a totally lost canal. Some parts of the line are still in water and could be extended without too many problems. A few buildings remain as do some bridges, although other major works such as the seventeen locks at Norbury are largely destroyed. However, apart from the A41 at Newport and the cutting off of Berwick tunnel by the new A5 there are no insurmountable obstacles to be overcome as faced by many other restoration projects.

Ultimate success would be the improvement and restoration for through navigation from the Shropshire Union Main Line at Norbury to the Butter Market at Shrewsbury for what is now the standard 6'10" narrowboat, although originally 6'4" width boats navigated from Wappenshall to Shrewsbury.

If full restoration could not be achieved then perhaps the whole line of the canal could become a long distance footpath through the truly rural Staffordshire and Shropshire borders. Large numbers of people who are not particularly interested in canals might be happy if the tow path was made available again for walking. Disused canals are havens for birds, butterflies and wild flowers and the joy of walking among them would delight many.

A better idea would be that short stretches of the canal could be re-watered and used for leisure pursuits such as canoeing, fishing, towpath walking, photography and so on. If a long enough length could be reclaimed then the possibilities of trip boats might attract visitors. Maybe charities such as clubs for the handicapped could benefit from the use of a specially designed boat. But best of all would be a fully usable waterway.

So you see "success" is different things to different people and in any event even when the restoration gains impetus improvement of the canal will take place so gradually that the various amenities can be brought back to life in stages.

Possibly, there are some people who say "Why bother to restore this rotten old canal at all?" They would be happy to let it gradually sink into oblivion as have many other parts of our heritage. It is surprising how quickly things disappear if they are not used and maintained. Decay sets in and that scourge of the twentieth century, the vandal, puts in his two-pennyworth and before you know it – nothing is left.

### So to sum it all up.....

The Shropshire Union Canal Society has an impressive record of initiative and achievement in their previous involvement with restoration. Late in 1987 the Royal Assent was given to the British Waterways Board's "Montgomery Canal" Bill which had successfully battled its way through Parliament. It was the S.U.C.S. that had beavered away for years before – clearing undergrowth, repairing towpaths, shifting loads of rubbish, re-pointing brickwork, raising funds and so on until people began to take notice. So from small beginnings great things can happen.

*But not without help.*

The Society needs support from all who are interested in our national network of waterways. The easiest way that you can involve yourself is by taking a general interest and being watchful – keeping an eye open for plans that might have an effect upon the line of the canal and reporting them to the Society. How do you contact the S.U.C.S.?

*Well, the best way is to become a member.*

There is a form in this booklet and you can rest assured that your subscription will greatly help the Society with this project.

These days schemes like this cannot hope to get completed without bringing in funds from large sources, such as District and County Councils, Industry and even the E.E.C., but that is for later. At the moment the Society is only just beginning to formulate plans for this new restoration.

Which brings us back to where this booklet started. The challenge is "The Shrewsbury & Newport". Don't say "It can't be done", – that was said about the Kennett & Avon, the Montgomery, the Droitwich .....

## THE SHROPSHIRE UNION CANAL SOCIETY LTD.

**We invite you to join us now.....**

If you believe in the future of our inland waterways in general and the Shropshire Union system of canals in particular, then join the society now.

Your subscription will help us to maintain and improve our interest in one of the country's most beautiful waterways and enable us – and you – to take up the New Challenge – restoration of the Shrewsbury & Newport Canal.

### Application for Membership of the Shropshire Union Canal Society Limited.

*(This form may also be used for renewals)*

I hereby apply for election as a member of the above Society and agree to abide by the rules of the Society

I enclose my remittance for .....\* being my subscription for the year ending June 30th, 19.....

Signed..... Date .....

Name in Full (Mr, Mrs or Miss) PLEASE PRINT IN BLOCK CAPITALS

Address .....

\*Single Adult: £4; Husband & Wife: £5; Family: £6; Juniors under 18 years of age: £1;  
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**IMPORTANT** it is more convenient for you and better for the Society if you will use the Bankers Order method of payment. If you can pay by this method please contact the Membership Secretary for details.



*Missing lock gates at Eyton  
upon the Weald Moors*

*'No headroom' near Wappenshall*



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