

Location & Access: The Grand Western Canal runs from Tiverton to Lowdswells, a total distance of 11.25 miles. Circular walk of lengths to suit your own needs are available from various access points along the route (eg Swan’s Neck Route - 2.25 miles)

The Tiverton Canal Basin is well signed from A361 North Devon Link Road and A396 Exe Valley road from Exeter. Tiverton Parkway rail station is 0.5 miles away. A regular bus service runs to Tiverton from Exeter, Barnstaple, Crediton and Taunton (the Canal Basin is 0.5 miles from here).

The canal tow path provides a flat surface - suitable for wheelchairs and buggies.



Sampford Peverell - photo: Paul Berry

Key Geography: Industrial archaeology, social history, canal and rail transport.

Description: The eleven and a quarter mile stretch of the canal that exists close to Tiverton has been designated as the ‘Grand Western Canal Country Park’ and a local Nature Reserve. The entire length of the canal’s towpath is a public right of way, offering a flat and car-free trail that winds through beautiful Devon countryside and passes close-by to quiet, charming villages.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE GRAND WESTERN CANAL

The canal has a fascinating history, and plans for the Grand Western were born out of an eighteenth-century idea to construct an inland waterway that crossed the south west peninsula to allow ships to pass from the Bristol Channel to the English Channel. This meant they could avoid the long and treacherous journey around Land’s End - a graveyard for sea vessels. The proposal aimed to join the Bridgwater and Taunton Canal with the Exeter Canal (the oldest canal in the country dating back to 1566).

In 1796, an Act of Parliament granted permission for the Grand Western Canal to be built. In 1810, work commenced on the highest or summit section from the limestone quarries at Westleigh to Tiverton, and was eventually completed on August 25th, 1814, at the cost of £244,500. Scottish engineer John Rennie surveyed the area, and chose a route that followed level ground to avoid the need for any expensive locks or lifts. This navigable eleven-and-a-half-mile section of the great plan is still in operation today.

After the achievement of 1810, many delays followed, and it wasn’t until 1831 that work began on the second section of the Grand Western Canal - a further thirteen and a half miles from Lowdswells on the Devon and Somerset border to Taunton. This joined up with the Bridgwater and Taunton Canal, enabling a twenty-five-mile *(continued overleaf)*

Curiosity Questions:

- # What is the speed limit for vessels travelling on a canal?
- # How many miles of navigable canals and rivers are there in the UK - 1,000? 3,200? 4,700? 10,400?
- # Which British city has the most canals?

Further information:

- # <https://wordpress.com/post/devongeography.wordpress.com/10794>
- # www.tivertoncanal.co.uk

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water through route from Tiverton to the Bristol Channel. The new section of the canal faced difficult problems with the topography of the land, notably a change in altitude of 262 feet from the river Tone to Lowdells. Plans had been put forward by engineer James Green, who planned for a narrow canal (half the width of the Tiverton section) which would use an inclined plane and a series of boat lifts instead of conventional locks to allow small tub boats to make the rise in height. The new section of the canal cost £330,000 and was opened on June 28th, 1838.

The 1840s saw a spell of prosperity for the Grand Western Canal, while it specialised in the transport of coal and limestone. But disaster was not far away, as around the same time, the Bristol and Exeter railway (under engineer Isambard Kingdom Brunel) was advancing south westwards. This brought competition that would eventually lead to the canal's downfall. The railway reached Taunton in 1842, Exeter in 1844, and a branch line to Tiverton was established in 1848.

"There is nothing the canal company could do to halt the railway's progress" (Helen Harris)

Once the railway had reached Tiverton, traffic on the canal dropped significantly. Traders began to use the railway almost exclusively for goods coming from Taunton and beyond, and reduced quantities of lime and stone were the only goods being transported by the canal.

In 1864, the Bristol and Exeter Railway Company acquired the Grand Western Canal, and in 1867, it closed the Lowdells to Taunton section, meaning this part of the canal had a working life of less than thirty years. Lifts and other equipment were dismantled and the land was sold off. Today, most of this section of canal has been filled in, although enthusiastic supporters have cleared an area near Nynhead Lift to show its original workings. The Tiverton section was allowed to continue due to the valuable limestone cargo it carried from local quarries - a trade that continued for another 60 years, up to 1925. The Tiverton section was then abandoned as a commercial waterway due to the high costs of repairs. A stretch near Halberton was dammed up while the remainder was left to silt up.



Reflections on a canal bridge — photo: Paul Berry

Once the commercial traffic of limestone had finished, the canal was leased to a Joseph Barry for the commercial growing of lilies. Lilies flower from June to early August, and after being harvested by hand from a slow-moving boat pulled by a horse, were sent to London, the Midlands and the North, being used mainly for wreaths. The Barry family worked the canal right up to the 1960s.

By the 1960s, the life of the Grand Western Canal seemed to have come to an end, and in 1962 it was formally closed to navigation. Proposals were made to fill it in and convert the land to residential development, but this gave rise to the formation of the Tiverton Canal Preservation Society, a public group dedicated to saving the waterway.

In 1969 a 'Save the Canal' campaign was launched, and 400 protestors walked the length of the route to advertise their cause. In 1971, the British Waterways Board handed the canal over to the Devon County Council, along with funds of £38,700 to support restoration work and future maintenance and it was designated as a Country Park. By 1973, the Grand Western was open again for non-powered craft, and punts were hired from the basin at Tiverton - the first craft on the canal for nearly 50 years. The Grand Western Canal Trust was created in 1988, after fears arose that leaks in the Swar's Neck section might lead to closure once more. In the years since, significant investment in dredging and repairs have improved visitor access and the canal has become a popular tourist attraction. In 1997, the Trust was incorporated as the Grand Western Canal Association Ltd, a registered charity, and was re-branded as Friends of the Grand Western Canal in 2012.

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THE WALKING ROUTE

There are many choices available for walking along the Grand Western Canal. A one-way trip along the entire length from Tiverton to Lowdswells (or vice versa) is 11.25 miles, while a number of circular walks of varying lengths are possible from a variety of access points along the canal. I chose to stay overnight at Minnows caravan park (located halfway along the route), which allowed for an eleven-mile return walk in each direction on different days. The following notes describe the full route along the canal from Tiverton to Lowdswells.

1) The easily accessible canal basin at Tiverton is a good place to begin your walk. There are a number of services here, and there is ample car parking space.

2) On the way from the car park to the canal, it is worth pausing to examine the well-preserved (Grade II listed) archways in the walls of the canal bank. Above each of these was a kiln that burned limestone brought here via tub boats from quarries several miles to the east. When the lime kilns were operational, this part of the canal would have been a hive of busy activity. The kilns were large chambers shaped like upturned old-fashioned milk bottles, and coal and limestone could be alternatively tipped into the top to create eight or nine layers in a ratio of four parts limestone to one part coal. At the bottom was a small hearth with an iron door to prevent air getting in. Kindling (wood and furze) was placed on a grating with some coal above, and the kiln was left to burn slowly without oxygen until all the coal was consumed, a process that could take eight hours or even longer. The hearth door could then be opened, and the burnt lime extracted. Once the firing had begun, fresh layers could be added as the burnt lime (or 'quick lime') was shoveled out. The powdery quicklime was then stored in casks and taken to farms where it could be added to soil to improve fertility. The job of the 'burner' was to test the progress of the process by pressing a long rod down through the kiln from the top. If the rod met resistance, then the limestone had not been cooked, and burning would continue. Some quick lime was used in the building industry, after being placed in a pit and water added – making it bubble and fizz. This turned it into 'slaked lime' which could be used in mortar and limewash.



Lime kilns at the Tiverton Basin — photo: Paul Berry

3) Numerous services are available around the canal basin, including a picnic area, play area, a floating bar (The Duck's Ditty Cafe Bar), and boat hire (rowing boats and Canadian canoes). There is also a quaint tea room (The Canal Tea Rooms) nearby in the grounds of an eighteenth-century lime kiln cottage. There is also the opportunity during summer months to enjoy the living heritage attraction of the last horse-drawn passenger barge (The 'Tivertonian') in Britain. This family run business has been in operation for almost 50 years, running trips over a three-mile zone between the canal basin and the Tiverton Road Bridge.



Visitor Centre — photo: Paul Berry

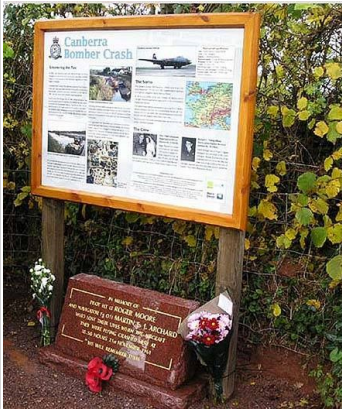
4) The Grand Western Canal Visitor Centre was opened in 2013 by local Olympian Jo Pavey. Interpretation boards describe the history of the canal, and there is an interactive map to explore. Entry is free!

5) The Williams Authers Footbridge was built to connect Spurway Road to the Wilcome housing estate, and was named after the late councillor who was a key figure in saving the canal from being filled-in during the 1960s.

6) Close to Tidcombe Bridge is Tidcombe Hall, an early nineteenth century house, formerly Tidcombe Rectory built by Rector John Newte, and currently ripe for redevelopment. Along the length of the canal towpath are a number of sandstone mileposts indicating the distance travelled from Tiverton. Some have been damaged, while a number of others are missing, but near this bridge is milepost 1 - can you locate it, or any of the others?

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7) The path soon moves away from the hustle and bustle of the town, and by the time Warnicombe Bridge is reached, the area has taken on a more rural feel with farmland next to the canal and views opening up of surrounding hills.



Canberra Bomber Memorial
— photo: Paul Berry

8) By the side of the tow path just before Manley Bridge is the Canberra Bomber Memorial Panel. A regular dredging operation in 2003 reported a smell of fuel in the silt, and turned up the remains of an RAF Canberra bomber that crashed into the canal in 1961 on a training flight from RAF Geilenkirchen in Germany. It plunged into the water following engine failure and both crewmen were killed. They had ejector seats, but rather than use them, chose to guide their 'plane away from the nearby town. The pilot was Flight Lieutenant Roger Moore (aged 29 from Hertfordshire) and the navigator was Flying officer Martin Archard (just 23 years old from Bristol).

9) Manley Bridge is a popular location with local people, part of a circular walk called 'The Old Railway Walk' which loops from Manley Bridge to the canal basin and joins the old Tiverton railway branch line, closed to passengers in 1964 (and to freight in 1967) as part of the infamous Beeching cuts. The last steam train to travel on the branch line was the "Tivvy Bumper" (GWR engine no 1442) which can be seen today at the Tiverton Museum. It is worth reflecting here that it was the arrival of the railway that put the canal out of business. A small car park is located close to the bridge.

10) East Manley Bridge is reached shortly after milestone 2. Nearby East Manley Farm carries names dating back to Domesday Book, and the Manley family lived here until the middle of the nineteenth century. Victorian poet Gerald Manley is a descendant.

11) Mid-Devon Moorings are located at Orchard Farm next to a winding hole on the canal where horse-drawn barges turn around on their two-mile journey to and from the Tiverton Canal Basin. A slipway here provides access to the water.

12) This is the only surviving aqueduct on the Devon section of the Grand Western Canal. It was built in 1847 by the Bristol & Exeter Railway Company, and it is thought that Isambard Kingdom Brunel was responsible for the design (although he had left company by the time of construction). The aqueduct was built to allow the Tiverton railway branch line to continue, and was designed to accommodate two lines, although only one was ever used. The railway was closed for passenger service in 1964. The land below the aqueduct is privately owned, and there is no public access.



Aqueduct — photo: Paul Berry

13) Crownhill Bridge was originally named Backlane Bridge or 'Change Path'. The towpath switches sides here (to the east, or right-hand side), and in the past horses pulling barges were led over the bridge. There is a bio-gas power station nearby. Although the canal is wholly man-made, nature has colonised the surroundings, and as now you have moved away from built up areas, there is a good chance of seeing some wildlife. The canal was recognised as a Local Nature Reserve in 2005. The Grand Western is a mass of colour in spring and summer with an abundance of wild flowers. and early-purple and common-spotted orchids can be found. The canal is home to a wide variety of fish including tench, perch, bream, rudd, roach, carp and pike, and these attract otters. Other mammals seen here include roe deer, foxes, and badgers. A number of bat species use the canal for feeding and as a safe corridor to travel between roosts and feeding areas. Daubenton bats can be seen on warm summer evenings. Waterfowl are found along most stretches of the canal, including moorhens, mute swans and mallards. Other bird species found along the canal include the kingfisher, which is regularly seen fishing in the water, especially between late summer and early spring. The canal is also a hot spot for insects, with butterflies such as the

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peacock and red admiral, along with the more delicate common blue, comma and gatekeeper. Common species of dragonflies found along the canal include the common blue damselfly, and the large impressive emperor dragonfly.

14) There is a well-used car park between the Tiverton Road Bridge and the Dudley Weatherley Jubilee Bridge - a lift bridge constructed in 2002, Queen Elizabeth's 50th Jubilee Year. It was named after a well-known local artist who was prominent in the campaign to save the canal back in the 1960s and early 1970s. He died in 2004. Milestone 3 is located between the two bridges. This is a popular location on the canal because it provides access to a large bend in the canal known as the Swan's Neck, which stretches to Greenway Bridge. There is a popular two-and-a-quarter mile circular route here that is popular with walkers and cyclists. It is well-marked in both directions, and incorporates section of towpath and some recently created paths to provide a largely off-road walk surrounded by farmland with views to the Blackdown Hills, and runs for a few hundred metres along the edge of the Tiverton Golf Club. When this part of the canal route was planned, engineer John Rennie decided it was more efficient to construct tall embankments, deep cuttings, and follow long bends to keep the canal on the level and avoid the use of lock gates.

"With the village of Halberton standing on the line where it would have been logical for the canal to be cut, it had been necessary to adopt an avoiding route that required several pieces of high and expensive cutting - through hard rock and porous sand - to the north of the village. The cut length had to be lined with clay puddle, causing great delays, and there was still much to be done and several bridges to be built" (Helen Harris)

The 50 feet embankment was a major challenge for the engineers. It was constructed in an area of heavily fissured sandstone, and has suffered a number of serious leaks that have proved expensive to repair. A major breach occurred here in 2012, following a period of exceptional weather when over two inches of rain fell on already saturated ground. The rainfall reached a peak on the night of November 20-21st, the canal flooded, and its overflow system failed to cope leaving it to overtop in several places. During the afternoon of November 21st, the embankment gave way and the surrounding farmland was flooded. Jo Cuthbert of Tiverton described the events at the time:

"The whole bank just gave way. We just watched the whole bank erode. The bed of the canal on this section is empty and there is a vast hole".

Some of the residents of nearby Halberton were forced to seek refuge in the village hall. Dams were installed to keep the rest of the canal open, and over 400 fish were collected and returned to the canal from flooded fields. The breach cost Devon County Council £3 million to repair. 15) After passing Sellake Bridge, you arrive at Greenway Bridge at the end of the Swan's Neck loop. There is parking available here, and the village of Halberton is nearby, with the excellent Halberton farm shop just a short walk away. This village saw some Civil War action, and two unknown soldiers are buried in the graveyard at the fourteenth century red sandstone St Andrew's Church. Mill House in Halberton was registered in the Domesday Book, and the Priory dates back to the twelfth century, and was once occupied by Augustine monks.

16) There is woodland by the canal from Greenaway Bridge to the Swing Bridge. Here, a stop gate was discovered lying on the floor of the canal here following repairs after the bad weather of November, 2012. Most canal bridges had a pair of these barriers that could be raised into a vertical position by horse-power, a bit like the Thames Barrage. These were removed and replaced in the twentieth century. Some of the bridges show a deep channel cut down vertically to the bottom of the canal, the grooves of which were constructed to hold wooden 'stop planks' that formed temporary dams that could be quickly installed if a sudden leak occurred, or a section needed to be drained for repair. Milestone 5 is located between Swing Bridge and Rock Bridge.



Swing Bridge — photo: Paul Berry

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17) The name 'Rock' refers to the bedrock that is close to the surface here, and must have made life difficult for the navvies excavating the canal. Rock House stands close to Rock Bridge, built around the same time as the canal for Captain John Twisden the engineer who helped extend the waterway to Taunton. He was offered any land he wanted for his new home, and obviously wanted to make a grandiose statement. It acts as quite a contrast to Waterside cottage on the other side of the bridge, which would probably have been home to the wharf keeper.



Canal near Sampford Peverell — photo:
Paul Berry

18) Wotton Bridge, Battens Bridge, and Sampford Peverell Bridge are all passed before the canal reaches the village of Sampford Peverell. There are numerous services here, including an excellent pub, the Globe Inn. St John the Baptist church (founded by Sir Hugh Peverell) overlooks the canal, and its main building dates back to the early thirteenth century. In the fifteenth century, Lady Margaret Beaufort (mother of Henry VII) added the south aisle and porch.

In days gone by, canals were known as 'navigations', and were built by 'navvies', itinerant labourers who travelled in gangs and camped rough. They completed dangerous work, but were poorly paid, and often lived up to their reputation of drunkenness and violence.

"They worked without the help of machines, using just spades, picks, and wheelbarrows. Their labour was backbreaking, dangerous, and poorly paid. With no sick pay, insurance, holidays or pensions, the men worked in all weathers for as long as they could stand." (Canal information board)

On one occasion in 1811, a riot occurred in Sampford Peverell when a group of navvies cut loose. At the house of John Chave in the village, ghosts had been reported. A mob of navvies besieged the house, and Chave fired a pistol in self-defence, killing George Helps (buried in the village churchyard). It transpired that the ghostly noises were in fact smugglers operating behind a false wall.

"About 300 of the men assembled in the village, causing a general nuisance, with dire results. An inhabitant on whom they centred their wrath, apparently acting in his own defence, fired a loaded pistol, causing one man to die outright. 'Justifiable homicide' was the verdict at the subsequent inquest, but this did not eliminate feelings of distrust." (Helen Harris)

19) East of Sampford Peverell, the route passes Buckland Bridge, and then Boehill Bridge, where the A361 North Devon Link Road crosses the canal. A slipway here for boat launching was built in 2003.

20) The canal passes right next to the Minnows Touring Park (which I used as a base to explore the canal in both directions over two days) before reaching Holbrooke Bridge.

21) Travelling east from Sampford Peverell, the canal path progresses through rural Devon and is much quieter. Ayshford Bridge is the next landmark, and between here and Ebear Bridge a few years ago, rangers operating a weed-cutting boat spotted a small population of scarce chaser dragonflies - the first record of this species breeding in Devon. Right next to Ayshford Bridge is the fifteenth century Ayshford chapel, a former private chapel used by the Ayshford family, who lived at nearby Ayshford Court up to 1689. The Manor of Ayshford was recorded in the Domesday Book. The chapel is a Grade I listed building under the care of the 'Friends of Friendless Churches'. Their website warns: 'Please be careful not to shut inquisitive sheep in the church when you leave' - a necessary alert as sheep often butt open the church's oak door. There are many family memorials within, including a memorial to Henry Ayshford, 'a spotless child' who died in 1666 (famously a plague year), aged just one year. A single bell in the chapel is dedicated to him. Beyond these buildings, a large solar farm is passed on the right.

22) Westcott Bridge was built to link a farmer's land split by the construction of canal. There is lay-by ***(continued overleaf)***



Milepost Nine — photo: Paul Berry

parking nearby. Next on the route is Ebear Bridge, and just beyond here is milepost 9. The river Lyner is carried under the canal here by Grade II listed twin culverts.

23) As the canal runs close beside the main railway line and then the hamlet of Burlescombe, it is crossed by the steel girder Black Bridge. Here, an old mineral line linked the limestone quarries at Westleigh to the railway main line. The section of the canal between Sampford Peverell and Westleigh is particularly rich in dragonflies.

24) The road that crosses over Fossend Bridge connects Westleigh to Burlescombe. Nearby are the remains of Canonsleigh Abbey, although little now remains of the twelfth century foundations except for the ruins of the West Gate. The Abbey was founded around 1170 by Walter de Claville as a house for the Augustinian Canons, and it became an Augustine nunnery in the late thirteenth century. The Grand Western Canal has frozen up in severe winters, and on

one occasion, three men were able to skate all the way from Burlescombe village to Tiverton.

25) From Fenacre Bridge to Waytown Tunnel, a deep cutting was required in order to keep the summit level lower to reduce the difficulties of providing an adequate supply of water. However, when the cutting was excavated, the problem was accidentally solved as it crossed a freshwater spring line which to this day supplies the canal with its water. In the early part of twentieth century, at a point near Fenacre Bridge, sheep were run through the canal to be washed before going for shearing. There is parking nearby.

26) Just beyond Whipcott Bridge is the old Whipcott Wharf, now in use as a picnic site. The canal runs through a deep wooded cutting from here to Waytown Tunnel. The water is clear, and the tow path is always very quiet, as the canal takes on a completely different atmosphere.

27) The Grade II listed Waytown Lime Kilns come as something of a surprise near the end of the route. There were originally three kilns here, served by the three largest arches. The two smaller arches acted as shelters for the lime workers. The kilns were served directly from local quarries using packhorses and then later the Taunton canal extension. The resulting burnt lime was loaded straight onto barges for transportation. Farmers still needed to get it home, and writing in 1808 Charles Vancouver commented that:

“A farmer living 10 miles from a lime kiln could only bring home enough lime in a week, using 4 packhorses, to treat half acre of land”.

Cheap and convenient canal transport certainly made life easier for a time.

28) There is a rather unexpected slight uphill stretch after the lime kilns to reach the Grade II listed Waytown Tunnel. This is rather a short tunnel (just 36.6 metres), really just an extended bridge, and is only around seven feet wide to make it navigable by tub-boats. The road crossing the canal here leads to the village of Holcombe Rogus, where Holcombe Court was the seat of the Bluett family for centuries. All Saint’s Church dates back to the fifteenth century, and there used to be a great pub, the ‘Prince of Wales’, that unfortunately closed in November, 2021. A fund-raising campaign attempted to re-open it as a village hub, but it went up for auction in August, 2023.



Waytown Lime Kilns — photo: Paul Berry

29) Lowdwells Lock (sat nav: TA21 0JY) marks the end of the in-water section of the canal, and is the north-eastern end of the Grand Western Canal Country Park. the gates have been removed and the

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centre of the basin has been filled-in to provide a bund across the canal allowing access to a picnic site on the far side. The house between the tunnel and the lock (Wharf House) was a modest wharf-keeper's cottage back in the day, but has been tastefully re-modelled and enlarged. The original part of the old building closest to the tunnel is still identifiable. From Lowdswells, the canal originally crossed over the road via an aqueduct and continued towards Taunton where it joined the Bridgwater and Taunton Canal. This section was abandoned in the mid-1800s, although most of the old tow path remains as a public right of way. To gain access to the abandoned section, you need to continue down the road, where on the left is a small car park. In front of this is a gate/style, and from here you can trace the route of the canal along the old tow path for 5.5 miles to the remains of Nynehead Lift near Wellington. Alternatively, there is a circular walk (The Appley Circular Walk) from Lowdswells that follows part of now defunct dry canal route and back via Appley to Waytown Tunnel. On the way, the route passes the Greenham Lift (just 400 metres from Lowdswells). This is the highest of the lifts on the Taunton section, and although not much remains, it is still possible to make out the top and bottom basins. Just past Cothay Manor, it is possible to take a short detour to check out the restored section of Jayes' Cutting.



Waytown Tunnel — photo: Paul Berry



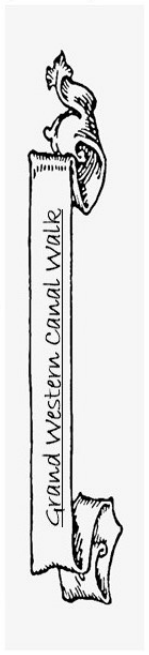
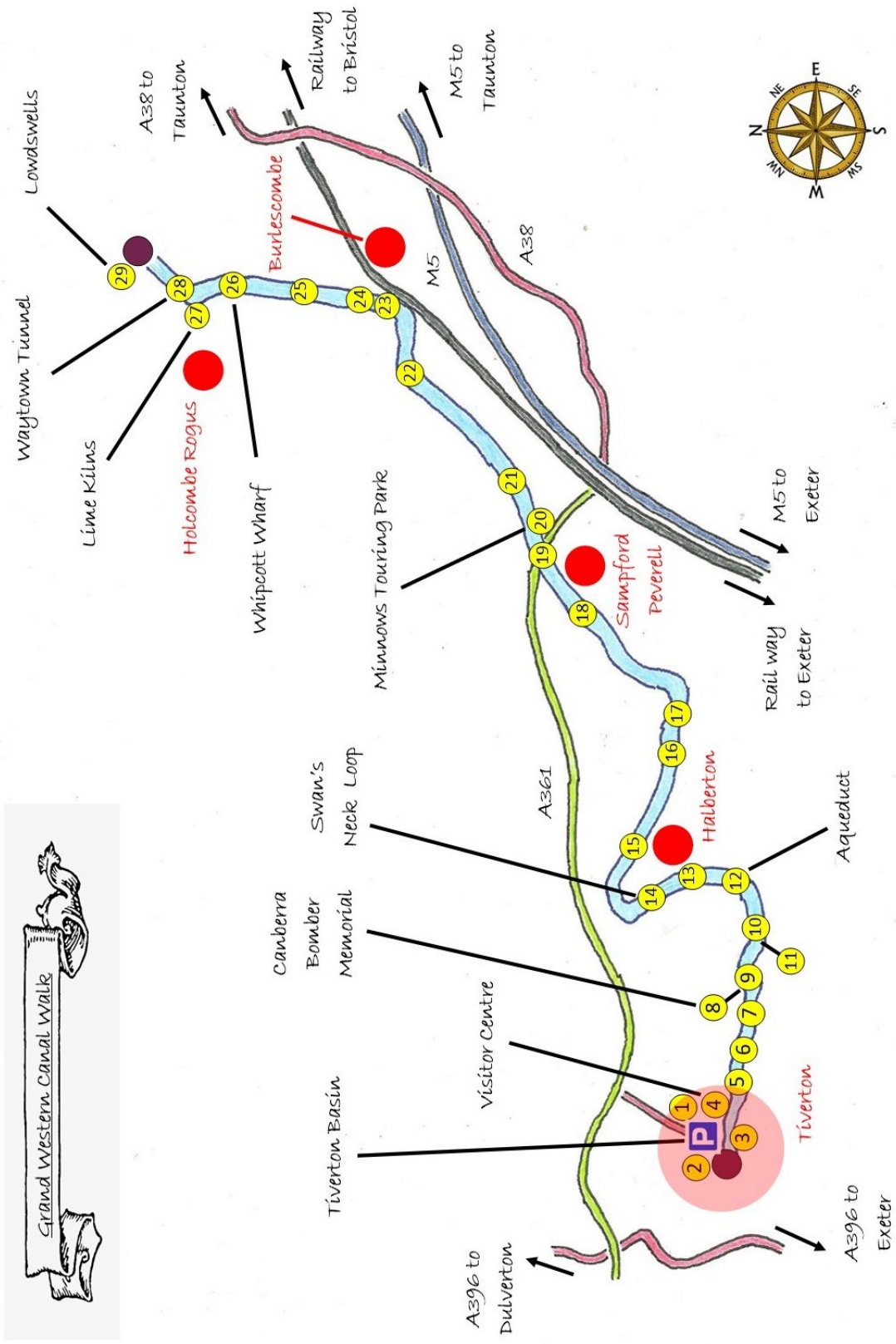
Lowdswells — photo: Paul Berry

Book reference: 'The Grand Western Canal: A Brief History' by Helen Harris

Answers to Curiosity Questions:

- # What is the speed limit for vessels travelling on a canal? (*4 mph*)
- # How many miles of navigable canals and rivers are there in the UK - 1,000? 3,200? 4,700? 10,400? (*4,700 miles*)
- # Which British city has the most canals? (*Birmingham has 35 miles of canals, said to be more than Venice*)

The Grand Western Canal, Mid Devon



Grand Western Canal Country Park and Local Nature Reserve

The Canal Basin, Tiverton



Sampford Peverell

