



## Somerset

### Maunsel Lower Lock

Here's a hike in the Garden of Eden. Well, that's what they used to call the fertile land out North Petherton way, just below the eastern elevation of the Quantock Hills. They used to say the wooden handle of a spade would grow in the peat of the Somerset Levels if you planted one.

And in the early 1800's men with spades did come here - only they weren't growing trees. They were navvies, working on the Taunton and Bridgwater Canal, and their handiwork is still very much in evidence today. It can be enjoyed by anyone with a small boat, or a pair of walking boots.

The Taunton and Bridgwater provides walkers with numerous opportunities along its 15 miles. You could, of course, walk from one end to the other and catch the train back if you wished.

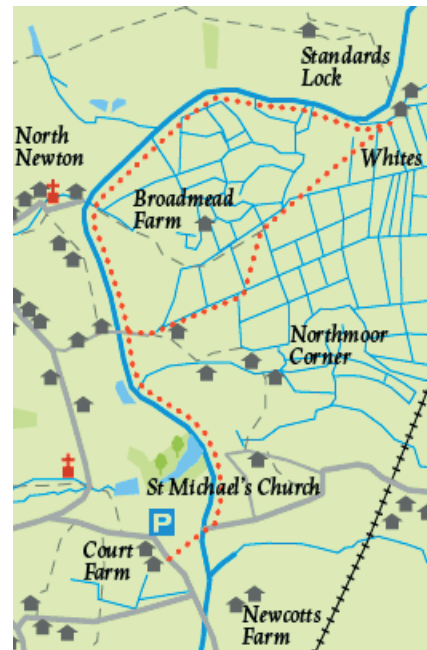
For the less ambitious a good introductory hike can be found around Maunsel Lower Lock where there's a car park, and a canal visitor centre with a tea room. To find it take the A361 Taunton to Glastonbury road, and follow the canal signposts between Durston and West Lyng. The car park is a mile or so to the north of the main road.

Once you are there an interpretation board offers a choice of four or five hikes - all based around the canal. This one goes north past Coxhill Bridge and the village of North Newton.

But before we step forth, let's take a brief look at the history of this lovely waterway. The Taunton and Bridgwater canal was part of an ambitious 19th century plan to create a route between Exeter and Bristol which would avoid the treacherous sea route around Land's End. It's a great pity the link never materialised, though we must be glad they managed to reach as far as Taunton.

This northerly section opened in 1827 and later, in 1841, an extra bit linked through to the new docks at Bridgwater, making a total length of 15 miles. The canal was used mainly for the transportation of coal, timber and limestone which was carried in barges and small tub-boats. The commercial viability of the waterway ended when the Bristol and Exeter railway opened. The rail company eventually bought the canal, and all commercial vessels ceased trading in 1907.

The British Waterways Association lobbied for many years to save the canal from dereliction and in due time local authorities, along with British Waterways, started restoration. Work



*Basic Hike: you have several choices at the Maunsel Lower Lock car park on the Taunton - Bridgwater Canal - but the one we chose was the walk north, along the tow path, beyond Godfrey's Croner to Whites, then south over the rhynes to Wisteria Farm and Coxhill Bridge - and back along the canal.*

*Recommended map: Ordnance Survey Explorer 40 Quantock Hills.*

*Distance and Going: four-and-a-half miles - very level and not muddy in dry weather. Canal walking is a wonderful thing. It is flat, you are constantly by water - which is always pleasant - and a well-laid footpath comes as part of the package.*

began in 1980 and continued until 1995 and now the West-country has a remarkable man-made navigation that it can be proud of.

We strolled along the towpath on a balmy evening recently, and were delighted by the low-lying bucolic idyll in which we found myself. Herons fished for their supper, various water-fowl seemed excited by the joys of spring, and a roe-buck shot off towards Middlemoor Drove like an athlete on a pogo-stick.

Several fishermen were busy doing nothing and one or two of them had the longest angling-rods ever used in such narrow waterway. «It'll go to 16 metres if I put all the extensions on,» explained a jolly man enthroned upon a tiny stool. He'd caught three tench, but said that it hadn't been a good afternoon. «Water's too clear. The fish can see you. On a day like this - it's them who've got us by the short-and-curlies.» Nearby, his car bore the bumper-sticker: «Gone Fishin'.»

There's an interesting book called *By Waterway To Taunton* (by Tony Haskell - Somerset Books - which can be obtained through Halsgrove of Tiverton) that explains how the canal builders had a fairly easy time of it in these parts. No difficult flights of locks for them. This waterway climbs a modest 35 feet between the tidal basin at Bridgwater and Firepool Weir at Taunton, an ascent that could be achieved with the help of just five locks.

The route follows the very lowest contour of the eastern tip of the Quantocks - everything beyond is the aptly named Levels. You see this as you walk; to your left, low ground begins to rise - to your right the vast swathe of peat moor is as flat as a pancake all the way to Othery.

We walked past the swing-bridge at North Newton where a handsome old church did its best to add grace to a village dominated by new homes, and out past King's Lock to round Godfrey Corner and reach another bend in the canal at a place called Whites.

Here we left the waterside to follow a footpath south across the rhynes - you'll see it on the map - it runs down to Wisteria Farm and from there you can regain the canal at Coxhill Bridge.

You could, if you were out for a whole day, continue along the canal to Fordgate and join the Parrett Trail across the rhynes to the River Parrett. Then you'd head upstream to Manor Farm near Burrowbridge, take the drove road to West Yeo, follow Lyng Drove south, turn right along Bankland Drove and so come back to Maunsel Lower Lock via Bankland Lane. A dozen miles - and not a single step to climb.