

## THE GRAND WESTERN CANAL IN HALBERTON



*Halberton Cut from Greenway Bridge, looking east*

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this leaflet is to outline the history of the length of the Grand Western Canal that crosses Halberton parish<sup>1</sup>. Let's start with two facts:

First, about forty percent of the navigable length of the Grand Western Canal is located within the boundaries of Halberton parish. Second, the canal has rather a lot of bends in it.

As we know it today, the Grand Western Canal runs for just over 11 miles from the canal basin at Tiverton to Lodwells (near Holcombe Rogus, Somerset) where the water comes to an abrupt end at what was once a set of lock gates. En route from one end to the other the canal snakes its way through the parish of Halberton from the boundary with Tiverton at Manley Bridge in the west to the boundary with Sampford Peverell in the east<sup>2</sup>. As the crow flies the distance between those two points is about 2 ½ miles (4 kilometres) but the distance along the towpath is far more than that, totalling about 4 ¼ miles (6 ¾ kilometres).

### **The master plan**

The year was 1794. An engineer named John Rennie presented his master plan for the Grand Western Canal to a select committee drawn from a group of men who were prepared to put their hands in their pockets to finance the building of it. Rennie's proposal was logical enough; in order to ease the passage of cargo from Bristol and South Wales to the ports along the south coast of England his plan was to build a canal linking Topsham on the River Exe with Taunton where it would join the Tone Navigation and then link to the Bristol Channel via Bridgwater. Despite strong

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<sup>1</sup> A lot of detailed information about the general history of the canal is available in books and on the Internet, see Appendix for a few suggested sources

<sup>2</sup> The boundary with Sampford Peverell is about 330 yards (300 metres) to the east of Battens Bridge

opposition from Exeter City Council, which stood to lose considerable port revenues if the canal were ever built, the Act of Parliament that authorised the building of the canal was passed in 1796. History doesn't record what Cornish Wreckers thought of Rennie's proposal.

### **Building the canal**

Progress was interrupted by the war with France and work on building the canal was delayed until 1810. By then the master plan had grown; the Grand Western Canal was to link to a waterway through Somerset to Bristol where a link to the Kennet and Avon Canal would establish an "Inland Navigable Communication... from London all through by Bristol to the port of Exeter". The investors stumped up an initial £130,000 (more than £10 million at today's prices) and work on building the Grand Western Canal began.

It was no accident that they started digging at Holcombe Rogus in Somerset (about halfway between Tiverton and Taunton) and headed towards Tiverton. The owners wanted to make the new waterway as profitable as possible as quickly as possible because they were acutely aware that the investors would soon be clamouring for a return on their investment. The cash that could be generated by transporting lime and limestone from Canonsleigh quarries (near Burlescombe) to Tiverton via the agricultural area that lay in between was too good an opportunity to miss.

Without sufficient supply of water a canal is pretty useless and the engineers soon hit problems with ensuring the supply of enough water to fill the new waterway. To overcome the difficulties a decision was taken in 1811 to access more springs by lowering the level of the canal by sixteen feet – one of the main reasons why there were no locks ever built on the section between Holcombe Rogus and Tiverton<sup>3</sup>. At the time the decision was made the investors raised an eyebrow or two because the estimated cost of building the canal shot up whereas we benefit from the decision today because it has resulted in a flat walking and cycle path that is more than 11 miles long.

Then someone took a closer look at Rennie's plans and realised that the proposed route ran straight through, not around, the village of Halberton. A revised route to solve that little problem, along with several other similar difficulties, was authorised in 1811. The building work continued and in 1813 Rennie presented a report on progress. He divided his report into sections and he must have felt extremely uncomfortable presenting his findings about Halberton:

"The Halberton lot has been the most difficult and expensive piece of Work of its kind on the canal. The village of Halberton stands in the line where the canal should have been made, to avoid which, the works have been thrown into several pieces of high and expensive cutting; some being hard rock and others open porous sand. This has occasioned great delay by the whole requiring to be lined. Much cutting and lining is still to do, and several bridges to build, the expense of which is estimated at £13,419 18s 11d". "West of Halberton is also a difficult and expensive lot, and there are still many different works to perform, the estimate for doing which amounts to £7,546 3s 8½ d"

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<sup>3</sup> The main supply of water for the canal today comes from a spring near Fenacre Bridge and groundwater from springs in the bed of the canal near Waytown Tunnel. That creates a slight flow of water towards Tiverton. If you have ever observed an angler on a flat calm day and wondered why his fishing float is making gentle progress towards the west... well, now you know why that is so.

Ignoring the odd half penny the costs Rennie mentioned total about £20,965. That would be getting on for £1½ million at today's prices. But works progressed, additional funds were raised, many other difficulties overcome and in August 1814 the first barge to navigate the first section of the canal made its way from Holcombe Rogus to Tiverton with a cargo of coal.

The building of the second major section of the Grand Western Canal that ran from Holcombe Rogus to Taunton was completed in 1838. At Taunton the canal joined the Bridgwater and Taunton canal and from that waterway there was access to the Bristol Channel. Imagine that – in 1838 you could transport goods from Tiverton to Bristol by boat. But within ten years you also had the choice of sending them by train. In 1848 the branch line that connected Tiverton to the Bristol to Exeter railway opened, the volume of canal borne trade plummeted, revenues fell and the Grand Western Canal, just like so many of its contemporaries across the country, was doomed.

### **Closing the canal**

We are used to the idea that a business can ignore the inevitable and continue to trade, piling up losses even when all hope has gone (Just think of High Street retailers versus the Internet). The people who run the failing business – and who continue to draw a salary from it – report to shareholders annually on how much the enterprise has lost in the last twelve months, investors pray that they won't lose their money, the banks agree bigger loans, everybody shrugs and goes home... until there comes a point where reality has to be faced.

By 1864 the Company of Proprietors of the Grand Western Canal had nowhere to turn and by an Act of Parliament of that year it was authorised to sell the business, lock stock and barrel, for £30,000. The losers were the people and organisations that had invested money in the Grand Western Canal; among them were Edward Cross of Parks, Halberton and his son James, who in 1814 had paid £600 for shares in the Grand Western Canal (Almost £40,000 at today's prices). The winner was the buyer of the enterprise, who got the whole thing at a knock down price.

And the buyer of the enterprise was none other than The Bristol and Exeter Railway Company. The new owners immediately closed the 13½ mile Taunton to Lodwells length of the canal and sold off all the assets (including land) along that length. But the Railway Company kept the 11¼ mile Lodwells to Tiverton stretch of the canal open for the same reason that it had been the first section of the canal to be built; it was profitable thanks to the local limestone and lime trade. Although another competitor for that trade arrived in the shape of road transport the Railway Company kept the canal in its ownership until Nationalisation in 1948 when it was passed into the hands of the British Transport Commission. In 1962 it was formally closed as a commercial waterway, remained in public ownership and the buck was passed to the British Waterways Board.

By that time most of the canal was in a rather sorry state. One persistent problem was leaks, mainly in the section between Halberton and the Tiverton Road Bridge. The "hard rock" mentioned by Rennie in his 1813 report actually had holes and cracks in it through which canal water leaked until the hole was located and plugged by packing it full of puddle clay. But holes weren't the only problem; on 26<sup>th</sup> May 1926 the Tiverton Gazette reported a leak between Greenway Bridge and the Tiverton Road Bridge. The canal was almost dry and it was blamed on burrowing badgers. Further reports of leaks were made in 1927, again blamed on badgers.

In 1939 the canal was leaking again and dams were erected at Greenway Bridge and Tiverton Road Bridge. It was reported that only a foot of water remained in the canal. The problem became so bad that by 1940, in order to save expense, half a mile of the canal between Halberton and the Road Bridge had been closed off and left dry.

The British Waterways Board had acquired a disused canal in a poor state of repair that included a half mile stretch that didn't have any water in it. The groans in Whitehall could probably be heard in Halberton.

### **Creating the Country Park**

There is a very British way of dealing with problems like this. It involves pressure from the public, discussions between politicians and senior public servants, committee meetings, lots of cups of tea, taxpayer's money, and (in this particular case) a new Act of Parliament. After decades of fruitless discussion and debate about the future of the canal the decision to pass it to the British Waterways Board in 1962 proved to be the main catalyst for positive action.

In 1962 a public meeting in Tiverton was convened by local politicians to test the water and the feeling of that meeting was that the canal should be preserved. A committee (The Tiverton Canal Preservation Committee) was set up; it exerted pressure on the Waterways Board and received assurances about the future of the canal so all seemed to be well. That was until 1966 when the Planning Committee of the Tiverton Borough Council took careful aim, threw a rock in the pool, and recommended to the Council that the canal in Tiverton should be filled in and houses built on the site. Thanks to a passionate and informed contribution from the chairman of the Tiverton Canal Preservation Committee the Council decided to defer taking any decision on the matter until adequate consultations had taken place and more detailed studies undertaken. Informal consultation revealed a lot of local support for the idea of preserving the canal and restoring it for use as an amenity. In September 1966 a public meeting was held at the Tiverton Town Hall to which "All interested in saving our Canal are invited to attend". (Note the use of the word "our"). More than 200 people turned up at the meeting and all the resolutions in favour of preserving and enhancing the canal were carried unanimously. The Tiverton Borough Council decided to boot the housing development proposal into the long grass.

In 1967 the Dartington Amenity Research Trust was commissioned to produce a detailed report on the three options for keeping the canal open, including comparative costs. The options were; to keep the Halberton section dry and restore the rest with basic channels; to keep the Halberton section dry and restore the rest with navigable channels or to restore the whole lot with a single navigable channel running from one end to the other. The 'bottom line' estimated cost of each option (i.e. after taking income into account) suggested that, whichever option was chosen, the annual cost of running the canal would be quite small (at most just over £4,000 per year) after initial restoration costs had been met.

While all of this was going on in Devon, wheels were also moving in the capital. In 1966 the Government issued a White Paper called "Leisure in the Countryside", which proposed the establishment of country parks and picnic sites. That White Paper formed the basis of the Countryside Act, 1968. The Countryside Commission's guidance was published in 1969, and specified that a Country Park should be accessible for motor vehicles and pedestrians; provide an adequate

range of facilities including, as a minimum, parking facilities, lavatories and a supervisory service and - of particular importance to saving the Grand Western Canal – Country Parks should operate as a single unit managed by statutory bodies, private agencies or a combination of both.

The solution to the question “what do we do about the Grand Western Canal?” was obvious. Presumably well aware of the contents of the forthcoming guidance, the British Waterways Board indicated in early 1969 that it would be willing to hand over the canal to Devon County Council. Following negotiations an agreement was reached in 1970 whereby the canal would be gifted to Devon County Council along with a one-off payment of £38,750.

On 24<sup>th</sup> June 1971 the official handover ceremony took place at Tiverton Town Hall. The 157 year old, eleven mile long canal with a half mile dried up section had become a Country Park.

### **Water, water everywhere**

In 1971 the County Council reopened the dry section at Halberton by having about a mile of the bed of the canal re-lined. That lining failed after ten years and it was subsequently re-lined with rigid plastic (basically a heavy duty version of the liners used to create garden ponds).

In July 2006 a one metre wide hole appeared at the water line on the embankment near Swing Bridge, the highest embankment along the Canal. Farmland below was flooded, the section was isolated by the installation of Stopboards<sup>4</sup> at Tiverton Road Bridge and Rock Bridge and the leak was repaired with puddling clay. Over twenty four hours this leak reduced the level of water in the canal by 4cm.

In 2007 another significant leak occurred near Battens Bridge when the cover of a valve in the bed of the canal collapsed. When the leak was discovered the affected section was dammed and drained and the leak plugged with clay and concrete.

2012 was the wettest in England since records began in 1910. At about 7.30 on the morning of 21<sup>st</sup> November the Canal Manager received telephone calls to say that the canal was overflowing at Lodwells and properties there were in danger of flooding. Half an hour later the manager had more calls, this time alerting him to the canal overflowing along the sixty foot high embankment near Shuteslade Farm at Halberton. By 11.20 that morning the northern face of the embankment was breaking away.

What happened next hit the national headlines; “Twenty homes were evacuated after water breached the 200-year-old Grand Western Canal at Halberton, Devon” (BBC); “Great (sic) Western Canal runs DRY after one side collapses in torrential rain” (Daily Mail).

A Devon County Council Committee report in February 2013 summed up what had happened; “The breach was a likely result of erosion resulting from over-topping of the embankment, rather than an inherent failure of the embankment. This followed unprecedented rainfall of 38mm during the early

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<sup>4</sup> Stopboards are lengths of timber – they look like very long railway sleepers – and are used to create dams to isolate a section of the Canal, which can then be drained. You can see a stack of them by Greenway Bridge. The boards slot into grooves in the sides of the canal and are placed on top of each other.

hours (as recorded at a nearby weather station), coupled with the ingress of water into the canal from adjoining land. Water levels in the canal rose by 25cm within a matter of hours". The report went on to say "The Canal is now dammed at Greenway Bridge and Rock Bridge. This mile section at Halberton is closed, as is the towpath between Swing Bridge and Rock Bridge. The rest of the canal remains open". The County Council approved expenditure of £3 million to meet the costs of the clean-up operation, repairing and re-instating the breached section, to replace the "somewhat archaic" water level monitoring system throughout the canal and to install an "effective system" to regulate and control water levels in the canal.

The work was completed in 2014 and the canal was re-opened on 19<sup>th</sup> March, just in time for the canal's bi-centennial celebrations in May of that year. The comprehensive official report into the canal breach is recommended reading for anyone who wishes to know the full story – see Appendix for sources.



Cutting the ribbon, 19<sup>th</sup> March 2014

### **The canal today**

The canal was declared a Local Nature Reserve in 2005. It has Conservation Area status and is also a County Wildlife Site. It has become probably the principal tourist attraction in Mid Devon with more than 250,000<sup>5</sup> visitors a year. The towpath is a public right of way, enjoyed by walkers and cyclists. (National Cycle Network 3 runs from Lands End to Bristol. It follows most of the canal towpath with the exception of the Halberton stretch, where the network diverts towards the village). Fishing rights are leased to the Tiverton and District Angling Club. Boats ranging from kayaks to small canal barges make their way to and fro. The canal basin at Tiverton is home to one of the few horse drawn barges still operating in the country.

The Grand Western Canal Country Park is a place for people who attach importance to enjoyment and simple happiness.

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<sup>5</sup> To put that into context, the Royal Shakespeare Theatre, the Roman Baths and Pump Room and the Eden Project each attract just over 1,000,000 visitors a year.

## The Halberton section

We will start our exploration of the Halberton section at Manley Bridge and follow the canal towpath through the parish of Halberton. Unless stated otherwise all of the bridges mentioned were built during the original period of construction of the canal (i.e. between 1811 and 1814).

### Manley Bridge (Grade 2 listed)



The bridge marks the western boundary of Halberton parish; the bridge itself is in Tiverton parish, the canal to the west of it (the view through the arch) is in Halberton parish.

### East Manley Bridge (Grade 2 listed)



This is an accommodation bridge over the canal. (Note - an accommodation bridge is built when the path of a canal would disrupt a pre-existing private road, path or right of access).

### **Halberton Aqueduct (not listed)**



During the 1840s surveyors working for the Bristol and Exeter Railway started work on the design of the Tiverton Branch Line (That line ran from Tiverton Junction station - which was situated by what is now the Lloyd Maunder's abattoir in Willand - to the centre of Tiverton). Faced with the problem

of how to cross a canal with a railway line they decided to dig a cutting under the waterway and build an aqueduct. Completed in 1847, the aqueduct is constructed of cast iron and carries the canal over a two arched bridge, built to accommodate a double track railway even though only one line was ever constructed. Isambard Kingdom Brunel was the engineer for the Railway at the time of construction of the aqueduct and his initials are on a contract drawing but it is not known how actively he was involved. When the canal was passed into the ownership of Devon County Council the aqueduct lining was reinforced with butyl and the original timber fences were replaced with a brick built parapet.

### **Crownhill Bridge (Grade 2 listed)**



This bridge carries the minor road that connects Halberton village (Lower Town) and the main road to Tiverton (the junction is just west of the entrance to the Tiverton Road Bridge car park).

### Tiverton Road Bridge (Grade 2 listed)



This bridge carries the A373 over the canal. There is a disused wharf on the south side of the canal here, next to the bridge. This was the last wharf to be used for the carriage of stone on the canal. Until the mid 1920's quarried stone was transported by barge for eight miles from Whipcott to the Tiverton Road Bridge

where there was a crushing depot owned by William Elworthy of Halberton. Elworthy was born in Ash Thomas, lived in Halberton all his life, died in 1941 at the age of 80 and is buried in the churchyard.

### The Dudley Weatherley Jubilee Bridge (not listed)



The white lifting footbridge spans the canal to enable pedestrians and cyclists to cross from the car park to the canal towpath. The bridge was built in 2002, Her Majesty the Queen's Jubilee Year, and the works were opened by Dudley Weatherley on 30<sup>th</sup> September. The bridge is named after

him. He was an ardent supporter of the development of the Grand Western Canal for leisure purposes and his artistic work has often featured scenes from the canal.

[Milestone near Tiverton Road Bridge \(Grade 2 listed\)](#)



Situated on the north side of the ninety degree bend in the canal is a large stone from the locality with the Roman numeral III marked upon it (recording the number of miles from Tiverton canal basin).

[Milestone west of Sellake Bridge \(not listed\)](#)



This is another stone from the locality, marking four miles from the Tiverton canal basin. Almost every trace of the IV mark has been eroded.

[Sellake Bridge \(Grade 2 listed\)](#)



This is another accommodation bridge and it carries a farm track over the canal. The Grade 2 listing names the bridge as Sellick Bridge. The sign on the bridge names it Sellake Bridge. Take your pick.

## Sellake Bay



East of Sellake Bridge the canal widens into an area known as Sellake Bay, where the canal sits on top of a short but high earth embankment. This must have been one of the “difficult and expensive” lots that John Rennie referred to in his 1813 progress report.

## [Greenway Bridge \(Grade 2 listed\)](#)



The bridge carries a minor road over the canal. The road – Greenway – runs northwards from Halberton village and crosses a bridge over the North Devon Link Road before joining the road from Tiverton to Uplowman.

## Halberton Cut (Photograph on page one)

For about 325 metres between Greenway Bridge and Swing Bridge the canal lies in what John Rennie referred to as a piece of “high and expensive cutting”, with tree lined banks rising up to ten metres or more above the water level.

You may be wondering what the canal builders did with all of the earth, rubble and rock that was removed to create the cut. The conversation between engineer and construction crew must have gone something like this: “Ok lads. See that hill? Just knock a cutting straight through it will you. Everything you get out of it needs to be shifted over there and piled up to make an embankment...”

### Swing Bridge (not listed)



There is more to this accommodation bridge than the attractive design and picturesque location.

On the 1889 Ordnance Survey Map the bridge was marked as “Swing Bridge”. In the same year the canal engineer referred to it by a different name; “Valley House Bridge”. (Valley House is the large

modernised cottage situated next to the canal just to the east of the bridge). The bridge deck as you see it today is modern, but in construction it is similar that shown on the 1889 engineer’s notes. There is no evidence in the present structure that the bridge ever swung horizontally although it is a possibility that it did.

The Swing Bridge had a stop gate. An archaeologist’s report produced in 2014 states “The stop gate is a wooden structure set within rebates in the abutments, and would have been one of a pair located either side of the bridge. In the open position it lay (as recorded) flat on the base of the canal. It is likely that it was pulled into its closed position by a horse. The stop gate incorporated a flap, which may have been manually opened to allow water through the structure when the gate was being lowered into its open position. There is some evidence to indicate that the stop gate was replaced by stop boards” (planks).

### The embankment to the east of Swing Bridge



The two hundred metre long, eighteen metre high canal embankment that lies beyond Swing Bridge was mainly constructed using material removed from cuttings.

Since 2012 it has become known locally as “The Breach Section” and whether that name will stick only time will tell.

The photograph has been taken from the official report

and the figure of the man in the top left corner gives a good impression of scale. The results of the restoration work are impressive and the channel of this part of the canal is now reinforced with what amounts to a heavy duty pond liner.

**Milestone east of the embankment (not listed)**



The five mile (V) mark, which is barely visible now, is inscribed on a stone situated at the eastern end of the embankment.

**Rock Wharf (or Halberton Wharf) at Rock Bridge (not listed)**



In her book “The Grand Western Canal” (1973) Helen Harris describes “the scene here” as “perhaps the most attractive of any on the canal’s length”. Looking at the same area today it is easy to see why she thought that. The stone face of the old wharf creates an area of water resembling a small formal lake which plays with the reflections of

the picturesque canal side house and its beautiful garden. This wharf, like all of the others along the canal, was used for loading and unloading goods from barges. By the early 1900s those barge cargoes had become almost exclusively road stone from local quarries.

**[Rock Bridge \(Grade 2 listed\)](#)**



Rock Bridge carries the A373 between Halberton and Sampford Peverell up over the canal. Just to the north of the bridge are the entrances to the Grade 2 listed buildings mentioned below.

[Rock House \(Grade 2 listed\)](#) and [Rock Cottage \(Grade 2 listed\)](#)

The two dwellings that are almost hidden behind trees on the north side of the canal towpath and to the east of Rock Bridge are Rock Cottage and Rock House.

Rock House is the substantial country house that lies further back from the canal than the cottage. It was built in about 1809 by the canal engineer John Rennie and was occupied by John Twisden, appointed clerk of the canal company in 1815. The house has a carriage entry and a long range of outbuildings that includes a stable block. Hidden beneath the house are three large cellars, about six metres deep. Worn steps suggest the cellars are older than the house, which may have been built on earlier foundations. A tunnel runs about thirty metres towards the canal and it has been suggested that this indicates an association with the medieval priory at Halberton.

Rock cottage was built at the same time as the main house and is thought to have been the gardener's cottage.

[Watton Bridge \(not listed\)](#)

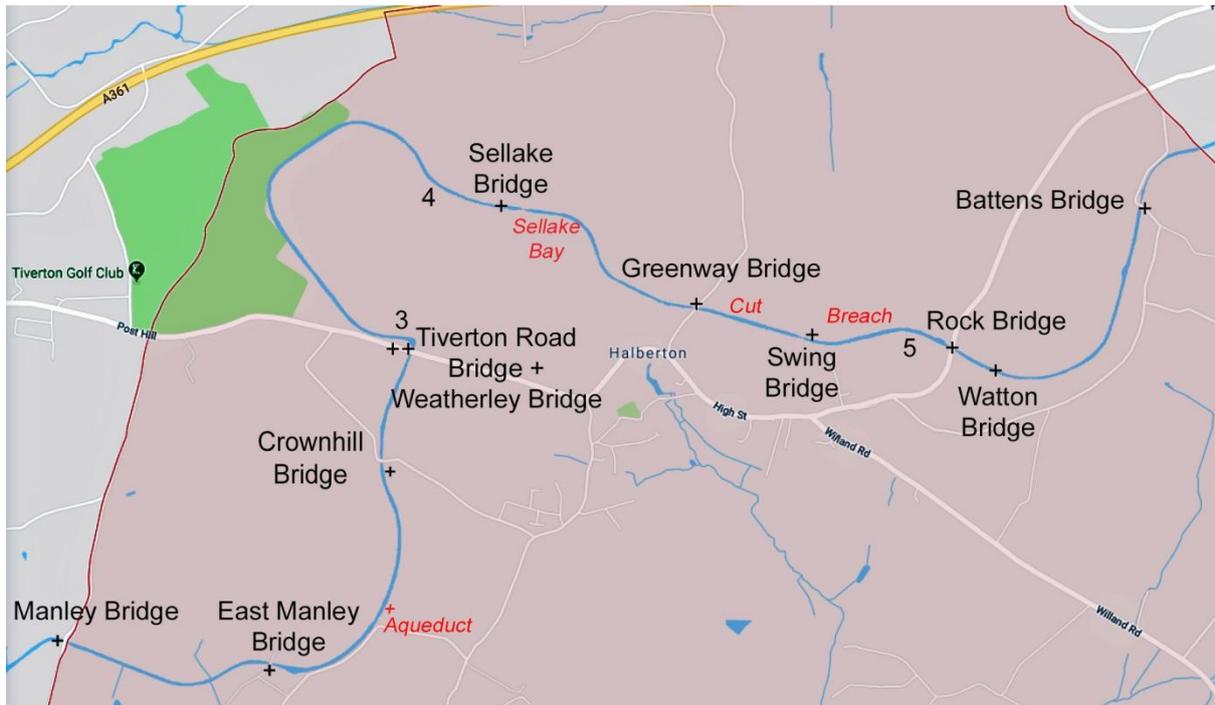


Watton Bridge, constructed using three very large metal girders, is another accommodation Bridge.

[Battens Bridge \(Grade 2 listed\)](#)



This is the eleventh and final canal bridge within Halberton parish. It carries a minor road (Batten's Lane) across the canal. The lane runs from the eastern end of Halberton village to join the Turnpike Road west of Sampford Peverell.



## APPENDIX - MAIN SOURCES

### Books

The Grand Western Canal by Helen Harris (1973) (ISBN 0 7153 6254 2)

Halberton and Halbertonians Volume 2 by Eileen Voce (2012 Tiverton and Mid Devon Museum Trust)

### Internet

[Report into the breach of the Grand Western Canal](#) (Devon County Council 2013)

[British Listed Buildings](#)

Natural England [“Towards a Country Park Renaissance”](#) (2003)

### Photographs

All photographs, with the exception of the image of the canal breach, have been contributed by a member of the Halberton History Group.