

The Union Canal

The Edinburgh and Glasgow Union Canal was opened in 1822 and ran for 31½ miles from Edinburgh to Falkirk where it was joined by a series of eleven locks to the Forth and Clyde Canal. The canal was divided into four stages and had milestones every half mile, some of which still remain. The commercial life ceased in 1936 and the canal was closed to through navigation in 1965.



Milestone

The canal is unique in being a contour canal. It runs along the lie of the land, contour 242 feet above sea level, and there were no locks between Edinburgh and Falkirk. The canal was designed and built by Hugh Baird with advice from Thomas Telford who, while this canal was being built, was building the great Caledonian Canal from Fort William to Inverness using Loch Lochy, Loch Oich and Loch Ness. Hugh Baird's design of a contour canal meant that when he arrived at river valleys he was not always at a narrow part and the result was he had to build large aqueducts.



The Avon Aqueduct to the west of Linlithgow is the second largest aqueduct in the United Kingdom. Only the aqueduct at Pontcysyllte in North Wales is larger. The Avon aqueduct is 810 feet

long and 86 feet high above the river. It has twelve arches and was built to the design of Thomas Telford. The water is carried in a metal trough and, unlike the English and Welsh ones, it has towpaths on either side.

Just beyond the Avon Aqueduct is Slamannan Basin. When the canal was opened in 1822 passengers could travel to Glasgow by day or night taking eight hours. In 1836 the railways had come to Scotland, and the Slamannan to Airdrie line had been built. The canal company thought it would be a good idea to build this basin so passengers could get off and take the train to Airdrie, thus cutting four hours off the journey. This was not a success, as by 1842 the Edinburgh to Glasgow Railway line had been built running parallel to the canal almost all the way. The basin however was extensively used as a transshipment basin for coal and other goods. On either side of the basin was an iron foundry and an ironworks. Remains of the railway can still be seen.

The failure of the Slamannan Basin was the beginning of the end of the canal's commercial life. By 1848 all passenger traffic had died out. Shortly after that the canal passed into the ownership of the railways. When British Transport was split up into British Rail and British Waterways, it passed to British Waterways now Scottish Canals who own it today. It is a scheduled Historic Monument.

Decline and revival of the Union Canal

After the Union Canal was formally closed to navigation in 1965 it rapidly became clogged with weed and unnavigable. The loss of this valuable leisure resource had to be publicised and the idea of an annual marathon on the canal was floated. The picture shows marathon competitors battling through the weeds at Woodcockdale in the late 1970s illustrating the growth of the vegetation.

For 15 years from 1975 to 1990 the Drambuie Liqueur Company sponsored the marathons between Glasgow and Edinburgh with Linlithgow Union Canal Society responsible for the organisation from 1977.



The marathons were reported in the Scottish national press and on local television and helped to highlight the decline of condition of the canal. The marathons were the precursor to the campaign to open up the Lowland canals resulting in the Millennium Link being completed in 2004.