

Heritage Audio Trail

01. Lock 1

During the early 18th century Belfast became a busy merchant town. Located at the mouth of the River Lagan, which meandered through fertile agricultural land, it was ideally situated to export the produce of its linen trade and import goods from the rest of the UK.

But there was a problem. Whilst the established road network had been crucial to Belfast's development, the opening of the Newry Canal, in 1742, illustrated that the transport of goods by water was far more efficient - one horse could pull a sixty foot long barge, or 'lighter', loaded with 78 tons of cargo.

In response, the prominent businessmen of Belfast spent the second half of the 1700s constructing a canal between Belfast and Lisburn, and onwards to Lough Neagh.

Just one hundred metres to your right you will find the remains of Lock 1; the busiest on the canal. Here tolls were paid and details of each lighter and its cargo were recorded into the permit book. In its heyday it wasn't uncommon for 40 or more lighters to be lined up here ready to embark on the 2 day journey to the shores of Lough Neagh; although the last two never left. It is said they still remain here today encased in the rubble and concrete that was poured over the top of them.

Lock 1 was known as Molly Ward's after a well-known 18th century tavern that was once located nearby. It was run by Molly and her husband, a Lock Keeper. The tavern is said to have been a popular place for the canal workers to stop and have a "wee dram" to warm their bones before setting off on their 27 mile trip. With each drink they indirectly helped subsidise the canal which was partly funded by a tax on beer and spirits in the Laganside districts.

In the late 18th century the United Irishmen were also known to frequent the tavern and it is said that Molly Ward was storing a keg of gunpowder for them when the house was raided. Thinking on her feet she quickly threw a blanket over the keg and made her mother sit on it with her grandchild!

From here, 11 miles of surfaced towpath can be followed to Lisburn, offering a chance to encounter wildlife, enjoy peace and tranquillity and follow in the footsteps of men and women who fuelled the local economy. How many locks, bollards and other signs of the canal folk can you find along its length?

02. Lockview

The problem with the River Lagan in its natural state was that boats could not be safely navigated along its length. Wide bends, shallow sections and waterfalls hindered the progress of any substantial vessel carrying goods to and from Belfast Port. In response Dutch engineer Thomas Omer was appointed to construct new channels, locks and weirs to overcome this issue. The result was the 'Lagan Navigation', a river rendered navigable by these man-made features.

The large weir you can see at Lockview directed water along the canal section, which loosely followed the line of the footpath from the car park, and towards Lock 1. Locks were used to raise or lower boats from one level to another. The remains of 13 locks can be seen on the 11 mile stretch between Stranmillis and Sprucefield Lisburn, which now forms the backbone of the Lagan Valley Regional Park. The Park was established in 1967 to protect 4000 acres of countryside after the Lagan Navigation closed in 1958.

This Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty attracts many visitors, some to enjoy the beauty of the River Valley with its iconic views and vistas, others to embrace the outdoors with all the challenges it presents. The beautiful landscape, river and rich biodiversity along with the wide range of recreational activities and users make the Regional Park a wonderful resource for all.

Money for building the canal came from the family of Arthur Chichester, the third Earl of Donegall, and from local taxes and grants from the Dublin parliament. Construction from Belfast to Lisburn commenced in 1756 under the direction of engineer Thomas Omer.

In 1820 it took 14 hours for a loaded lighter to go from Belfast to Lisburn, and another 14 to reach Lough Neagh.

03. Lagan Meadows

If you have time to explore this small Local Nature Reserve you are likely to stumble across the source of Belfast's first piped water supply, which still flows today.

Lester's Dam, a reservoir named after John Lester, who leased neighbouring land, was created 200 years ago when an earth wall was built to contain the naturally occurring spring. The Dam was capable of holding one million gallons of water.

From here the water was fed by gravity through a system of open aqueducts to holding ponds at Botanic Gardens and Lennoxvale, and on into Belfast through a series of wooden pipes.

The brick ruins of a pump house, and the remains of the dam can still be seen, partially hidden by a few hawthorn trees.

A variety of birdlife can also be spotted within the meadow and woodland: Heron's often fish in the marshy areas; the secretive Jack Snipe, which has a low, 'bouncing' motion in flight, may be seen over wintering in the tussocky grass; and the Jay, the most colourful member of the crow family, may be seen flying between trees – the flash of white on the rump a tell-tale sign.

Look out too for large numbers of frogs spawning close to the towpath.

04. Lock 2

Known locally as Mickey Taylor's, imagine this lock in its heyday. Wooden gates enabled the water level in the lock chamber to rise and fall. When opened the gates sat neatly in the indented wall section on each side of the lock. Can you see them at either end of the chamber? The metal hinge loops can still be seen attached to the stonework on the lower gates.

Mickey Taylor, who was the Lock Keeper here between 1860 and 1897, had a little hut at the lock gates, but he lived in a cottage built on Moreland's Meadow. This is the grazed island that was created when the canal cut was made to avoid the long curving bend in the river between here and Brown Bridge. Today the meadow is dotted with impressive oak and cedars. If you are heading upstream you may wish to cross the bridge onto the 18 acre site and follow the lock keepers path to Brown Bridge.

This path route offers better views of Belvoir Estate and the car park where Belvoir House once stood, but can be muddy.

05. Brown Bridge

When navvies dug the canal channel between Brown Bridge and Lock 2 it created an island - Moreland's Meadow. Although nothing remains today, the original lock keepers house was built on it.

Carefully take a look directly over the side of Brown Bridge. Can you see the remains of the weir – the small overflow dam? Look also at the stone walls of the river channel and you will see a thin vertical slot disappearing down into the water. This is where the sluice gate sat. The sluice was operated by the Lock Keeper at Lock 2. He raised and lowered it to control the water levels flowing into the lock.

If you are heading downstream you may wish to walk though Moreland's Meadow, on the other side of the canal, and follow the lock keepers path to Lock No.2. This path offers better views of Belvoir Estate/Motte/House (?), but can be muddy.

Belvoir House was a large; three storeys mid-18th century mansion in what was formerly the Belvoir Park demesne. It was demolished in 1961, by the Territorial Army code named 'Operation Lusty', after the new Parliament of

Northern Ireland rejected it as a possible seat of Government in favour of Stormont.

06. WWII landing site

During the Second World War, Belvoir Estate was used by the American Admiralty as a munitions store. The corrugated pilings on the opposite side of the river formed a landing stage for the Americans to load and unload the ammunition that was transported between here and Belfast Lough. These were then stored in Nissen huts – simple, half-cylindrical corrugated steel shelters - in the woodland that shrouds the field ahead.

The sounds of motor-powered boats and busy chatter would have floated on the air as troops transferred their dangerous cargo.

07. Red bridge

Cast iron bollards like this one can be found all along the Lagan Navigation. This is a particularly good example as it shows deep scratches, but what made them?

These bollards were used to moor the lighters to the shore. 200 years of rope strain has worn these grooves into this anchor point.

You'll notice the top of the bollard has a larger diameter, this is to discourage the ropes or chains from coming loose. They clearly worked!

Red bridge also stands at this point. Originally wooden, this bridge has always been painted red, hence the name. Across the bridge, we find Lock 3, the only site on the Navigation with the Lock Keeper's cottage, lock and bridge still intact.

Communication between the Lock Keepers was vital to ensure the smooth running of the Navigation. This bridge would have felt the pounding feet of children running up the towpath to pass messages along the line. If they were lucky they may have hitched a lift on one of the lighters.

08. Lock 3

The Lock Keeper's role was an important one. They were employed to look after the locks and help the boats pass through them, record details of the boat and its cargo. An important element of the job was to ensure that the locks were kept clean, operational and that the banks were kept clear. Most lock keepers had a weir to look after as well as help maintain the correct water level. If it was too high or too low, the boats could not pass. Due to a lack of reservoirs on the Lagan Navigation the conservation of water extremely important.

Each lock keeper was paid a wage that was poor in comparison to others of the same social class, considering the important nature of their work. To counter this each lock keeper was given their own house with a small piece of land where they could subsidise their income by growing their own food.

Lock keepers were regulated by strict rules. Anyone found flaunting these would find themselves fined, which would have had a big impact on such a meagre wage. Sometimes in severe weather conditions, they had to stay up all night moving constantly between lock and weir to prevent flooding. Sometimes the battle was just too much, and the cottage at Lock 3 was flooded on at least two occasions in the 1900s.

The last lock keeper at Lock 3 was George Kilpatrick who lived there with his wife and ten children, all of whom were born in the cottage. To make his wages stretch further he would exchange vegetables and tea with the Lightermen in return for coal. He also sold sweets and lemonade to passers-by, from a lean-to on the gable end of the cottage.

09. Clement Wilson Park

The business park at the end of Newforge Lane, just a stones throw from here, was originally the site of an iron works in 1630. In subsequent years flour and linen mills [or was it a bleach green], plus a clog factory occupied the land. However, it was the owner of a canned food factory who lends his name to Clement Wilson Park in front of us.

When Robert Clement Wilson had an argument with his father about business methods, he was challenged to set up his own. His business soon thrived, becoming well known for its canned 'Ulster Fry'.

Forward thinking Clement Wilson was constantly bringing in new ideas and new technologies. His factory was the first to have a health centre, tennis courts and pleasure gardens for its employees. The park ahead of you was the site of the factory's vegetable gardens and piggeries.

During the Second World War, Clement Wilson Park was covered in Nissen Huts that were occupied by Ghurkas – Nepalese and North Indian troops who have fought with the British Army for over 200 years.

When the mills were in operation they were powered by water from a millrace. It followed the line of the surfaced path through the park towards Shaw's Bridge, where a sluice diverted water along its course.

When the millrace was filled in with the Ghurkas Nissen huts, and rubble to create the raised path. It was because of this it is known as 'Burma Road'.

10. Rath

Lagan Valley Regional Park has been a place of settlement for thousands of years due to its fertile soils and river basin close to the sea. When St Patrick is said to have brought Christianity to Ireland in 432AD the tree-covered mound directly ahead of you would have been a fortified farm, called a "rath".

A ring fence, like a row of upturned, over-sized pencils, offered the families and their animals inside protection from wild animals; at that time, wolves were still rife in the area. Soil, dug out by hand to form a ditch around the fort, was piled onto the banks to offer further defence.

In small leaf-shaped fields outside the rath, several varieties of grain, plus peas, beans, onions and celery were grown. Cattle, let out during the day, provided a valuable source of milk that formed an important part of their diet. Horses, pigs, sheep, hens, bees, geese and dogs were also kept - the latter two proving useful guards for the property. Cattle thieves were not uncommon either.

The farms position close to the Lagan was no coincidence either. Rivers were a good source of food and communication. 1500 years ago travel was much easier by water than through the heavily wooded land.

The waterfall, or weir, you can see in the Lagan, directed water back along the canal. The lock keeper at Lock 3 was responsible for managing this weir and ensuring the correct water levels were maintained.

11. Shaw's Bridge

There has been a bridge across the river Lagan at this point for approximately 500 years, although the current one, the fourth to be constructed, is relatively young at just 300 years old!

Shaw's Bridge is an important structure. For centuries it carried the main road to Dublin and other parts of Ireland. It is named after Captain Shaw who built an oak bridge here in 1655 to allow Oliver Cromwell's gunners to cross the River Lagan. Before the end of the 1600s Cromwell's army replaced it with a more substantial stone bridge, only to see it swept away by floodwaters shortly after. The stone is likely to have come from the ruins of at least one ancient fort. When the river is low you can see different stonework belonging to the older bridge structures.

The bridge proved a challenge for 'haulers', the men who led horses along the towpath. How did they manage to pull the lighters under the bridge at the same time as crossing the horse over the bridge? [pause] Pulleys at either end of the bridge helped the rope turn through 90 degrees, and grooves in the stonework on top of the bridge show where the ropes strained past a post, which also aided the process.

At the crucial moment, the rope would be unhitched from the boat and the lighterman would use a pole to push himself through the tunnel, in the same manner, a gondola in Venice is manoeuvred. The horse would then be re-hitched to the lighter once it had crossed over to this side of the river.

12. Minnowburn

At this point, you can see a river joining the River Lagan. This is the Purdysburn. It is crossed by Minnowburn Bridge. Can you see it through the trees?

The bridge is a good spot to see Dippers. As the name suggests, these short-tailed, plump birds bob up and down looking for food in the shallow, fast-flowing waters.

Up on the skyline you may be able to see the wall belonging to Terrace Hill. In 1861, it was described as a “roomy elegant house built five years ago and commanding a splendid view of the valley of the Lagan, well finished with projecting bow windows and having servants’ rooms.” Edward Robinson owned the house in the early years of the 20th Century. He, along with his brother Harold, was a director in the firm of Robinson & Cleaver Ltd, who were linen manufacturers. Linen was produced in great abundance in the Lagan Valley for over 250 years, dominating the economy of the area. Further upstream there remains evidence of a number of linen mills that took advantage of the Lagan’s waters.

In 1936, Edward Robinson demolished Terrace hill and a new house, which retained the name, was built in its place.

Wet woodland habitats are found on floodplains and as small patches within larger wooded areas. The damp ground becomes home to species such as willow, birch and alder. Wet woodland is an extremely rich habitat for invertebrates, supporting a very large number of species, many of which are now rare in Britain.

This unique habitat is ideal for many insects from larvae to adulthood, which in turn are a food source for other creatures including tree-creepers and blue-tits. The damp conditions are also preferable to fungi, mosses and lichens that would not be able to survive elsewhere.

There have been considerable losses of wet woodland habitats in the last century, mainly due to the felling of trees, changes in land-use or through drainage.

13. Gilchrist Bridge

This high wooden bridge is named in honour of the first Chairman of the Lagan Valley Regional Park, John Gilchrist. Crossing the bridge takes you to Edenderry village and onto Giant's Ring; a Scheduled Ancient Monument. It is one of Northern Ireland's most important Neolithic monuments, believed to be over 4000 years old. The existing chambered grave is unusual in that an earthen ring surrounds it.

Edenderry, meaning "hill-brow of the oak-grove", has long been associated with the linen industry. As early as 1780 there was a bleach green that belonged to John Russell. The bleach green was simply an open area where linen was laid out and, through the process of water, chemicals and the sun, the material was bleached white.

In the 1830's the Russell family converted the site to a water-powered flourmill. It was located just upstream and around the corner from Gilchrist's Bridge, where 21st century, 3-story residential houses now stand.

After the business dissolved, John Brown Shaw bought the mill and converted and enlarged the premises into a weaving factory, naming it after his wife. St Ellen Works had a private quay on the canal to receive deliveries, and it can still be seen today.

14. Lock 4

Lock 4, Rosie's Lock, was named after Rosie Ward who was the lock keeper here in 1834. If you follow the footpath over the bridge, you will soon come to a picnic area. Here you will find 'Eel Weir'. The weir was likely named because it was a good spot to find these fish. Today, Otters and Kingfishers can be seen along this section of the river; further evidence that it remains a good place to fish.

Just downstream of the lock you can find the output of a sluice that allowed the Lock Keepers to regulate the water. Conservation of water and maintaining levels was a huge responsibility for the lock keeper. The following selection of the Lagan Navigation Company's regulations illustrates that if they were broken, the lock keeper's daily pay of 4 pence could soon be swallowed up:

1. The Lock Keeper shall carefully watch over the Banks, Towing Paths, Bridges and Keys, and keep in repair the Banks and Roads under his charge, and shall report without delay to the Inspector, anything in the state of works that require immediate attention under a penalty of 10/=-.
2. The Lock Keepers shall attend to all Lighters that come at proper hours but shall not pass any Lighters through the Locks at night without an order in writing from the Secretary or the Inspector under a penalty of 5s.

3. The Lock Keeper shall not permit any lighters to be moored within 60 yards of the Lock Gates, nor to enter the locks unless there is sufficient water to carry them through the next level, nor when Lighters pass allow the gates to close of themselves under penalty of 2/6 for each offence.
4. The Lock Keeper shall not allow the chamber of his lock to remain full for half an hour time nor by carelessness or waste of water, suffer his level to be run so low as to obstruct the traffic, under a penalty of 5.
5. All Lock Keepers, during any weather shall keep their gates properly secured with moss to prevent waste of water 9s 6^d.
6. The Lock Keepers shall not suffer the racks to fall without winding them down under a penalty of 5s.

15. Lock 5

There was no lock keeper's cottage here. Instead, it was the responsibility of the Lock Keeper at Lock 4 to manage the passage of boats. It was probably a good thing too as "canal folk" that normally slept on the boats overnight would not stay here. These men, known as "lightermen", claimed there were more "strange influences" present on this stretch of canal than anywhere else on the Navigation.

The Lightermen and their families usually lived on board the boat. Their job was to transport the cargo between Belfast and Lough Neagh as quickly and efficiently as possible. Each lighter had a small cabin with a coal-fired stove for heating and cooking, two small cupboards, a folding table with bench seats (which doubled as beds at night) and additional beds on a raised platform. This would have been all the accommodation for the lighterman and his family, which may well have been quite large. In the 19th century, it would have been quite rare for the children of lightermen to go to school. Most of the families would have stayed working on the canals.

The main cargoes on the boats would have been coal to power the factories and mills in the Lagan Valley and linen from the same places. Other cargoes included flour, turf, tiles, sand and farm produce. Sometimes the lighters would take much more sinister cargoes. There is a very old churchyard at Drumbeg Church and there are records of body-snatchers transporting bodies by barge for medical research at Queen's University.

Just a little further upstream towards Drumbeg there is a private bridge, over which cattle were driven. Rope marks from the horse-pulled Lighters are clearly visible as you pass below.

16. Drum House

In the second half of the 17th century two significant groups of settlers arrived in the Lisburn area: Quakers, who had emigrated from northern England were joined fifty years later by Huguenots – French Protestants. Many of these immigrants were skilled in the manufacture of linen.

With an experienced workforce, plus ideal growing conditions for Flax – from which linen was made – and the Lagan itself, the linen industry soon became firmly established here.

Those who made their fortunes from linen frequently owned a country house, a small estate, and lived the life much like that of a landed gentry.

Drum House, belonging to the Maxwell family, was one of many grand houses along the Lagan owned by linen moguls. The Maxwell's made their fortune from linen bleaching.

In 1725 Maxwell Hamilton is credited with introducing the first water-powered machine for beetling linen. This new technique, which pounded linen to give it a flat, glossy effect, was widely celebrated and became universally adopted by bleachers.

In the early 1880s draper John Arnott bought Drum House and employed an architect to front the old house with a late Victorian villa. And it has remained relatively unchanged since. For over fifty years it has been known as Drum House Nursery.

17. Lock 6 Drumbeg

Here we find the remains of Lock 6. Can you see the bollards that were used to secure the barges next to the lock? There was also a quay here owned by the Lagan navigation Company, where coal and sand were unloaded.

Just upstream of the lock is Drum Bridge, a three-arch stone bridge dating back to the early 19th century. At the top of the bridge look for the pulley which guided the towing rope as lighters passed underneath. This was necessary as the towpath changed sides here.

Haulers, the men who led the horses along the towpath, were often farmer's sons. The horses too were brought in from the agricultural sector; many were deemed unsuitable for ploughing or too ill tempered to work with. On the canal towpath, even the most unruly horse could be made to work if the alternative was to fall in the water rather than follow the line the hauler set out.

The haulers would gather in the early morning at both ends of the navigation and wait for the lighters to arrive. The lightermen chose a hauler by throwing them a rope. One journey would normally take two days so at night, after a long day's walk, the hauler would make sure his horse was well looked after. He would then spend the night sleeping on the deck of the lighter or in the cabin with the lighterman and his family.

However, this was not a favourite spot for the 'canal folk'. They claimed there were "strange influences" and that temperatures were lower here than anywhere else on the Navigation. The ghostly reasons for this 'cold spot' can be discovered in the car park outside Drumbeg Parish Church.

18. Drumbeg Parish Church

The Church of Drumnow, now the parish of Drumbeg, derives its name from the Irish, Druin beag, a little ridge. Within the churchyard lies a grave to a James Haddock, which fails to remain upright.

When Haddock died in 1657 he left part of his land in the Malone area to his wife Arminell and the rest to his young son. The executor of the will was one Daniel Davis, who eventually married Haddock's wife. They had a son and Davis altered the will to benefit this son instead.

Five years passed when one night James' friend, Francis Taverner, was riding over Drum Bridge and his horse reared up and there before him stood Haddock's ghost. "Take Daniel Davis to court" moaned the ghost, "There is something strange happening to my will."

Taverner resisted the appeals of the unearthly Haddock who continued to haunt him night after night for a whole month, until finally Taverner took Davis to court.

By the time the case was heard the story had spread far and wide, and the courtroom was packed. The blinds were drawn and in the gloom the proceedings began. Eventually came the moment all had anticipated.

The opposing council abused Taverner and taunted him to call his spiritual witness if he were able. "Call James Haddock" shouted the Usher. There was no reply. The crowd laughed nervously. "Call James Haddock". Again there was silence. At the third summons a clap of thunder made the courthouse tremble to its base, a hand hovered over the witness box and a somber voice exclaimed 'Is this enough?' and it was, and Davis was found guilty.

Daniel Davis slunk away amidst popular jeers, mounting his horse to ride home, but he fell by the way and broke his neck. Never again did the ghost of James Haddock appear before Francis Taverner.

19. Sir Thomas and Lady Dixon Park

On the opposite side of the canal stands the beautiful Sir Thomas and Lady Dixon Park.

Thomas Dixon was a prosperous Ulster businessman who served as High Sheriff of Antrim and was knighted. Lady Dixon became a Dame of the British Empire (DBE) for her work for the armed forces during World War I.

The park comprises rolling meadows, woodland, riverside fields and formal gardens. It flanks the Lagan Navigation for a mile upstream. The main entrance to the park is from Upper Malone Road, which crosses Drum Bridge. A café, playground and a variety of walks offers something for everyone who visits.

The City of Belfast International Rose Garden has made the park world famous, and contains over 20,000 blooms in the summer. The garden is divided into trial and display beds and a heritage garden that displays the best of the roses from local breeders. Each July thousands of visitors enjoy the rose gardens and associated events during Rose Week.

Sir Thomas and Lady Dixon Park also contains International Camellia Trials, a walled garden, a Japanese-style garden with water features for quiet contemplation, a very popular children's playground, an orienteering course and many walks.

The Stewarts, a Scottish farming family, built Wilmont House, in the grounds of the park, in the early 1760s. They were among the first to grow carrots on a large scale in the early 19th century. In 1811 an early threshing machine was erected on the property.

There was also once a mill on this site and the millrace, which provided waterpower, followed the line of the footpath you can see across the river.

20. Lock 7 – McQuston's Lock

Cross over the original sandstone bridge and you will find the Dutch design Thomas Omer lock keepers house. Although it lies in ruins, the distinctive arched gables can be clearly seen. Some of the building stones are huge, and understandably get smaller the higher the building gets. Can you also see the overgrown beech hedge that separated his vegetable garden from the canal?

This, and the now privately owned cottages at Locks 6 and 8 were designed by the Dutch Engineer Thomas Omer, who was also responsible for the construction of the canal cuts between Belfast and Lisburn. The Navigation opened in September 1763 amid scenes of great enthusiasm, the first boat, Lord Hertford, travelled its full length. During the following four years work progressed to Sprucefield – the length of the towpath within the Lagan Valley Regional Park today – until funding dried up. The navigation also suffered from drought, although severe floods were common in the winter too.

With private backing towards the end of the 18th century it was decided a new canal would be cut all the way to Lough Neagh, extending the canal to 27 miles. Britain's largest inland lake would provide more water, and link the navigation with the wider canal network across Ireland.

The growing influence of the rail and road network, evident by the M1 motorway here, would signal the demise for the Lagan Navigation in the 20th century. The Navigation was abandoned in the 1950's and a central section of canal along its route, extending approximately 12.5km between Sprucefield and Moira was lost when this Motorway was constructed in the 1960's.

21. Rambler's Bridge

Wander up onto this wide bridge and you can see the river veering away from the straight cut of the canal. The community of Seymour Hill stands on the opposite bank. This area developed when a linen mill was established here by the Charley's. They were a Lancashire family, originally known as Chorley, who settled in this area in the 18th century.

The Charley's were pioneers in the linen industry and it is said that they developed a new process of bleaching linen cloth with chlorine. Their business was always a speciality one, confining itself to the finest and most luxurious qualities in all sorts of household linen goods. For many years embroidered linen sheets made by J & W Charley were presented as gifts from Northern Ireland to members of the Royal family when they married.

Along the banks of river and canal you will likely see and hear many species of bird.

Tree Sparrows, with their tail almost permanently cocked, are more active and smaller than House Sparrows. Look along the hedgerows for a bird with a chestnut brown head, nape, white cheeks, and collar with a contrasting black cheek-spot. Another common site in hedgerows, trees and bushes is the Blue Tit.

The colourful Blue tits generally feed on insects, caterpillars, seeds and nuts.

Look up into the sky and you may see Buzzards soaring, holding their wings in a shallow 'V'; tail fanned. The buzzard is now the commonest and most widespread UK bird of prey. It is quite large with broad, rounded wings, and a short neck and tail. Their mournful mewing call could be mistaken for a cat.

22. Lock 8

This lock, like many upstream of this point, has been altered since the Navigation closed. The channel is steeper here and so the chamber has been altered to assist the flow of water through the lock.

Due to the river meanderings, the Lagan Navigation's Engineer, Thomas Omer, focused much of his effort towards the Lisburn end of the Navigation. The section between Lock 7 and Lisburn consists almost entirely of canal.

Ballyskeagh High Bridge, which dominates the towpath, was the only road bridge along the navigation designed by Omer. This tall red sandstone bridge carries the main road from Lambeg Village to Drumbeg. This bridge is also, where the last man in Ireland was reputed to have been hung for sheep rustling. It was built around 1760 and has two arches: one for boats and the smaller second arch to allow the horses through. You can still see grooves in the stonework from the hauler's ropes.

The Ordnance Survey Memoirs from the 1830's covering the local districts make many references to the canal system. "Vessels of from 25 to 30 tons trade up the canal. The charge is 5s per ton for potatoes, oats, etc. They bring timber from Belfast to Tyrone and Armagh coasts, also slates, iron, sugar, coals and tar; in fact anything that will fit in their boat...."

23. Three bollards

Here, and upstream for a short distance the canal and River Lagan become one again. The three bollards and wide river indicate this was a popular place to moor up, out of the way of other Lighters. It is the only place along the navigation where so many bollards are located together. Think of it as motorway services of its time.

Today it is much quieter, supported by the fact Otters have been spotted along this stretch. The river meanders a good distance away from the towpath downstream of this point, offering these secretive mammals some privacy.

Across the river we can see Lambeg church. Within the graveyard are buried the bodies of some eminent mill owners. Most notably, perhaps, are the owners of Barbour's thread mill. Their Hilden site, located roughly one mile upstream, was one of the original locations of the Irish textile industry becoming the centre of the greatest linen thread works in the world.

24. Lock 9 Lambeg

There is history of a linen bleaching green here since 1626. The location was chosen because of the deep underground aquifer, a water source that supplies large amounts of clean fresh water.

The original bleaching process was very tedious, occupying a complete summer. It consisted of submerging the cloth in an alkaline 'soap' for several days, washing it clean, and spreading it upon the grass for some weeks. This was repeated five or six times until the linen had acquired the required whiteness.

A number of mill owners in this area implemented improvements to the practice, substituting the soap with sulphuric acid, and using chlorine to aid the bleaching process.

With the advent of the Industrial Revolution, the technique was mechanised, and the bleaching could be undertaken indoors, within a far shorter timescale. As such, the Lambeg Bleaching, Dying and Finishing Company was established here. They used the canal to transport their goods.

The site was eventually taken over by Coca Cola who, took advantage of the spring water, and turned it into a bottling plant.

25. Hilden Mill

Like many of the lairds in the Glasgow area, John Barbour's family were engaged in the linen industry. Having grown increasingly frustrated with the unreliability of Scottish yarn he moved to Ireland in 1784 and established a linen thread works in Lisburn. Qualified teachers were appointed to instruct his employees in the skills of thread-making and within two years Barbour's Linen Threads was in full production.

At the same time his son, William, bought a derelict bleach green at Hilden and set up business. When John died in 1831, William took over his father's enterprise and consolidated the business here at Hilden. Works relating to this were placed beside the Lagan and all of the machinery was driven by a single 15 foot water wheel using a fall of water 7 feet high. This powered a double beetling engine and several rollers.

Here at Hilden Mill the Lagan Canal was used to transport goods, and it ran its own barges on the canal called the 'Nellie' and 'Eva'. Can you see the tie rings on the quay opposite?

From time to time adverts appeared in the Belfast Newsletter relating to various facets of the Canal.

"To Be Sold. On the 2nd of October next at Lisburn. Lighter, the property of Mrs. Agnew, of Mossvale, and Mr. Johnston of Seymour Hill; about 35 tons burthen."

The company built a model village for its workforce in Hilden, which consisted of three hundred and fifty houses, two schools, a community hall, children's playground and village sports ground.

26. Lock 11

The river, canal and millrace for Barbour's Mill ran alongside each other at Lock No. 11, named Scott's lock after Lock Keeper William Scott. The water from the millrace powered the mill and factory.

The Hilden Mill site, on one of the original locations of the Irish textile industry, extends over one quarter of a mile downstream to Hilden Bridge. It was a massive operation.

William Barbour & Sons embraced the technical innovations of the trade and the business rapidly expanded. William's eldest son, John, succeeded his father as Managing Director and he further advanced not only the prosperity of the business, but the welfare of Lisburn and the surrounding district too.

By 1914 the business employed about 2,000 people and it was the largest thread-making works in the world. One of William Barbour's other sons, Thomas, was a founder of the linen thread industry in the USA.

On the grass verge on this side of the lock a row of 3 or 4 cottages once stood. Today, the low wall is all that remains of these farmer's cottages.

27. Waterfowl

You will see many waterfowl along the Navigation, and this site, with its wide open waters, is a great place to see a wide variety of them.

Along with Mallards, the slightly smaller Tufted Duck can be seen all year round. They are black, with white sides, and as the name suggests, have a crest, or tuft, on their head.

The Little Grebe, or Dabchick, can often be seen diving underwater for food, surfacing some distance away – often unseen. It is a small dumpy bird which often appears to have a 'fluffy' rear end. They can also be noisy, with a distinctive whinnying trill.

Keep your eyes peeled for the flashing blue of a Kingfisher; the symbol of the Lagan Valley Regional Park. These small birds hunt fish from riverside perches, occasionally hovering above the water's surface. Kingfishers are very short-lived. Although only a quarter survive to breed the following year, this is enough to maintain the population.

Moorhens, not to be confused with the white-billed Coots, have a red beak with a yellow tip. Although they look black from a distance their back is olive-brown, and the head and underneath are blue-grey.

You are likely too, to see Mute Swans gracing these waters. These large water birds, with an s-shaped neck and orange bill, are the only swans that can be found in the UK all year round.

28. Water conflicts

This point opposite the weir marks as a useful reminder of the importance of water along the navigation. Although it served a number of industries along its banks, the most notable being the linen mills, the relationship wasn't always harmonious. As the mills used the river for the bleaching process and to power their water wheels, there often existed a conflict between the mill owners and the navigation authorities in the use of water. So much so that no employee of the mills or their families were permitted to work on the canal.

The bleachers and the linen mills they were attached to were a powerful lobby group, and managed to stop the construction of reservoirs; however, some were installed in as the canal needed to be viable for the benefit of all concerned.

The weirs – this one has been modernised – also preserved water by slowing the rate of flow. It also helped to back it up and provide a suitable depth for the flat-bottomed lighters to safely navigate the channel.

However, you will notice a smaller wooden sluice gate just a few metres upstream of the larger weir. This was the sluice for the millrace, and as you may imagine caused anxiety for the Lock keepers when the carefully managed Navigation lost thousands of gallons down the mill race when their sluice was raised – especially when the regulations fined Lock keepers for not managing water levels correctly.

29. Lock 12 Island Centre

Now the site of Lisburn Civic Centre with its restored lock, this was originally the site of Vitriol Island, a three acre island between the canal and river at Lisburn, where chemicals were manufactured. 'Vitriol' or sulphuric acid was used to bleach brown linen white.

In 1840 the site was purchased by the Richardsons who changed it to the manufacture of linen and thread. In 1867 they set up the world famous Island Spinning Company Ltd. There was once two beetling mills located here, both with two water wheels of 16 and 14 feet in diameter. This plant expanded to include two powerlooms in 1837.

The roll call of Lock Keepers here followed a typical trend along the Lagan Navigation; the responsibility was passed down through the family. John

Hanna was the lock keeper in the latter half of the 19th century. His brother James then took over and he was followed by his son Dick, who was lock keeper for almost 60 years. Dick supported a wife and four children on 10 shillings a week. He had three certificates for lifesaving and saved over twenty people and horses.

30. Castle Gardens

Lisburn is known as the birthplace of Ireland's linen industry, which was established in 1698 by Louis Crommelin and other Huguenots. An exhibition about the Irish linen industry is now housed in the Irish Linen Centre, which can be found in the town's old Market House in Market Square.

This isn't too far from the Castle Gardens that stand before us. This was once the site of Lisburn Castle, a fortified manor house built in 1622 by Lord Conway, the landlord of Lisburn. The castle was roughly E-shaped with three projecting wings.

When Lisburn was almost destroyed by fire during the Irish Rebellion of 1641, the town and castle were rebuilt soon after. It was during this time that the gardens were developed by a Dutch gardener who was brought over specially. His influence was seen in the terraces, stone walls and pots of colourful flowers which give this area its distinctive look.

When a second massive fire in 1707 had an equally devastating effect in the town, the castle was never rebuilt.

The estate continued in the hands of descendants of the Conway family, including Sir Richard Wallace. After his death and that of Lady Wallace, the gardens were gifted in 1903 to Lisburn for use as a public park. Since that time £3.7 million of Heritage Lottery Funding has been used to restore Castle Gardens, and today they are freely open to the public on all but two days of the year.

Lisburn is of course not the city's original name. Cathedral and other records show that the name *Lisburn* only came into common use around 1662. Prior to that the townland was known as Lisnagarvey, meaning the 'ringfort of the gamblers'.

31. Lisburn Quay

Lisburn was without doubt one of the most important ports on the navigation and its harbour was always busy. In 1763 the 61 tonne Lord Hertford was the first barge to make the journey between Belfast and Lisburn, effectively opening the canal.

A bonfire had been lit in the marketplace and a barrel of ale had been given to the populace by Mr. Higginson, Lord Hertford's agent, to toast to the Monarchs Majesty's health, the prosperity of the Navigation Board and Mr. Omer "who had conducted the works in so masterly a manner."

Liquor, however, was reported to have been instrumental in the death of someone described as "one Smith", who belonged to the Lord Hertford Lighter at Lisburn. It was reported that this person fell overboard and was drowned two days after the official opening on Friday 9th September, 1763.

Of Lisburn's nine quays, one was owned by the navigation company and the other eight were privately owned. The majority of the cargo handled was coal for the adjacent gas works, though other cargoes included linen, corn, flour, timber and farm produce. Tolls were charged on cargoes, but to encourage greater use of the waterway it was decided to waive charges on potatoes, hay and straw moving downstream in 1813.

The navigation here is dominated by the Union Bridge. The present structure dates from 1880 and replaced a number of earlier structures. The new bridge while fit for purpose from the road caused the lightermen all sorts of problems. The blue ornamental dragons on the bridge would catch the ropes used to pull the lighters, much to the frustration of the men below. There was an even older bridge just to the north. Henry Mulholland, a local timber merchant, erected a dry dock nearby in 1837 where they built and repaired small vessels and lighters. They could repair two or three lighters at a time including loaded ones. The remaining quays belonged to spinning, weaving and bleaching companies.

32. Lock 13 Becky Hogg's

This section of the Lagan navigation, between Lisburn and Sprucefield, was completed between 1763 and 1767, once the stretch to Belfast had been opened.

In 1856, William Hogg was the lock keeper here. When he died his wife, Becky, took over the running of the lock for many years after. Lock Keepers generally worked a 44 hour week from 8am to 5pm on weekdays and from 8am until 12 noon on Saturdays.

There was no Lock Keepers cottage here, due simply to the proximity of a relatively large population, and the keeper would have likely been housed in an existing property in the town.

Looking at the lock itself can you spot the iron bracket that would have secured the lock gates to the chamber? You may have also noticed this lock chamber is quite deep. This illustrates the steeper incline of the river bed here.

The weir, which can be viewed by following the short path across the lock chamber, would have fed water into the lock chamber as the Lock Keeper needed it.

33. Moore's Bridge

Moore's Bridge, near the summit, was built in 1825 at the cost of £3000, and this bridge now carries the main Lisburn to Hillsborough road. When it served as the turnpike road this was where tolls were collected. The bridge has three arches and is constructed of dressed sandstone with black stone parapets. Steps have been constructed to give access to the towpath which passes underneath.

Within five years of the bridge being built the Lagan Navigation Company cleaned out the bed of the canal, repaired flood gates and locks, enabling larger vessels to be used. This coincided with the growth of Lisburn, as a town, and the reduced tolls saw traffic increase considerably. Over one quarter of a million tonnes were carried on the waterway on the following seven years.

Of the 63 lighters listed as using the canal around this time 44 were noted as being in 'good' order, 12 were listed in 'bad' condition, and 7 were noted as being in 'middling' order. 36 of these vessels were wooden and 25 were iron.

During the latter part of the 19th century the Lagan Navigation flourished with 153,000 tonnes being transported in 1893 alone. It continued to be a strong contender against the railways, as it could deliver coal directly to the mills along its length.

34. Union Locks

Constructing the Navigation from Belfast to Sprucefield, where we stand now had cost the Lagan Navigation Company £40,000, and that had exhausted the funds. It had its problems, suffering from severe floods in the winter and water shortages in the summer.

With this in mind Robert Whitworth, assistant to famous canal engineer James Brindley, surveyed the canal the following year and made 2 recommendations: either abandon the river course altogether and construct an entirely new canal; or extend it beyond Sprucefield by either constructing a canal on the north side of the river or a new cut on the south side crossing the River Lagan via an aqueduct at Spencer's Bridge.

The second option was chosen and, with private funding from the 'Company of Undertakers of the Lagan Navigation', works on a new canal cut to Lough Neagh started in 1782 with English engineer Richard Owen being employed for a fee £200 per year.

The navigation was carried up 8 metres through these four locks, known as Union Locks, to the highest point of the canal. Between two of the locks there is a basin where a boat could stop. There was also a boathouse, carpenter's workshop, lock keeper's house, stables and coal quay.

The 'head' or 'summit' level extended for eleven miles to Aghalee, crossing the River Lagan near Spencer's bridge via an impressive aqueduct. Sadly this was demolished during the construction of the M1 motorway.

From Aghalee the canal dropped down 21 meters through 10 locks to Lough Neagh. In December 1793 the canal was finally completed to the shore of Lough Neagh at Ellis' Gut. It was reported that on Wednesday 1st January 1794, to celebrate the opening of the navigation, the Marquis of Donegall, who had a controlling stake in the Company of Undertakers, and Richard Owen travelled on the canal near Moira to the firing of cannon and cheering of crowds.

35. Western end of the Lagan Valley Regional Park

This point marks the western limit of the Lagan Navigation and the Lagan Valley Regional Park.

The Lagan navigation was a reasonably successful enterprise, but when the company was persuaded to take over the Ulster Canal this proved a drain on its finances.

From 1910 annual cargo rates steadily declined and by 1938 only 46,000 tonnes was being transported; less than a third compared to fifty years earlier. Despite a slight revival due to the military use of barges during the Second World War this decline continued. In 1954 the stretch from Lisburn to Lough Neagh was officially abandoned, and in 1958 the stretch from Lisburn to Belfast closed too.

Today, this waterway offers a peaceful place to enjoy the beauty of the River Valley with its iconic views and vistas, whilst still providing hints of its industrial past. The beautiful landscape, river and rich biodiversity along with the wide range of recreational activities and users make the Regional Park a wonderful resource for all.