



The Fossdyke Navigation

England's Oldest Working Canal

Some historians believe that the Fossdyke was dug by the Romans almost 2,000 years ago, making it the oldest canal in England still in use today. It links the River Trent to Lincoln's Brayford Pool, and then runs out to the sea



Roman route: The Fossdyke was possibly created by the Romans to transport food and supplies from the fertile fenland to feed soldiers at Lincoln's fortress and beyond. While its origins may lie in Roman engineering, the first written record of the canal appears much later, in 1121.



Life on the water: When the winds were unfavourable, horses were hired at Torksey or Lincoln to haul barges along the towpath. 'Steam packets' - early steam-powered vessels - provided regular services for traders and market-goers, while ferries dotted the waterway at various points including Skellingthorpe.



Trade artery: Over the centuries, the canal became a vital highway for goods. By the 1800s, large sailing barges known as keels carried coal and chemicals to Lincoln's factories, and grain and malt to the breweries. They then returned laden with wood for pit props for the collieries, and wool for the mills in the Midlands.



Decline: Despite the fierce competition of the railway, keels were still in use on the Fossdyke until as late as 1972. By then, centuries of commercial life were coming to an end, and the waterway entered a new chapter as a place for leisure and recreation.

Step back in time:

Close your eyes and picture the Fossdyke 150 years ago. Imagine the creak of wooden keels as they pass by, sails straining against the wind, and the clop of horses' hooves on the towpath. Smell the coal smoke from the packet boats, hear the shouts of boatmen loading grain, and feel the bustle of a working waterway that connected Saxilby to the wider world.

