

Why build a canal?

Before the 19th century, transport and travel by road was dangerous, uncomfortable and slow. Goods and people were moved by horse and cart, and roads were often little more than muddy tracks unusable in winter.

Businessmen and merchants tended to prefer moving their goods on water such as seas and rivers which were safer and more efficient.

The end of the 18th century brought a system of canals to England which meant that goods and produce could be moved around the country between agricultural land and ports and cities where other options weren't available. Heavy loads could be pulled by a single horse attached to a barge and the barge steered by a single boatman.

These canals were financed by wealthy businessmen whose aim was to make a profit.

Why Croydon?

The Croydon Canal was intended to be part of the Grand Surrey Canal linking East Surrey through the London suburbs to the Thames in South East London. It would transport agricultural produce from Surrey farms as well as lime, timber and chalk in exchange for coal.

A committee was set up in 1799 for the possibility of a canal to supply Croydon with coal, timber and general merchandise and to export agricultural produce along with chalk, firestone and fuller's earth.

The company set up had 204 proprietors including the Duke of Norfolk. The chief engineer was Ralph Dodd, the inventor of a canal cutting machine and the consulting engineer was John Rennie, a heavyweight in the canal design world. Dodd proposed an expensive project involving two inclined planes and two static steam engines and a wide canal which would carry large barges but Rennie preferred a route with locks to overcome the rise in height with smaller narrowboats.

Where did it go?

It was to join the Thames at New Cross from West Croydon via Forest Hill, Penge and Anerley through the Great North Wood. From there it would form a link to the Thames at Rotherhithe.

What was its lifespan?

In common with all canals it needed an Act of Parliament to authorise it and to close it.

In 1801 an Act to build the Croydon Canal was passed. Its title was "*An Act for making and maintaining a navigable Canal from, or from near, the town of Croydon, in the county of Surrey, into the Grand*

Surrey Canal, in the parish of St Paul Deptford, in the county of Surrey; and for supplying the towns of Croydon, Streatham and Dulwich and the district called Norwood, in the parish of Croydon in the said county of Surrey, and the town of Sydenham, in the county of Kent, with Water from the said canal”.

It was financed by selling shares at £100 each.

The Lord Mayor of London opened it on 22 October in 1809 at the same time as the Grand Surrey Canal, to much acclaim and celebration with decorated barges, brass bands, fanfares, songs and poems.

*All hail this grand day when with gay colours flying,
The barges are seen on the current to glide,
When with fond emulation all parties are vying,
To make our canal of Old England the pride.*

Chorus :

*Long down its fair stream may the rich vessel glide,
And the Croydon Canal be of England the pride.*

*And may it long flourish, while commerce caressing,
Adorns its gay banks with her wealth-bringing stores;
To Croydon, and all round the country a blessing,
May industry’s sons ever thrive on its shore!*

*And now my good fellows sure nothing is wanting
To heighten our mirth and our blessings crown,
But with the gay belles on its banks to be flaunting
When spring smiles again on this high-favoured town*

The opening ceremony was reported in the Times “...one of the highest and best constructed canals in England”.

It was much admired by poetically-minded reporters... “finding themselves gliding through the deepest recesses of the forest, where nothing met the eye but the elegant winding of the clear and still canal, and its border adorned by a profusion of trees, of which the beauty was heightened by the tint of autumn “.



Unfortunately, it was not a financial success which meant it became the first canal to be closed by Act of Parliament in 1836.

Why did it fail?

Even though canals used to follow the contour lines of the countryside to keep them level, they needed a system of locks to cope with changes of level when there were hills on the route. In the nine miles between Honor Oak and New Cross there were 28 locks in two flights to overcome the 150 foot rise, along with many swing bridges. Filling and emptying locks is a fairly slow procedure and this led to long queues of barges and frayed tempers. Delays meant that goods arrived late at their destination.

On top of that locks are expensive to maintain both in manpower and materials . All this contributed to it being deemed to have been over-ambitious and a financial failure.



Eventually, with the rise of the railway system, businessmen decided to support transport by train and canals became much less popular. The shares sold with so much optimism at £100 a share were being sold at £1 for 10 shares in 1830. It was sold to the London & Croydon Railway Company for £42250.

It was closed on 22 August 1836 and was the first canal in the country to be closed by Act of Parliament.

What happened to it?

For a while parts of it were still used but it began to be filled in and used by railway companies for their tracks. The basin at West Croydon was filled in and became West Croydon Station.

The parts that were left became pleasure lakes.

The Anerley Tea Rooms and Gardens were still open when the Crystal Palace was built and offered a boat trip on the canal, a walk through the gardens, beverages in the tea room and a trip up to the Palace. It became eclipsed by the success of the Palace.



The other reservoir dug to feed the canal was South Norwood Lake which is still a boating park. It was fed by springs formed where the local gravel meets a band of London clay.

What is left of it now?

The area is left with a few street names as a reminder.



A small patch of water can be seen at Dacres Wood in Sydenham and another is at Betts Park in Anerley.



