

The Grand Canal

Walking from Sallins to Robertstown: 7.25 miles, 11km

You will experience some of the most picturesque parts of The Grand Canal from Sallins to Robertstown both from an industrial heritage aspect and some of the most intriguing sections of waterway. Begin your walk on the north bank of The Grand Canal from Sallins bridge, the towpath follows a gravel road for the first mile out of Sallins. It would be easy to miss the abandoned canal channel to the right – you must go through a gate just past the now disused meat factory, this channel marked an early failed attempt to cross the Liffey. Equally subtle on the south bank of the canal is an abandoned dry-dock chamber. Shortly afterwards on the same side is the three - legged junction with the impressively scenic and historic Naas & Corbally branch of the canal.

The triangular island at the junction is known locally as Soldier's Island. Some say the name comes from the ghost of a soldier who hung himself there; more likely it refers to the location of a guard post during the 1798 disturbances when the canal barges were often raided by rebels.

As with so many of the canal's spectral features the Leinster Aqueduct steals up suddenly. There is no sense of traversing a major landscape feature yet the Aqueduct was a huge challenge for the canal builders in the 1800's and yet it still inspires admiration today. Sit on the low wall (take care, of course!) and look down at the muddy waters of the Liffey spanned by the mass of the Aqueduct.



A plaque on the bridge proclaims that it was completed by Richard Evans, engineer, in 1783. The completion of the Aqueduct opened the way for the canal builders to continue their progress to the west. There is an added thrill in store for you if you descend the embankment immediately after the parapet of the aqueduct bridge and find the passageway under the canal which leads to the public road. The experience of walking under so many hundreds of tons of water will surely heighten admiration for the canal builders of three centuries ago.

Continuing on the main line of the canal the landscape could be described as luxuriant Leinster pastureland with the gentle gradients relieved only by a hill crowned by prehistoric earthwork on the south bank of the canal. Just as Digby Bridge comes into view an fascinating structure just off the towpath defies explanation. Commonly thought of as an overflow control device its concentric walls with tunnels and culverts seem highly elaborate for such a routine purpose.

Sandymount House to the right of Digby Bridge (home of Ronnie Wood or Rolling Stones fame!) seems to have been built to face the canal rather than the road. At the bridge, transfer to the south bank and continue along a narrow path on the water's edge with a wood to the left. This leads out on to the public road which has been following the canal bank since the Aqueduct and which in turn swings back to the north bank of the canal at Landenstown Bridge.

Follow this road taking time out to study the pair of quaint gate lodges at the entrance to Landenstown House (the house is out of view behind trees on the South bank of the canal). If you are walking on a Saturday or Sunday you will be sure to hear the noise of racing engines at the nearby Mondello Park motor racing circuit this is of course forming a contrast to the otherwise quiet ambience of canal and farms. Follow the road for just under a mile until the canal swings to the south - west leaving the road which has been its constant companion since the Leinster Aqueduct. The 18th lock may seem like any other but it has special significance - it is the last step to the summit level of the main line of the canal. From this stretch, 279 feet above the old Ordnance Survey sea - mark in Dublin Bay, the headwaters of the canal divide to the east and the west.

After the 18th lock the towpath deteriorates a little into a narrow and sometimes a muddy trail that is almost at the water's edge and wonderfully overshadowed by high banks and scrub however the serenity overwhelms you being so close to nature. Stop here and just listen..... This is one of the least attractive stretches but fortunately on passing under the next bridge - officially titled Burgh Bridge but locally known as the Cock Bridge - the character of the walk changes sharply for the better. The cutting although still impressively high widens out and the towpath becomes firmer forming a fine walking track through the Hill of Downings and on to Bonynghe or Healy's Bridge. In high summer and autumn this is a particularly delightful stretch with a forest of blackberry bushes featuring among the luxuriant growth.



Through the eye of Healy's bridge you will see the dead-end of the filled-in Blackwood feeder which linked the waterway with Ballynafagh reservoir which is located two miles to the north. Cross Healy's bridge to the south bank. After a few paces the canal scenery changes again - this time revealing a vista of cut-away bog, forest and thin bushes which will be constant theme for the remainder of the canal's course across the bogs of West Kildare. For the first time since leaving Sallins the canal is carried on a high earthwork. This elevation was caused both by the need to build the canal on an embankment over the bog and by the effect of decades of cutting of the peat on either side of the waterway. Canal historians record that the entire canal project nearly foundered in the mire of bog over the one-and-half miles between Healy's Bridge and Robertstown.

Just as you are beginning to wonder if the relaxing but unchanging cutaway bog landscape is going to be your lot for the rest of the walk a structure, large and rusty - pink in colour, appears at the end of the stretch from Healy's Bridge like some sort of midlands mirage. Draw closer and the solid outline of the Grand Canal Hotel at Robertstown becomes clearer. An unusual place to find a hotel on this island in the Bog of Allen but it was no doubt a welcome sight for boat passengers and crews battered by bad weather on the slow journey from Dublin.



The Hotel was built in 1803 and was closed as such in 1849. However the building continued in use for various purposes including a constabulary barracks and, in the 20th century, a hostel for turf - workers.

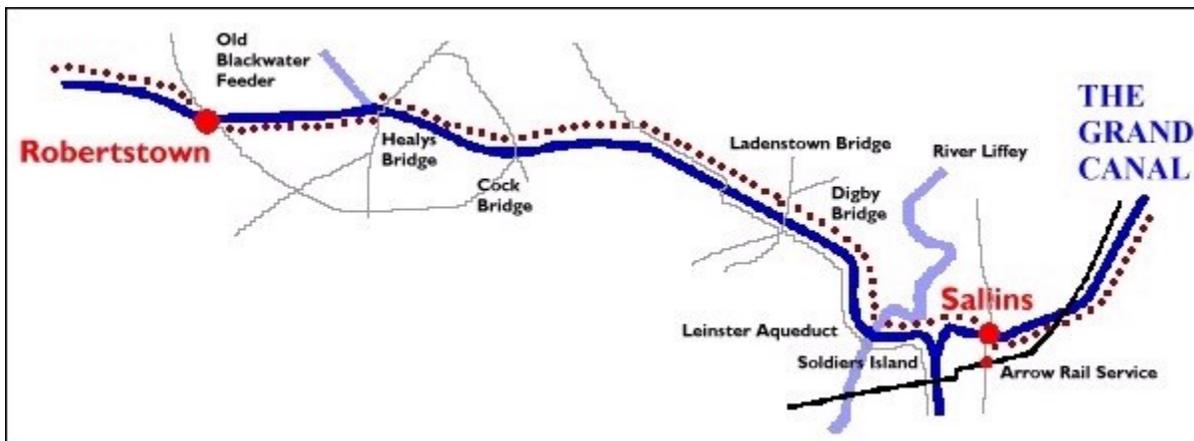
In the early 1970s it became the hub of an imaginative community project capitalise on Robertstown's canal heritage. Seizing on the tourist potential of the village's water-side location the locals set-about restoring the hotel and recapturing the village's period atmosphere. Period banquets in the hotel, barge cruises, and a week of canal side festivity

marked a resurgence of Robertstown, this time as a tourist venue. The momentum was difficult to sustain and now the Hotel stands majestically awaiting love and care awaits its fate of Kildare County Council planners to be renewed to its Glory of the 1900's as a hostilely for all of us to enjoy. See below how the village remains architecturally the same over hundreds of years.

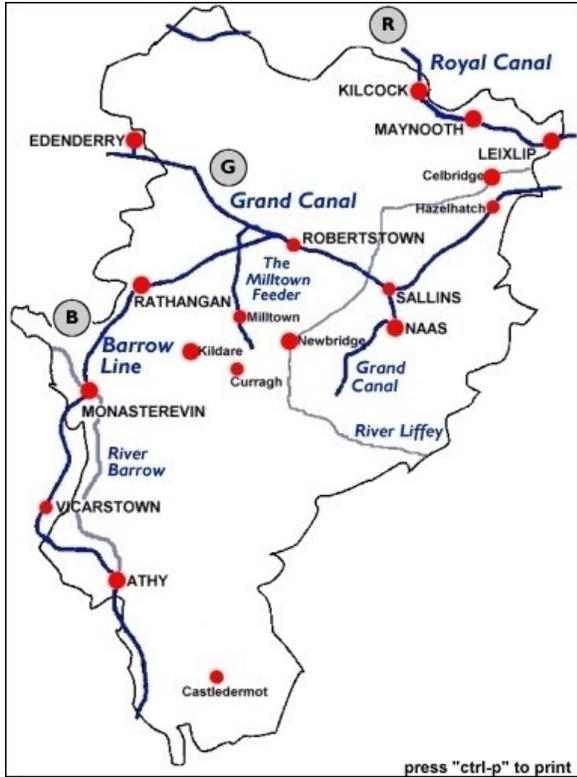


Waterfront buildings remain almost as they were almost three centuries ago and still form a spectral atmosphere as a waterways village. An overnight stop for canal travelers can be avails of at the Canal side Holiday Village built in 1998 and boasts 8 self catering cottages.

Robertstown is one-half of the pair of locations which together form the centre-of-gravity of the Grand Canal system. The other half, Lowtown Junction, is another mile along the road. Cross the bridge at the west end of the village (Binn's bridge) to the north side of the canal and keep to the canal bank road where it diverges from the main road.



Canal System on County Kildare



The Grand Canal

Robertstown To Edenderry: 13 miles, 21 km

This beautiful walking route takes you to Lowtown Junction, known as the “cross roads of the Grand Canal” it is a triangular link between the main line of the Grand Canal which continues west and the beginning of the 28 mile Barrow branch of the canal. Lowtown once served the canal system as stables for barge horses and as a coal yard. Today it is an inland dockyard. There, a distant short stroll from Robertstown, is a place of industry and activity within an island of canal links.



Pleasure boats of all shapes and sizes lie moored to either Canal bank. In summer numbers vary greatly with the craft having departed for cruises on the canal system daily but in winter the marina echoes to the sound of generators, angle-grinders and drills as boat owners snatch hours at the weekend to prepare their craft for another season's cruising. You will also find some inhabited boats as there are many people deciding to reside on the waters of the Grand Canal.

Go atop Fenton's bridge, pause and take a long look at the boating activity and perhaps enjoy a chat with a crew setting out for some distant point of watch a cruiser go through the lock. Think of the words of this song by Andy Swords..... "Lowtown must I leave you, these sadly words I say from the Auquadock Aqueduct) to the noisy lock....." Lowtown lock is called the noisy lock as it is the summit of the Grand Canal and from there the Canal flows to the Shannon, Barrow and famously takes the fresh water from the Milltown feeder to Guinness in Dublin. So once you have imagined all of that out continue your walk by returning over Fenton's bridge to the north bank of the main line of the canal. The second canal junction which you pass as you leave Lowtown is another link to the Barrow line. The walk passes by a neat culvert over the clear waters of the River Slate - an important bogland drainage stream. Many of the cottages dotted along the line as you walk are all of families that for generations served proudly with the Grand Canal Company as boatmen ferrying cargo up and down the country day and night 365 days a year. The last cottage you pass along this stretch and before Bond Bridge is "Waxers Place". This is called after a local man of great character Paddy "Waxer" Dunne. He began at the age of about 11 on his father's boat and later went to work mainly on the 74M. Many of these fine characters were Boatmen till the day they died. This extract from a poem "The Boatmen that are gone" tells of how hard and faithful these generations of men were to the Grand Canal Company



"Now the Grand Canal is just the same old winding waterway but its old time navigators are now moldering in the clay. Those gentle old world boatmen who sailed those waters o'er, they have departed on a voyage from which they'll come no more.

I miss each old familiar face that have been cut away. Like the bloom of early summer that autumn winds decay. Their sins against the Father e'er He on them did call the lives they led on earth may they atone for all.

Though they are gone they've left us a memory sweet to save. While summer breezes whisper round their narrow silent graves. May they be with their Master in Heaven's light shine on those one time hardy son's of toil the Boatmen that are gone.

With hearts within their bosom that knew no art or guile with honest faces that always bore a kindly welcome smile. Hearts that will never beat again, may the clay lie lightly on those poor toil worn bodies of those Boatmen that are gone."

Somber thoughts as you continue along the track under Bond Bridge on the Allenwood - Kilmeague road where the gravel laneway gives way to the grassy bank. The canal now closes with the Prosperous - Edenderry road as a curiously angled bridge looms ahead. This is known locally as the skew bridge (pronounced by locals as Scow').

On the right of the Skew Bridge you could see the Allenwood Power station that stood generating power for the Electric supply board. This was demolished in the 1980's and now is a facility for the community as a training and business centre.



Now back to the Skew Bridge (pronounced by locals as Scow'). Here ignore the Grand Canal Way' signs which point along the north bank. This in fact would lead on to the busy and fast Edenderry Road. There is seating along this route for the cup of tea and time to ponder on those men of toil that worked upon the Canal up to the 1960's when the Grand Canal cargo boats ceased - a gesture here near the seating says "welcome to the passing walker". It is more comfortable to cross the Skew' bridge to the south bank where after a few paces on a tarmac road you gain a grassy stretch which in turn gives way to a minor canal bank road. This leads by a guillotine-style lifting bridge for a narrow gauge peat railway. Continue on to Hamilton's Bridge and cross back over to the north bank pausing on the bridge to take in the view to the south which reveals a vast stretch of airy peatland merging with the horizon.

Continue on a rough track under a narrow modern bridge, passing the redundant Lullymore briquette factory to the left. This was a Bord na Mona factory manufacturing compressed peat briquettes of logs. It is now a ghost of its past.

Hartley Bridge at Ticknevin comes into view followed shortly by the 20th lock which marks the end of a 7-mile stretch without a lock gate but the start of an 18 mile level. It is from this point that the true wilderness of the Bog of Allen comes into its own. For a stretch the canal is bounded by bushy followed by forestry plantation but as the channel continues west across the unmarked Kildare-Offaly boundary the trees fall back, the ground falls away and the horizon widens. The canal is carried along on a massive embankment, its height accentuated by years of cutting away of the peatland.

The vista to the south is one of almost unending peatland: the flat horizon broken only by a power station cooling tower or peat-harvesting machinery moving like yellow mechanical insects across a desert of brown.

The canal-builders tempted nature along this stretch. It was here that the watery morass almost brought the entire canal project to an end in the late 18th century. Year after year workers had poured tons of filling into the canal foundation only to find that within the space of each winter the bog swallowed the solid material. It was only after a decade of back-breaking work that construction was possible on the treacherous bog and the canal was able to push on towards Edenderry.



However a bog is never a permanently stable foundation and over the years the canal rampart has breached as its underpinning gave way. The most serious breaches ever on the canal occurred along this stretch in 1916 and, even more spectacularly, in 1989 when just to the west of the Blundell viaduct a section of bank under the north towpath gave way releasing three hundred million litres of water into the fields below. The embankment was devastated and the canal drained for nearly twenty miles. The damage was repaired by a modern generation of canal engineers who have continued to embark on a rebuilding programme for other vulnerable stretches of canal across the bog. Layers of peat, plastic

membrane and a special clay are laid one on top of the other to strengthen the old canal formation for another two centuries.

The towpath takes you across the Edenderry-Rathangan road by the Blundell viaduct (locally the tunnel') and to the unusual and charming horse-bridge which allowed towing horses cross the leg of canal which branches from the mainline to Edenderry town. Do not cross the bridge (unless you are carrying on further west along the main line) but follow the branch into Edenderry. After walking across so much flat land it is a welcome change in the perspective to find the waterway contouring around a hill which is crowned by the remains of an old castle. The branch curves into Edenderry's neat harbour which is located right beside the town's main street. There is plenty to see in this well planned estate town which owes its present shape and landmarks to the Earls of Downshire once the principal landlords in this area. A walk back up the hill towards the castle ruin which is surrounded by a public park will give a parting vista over the Bog of Allen and the canal route you have just walked.

