

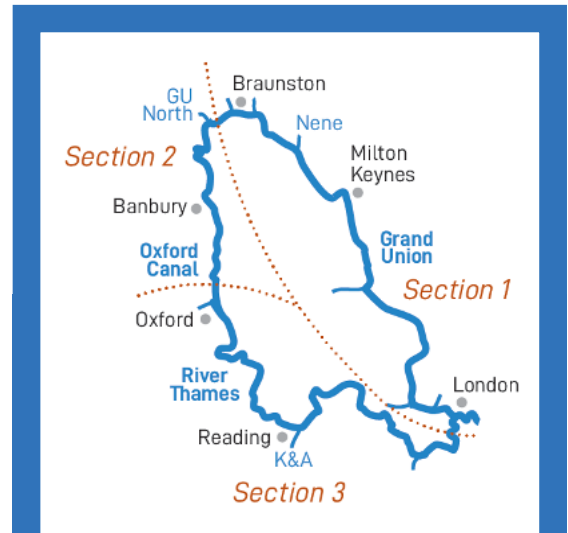


WW guide to the...

Thames Ring

For sheer variety of cruising experience, this ambitious, three-waterway circuit is difficult to beat.

James Francis Fox sets off from Brentford...



Overview

Distance: 244 miles

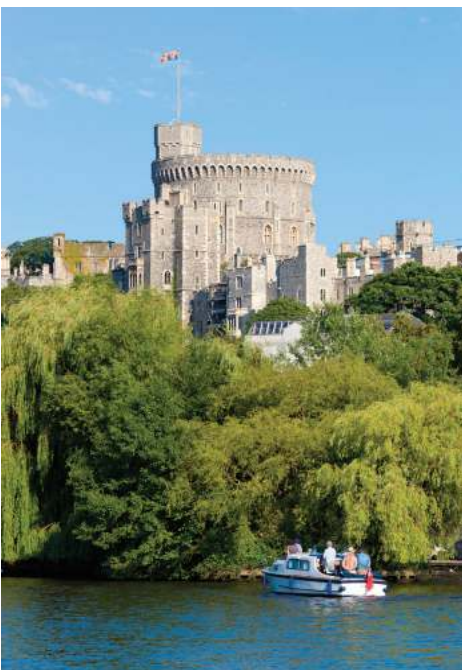
Locks: 173

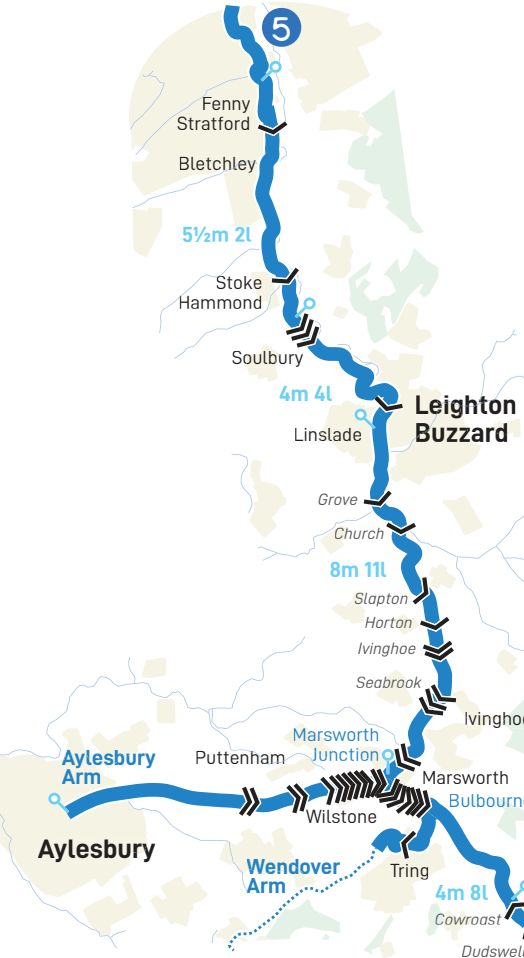
Max dimensions: 72ft x 6ft 10in

Duration: 3-6 weeks

Discover...

Take Britain's longest wide-beam canal, its dreamiest, most intimate narrow-beam waterway and the finest section of its premier river navigation, and what do you have? The Thames Ring, a 244-mile, 173-lock circuit around central southern England and the south Midlands. As rings go it is, in the immortal words of Tina Turner, simply the best. All you need is three to six weeks at your disposal, a boat (or a very stout pair of walking boots!), plus of course your WW guide, and you're in business...

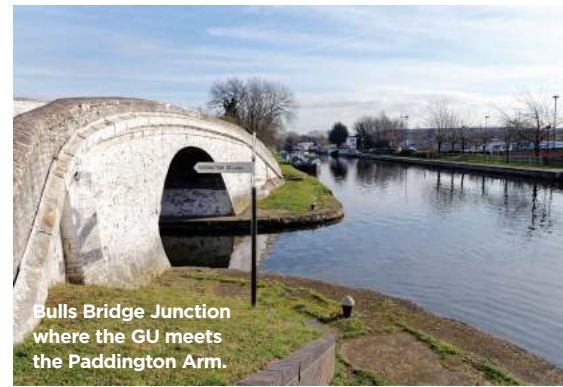




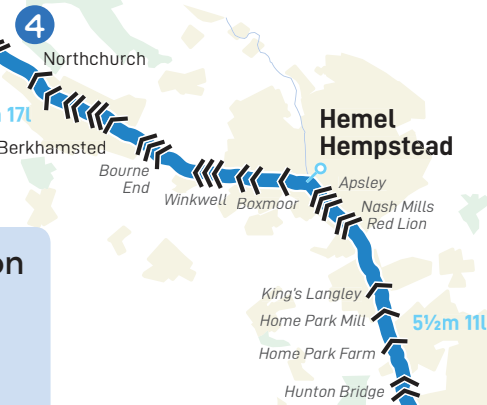
One of the duplicated Gauging Locks at Brentford.

1 We start at **Brentford**, meeting point of the Grand Union Canal and the River Thames. Perceived by the uninitiated as part of London's sprawl, Brentford (Middlesex) is very much a town in its own right. The canalside environment is pleasing to the eye, with a pair of Thames Locks and the duplicated Gauging Locks introducing the boater coming off the river to the joys of the GU.

2 Playing hopscotch with the M4 and A4, the canal heads north-west, traversing a densely urban landscape. **Bulls Bridge Junction** (with the Paddington Arm) and **Cowley Peachey Junction** (turn left for Slough) come along in quick succession, offering diversion opportunities for those with time at their disposal. **Uxbridge** has a proud history, being a Parliamentary garrison town during the Civil War, and the command centre for the RAF during the Battle of Britain. It's a good place to drop anchor for a while with adequate public moorings generally available.

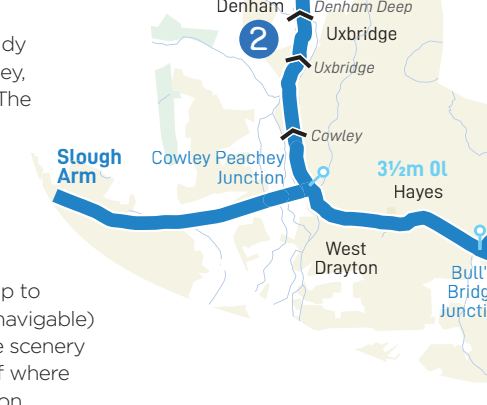
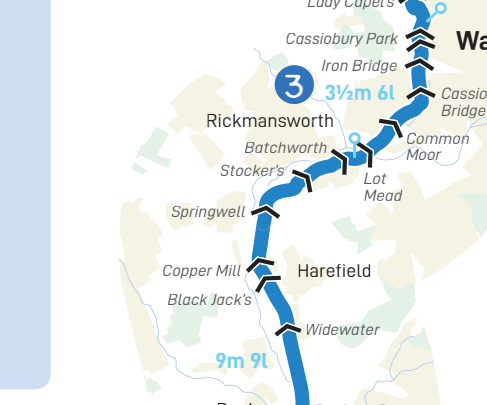


Bulls Bridge Junction where the GU meets the Paddington Arm.



Cruising through Cassiobury Park.

3 Denham Country Park introduces a rural theme - and how welcome it is after the lengthy passage through suburban Middlesex. A series of locks, many overlooked by flooded gravel pits, brings you to **Rickmansworth**, a typical Home Counties town exuding genteel affluence from every pore. **Cassiobury Park**, on the outskirts of Watford, is one of the loveliest parks in England, and the Grand Union has the good fortune to glide through its wooded slopes.



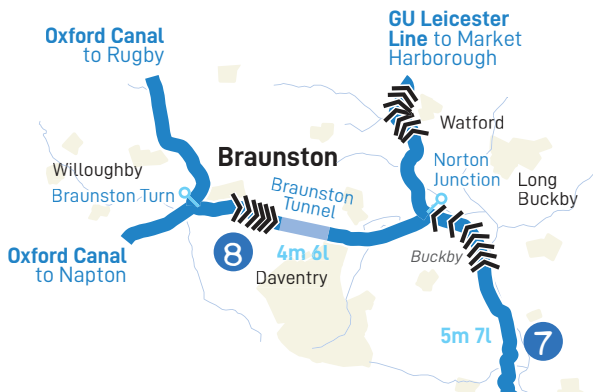
In brief

Brentford to Braunston Junction
93 miles, 101 locks
Crusing time: 1-2 weeks

The Grand Union is a big chunky brute of a canal where everything is, appropriately, on a grand scale: locks, bridges, cuttings and embankments. It traverses a suburban landscape for some distance from Brentford, though once through Rickmansworth and Berkhamsted, rural scenery comes to the fore as you head up to the Tring Summit. Be sure to drop anchor a while at Stoke Bruerne, beyond which two lengthy tunnels take you to that other famous canal village, Braunston.

4 A succession of towns punctuates your steady progress through Hertfordshire: Kings Langley, Apsley, Hemel Hempstead and **Berkhamsted**. The latter is by far the nicest and you'll be beguiled into staying for a while, however tight your cruising schedule. There is a wealth of history to absorb, the town's most famous citizens including Geoffrey Chaucer, Thomas Becket and, more recently, Graham Greene.

The locks are relentless, as you make your way up to the Tring Summit. Both the Aylesbury and (partly navigable) Wendover arms are well worthy of exploration. The scenery becomes particularly pretty around Pitstone Wharf where the Dunstable Downs loop up on the eastern horizon.



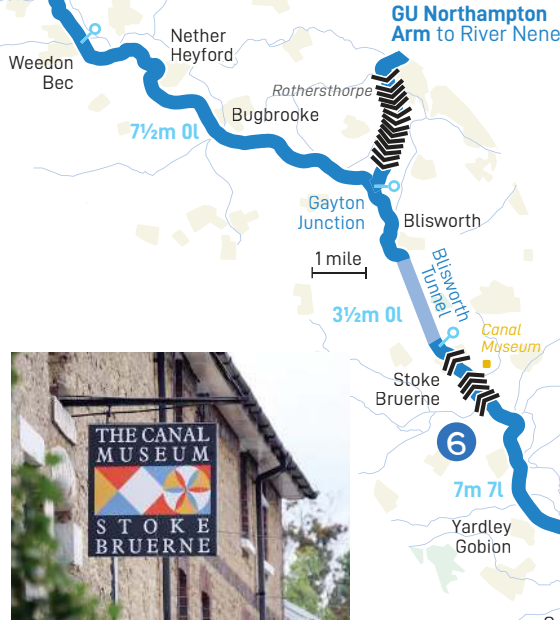
5 After negotiating Fenny Stratford Lock, with its fall of just 2ft, the canal skirts the eastern periphery of **Milton Keynes**. Bridge 82A is well within walking distance of the centre of the new town, should you feel inclined to visit.



Cruising into Milton Keynes.



Stoke Bruerne in spring.



6 Crossing the boundary from Bucks into Northants, you come to one of the Grand Union's brightest stars: **Stoke Bruerne**. Sitting demurely at the top of a flight of seven locks, it is a picture-postcard canal village and worthy of a prolonged stay (see below).

Another highlight follows hot on its heels: **Blisworth Tunnel**. At 3,065 yards, it is one of the longest on the network. Closed for repairs for several years in the late 1970s/early '80s, it is wide enough for narrowboats to pass each other, and it is normally just possible to see one end from the other, i.e. there is always light at the end of the tunnel.



A busy scene at Braunston.

7 The miles are flying by now, although it may not feel like it, for the locks keep on coming. Beyond **Gayton Junction**, where the Northampton Arm gives access to the Nene, you are sandwiched between the M1 and West Coast Main Line railway for the climb up Buckby Locks to Norton Junction. The Leicester Section looks inviting (and we'll be back there soon when we cover the East Midlands Ring) but for now we stick to the GU's main line.



The Grand Union near Gayton Junction.



8 Gently rolling hills accompany you as you head west, before diving into **Braunston Tunnel** (2,042 yards) and descending six locks to arrive at Braunston. The village itself sits quiet and aloof on a low ridge, while the canalside settlement hums with a hire base and busy marina. It almost recalls the days of yesteryear, when this was the centre of commercial carrying, with such companies as Pickfords, Fellows, Morton & Clayton, Samuel Barlow, Willow Wren and Blue Line all having headquarters here.



Boating near Berkhamsted.

Stoke Bruerne

Perhaps the most famous canal village in the land, Stoke Bruerne sits amid scintillating countryside, perched atop a flight of seven immaculately maintained locks. It is often said that the canal serves as the main street, where the popular Boat Inn faces across the water to a row of red-brick and stone cottages, together with the renowned Canal Museum, which is housed in an old corn mill.

Day-trippers flock here in droves at weekends, but Stoke Bruerne holds its head up high and retains its dignity; visit during the week if you can to experience this magical showpiece village at its best.



In brief

Braunston Junction to Oxford

53 miles, 37 locks ⌚ **Cruising time: 1 week**

A classic example of an 18th-century contour canal, the south Oxford provides a stark contrast to the business-like Grand Union. Narrow, winding and largely rural, it is among the most enchanting waterways in the land. The village of Cropredy is its brightest jewel, but you'll find a host of other appealing villages along the route, plus several others a short walk from the towpath. Arguably, the real highlight comes at the end of the canal, where you have the opportunity to soak up the rich culture of Oxford.



Cruising from Braunston towards Napton.

1 The Grand Union and Oxford canals share the 'track' between Braunston and Napton. It's a delectable length of canal, traversing a remote and silent landscape. The waterway is rarely silent, however, this being the heart of 'marina land' where a plethora of large mooring basins has sprung up in recent years. Avoid weekends if you want a quiet life.



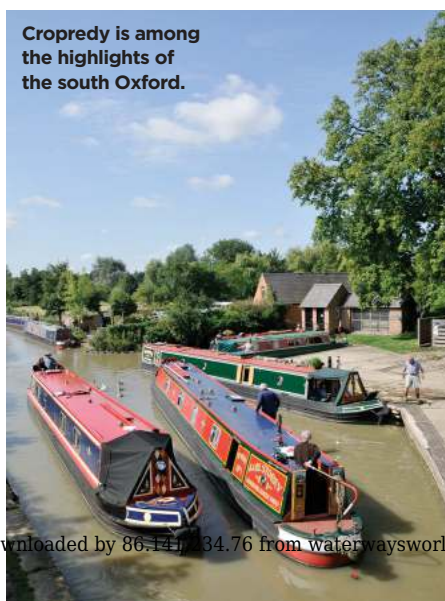
On the Napton flight, with the iconic windmill in the distance.



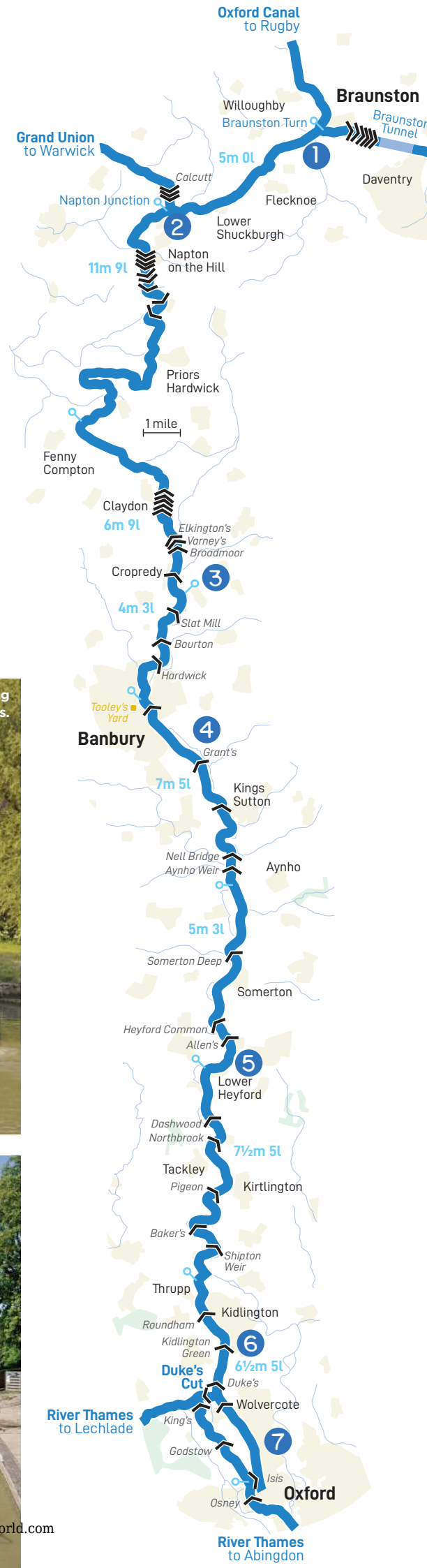
Descending Napton locks.

2 **Napton Junction** was known to working boatmen as Wigrams Turn. Here the Oxford Canal meanders off to join the Thames, some 46 miles away. And what glorious miles they are, every last one of them. The seven narrow-beam locks of the Napton flight lift the canal up to the winding summit level.

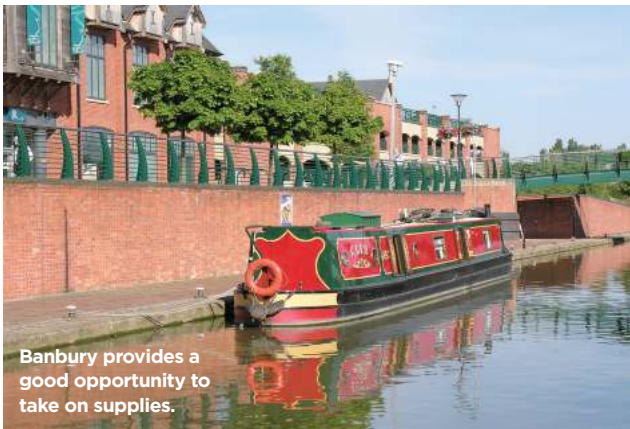
3 Claydon's five locks, plus three further isolated chambers, bring you to **Cropredy**, the 'Queen of the Oxford Canal'. All the ingredients are here for the perfect canal village: an old toll office and manager's house, former coal wharf, good visitor moorings north of the lock and two convivial pubs. There's history too (a famous 1644 Civil War battle), while most folk music fans will know that the Fairport Convention performs here every August at the renowned Cropredy Festival.



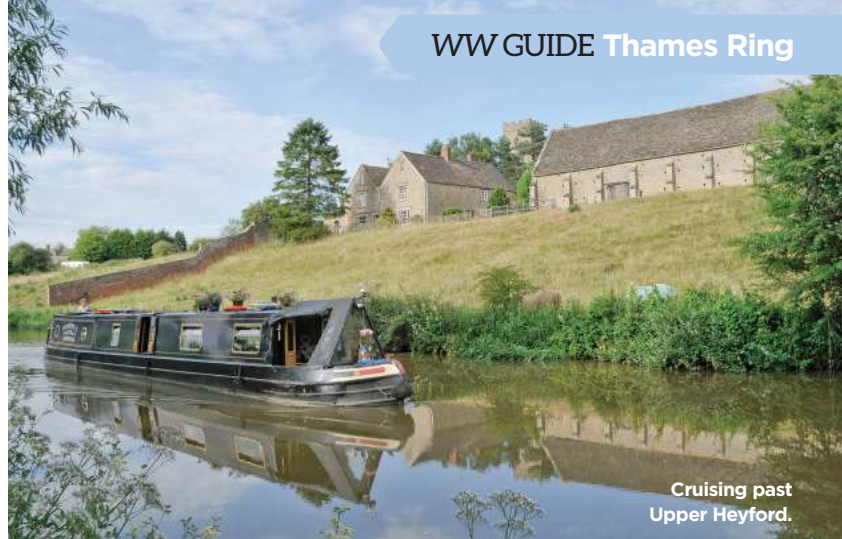
Cropredy is among the highlights of the south Oxford.



4 Just when you're thinking that the south Oxford must be a waterway handcrafted in heaven, the M40 noisily gatecrashes the party, criss-crossing the canal three times in just a few miles. And **Banbury** – once cruelly described as a 'boil on the bum' of the Oxford Canal – doesn't overly endear itself either, although its shopping and commercial facilities will doubtless prove useful to many Thames Ring travellers.



Banbury provides a good opportunity to take on supplies.



Cruising past Upper Heyford.

5 Reaffirming its rural credentials, the Oxford Canal journeys through a succession of pretty villages, including Aynho and the two Heyfords: Upper and Lower. The infant River Cherwell comes alongside, playfully escorting you on your southbound journey. Does Thrupp seem familiar, even if you've never ventured this way before? Possibly, for it featured in the Inspector Morse tale *The Riddle of the Third Mile*; notwithstanding the acting talents of John Thaw and Kevin Whateley, the canalside village, with its iconic lift-bridge, was clearly the star of the show.



Moored boats at Oxford.



Oxford

Unlike Cambridge, Oxford doesn't turn its best face to the river – nor to the canal for that matter. But don't give up on it too easily, for this is a city rich in history and culture.

Start your exploration at the Carfax, the crossroads in the centre of town. The streets west (Queen Street) and north (Cornmarket) of here are shopping thoroughfares, but things get more interesting when you walk east along 'The High'. Lined with colleges, this is the heart of the world-famous university. The side streets to

the south (especially Merton Street) are more evocative still, while to the north you'll find the curious Radcliffe Camera and the Bodleian Library. Walking past these will take you to Broad Street, another Oxford highlight.

You should try to visit the Covered Market, situated between Cornmarket and The High, while another must-see lies nearby: the Ashmolean Museum, packed with antiquities, art and archaeology. You can finish your tour by heading north up Walton Street to Jericho, a good place to eat or catch an art-house film.

6 All too soon, Oxford's somewhat bland northern suburbs reach out to engulf the canal. Two routes lead to the Thames. Plan A is to continue past allotments, playing fields and nondescript housing to the heart of the city where, just before the terminus, you descend through Louse Lock into the Sheepwash Channel which discharges you into the river close to Oxford railway station.

7 **Duke's Cut** offers a far more edifying introduction to the Royal River which you join above King's Lock. After so many miles of 'innocuous' canal cruising, you should respect the weirs here and at Godstow, just downstream. And so to Port Meadow where horses, sheep and cows graze contentedly against the magical backdrop of Oxford's dreaming spires. What an introduction to the Thames! Can it get any better than this? Moor below Osney Bridge while you explore the city – and don't rush, this is one of the highlights of the entire Thames Ring.



Entrance to Duke's Cut.

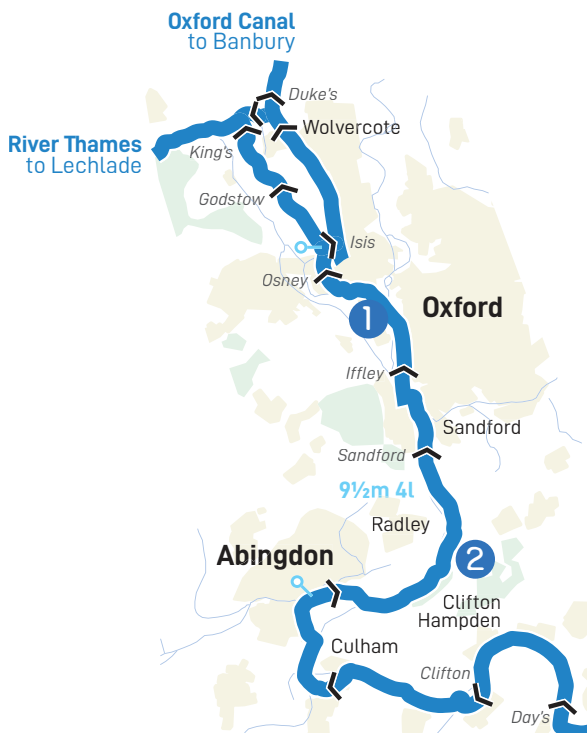
Walking

The Thames Ring represents a perfect challenge for experienced long-distance walkers who would probably expect to cover the distance in three weeks with a series of carefully planned stops along the way.

Lesser mortals will probably happily settle for walking sections of the Thames Path, a National Trail opened in 1996. It follows the river for 184 miles from its source



near Kemble in Gloucestershire to the Thames Flood Barrier at Woolwich in London.



In brief

Oxford to Brentford

98 miles, 35 locks ⌚ Cruising time: 1 week

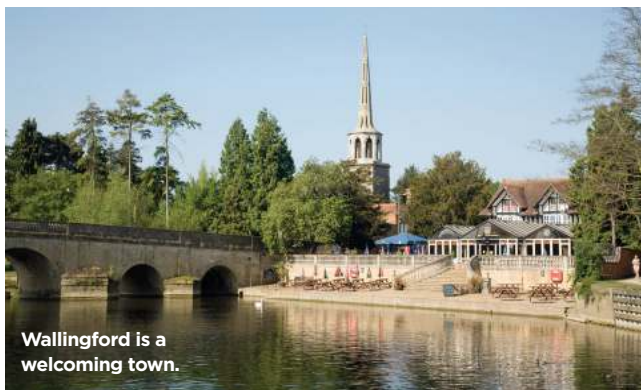
So it's onto the mighty Thames for the majestic final leg of your trip. Noticeably quieter than the canals you've been plying, it is also wonderfully rural; the scenery south of Abingdon is divine, and there is a host of salubrious towns and villages to entice you ashore. Below Marlow, the Royal River really lives up to its name, with the world-famous sites of Windsor Castle, Eton College and Hampton Court Palace lining its banks. The climactic end to your journey comes with a 5½-mile tidal section from Teddington to Brentford.

1 Although it has to concede second best to the glories of the Cam at Cambridge, Oxford's river (historically referred to here as the Isis) is full of interest. **Folly Bridge** is the focal point. The adjoining Head of the River pub attracts students, tourists and locals alike, but more significantly, this is the home of Salter Bros, famed operators of Thames steamers for over 150 years. A short distance downstream you renew acquaintance with your old friend the Cherwell - beware of novice punters and rowers coming at you from all angles!

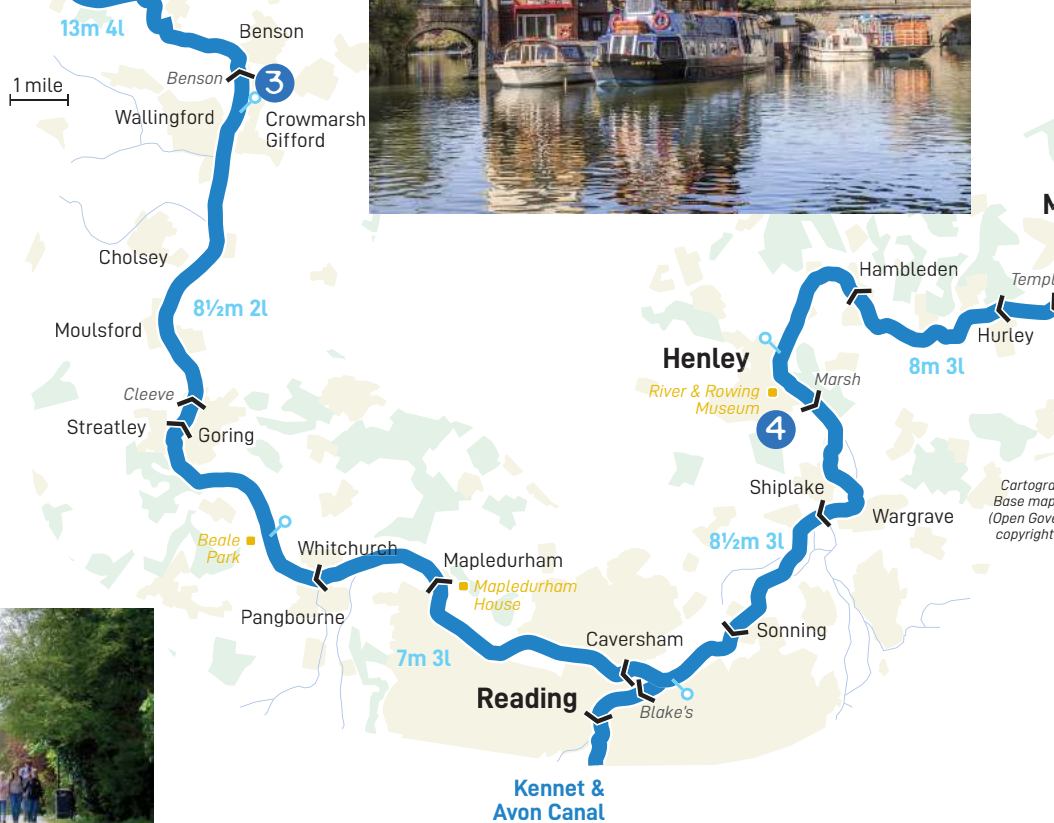
2 Iffley Lock is electrically operated and generally manned, although 'self-service' is available at certain times - look out for the blue signs. **Abingdon** is a welcoming port of call, with free meadowside moorings, good pubs and restaurants, and a splendid little museum lurking within County Hall in the Market Place.



Approaching Iffley Lock.



Wallingford is a welcoming town.



A busy boat scene at Folly Bridge, Oxford.

3 **Wallingford** welcomes boating visitors with open arms, providing good moorings above and below the 17-arch bridge, only five of which span the river. It is a friendly, no-nonsense kind of town, where all the shops, pubs and restaurants you could possibly desire lie close at hand.

4 Words can scarcely convey the beauty of the Middle Thames, notably the Sinodun and Dykes Hills at Dorchester, the Goring Gap, graceful Beale Park and the extensive watermeadows at Pangbourne. And there is the succession of genteel towns and villages: Wallingford, Goring, Whitchurch, Henley and Marlow. All will tempt you with their pleasant moorings and beguile you into spending copious amounts of time and money in their sophisticated shops, inns and restaurants. Sophisticated may not be an adjective too often ascribed to Reading, but this is perhaps the place to attend to such mundane activities as buying the groceries for the rest of the trip.



The Thames at Marlow.

5 The Thames is at its most ostentatious and regal best below Marlow. World-famous tourist attractions – Windsor Castle, Eton College, Hampton Court Palace – line its banks. How can you possibly fit them all into your schedule? Stoke Bruerne, Blisworth Tunnel and Buckby Locks, back on the ‘earthy’ GU, suddenly seem to belong to a different world. Cliveden Reach is said by many to be the finest on the river. Dense beechwoods rise sheer from the water, crowned by the impressive bulk of Cliveden House, scene of the Profumo scandal in 1963.



Windsor Castle is one of several historic landmarks beside the lower Thames.



Teddington Lock is the start of the tidal passage.

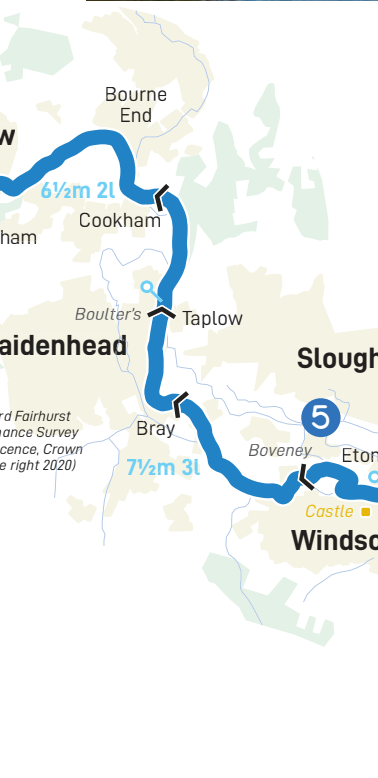
6 At **Teddington Lock** the Thames goes tidal. There are in fact three locks: the Barge Lock (650ft x 24ft 9in), Old or Launch Lock (178ft x 24ft 4in) and Skiff Lock (49ft x 5ft 10in). In your humble narrowboat or cruiser you will normally use the Old Lock, though if approaching from downstream, an illuminated arrow will show you which one to enter. The locks are manned 24 hours a day.

A new and exciting chapter of your epic Thames Ring has begun – you’re on the tideway! But there is nothing to fear provided you are well prepared (see page 52 for essential boating advice).



Elegant Richmond.

7 With its stately bridge and immaculate waterfront, **Richmond** is quite the loveliest town on the lower river; but probably best appreciated by mooring above Teddington Lock and catching the train. Richmond Half-Tide Lock is under the control of the Port of London Authority and serves to maintain a minimum depth of 5ft 9in in the reach up to Teddington. Two hours after high water, sluices are lowered into the river to create this depth, remaining in place until two hours before the next high water. During this period all craft must use the lock, which, like Teddington, is manned all day, every day.



5 Windsor Castle

6 Teddington Lock

7 Richmond Lock

8 Brentford Lock



8 With a final flourish, you breeze majestically past Kew Gardens and Syon House to arrive at **Brentford** and the reliable old Grand Union Canal. You’ll find services at the town’s mooring, though amid the modern, high-rise surrounds there is little evidence of Brentford’s vital role in the canal’s working past, save for the big warehouse overhanging the towpath.



Grand Union Canal

8 Brentford Lock

7 Richmond Lock

6 Teddington Lock

5 Windsor Lock

4 Slough Lock

3 Maidenhead Lock

2 Maidenhead Lock

1 Maidenhead Lock

0 Maidenhead Lock

0 Maidenhead Lock

0 Maidenhead Lock

0 Maidenhead Lock

0 Maidenhead Lock

0 Maidenhead Lock

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5m 2l tidal

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PRACTICALITIES

Can I do the Thames Ring in a wide-beam?

Sadly no, the Oxford Canal section of the cruise is for narrowboats only.

Can I do it in a 70ft boat?

Yes, without let or hindrance.

What licences will I need?

Most of the ring is on Canal & River Trust waters, but you'll also require a licence for the Thames (administered by the Environment Agency), which is covered by the joint CRT/EA Gold Licence.

Do I need to book?

Only for Thames Locks at Brentford which should be booked in advance on 020 8568 2779 (see 'Navigating the tidal Thames' below).

What precautions should I take?

Anchor and lifejackets are essential for the Thames, plus a VHF radio or fully charged mobile phone for the tideway (but see below). Some form of mechanical trouble cannot be ruled out on an extended cruise such as this, so consider signing up with River Canal Rescue or a similar recovery/repair service prior to setting off.

Navigating the tidal Thames

- Passage between Teddington and Brentford takes approximately one and a quarter hours. Ideally you should pass through Teddington Lock 30 minutes before high water, and certainly no more than 30 minutes after, to utilise the ebb tide. In the opposite direction you should leave Brentford some two hours before high water to travel with the flow. Teddington Lock may be contacted on 020 8940 8723.
- Thames Locks at Brentford are open only at specific states of the tide and should be booked 24 hours in advance on 020 8568 2779.
- You should always wear life-jackets on the tideway. Make sure your anchor is to hand and ideally a life ring too. Port of London Authority regulations stipulate that all craft over 45ft must carry a VHF radio and listen on Channel 14, but narrowboats travelling between Teddington and Brentford may use a mobile phone to report to London VTS when setting off and arriving (020 3260 7711).
- Two orange lights mark the navigation arch at each bridge, and Richmond Half-Tide Lock is beside the southern bank.

- The Grand Union (especially north of Gayton Junction) and south Oxford canals are among the busiest on the network, with congestion commonplace in the summer months. The Thames, by contrast, is much quieter today than in the 1980s, although it too can be busy with trip-boats, canoes and rowing boats in peak summer.
- The speed limit on the non-tidal Thames is 5mph and is regularly enforced.
- On the Thames, yellow or red boards will be displayed at locks under 'strong stream conditions'. Head for a safe mooring when yellow boards are out, and don't venture out at all when red boards are displayed. Consult environment-agency.gov.uk/riverthamesconditions.
- Thames banks are privately owned and mooring is generally only at designated locations. Most towns and villages offer good moorings (charges may apply), as do many riverside pubs – for patrons only. Meanwhile, towpath mooring is freely available for mooring on the Grand Union and Oxford canals.

DIMENSIONS

- Grand Union Canal, Brentford to Braunston Junction:**
Length 72ft, beam 12ft 6in, draught 3ft 6in, headroom 7ft 6in
- Oxford Canal, Braunston Junction to Oxford:**
Length 72ft, beam 6ft 10in, draught 2ft 9in, headroom 6ft
- River Thames, Oxford to Brentford:**
Length 120ft, beam 17ft 3in, draught 4ft, headroom 7ft 6in

NEXT MONTH

August issue on sale 25th June



THE SERENE STRATFORD

Reliving the recent pleasures of an out-of-season cruise from Birmingham to Bancroft Basin



ALTERNATIVE SECOND-HAND BOATS

Some of the more unusual craft that have come up for sale on the used market in recent years

DRAMA ON THE K&A

An eventful hire-holiday that combined a family celebration with research for a crime thriller



PAST & PRESENT: CENTRAL BIRMINGHAM

The changing face of the Second City's canals