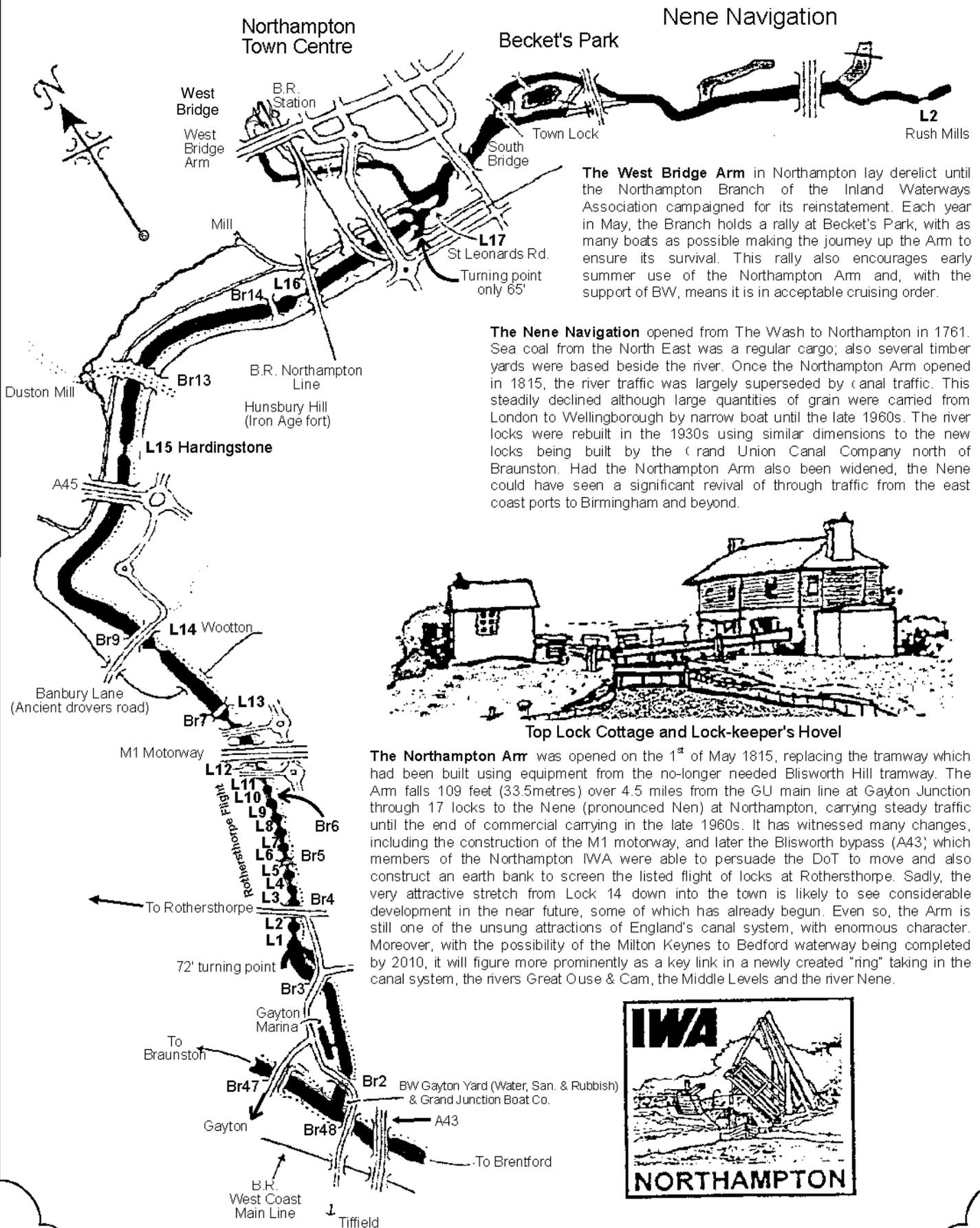


# The Northampton Arm of the Grand Union Canal



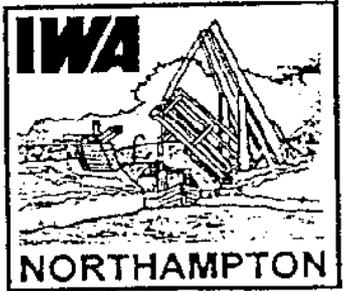
**The West Bridge Arm** in Northampton lay derelict until the Northampton Branch of the Inland Waterways Association campaigned for its reinstatement. Each year in May, the Branch holds a rally at Becket's Park, with as many boats as possible making the journey up the Arm to ensure its survival. This rally also encourages early summer use of the Northampton Arm and, with the support of BW, means it is in acceptable cruising order.

**The Nene Navigation** opened from The Wash to Northampton in 1761. Sea coal from the North East was a regular cargo; also several timber yards were based beside the river. Once the Northampton Arm opened in 1815, the river traffic was largely superseded by canal traffic. This steadily declined although large quantities of grain were carried from London to Wellingborough by narrow boat until the late 1960s. The river locks were rebuilt in the 1930s using similar dimensions to the new locks being built by the Grand Union Canal Company north of Braunston. Had the Northampton Arm also been widened, the Nene could have seen a significant revival of through traffic from the east coast ports to Birmingham and beyond.



Top Lock Cottage and Lock-keeper's Hovel

**The Northampton Arm** was opened on the 1<sup>st</sup> of May 1815, replacing the tramway which had been built using equipment from the no-longer needed Blisworth Hill tramway. The Arm falls 109 feet (33.5metres) over 4.5 miles from the GU main line at Gayton Junction through 17 locks to the Nene (pronounced Nen) at Northampton, carrying steady traffic until the end of commercial carrying in the late 1960s. It has witnessed many changes, including the construction of the M1 motorway, and later the Blisworth bypass (A43); which members of the Northampton IWA were able to persuade the DoT to move and also construct an earth bank to screen the listed flight of locks at Rothersthorpe. Sadly, the very attractive stretch from Lock 14 down into the town is likely to see considerable development in the near future, some of which has already begun. Even so, the Arm is still one of the unsung attractions of England's canal system, with enormous character. Moreover, with the possibility of the Milton Keynes to Bedford waterway being completed by 2010, it will figure more prominently as a key link in a newly created "ring" taking in the canal system, the rivers Great Ouse & Cam, the Middle Levels and the river Nene.



### Cruising the Arm

After leaving Gayton Junction, the first bridge (No.2) is a turnover bridge bringing the towpath to the right hand side for the remainder of the route. Next on the left is Gayton Marina (operated by Alvechurch Boat Centres), a former clay pit now connected to the canal and used for private moorings. After Bridge 3 we commence the fall through the Rothersthorpe flight of 13 locks with the former keeper's cottage at the top. A 72ft winding hole is sited just above the top lock. There were originally three other cottages - one alongside Locks 10 and 15 (towpath side), and the other by Lock 16 (off-side). After Bridge 4, the M1 Motorway becomes visible, and over the top of it, the Express Lifts tower. The Blisworth by-pass (A43) follows the Arm to the right with the village of Rothersthorpe across the fields to the left. Most of the locks have open spillways on the left hand side of the chamber; these can be a danger to smaller children and appropriate care should be taken. Old lift bridges below Locks 5, 10 and 13 have now been re-instated, a feature that enhances the character of the Arm. Lock 12 is almost under the M1. Soon after Lock 13 the traveller crosses a new aqueduct over a feeder stream to the River Nene. There is a gauging weir in this stream by the towpath. From this point on the urban sprawl of Northampton is enclosing upon the Arm, with the Swan Valley Distribution Centre to the west and housing to the east

A look back from Lock 14 shows how the motorway embankment forms a visual barrier across the Nene valley at this point. On the hill ahead are the distinctive buildings and tower of the former St. Crispin Hospital. The canal now runs alongside the river with water meadows on one side. The Express Lifts tower is in full view. This tower, 417 ft (127metres) high, contained three lift shafts and for several years was considered to be the best testing facility for high-speed lifts in Europe. Sadly, Express Lifts have left Northampton and Terry Wogan's famous 'lighthouse', despite its relative youth, has become surplus to requirements. However, the site is being redeveloped for housing and the tower, a listed structure, is presently used as a communications tower.

As Northampton's high rise downtown area comes into view, the tallest building is identified as Northampton House - previously headquarters of the County Council and now converted into luxury flats.

Around Bridge 14 and Lock 16 is a favourite play area for local children of all ages and extra care should be taken. After passing beneath the main railway line and between the abutments of a demolished bridge the canal deviates to the left, a diversion made at the time of railway alterations in 1879.

After a busy main road, a major "brown field" housing development is nearing completion on the south bank. On the left is Carlsberg brewery. Above Lock 17, boats up to 65 feet in length can be turned, albeit with a struggle. At the tail of Lock 17 you leave the canal and join the River Nene (pronounced Nen in these parts) and responsibility for navigation changes from BW to the Environment Agency. Boats from the canal are permitted on to the river only if they have a Gold Licence or if a licence has been obtained from EA (Anglian Region). At the junction with the River Nene, a right turn should be made to pass under the centre arch of South Bridge. Almost immediately you pass under a new footbridge. Ahead is Northampton Town Lock in Becket's Park. Moorings are available both above and below this lock on the left hand side but the brick wall below the lock should be approached with caution. A quiet mooring can be found at the back of the lock island, which is approached by bearing right before the lock cut and mooring on the left beyond the small weir. Beware the remains of the old railway bridge below water on the right opposite the willow trees.

### West Bridge Arm (also known as the Brampton Arm)

At the junction of the canal and river, turn left and then take the right hand branch alongside the brewery. Keep on the outside of the bend, then under the concrete footbridge, through the site of the old gasworks. Between the junction and the footbridge the original course of the river lies under the brewery. There were two breweries and other wharfs, including FMC, along this stretch, where boats loaded coke and tar at the gasworks. After the gasworks keep left. Navigation is possible with extreme care for a few yards beyond the winding hole by small boats, but you will have to reverse out. This part of the navigation served the council depot and Watkin Bros' timber yard, which is mentioned in Bradshaws.

B&Q have opened a new retail warehouse and provided an excellent mooring for their patrons on the other fork of the river a short distance from the junction, but there are no facilities to wind, so boats above about 40ft will have to reverse out of this branch.

### Plaques

A brass plaque is available to commemorate your trips along the Northampton Arm and the West Bridge Arm. They can be obtained by post from, Roger Hasdell, 8 High Street, Hardingstone, Northampton, NN4 7BT at £8.00 each. Cheques should be made out to 'IWA Northampton Branch'. Proof of navigation is needed.

### Facilities

All the usual facilities are available in Northampton town centre, which is little more than a quarter of a mile walk from Becket's Park. Markets are held on most days on the Market Square. Nearer to South Bridge and the canal is St Leonard's Road with a variety of shops. A Netto supermarket is near the railway level crossing en route to St Leonard's Road. There is also a large Morrisons store above Town Lock with close and easy access from the towpath. A pharmacy is on the same site. Cash points for all major banks and building societies are found in the town centre.

Rubbish disposal, sanitary station and water point are all available at the BW Maintenance Yard at Gayton Junction, and also about a quarter of a mile below Town Lock on the River Nene (alongside a landing stage on the left bank beyond the road bridge leading to Avon Cosmetics).

Boatyards: Grand Junction Boat Co, Gayton Yard, tel. 01604 858043  
Alvechurch Boat Centres, Gayton Marina, tel. 01604 858685  
Blisworth Tunnel Boats, Blisworth, tel. 01604 858868  
Alvechurch and Blisworth have pump-out facilities

All the following are in and around St Leonard's Road

- High quality bakery
- Nationwide Building Society (with cash-point)
- Dental surgery and optician
- Co-op Welcome general store (open late), off-licence
- Cycle repairs
- Launderette, dry cleaner, ironing services
- Men's/ladies hairdressing
- Takeaways (fish and chips, Indian, Chinese) also Chinese take away on way to St Leonard's Road close to South Bridge.
- Angling shop
- Newsagent
- Betting shop
- A high quality butcher's shop in Haines Road (walk up to it from Co-op Welcome general stores in St. Leonard's Road)
- Garages: Morrisons store and in the London Road beyond Netto.

General Vet: Rhodes, 66 Towcester Road, tel. 01604 762607  
Tourist information: tel. 01604 622677  
Swimming: Upper Mounts  
Railway Station adjacent to West Bridge: Silverlink local services to London, Rugby and Birmingham, tel. 08457 4849500  
Pubs and restaurants: a wide variety in town centre  
Post Office: in St Giles Street not far from Town Hall at top of Guild hall Road  
Theatres (Derrogate & Royal) and Museums: Guildhall Road  
Hospital: Northampton General (1/4 mile from Becket's Park) tel. 01604 634700  
Police: Campbell Square, tel. 01604 700700  
Telephones: Inside Morrisons store and town centre area.

### The IWA

The Inland Waterways Association is a registered charity campaigning for the retention, restoration, conservation and the fullest commercial and recreational use of all inland waterways.

### For further information, including membership details, contact:

The Inland Waterways Association  
PO Box 14, Rickmansworth, WD3 1ZY, tel. 01923 711114  
web site [www.waterways.org.uk](http://www.waterways.org.uk)  
Local enquiries: 01604 767212

Although we have done our best to ensure the accuracy of the information contained in this guide, we cannot undertake any responsibility for errors, omissions or their consequences.  
Last reviewed Spring 2007

The Inland Waterways Association, Northampton Branch

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