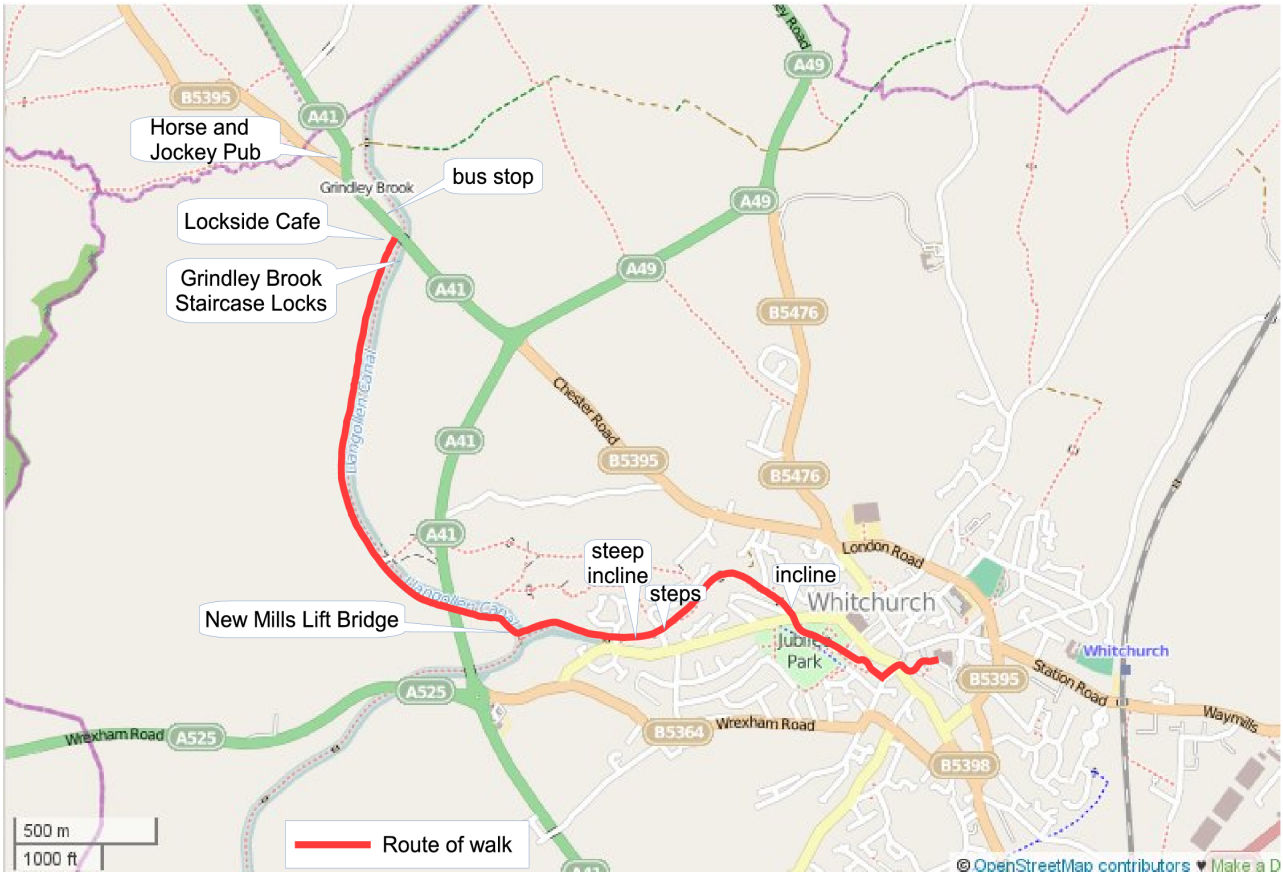
A Walk To Grindley Brook

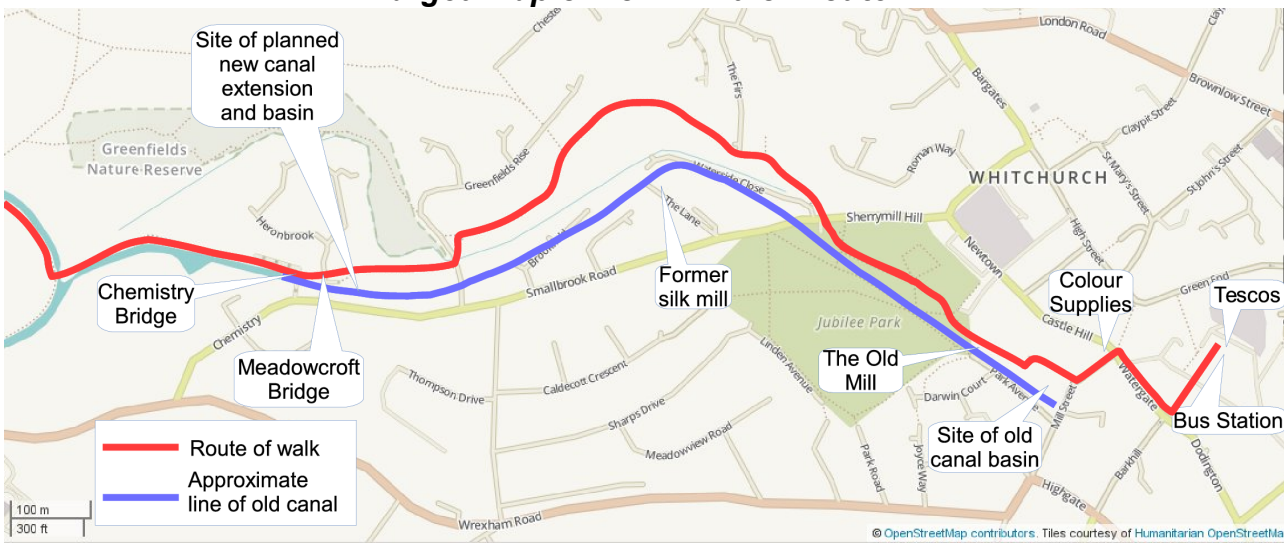
(Updated from the original walk by Peter Brown "IWA Winter Walk : Whitchurch January 2010)

The walk from Whitchurch Bus Station to Grindley Brook takes about an hour in one direction. It is mostly flat, with an incline down from Sherrymill Hill, steps (or an incline) up to Greenfields Rise and a further steep incline east of Meadowcroft Bridge. The path west of Greenfields Rise and the first part of the towpath from the lift bridge towards Grindley Brook can be muddy in wet weather. The 41/41A bus runs from the bus stop on the A41 just to the west of the canal at Grindley Brook to Whitchurch Bus Station, if you only want to walk one way. As of July 2014, its frequency was every couple of hours, and there was no service on Sundays. Checking is advised if you are thinking of using this bus.

Map of Entire Route



Enlarged Map of Town End of Route



Brief History of the Whitchurch Arm

The main line of the Ellesmere Canal, completed in 1805, bypassed Whitchurch. To save money, it was decided not to build the branch from New Mills to Sherryman's Bridge which had been authorised in the Act. Dissatisfied with this, a group of Whitchurch businessmen led by William Turner asked the canal company to give permission to build the branch and to extend it to a terminus at Castle Well. The canal company agreed, subject to it being able to take over the branch any time within ten years of its completion.

However, the lawyers realised that the canal company had no authority to delegate the powers in its Act. A new proposal was put forward which had the same effect: a local consortium would contract with the company to build the branch for the sum of £2,000, the money being lent by the consortium to the canal company for four years 'with lawful interest', later agreed as 5%. The company was to apply for an Act for the extension from Sherryman's Hill to Castle Well. The branch was made as far as Sherryman's Bridge in 1808 and fully opened in 1811. This method of financing was possibly unique.

The canal enabled Whitchurch to prosper, its population increasing by 36% between 1811 and 1841. A large proportion of this increase was in Dodington, where the canal terminated.

The last recorded commercial traffic using the Whitchurch Branch was in 1936. The branch (together with the rest of what is now known as the Llangollen Canal) was formally closed by Act of Parliament in 1944. The section southeast of Sherryman's Bridge was sold in 1948; the rest of the branch had been sold by 1968.

From Whitchurch Bus Station, walk through Watergate Arcade (opposite Tescos), turn right at the end down Watergate to the mini-roundabout at Colour Supplies, cross at the crossing and continue down Mill Street. At the bottom of the slope, turn right onto a footpath in front of a retirement development called Brookes Court.

Whitchurch Canal Basin

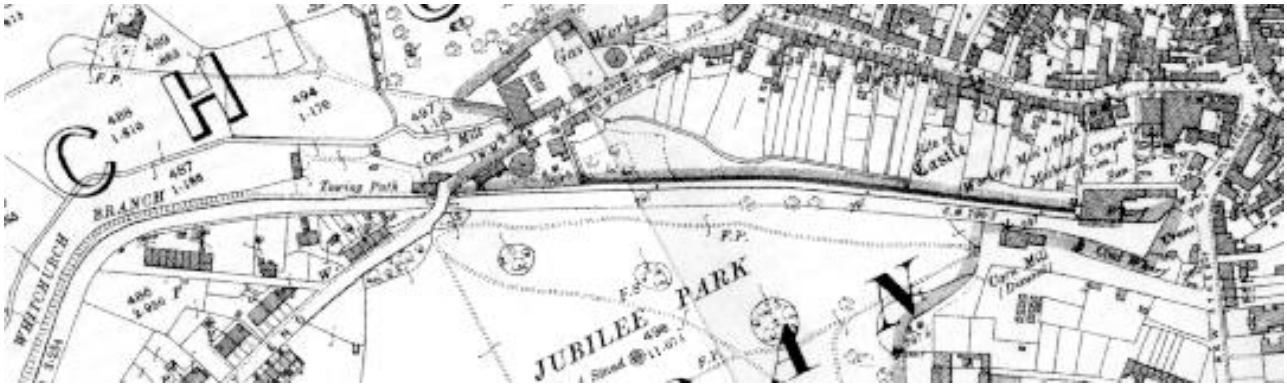
Brookes Court has been built on the site of the old canal basin and the footpath used to skirt its northern side. The canal company's original plan was for a rectangular basin. As this would have given William Trevor, owner of the property most affected by its construction, control of the land for the wharfs, William Turner drew up a plan which enabled five people (including himself) to make wharfs, and it was this alternative plan which was approved by Parliament. The basin as built was an elongated triangle, similar to that at Ellesmere.

The main wharf building, warehouse and stores were on the north side of the basin. The warehouse had an awning which came over the water, enabling cargo to be transferred in the dry. The end of the basin had an open wharf with a crane; on the south side were coal wharfs.

The four-story steam-powered corn mill was built near the basin in 1826. It has been tastefully converted into The Old Mill bistro.

Continue along the footpath past The Old Mill on your left, then cross Jubilee Park, going through double gates, past the Victorian bandstand and children's playground, and through the car park to the mini-roundabout on Sherrymill Hill.

Sherryman's Bridge



There used to be a bridge over the old canal here called Sherryman's Bridge. Stagg's Brook,

Whitchurch's natural watercourse is culverted from the far side of Tesco's to Sherryman's Bridge — its water can be heard under various drain-covers. The stream never fed the canal, the water for which came from the main line, bringing with it silt and the need for frequent dredging.

The gas works had opened by 1851. It is assumed that the original site was where the car park is now, and when that site proved too small it expanded on the other side of Sherrymill Hill. Most early gas works were built canalside if possible; other local examples include Shrewsbury, Ellesmere and Welshpool.

The road used to have a double bend over the bridge, but this was improved some time after the Whitchurch Urban District Council bought the bridge in about 1950.

Adjacent to the bridge, on the north side of Sherrymill Hill was a corn mill.

There was never a winding hole here, so for the three years (1808–11) that this was the canal terminus, boats had to be pulled backwards to the junction.

Cross Sherrymill Hill next to the mini-roundabout and take the footpath in front of you, which goes through Whitchurch Waterways Country Park. From here the line of the former canal branch is lost for half a mile, first under Waterside Close and then the properties in Brookfield. Follow the footpath to the north of the stream, and cross the end of The Firs.

Eastern end of Whitchurch Waterways Country Park

The area to the left just beyond the end of The Firs has planning permission for 14 houses.

On the other side of the valley, just to the south of the former line of the canal, is a row of cottages. This was built by George Whitfield & John Sergeant as a silk mill in 1828, providing working space for 200 people. It was two storeys high, but constructed in such a way that three further storeys could be added. A 10hp steam engine powered four 104-bobbin doubling frames, four 100-bobbin drawing frames and a silk engine with 100 swifts. It was a commercial failure, and was offered for sale in 1831. By 1851 it had been converted into a warehouse by Thomas Burgess, a cheese factor and corn merchant.

Continue on, cross a wooden footbridge, then take the left fork and ascend the steps up to Greenfields Rise (Alternately, take the right fork to ascend a slope instead). Cross Greenfields Rise, walk a little way left and take the path ahead of you on the other side of Greenfields Rise. As you approach a steep incline, the area between the path and Smallbrook Road on your left is roughly where the new canal basin will be (although you would be standing in water now if it had already been built !)

Site of Planned New Canal Basin

The land here was donated by the builders of the various housing estates. As part of the planning requirements they also built the two bridges — unfortunately that at Greenfields Rise is too low to allow a canal to pass through it. A plan of the new basin is shown below.

Bear right at the fork and continue under the modern Meadowcroft Bridge. In front of you is the older Chemistry Bridge.

Chemistry Bridge

Chemistry Bridge is the only surviving original bridge on the arm. The reason for the name is not known; one possibility is that chemicals for dyeing or tanning were made from oak galls in a building nearby.

Go through Chemistry Bridge and along the towpath of the already restored section.

The Already Restored Section of the Whitchurch Arm

Shropshire County Council organised the restoration of the section from the junction to Chemistry Bridge in 1993, largely financed by a Derelict Land Grant. It is now managed by the Whitchurch Waterway Trust. Well used by private boaters visiting the town, it also has a few permanent revenue-earning moorings.

Continue to the end of the Whitchurch Arm; cross the New Mills lift bridge, turn right, and go along the towpath to Grindley Brook.

The Llangollen (Ellesmere) Canal

The lift bridge by the junction is modern but to a traditional design.

The line of canal from here to Hurleston Junction was never envisaged by any of the promoters. The approved main line was from Shrewsbury to Trevor then via Bersham to Chester; people such as William Turner who wanted the canal to take a route east of the Dee thought the best line would be from Fens Hall (three miles west of Whitchurch) to the Chester Canal near Tattenhall.

The Chester Canal Company needed a better source of water for its summit level and proposed building a feeder from the River Weaver at Wrenbury. At the same time, the Ellesmere Canal Company ran out of money having built or contracted for the line from Weston Lullingfields to Trevor and the branches to Llanymynech, Quina Brook and Tilstock Park. A compromise was identified which would enable the isolated canals to be joined to the Chester Canal and also provide the latter with a reliable supply of water — the Ellesmere Canal was constructed to Hurleston Junction, the contractors being John Simpson & John Fletcher. It opened in 1805, the same year as Pontcysyllte Aqueduct was completed. (The navigable feeder from Horseshoe Falls opened in 1808.)

Grindley Brook

Staircase locks are normally considered to waste water, but this canal was unusual in having a good supply of water during the whole of the year. However, they do delay boats, a great problem now for pleasure boaters.

The lock-keeper's cottage is usually attributed to Thomas Telford, though there is no positive evidence that he designed it. By the time of its construction he was spending most of his time in Scotland — he could have outlined what he wanted, or he could have left it entirely to one of his assistants, probably Thomas Denson.

Wharfs and warehouses were built here when the canal opened. The concern that Grindley Brook might displace Whitchurch as the general market for the area was a major motivation for the promotion of the Whitchurch branch. Boats were built and repaired here. As at most of the canalside settlements, there were limekilns, principally for producing fertiliser for farmland but also building mortar. A small settlement grew up — the Canal Tavern was built to serve the settlement and the boaters, but the Horse & Jockey may have pre-dated the canal.

The mill, built later in the 19th century, was powered by a water turbine in the by-wash of the staircase locks. Other rare examples of where canal water was used as a power source were on the Montgomeryshire Canal and at the warehouse at Portland Basin on the Ashton Canal. Grindley Brook would be an ideal place for a small-scale hydro-electric power plant.

A further warehouse building survives below the locks.

Walk down by the locks and view the warehouse. Refreshment options are the Horse & Jockey pub across the A41 (go through a single gate from the towpath between the 2nd and 3rd of the 3 single locks below the staircase locks), or the Lockside Cafe (licensed and sells ice creams).