



The flight of 29 locks up Caen Hill (above).
Volunteer Colin McDermott operating a lock (left).

Significant waterway

A mile from the centre of the town are the Caen Hill Locks on the Kennet and Avon Canal. Built between 1794 and 1810, the canal connected London and Bristol. The locks are a series of 29, rising 237ft (72m) over two miles in the direction of the capital. The locks come in three groups, but it is the middle block of 16, forming a steep flight straight up Caen Hill, which are of particular significance. They run in a straight line, with very short sections in between, to enable the canal to rise rapidly, approximately 130ft (39m) up the steep hill. As a result, there are large sideways-extended pounds, which hold the water needed to operate them.

“The flight of locks was engineer John Rennie’s solution to climbing Caen Hill,” says Steve Manzi. He is a volunteer development coordinator with the Canal & River Trust. “It was the last section to be completed, and a tram road provided a link while the locks were under construction. Its remains can be seen in the bridge arches that cross the towpath.”

Once completed, the locks became a key way of transporting coal, beer and tobacco. However, it took five to six hours to traverse them. The coming of the railways in the 1840s hit the canal, and it fell into disuse, closing in 1948. Then, in the 1960s, a group of volunteers took on the task of clearing and rebuilding

the canal, eventually restoring it to its former glory. Today, it is a stretch bustling with holidaymakers, cyclists and walkers.

Colin McDermott is one of 40 volunteers who regularly help operate the locks, as well as maintain the channels, pathways and surrounding habitats. “Lots of people just come for the views,” he says. “But it’s more than that. The locks are one of the Seven Wonders of the Waterways. To be involved with such an important part of the country’s heritage: what could be better?”

But this part of Wiltshire is not just about the past. Following the canal back towards the east, a more modern landmark comes into view on the horizon. This is another white horse, this one a symbol of the new millennium. The Devizes White Horse, as it is known, was inspired by a horse that once graced a slope at Roundway Down. The new horse was designed by a former student of Devizes Grammar School, and cut by 200 local people in 1999. Measuring 150ft long by 148ft high (45.7m x 45m), it looks right, one of only four chalk horses in Britain, and the only one in Wiltshire, to do so. The reason is unknown. It adds yet another mystery to this ancient landscape. “Wiltshire is a place of unanswered questions,” says David Dawson. A place to let the imagination gallop free. ■

• Words: Emma Pritchard

WHITE HORSES OF WILTSHIRE

From Marlborough to Westbury, to Alton Barnes and Pewsey, Wiltshire is a county of white horses. It is believed there were 24 of these hillside landmarks around Britain, with 13 within this county. The majority of these chalk figures were cut in the past 300 years. Only the Uffington White Horse, located across the border in

Oxfordshire, has particular historic weight. It belongs to the Bronze Age, and may have been created in honour of a goddess or local tribe. Over the years, five of Wiltshire’s white horses have disappeared into the landscape, due to lack of maintenance. Without regular scouring, to remove weeds and soil from the surface, and rechalking, the figures can become overgrown, blurred and faint. Many are now looked after by local volunteer groups, the council, or in the case of Wiltshire’s oldest horse at Westbury, the National Trust.



The right-facing Devizes White Horse.

Illustration: Steven Hall Photography: Alamy, Getty Images; Jeremy Walker