

Mansbridge Lock



Sandwiched between the M27 motorway and the busy A27 road, you'll find Mansbridge Lock. Before ducking under the A27 bridge, look back across the River Itchen, to where a notch overgrown with willows marks the start of the Itchen Navigation.

Overhead, you'll almost certainly hear the very modern roar of planes taking off from Southampton airport. But here, set in exuberant early summer growth, with brilliant blue damselflies and busy moorhens, the lock tells a tale of earlier, quieter transport.

It takes its name from Mansbridge, once the only crossing above the river Itchen's tidal reach, and a vital link to Portchester from as early as Roman times.

Built sometime before 1710 as part of the 10-mile Itchen Navigation linking Southampton and inland Winchester, the lock's turf sides formed a long narrow chamber some 15 feet wide and 100 feet long. You can still see the stone and brick abutments that held the lock gates.

Barges 14 feet wide and 70 feet long, carrying between 20 and 45 tonnes of cargo, entered the open downstream 'tail' gates, which were then closed. Paddles in the upstream 'head' gates were opened, filling the lock with water and floating the heavy barges up some seven feet.

The upstream gates were opened, releasing barges to sail on through a further 14 locks and two half locks. In all, they were lifted some 114 feet on their journey to Winchester.

Six barges worked the Itchen Navigation, powered by men using poles or tow ropes, with help from a horse and even a sail hoisted in favourable wind. They took coal and culm – anthracite coal dust – to Winchester. Some cargoes may even have warmed the toes of the Bishop and Winchester College scholars.

Now, the lock has a new role to play, as a peaceful haven for wildlife and walkers in an ever more congested southern Hampshire.

Terry Gould
Itchen Navigation Volunteer Heritage Researcher