

u3a Bike Rides
Along the Grand Union Canal to Osterley Park
Friday 28th August 2026

Due to the challenge of taking more than eight bikes on one train, we split the group into two with five meeting earlier and taking the 10.02 train to Kew Bridge station. Given there is no step-free way out, John D was duly deployed to lead that group and help carry any bikes that were a bit heavy for their riders.

Denise led the remaining riders, who cycled along a very dry but still a bit bumpy riverside path from Mortlake to the newly discovered coffee shop under Kew Bridge.



It was a beautiful day for cycling, bright sunshine but not too hot. Group 2 arrived shortly after the Kew Bridge group so there wasn't a big delay in getting our caffeine fixes. In true chattering cyclists style, there had to be a nudge to get people moving again and it was just another reminder of how lucky we are to have such a sociable group.

The road to Brentford has a much-improved cycle lane for much of the route that even directs you away from the main road to the riverside at one point, making it a more pleasant experience. The London Museum of Water and Steam still stands grandly, and I am sure there will have been others who noted having not been to visit despite being reminded about its existence every time we go along this route.

We reached the entrance to the canal side and group 2 waited and admired the environs and took the opportunity for a photo shoot.



The Grand Union Canal goes all the way from the Thames at the Brentford Lock to Birmingham and was to provide a new, shorter and quicker route for goods to be transported between the two cities. The early sections was opened in 1794 and was originally called the Grand Junction Canal. See below for more information.

The canal path was perfectly dry but quite busy with walkers, all of whom were very understanding and helpful as our two groups cycled along. We were our usual polite selves which always helps to charm people.

The first lock is called the Brentford Gauging Lock (Lock 100) where charges were made for the weight of the cargo, judged according to the depth the boat in the water.



Once over the canal using the bridge, we wend our way along past locks, barges and gardens. It is amazing how many people live along the canal now – far more than when we first used this route. The path was a bit narrow at times and the tree roots have raised the surface in many places but with care it was passable and didn't cause too many problems. We noted one lock where work had been done to help the Elver population move along the canal – something we learnt about during the time we had Zoom meetings with PowerPoints during lockdown!!



In no time at all, we were at the first of the Hanwell locks, a flight of seven locks and we were lucky to see several barges moving through the lock systems. For more information, see below. It looked very relaxing and inviting, although the yappy dog on the last barge was a little annoying. John took a photo of this lovely little cottage, formerly used by the lock-keeper, in earlier times.

Here is a lovely view of the canal.



We stopped to look at the lock by the wall of the old Asylum with its bricked-up arch which gave access to the Asylum lock where goods went in and food grown within went out. Surely, it must have been deliberate for the barge workers to leave the coal outside overnight so that the locals could come and top up their supplies!

Shortly after we reached lock 90, the final lock of the Hanwell flight, where the canal was opened in 1794 and became the Grand Union Canal. As always, we stopped to look at the amazing construction by Isambard Brunel. Two bridges and a canal called Three bridges, amazingly with the railway underneath the canal and a road. At this point we left the canal and made our way up to the road. This is the view from the road.



As always, we crossed the bridge but instead of going along Windmill Lane, we took the first right and went along Tentelow Lane, a quieter road with a 20 mph speed limit. This took us to Osterley Road, a narrow lane which went over the top of the M4 before entering Osterley Park itself. It was surprising and upsetting to see how much fly tipping there was at the side of the road.



The route through the park was lovely and we got a much better feel for the size of the estate, despite being alongside the M4 for a while! It also gave us two stunning views of the house which we had not seen before.

Despite worries about there being a lack of sandwiches at the National trust café, there had not been a big coach load of visitors and there was plenty to choose from. We had a leisurely lunch and Caroline even had time to find a friend who volunteers in the main house and had a mini tour.



We then cycled at a gently pace down through residential streets and we all arrived safely at Syon Lane station. At this point, we realised that we had not taken the usual group photo so this was rectified with a series of small group photos as we all spread out along the platform. (Caroline and Denise escaped)



The riders then left the train at either Clapham Junction or Vauxhall.

Riders: *John and Denise Davies (group leaders), John Clements, Dilwen, Valerie, Jane, Joe, Gerry, Brin, Mark, Daniella, Caroline*



Notes

The Hanwell Lock flight is a series of seven locks which raises the canal by 53ft in a third of a mile, a trip that can take boats over an hour to make. The locks were built in 1794 to take the Grand Union down to the Thames along the “canalised” River Brent.

The flight of locks, now a Scheduled Ancient Monument, was featured in a painting by JMW Turner, who in 1810 painted the canal at Hanwell, with a lock in the foreground and windmill behind, a surprisingly rural look for such an industrial area.

Five side ponds can be found alongside the flight on the south side of the navigation. Built in 1815, these were used to store water to re-fill the locks in busy times. Look out for a ramp for recovering horses that fell into the canal.

Ealing Hospital was originally the (1st) Middlesex County Asylum, better known as Hanwell Asylum, which opened on 16 May 1831. The site is now home to the West London Mental Health NHS Trust: behind the high walls are high barbed wire topped fences. The pale filled-in arch was once the entrance to a dock in the asylum. Asylum Dock was used to bring in goods for the hospital, such as coal, and to transport out excess home-grown produce from the hospital.

Lock 90 to 93

This stretch of the Grand Union Canal passes through Norwood and Hanwell Locks from the River Thames at Brentford Locks and was opened in 1794. This was the first section of what was originally called the Grand Junction Canal. Its purpose was to provide a new, shorter and quicker transport route between London and Birmingham by connecting with a network of canals at Braunston, near Daventry in the Midlands. When the canal reached Braunston in 1805 it cut 60 miles of the shortest alternative route which had been via Oxford.

William Jessop, the canal Chief Engineer, had foreseen the bottlenecks when boats queued to pass through busy locks. Here on the Grand Junction Canal he built locks wider enough to take two narrowboats at the same time.

Three Bridges At this point, a road crosses the canal which in turn crosses the railway. It was designed by Isambard Kingdom Brunel for the Great Western Railway branch from their mainline to Brentford Dock. It was completed in 1859 and was perhaps Brunel's last major undertaking. It is a rare surviving example; most of the cast iron structures he designed have been replaced. See also:

http://www.disused-stations.org.uk/features/windmill_lane_bridge/

Osterley House. This impressive neo-classical mansion was originally a Tudor house built in the 1570s by Sir Thomas Gresham. It was acquired by wealthy banker Sir Francis Child in 1713, a perfect symbol of his status and prosperity. His grandson, also called Francis, engaged Robert Adam in 1761 to remodel and transform Osterley into the 'palace of palaces', a lavish party palace for entertaining the Childs' family, friends and clients.