

The Leeds and Liverpool Canal is the longest single artificial waterway in Britain, passing for 127 miles from junction lock with the River Aire in Leeds to Stanley Dock in Liverpool. Small wonder then that it took fully 46 years (1770-1816) to complete, costing around £824,000 (equivalent to around £28m in today's money)!

The canal's course traverses some of the most important of Yorkshire and Lancashire's historic manufacturing town and was constructed during the industrial revolution to meet the needs of the thriving textile industry that had made the north of England the world's leading economic powerhouse. The canal was itself one of the creative manifestations of the industrial revolution and the canal's engineers needed to find innovative solutions to ensure its completion, not least of which was overcoming the sharp rises in falls in gradient as canal crossed the Pennine hills between Lancashire and Yorkshire: the Bingley Five-Rise Locks, still the steepest flight of locks in Britain, provides a visible demonstration of the engineering ingenuities of the industrial revolution for us to appreciate today. From its inception, the Leeds and Liverpool Canal's main cargo was the coal used to power the steam engines of the region's cotton and woollen factories. The need for coal led to clusters of factories being built on the canal's banks, the best known of which is Salt's Mill at Saltaire, near Shipley, completed in 1853, and like the Bingley locks, now a major tourist attraction. By the second half of the nineteenth century, canals faced significant competition from railways. The Leeds and Liverpool Canal withstood this competition better than most and remained a significant carrier of freight until the late twentieth century. However, today the Leeds and Liverpool Canal, like all of Britain's canals, find its main use in the leisure business. Today's canal cruisers now not only have the opportunity to appreciate the region's rich industrial history but also the beautiful rural scenery along much of its route.

Pirates of the Canal provides a unique opportunity to revisit some of the past glories of the Leeds and Liverpool in a way emphasises the hard work and endeavour that characterised the British canal system in its eighteenth- and nineteenth-century heyday. Indeed, the aim to complete the journey from the International Slavery Museum in Liverpool to the Royal Armouries in Leeds in six days is roughly the same timeframe that horse-pulled barges would have hoped to complete the same journey two hundred years ago! This mother and daughter adventure also helps us to remember the harsh experiences of thousands of families of canal-boat people who lived and worked on the British canals during the industrial revolution and beyond.

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