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Waterways

FOUR COUNTIES RING

TIMELESS ENGLISH COUNTRYSIDE



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TIMELESS 'OLDE ENGLISH' TOWNS AND FAMILY FUN; GET BOATING ON THE FOUR COUNTIES RING!

Do you enjoy the relaxed pace of a narrowboat holiday and are looking for a new adventure? Then why not try The Four Counties Ring boating route? A great favourite with boaters, this is a fascinating tour through timeless English countryside and traditional towns, featuring the best of Cheshire, Staffordshire, Shropshire and the West Midlands - the four counties of its name.

After relaxing at a pretty canalside pub you can venture into 'Monkey World' at Trentham Gardens, or get creative at The Potteries museums in Stoke-on-Trent. Why not explore picturesque towns such as Market Drayton, Nantwich and Penkridge, with their pretty half-timbered buildings and lively markets? For a taste of city life, stop off at Stoke-on-Trent or Wolverhampton, to enjoy the shops, restaurants and museums.

This route is a perfect way to explore England's heritage, with beautiful historic houses and gardens to explore, as well

as fascinating tales of traditional industry at The Potteries. Not to be missed is The Shugborough Estate, perched majestically alongside the Trent and Mersey Canal at Great Haywood. Costumed characters will lead you back in time, or you can simply enjoy a toy train ride around the magnificent grounds! This part of the country boasts many superb gardens, and two of the best are Dorothy Clive Garden and Wollerton Old Hall Garden.

The Four Counties Ring is ideal for boaters with some experience. Full of variety, it offers lazy days without a single lock, alongside the

underground adventure of navigating the 2670 metre Harecastle Tunnel, said to be haunted! Save some energy for the twenty six locks of 'Heartbreak Hill', running from Sandbach to Wheelock.

Experienced boaters can complete the 109 miles of The Four Counties Ring in one week, cruising for around eight hours per day. If you're new to boating or just want to take your time enjoying the sights, allow two weeks for your adventure. There are lots of great places to moor, either for a relaxing lunch or overnight, so you can create the perfect itinerary for you!



Shugborough Estate



Boating at Brewwood



The Guildhall Shopping Centre

GET ACTIVE WITH THE KIDS!

The Four Counties Ring is perfect for active children who enjoy the outdoors. Apart from the thrill of being 'first mate' on board, they can step onto dry land and have a go at activities like tobogganing, indoor water sports, horse riding, fishing, cycling and wildlife spotting. For great ideas for waterside activities for children, visit our web site www.wow4water.net

Stoke-on-Trent is a great place to treat the kids to some adventures. **Trentham Gardens** (Tel: 01782 646646 www.trentham.co.uk; close to 14 day visitor moorings at bridge 106, Trent and Mersey Canal) offers boat and miniature train trips, 'Monkey World', a forest with 140 Barbary macaques, and a crazy hedge maze and adventure playground.

For some high-adrenaline adventures you can't beat **Waterworld** in Stoke-on-Trent, the UK's number one indoor aqua theme park (Tel: 01782 205747 www.waterworld.co.uk; moorings at bridge 117, Trent and Mersey Canal). Hair-raising rides like Nucleus water roller coaster, the Twister and the Super Flume offer unique water adventures for kids and adults alike. Afterwards you can take it easy in the spa and bubble pools and the 'lazy river'.

After all that excitement, why not try something different and learn more about Stoke-on-Trent's famous pottery industry? A good place to start is **Gladstone Pottery Museum** (Tel: 01782 319232/311378; moorings at bridge 109, Trent and Mersey Canal), a fascinating intact Victorian pottery

factory offering demonstrations of traditional skills. Another 'living museum' worth a visit is **Eturia Industrial Museum**, particularly Jesse Shirley's Bone and Flint Mill and the Victorian blacksmiths shop (moorings at bridge 117, Trent and Mersey Canal. Tel: 01782 233144). For information on all of The Potteries Museums visit www.stoke.gov.uk/museums.

To travel back almost a thousand years, take a tour of **Stafford Castle**, built at the time of William the Conqueror (Tel: 01785 257698 www.staffordbc.gov.uk; access from bridge 98, Staffordshire and Worcestershire Canal). Its 'hands-on' approach to history is ideal for children and it boasts fascinating excavated artefacts.

FROM CYCLING TO EXPLORING HISTORIC GARDENS - ENJOY THE GREAT OUTDOORS!

Tranquil countryside is the backdrop to much of The Four Counties Ring route, making it perfect for intrepid expeditions! Why not moor at Great Haywood and explore **Cannock Chase** (Forest Centre: 01889 586593, www.cannock-chase.co.uk; moor at Great Haywood Junction), a superb country park of ancient heathland with great walking and cycling trails for all ages.

Another delight for walkers is **Trentham Gardens**, which offers plenty of signposted trails. It boasts its own herd of fallow deer, and herons and kingfishers on its lake. If you can't keep away from boats, why not take a catamaran trip or hire a rowing boat?

Bantock House and Gardens, near Wolverhampton (Tel: 01902 552195 www.wolverhamptonart.org.uk/bantock) is renowned for its collection of locally made enamels and jewellery, and

imaginative puppets depicting inspirational sons and daughters of Wolverhampton! Kids will enjoy the play area and putting green. Moor at Wolverhampton Boat Club and take a train from Bilbrook into Wolverhampton (information from Centro: 0121 200 2700). Whilst in the city take the kids on the 'Wild over Waterways' canalside adventure trail (available from West Midlands Waterways on 0121 200 7400).

Photos: 1. Cannock Chase, 2. Exploring on foot, 3. Reed Warbler



FROM UP-TO-THE MINUTE TO OLDE WORLDE

Whether you are shopping for treats for a canalside picnic or presents to take home, there are lots of great shopping destinations on The Four Counties Ring. Lovers of traditional market towns can wander happily around **Nantwich**, **Penkridge**, **Market Drayton** or **Stone**. Wednesday is a popular day for markets, with Penkridge's famous one selling everything from pottery to meat, and the Market Drayton market, popular with foodies looking for local delicacies.

Why not spend a relaxing afternoon in Nantwich, with its lovely medieval winding lanes, pretty boutiques, and tea rooms to relax in? If you don't want to stray far from your boat, then **Stone** is the place for your shopping trip. The Trent and Mersey Canal runs through the heart of this bustling town, with its pretty traditional shops offering everything from gifts to cakes.

If you yearn for city shopping facilities, there are plenty of options around the route. **Stoke-on-Trent** offers lots of big name stores in **The Potteries Shopping Centre**, characterful boutiques and a lively indoor market. Book lovers will enjoy browsing new and antiquarian book shops in the Hanley district, and don't miss out on bargain china and glass, the city's most famous exports, in the factory shops. Further south **Wolverhampton** has plenty to attract shoppers, at the Wulfrun and Mander centres and in its thriving markets (moor at Wolverhampton Boat Club and take the train from Bilbrook station into the city centre).

Stafford is another town worthy of a stop en route. **The Guildhall Shopping Centre** makes a good starting point, and don't miss its picturesque streets and lanes lined with designer shops and restaurants.

DISCOVER OTHER CANAL DWELLERS

The Four Counties Ring is a favourite with wildlife spotters, so make sure that you keep your eyes open both day and night, for birds, otters and even bats! Another nocturnal creature to look out for is the badger, as they often burrow their setts in woodland and fields by the canal.

One place well worth stopping off is **Belvide Reservoir**, which supplies water to the Shropshire Union Canal. Close to the pretty village of Brewwood (with its visitor moorings), Belvide is an important bird sanctuary where nature lovers can watch species including divers, sandpipers, grebes and warblers from three observation hides. As it is a Site of Special Scientific Interest, you need to obtain a permit to visit in advance from West Midlands Bird Club, who manage the site (permits@westmidbirdclub.com). Permits cost £12 and also offer access to **Gailey Reservoir**, another wildlife haven on the Four Counties route, home to a large heronry and many wildfowl.



Photos: 1. Penkridge, 2. Eating by the water, 3. Boating at Brewood

A GOURMET TOUR

Foodies will love the Four Counties Ring, as everything from local farmers' produce to international cuisine is on offer. Waterside pubs offer relaxed dining all around the route, and, for more cosmopolitan cuisine, explore Wolverhampton's famous balti houses.

In Staffordshire no fry-up breakfast is complete without oatcakes, a cross between a pancake and a crumpet, and pikelets are another local speciality. Head for North Shropshire if you have a sweet tooth - gingerbread was 'invented' in Market Drayton, and traditional sweet shops offer yummy old-fashioned boiled sweets like peardrops and sherbet lemons, that will remind you of childhood! You can also sample 'Clive Pies' in Market Drayton, named after Clive of India, the town's most famous son.

Cheshire is world famous for its cheese, with plenty of 'the real thing' made locally. **Nantwich Museum** boasts a 'Cheese Room', telling you everything you always wanted to know about cheese making! (Tel: 01270 627104 www.nantwich.org.uk). For a real treat head for **Snugbury's Jersey Ice cream**, just outside Nantwich (Tel: 01270 624830 www.snugburys.co.uk; nearest moorings at bridge 91, Shropshire Union Canal). With flavours including sloe gin and damson, and clotted cream, you will struggle to choose!

If you're a real gourmet, why not time your visit to coincide with a food festival? The popular **Nantwich Food and Drink Festival** offers cookery demonstrations and a CAMRA beer festival, food trails and displays from over one hundred local producers. It takes place each year on the last weekend of September. **Market Drayton Taste of the Town** celebrates local food producers and also features a continental market. It is held every two years, in July.

STORIES OF TIMES PAST

History is all around you as you cruise The Four Counties Ring, with fascinating historic buildings right on the canalside for you to discover. Visit the **Shugborough Estate** at Great Haywood Junction and be transported back to the manor houses of Georgian England, with their lively servants' quarters and farm yards, and 900 acres of superb parkland to roam (Tel: 01889 881388 www.shugborough.org.uk; moorings at Great Haywood Junction).

Arriving in Stoke-on-Trent you cannot miss signs of The Potteries, with remarkably beautiful industrial relics like the bottle kilns canalside at **Etruria Industrial Museum**. With its Victorian bone and flint mill and blacksmith's shop, this lively interactive museum tells the story of Stoke's world famous china industry, and runs lots of children's activities.

In South Staffordshire head for the pretty village of Brewood, which has both **Chillington Hall** and **Boscobel House** on the doorstep (moorings at bridge 14,

Shropshire Union Canal). These two houses were built by the Gifford family, a powerful clan who enjoyed favour at royal courts over the centuries. A catholic family, legend has it that they built Boscobel House as a safe haven for persecuted catholics; they also sheltered the future King Charles II, during the Civil War. Built in 1632, this beautiful timbered house is popular with visitors, and has a dairy, farmyard, smithy and gardens (open April to October. Tel: 01902 850244, www.english-heritage.org.uk).

As you cruise past Brewood look out for a magnificent avenue of trees leading from the Shropshire Union Canal to Chillington Hall, a fine eighteenth century house open to the public on selected days in July and August (Tel: 01902 850236 www.chillingtonhall.co.uk). The prettiness of this stretch of canal, particularly the ornate Avenue Bridge, owes much to the Gifford family. They were keen to ensure that their lovely rural views were not spoilt by the 'new, industrial' Shropshire Union Canal.

FINDING YOUR WAY AROUND THE FOUR COUNTIES RING



KEY

- Four Counties Ring
- Tourist Attractions
- Lock Flights
- Towns / Cities
- Urban Areas

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DISCOVER THE BEST OF CHESHIRE, STAFFORDSHIRE, SHROPSHIRE AND THE WEST MIDLANDS.



Trentham Gardens



Gailey Roundhouse

SOUTH CHESHIRE

Enjoy a well-earned rest as you cruise through South Cheshire - in the fifteen miles or so between Nantwich and Middlewich you will find just two locks! This peaceful rural stretch is punctuated by charming 'Olde English' market towns, particularly the 'Wich' towns, famed as producers of salt. One place well worth a stop is **Nantwich**, a medieval town full of beautiful half-timbered buildings,

whose parish church, St Mary's, is known as the cathedral of South Cheshire. Nantwich Museum is the place to discover the town's many stories, including the Great Fire.

Further North **Middlewich** is a true canal town, lying not only on the junction of the Shropshire Union and Trent and Mersey canals, but also boasting the Wardle Canal, the UK's shortest. Time your visit for the

hugely popular Folk and Boat Festival, held each year in June and featuring superb live bands, craft stalls and a vast boat gathering of around four hundred craft!

If you need to stock up on provisions **Sandbach** is also well worth a visit, particularly for the Thursday market in its ancient town square (moor at bridge 153, Trent and Mersey Canal).

NORTH STAFFORDSHIRE

The Four Counties Ring leads you into the heart of North Staffordshire, and its main city **Stoke-on-Trent**. From The Potteries museums to Waterworld, Stoke-on-Trent is a vibrant city and an ideal place for a family day out. Active types will love **Festival Park**, with its alpine rollercoaster, and **Waterworld**, offering unique 'white knuckle' water rides! Other adventures on offer at

Festival Park are dry slope ski-ing and ten-pin bowling, and the secure overnight moorings mean that everything is on your doorstep (www.festival-park.co.uk; moorings at bridge 117, Trent and Mersey Canal).

Etruria Canal Festival is a popular event held each June featuring fairground rides, boats and steam engines, and lots of 'hands on' arts, crafts and musical activities.

The Potteries Shopping Centre offers both famous high street stores and funky boutiques, and, for some 'local flavour', visit factory shops selling local china and glass.

For some peace and quiet boat down to Stone and Great Haywood and enjoy classic English scenery from the comfort of a canalside pub.

Market Drayton



Great Haywood



Signpost at Great Haywood





Enjoy the peace and quiet of the Four Counties classic English scenery.

Photos: 1. Boating at Brewood, 2. Grey Heron, 3. Feeding the ducks at Norbury

CENTRAL AND SOUTH STAFFORDSHIRE

As you cruise south, Staffordshire reveals a charming rural character, punctuated by pretty towns such as Penkridge and Brewood.

Penkridge is an ideal place to stock up on provisions or to enjoy a leisurely few hours at a waterside pub. The county town of **Stafford**

makes a great lunch stop, and its tourist information centre is housed in the **Ancient High House** on Greengate Street, a superb timberframed house. Call in for lots of ideas for enjoying your time in Staffordshire.

Further south lies **Gailey**, with its distinctive Round House. Built as a collection point for cargo tolls, it is now a canal book and gift shop. A great place to buy souvenirs and maps. Wildlife lovers flock to Gailey to explore its reservoir, particularly the heronry.

WEST MIDLANDS

If you're progressing well on the Ring, take time to explore Wolverhampton. One of the UK's newest cities, **Wolverhampton** is a lively city benefiting from exciting canalside regeneration projects (moor at Wolverhampton Boat Club and take the train from Bilbrook station into the city centre). It is renowned for its arts scene, with top rock bands at the **Wulfrun Hall** and **Civic Hall** (01902 552121 www.wolvescivic.co.uk), and funky Pop Art by Andy Warhol at

Wolverhampton Art Gallery (Tel: 01902 552055 www.wolverhamptonart.org.uk). There's also plenty for sports fans, with football at **The Molineux**, home of Wolverhampton Wanderers FC (www.wolves.co.uk), and the chance for a flutter at **Wolverhampton Race Course** (Tel: 0870 220 2442 www.wolverhampton-racecourse.co.uk). This floodlit course backs onto the Birmingham Main Line Canal and offers high-quality evening racing throughout the year.

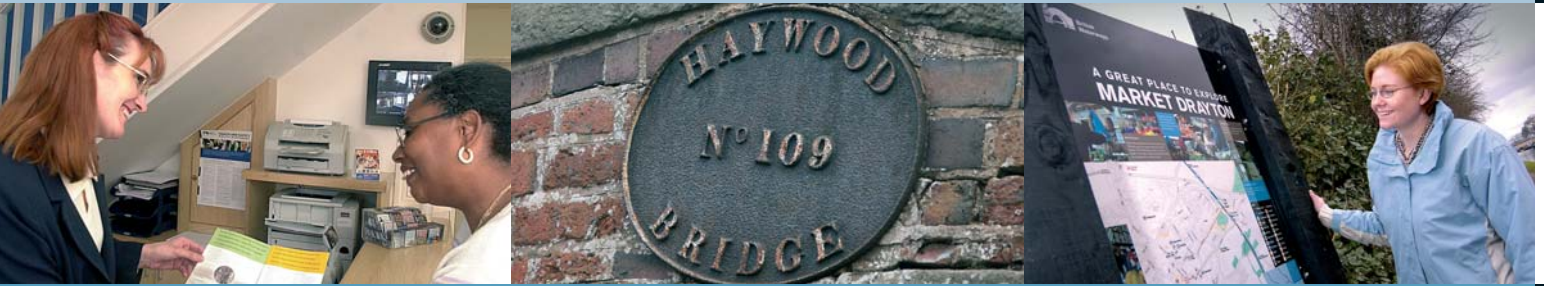
SHROPSHIRE

One of the four counties of this route is Shropshire, and one of its 'jewels' is the half-timbered town of **Market Drayton**. A real 'foodie' town, Market Drayton was renowned in times past for its damson fairs. Lots of local goodies are on sale at the Wednesday market, and, to walk off all this food, try one of the town trails - 'Murder and Mayhem'

or the 'Children's Wild Animal Adventure' trail are a fun way to explore! A short drive away is a haven for the green fingered - **Wollerton Old Hall Garden** (Tel: 01630 685760 www.wollertonoldhallgarden.com; moor in Market Drayton), featuring a knot garden and superb English summer flowers.

Cycling at Great Haywood





SOURCES OF FURTHER INFORMATION

For further information about The Four Counties Ring and canals in the region, contact British Waterways.

Wales & Border Counties Waterways

Navigation Road, Northwich, Cheshire, CW8 1BH
Tel: 01606 723800
Email: enquiries.wbc@britishwaterways.co.uk

West Midlands Waterways

Peel's Wharf, Lichfield Street, Fazeley,
Tamworth, Staffordshire, B78 3QZ
Tel: 01827 252000
Email: enquiries.westmidlands@britishwaterways.co.uk
Open: 8.30am to 5.30pm, Monday to Friday

West Midlands Waterways' Customer Service Centre

Cambrian House, 2 Canalside,
off King Edwards Road, Birmingham, B1 2NX
Tel: 0121 200 7400
Email: enquiries.westmidlands@britishwaterways.co.uk
Open: Monday to Friday, 9am to 5pm all year; also open on Saturdays and Sundays, 10am to 5pm, from Easter weekend until 1st October.

TOURIST INFORMATION CENTRES

Nantwich Tourist Information

Church House, Church Walk, Nantwich, Cheshire, CW5 5RG
Tel: 01270 610983

Shropshire Customer First & Visitor Information Centre

49 Cheshire Street, Market Drayton, TF9 1PH
Tel: 01630 652139 or 653114
Email: marketdrayton.scf@shropshire-cc.gov.uk

Stafford Tourist Information

Market Street, Stafford, ST16 2LQ
Tel: 01785 619 619
Email: tic@staffordbc.gov.uk

Stoke-on-Trent Tourist Information

Victoria Hall, Bagnall Street, Stoke-on-Trent, ST1 3AD
Tel: 01782 236 000
Email: stoke.tic@virgin.net

Wolverhampton Tourist Information

Queen Square, Wolverhampton, WV1 1TS
Tel: 01902 556011
E-mail: ticwebmaster@dial.pipex.com

Useful Web Sites

www.visitcheshire.com
www.visitstafford.org
www.shropshiretourism.info
www.ssta.co.uk
www.blackcountrytourism.co.uk

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waterscape.com

Your on-line leisure guide to Britain's canals, rivers and lakes.

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Games and waterside activities for children.

Safety first: The above customer service centres can supply free copies of the Boater's Handbook and Waterways Code, which offer invaluable safety advice.

The inclusion of attractions in this publication does not constitute a recommendation.

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Front cover image: Working a lock at Stone. Images of third party attractions supplied by Shugborough - The Complete Working Historic Estate, The Guildhall Shopping Centre, Cannock Chase AONB Unit, Trentham Gardens and Shropshire Tourism.

All information correct at the time of going to press. The inclusion of attractions in this guide does not constitute a recommendation.

This leaflet is available in alternative formats on request.

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