

## **Hythe Bridges After the Canal (1804 Onwards)**

The construction of the Royal Military Canal between 1804 and 1809 fundamentally transformed Hythe's landscape. Built as a defensive barrier during the Napoleonic threat, the canal introduced a long, continuous stretch of water running through the district along the northern edge of the town.

In doing so, it replaced much of the earlier natural drainage system. Former stream crossings were altered, diverted, or lost altogether. The small bridges that had once crossed natural brooks were no longer sufficient. Instead, new bridges were required to span the engineered military waterway.

Initially, only wooden bridges were constructed across the canal, as brick supplies were prioritised for the building of the line of Martello towers along the coastline. These early crossings were functional and temporary in nature, reflecting the urgency of the military threat.

The canal was officially opened to the public in 1810, although tolls were charged for passage boats. A regular barge service operated between Hythe and Rye, and a passenger service ran between the Swan in Hythe and Appledore. The outward journey departed at 10:30 am, returning at 5:00 pm each day. However, the tolls collected did not cover the cost of maintenance.

Although the threat of invasion passed, the canal remained. With it came a new and permanent need for access. Stronger, more substantial bridges became essential to reconnect communities divided by the waterway. Some were designed to carry vehicles and livestock, supporting trade and transport. Others were built solely for pedestrians, providing local links and scenic crossings along the canal path.

The canal's commercial fortunes declined further after the opening of the Ashford to Hastings railway line in 1851, which offered a faster and more reliable means of transport.

## **The Canal Today (February 2026)**

Along the section of canal covered here, from Seabrook to West Hythe Bridge, a distance of approximately 7 km (4.3 miles), there are currently twelve bridges, including the Outfall (landing stage) at Seabrook.

These consist of:

Six footbridges for pedestrians

Five bridges carrying both traffic and pedestrians

The Outfall (landing stage) at Seabrook

Together, they represent successive phases of Hythe's development. What began as a defensive military structure evolved into a transport route, and later into a valued heritage feature. Today, bridges serve walkers, cyclists, residents, and visitors alike, reflecting both the canal's strategic origins and its modern role within the community.