

Why did the Somerset Coal Canal fail?

Before the canal and the railways, coal from the Somerset coalmines was transported by horse and cart. This was an inefficient method and meant the coal was expensive. The Somerset Coal Canal meant coal could be sold in large quantities cheaply across the south of England and in London.

In 1838, the canal carried 138,403 tons of coal and other goods, e.g. Bath stone. Cargoes of more than 100,000 tons were common until the 1870s. Competition from the railways dramatically reduced the canal's profitability and it was closed some years later.

Table 1:

The amount of coal moved by railway from the Somerset coalfield between 1860 and 1920:

Year	Total (thousands of tons of coal)
1860	185
1870	295
1880	278
1890	319
1900	520
1910	642
1920	650

Activities

1. How was the coal transported before the canal and railways were built?
2. Why do you think was this a poor/inefficient method of transporting coal?
3. Draw a bar graph to show the amount of coal carried by the railways from the Somerset coalfields between 1860 and 1920. Use the vertical scale for coal moved by the railway and the horizontal scale for the time.
4. Use your graph to estimate when you think the Somerset Coal Canal closed.

This resource is one of a group of resources for KS1, 2 and 3 on the subject of the Somerset Coal Canal and coalfield.

More information from the [Somersetshire Coal Canal Society](#).

