



TOOME CANAL



Total length: 2km Grade: Easy

The small town of Toome lies at the north-west corner of Lough Neagh. Toome Linear Park is a community development project implemented by local group TIDAL in 2001. As you approach Toome from Antrim the road veers left just past the bus stop. Turn left immediately as this road swings right and park in the small area opposite the lock-keepers cottage. A 2km long walk to the shores of Lough Neagh begins as you go along the canal bank towards the park gates. At 383km², Lough Neagh is the largest freshwater lake in Ireland and Britain. While six main rivers drain into the lough, only the Lower Bann drains out of it. The river makes its exit from the Lough here at Toome, where it starts its journey north to meet the Atlantic near Castlerock. Excavation work on Toome Canal unearthed the remains of the late 17th century Toome Castle. It was one of several defensive castles constructed around the loughshore during the 1600s. During this excavation, evidence of earlier medieval occupation of this area was also recorded. Toome derives its name from the Irish *"Tuaim"* meaning *"pagan burial place"* although the site of that burial place has not been identified. An earlier name was *"Fearsaid Thuama"* meaning *"sand-bank ford of Toome"* referring to a former ford crossing of the Bann here.

From the parking area walk south towards the loughshore along the banks of Toome Canal. To your right are the remains of the old railway bridge over the Bann. A rail line from Randalstown to Cookstown was opened in 1856 and included the construction of the Carlisle Bridge. As happened in many places, the railway was closed in the late 1950s following increasing competition from road traffic. The Carlisle Bridge soon fell into a state of disrepair and

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has been largely dismantled following the opening in 2004 of the new Toome by-pass a short distance to the north.



Toome is famous for its eel fishery. The Lough Neagh Eel Fishermen's Co-operative Society Limited controls the catching and marketing of eel and other scale fish from Lough Neagh and provides licences for around 100 commercial fishing boats on the Lough. The eels spawn in the Sargasso Sea between Bermuda and Florida and after

three years floating adrift, the eel larvae develop into small eels, or elvers, and become strong enough to swim north with the Gulf Stream towards the rivers and lakes of Europe. They enter Lough Neagh through the Lower Bann and spend 8 years in the Lough and its rivers before reaching maturity. At that stage they change from brown in colour to silvery-black and begin their 4,000 mile journey back to their spawning grounds.

As you continue towards the loughshore, you pass, again to your right, some of the Lower Bann sluice gates. For many generations, high winter rainfall draining into the Lough raised water levels causing surrounding farmland and meadows to be regularly flooded. Over the last century or so, successive schemes have increasingly brought this problem under control. Today, three sets of flood gates and five sets of locks on the Lower Bann allow the water level of Lough Neagh to be controlled by draining excess water during periods of high rainfall and also maintaining navigable flows during periods of lower rainfall. Today, Lough Neagh is 3.6m lower than it was in 1847 and the former, higher lake shores can still be seen at several places around Lough Neagh today.

The path soon reaches the shores of Lough Neagh and a viewpoint provides wide panoramas over the Lough which takes its name from "*Loch nEathach*" meaning "*Eochu's Lake.*" According to one legend Eochu was the son of Mairidh who drowned when a mystical well overflowed to create the present day Lough. In the late 16th and early 17th centuries there were several attempts to re-name it including Lough Sidney (after Sir Henry Sidney) and Lough Chichester (after Sir Arthur Chichester). To finish this short walk, simply retrace your steps along the canal bank to the parking area or follow the loop to the right back to the car park.

