

Waterway Operative

Waterway operatives maintain and operate locks on a canal or other inland waterway and look after the areas around the waterway. They operate the lock mechanism themselves or make sure that boat crews do so correctly and safely. They may be called canal associates.

The Work

Locks are devices built across a waterway, which allow boats to transfer from one level to another. The boat goes into a lock (a section of the waterway which is closed off by gates) and the water level in it rises or falls. The other end of the lock then opens to let the boat sail on to the new level. Sometimes there is a series of locks, turning the waterway into a kind of staircase for boats. Sea locks let boats travel between tidal and non-tidal waters. You could be:

- registering boats and collecting fees
- operating the lock mechanisms yourself or helping boat crews to do it
- using hydraulic lockgear to open and close the lock gates and operating swing bridges to let tall boats through
- opening sluice holes in the gate to raise or lower the water level in the lock
- making sure boats in the lock do not collide as the water level changes
- opening the gates when the water in the lock has reached the level of the next stretch of water so that the boats can move through
- maintaining the locks, paddles, bollards and hooks to make sure they are in good working order
- keeping waterways clear from obstructions, such as litter, and managing vegetation
- helping boat crews with maps, equipment and problems, for example engine breakdowns.

Pay

The figures below are only a guide. Actual pay rates may vary, depending on:

- where you work
- the size of the company or organisation you work for
- the demand for the job.

Salaries for waterway operatives are around £12.60 an hour (based on job vacancies in 2025). You would receive extra allowances for working flexible shifts or rotas.

Highly experienced waterway operatives covering large stretches of waterway may be able to earn more. In some cases you may also get accommodation with the job.

Conditions

- You would have to work outdoor in all weathers.
- You would work on a rota basis which would involve weekends, or evenings.
- You might work longer hours during the summer months.

- Sometimes you would live and work in quite remote places.
- The work can be hard and physical.
- You might have to lift heavy weights.
- You would have regular contact with the public as well as being responsible for the equipment.

Getting In

- A good general education is useful.
- It is helpful if you have some previous work experience involving working in a team and providing customer service.
- If you are aged 16 or over and are not in employment, you could apply to join the [Canal College programme](#). This will give you experience of working at canals and can lead to cultural heritage awards.
- Knowledge of the local and surrounding area may also be advantageous.
- You may need a driving licence for some jobs, and possibly your own transport.
- Basic DIY skills are an advantage.
- You can apply for volunteer work through Scottish Canals.

What Does It Take

You need to be:

- reliable
- practical and fit enough to carry out some physical work
- able to swim
- observant
- confident about operating machinery
- aware of health and safety issues.

You need to have:

- good communication skills
- patience
- a strong sense of responsibility
- the ability to make decisions
- the ability to work alone as well as with others.

Training

- Training takes place on the job and is mainly of a practical nature.
- Your employer may provide an initial training course covering topics such as health and safety issues, first aid and customer service skills.

Getting On

With experience, you could become a supervisor or manager. You might have to move to another part of the country to do this.

Contacts

Scottish Canals

Tel: 0141 332 6936

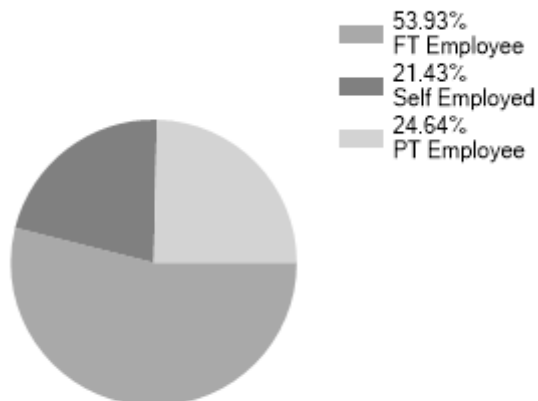
Website: www.scottishcanals.co.uk

X: @scottishcanals

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Statistics

Employment Status UK %

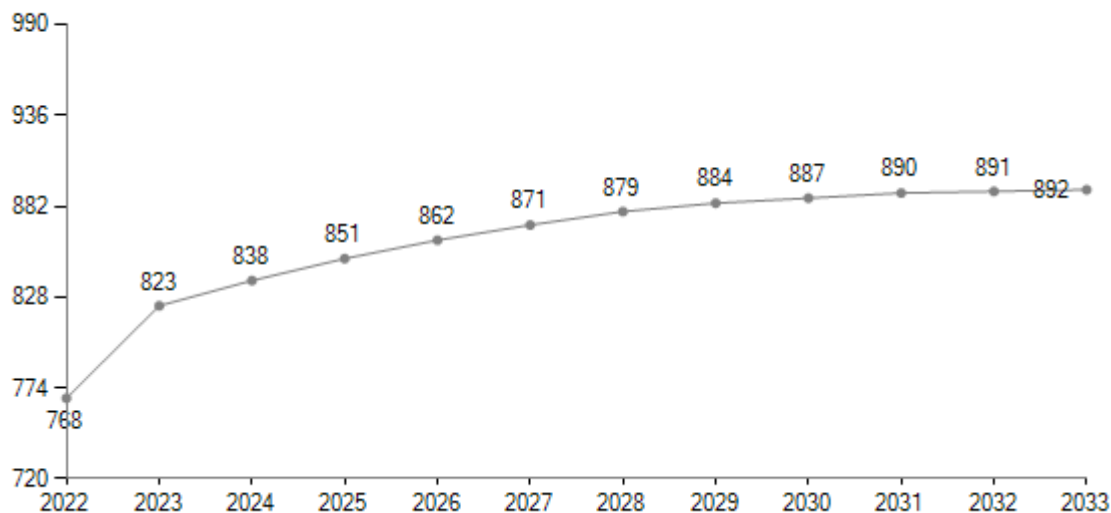


Past Unemployment - Scotland

No Claimant statistics available for Scotland.

LMI data powered by [LMI for All](#)

Predicted Employment in Scotland



LMI data powered by [Lightcast](#)