

AINA CASE STUDY

THE WAY FORWARD

Huddersfield Narrow Canal: 'the impossible restoration'



The early efforts of an enthusiastic canal society influenced plans for major works once suitable funding became available

Restoration of the Huddersfield Narrow Canal began in the 1970s and continued steadily through the 1980s under the leadership of the Huddersfield Canal Society, using job creation schemes which trained many people in new skills. During the 1990s, Derelict Land Grant was used to fund a number of major projects and in 1998 funding totalling £31.8 million was obtained (mainly from the Millennium Commission and English Partnerships) for several key projects to complete the restoration to navigation.

The objectives were to re-open the canal for full navigation, to use the restored waterway as a catalyst for urban and rural regeneration, and to create a visitor centre in Standedge. The major obstacle to be overcome was the reopening of the famous Standedge Tunnel, 5.2 kilometres in length, as the longest, highest and deepest canal tunnel in Britain.

Repairs and dredging works lasted two years. Major regeneration was required to bring the canal back through Stalybridge, with the construction of five bridges and four locks, as well as the excavation of 800 metres of culverted channel. The original line was reopened and linked to restored stretches, and the work has changed the character of the town centre. Redevelopment has followed, a new superstore takes advantage of the waterside setting and pedestrian areas and civic spaces have been created. In Huddersfield works took the canal beneath two established factories, and a couple of tunnels and a lock were built to enable the realigned canal to be lowered under both premises.

As part of the project, a visitor centre at Standedge was specifically created as a heritage attraction through the conversion and refurbishment of the former listed canal company warehouse at the western end of the tunnel. This provides information, education, interactive displays and a shop and restaurant. A specially designed electric tugboat offers visitors a 25 minute boat trip into the tunnel.

The work – often called 'the impossible restoration' – was able to identify good practice to share with other waterway projects. These include the effectiveness and enthusiasm of a voluntary sector project champion with the persistence to drive the project and work alongside other partners, and the need to allow project management and funding to respond to achievements and new opportunities.