

AINA CASE STUDY

THE NATURAL ENVIRONMENT

Ashby Canal: working with wildlife



Ten kilometres of important canal SSSI are managed through a consensus approach

Built in 1804, the Ashby Canal served mainly coal mines but declined during the 20th century due to subsidence. A new 2.1 kilometre section at Moira, managed by Leicestershire County Council and partners, is isolated from the larger main canal network but there are plans to extend and reconnect this length.

The main length of canal has no locks and is essentially rural in character. It is approximately 10 metres wide, 1.2 to 1.4 metres deep, shallow at the sides and puddle clay lined. Mooring is difficult for deeper boats except at certain limited points. The canal has sedge banks, sheet piling and some wooden bank protection installed mainly to assist towpath reinstatement.

The top 10 kilometres of the canal are designated as a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI), but general boating, angling and passenger trip boats continue to take place. British Waterways has a management agreement with Natural England since the SSSI has emergent aquatic vegetation, crayfish and species of damsel fly. Specific conservation issues are turbidity and bank erosion, which is now largely resolved by planting of appropriate reed and sedge species.

Natural England requires Leicestershire County Council to provide off-line reserves, where practicable, on the main length to help compensate for any potential increase in traffic due to planned restoration at the top end. Local waterway groups support wildlife protection measures that are not at the expense of navigation, though debate remains as to what impact, if any, an increase in boat traffic will have on aquatic wildlife.

On the main length, trees have been felled to allow more light into the canal and to encourage weed growth. Offside planting areas are incorporated in the ongoing restoration design work, and experiments have shown coir matting and coils to be satisfactory ways of allowing the establishment of aquatics and preventing erosion.

Consensus building is arranged through meetings to ensure agreement is reached on management work. This is a lengthy process, given the differing agendas of key stakeholders, and communication and consultation are important. Interested groups include the Ashby Canal Trust, Ashby Canal Association, Measham Canal Restoration Group, and the local branch of the Inland Waterways Association.