

Lancaster Canal: balancing the needs of navigation and wildlife



The Northern Reaches of the Lancaster Canal pass through attractive countryside on the southern edge of the Lake District, but were isolated from the main line of the canal when the M6 motorway was built



Plans to restore the Northern Reaches will take account of aquatic habitats

The Lancaster Canal, linking Preston, Lancaster and Kendal, declined during the 1950s when its northernmost section was closed and partly in-filled. Further closures followed, and today it remains navigable between Preston and Tewitfield, where it is classified as a cruising waterway. Further north, those sections in water – called the Northern Reaches - are designated remainder waterways and are closed to through navigation. Lengths in water have remained in the ownership of British Waterways, together with the Glasson Branch which links to the coast.

The canal is a broad rural waterway which contours through the countryside. The Northern Reaches are lock-free and attract anglers and canoeists, and a trip boat is operated by the Lancaster Canal Trust. Subject to funding and the continued support of partners, plans to restore the Northern Reaches into Kendal are based on a three-phase approach.

Whilst there are no statutory nature conservation designations directly related to the canal, restoration work will recognise the importance of the natural environment and will aim to conserve or enhance ecological value. The canal supports a range of habitats which are home to a wide variety of plants and animals and the value of the waterway lies as much in its ecological diversity as it does in the rarity of species recorded along it, which include water voles, bats and insects.

Restoration of the dry section will create approximately nine kilometres of open water habitat, including a fringe of emergent vegetation on the off-side of the canal. This will replace improved agricultural land and will contribute to national and local biodiversity objectives. Local concerns about the potential impacts of restoration and navigation on nature conservation are being allayed through feasibility and research work, and a desk study of the environmental, cultural and social resources of the canal was undertaken to provide a preliminary assessment of the significance of the waterway corridor. This forms the basis for future work, including any Environmental Impact Assessment, and design and engineering work will draw upon previous best practice developed on other waterway restoration projects.

Consensus working remains important, and plans for restoration are coordinated by the Lancaster Canal Restoration Partnership which meets quarterly and includes a wide range of interested organisations and stakeholders.