

Liskeard & Looe Union Canal



The tidal lock at the southern end of the canal can still be seen adjacent to the road and railway

A long-lost canal in deepest Cornwall provides an opportunity for tourism

Prior to recent local authority reorganisation, Caradon District Council in Cornwall recognised that the historic line of the Liskeard & Looe Union Canal was worthy of recognition and research. The six mile canal, which linked the port of Looe with the market town of Liskeard, has been disused since the turn of the 20th century and, whilst there is no prospect of restoration, enough features survive to merit interpretation. The canal could also be used to widen sustainable tourism away from the popular coastal paths and resorts.

The canal hugged the floor of the steep East Looe Valley, but fell into decline when a railway line was built parallel to, or sometimes even on top of, the waterway. A study was commissioned which showed that some locks remained and, at various places, good views of the old waterway were still possible. However, the towpath has disappeared which means that ideas to promote the canal's history are now dependent upon alternative options.

The single-track railway survives and is now known as the Looe Valley Line. This provides an interesting way of seeing the canal, with four extremely rural stops between Liskeard and Looe (now a popular holiday town). Ideas in the study included on-train interpretation and information at each railway platform. In addition, some locks are visible from the stations and offer scope to be restored as locally unique heritage features.

Other ideas included using canal related features such as lime kilns, copper mines and granite quarries to tell the story of the waterway. Proposals were prepared for low key access to lock chambers and the land surrounding the old basins, where walks could be developed linked to the main line railway station up the hill at Liskeard.

At its southern end the canal linked to the tidal East Looe estuary where the first lock and bridge can be seen. Here there are sweeping landscapes with opportunities for bird watching and wildlife spotting, and paths above the valley slopes provide views over the canal's wider setting.

Cornwall County Council (as Caradon's successors) remains keen to find ways of broadening tourism activities and 'spreading the load' across lesser known areas and attractions. The study recommended that the special combination of railway, canal, history and scenery were worthy of promotion, and the trains are now operated under the community rail banner which has opened up new ways to promote the service. Passenger numbers have risen during the summer season and, though there is always more to do, new interpretation is provided at the stations.