

AINA CASE STUDY

THE NATURAL ENVIRONMENT

Grand Western Canal: working with farmers



A maturing offside buffer strip with specially installed drinking point for livestock

Newly created offside buffers trips provide important canalside habitats

The Grand Western Canal is an isolated waterway extending 18 kilometres between Tiverton in Mid Devon and Lowdells near the Somerset border. The canal is managed as a Country Park and Local Nature Reserve, having been taken over and saved from dereliction by Devon County Council in 1971. Restoration and management since then have emphasised the need to maintain environmental quality whilst also supporting recreational use.

The creation of offside buffer strips to reduce silt and nutrient inputs into the water and to improve wildlife habitats was first identified in the 1990s, and significant work eventually commenced in 2003 when a potential funding source was identified through Defra's Countryside Stewardship Scheme (now administered by Natural England). This offered the opportunity to claim capital payments for fencing work to create wildlife strips, and annual revenue payments for their on-going management. The Stewardship work was then dove-tailed with a broader programme focussed on sustainable dredging and silt management, secured through a three year EU Interreg IIIb project.

Permission was needed to cross adjacent land to undertake fencing works, and the canal manager visited all adjacent landowners to discuss the work and any issues arising. Many of the farmers were keen to see their land fenced from the canal, since they felt this would reduce risks to livestock entering the canal or drinking water-borne diseases or parasites. However, all offside landowners have a right - enshrined when the canal was built - for their livestock to drink from the canal, and to enable stock to reach the water surfaced drinking points were constructed. These did not attract any Stewardship funding, but the majority were funded via the Interreg project.

Approximately 4 kilometres of offside canal bank have been fenced off to create wildlife strips, where previously land was grazed or cultivated. Other work has included hedge restoration, coppicing of bankside trees and disabled access improvements. Fencing was carried out by a specialist contractor and a strip of thick, wildlife-rich vegetation has now naturally emerged with no need for planting or seeding. In some areas, control of brambles and thistles has inevitably been required.

The long-term effectiveness of the work will have been increased through the associated focus on farming practices in the surrounding catchment. An important additional benefit has been the clear demarcation of waterside ownerships.

Further information: www.devon.gov.uk/grandwesterncanal

