

Grantham Canal water supply position statement

Background:

Most of the Grantham Canal is unnavigable for boats and the canal was designated as a Remainder waterway in the 1968 Transport Act – this meant that no commercial or leisure use could be foreseen at that time. The Trust has a long term aspiration to see the whole canal restored for navigation and is working with the Grantham Canal Society and others to achieve this, however such an undertaking is likely to take several decades.

Water supply on the canal is challenging, particularly at the Nottingham end where the stretch from Cotgrave down to Lady Bay has only one significant source of water supply – the Cotgrave feeder which enters the canal near Skinners Lock Cottage. This means that the water levels in the canal are very much affected by rainfall, and do tend to drop during the summer, particularly in the downstream end at Lady Bay.

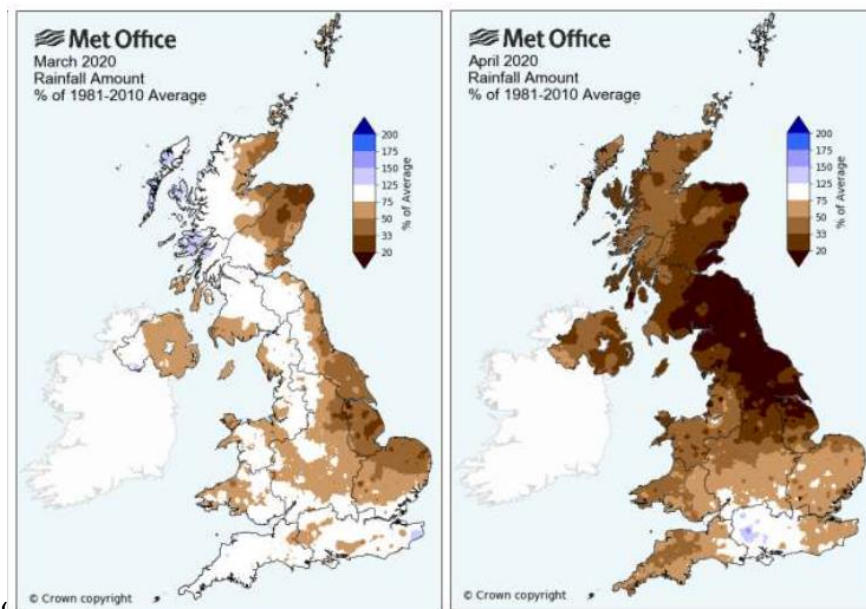
Water supply issues on the Grantham have been compounded by low flat culverted bridges which have been built across the canal since it was closed to boat traffic.

Nevertheless, even in sections without water such as Cropwell Bishop, the canal is a much-loved and important green space for the communities along its length and the Canal & River Trust wants to make sure that it can continue to provide important habitats for wildlife and a tranquil place for people to escape to.

Current situation:

We've received a number of reports of low water levels on the Nottingham end of the canal and at Kinoulton – and we welcome the concern and affection people clearly have for their local stretch of canal.

In many ways the low water levels aren't surprising as March, April and May have been particularly dry – April saw only 40% of the long-term average rainfall and the Met Office have recently recorded the driest May on record in England.



In truth water levels at Lady Bay may seem low but are actually only just below where we would expect them to be given the low rainfall and the difficulties of getting water past the A52. We've checked the feeder at Skinners Lock and it is running.

We recognise that levels at Kinoulton, which is ordinarily a shallow stretch anyway, are lower than usual however our ability to get water there is limited, due in part to the porous canal bed.

Impact on wildlife:

Whilst water levels may seem low in some specific locations our expert ecologists have been regularly visiting the canal and have recorded no immediate threats to wildlife. We're still seeing coots and moorhens with chicks, along with nesting swans. Herons, which have large ranges with many nearby sites, can still be spotted on many sections of the canal where they hunt for fish.

Fish are the species that is probably most acutely affected by low water levels, warm temperatures and resultant lack of oxygen. Again, our specialist ecologists keep a close eye on the canal for signs of distress and carefully monitor dissolved oxygen levels in the water. When it's clear that fish are in distress then we can use pumps to oxygenate the water and, as a last resort, can relocate fish to unaffected sections of canal - as we have done in the past.

It's important to remember that wildlife is very resilient and, if necessary, many species will simply move to the next stretch of canal which has water. Some species of waterfowl can actually benefit from fluctuating water levels as it makes it easier for them to find food in the exposed mud.

Protecting the wildlife that makes the Grantham Canal so special is incredibly important to us and in recent years we've been working with members of the Lady Bay community to improve their local stretch of canal for nature. The local residents have come to understand the particular challenges that increasingly regular dry spells are placing on it and have been keen to play their part in overcoming them.

Our work has included clearing reeds to improve flow and oxygen levels within the water, carrying out dye tests to identify any leaks and, as a last resort, safely relocating fish to sections of the canal which are less susceptible to water supply problems.

We're keen to work with other local communities along the canal in a similar way.

Next steps:

Unfortunately there are no quick wins, no alternative supplies of water that can be easily tapped into, but the Trust wants to work with other members of the Grantham Canal Partnership to explore external sources of funding and engineering ingenuity to improve the water supply to the canal. However, these are increasingly challenging and competitive times so realistically such a solution may be some years away.

In the meantime, with hot, dry periods becoming more common we perhaps have to look at the Grantham Canal in a new way.

Freshwater habitats which fluctuate between being wet and dry can be very valuable and so perhaps, with careful management and the involvement of local communities, we can work together to maintain the canal's unique character and ensure it remains a special place for people and wildlife.

This is not about letting the canal die but adapting the way we care for it to give it a whole new life and ensuring that it still provides important habitats for wildlife and can be enjoyed for generations to come.

We're keen to hear from any community groups that would like to help us in our work on the Grantham Canal, as residents at Lady Bay have done. Anyone interested in finding out more can contact us at volunteer.eastmidlands@canalrivertrust.org.uk.