



Gloucestershire Society for Industrial Archaeology

Cotswold Canals Restoration

Phase 1b. Saul Junction to The Ocean, Stonehouse

Project S24

Stroudwater Canal Walks (Phase 1B) for GSIA Members

by Ray Wilson April 2007 Issue 1

Three 2½ hour field visits have been organised for GSIA Members to explore the line of the Canal (Phase 1b Section). This is a key activity in the review and updating of the contents of the Cotswold Canals Heritage Survey carried out by Cotswold Archaeology in 2003.

Field Visit 1 Sunday 17 December 2006 Saul Junction to Bristol Road

Field Visit 2 Sunday 28 January 2007 Bristol Road to Eastington

Field Visit 3 Sunday 29 April 2007 Eastington to The Ocean (Stonehouse)

This report gives brief details of these visits.

Stroudwater Canal Walks (Phase 1B) for GSIA Members

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Walks along various stretches of the canals have been a regular feature of the Society's activities for many years. However the forthcoming bid by the Cotswold Canals Partnership to the Big Lottery Fund for funding for Phase 1b of the restoration project provided a good reason to organise walks along the full length of the relevant section. Members were therefore able to see at first hand the present state of the canal. In total three walks were needed to cover the Phase 1b section which runs from Saul Junction to The Ocean at Stonehouse.

Two additional aims of the walks were:-

- 1) to identify features which may have been missed from the heritage survey carried out by Cotswold Archaeology in 2003.
- 2) to discuss with Members the various projects underway in support of the restoration of the canal and encourage suggestions for the development of these projects and ideas for new projects.

The three walks took place on the following dates:-

Walk 1	Sunday 17 December 2006	Saul Junction to Bristol Road
Walk 2	Sunday 28 January 2007	Bristol Road to Eastington
Walk 3	Sunday 29 April 2007	Eastington to The Ocean (Stonehouse)

Sunday 17 December 2006 Saul Junction to Bristol Road

A total of 17 members and friends met at Saul Junction at 10-00am and first looked at the numerous interesting features on both the Stroudwater and Gloucester and Sharpness (G&S) canals at this spot. Starting off along the Stroudwater Canal we noted how the line of the canal had been realigned in about 1820 when the G&S was built. This short stretch of canal up to the now fixed Walk Bridge is now a popular marina. It was here just below the bridge that one of our guides, Joan Tucker, had lived on a boat on the canal between about 1962 and 1964.

Hugh Conway-Jones, another of our guides, had been looking at the effect that the coming of the G&S had on the Stroudwater Canal and was able to explain the various features regarding water supply to the canal near the site of Whitminster Mill. Close by we saw Whitminster lock where the lock gates had been partially restored about 10 years ago. It was on the stretch to the east of here that the canal and river occupy the same channel as a result of work carried out by Severn Trent in the 1970s. This work had also affected the site of the aqueduct at Lockham Bridge.

We stopped to look at a well preserved pill box nearby. Here Alan Strickland, who has been carrying out a survey of the pillboxes along the canal was able to point out its salient features. Pressing on we reached the fine brick built bridge called Occupation Bridge. We were in

sight of the A38 main road but time had caught up with us and we returned to Saul Junction along our outward route.

Sunday 28 January 2007 Bristol Road to Eastington

The party met at 10-00am on the old A38 Road, which is now a layby immediately to the north-east of the roundabout that forms the junction of the A38 road and the A417 road to junction 13 of the M5 motorway. There were a total of 24 members and friends who turned up for this second stage which was led by Ray Wilson.

We started by looking briefly at the wharf house situated just across the A38 and then considered the difficulties that the roundabout presents to the restoration programme. By walking a short distance south down the A38 we reached the bridge over the River Frome on its way to Fromebridge Mill. From here we took the public footpath which lies south of the River in an easterly direction. Although the lack of a public right of way here had taken us some way south of the original line of the canal we were actually walking along where the River Frome was straightened and made navigable in 1759 to 1763 by John Kemmett and his associates.

Clearly visible in the fields were a number of loops which were cut off by Kemmett and show the course of the River some 250 years ago. A photographic record of the line of this navigation is being carried out by John Berry. We passed the end of Meadow Mill which owes its existence to the fact that the canal could bring coal needed for the steam engines. On reaching the Eastington Road we turned north and rejoined the canal at Pike Lock

We admired the new Pike bridge which bears a date stone of 2005 and is to the design of a bridge that was put here in 1924. A short excursion was taken westwards along the line of the canal to look at the site of the maintenance yard at Chippenham Platt (see report for 29 April 2007). Stopping at the site of Eastington wharf (immediately west of Pike Bridge and on the north side of the canal) provided the opportunity to discuss proposals for a new project looking at the history of the various wharfs. This project would seek to unify the results of several projects already under way. The wharfs (and the bridges) are locations where there is likely to be a need to provide interpretation of these sites for the public, and results of the proposed project would be invaluable. It was then a case of following the road back to the cars.

Sunday 29 April 2007 Eastington to The Ocean (Stonehouse)

The third walk in the series was arranged at relatively short notice and a number of apologies were received. Nevertheless, 14 members and friends did actually meet up at 10-00am on yet another glorious morning in what was being hailed as the warmest April for more than 300 years. We met at the car park at Pike Lock, Eastington, and initially walked with our leader, Ray Wilson, westwards to Westfield Bridge. We noted that this was constructed in Staffordshire blue brick and so not built for the opening of the canal in 1779. Indeed, the keystone on the eastern side bears the date 1841. Some of the coping stones of Westfield Lock immediately to the east of the bridge were just apparent but basically the lock and canal have been completely filled in here. At this point we were at the lowest of the five locks that come in quick succession.

Moving eastwards we first stopped at the elaborate circular overflow weir. Halfway between here and the second lock (Dock Lock or Court Orchard Lock) we successfully located the masonry of the wall of the coal pen shown on the map although it were pretty well overgrown. This site had not been noted in the heritage survey carried out in 2003. At Dock Lock we looked across the canal to see the remains of the company's maintenance depot at Chippenham Platt. Although now completely filled in we could see the site of the dry dock which lay parallel to the canal. It was clear where the actual entrance to the dry dock was from the change in angle of the canal bank. Passing the engineer's house we soon arrived at Pike Bridge, rebuilt in 2005 replacing the 1970s bridge.

After crossing the main road we looked at Pike House and Pike Lock. We then continued through the car park to Blunder Lock and noticed one of the Canal Trust's maintenance vessels listing at a precarious angle in the pound just before the lock. A short walk took us to the fifth and topmost Lock which is now called Newtown Lock but was originally called Upper Nassfield Lock. The rest of the walk as far as the Ocean was now on the level. The main site of interest before the Ocean was Bond's Mill and the famous "World's first plastic bridge" that was erected here in July 1994. Sadly it is not currently operational and it has had a steel deck added. The pillbox and machine-gun post from World War II was duly noted.

A few minutes walk finally brought us to the Ocean but not until we passed through the 'Armco' tunnel through the railway embankment. This will be one of the biggest obstacles to overcome during Phase 1b of the restoration. We then retraced our steps to the car park after an interesting and enjoyable morning.

Concluding Remarks

As well as familiarising Society members with the current state of the canal, it was generally agreed that these walks provided good opportunities for discussing ongoing research and for identifying topics where more investigations are needed.