

THE COTSWOLD CANALS RESTORATION: AN UPDATE IN JULY 2003

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One aspect of the proposed restoration of the Cotswold Canals (1) of particular interest to the Society is the detailed heritage survey completed in June 2003 by Cotswold Archaeology (2). This is an assessment of the significance of the canals from a historical perspective. Architectural historians and archaeologists have studied structures such as the Sapperton Tunnel, the roundhouses, and less distinctive relics such as locks, wharves, bridges and boundary markers to assess their heritage value (3). Archival and other records have also been examined in the study, which included information from Society members.

This, together with assessments, proposed management procedures and other surveys covering all aspects of the restoration, formed part of the application to the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) in June 2003 for a major grant of £22 million to cover about half the cost of the first phase of the complete restoration of the Cotswold Canals. Matched funding is in place. This phase is planned to include the restoration of the Stroudwater Navigation (12km.) and 4km. of the Thames and Severn from Stroud to Brimscombe Port (now owned by British Waterways), together with the establishment of a walking trail along the entire 58km. (36 mile) length. It is expected to cost £40 million and take up to five years to complete. The result of the HLF bid will be known by the end of February 2004. Much of the timing and extent of the restoration projects planned will depend upon the outcome of the bid.

Four further phases are envisaged. These will be the restoration of the canal from the Thames to the Cotswold Water Park; its connection to Swindon through the North Wilts. Canal; the restoration of the Thames and Severn from Brimscombe Port to the west portal of Sapperton Tunnel and from the east portal to Lechlade; and the restoration of the tunnel (4).

Meanwhile, other development and strategy surveys continue. A comprehensive restoration plan and programme will have been completed by the end of December 2003, and an Environmental Impact Assessment Study for the whole canal is being made.

Significant progress can also be seen on the ground. British Waterways has gained operational access to the canal and a gateway to the River Thames by completing the purchase of the Grade II- listed Inglesham roundhouse, canal, lock, bridge and three acres of land in December 2002 (5). British Waterways and The Waterways Trust are the lead partners of the Cotswold Canals Partnership, with a major role being played by the Cotswold Canals Trust and others (1).

Work currently underway on a new raised Western Spine Road Bridge (near South Cerney) is due for completion in October 2003.

Excavation of 640 metres of the Ebley infill between Oil Mills Bridge and Frome Gardens by the Stroudwater Redevelopment Partnership is well advanced. Part of the regeneration of the Ebley Wharf area, an imaginative complex of housing, commercial and light industrial units, is proposed. Part of the canal westwards from Bowbridge has also been dredged as part of a local construction scheme, and the main restoration project of the Cotswold Canals Trust at Valley Lock, Chalford, has continued.

Design work on the Walk Bridge replacement lift bridge is complete. Its construction awaits sufficient funding. Designs for the next section of the Stroudwater, including Whitminster Lock and its connection to the River Frome, have also been undertaken, and the canal route to Eastington under the A38 and M5 is being defined up to design stage. Comprehensive engineering feasibility studies are progressing.

Currently, it seems likely that the preferred option will be to stay with the line of the old canal route now blocked by the roundabout on the A38, then through the field system to the M5. Here it could pass under the M5 through box culverts drawn into place through cuttings, and on to Eastington (6). These and other options are now being reviewed with the Highways and Environment Agencies, but decisions are not imminent.

Further east, it seems from initial discussions with Network Rail about passing through Ocean Railway Bridge that the preferred option may be to divert the canal route slightly to the north, on cost and railway operational grounds. There are unlikely to be any problems in re-routing the canal under the railway viaduct near Waitrose on the Stroud by-pass (6).

Support for the restoration programme grows steadily, but not without opposition. Concerns and doubts continue to be expressed by individuals in the local press, and by organisations such as the Canal Owners and Neighbours Conservation and Protection Trust (CONCEPT). Key concerns are that the expenditure will not be justified because the capital cost will be significantly higher than estimated so far and operating costs will not be covered by the estimated income; potential benefits have been overstated; the resourcing of water will not be possible without a negative impact on the natural watercourse system; inappropriate compulsory purchases may be inevitable; and there will be unacceptable blight and disturbance to existing properties and their residents' quality of life (7). The fact that a satisfactory water supply system had not been defined and agreed before public financial support for the restoration was sought has also led to criticism (8), although it has been reported that reasonable proposals have been received from leading water consultants (5).

Proposals in the final plan may well mitigate some of these concerns. Time will tell how justified they prove to be. However, they exemplify some of the sensitive issues involved, and which have to be addressed and considered fully, in what is currently the leading national waterways restoration scheme.

References

- (1) GSIA Journal 2001, p.22.
- (2) Cotswold Canals Restoration Project, Heritage Survey, Cotswold Archaeology Report CA 03055, June 2003.
- (3) T. Eaton, Regeneration News, No. 2, Summer 2003.
- (4) Cotswold Canals Partnership Press Release: 23 June 2003.
- (5) A Stumpf, The Trow, No. 120, Spring 2003, p. 4.
- (6) J. Laverick, Talk to Cotswold Canals Trust following AGM, July 26, 2003.
- (7) CONCEPT leaflet: The Downside to Canal Reconstruction, April 2003.
- (8) I. Swallow, Wilts. and Gloucestershire Standard, July 17 2003, p. 16.