

## **THE RESTORATION OF THE COTSWOLD CANALS: AUGUST 2004 UPDATE**

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### **Recent Progress**

Money is a great enabler. The decision of the trustees of the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) on 20 July 2004 to make available an £11.3 million grant, provided it is supported by similar funding from other sources, should make it possible to reopen a significant length of the Cotswold Canals to navigation in the foreseeable future.

This first phase will consist of the six-mile stretch from The Ocean on the Stroudwater Navigation west of Stonehouse to Brimscombe Port on the Thames and Severn Canal east of Stroud. It is also planned to include in this phase the acquisition of the remaining four miles of the route from The Ocean back to Saul Junction on the Gloucester and Sharpness Canal, together with the creation of a cycle trail and footpath, subject to negotiation with the relevant landowners. This will open up a ten-mile multi-user trail and prepare the way to connect the restored Phase One section with the Gloucester and Sharpness Canal in the future.

The total cost of this phase is estimated to be £25 million. However, the award is subject to the Cotswold Canals Partnership demonstrating within a year that it can secure formal commitments to complete the matching funding for this first phase (1). The HLF has also asked to see how the Cotswold Canals Partnership proposes to complete the Navigation to Saul.

Ideally, it had been hoped to include restoration of the whole ten-mile length from Saul to Brimscombe Port in this initial phase. This would have been better from many points of view, but was not possible because of limited fund availability from the HLF due to other demands. Nevertheless, this is a major step forward, and a big psychological boost for those who have worked so hard to achieve it. All being well, the first phase should be completed with three years of the start date.

The stretch of canal selected passes through the most populated areas along its length, and has the benefit, particularly in view of the GSIA's interests, of including most of the more historic structures. These will be protected. So the way has been paved for a start to what could become the largest and most far reaching restoration likely to be seen in Gloucestershire for decades.

Determined efforts are also continuing to secure funding for the restoration of the waterway between Saul and The Ocean as the next priority, and the remaining sections of the Thames and Severn Canal in due course. Residents in the eastern section area were invited to a public meeting on 26 February 2004 when the latest progress and plans were shared with them.

Preparatory work for the HLF funding bid and subsequent restoration work has included the production of two documents of direct interest to the Society. The first is the Heritage Survey undertaken by the consultants Cotswold Archaeology and referred to briefly in the previous update (2). In this, 270 existing structures, sites and remains along both canals are listed. Each of these was rated by assessing its local, regional and national heritage importance and its significance to local and national canal interests. Many were considered to be of high local heritage importance, some of high regional importance but few of high national importance. The last named category included the Sapperton Tunnel, Brimscombe Port, the round houses

at Coates, Cerney Wick, Marston Maisey and Inglesham and the coal pen at Ryeford. Even the most ardent Cotswold Canals enthusiast might not be reluctant to admit that there are few remaining features along these canals to compare with the Anderton Boat Lift Bridge or Pontcysyllte Aqueduct.

Other features, such as Saul Junction, Bridge House at Ebley, Dudbridge Wharf, the Stroudwater Company Offices at Wallbridge and the wharf houses at Cricklade and Kempsford were considered to be of high importance to national canal history.

The second document is a comprehensive Conservation Management Plan being prepared for the restoration and subsequent management of the full 36 mile length of the Cotswold Canals. When complete, it will provide the background and framework necessary to protect the unrestored sections of the waterway, guide the restoration and set policies, practices and actions for the future management and maintenance of the canals (3).

A first draft of the section entitled 'Built Heritage and Archaeology' has been published on the British Waterways website as a consultative document (4). Over 550 individual canal features have been defined along the line of both canals during recent survey work.. Half of these are readily recognisable above ground, most having been recorded in the Heritage Survey. The remainder have been defined by the analysis of maps, archives, national records and knowledge of local people including several of our members.

It is interesting to note from this draft that over 30 bridges over the Thames and Severn Canal were 'lost' during the twentieth century. Their former locations can be established from documentary evidence, and in many cases, earthworks. In at least one case, the Spine Road Bridge at South Cerney, an earlier structure was replaced by a newer bridge and subsequently replaced in turn by the stronger version, just completed, with greater headroom above the waterway surface.

It is also recorded that there are 142 listed buildings and structures within one kilometre of the canal (excluding those within a dense urban area of Stroud). At least 35 of these are directly associated with the canals, 32 of them being on the waterway itself.

There is still much heritage to be explored along the canals. British Waterways would like to see more people in the local community taking part in this. At the time of writing GSIA was considering how it might become more involved in the project.

### **Further Considerations**

It is already clear that the term 'restoration' might be misconstrued when possible target and likely achievements are considered. What is primarily in mind is a reopening of the waterway to navigation. Times are very different today from those 200 years ago in which the canals passed through mainly rural country and linked settlements. The historical settlement character has gone and cannot be recreated. Buildings and other facilities associated with the canal resulted in the formation of a canal corridor which itself changed significantly over the past 100 years. Indeed, building survival on both canals is poor.

In view of this critics, or purists may decry the current restoration plans as being likely to result in a modern mock-up. Perhaps this is inevitable, for in any restoration something is gained and something lost. Should attempts be made to replace innovations such as the world's first load-bearing polymer composite bridge at Bond's Mill, installed in 1994, with an

iron replica of the original bridge? Surely not. Indeed, the innovation itself is a potential industrial archaeological artefact! Nor are replacement humped back bridges likely to be appropriate. There are many issues such as these which need to be considered, providing interesting food for thought.

New developments such as waterside dwellings are already creating a new canal character more appropriate to the twenty-first century. Typical are those near completion at Stonehouse wharf, where the newly excavated waterway sections will allow boats to moor and gain access to Stonehouse town centre, and those close to Ebley House, now exposed again for all to see.

Building usage has changed too over the years. Newtown was known for its public houses in the early days, not the children's nursery of today. This is a sure sign that times have changed. Indeed so they did during the working life of the canals when the needs of the day necessitated changes insofar as they were possible. A towpath became necessary when donkeys and horses replaced manpower, and now cycle trails are planned. What will be achieved with the reopened waterway is likely to be a continuation of what has been an evolutionary process so far.

However, perhaps a note of caution might be timely. Many will envisage and hope for a quiet and predominately rural waterway. Perhaps this will be possible in its extreme western section and east of Chalford. However, it is likely that the canal will be a magnet for developers, especially between Saul and Chalford. This could result in ribbon canalside development of housing, marinas and visitor centres, leading to overcrowding with too many users.

Clearly there is an urgent need to ensure that the relevant planners will require designers of future housing, commercial and industrial developments along the canal corridor to provide an environmentally sympathetic and attractive aspect for their buildings when seen from the canal, and also that a good balance of practical and visual amenities is achieved. Canal users, whether afloat or walking alongside, will need some respite from burgeoning housing and superstore developments and to have the opportunity to enjoy the surrounding countryside away from creeping suburbanisation!

Despite such worries, support for the revival of the waterway continues to grow. However, members of the Canal Owners and Neighbours Conservation and Environmental Protection Trust (CONCEPT), whose concerns are mainly related to the eastern end of the former Thames and Severn Canal, continue to oppose the restoration.

Meanwhile much water still needs to flow under the canal bridges before restoration plans are finalised and achieved. Where will that water come from? The relative merits of several proposals are still being considered to ensure that adequate supplies of this vital resource will be available when the reopening of the waterways is completed.

## References

- (1) British Waterways, Press Release, 21 July 2004
- (2) GSIA *Journal* for 2002 pp 44-45.
- (3) Andrew Stumpf, *The Trow* No. 125, Summer 2004, page 8 (Cotswold Canals Trust).
- (4) [www.britishwaterways.co.uk/cotswolds](http://www.britishwaterways.co.uk/cotswolds)