

THE RESTORATION OF THE COTSWOLD CANALS: OCTOBER 2005 UPDATE

Theo Stening

Introduction

The progress which has been achieved by the Cotswold Canals Partnership, led vigorously by British Waterways, was hard to envisage four years ago when the first article in this series appeared (1). Developments since then have been summarised in previous updates (2,3); further advances are now reported here.

Recent Progress

By the end of January 2006, all being well, the Heritage Lottery Fund's (HLF) provisional grant of £11.3 million is expected to be confirmed. Much effort since the last update has been concentrated on the preparation of the HLF Stage 2 and South West of England Regional Development Agency (SWERDA) applications submitted in October 2005. These included detailed proposals and designs for restoring the six mile section of the waterway between The Ocean at Stonehouse and Brimscombe Port and for overcoming the known obstructions or realigning the canal to circumvent them. It was necessary to show that solutions will be possible.

Part of the anticipated grant will be apportioned to repurchasing land between Saul and Eastington to enable a continuous path to be created as far as Brimscombe Port. Confirmation of the HLF grant will depend mainly on the conservation-led restoration proposals and the availability of matched funding. The substantial grant being sought from SWERDA as part funding will depend on the prospect of a significant number of commercial developments and boosting local employment. It is hoped to achieve this largely through the regeneration of brownfield sites and the creation of new tourism, recreational and leisure jobs. This, in turn, depends very much on Stroud's development plans.

In anticipation that site work can be started in 2006, Morrison Construction Services Limited have been appointed management contractor. They will implement the first phase of the restoration project. Having worked successfully with British Waterways on many previous canal restoration projects they will be responsible for selecting the most appropriate way of undertaking each piece of work and arranging for it to be done.

Visible signs of opportunistic work continue to be seen elsewhere. Near South Cerney the Spine Road Bridge (approximate cost £500,000), with distinctive stainless steel balustrades in the form of bulrushes mounted on its parapets, was formally opened on 30th April 2005 and renamed the 'Gateway Bridge'. Most of the work had been completed in 2004.

The parapets of the newly completed Pike Bridge (£350,000) reflect the design of the elegant 1924 version. They are thicker and not completely penetrated by the decorative cross-shaped features, to better withstand possible vehicle impacts. This project was made possible by a grant covering nearly half the cost from the Aggregate Levy Sustainability fund of the Countryside Agency which had also contributed generously to the Gateway Bridge. Further financial support for Pike Bridge was given by Gloucestershire County Council, the Inland Waterways Association, the Cotswold Canals Trust and others.

It is interesting to record that the new Pike Bridge is in effect two bridges. The western half with its curved outer arch but flat underside was cast in-situ on the abutments of the 1770s bridge and its 1924 extension. The new foundations of the eastern carriageway are cast behind the original brick walls of the 1770s bridge. These walls will be seen from the towpath which will be lowered to provide adequate headroom (2.0m, 6ft 6in) for its users (4).

Dimensions

Likely dimensions of the restored canal are of interest too. The intention in the first place is to get as close as possible to those originally achieved. This implies a navigation with at least a 2.44m (8ft) headroom, 1.5m (5ft) depth and a minimum width of 4.8m (15ft 9in) at the water level. The channel dimensions will be those of the original canals as far as possible, although there may have been some encroachment in some cases which will preclude complete restoration. (5). It is already known that some of the locks on the Thames and Severn sections are not as consistent in size as originally thought. (6).

Water Supplies

The completed and positive study on the feasibility of resourcing and maintaining an adequate water supply is now being reviewed with the Environment Agency. This was prepared by MWH, an international company which is one of the world's leading experts on water and other environmental services. Inevitably a combination of backpumping and new reserves of water will be necessary, as will be the lining with concrete of the summit section from Coates eastwards to conserve water in the canal.

Other Developments.

It has been discovered that lesser horseshoe bats are living in the Sapperton Tunnel. The implications are not yet clear. The bats have their conservation rights too!

In addition to specific problems reported in previous updates it is now clear that significant engineering work will be required in the former Capel's Mill area. This is on the far side of Dr Newton's Way near Waitrose in Stroud. Extensive land filling here over many years has raised the level of the ground 8m above the former canal bed level.

At the western end of Brimscombe Port, existing roads and the need to retain access to business premises currently makes it seem likely that the canal will need to be re-routed along the River Frome for a short way at this point. The river would be re-routed along the old canal line.

Numerous studies on engineering matters, conservation management, ecology and archive research continue. Consultative meetings are held regularly to progress the restoration project on a broad front. Some are directly involved in the HLF and SWERDA submissions, whereas others are vital to longer term restoration.

The Eastern Section

Progress in the eastern section of the Thames and Severn is steady but much slower, largely because of the current need to concentrate efforts further west. Initial steps have been taken to increase public awareness and involvement and to conserve current towpaths and access points. It is hoped to work with supportive landowners to develop permissive paths and circular routes in conjunction with existing towpaths. Others remain ambivalent about or are opposed to the proposed restoration.

Increasing co-operation with the Joint Management Committee of the Cotswold Water Park is being explored because of mutual interests. They see a restored canal as another way into the Water Park and their existing relationships with local authorities and landowners could benefit its restoration. The water levels in the lakes vary considerably according to season but there is some potential to develop canal reservoir facilities within the Park.

Administration

A major step forward was taken on the 13 April 2005, when the Company of Proprietors of the Stroudwater Navigation leased the Navigation to British Waterways for 999 years. This will facilitate its restoration in many ways. British Waterways can manage it in a way consistent with the statutory approval processes, consultative systems and operational procedures already in place on its other waterways.

Conclusion

Much continues to be achieved, and the Cotswold Canals are a significant part of the Government's plans for Britain's waterways over the next twenty years (7). Adequate funding permitting, there seems little reason to doubt that a direct waterway between Saul and Brimscombe will be re-established in the foreseeable future. British Waterways believe that the complete restoration of the Cotswold Canals, like that of seventeen others, will be completed within a 20 year horizon.

One of the others is the Wiltshire and Berkshire Canal between the River Thames at Abingdon and the Kennet and Avon near Melksham via Swindon. This will include its reconnection with the Thames and Severn at Latton via the North Wilts. Canal, although reopening of the whole canal by 2025 is thought to be unlikely because of the complexity of the scheme.

However, concerns remain that the physical regeneration of brownfield sites through which the waterways pass remains at risk from poor design and a piecemeal approach. Selected development of individual sites reduces the opportunities for more attractive coherent schemes. As always, much depends on the planners.

- 1 T. C. Stening, GSIA Journal 2001, p.22.
- 2 T. C. Stening, GSIA Journal 2002, p.44.
- 3 T. C. Stening, GSIA Journal 2003, p.59.
- 4 K. N. Burgin, The Trow (Cotswold Canals Trust) No 129, p.10.
- 5 A. Stumpf, The Trow (Cotswold Canals Trust) No 129, p.22.
- 6 K. N. Burgin, The Trow (Cotswold Canals Trust) No 129, p.22.
- 7 Waterways 2025, British Waterways, June 2004.

Note: On 25th January 2006 it was announced that the HLF had awarded the project a grant of £11.9 million and that SWERDA had offered match funding of £6 million.