

THE RESTORATION OF THE COTSWOLD CANALS SEPTEMBER 2007 UPDATE

Theo Stening

Introduction

Just as the progress of barges along the canals was measured by their passing of milestones, so too can the progress of the Cotswold Canals restoration, albeit with somewhat different milestones.

The first major milestone, following many years of preparatory work by several groups with the Cotswold Canals Partnership, was the award of an £11.9 million grant by the Heritage Lottery Fund in January 2006. This, coupled with an offer of £6 million match funding from the South West of England Regional Development Agency and significant contributions in many other ways from other organisations, enabled the implementation of plans to restore the canal between Brimscombe Port and The Ocean at Stonehouse with a multi-user trail onwards towards Saul.

The Next Phase

Now a second milestone is being approached. The Cotswold Canals Partnership submitted its bid to the Big Lottery Fund (BLF) *Living Landmarks* programme on 30th May 2007 for a grant of £18.9 million towards the cost of restoring the waterway between The Ocean and Saul Junction. The outcome will be known by October 2007.

The total cost involved in a second phase is likely to be about £25 million. Plans include the building of a 72 berth marina to the east of Westfield Bridge, Eastington. If successful, the bid should enable the reopening of the through route between Brimscombe Port and Gloucester and Sharpness canal to become a reality.

However it must be added that there is fierce competition for awards. Funds are limited even more so since the Government recently withdrew £638 million from the BLF to help pay for the London Olympics in 2012.

GSIA Participation

As already reported elsewhere in this Journal (pages 3-11), GSIA members have already made a significant contribution to this BLF bid in which a high degree of community interest must be demonstrated. Our assistance is being in the form of a large number of wide-ranging mini-projects including descriptions of vessels using the canal, the effect of the canal on the mills, details of the traffic and various aspects of social history. Much of the information in these is reported on the GSIA web site (www.gsia.org.uk). Additionally, all this work done by GSIA volunteers counts as match funding, valued at £21,000 so far.

In recognition of its ongoing contribution, GSIA has been invited to join the Cotswold Canals Partnership, thus taking a more active role in the management of the overall canal restoration.

Recent Progress

Meanwhile, much progress has been made on many aspects of the plans to restore the canal between Brimscombe Port and The Ocean. The Brimscombe Port Mills Business Estate has been purchased, planning consent for Oil Mills Bridge at Ebley and clearance down to

Ryeford Locks has been granted, and The Lawns pond at Dudbridge cleared. Mixed views about the best route the restored canal should take in the Capels Mill area were resolved during a public consultation exercise completed in February. The most popular route turned out to be the one partly along the present bed of the River Frome. Incidentally, this is the route preferred by the GSIA as the few remaining foundations of Capels Mill would be preserved. Further investigations and design work are being undertaken.

An Area Action plan is being formulated by Stroud District Council for the Brimscombe area incorporating Brimscombe Port, Hope Mills Industrial Estate and the former Canal Ironworks. This is an area of important heritage significance. It will be necessary to re-route the canal through part of the infilled areas, where several potential restoration options exist. A balance is being sought between commercial development possibilities, community and stakeholder aspirations, and the opportunity to create unique landmark feature in the centre of the canal project.

Perhaps the best news of all is that at the long-awaited and long overdue work at Ebley involving the restoration of 650 m length of the canal and the construction of a new bridge leading to the Snow Mill (formerly Oil Mills) and private houses will begin in mid-September 2007. This had been due to start in January 2007 but difficulties accessing the site, the need to rehouse some resident reptiles and to await the departure of some fledgling birds have now been resolved! Morrison Construction will undertake the work.

All this news is positive, as is the increasing amount of community participation and training. But progress so far has not been without its frustrations. Coupled with delays in starting the groundwork in earnest perhaps the foremost of these has been the action of the Department of the Environment Food and Rural Affairs (to meet a deficit of £200 million in its own spending) of slashing the budget of British Waterways board by £50 million over the next five years. This has forced the Board, lead partners in the restoration programme, not only to cut back dramatically the maintenance required for keeping many popular canals in working order but has also had a knock-on effect on new projects. Understandably British Waterways is now saying to its partners in the Cotswold Canals Partnership that any new risks it takes on in the present circumstances must be severely limited.

The Conservation Management Plan

From the outset it has been a guiding principle that the restoration project would be conservation-led. This has implied that the landscape, historic structures and archaeology, the wildlife and the flora would be properly protected during restoration and after completion. To do this, it followed that everything that was valued and vulnerable had to be identified and procedures developed whereby these assets could be safeguarded and, ideally, enhanced as part of the restoration.

This has been the purpose of the recently completed Conservation Management Plan, which involved a comprehensive assessment of the natural and man-made assets. It is also an evaluation of how they are, or could be, valued and used by everyone. Above all it sets out to ensure everyone involved in the project takes an informed and practical approach to the conservation of the canal's heritage and environment, and establishes the criteria to be met in funding solutions to problems. The plan was a key part of the recently submitted bid to the BLF. It complements the Stroud Industrial Heritage Conservation Area Statement, and the likely impact of the canal restoration demonstrated in an Environmental Impact Assessment submitted to Stroud District Council.

The Eastern Section

At the eastern end of the waterway, volunteers have continued to repair Rucks Bridge (but not the parapets which have to remain dismantled to allow the passage of wide farm machinery). A start has been made to restore Eisey Lock, both signs of commitment and progress along what is hoped will become a further phase of the canal restoration in the not too distant future.

The Wilts and Berks Canal Trust has recently submitted a bid to the Big Lottery Fund for help in restoring the North Wilts Canal as part of the Cricklade Country Way project. This joins the Thames and Severn at Latton at present, but is likely to be realigned.

Concluding Remarks

Understandably the most visible signs of progress in the near future are likely to be at the western end. Nevertheless significant steps will continue to be achieved elsewhere along its route as local action groups keep nibbling away in restoring the canal and its remaining features. It was a visionary group, now the Cotswold Canals Trust, that set out to protect the route over 30 years ago. Without them, would the present plans have been feasible? Certainly, there would have been more problems.



The former Thames and Severn Canal Company headquarters building at Brimscombe Port in 1966 shortly before demolition. [photo: the late Christopher Cox, copy: Ray Wilson]