

THE RESTORATION OF THE COTSWOLD CANALS APRIL 2008 UPDATE

Theo Stening

Oil Mills Bridge

Despite some severe setbacks in recent months there is still continuing good news about the progress of several projects in the current restoration. The new bridge leading to Snow Mill (formerly Oil Mills) at Ebley opened to road traffic on 10 April and the 650 m length of canal westwards to the Ryeford double locks has been cleared. The first part has already been excavated by British Waterways and filled with water: 8400 tons of material (mainly domestic waste) was removed mostly to the Hempsted tip. Sub-base stone has been laid on the towpath towards Ryeford. A grant of £10K from the SITA Greenprints scheme has been used to install soft bank protection.

Excavation of the remaining bund on the eastern side of the bridge is still the responsibility of the new housing developer and should be completed soon, thus restoring a continuous waterway up to beyond Hilly Orchard. One problem, however, that needs to be resolved first is the relocation of a sewer pipe from Bridge House which has been found to cross the canal and needs to be re-routed. In the restoration of the bridge itself, as much of the old brickwork as possible was retained. The new flat concrete deck surmounted by a white steel open parapet is supported by concrete piles sunk into the old bridge abutments.

Future archaeologists may well be puzzled by the novel aperture in the northern abutment and the two grill like openings just above it on the underside of the bridge. The aperture on the abutment leads to a purpose-built bat roost approximately 40 cm high and 20 cm wide behind the brick facing of the bridge. Those above it lead to bat bricks which are standard brick size. Each of these have six holes in them about a fingers width in diameter which allow bats access but are too small for birds.

These bat bricks are examples of the conservation steps being undertaken in the restoration programme. Coupled with delays of several months to rehouse more than 325 slow worms, grass snakes and other reptiles, and to allow the departure of some fledgling birds, today's canal builders face concerns presumably ignored by their predecessors! The restoration of the bridge was helped by a grant of £50K from the Gloucestershire Environmental trust.

Towards Stroud and Onwards

Much trimming of overhanging branches and clearing of undergrowth has been completed along the towpath from Dudbridge through Lodgemore towards Wallbridge. The Thames and Severn Canal from Wallbridge to Brimscombe was transferred to British Waterways from Gloucestershire County Council on 7 Dec 2007 and immediately leased back to the Council who will continue to maintain the canal in the short-term.

Detailed design work is being commissioned for a new Merrywalks bridge carrying the A46 road over the canal at Wallbridge, where some re-routing is likely to be necessary. Some ground clearance has already been completed. A public exhibition of the proposals took place in Stroud on 22 April: it is hoped that the construction work will start towards the end of the year.

Further on, ground investigations have been instigated at Capels Mill to gain an understanding of the underlying ground conditions and groundwater flow. Beyond that, vegetation has been cleared at Bowbridge and around both Stanton's and Ham Mill bridges.

The lock walls and edges at both Ham Mill and Griffin's Locks have been exposed. The overgrowth has also been cleared on the canal route from Gough's Orchard Lock (where soil studies are in hand prior to excavation and restorative work) towards Brimscombe.

Much of all this clearance along the canal and other restoration work has been achieved by volunteer groups as diverse as the Cotswold Canals Trust itself, The Prince's Trust, the Severn Vale Rotary Club, Cirencester College, staff from the Environment Agency and work parties from Leyhill Prison. Unpaid work does not mean unprofessional work, as much of the restoration already achieved has already shown.

The Brimscombe Port area

Following the previously reported (1) sudden reduction of British Waterways budget last year, Stroud District Council agreed in November 2007 to take the lead role in the regeneration of the Brimscombe Port area. This is not straightforward, necessitating an appropriate balance between new community opportunities for housing and employment, heritage protection, visitor attractions and the extent of the waterway to be reopened. There were a series of public consultations in November and December 2007 and two workshops in January 2008 in respect of the Cotswold Canals Brimscombe Area Action Plan (AAP) which the Council needs to produce. This covers Brimscombe Port, Hope Mills Industrial Estate and the former Canal Ironworks.

The next stage in the production of the AAP is that a "Preferred Options" document will be considered by the Stroud District Council Cabinet following feedback workshops in March. Several consultants are involved in assessing the options and considering design alternatives. It seems unlikely at present that construction work will start until the end of 2009.

Meanwhile the proposed restoration of the old port walls at Brimscombe was helped in November 2007 by being awarded a prize of £80K in the People's Millions Lottery following a television vote. Volunteers have already undertaken initial training in restoring historic stonework.

Just beyond Brimscombe Port, the considerable clearance and towpath maintenance by more volunteers at Bourne Lock has complemented the significant restoration work at Bourne Mill undertaken by the owner of Noah's Ark retail cycling business. Silt has also been removed from near the chamber of the lock and the boundary walls and side entrance gates to the port had been exposed. Further on, the pound by the Roundhouse at Chalford has been dredged and a new sluice fitted.

The Eastern End

More clearance has been completed at Rucks Bridge and the now exposed Eisey Lock. Repair work has been undertaken at both, the face of the bridge having been repointed and the parapets recapped. A work camp is planned at Eisey in July and August 2008. Here badger management is a key activity, not slow worms, grass snakes or bats! About 40 holes (some disused have been found within 25 metres of the lock, the main sett being currently located to the west of the lock and well out of the way of the current work. Even so, the badgers have damaged a brick culvert in particular and a control system has been installed.

Conservation Management Plan

It has been stressed from the outset that the Cotswold Canals Partnership would take an informed and practical approach to the conservation of the canals' heritage and environment.

A fully illustrated version of the Conservation Management Plan was published in April 2008. In this, valued and vulnerable natural and man-made heritage assets are identified together with the methods by which they can be protected and enhanced. The method of approaching and resolving problems is described, and the criteria which must be met in finding solutions are stated.

The Big Lottery Fund Bid

As reported in the last update (1), the Cotswold Canals Partnership submitted its 10 volume bid to the Big Lottery Fund (BLF) Living Landmarks Programme on 30 May 2007. This was for a grant of £18.9 million towards the likely total cost of about £25 million to restore the waterway between Stonehouse and Saul Junction. GSIA members had made a significant contribution to this BLF bid in the form of a large number of wide-ranging mini-projects recording various industrial and social aspects associated with the canal (2).

It was a great disappointment to the Partnership to learn in November 2007 that despite being in the final nine projects selected for detailed consideration from many hundreds of applications the bid was not successful. Inevitably this will delay progress along this part of the route, but much potentially very useful preliminary work was possible because of the £250,000 development grant received on reaching the last nine. This, coupled with all the other research and feasibility work undertaken by many groups, has significantly advanced the project in other ways and will be a firm base from which to make applications for further funding and to facilitate further restoration as it progresses into the future.

British Waterways

British Waterways announced its firm intention to restore the Cotswold Canals on 3 July 2001 and since 2002 has been a very active lead partner frequently reiterating this intention. Much of what is being planned and achieved would not have been possible within the same time span without them and their Regeneration Team was strengthened significantly as recently as last autumn.

On 4 February 2008 British Waterways announced quite unexpectedly that it had decided to withdraw from the Cotswold Canals Partnership with effect from the end of April 2008. It gave as its main reason the urgent need to divert funds from its limited budget to progress the repair of the breach and other structures on the Monmouthshire and Brecon Canal which was expected to cost £15 million over four years.

This was a quite unforeseen and serious blow to the overall restoration programme, particularly the current Phase 1a work. The residue of the funding they had pledged to this project (increased to £6 million in total last autumn) would no longer be available: key British Waterways staff have already been redeployed.

Although the remaining partners are still very positive, with Stroud District Council and the Waterways Trust having already pledged their continuing support, the Cotswold Canals Partnership will take some time to reorganise itself. Credible lead partners will need to be appointed in each of its activity areas. Urgent talks have already been held with the Heritage

Lottery Fund and the South West of England Regional Development Agency to ensure their funding is not diverted elsewhere.

Other steps already being taken include a review of British Waterways overall costings for phase 1a (now £37 million in total including their purchase of Brimscombe Port and its restoration and including £25 million for canal work) and whether these can be reduced by efficiency savings and much greater volunteer input. The future status of the lengths of the Stroudwater and Thames and Severn Canal recently transferred to British Waterways also need to be determined. The detailed studies, provisional restoration schemes and costings and other intellectual property now within British Waterways also needs to be safeguarded and transferred to the most appropriate recipients as the project progresses.

There is much to be considered and done: adverse consequential effects to be identified and minimised. At the time of writing it seems likely that Stroud District Council may take an increased part in the public sector while the Cotswold Canals Trust will take a greater role in organising the voluntary sector. Perhaps it is fortuitous that the Trust recently appointed a Chief Executive. His role will include expediting of new funding provisions and progressing the restoration at the eastern end.

Conclusion

What does the immediate future hold for the Cotswold Canals restoration project after this major hiccup? It is early days yet. It is tempting to use the popular expression “watch this space”, but this is very appropriate in the current circumstances. As reported there are several projects in hand and nearing completion. Others are planned, particularly for volunteer groups and much has been achieved already. The project faces new challenges but the remaining partners are very positive and there is no shortage of determination.

References

- (1) Gloucestershire Society for Industrial Archaeology Journal (GSIAJ) for 2006, p. 29.
- (2) GSIAJ 2006, p. 3.



The new Oil Mills bridge nearing completion in May 2008, looking east.

(Ray Wilson)