

THE RESTORATION OF THE COTSWOLD CANALS MARCH 2009 UPDATE

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Introduction

The unexpected withdrawal of British Waterways (BW) from the Cotswold Canals Partnership (CCP) with effect from the end of April 2008 was reported in the previous Journal (1). The urgent need for the Cotswold Canals Trust (CCT) and Stroud District Council (SDC) to secure the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) financial support made available for the first phase of the restoration work was also noted. Despite the seriousness of this new situation it has not been the knock-out blow that some had feared.

Current Position

The continuing positive approach and determination of the remaining CCP partners has led to the funds being secured by the Stroud District Council's agreement on 16 December 2008 to lead the estimated £17.8 million regeneration of the waterway between The Ocean at Stonehouse and Iron Mills, Brimscombe. The creation of a multi-user towpath between The Ocean and Saul Junction would be included but the Cotswold Canals Brimscombe Area Action Plan has been discontinued. A private developer, not yet appointed, will now take over the redevelopment of the Brimscombe Port area, estimated to cost £7.9 million, with the potential gain of 300 new jobs in what is likely to be a commercially led rather than a housing led project.

The waterway restoration will now be funded by the HLF grant (£11.9 million), South West of England Regional Development Agency (SWRDA) £6 million, SDC (£1.5 million already promised and an additional £2.3 million), CCT (£800,000), The Waterways Trust (£469,000 grant), the Gloucestershire County Council (land valued at £286,000) and Sport for England (£225,000 grant).

All being well, this SDC-led restoration would be completed within four years. It is anticipated it will attract new private investment of £83 million, create a total of 600 new jobs (including Brimscombe) encourage 215,000 new visitors to the area, and allow 30 historic buildings to be conserved by 2020.

Regarded by many as a unique opportunity for Stroud to benefit from this major injection of new external funding into the local economy, it is nevertheless a courageous step for a local authority to take. There is a precedent: the viability of the project has been assessed by the Tameside Metropolitan Borough Council which gained relevant experience by restoring parts of the Huddersfield Narrow Canal. The present proposal was approved by over 80% of the councillors present at the SDC meeting on 16 December 2008 by voting 37 for and 7 against.

Others have not been supportive, complaining the project was too much a gamble in the present economic climate. It would utilise too much of the local taxpayers' money, with inadequate capital back-up, and other local projects would suffer. There was even a reference to the return of canal mania.

Clearly the SDC decision is a reassuring step forward again for the Cotswold Canals project. Not only is Stroud likely to benefit in the short-term: it will be a further stimulus to link the town with the main waterway at Saul in due course.

Much must now be done. A new Project Manager, Paul Coupe has been appointed and he has to build a new strong project team. New relationships have to be established with those affected by the restoration, complex legal land ownership arrangements adapted or unpicked, planning permissions obtained and remaining disputes resolved. The aim is to gather momentum in early 2009. As reported previously, there is no shortage of determination to succeed and it is recognised that as with any project, some calculated risks will need to be taken.

Progress: Phase 1A

Inevitably most of the major restoration activities previously planned have been delayed. Work in the new Oil Mills bridge area is not yet complete. Rubbish still remains on the northern side of canal bank to the west of the bridge where a 50 inch diameter sewer pipe still needs to be relocated. The roadworks needed for the new A46 bridge of the canal at the intersection of the A419, which were due to start in September 2008, have been delayed for a year while a survey on their likely impact on traffic is completed. Work is now due to start in October 2009.

Agreement is still being sought about the type and siting of a new access bridge over the Stroudwater Navigation into the Upper Mills Industrial Estate. This cannot be where the present bridge is, due to different road levels, insufficient clearance and the development of adjoining land. It is likely to be relocated nearer to the main road, but realignment of the canal may present problems due to the limited steering radius of most boats. This is a typical example of the balance which has to be achieved between heritage and modern-day requirements. Further westwards, dredging is being planned in the Stonehouse area to clear the extensive banks of reeds growing there, in many cases across the canal. Disposal of this waste is not always straightforward.

East of Stroud, the CCT has undertaken vegetation management at Stanton, Bagpath and Ham Mill bridges. The silted section near the Chalford Roundhouse has been dredged. At Gough's Orchard, the Waterways Recovery Group (WRG) and CCT have undertaken much clearance of vegetation along the canal line. An area at the top of the lock has been excavated to assess what may be needed to complete the excavation, and exposed brickwork repaired by the WRG. Further work is planned to complete the restoration of the lock.

Eastern End

East of the Sapperton Tunnel, undergrowth has been cleared from the original A433 bridge over the Thames and Severn at Thames Head so that the bridge itself and the commemorative plaque can now be seen clearly again (Fig. 1). Progress has been steady between South Cerney and Inglesham, a length of the waterway which is attracting growing interest. An extensive programme of towpath improvements has been completed towards Latton where ninety years accumulation of silt and reeds have been removed from one hundred yards of the Thames and Severn north of its junction with the former North Wilts. Canal. The canal there and its junction with the former transportation basin (already cleared by North Wilts. volunteers) has been restored to navigable depth. Many of the key structures here have now been exposed. The restoration of the Weymoor Bridge over the Thames and Severn at this point is thought unlikely to create a problem, as the road it carries is not public and the landowner is very supportive.

Dredging downstream from the Spine Road is also proposed, but there is an Esso pipe line crossing the canal just above the recently cleared stretch. What may be involved here is not yet clear. The project to restore Rucks Bridge is virtually completed, and work has continued at the excavated Eisey Lock where stop slots have now been fitted. BW has not yet allowed similar restoration work to be started at Inglesham Lock. The Eastern Consultative Group of the CCP has been re-established to help influence local Parish Councils and other local bodies.

Cotswold Water Park

Perhaps one of the most interesting developments at the Eastern end is the publication of a consultative document, the *Cotswold Water Park Master Plan*, with proposals for the future of the Water Park. In this, the important role that the Thames and Seven Canal could play as the main artery within the broad structure of the Water Park is highlighted, especially if linked eventually by the North Wilts. Canal to a restored Wilts. and Berks. Canal running through central Swindon and on to the rest the waterway system. The restoration of the Thames and Seven could therefore play an important part in a successful Water Park feature: a useful potential impetus

Conclusions

The Cotswold Canals Restoration Project is still alive and well, having survived a severe setback which may have the hidden benefits of allowing a more flexible and low-cost approach in the future than has been possible under the leadership of BW. In addition to the progress reported in this note, it is fully recognised that public conceptions about the benefits can best be enhanced by getting the waterway open at both ends and in water again elsewhere wherever and as soon as possible.

The success of the smaller efforts now being completed improves the chances of getting bigger funding for major expenditures such as opening up again the waterways back to the Severn and Thames. Time will tell: meanwhile everyone concerned is continuing to nibble away. Overall, the concept of completing that Cotswold Ring of Canals remains - so might BW come back again in due course?

References

- (1) Gloucestershire Society for Industrial Archaeology Journal (GSIAJ) for 2007, p. 43.



Fig. 1 The original A433 bridge over the Thames and Severn at Thames Head after the removal of undergrowth. The commemorative plaque above the arch reads :-

THAMES HEAD BRIDGE 1789 - UNDER THIS BRIDGE WAS THE THAMES AND SEVERN NAVIGATION - PART OF A WATERWAY CONNECTING THE SEVERN ESTUARY WITH THE HEADWATERS OF THE THAMES, OPENED 1789. ABANDONED 1927. ROAD REALIGNED BY GLOUCESTER COUNTY COUNCIL 1962.