

## **THE HEREFORDSHIRE AND GLOUCESTERSHIRE CANAL.**

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This paper is an account of the progress on the restoration of the Canal which once linked the River Severn (near Gloucester) to the heart of Hereford City. 34 miles of "Main Line", plus a 2 mile "Coal Branch", 22 locks and three tunnels were constructed over a period exceeding 50 years, only - as elsewhere in the country - to be rapidly eclipsed by the railways. Indeed, part of the route was later used for the now equally defunct Ledbury to Gloucester railway.

The history of the Herefordshire and Gloucestershire Canal is well documented and illustrated in David Bick's book. [1]

The original Canal Society (which was formed in 1983) initially only intended to preserve what was left of the Canal; however, the "new" Charitable Trust (which replaced the Society in 1992) adopted the long term aim of full restoration.

The first thing that must be stressed to anyone enquiring about progress is that there is only about 90% left to do! The wholly voluntary restoration efforts have been deliberately concentrated at two main restoration sites; one in each county. However, much of the progress is not discernible on the ground.

One of the greatest assets of the Herefordshire and Gloucestershire Canal has to be the fact that it runs through such magnificent rural scenery and this, in turn, means that the number of physical obstacles to restoration are far less (pro-rata) than on the majority of the restoration schemes currently in progress. However, there is no room for complacency! Development pressures in the area are probably greater than ever before and it has been a priority to take all reasonable steps to ensure that no fresh obstacles to restoration should arise as a result of new buildings - or roads - on the line of the Canal. The Canal Trust has been very active in establishing (and maintaining) contacts with each of the five district and two county councils along the line of the Canal - as well as with two National Rivers Authority Regions and other appropriate bodies.

The hard work behind the scenes has slowly resulted in very positive "protective" Planning Policies appearing in each of the Local Plans. The Policies not only "protect" the historic line of the Canal but also provide for essential diversion routes to be protected (for the 10% of the historic line that has already been obstructed by development).

It has not all been plain sailing for the Canal Trust; Forest of Dean District Council refused to accept the need for a main Policy in their Local Plan and their intended "Supplementary Policy" was so weakly worded that any developer would have had little difficulty in challenging it. The Canal Trust swung into action and, during the six week formal "Deposit" period for the Forest of Dean Local Plan, the Council was inundated with individual objections from members and supporters. By the closing date out of just over 1,000 formal objections to the whole Local Plan nearly 450 related to the weak "Canal Policy"! A Public Inquiry was necessary but prior to its commencement the Canal Trust had been offered revised wording, for a main Policy, by the Council. In his report the Inspector strongly recommended that the revised wording be adopted "... to ensure that the Trust's worthwhile aims are not hindered .....there is a considerable body of support for this project". The council have confirmed that they will now include the agreed main Policy in the final version of the Local Plan.

As a result of these emerging Planning Policies a number of development proposals have been refused permission. The most notable being a proposed linear gypsy site on the line of the former Ledbury to Gloucester Railway (itself on the line of the Canal) at Barbers Bridge in Gloucestershire. This went to Appeal and the Inspector cited the interference with future restoration of the Canal as one of his reasons for rejecting the Appeal. More recently a significant industrial development in Hereford, which would have blocked both the historic line and the only available diversion route, has also been rejected by the Planning Authority.

There are a number of points where the Trust does not propose that the Canal is restored on the historic alignment. The hard won credibility would soon be lost if it promoted the destruction of a home, or a factory, in order to maintain 100% historical accuracy! In all cases where a diversion is considered essential the Trust has undertaken at least a preliminary survey to prove that a viable alternative route exists. The longest diversion is around Ledbury where, unfortunately, the original route was lost before restoration of the Canal was ever contemplated. Shorter deviations will be necessary in and near Hereford, at Dymock and in Newent.

The Trust's earliest foray into the world of Public Inquiries related to the A49/A465 Hereford Bypass proposals which (if the eastern route is finally chosen) would have placed a massive embankment across the historic line of the Canal, on the outskirts of the city, some two miles from the original terminus. Although the new road would (fortunately) be elevated to pass over a nearby railway, the Department of Transport steadfastly refused to make any provision for the Canal to pass under the embankment. Therefore the Trust had to produce a detailed Proof of Evidence and the author was "booked" to appear for two hours or so before the Inspector at

this major Inquiry. However, the strength of the Trust's case (and the detailed documentation) caught the Department by surprise and they applied for two adjournments! To cut a long story short the author made a total of three appearances before the Inspector and, after a delay of over 18 months, his final recommendation was highly favourable as far as the Trust's interests were concerned - a navigable culvert should be provided as part of the road scheme to permit the future restoration of the Canal. The Secretaries of State for the Environment, and for Transport, however, rejected the Inspector's main findings in respect of this major bypass for Hereford and the road proposals are still to be resolved at a further Inquiry in due course.

During the earlier part of 1995 Hereford and Worcester County Council demolished the original Roman Road Canal Bridge. This crossed the line of the Canal only a few yards - on the city side - from the point where the Hereford bypass is due to cross (if the eastern route is chosen). For a number of years the Trust has been in discussions with the county council as they intend to improve the vertical alignment of the road by lowering it substantially - just providing a very small diameter drainage pipe to link the barely discernible remains of the Canal on either side. This would have been a major obstruction to the restoration of the Canal and without this bridge the case for provision under a future bypass would almost certainly fail. The loss of the Roman Road crossing would almost certainly have prevented restoration into the heart of the City (the Trust have a route within a few yards of the original terminus basins). Whilst the Trust reluctantly accepted the technical arguments leading to the loss of the masonry bridge (the stone was subsequently donated by the county council to the Canal Trust) it also fought for provision to be made for future restoration.

Travelling along the A4103 on the outskirts of Hereford today (just beyond the Aylestone roundabout) one passes over the historic line of the Canal - a navigable culvert having been provided to permit ultimate restoration (one way working with full headroom on the Canal with a towpath). What is remarkable is the fact that this is some 32 miles from the nearest part of the main inland waterways system (ignoring the contentious issues of navigation on the rivers Lugg and Wye!)

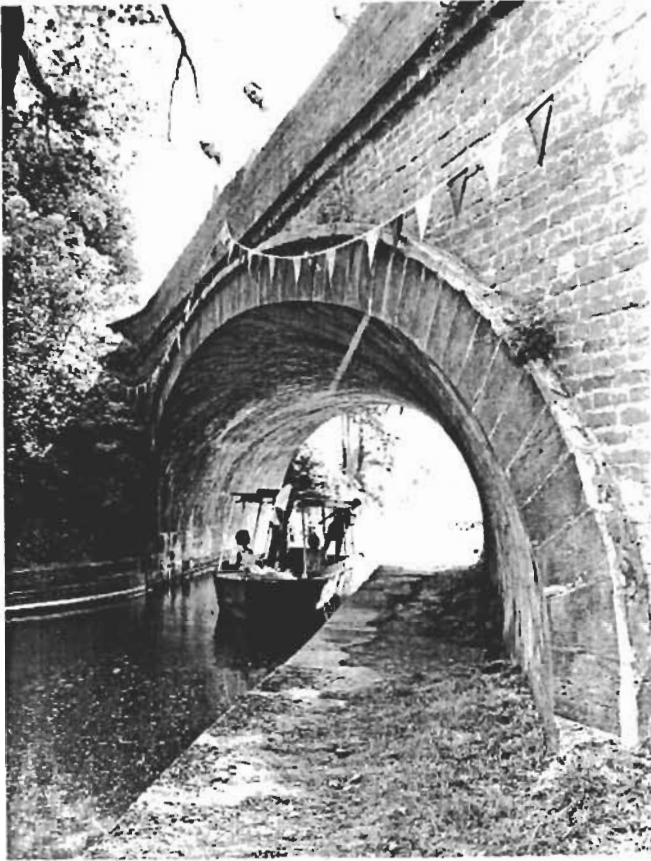
It has to be emphasised that there is a lot more to restoration of the Canal than getting covered in mud. The efforts of the Trust with pen and voice have been essential in order to safeguard past, present and future exertions with spade! Apart from the need to obtain positive planning policies and be vigilant to individual development proposals (including highway schemes) we have identified the need to actively promote - both locally and nationally - the objectives of the Herefordshire and Gloucestershire Canal Trust. This can be done in a number of ways. Members of the Trust attended events all over the

country, with a display and sales presence. Whilst some events are waterways related many are not. The display was awarded the British Marine Industry Federation's trophy for the best voluntary group display at the annual National Waterways Festival in 1994 (held at Waltham Abbey on the outskirts of London). The sales element has contributed towards the £12,000 that our Trading Company has covenanted to the Canal Trust over the past three years. Another area to which great importance is attached is the quarterly newsletter The Wharfinger; it is another means of spreading details of our work to an increasing number of influential people (in addition to the 600 plus members). The print run now exceeds 1,000 per issue. It is sold at a number of "retail outlets" and is distributed to local authorities, government departments and to many others who it is hoped will support our work now and/or in the future!

Apart from the money obtained from "sales" at various events the Trust also raises money in a number of other ways. The Trading company has undertaken the clearance of a county council culvert (which linked ditches draining fields alongside the Canal) under the main A4103 road and we have recently held our first "craft fair" in Newent. For the past three years the Trust has run a very successful Grand Holiday Draw which requires a great deal of behind the scenes activity - but it brings in some £2,000 each year! Grant aid is generally very modest and considerable voluntary effort is expended in filling many forms each year to gain a few hundred pounds here and there! Invariably we have to provide "matching funding". The Trust has yet to establish a regular trip boat operation however, ever resourceful, our 12 seater boat "Mallard" did sterling work at the Welsh National Eisteddfod in 1994. Had it been the 1995 weather the Trust would have made a fortune - unfortunately it was very wet and the very considerable efforts of getting the boat up to standard, transporting it to and from Wales, training all of the steerers to comply with regulations and simply organising it all made for a very hard won £800!

The Trust's social events (third Tuesday of every month, 7.30 for 8.00pm, Cavern Bar of the Royal Oak Hotel, The Southend, Ledbury) are yet another way in which a service is given to members. It also spreads news about the Canal and the work of the Canal Trust as non-members are welcome. The Trust also runs regular coach outings, for members and friends, to other inland waterways. However, the most notable example to date (the Trust is always looking to exceed past performance) of introducing the Canal to the general public has to be the talk given by our member Bob Simpson regarding the 2,109 yards long Oxenhall Tunnel. Four talks have been attended by some 600 people!

Restoration commenced in Herefordshire some 12 years ago, initially concentrating on the length of the Canal in the immediate vicinity of the famous "skew bridge" - the skewest on the whole of the inland waterways network. (At the third



attempt the former Canal Society eventually got the bridge Listed Grade II.) The Canal was not recognisable as such - after considerable clearance of scrub and mostly spindly ill-formed willows, what a local radio reporter described as "little more than a heavily overgrown muddy ditch" was revealed. Only then could 100 years of silt (in places over eight feet deep) be removed - under Skew Bridge the initial silt removal was all done by barrow and spade! Neither initial funds or experience would run to any form of dumper - let alone an excavator.

The full 6ft water depth was eventually restored and many hours of voluntary work on the adjacent lengths of the

'Skew Bridge', Monkhide, Herefordshire: one of the first small craft to pass under it for 100 years. (Photo: Hereford Times)

Canal and towpath, have resulted in conditions that bear no resemblance to those of a few years ago. In 1992 the first passenger carrying trip boat passed under Skew Bridge and in 1995 - to celebrate the 150th anniversary of the first boat reaching Hereford - a full length steel narrow boat was craned into the Canal to lead a procession of small craft onto a newly restored additional half a mile beyond Skew Bridge.

More recently Canal Trust restoration in Herefordshire has concentrated on three-quarters of a mile of the Canal on the Hereford side of the main A4103 Hereford to Worcester Road (which commences a quarter of a mile from the road - this first short length having been the subject of some limited work by the landowner). The length that the Canal Trust is currently working on marks another milestone in the restoration of the Canal as it is the subject of the first "Landowner Agreement" - designed to give security of tenure to the Canal Trust until 2045. (This Agreement, representing over two years work and significant third party legal costs, has very recently been adopted by the Inland Waterways Association as a specimen for

use nationally.) This section is the end of the original 10 mile summit pound and initial excavations have also been undertaken at the site of the first lock on the descent towards Hereford - "Barrs Lock". As with the majority of the locks and wharves the upper stonework has been "robbed" many years ago (spot the farm house wall with mooring rings!) but there are indications that the base still exists.

Physical restoration has been accelerated by the acquisition of two ("previously owned"!) 360° tracked excavators (one in each county) - the grant aid that we receive is very modest, our largest ever grant of £4,800 being matched by Canal Trust fund-raising to purchase the first machine. Also, the Trust have a small fleet of dumpers. The latter could, until recently, have been described as a small fleet of small dumpers but concentrated fund-raising efforts have culminated in the purchase, in the past twelve months, of two 4 ton articulated dumpers to speed muck shifting operations.

The past two years on the Gloucestershire site has seen the continued "dredging" (perhaps excavation would be a better word) of up to ten feet deep of mud and silt from the course of the Canal and towpath working towards the southern portal of Oxenhall tunnel. The initial dense scrub clearance revealed what is believed to be the unique "leggers rest/mule stable" cut into the side of the cutting just before the Tunnel mouth. This has been underpinned and brickwork made good (deliberately accentuating the new as a close match could not be achieved). Initial reinforced concrete work has been undertaken over the first few yards of the Tunnel and reconstruction in brickwork faced reinforced concrete is under way to the portal. A large brick culvert has also been the subject of initial restoration work.

The towpath and off-side retaining walls to the nearby Coldharbour Lane Bridge have been totally rebuilt with reinforced concrete faced in engineering bricks. (The bricks for all of the above structures being paid for by Shell Better Britain grants.) These works are all designed at the lowest cost but with appearance and longevity in mind - we aim for it all to last at least another 150 years! Working away from the Tunnel initial clearance now extends in the Gloucester direction as far as (but not including) the site of the lock adjacent to which the original Coal Branch parted from the Main Line.

A short distance along the Main Line towpath from the point where the Coal Branch departed, towards Newent, is the site of one of the Trust's as yet unresolved "battles" - Oxenhall Cottage and Lock. Unfortunately the Forest of Dean District Council failed to take action with regard to Oxenhall Lock Cottage and the adjacent lock (both listed structures), as well as the nearby Ell Brook Aqueduct. Many years ago these structures (and the associated length of the Canal) were

purchased by a gentleman now living in Bristol. A number of attempts were made to commence restoration of the Cottage (which was designed by Stephen Ballard, engineer to the latter part of the Canal construction), a rare example of a Herefordshire and Gloucestershire Canal building - and the only surviving unaltered lock cottage on the whole canal. Unfortunately the very isolated site is a favourite with the local vandals and as soon as work was undertaken they struck. Eventually the owner, by then in receipt of the first of a number of formal "Repairs Notices", installed temporary steel shutters on the lower windows and reinforced the bolts to the inside of the door. Within weeks the local lads had used a ladder to enter the upper (unguarded) windows and then unbolted the door from the inside in order to continue with their destructive activities.

As result of continued pressure from the Canal Trust and other bodies, the Council have now obtained a detailed report from a Structural Engineering Consultancy with a view to (eventually) obtaining the structures by Compulsory Purchase. The Report is favourable in respect of the Cottage, Lock and (to the Trust's surprise) the very badly deteriorating Aqueduct. The Canal Trust is closely monitoring the situation and hopes that progress will shortly be made to secure these unique examples of industrial archaeology for future generations to enjoy.

The Canal Trust is proud of the fact that many of its active members learn new skills as a direct result of membership. Much of the recent brick laying has been undertaken by two volunteers, a retired lady and gentleman, who have learnt their bricklaying skills from one of the members who used to be in the trade. The excavator drivers either do it for a living or have been trained within the Canal Trust. Health and Safety/insurance considerations dictate that a "permit to drive" system applies to all of our Plant and Equipment. Many of the Trust's regular restoration volunteers have received first aid training organised by the Canal Trust.

The Trust's final area of interest in Gloucestershire is the point where the Canal linked with the western channel of the River Severn; in the grounds of the former Over Hospital. Just before the Hospital closed (in 1994) Agents acting for the Regional Hospital Board applied for Planning Permission to totally re-develop the site as a very large "out of town" supermarket. The initial contact with the Planning consultants was not favourable but after the Trust's case had been presented the "constraint" of the presence of the line of the Canal within the site had been turned into a major asset! The original Over Lock Keeper's House remains, in a deteriorating state, and, following a request from the Canal Trust for the roof to be "temporarily sheeted" to reduce weather damage, the Hospital authorities promptly let a contract to cover the whole roof in (temporary) coated metal sheeting. They also willingly authorised trial preliminary excavations on the site of the



former deep lock into the river Severn where the Trust found substantial masonry remains and clearly definable lock gate recesses. Unfortunately out of town supermarkets are no longer favoured and the long-term use of the site remains undecided.

Before leaving the restoration topic it is worth mentioning that the Trust has established good working relations with the local Nature Conservation Trusts in each county. The Trust does its utmost to work in harmony. Whilst it is inevitable that wildlife will be disturbed, this is kept to a minimum by, for example, limiting work during the nesting season. Both counties have limited water habitats of the type presented by restored canals and people frequently remark at the wide variety of wildlife that is seen following our work.

One of the recent achievements was the publication of a "desktop" study that British Waterways kindly undertook for the Trust. This proved what the Trust has always said - the Herefordshire and Gloucestershire Canal will be a major asset to the communities through which it passes (and to the surrounding areas) in terms of informal recreation, amenity and tourism. The report indicated (based on recent data relating to established narrow rural canals elsewhere in the country) that in excess of £4.3 million per annum would be brought into the local economy of the two counties from tourism and related expenditure. Over 160 full time jobs would be supported by the restoration of the Canal.

Currently the Canal Trust are holding regular meetings with Officers from each of the local authorities, the two National Rivers Authority Regions and other relevant organisations. It is hoped to fund a major independent Consulting Engineers appraisal of Engineering, Water Resources, Cost Benefit and Ecological aspects of the restoration of the whole Canal prior to the development of significant grant aid bids.

### Notes

1 David Bick's book, second edition published in 1994 is available from the Canal Trust at £7.95 including postage and packing. the address for obtaining the publication is "Coppice", Burley Gate, Hereford, HR1 3QS.

**Editor:** For further details of the Herefordshire and Gloucestershire Canal Trust please write to: H&G Canal Trust, 8, Bloomfield Road, Gloucester, GL1 5BL with a stamped addressed envelope.

It is important to appreciate that much of the historical route of the Canal lies on private land. Only very limited sections of the former towpath are public rights of way. Readers can assist the Canal Trust in maintaining good relationships with land owners.