

THE RESTORATION OF THE COTSWOLD CANALS SEPTEMBER 2006 UPDATE

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Introduction

A six-mile stretch of the canal between Brimscombe Port and The Ocean at Stonehouse fully restored and a multi-user trail onwards for four miles to Saul, all completed by the end of 2008. That's the target, and a sure sign of progress in reopening the Cotswold Canals. Ten locks will have been restored and nineteen bridges updated or replaced, as well as several natural habitats created or conserved.

This £24 million first phase will have been possible because of the £11.9 million grant confirmed on 25 January 2006 by the Heritage Lottery Fund, coupled with an offer of £6 match funding from the South West of England Regional Development Agency, both reported previously. (1) Added to this will be further funding from other public bodies and other organisations. By far the biggest proportion comes from national, regional and local public resources, but voluntary organisations such as the Cotswold Canals Trust continue to make significant contributions in many other ways too.

The restoration programme

What will happen, when and where? Plans may change, but subject to satisfactory planning approvals being obtained, removal of the infill at Ebley and the section to Ryeford Lock should be completed by the end of 2006. Trees obstructing the first year's restoration route will also be removed. This will enable the waterway between Ryeford Lock and Hilly Orchard to be reopened. Less obvious work will be the renovation of the large pond in The Lawns the public open space now owned by the Stroud Community Land Trust. This was once the garden of The Lawn mansion demolished to make way for the Cainscross roundabout.

New road bridges are planned at Oil Mills, Upper Mills and The Ocean between January and May 2007. Ryeford Double Lock should be restored and work undertaken to canalise flood relief channels associated with the River Frome near the A46.

All being well, a start should be made in April 2007 to restoring the waterway through the Capel's Mill area on the far side of Dr Newton's Way from the Waitrose supermarket. Dudbridge Lock should be renovated, and work initiated on the A46 bridge and basin.

The development of a "Stroud Waterfront" between Wallbridge and Capel's Mill is a key element of the restoration programme. This has been facilitated by Gloucestershire County Council's agreement at the end of 2005 to transfer Wallbridge, Capel's Mill and associated land holdings to British Waterways.

By mid-2007 renovation of the locks, by-weirs and landings between Wallbridge and Brimscombe should also have started. More on this in a later update perhaps. Suffice it to say that the excavation of much of Brimscombe Port (but not all) will be completed by the end of 2008. Another section of the missing canal route here was secured on 31 March 2006 when British Waterways acquired the Port Mill Industrial Estate at the western end, adjacent to the port area they already own.

When the restoration starts in earnest there will be concerns about its initial impact on the local environment . Some disturbance is inevitable, but experience elsewhere shows that in time it will all blend harmoniously again with the surrounding landscape.

Much care is being taken throughout the planning stage to ensure that all the relevant factors, including built heritage, archaeology and social history, are considered in detail. British Waterways has formed the Cotswold Canals Heritage Consultation Group. Its members include representatives from British Waterways, Stroud District Council, English Heritage, the Cotswold Canals Trust, Gloucestershire County Council Archaeology Services and GSIA. Stroud District Council is actively preparing a Cotswold Canals Area Action Plan. This seeks to ensure development of an appropriate scale, mix and quality for key areas of change and conservation.

The revised Stroud Industrial Heritage Conservation Area Statement, now in preparation, will provide guidance and interpretation of conservation area policies to be set out in development plan documents. Much is happening. The new Cotswold Canals Partnership website is nearing completion. This will be a comprehensive source of information on all aspects of the canals project.

The Eastern Section

Volunteers at the eastern end of the waterway continue to clear maintain and progressively improve the towpath from Siddington to Latton Basin. They have also cleared Ruck's Bridge, a large brick-built accommodation bridge at Alex Farm near Marston Meysey, and the canal on either side with a view to restoration work being started on it later in the year.

The increasing interest in restoring the North Wilts Canal from Swindon, which previously joined the Thames and Severn at Latton Basin, is helpful in supporting the restoration of the Thames and Severn from the Cotswold Water Park to Inglesham at as early a date as possible.

However, it is now clear that the preferred route for the North Wilts will be through a new cut to the eastern side of Cricklade to join the Thames and Severn west of Eisey, and not at Latton Basin as before.

Future Plans

An application was submitted to the Big Lottery Fund (Living Landmarks Programme) in January 2006 for £15.95 million to complete the restoration of the waterway from The Ocean to Saul. This led to a review visit to the site of the proposed restoration at the end of May 2006 and the award of a development grant of £250,000 in August to enable further work on this project to be undertaken. The project was one of only 23 out of over 700 applicants selected for development funding. Successful applicants at this first stage have until the end of May 2007 to submit a second stage application. A final decision about who will receive further funding will be made by the end of August 2007.

If all goes well, such funding could see the full restoration of the canal between Saul and Brimscombe Port being completed by the end of 2010. Shall we see boat trips restored between Brimscombe Port and Gloucester?

1. Stening, T. C., GSIA Journal for 2004, p. 61.