

## **THE RESTORATION OF THE COTSWOLD CANALS JULY 2010 UPDATE**

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### **Introduction**

Now just over two years since British Waterways withdrew from the Cotswold Canals Partnership, news about the restoration project is still very positive since the update in last year's Journal (1).

At the end of March 2009 a new limited company was set up to own and operate the two canals for the benefit of the public. This is called the Stroud Valleys Canal Company (SVCC). The key shareholders are Gloucestershire County Council (GCC), Stroud District Council (SDC), The Company of Proprietors of the Stroudwater Navigation and the Cotswold Canals Trust (CCT).

SDC has a lead role in the restoration programme. Its canal team under the project manager, Paul Coope, has now been built up to full strength. Results from the major efforts on site and behind the scenes by both the formal bodies and dedicated volunteers (mainly from the Cotswold Canals Trust) are now becoming increasingly apparent both on the ground and in the water.

### **Progress**

#### **Phase 1a Brimscombe Port to The Ocean, Stonehouse**

##### **(i) Land**

The eastern end of Brimscombe Port was bought from British Waterways and transferred to the SVCC almost immediately the new company had been established. The lease of the Stroudwater Navigation was reassigned to the SVCC too. Towards the end of 2009, the transfer of many sections of the Thames and Seven Canal to the SVCC, mainly from the GCC and the small sections owned by British Waterways, was also completed.

Good progress is being made on the remaining land purchases necessary, but it is slow where the canal is built over at Thrupp.

Ownership of the land on the canal route by one body is an essential part of the funding agreement with the Heritage Lottery Fund.

Interest from private sector buyers who might get involved in the redevelopment of Brimscombe Port is now being encouraged by the SDC.

##### **(ii) Restoration**

Construction of the long-awaited A46 replacement bridge in Stroud started in July after various delays. Carillion, the contractors, are optimistic about completing the project by Christmas 2010. Roughly two-thirds of the cost is being funded by SDC from Canal Project fund resources, but the work is being led by GCC. Planning permission has been granted for the restoration of Wallbridge Lower Lock at the same time.

Further west the new Upper Mills Bridge is scheduled to begin in August this year. It will be similar in style to those at Stonehouse and Haywards Bridge. The unexpected reoccu-

pation of an old badger sett at the eastern end delayed the start until the end of the breeding season.

Extensive reed clearance between Bridgend and Nutshell Bridge, and Upper Mills and Ryeford has cleared a channel so essential to improve the flow to prevent possible local flooding, and as a necessary prerequisite to dredging. The dredging of the Ryeford pound is expected to start this year too.

Planning approval has been granted for the installation of new gates, together with other repairs at the Ryeford Double Lock.

Work has also started to lay an upgraded towpath of recycled gravel-sized hard core two metres wide where possible between The Ocean and Stonehouse Bridge.

Looking ahead, there are new ideas at Capel Mill, where the canal is now expected to skirt the tail of the landfill tip, instead of following the design proposed by British Waterways. This involved a new canal aqueduct and the diversion of the River Frome. Designs based on the new ideas are being prepared. Further work is planned at Gough's Orchard Lock, near Brimscombe and the restoration of Griffin Mills Lock, near Bowbridge will be reinstated. This was originally started in the 1970s before a land ownership problem halted progress.

### **Phase 1b: The Ocean to Saul Junction**

The priority on Phase 1b will rise as Phase 1a nears completion, but it remains the critical link to the Gloucester - Sharpness waterway.

Plans were well advanced to purchase 35 acres of land between the A38 and M5 to enable the canal to pass through what would have been largely developed as a multi-user wetland conservation area. A substantial Aggregate Levy Sustainability Grant had been arranged to contribute to the purchase of this area. Unfortunately, this has now fallen through due to the late decision of the owner to sell only the land necessary for the canal restoration. However, even that is a step forward if funding can be found.

Meanwhile, the water supply to the Eastington stretch has been much improved by the removal, as already reported, of reeds further east, and regular maintenance work continues.

### **Phase 2 Inglesham to South Cerney**

The good news announced in January 2010 (2) was that British Waterways had given the CCT a package of land, together with the entrance and a section of the Thames and Severn Canal, to help enable the Trust and its partners to restore the canal. This includes the junction with the Thames and the first lock (Figure 1). The Inland Waterways Association has launched a national appeal, with a target of £125,000, to raise funds for the restoration and recommissioning of Inglesham Lock, and the purchase and restoration of 380 metres of the pound above the lock.

The Roundhouse and bridge are listed buildings which have been sold by British Waterways to a private buyer. The privacy of the new owners will have to be ensured, necessitating the re-routing of the towpath. The acquisition of a further stretch of canal here would be an undoubted asset.

To the west, overgrowth threatening the structure of Oatlands Bridge, near Kempsford has been cleared by kind permission of the owner.

Gravel extraction operations are extending over wider areas at and near Marston Meysey, affecting the canal route. Broad agreement has been reached with the owners to reinstate the canal across the gravel extractions at Roundhouse Farm. It is hoped that a similar agreement will be achieved if and when extraction starts at nearby Whetstone Bridge Farm, where a length of canal survives. Gravel extraction is also intended at and around Alex Farm, near Eisey. Ground preparation generally could start in 2011: its complete restoration is likely to take 15 years.

Between Roundhouse Farm and Inglesham restoration work at Rucks Bridge is complete and work on Eisey Lock continues. These are all separate sites at present, but it is hoped that they will be linked up in due course. There is no public access to any of these areas, including Inglesham Lock, yet.

Preparatory studies, including wildlife considerations, are in hand on the stretch between the Spine Road and Cerney Wick. It is hoped that these will lead to this length being dredged. Some of the canal banks are now lower than they should be, and will need to be re-levelled.

Re-watering the canal here would bring it very much into the public eye, being by the Gateway Centre, especially if a trip boat could be introduced in the future as envisaged by the CCT. This could also be an asset to the Cotswold Water Park attractions: close liaison with the Cotswold Water Park Society is being maintained in several joint projects.

### **Phase 3 Brimscombe to South Cerney**

Although no scheduled programme of work is envisaged for the time being, the restoration of this stretch being a longer-term aspiration, relevant work has been undertaken at several locations.

Emergency removal of reeds which had blocked the canal between Beales and St Mary's Lock and the towpath, causing overflow of water across the public path into the river, was successful. The towpath was rebuilt with hard core.

The Bakers Mill bridge has been strengthened recently by Gloucestershire County Council, but the choice of highly visible galvanised guard rails cannot be reported as being sympathetic to the surroundings. Hopefully these will mellow with time.

Plans are afoot to restore the Coates portal of the Sapperton Tunnel again, and vegetation has been cleared from the middle two locks at Siddington. These are in good condition compared to most.

### **General**

The potential shortage of water along major stretches of a restored canal has always been a major consideration. Equally the increasing shortage of water in south eastern England is also a cause for concern.

Thames Water propose to build a large reservoir at Abingdon. Their proposals were the subject of a public inquiry in June 2010. The CCT objected because it feels insufficient consideration has been given to the possibility of using the Cotswold Canals route to the River Thames as a

means of transferring water from the River Severn. This water source could supplement, reduce the size or be an alternative to the proposed reservoir (3).

Such an alternative would have the double benefit of creating one leg of a potential national water network grid at reduced costs by saving the extra 100 metre hydraulic lift which would be necessary to pump water over the Cotswolds instead of through the Sapperton Tunnel. It was a favoured option of the former national water authorities before private water companies focused on their own regions for commercial reasons. Irrespective of the outcome of the objection, it is an example of how every opportunity is being taken to try to take advantage of other possibly related developments.

**Conclusion**

The restoration project is now moving forward steadily again, with work being undertaken at several points simultaneously. Added to bats in Sapperton Tunnel, environmental concerns such as badgers and Japanese Knotweed at Upper Mills, Stonehouse and invasive poisonous Giant Hogweed along lengths of the canal continue to present unforeseen challenges which it is hoped will be resolved.

Very encouraging features include the major contributions to progress made by an increasing number of volunteers both on major projects as well as tidying up new and restored areas, and the success of seeking opportunity funding wherever possible. Both are essential.

Indeed, they are timely, for it is interesting to wonder what might have been. Government funding for British Waterways has been cut again for 2010. Would the Cotswold Canals regeneration project have felt the repercussions of this anyway, particularly in these generally difficult financial times?

A target date of January 2014 for has been set for completion of Phase 1a. A little optimistic perhaps, but everyone is going for it.

**References**

- (1) Gloucestershire Society for Industrial Archaeology, *Journal for 2008* p 53.
- (2) *Wiltshire and Gloucestershire Standard*, 21 January 2010 p 7.
- (3) Cotswold Canals Trust, *The Trow*, No. 149 page 9.

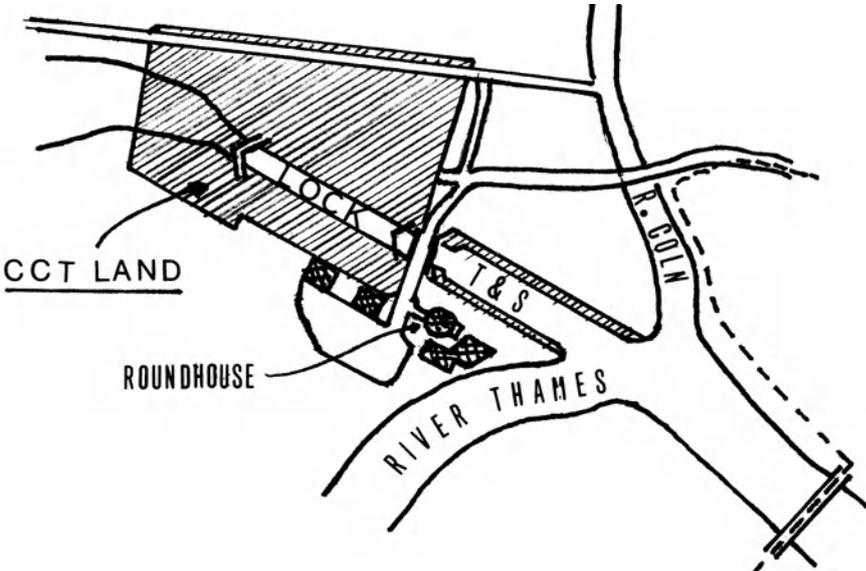


Figure 1.  
Land given by British Waterways to the Cotswold Canals Trust at Inglesham.