

THE RESTORATION OF THE COTSWOLD CANALS : AUGUST 2012 UPDATE

Theo Stening

Last year's report (1) was a record of positive achievement. Since then progress has been steady. Among other advances, the installation of one more bridge will soon be completed, another is under construction, Ryeford Double Lock is working again, the new overflow weir and floodgates at Ebley finished, the Capel's Mill diversion started and restoration work continuing at the eastern end.

The highlights of the restoration year were the visit of HRH The Princess Royal on 10 February 2012 when she opened the restored Wallbridge Upper Lock and cut the tape beneath the new Stroud Brewery Bridge aboard the first passenger boat to sail through it, and the 'Stroud on Water' celebration incorporating the Inland Waterways Association (IWA) National Trail Boat Festival. This was held over the Queen's Diamond Jubilee Weekend from 1st to 4th June attracting over 10,000 visitors. The sight of more than 30 boats of all shapes and sizes sailing along the three mile stretch of the Stroudwater from below Dudbridge Locks gladdened the hearts of everyone involved in the restoration project. Perhaps inevitably there have been some disappointments too. These will be described in this report, together with a summary of the further work in hand.

Phase 1A: The Ocean, Stonehouse to Brimscombe

The growing number of achievements within Phase 1A are the result of supportive funding, initiatives taken, engineering expertise, many hours of hard work undertaken by contractors and volunteers alike, and at times sheer persistence and determination. It is not surprising, however, that despite the many restoration projects completed satisfactorily, there have been occasional teething problems.

This was the case at the new manually-operated Ocean swing bridge, where adjustments needed to be made to the alignment to ensure traffic passes well clear of the adjacent building. Changes also need to be made to the bridge mechanism to make it easier to operate. Suitable modifications have been designed: the bridge should be reopened to road traffic by the end of August, but not to canal users.

Boats have now passed through the restored Ryeford Double Lock for the first time in what is thought to be just over 70 years. The Stroudwater was reopened at Oil Mills Bridge after a sewer was relaid at a greater depth and the earth bund removed.

New flood gates have been installed at Ebley Mill to reduce the risk of flooding in Bridgend and Ryeford. When three feeder streams upstream cause the water in the canal to rise to a potentially dangerous level, the gates will be shut to divert the excess water over the adjacent spill weir into the River Frome below.

Changes have been completed at Hilly Orchard Bridge too where disabled access is now possible. These were completed just in time for the 'Stroud on Water' festival. Boats were queuing up to pass beneath it while parts of the former bridge were being cleared away. The new bridge extends across the towpath and the approach on the eastern side has been raised to allow an access ramp to be included.

Further towards Dudbridge a landing stage is being constructed just below the bridge. This should be completed early in September 2012 allowing the towpath to be reopened. At

Dudbridge Locks permanent piling of the canal channel between the two locks, which started in January 2012, has been delayed because of a complication. An old culvert which formerly carried the Ruscombe Brook beneath the canal was broken into by contractors excavating the channel for the new hydroelectric scheme. The culvert contained water which had leaked through the bottom of Dudbridge Lock, so the bottom of the lock needs to be repaired. Unfortunately it may not be possible to resume the restoration of the locks until May 2013 because of regulations relating to the fish spawning season unless it is possible to complete the lock by-pass channel by 1st October 2012. Many are the restrictions today's canal builders face!

Work on the hydropipe and bypass channels has also been delayed but construction of the turbine house has continued. This project is being financed separately from the main restoration programme. So far about three quarters of the likely £300,000 cost has been raised.

Construction of the new electro-hydraulic swing bridge at Chestnut Lane is well in hand. This will be capable of carrying 44 tonne vehicles, and will be completed in September 2012. It was necessary to divert some gas and water services to a greater depth over far longer distances than originally envisaged to make provision for possible future mooring of boats.

The canal between Chestnut Lane and Lodgemore bridges has been widened. Plans for replacing Lodgemore Bridge have still not yet been finalised, partly because there are some land ownership matters to be resolved.

Perhaps the most visible restoration success is the Wallbridge area. Here the new Stroud Brewery Bridge has been complemented by the restored Wallbridge Upper Lock, and enhanced by the Cotswold Canals Trust's Visitor and Exhibition Centre, the Lock Keepers Café Bar with its canal-side terrace, and a small meadow of Cotswold wild flowers which will bring added colour until October. The successful regeneration of this area has been recognised by The Waterways Trust, who announced on 23 May 2012, that the site was the winner of the 2012 Waterways Renaissance Award for 'Partnership'.

It is a striking forerunner of what is a major potential opportunity to create a new focal point for social and leisure activities in Stroud. Certainly, there is scope for an imaginative redevelopment for the surrounding area. Waterside centres have a special attraction for the community, as has already been shown in many other canal towns and, indeed, at 'Stroud on Water'. Preliminary thought has already been given to what might be achieved given good support and funding.

Much has been reported previously about the former canal route near Capel's Mill, Stroud, part of which was buried, together with the former millpond by landfill in the 1970s. Another length was built over when Dr. Newton's Way was constructed in the 1980s. It is one of the few sections within Phase 1A where the canal line has been completely lost.

Volunteers from the Cotswold Canals Trust (CCT) undertook a major programme from February 2012 onwards to clear the site of trees and other vegetation. This facilitated the cutting of a new canal line to the railway viaduct arch and onto a new aqueduct around the lower slopes of the old tip.

This £2 million project was started in May 2012 by the Abergavenny canal and waterway specialists Alun Griffiths. A concrete channel 330 metres long will be constructed to link up with the existing canal near Arundel Mill, leading towards Bowbridge. This will overcome one of the largest obstacles along the canal route, opening it up towards Brimscombe. It will also

reduce contamination leakage into the River Frome from the tip. Work is not expected to be completed until early 2013. Proposals include the planting of 1000 trees.

Further upstream proposals have been prepared by SDC and Halcrow for restoring the lock and strengthening the bridge at Bowbridge, enabling heavy plant to reach the south side of the canal. CCT volunteers are well into repairing the structure of Griffin's Mill Lock in a programme of work which will last until 2014.

The future development of Brimscombe Port is not progressing as well as had been hoped. Despite the ambitious initial plans drawn up four years ago, the current housing market is very different now. In today's economic climate, it has not been possible to find a private sector developer with sufficient funding to build over 200 houses, shops and business premises as originally envisaged. Although several developers expressed interest initially, only one came close to being able to satisfy the requirements of the development brief, but additional public funding would have been required. As progress had been dependent on finding a private sector developer to provide funding too, the project now requires rethinking.

Stroud District Council (SDC) has confirmed its intention to redevelop the port along the lines of the original scheme if possible. It was visionary, so SDC intends to approach both the Heritage Lottery Fund and the Homes and Communities Agency for a grant of up to £10 million in its determination to find a way forward. It seems likely that some of the further funding will be necessary to complete the restoration of the canal from Bowbridge to Brimscombe too, so there may need to be a compromise at Brimscombe Port by pursuing the ideas of a scaled down development or redeveloping the Port sequentially in small sections. Preliminary discussions have been started with possible partners for the second alternative.

Phase 1B: Saul Junction to Stonehouse

This continues to be vital as the link between the Gloucester and Sharpness Canal (and hence the UK waterways network) and the currently landlocked stretch of the Cotswold Canals between Stonehouse and Brimscombe.

Much effort was put into preparing a bid for submission to the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) to work up detailed plans for what is likely to be a £20 million project to restore the link. It was hoped that this would lead to about £13.5 million from the HLF matched by £3.5 million from other sources and over £2.5 million of volunteer input and from work-in-kind contributions. Stroud District Council has said it will continue to provide leadership for the project, but could not make a commitment to underwrite the financial costs.

There was severe competition for HLF support this year from more limited funds available as a result of the London 2012 Olympics. Hence the optimism which followed a February 2012 visit from HLF officials to tour the Phase 1B route did not prove to be justified. It is disappointing to report that the bid was not successful this time. There will be another opportunity next year when further completion of more of Phase 1A should enable a strengthened case to be submitted.

Meanwhile maintenance work involving repairs at Newtown Lock and additional road surface steel plating at Bonds Mill bridge has been completed. Plans have been formulated to replace the lock gates at Blunder Lock at an appropriate time.

Phase 2 South Cerney to Inglesham

The canal length between the Spine Road Bridge and Cerney Wick has been the focus of much of the work in this area. Dredging has now been completed, and further work on restoring the

stone overflow weir awaits significant bank repairs. After a year's growth of vegetation, this stretch has regained much of its sheltered and secluded appearance which was lost after the austere clearance of trees and shrubs necessary last year to ensure the safety of the dredger and overhead power lines.

At Eisey the structural restoration of the lock is complete, but it will not be gated until the whole length is in water. Vegetation has been cleared from over one kilometre of the canal below the lock but here, as elsewhere along the restored sections not yet in regular use, Mother Nature is already trying to restake her claim. It is hoped to restore the towpath, with the aim of opening it as a permissive path.

At Inglesham work on both the lock and the canal bed upstream is being continued by the Waterways Recovery Group during the summer. Designs for a back pumping scheme have been completed, but now new adversaries – voles and badgers - are having to be taken into account.

There is growing interest from Natural England and local councils in recovering access to former towpaths, particularly along the eastern section of the canal. For example, Kempsford Parochial Church Council in particular is keen to have the towpath restored. All this interest helps to create future progress.

Phase 3: Brimscombe to South Cerney

Just above the South Cerney locks, a length of canal bed and the adjacent farmland at Claymeadow cutting is owned by Gloucestershire County Council (GCC). The farmland is being sold by GCC, but the canal land is being generously transferred to the CCT. For a nominal sum, work is also being undertaken on Cowground Bridge, near Siddington, with the permission of the owner.

Water transfer proposals

The severe drought in southern parts of England earlier in the year with consequent falling levels of water in boreholes and reservoirs has once again focused attention on the need to transfer water from the wetter north western regions to the south. The possibility of doing this by transferring water along the Cotswold Canals route, and the merits of doing so have been described previously (2). Thames Water continue to study the proposal, together with others, very carefully and have appointed external consultants to examine and cost this option. The Chief Executive of the CCT is included in quarterly meetings to discuss all the options. An indication may be given by the end of 2012 or early in the following year whether the Cotswold Canals option is likely to evolve into the preferred scheme to enable future water resources to be enhanced in the south.

Organisation

A new manager for the Cotswold Canals project, civil engineer Ian Edwards, started in January 2012 bringing earlier experience of working in Worcestershire on the Droitwich Canal. In the interim period the Stroud District Council team have continued and enhanced the restoration process with marked success.

The sad and unexpected death in April 2012 of Tony Robinson, the Chairman of the Cotswold Canals Trust, was a great loss to the project. He had been responsible for developing the work at the eastern end of the canal with much enthusiasm and energy. The former chairman Liz Payne nobly took over the position of Chairman again until a new Chairman can be appointed. Another potentially relevant change is that the state-run British Waterways ceased to exist on the 2nd July 2012. In its place an organization named Canal and River Trust (CRT) has been set

up to manage 2000 miles of English and Welsh inland waterways. In Scotland, British Waterways will continue under the name 'Scottish Canals'.

This reorganisation seems unlikely to have any immediate effect on the restoration of the Cotswold Canals as the new trust will need time to settle down. Longer term, there may be opportunities to co-operate one way or another, but meanwhile it is business as usual for the Cotswold Canals project.

Conclusion

Overall, subject to a satisfactory solution to the further funding requirement at Brimscombe, the completion of Phase 1A now seems to be within reach in the foreseeable future. The forerunner of the Cotswold Canals Trust was the Stroudwater, Thames and Severn Canal Trust, founded initially as the Stroudwater Canal Society 40 years ago. There is a dedication to a former Secretary of the earlier trust at Newtown Lock. It bears the quotation “Better to say here it is than here it was”.

It is becoming increasingly possible to say “here it is” as more lengths of the canal are restored. Success breeds success, it is said, and local public interest continues to grow. One only needs to cite 'Stroud on Water' as a demonstration of this.

References

- (1) Gloucestershire Society for Industrial Archaeology (GSIA), *Journal for 2010*, p 52.
- (2) GSIA, *Journal for 2010*, p 56.



Boats on Stroudwater Navigation again: ‘Stroud on Water’ Festival, June 2012. The Dragonfly is owned by the Wilts and Berks Canal Trust who kindly supplied the picture. Ebley Mill is visible in the background.