

Meeting Friday 22nd October 2004

Canal Directors Report

1. General

1.1. A summer of mixed extremes of weather, but with an overall dry trend has caused operational difficulties. A closure notice for the Deepcut, Brookwood and St Johns Locks was originally issued for mid July after very hot weather and rapidly falling levels. This was “pulled” at the last minute following a week of heavy rain, allowing the whole Canal to remain open into August. However the very hot spell in early August forced a closure of the aforesaid Locks through the first 3 weeks of August. Further heavy rain in later August allowed us to open fully for August Bank Holiday weekend, with a consistent dry spell pretty much ever since again forcing a closure. Levels have been monitored on a daily basis and full control maintained to keep levels up on the Hampshire and Mytchett pounds. (NB Woodham Flight and the Woking pound have remained open throughout the period). Whilst the media has been full of stories of the “wet summer”, it is important not to forget the very hot weather earlier in the year, and more significantly the overall lack of rain since January, combined with the near drought last summer, all of which have had a significant effect on groundwater and canal levels.

1.2. Vandalism is always a problem on the canal, but we have had some particularly bad episodes this summer. It is worth listing some of the problems to give a view of the disruption to staff and the financial implications of this. Some of the key incidents include:

1.2.1. The Hampshire Patrol Boat has been the target of repeated and malicious vandalism, including the deliberate drilling of holes in the bottom to cause it to sink. Police have been involved, as have the press. Over £2000 of damage has occurred.

1.2.2. The Dredger had to be taken to Woking to extract a car which had been stolen and driven in to the Canal. This was pushed in again, having been retrieved. Consequently it was then stored in the dredger hopper to await it being collected by the insurance company. Mistake! The car was set on fire in the hopper causing severe damage to the dredger. The security covers warped in the heat and were ripped off, allowing the electrics and cab glass to be trashed. We estimate some £4000 of damage has occurred and at least 10 staff days “wasted” dealing with this. The dredger has been out of action for 6 weeks while assessment and repairs take place. During this period a second car was driven in to the Canal, although police retrieved this one.

1.2.3. Trenches have been cut across the towpath near Chertsey Rd Bridge in an attempt to “drain” the canal.

- 1.2.4.** Ash Embankment sluice gates have been repeatedly vandalised allowing water to escape in this very sensitive area. The vandalism has required large wrenches of the correct fit to carry out and appears to have been calculated and deliberate. Police informed.
- 1.2.5.** Graffiti has been near continuous on Locks 1 through to 11.
- 1.2.6.** Actual damage has been caused to Locks 1,3,4 and 5, including smashed paddle gear and dropping large objects in to the chambers to block gates.
- 1.2.7.** A large and very heavy pipe, securely stored on site for the St Johns Backpumping scheme was lifted and rolled in to Lock 7
- 1.2.8.** Stone pavoirs below Skew Bridge were stolen and had to be replaced as a serious trip hazard was created.
- 1.2.9.** The “bump beam” – a large piece of solid oak fixed to the Lock gates to prevent boat damage - was stolen from Lock 5. It is probably now the feature mantel piece to a fireplace. A new one has been made from felled oak using the sawmill.
- 1.2.10.** Trip Boats based at the Canal Centre have been “tormented” by stone throwing youths, which has led to police involvement. Actual damage to boats has been caused.
- 1.2.11.** It is hard to put a figure on what this has cost the Canal Authority, but it is likely to be around £10,000 in material damage and up to £30,000 if “wasted” staff time is costed in. Possibly more significant is the disruption to the work programme this has caused, particularly the loss of the dredger for 6 weeks. There is also a significant demoralising effect.
- 1.2.12.** Some of the damage is attributable to Summer Holiday Syndrome – although this is not an excuse. A lot of the damage in Woking coincided with a nearby Gypsy incursion and the problem now seems to have stopped.
- 1.2.13.** In response to other issues the BCA have worked closely with local Police in Odiham, Surrey Heath and Woking. This has resulted in a number of youths being interviewed by the police in the presence of their parents. In the future we will work to build further links with local Community Crime Prevention teams. It has also been suggested that we investigate having some of the mobile CCTV units now available in the Boroughs stationed at known “hotspots” on the Canal.

1.3. Canal Management Plan

Work has progressed well on this document, with some very valuable feedback from user and interest groups and organisations. The “Scoping Group” agreed that a deadline of the April 2005 JMC was more practical due to other workload commitments. This has proved true, with work actually stopping over the Summer Holidays as reactive issues came to the fore. However the next draft is nearing completion and work on it will be picked up again in October with a view to circulating a draft asap.

1.4. Dry Dock

The BCA introduced further working time restrictions and procedures in response to feedback from Guildford Borough Council and the complainants. A copy is attached as Appendix 1. This has been carefully enforced and monitored. However complaints have continued.

A high level meeting was organised to reach a resolution involving the JMC Chairman, BCA, the local ward Cllr, Guildford Environmental Health and Legal Services, Surrey County Council as landowners with their Legal Services and the Canal Society.

The result was a recommendation that we meet directly with the complainant to reach a mutual agreement, they having produced some recommended work practises. An update on the situation and report back from the meeting is provided in a separate report.

2. Maintenance

2.1. Despite the challenges listed above, Canal staff have managed to keep moving forward with maintenance work and tackle some of the backlog as well as keep the canal running. A summary of maintenance works completed, planned and unplanned is attached as Appendix 2.

2.2. Discussions with Hampshire and Surrey County Councils have taken place to identify infrastructure priorities and look at obtaining additional capital funding.

2.3. We are discussing options for the planned Deepcut Flight drain down and dredging with ADAS, who will work to analyse the sediment and try to find suitable sites for depositing dredgings, working within all legislation.

3. Conservation

3.1. A Bechstein's bat was again discovered at the Greywell Tunnel by Canal Ranger (and licensed bat worker) Paul Hope. This is the second sighting for this very rare species in recent months.

3.2. A major survey of all the Canal Flashes has been undertaken. Results are awaited, although initial reports suggest the flashes are in decline, yet not to as such a great extent as the canal.

3.3. Crayfish have continued to be a problem. One commercial operator and a number of individuals, as well as the Angling Association have applied for permission to trap and we are talking to the Environment Agency about a co-ordinated approach. The value of trapping still seems to remain an area for debate. However the general feeling is that we need to try something.

3.4. A campaign against notifiable and alien weeds – especially Japanese Knotweed and Himalayan Balsam - has taken place to control and hopefully

eradicate these problems.

- 3.5. A programme of bankside protection and replanting works has been arranged to be funded by the SITA/ Waterways Trust money.

4. Recreation and Visitor Services

- 4.1. The Canal Centre has had a busy season. The Campsite has been well used, especially with the added bonus of the Farnborough Air Show. The Club Room has also been very popular following a revamp and extra promotion. We are also very pleased with the way the Tea Room is running. Some excellent feedback has been received and we are also exceeding the “break even” point we were aiming for this year, with the Tea Room hitting new record takings targets throughout the summer. We anticipate that the combination of the Campsite, Tea Room, Club Room and Shop will show a good income for the site this year.
- 4.2. Bat walks have proved very popular and booked out, leading to additional walks being organised.
- 4.3. Summer Events at the Canal Centre have included a range of children’s activities which have all sold out. The Santa Cruises started taking bookings on the 1st October and has sold extremely quickly. We anticipate another sell out.
- 4.4. The NFA Division 2 Angling Match went well, being publicised along the towpath in advance.
- 4.5. The major task of putting up new signs along the canal has started. A new robust design in routed wood is being used which will hopefully last longer and is easily maintained through oiling and sanding and a paint touch up.
- 4.6. A wildlife study area is being developed on the Canal Centre Field. The aim is to provide a safe, secure area with lots of interest which teachers can book and use on a “self guided” basis. This will free up valuable staff time.
- 4.7. The Website and the ease of E mail generally has prompted many more enquiries. We deal with approximately 15 actual E mail enquiries for information etc. per day from subjects as varied as boat trip times and wildlife information to the upkeep of the wartime defences. This is taking a noticeable chunk of staff time, although is a valuable role.

5. Mooring Basin

- 5.1. The mooring basin survey work has been completed. This included a flora and reptile survey, which had to be carried out in June and a bat survey which needed to be carried out in July / August. Neither survey highlighted any problems, although the need to carry out a reptile rescue prior to works commencing was highlighted. This has to be carried out in late summer, and has accordingly been completed, including the construction of an artificial “hibernaculum”.

- 5.2. The surveys, plus a full report of the reptile rescue works have been sent to Surrey County Council to be included as part of the Planning Application. This is due to go to further consultation with a view to making the December Planning Committee.
- 5.3. In anticipation of a positive result we are currently putting project management and other background works in to place.

6. Health and Safety

- 6.1. A Hand Arm Vibration (HAVS) assessment of all BCA equipment and staff procedures has been carried out in line with Hampshire County Council Policy.
- 6.2. Two members of staff have been trained as Manual Handling and Lifting assessors and trainers. This is a significant responsibility and follows another HCC initiative. An in house programme of assessment and training will follow.
- 6.3. Regular inspections have been carried out of all embankments and structures.
- 6.4. A survey of the Canal Centre grounds has been carried out to look for any hazardous trees, this is of particular concern due to school visits and extensive site use. This was carried out in house following training (See section 2.5). Several dead limbs were identified as potential hazards and have been removed.

7. Community Links

- 7.1. An appeal for help through the Woking press has resulted in several people being in contact who are willing to help litter pick. We are supplying litter pickers and support.
- 7.2. A number of charity events have taken place on the canal this summer. We are aware of about half a dozen, although others do take place without any consultation – which could, although has not yet to date, cause problems. Nevertheless this does demonstrate another valuable role the canal has in the community.
- 7.3. There has been high media coverage of the Canal, including TV features on “The Politics Show” and “Country Ways”. BBC South ran a feature in August on vandalism, which they had picked up from the local press. Scenes for an episode of “Rosemary and Thyme” were filmed, earning £1000 facility fee.
- 7.4. We are very grateful to the Surrey and Hants Canal Society for their continued support and work on the Canal. As well as the St John’s Backpumping, the Society have embarked on piling work on lock wing wall returns, which is a vital contribution to canal maintenance. We are also working with the Society to look at ways of using the “advantages” of the two organisations to raise funds for the Canal.