

BASINGSTOKE CANAL JOINT MANAGEMENT COMMITTEE**THE SURREY & HAMPSHIRE CANAL SOCIETY REPORT – APRIL 2012****1. The Navigation**

In order to test the condition of the eastern end of the canal and the operation of the Woodham and St Johns lock flights, a group of 8 boats, organised by the Byfleet Boat Club, navigated the canal over the Easter weekend as far as Brookwood Country Park. The trial was successful and the operational experience will be fed into the discussions which are underway between the boating interests and the BCA to put in place an 'open access' policy. This policy is intended to encourage greater use of the canal and it will also produce significant cost savings in terms of ranger time. Other initiatives aimed at attracting more visitors including, for example, making arrangements for the sale of boat licences at Thames Lock and another location on the R Wey have yet to be put in place. The BCA should be asked to deal with this as a matter of urgency.

Recommended Action : The BCA shall finalise the Open access Policy and the arrangements for the sale of navigation licences by the end of May.

Although water shortages have led to the decision to keep the Deepcut Flight closed this summer, the Canal Society understands that the remaining balance of the capital sum allocated to the canal by SCC in 2010 will be used to complete the remaining work at Deepcut such that the flight can be put back into operation as soon as the water supply position improves.

The closure of the canal for bridge and building works adjacent to the towpath remains a serious issue for the navigation. Despite repeated requests, the JMC has still not received a proper acknowledgement from Network Rail that bridge closures (other than for emergencies) must be planned well in advance following consultations with the boating interests, must be carried out during the winter months when navigation is less affected and must involve the closure of the canal for the minimum amount of time. There is ample evidence from other parts of the canal network that these objectives can be achieved but it is essential that the BCA takes all the necessary steps to ensure that the prolonged closure of Ash railway bridge (which caused significant economic impact on boat operators) is not repeated.

Recommended Action: The County Councils write again to Network Rail asking for assurances that bridge closures will be subject to prior consultation, will be restricted to the winter months and will result in the minimum disruption to the navigation.

2. Working Parties

The Canal Society continues to organise working parties using its own volunteers and other volunteers from waterways groups including the Waterways Recovery Group (WRG). Recognising the serious condition of the towpath between the Canal Centre and Guildford Road Bridge in Frimley, the Canal Society's working parties have been installing soft bank protection and infilling the 'dog holes' which have caused considerable erosion to the towpath. This is a very large and laborious task but it does emphasize the need for the members of the Canal Partnership (and, in this case Surrey Heath) to recognise that continuing neglect will result in a canal which is not navigable and a towpath which is not useable. In order to partially address the 'dog holes' issue, access points for dogs are being provided as part of the repair work.

Other working parties have cleared some of the non-towpath side of the canal north of the Canal Centre and Canal Society volunteers have been working every week throughout the winter with BCA rangers on a variety of jobs including bank side clearance, painting and sprucing up the area around the Canal Centre

A one week work camp is planned for this summer, with a separate weekend visit. These will involve groups from WRG who will carry out a number of tasks which may include surfacing the towpath between Ash Lock and Farnborough Road Bridge, lock renovation at Deepcut, and brickwork repairs at Crookham Wharf. The importance of the long term commitment of WRG to the Basingstoke Canal cannot be over-emphasized. WRG were heavily involved in the restoration in the 1970s and 1980s and they are now playing a large part in ensuring that the navigation is restored.

Since the last report the Canal Society has contributed 109 man/days of work to the canal. During this period expenditure has been low because most of the towpath work at Frimley has been funded by an environmental fine collected by Surrey Heath BC from a company which was involved in a pollution incident.

3. Canal-side Developments

The Canal Society wishes to raise, once again, the vital importance of protecting the canal corridor from inappropriate development and ensuring that new developments provide benefits for the canal derived from their canal frontage location. Our previous proposal, which was discussed at a JMC last year but was not acted upon, was for all the 6 District Authorities to work with The County Councils, the Canal Society and other interested stakeholders on a Planning Guidance document for the canal which will provide advice and guidance on the way in which the canal partnership will respond to development proposals, assist developers and landowners who wish to promote developments which may affect the canal and promote mutually beneficial working partnerships which will enhance the value of the canal to the communities that it serves.

An excellent example of what the Canal Society has in mind is the document enclosed with this report which has been drafted by our sister waterway, the R Wey. We strongly recommend that the JMC adopts our proposal for a Planning Guidance document for the Basingstoke Canal and that the constituent authorities are requested to support this proposal.

Recommended Action: The JMC approves the proposal to put in place a Planning Guidance document for the Basingstoke Canal and requests the constituent authorities to co-operate in the preparation of such a document for review by and approval of the JMC at its autumn meeting.

4. Water Supplies

The Water Strategy Group, established following an initiative by the Canal Society and comprising representatives from the Society, the IWA and the Counties continues to work on a water strategy for the canal. It has become evident, during the course of this work, that the hydraulics of the canal is a complex subject and the options for accessing further supplies are both limited and will be difficult to bring to fruition. However, work is already underway to finalise an application to the Environment Agency to increase the abstraction limit on the supply pumped from the R Wey at Byfleet. From the investigations so far, it would appear that the drilling of a borehole above Deepcut would probably be the most productive option in terms of the amount of water that could be obtained. However, a bore hole (or, indeed some of the other options) would require funding and there would undoubtedly be issues with the other stakeholders including Natural England. The Canal Society does, however, wish to reiterate the fundamental point that without adequate water supplies, the canal will die and return to dereliction and, with it, the SSSI, the fishery and ultimately the towpath. We would therefore urge all constituent members to fully support the water initiatives that are being taken and to assist, at the appropriate time, with planning and other regulatory consents.

5. Income Generation

After over 3 years of hard work by the Basingstoke Canal Canoe Club, the BCA and the Canal Society it had been confidently expected that the project to build a new amenity block and to upgrade the camping field at Mytchett would, by the time of the JMC meeting in June, be well underway and that the potential to generate additional income for the canal from these developments would be closer to reality. Sadly the whole project is now stalled, yet again, for reasons which are not entirely clear but which appear to relate to a property evaluation being undertaken by SCC's Estates Department of the whole Mytchett site. We can hardly over-state the dismay which this recent turn of events has caused to the voluntary sector and the Canoe Club in particular. The Mytchett project has been in the planning stage for some time and the Canoe Club has already expended some of its hard won funds on the design for the new building.

Before the recent development, the Canoe Club was on the brink of submitting an application to Sport England for a grant to part fund the project. The deadline for the application has now past and there is currently no clear indication of when (or indeed if) this project will get back on track. If the JMC is serious about generating additional income for the Canal the Mytchett development is the sort of project that could produce additional funds in the short term. The project would also deliver a desperately needed facility for the Canoe Club whose members have lacked any proper facility at Mytchett for many years.

6. Other matters

1. Now that the Vision document is to hand, we strongly urge the JMC to set up a working group to consider how the canal should be managed in the future. We have mentioned on several occasions in recent years that the current governance structure (which was created over 20 years ago shortly after the canal was re-opened) is no longer an effective vehicle for managing the canal and carrying it forward. We would be interested to hear the views of other JMC members on this key issue.

2. By the time of the JMC meeting in June, the Canal society's rally at Frimley Lodge Park will have taken place and a report on the rally will be provided to the meeting. In the Canal Society's view, rallies of this kind are an essential way of promoting the canal and ensuring its better use. We are planning more rallies in the years to come and we would like to engage with each of the constituent authorities to identify suitable sites, appropriate occasions to celebrate and other ways in which we can work together to get the best out of the canal.

P.Riley

Chairman
The Surrey & Hampshire Canal Society

27.4.12