

Canal Management Report

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Key Issue

To inform the Committee of actions taken by the Strategic Manager and BCA Canal Manager in managing, maintaining and operating the Canal; and report the work of the Conservation Steering Group.

Operation & maintenance

BCA Maintenance & Inspection Works

Planned

The BCA carried out the following planned maintenance and inspection tasks:

- Upper and lower Lock gates replaced at Lock 22 and pot reset
- Winter flail cutting of towpath.
- Drain down for full inspection of St Johns Lock flight by SCC Engineer (see below).
- Offside cutting at Ash Vale, Lousey Moor (Nr Dogmersfield Park) and Malthouse Cutting.
- Replanking of gates at Lock 8 and repairs to Lock 25 gates.
- Greywell Tunnel engineer's inspection and bat hibernation survey.
- Agreement holder removed 10 tonnes of signal crayfish from canal during year.
- Preparation works for Farnborough Rd mooring including offside cutting and car park refurbishment.
- Length Inspections, Supplemental Inspections, Reservoir Surveillance Inspections / Reservoir Inspection by the Supervising Engineer, and the Lock General Inspections were all conducted on target.
- Additionally a complete inspection of all Embankments identified as have a significant consequence on failure was conducted – the BCA has not been regularly meeting this target to this point.

Reactive

- During the autumn boats lifted lock gates at both lock 2 and Lock 15, both required repairs and reinstating as a result. Boaters were recharged for costs incurred in repairs.
- On 30 May a visiting boat accidentally rammed the lower gates at Lock 18, causing extensive damage to the timber gate frame. The Deepcut lock-flight was closed on safety grounds, and will remain closed whilst a replacement set of gates are manufactured; expected delivery of the new gates is late July. We are in discussion with the boater's insurers over recovering our costs.
- Repairs to minor leaks at Woking, New Haw, St Johns and Crookham silt dump embankments.
- Repairs to stem leaks to high risk embankments below Lock 1 and Pyestock following cyclical inspections – showing the value of regular inspection
- Badger "eviction" from Dinorben embankment to prevent damage to integrity of embankment.
- Work with Canal society preparing plans for works at Crookham Wharf car park to lower wharf height and general refurbishment of car park and new map sign.
- Tree clearance works for 2 weeks following bad weather late 2017.
- Large Ash tree self felled and hung up next to Poulter's bridge. Required extensive works by rangers to bring down safely and clear from canal.

Events/Visitor Services

- Over 2000 people attended Santa Cruise month long event in December.
- We now have 2,537 followers of our Facebook page.
- New volunteer skippers trained and *Rosebud* and the Patrol Boat both out again regularly. The Patrol Boat carried out full trip up to Greywell over several days in March clearing rubbish and debris and generally sprucing up for the season.
- Small Byfleet boat club rally of 6 boats over Easter holidays.
- Canal navigation re-opened following winter works early in mid March following timely completion of works programme.
- The lack of online booking facilities is hampering development of several of the BCA's business streams.

Volunteers

- Volunteer Christmas party with over 40 attendees for seasonal merriment.
- Average of 16 volunteers attending every Tuesday who spent the winter tackling towpath side vegetation cutting throughout the canal. Sheerwater in particular was "blitzed" with 6 weeks spent in this area, clearing back the embankment and collecting over 6 trailers of rubbish.
- The following volunteer hours were recorded during the year:

17/18

Tuesday work party – 2841

Canal Society weekend party – 2282

Canal Society (other than work party) – 1272 – *figures from Jan & Feb 18 only as not supplied previously*

Lengthsmen scheme – 3925

Rosebud trip/charter boat – 1425

Patrol boat – 1354

Canal Centre – 328

Corporate – 223

Canal Centre Santa Cruise reception – 42

Father Christmas – 142

Total = 13,834 hours

This is the equivalent to £86,500 (*using HLF standard rate for unskilled volunteers working an 8 hour day*)

Capital Works Programme

The following works from the capital works programmes of Surrey and Hampshire County Councils have been carried out from the 2017 programme:

Surrey

- **Woking town wharf** – work was expected to start in September, but during neighbour consultations an issue was raised about possible soil contamination which meant that that the contractor's autumn window of availability was missed. Start on site delayed until April 2018 – the contractor is now progressing works with an expected completion date of the end of July.
- **Bank protection** – a prioritised list of sites have been surveyed by the BCA and SCC Engineer for a scheme of bank protection throughout the Surrey half of the Canal. A schedule of site were priced but lack of contractor availability meant that this work has been postponed until September 2018.
- **Heath Vale Road Bridge** – the collapsed towpath wall under the bridge has been repaired, along with a section of bank protection at Great Bottom Flash and opposite Ash Wharf by the same contractor – works finishing on 23 December.
- **Lock inspections / repair** – the St John's Locks were drained for Principle Inspection by the SCC Engineer. A contractor immediately carried out the key items of maintenance identified. All of the locks inspected so far have been in better than expected condition.

Hampshire

- The 2017 HCC **bank protection** projects were priced by the same contractor as the SCC projects and were therefore also delayed due to contractor availability. HCC now have substantial additional resource and additional sites can now be targeted.
- In late May a leak was noted worsening in an embankment near Farnborough Airport. Urgent bank protection works are being progressed as part of the capital **bank protection** programme, with the aim of them being completed before the Airshow.
- **Swan “cutting”** – All neighbours permitted access for a complete site survey, which HCC Surveyors conducted in April. The survey results have now been passed to Roy Sutton, IWA Hon. Engineer, who will conduct a costing estimate of the two remaining remediation options. A discussion will then need to be had with the Canal Society and HCC Engineers about how the project will be managed and funded.

A separate report is being presented on the forward capital works programme.

Management Team

The Canal Manager and Strategic Manager have been working on the following matters:

- **Canal Centre Campsite Redevelopment** - Plans and preparatory surveys have been prepared to enable a planning application to be made for the redevelopment of the campsite. As the site is greater than 1 ha it is classed as a major development and a significant amount of data has been required. Support is now required from an architect to complete the design of the building (especially services) and SCC Property have now appointed Crowper Griffiths to complete this work. It is proposed that a Planning Consultant will be used to check and amend the application, design and surveys before submission; funding for these services have been promised by SCC Property.
- **Staffing** - A minor staff restructure is being looked at following the resignation of the Senior Admin Assistant, to ensure the visitor centre can cope in summer seasons, and also looking at ways to ensure that the BCA meet all of their key inspection targets.
- **Chobham Road turnover bridge** – the Strategic Manager is engaged with design and consents approvals for a Woking Borough Council / SCC project funded by EM3 to provide a new turnover bridge at Chobham Road, Woking. A planning application has now been granted by Woking Borough Council. The bridge will be owned by Woking BC under an agreement with SCC as Canal owner.
- **Water Environment Grant** – the Canal Manager has been working on working up suitable projects to enhance the Canal using measures set by the Environment Agency in the Water Framework Directive and Natural England; these will be projects based on conservation objectives in the Canal’s Conservation Management Plan (see below). The grant is to enhance rural stretches of water and a substantial “pot” of funding is available for projects over the next three years. This is a one-time only grant application process as it is based on EU funding.
- **Abstraction Licensing** – The water abstraction licensing regime changed on 1 January 2018. A large number of previously exempted activities, including navigation, now require licensing. Navigation Authorities are entitled to transitional arrangements and some exemptions within their waterway system; but non-navigation authorities require abstraction licences for every water transfer. The EA have previously challenged SCC/HCC/BCA’s role as a navigation authority, there is therefore a substantial risk that additional costly licenses would be required for each lock and bypass should their previous view prevail. The Strategic Manager has therefore instructed SCC Legal Services to engage a legal Counsel for advice.

Conservation

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The Canal is 90% designated as SSSI, for its unusual water chemistry, and the resultant range of aquatic plants and dragonfly species. The Wildlife & Countryside Act 1981 places a duty on public sector owners of SSSI habitats protect and enhance them, it further places restrictions on the type of work which can be undertaken in an SSSI without having first obtained the assent of governments' watchdog – in our case Natural England.

It would be entirely unworkable to apply for assent for most of the day to day managements and maintenance of the waterway. A way around this is to agree a management plan for the site with Natural England. This covers most of the normal operations and management activities, based on conservation objectives which when combined protect and enhance the waterway.

A Conservation Management Plan was agreed with Natural England in 2008 for 10 years. This was in a large part drafted by Dr John Eaton – the leading expert on canal botany. The plan whilst being based on sound science, has proved very practical and useable with clear objectives and managements. Technical oversight of the Plan is by ecological experts from each of the County Councils, Natural England, and the Environment Agency sitting alongside officers of BCA and Canal Society as a Conservation Steering Group.

The 2008 Plan is now near the end of its 10 year period and a further plan is required in order for the BCA to effectively operate the Canal; Natural England will need to approve a replacement plan by November 2018 or the BCA will need to revert to applying for individual permissions for most of its operation and maintenance activities.

In the intervening years Dr Eaton has retired and is no longer able to advise us. The Canal Manager and Strategic Manager have therefore conducted a revision of the existing plan based on the premise that the previous plan needed only minor revisions to make it work more effectively advised by ecologists from HCC and SCC; the major reason that the previous plan had not delivered on all of its objectives is simply down to lack of resource.

The draft has been circulated to CSG members in December 2017, who discussed the views at their meeting in March 2018. Natural England are by and large happy with the draft, with some minor amendments, their major comment being a technical one surrounding the national technical measuring standards which have yet to be revised to match those in the Water Framework Directive (which became UK law in 2003).

Despite a robust debate led by the Canal Society it is quite clear that Natural England has no appetite to increase the limit on powered boat movements. The evidence of the limited amount of improvements in the botany shown in the 2012 botanical survey, previously reported to this Committee, was not repeated in the 2017 survey. Whilst it is not clear there is one isolated cause for the apparent decline in botany, turbidity from boat traffic, especially in Hampshire, is being suggested as one possible culprit. It is the Strategic Manager's view that if pressed too firmly Natural England may decrease the powered boat movement limit, rather than increase them, as there is no supporting evidence to demonstrate boat movements are having a beneficial or neutral effect on the ecology but some limited evidence to suggest it is contributing to decline. As there is now apparently a conservation based objective for dredging a better course of action is to plan dredging works to reduce the silt load and monitor the results.

Officers therefore intend to make the amendments agreed by the CSG, and submit a final draft of the Conservation Management Plan to Natural England for assent.

Background Documents

- Basingstoke Canal Conservation Management Plan 2008-2018
- Notes of Basingstoke Canal Conservation Steering Group - March 2018