



BASINGSTOKE CANAL JOINT MANAGEMENT COMMITTEE

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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 since the preceding meeting, and look forward work likely to happen in the 1st half of 2023; and to report the work of the Conservation Steering Group.

Officer's Recommendation

That the Committee note the content of the report

Operation & Maintenance

BCA Maintenance & Inspection Works

- Length Inspections, Supplemental Inspections, Lock General Inspections, Reservoir Surveillance Inspections have all been carried out.
- Staff time has continued to be taken up with training of new staff (see below – staffing)
- The 'Safer Streets Project' working in partnership with Surrey Police and Woking Borough Council, that was previously reported to JMC was entered by the Police for a 'Tilly' award and was announced winner. This project focused on extensive graffiti removal throughout the Woking stretch of Canal, a Canal Watch team of volunteers (utilising some of the BCS Canal Lengthsmen), new CCTV cameras along the towpath and electric bikes to assist the police and volunteers to actively patrol the area making it safer for women and young girls to use this area that has suffered from incidents of indecent exposure in recent times. The award was given to the police on recognition of innovation in working with local communities to solve problems. 13 arrests have now been made in relation to the issues in this area.
- Water Levels have been difficult this summer. The levels of input from the aquifer held well and we were able to continue to pass water down the Canal until on 22nd June when the Deepcut and Brookwood lock flights closed. This was followed by the closure of Ash Lock on Fri 24th June. We continued to pass water down from Hampshire pound until it got to the point that losses to evaporation and transpiration were resulting in declining levels in the Hampshire Pound. Without supply this meant the closure of Mytchett pound to powered boats on 12th July. Levels continued to fall fast in the Mytchett pound with ongoing hot weather and the resulting evaporation and transpiration. This resulted in the unprecedented closure of the Mytchett pound to unpowered boats on 15th August. This is the first time since restoration that this has had to happen due to drought and lack of water.

The good news was however that we were able to maintain powered and unpowered navigation in the

Hampshire Pound for the full season despite starting the season with artificially lowered levels. The Mytchett Pound remains extremely low but rainfall at the end of August allowed re-opened to unpowered boats on 14th September. Further prolonged rainfall will be required before the Mytchett Pound and Deepcut Locks are able to re-open to powered boats.

- We took advantage of the low water levels in Mytchett to carry out some bank repair work just upstream of Mytchett Place bridge where the old wooden edge had rotted away. We were able to recycle our old stop planks from previous works to use for this project and carry this out in-house.

Staffing

- Two Assistant Rangers left in the last 6 months, one was planned due to end of a temporary contract.
- We have successfully recruited into one of the vacant Waterway Ranger Posts.
- The other vacant Waterway Ranger Post was readvertised again, and an offer of employment has been made.
- The vacant Lock Keeper post was filled in August.
- All of the new staff are undergoing a period of extensive training; both formal courses for key skills, tools and equipment, but also job shadowing of the existing Rangers to learn how the Canal works and how to manage water.
- We welcomed a Police Sergeant from Hampshire Police force on a 2 week placement with us (with a further 2 weeks this winter) as part of a fast track promotion programme. They gave great feedback from their first 2 weeks. *"it was delightful, insightful and just good fun! Everyone was so patient and I really appreciated how involved they all made me feel."* As a result of the placement they will be feeding back to Hampshire police teams on the Canal to raise awareness of our presence and about the kind of things that go on here.

Events/Visitor Services

- Santa Cruises tickets went on sale on 26th Sept and sold about 80% of tickets on day one and over 90% were sold by the end of day 2. We hope that water levels will have come up enough to run the boat part of the trip by Dec but have a backup plan to offer a Santa Trail in place just in case, however this will impact income as we will offer a part refund.
- On social media our number of followers are:
 - Facebook - 8367 Followers,
 - Instagram - 1237 Followers,
 - Twitter - 1864 Followers (as of 27/9/2022)
- The drought and consequent low water levels have negatively impacted income this summer.
 - Rosebud was unable to operate from 12th July due to low water levels in the Mytchett pound.
 - The Unpowered Boat hire business was unable to operate from 15th August due to water levels in the Mytchett pound, however we had already had to reduce the type of boat on hire during the proceeding weeks due to difficulties with safe loading and beaching.
 - Self-led Pond dipping also had to be suspended due to ponds drying out and unable to be refilled from the canal.
- We had 2 fires on site at the Canal Centre campsite this summer. One set alight by a group of travellers and which required multiple fire engines to put out to prevent a major fire on neighbouring MOD land. The 2nd fire was a caravan that burnt out and was recorded as an accident. Thankfully no one was hurt in either incident and staff reacted quickly to contain the situations.

Conservation

- The Conservation Management Steering Group meeting was held on 12th Oct.
- Thomson Ecology are carrying out a study on existing canal survey data and presented their interim report to the CMSG. They are analysing data, examining relationships between environmental and human interactions to look into the relationships and factors that may be affecting the condition of the Canal SSSI, and will make recommendations for future management. Their report is expected at the end of November.

Volunteers

- Volunteers have been operational each Tuesday and some additional days, organised and overseen by a Waterway Ranger and Volunteer Leaders. This summer's work has concentrated on Lock painting and mowing and also removal of floating pennywort from the Woking pound. They also carried out repairs to the canoe platform at Mytchett and carried out some path resurfacing near Frimley lodge Park to repair some worn areas on this heavily used stretch of towpath.
- Some volunteers also undertook formal training in Ride-on/Pedestrian mowers and also Hedgetrimmers.

Management Actions

Partnership finance – significant rises in costs and decreases in funding from some partners, means that the forward operational budget has been cut to the minimum in order to set a balanced budget. Further increases in costs or cuts in revenue support will impact the BCA in being able to procure key items such as Principal Inspections – with the Culvert PI already being unaffordable in one year. This is covered further in the **Risk Register** and **Finance Reports**.

Staffing – the key Waterway Ranger team will be back at full strength, but are several months away from all staff being able to undertake all roles as the new team members undergo training. This however leaves the Assistant Ranger and Lockkeeper roles vacant – these staff are key to making the waterway useable and presentable.

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

- **Tree Inspections** – SCC's Arborists will carry out the delayed inspection of the Hampshire half of the Canal over the coming months.
- **Mytchett Lake Reservoir** – The independent Inspecting Engineer has carried out the 10-year assessment of the reservoir. He requires a draw down study, and a re-examination of the 2010 flood study in the light of new inflows and evidence. These have been referred to SCC for funding as they are a consequence of SCC's ownership not operations or regular maintenance issues. The Inspecting Engineer also requires a number of mostly minor works to be undertaken – some of which are operational in nature falling to the BCA, but some will need to be funded from the SCC capital programme over the coming years. The independent Supervising Engineer (who inspects the Lake and connected section of canal twice a year) has been asked to certify the On-site Plan for the Reservoir, but he required substantial modifications to the plan resulting in a significant amount of work; this however was finally certified in June. The Strategic Manager is also seeking legal advice from SCC's lawyers on requirements by the Inspecting Engineer that SCC are responsible for works on parts of the lake which are not in SCC ownership.
- **Water level management** – regular meetings to keep on top of drought situation and appropriate water & media management.
- **Towpath Improvement works** – Working with Crookham Parish Council on potential towpath improvement works between Malthouse bridge and Zebon Copse swing bridge.
- **Regular Liaison Meetings** – Basingstoke Canal Society (BCS), Boat User Group, Basingstoke Canal Angling Association, Woodham Houseboat Tenant engagement sessions and regular meetings with a number of commercial/quasi-commercial operators. BCS – Planning group
- **New Commercial Licences** – An agreement is being drafted regarding commercial use of the car park for a small business at Colt Hill.

Asset Management Programme

The following works from the County Councils' "capital" asset management programme were planned for the 2022/23 programme:

Surrey

- **Bank repairs** – These will be measured up and prioritised for works this winter according to available budget.
- **Lock gates** – After the Lock general inspections were carried out, Lock 3 upper gates have been prioritised for replacement this winter. The regular inspection and prioritising of lock gate replacement has allowed lock

gates to be cyclically managed allowing better planning for annual budget spend and spread of costs and associated revenue works.

- **Deepcut Towpath Improvement** – pre-construction consents and surveys are being undertaken, with a view to the main body of work being undertaken in summer 23/24. There appears to be significant difference of opinion between SHBC, GBC and SCC as to whether Planning Consent is required for the works – this is being discussed with SCC Planners and Lawyers. A requirement to gain planning consent is likely to delay construction.

Hampshire

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- **Crookham Deeps** – this project has halted after the contractor left site without completing the works. An interim repair was installed in August and so far, has successfully halted the main leak allowing water levels to be brought up as and when there is enough rainfall.
- **Swan “cutting”, North Warnborough** – The Canal Manager and Strategic Manager together with Engineering and other professional colleagues at Hampshire County Council continue to work on this project. Hampshire County Council geotechnical engineers are currently drawing up the design for this project which will then need to be agreed by all parties. Pre-construction wildlife and vegetation surveys that will inform construction approach and a required Planning Application are currently being carried out.
- **Bank Repairs** – These will be measured up and prioritised for works this winter according to available budget, and are likely to be combined with the revenue spot dredging works at the western end of the Canal.
- **Weirs and Sluices** – As a result of the previous principal inspection of weirs and sluices elements at Norris Hill weir/sluice were noted as life expired or needing major attention, with a complete replacement of the sluice gates essential. In order to improve water safety on the Canal and address more minor issues identified at North Warborough and Farnborough Road, Aldershot - three new dual leaf weir penstock gates are being purchased. This style of gate was successfully installed at Hermitage weir in Woking in 2016 and require less staff intervention to manage high winter levels and improved safety for waterway users. Installation of the new gates will, consents allowing, be programmed to take place in the late spring.