



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, to look forward to work likely to happen in the 2nd 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 Operations & Inspection Works

- Length Inspections, Supplementary Inspections, Reservoir Surveillance Inspections have all been carried out as planned.
- The Waterway Inspector has completed the General Inspection of all embankments, something that has not been achieved previously – highlighting the reason that a ranger role was remodelled as an Inspector, to lead on inspections. General Inspections are a more detailed inspection by asset type, conducted mainly at annual intervals.
- The General Inspection of Locks is underway and will be completed in early October.
- A leak has been found at the Aqueduct over the River Whitewater – this is a reoccurrence of a similar issue and appears to be linked to poor quality reconstruction work in the 1970s. The BCA and Canal Engineer are investigating options for repair.
- There was a further minor pollution incident in Woking town centre – thought again to have come from road drainage. There was minor disruption to the canal for a few days whilst the BCA cleaned this up.
- Water levels have been maintained across the canal allowing for an uninterrupted boating season, although powered boat use is lower than in previous years without water related interruptions.
- The St John's back-pumping system failed mid-season, requiring creative water management to allow continued navigation between Lock 7 and 28. A major overhaul of the system was overdue, and the BCA have procured a major overhaul/repair from SCC capital funding.
- Although beneficial for water management perspective the unsettled weather resulted in multiple fallen trees and branches. These were all cleared by the ranger team or, when under 3rd party ownership, contact and arrangements made with the owners to ensure timely clearance therefore avoiding unnecessary expenditure from the canal budget.

- The ranger team, with assistance from weekly volunteer team, spent the summer ensuring the towpath remained unhindered by vegetation, despite good growing conditions.
- Works to relocate badger setts under licence from Natural England sited on a high risk embankment in Fleet remain ongoing, as the badgers seem determined to dig the embankment – badger setts pose a significant risk of breach.
- The BCA team has also had to spend time repairing and upgrading security arrangements at Ash Lock Depot following a break in that resulted in the loss of £12,000 worth of tools, including some donated by the BCS. Due to the age of some tools, insurance cover will only refund about £5,500 resulting in a budget pressure. The Police were made aware that the break in was in progress but did not attend.
- Rangers worked with the Environment Agency and volunteers to clear highly invasive Floating Pennywort (*Hydrocotyle ranunculoides*) from isolated areas within Fleet, which we believe may have been introduced by persons unknown. The BCA and volunteers will continue to keep a very close eye out for further plants and take steps to immediately remove if located. The BCA are also planning to post information notices to local residents in collaboration with the Environment Agency.

Staffing

- A new Lock Keeper joined the team in June bringing the Ranger team up to full strength.
- The Canal Operations Manager left in July, but despite a recruitment exercise a replacement has yet to be found. The Strategic Manager, Senior Ranger and Canal Centre Manager have all been covering elements of the Canal Manager's duties during the vacancy.

Events/Visitor Services

- Santa Cruise event tickets went on sale on 25 Sept and all 164 trips were sold out in just 2 days.
- On social media our number of followers (as of 5 October 2023) are:
 Facebook – 9029 (Sept 2022 - 8367) Followers,
 Instagram – 1334 (Sept 2022 -1237) Followers,
 Twitter / X – 1829 (Sept 2022 – 1864) Followers
- The campsite and summer visitor activities are nearly at their income targets in September, despite a wet summer, and 4 traveller incursions on to the campsite.
- The Visitor Services team are working with HCC colleagues on developing the online booking system for camp site, there have been a series of technical issues in getting the system to work as intended.
- Due to the huge support from our Skipper and Crew volunteers, *Rosebud* public trips sales have been very strong, with a majority of trips being sold out. The Cream tea trips have also been extremely popular this year, with all but 3 trips sold out.
- The Visitor Service Team now have three volunteers helping out in the Office and reception.

Conservation

- The Conservation Management Steering Group meeting was held on 25 October.
- Monitoring of the areas dredged last winter has continued, with volunteers undertaking a bathymetric survey of these areas.
- We are awaiting results of a dragonfly survey which has been undertaken across the Canal this summer – this is the first survey in 10 years.
- The 4-yearly botanical survey required in the Conservation Management Plan is due in in 2024.

Volunteers

- Volunteering continues to be an essential part of making the Canal work effectively – Volunteering encompasses a wide range of activities and is not just the practical tasks undertaken by the BCA's Tuesday Group and the Canal Society's Weekend Workparty.
- Volunteers from the Tuesday Group have been working on towpath vegetation, regular painting and maintenance of the Deepcut Lock flight, and carried out a joint conservation working party with the Blackwater Valley CMP volunteers at Claycart Flash.

- In the financial year to date 10,565 hours have been logged by volunteers, of which 5435 was in quarter 1 and 5130 in quarter 2. This is very similar to last year's figures.
- The Canal Society volunteers have organised and led over 22 corporate teams who have contributed 1,316 hours of work delivered by 237 personnel. Some of the companies have also contributed £1,000 per event to the Society.

Management Actions

Partnership finance – there are still major pressures on the BCA's partnership budget, and this has only been compounded by the withdrawal of funding with immediate effect by Woking Borough Council notified in September, owing to that Council's financial position. Savings are being sought to cover at least part of the £53,000 pressure within the 2023/24 budget, rather than increasing the draw on reserve. The 2023/24 financial position is further referred to in the Finance Report and Risk Register Report.

The costs of inflation on supplies, services and contractor's costs alongside the withdrawal of partner funding is not a sustainable position – the Canal Futures workstream has been looking at this and is referred to in other reports to this Committee.

The Strategic Manager, with the Project Officer and Canal Engineer, has been working on the following matters:

- **Tree Inspections** – SCC arborists completed a survey of the Hampshire half of the Canal in May, and this has resulted in a significant number of trees requiring safety related work. The most urgent matters (109 instructions) are currently being dealt with – further works are expected to be required before the end of the financial year, placing an additional pressure on the BCA revenue budget.

As a result, the Strategic Manager has been reviewing the corporate tree policies of Surrey and Hampshire and working on a tree management plan that will fit with both policies, fit within legal requirements for tree safety set by case law and also potentially reduce costs. A draft is currently with the Canal Senior Management Team for review.

- **Mytchett Lake Reservoir** – The independent Inspecting Engineer carried out the 10-year assessment of the reservoir last November, reporting in April 2022; he has directed a series of Measures in the Interest Of Safety (MIOS) – it is a legal requirement for these to be carried out. Further work has been ongoing with these items, along with monitoring and developing a plan for remediation of a leak which has developed in the mitre between the canal and railway embankments.

Surrey County Council, as the formal undertaker for the reservoir, has changed the independent Supervising Engineer due to lack of continuity of staff and increasing prices from the previous supplier. The new supplier already provides similar services to SCC for other reservoirs on its estate and has tendered a much more competitive price for this service.

- **Regular Liaison Meetings** – Basingstoke Canal Society (BCS), Boat User Group, Basingstoke Canal Angling Association, and regular meetings with a number of commercial/quasi-commercial operators.

Asset Management Programme

The following works from the County Councils' "capital" asset management programme have been undertaken from the 2023/24 programmes, or as most works have to be conducted in winter, are being developed or procured:

Surrey

- **Deepcut Towpath Improvement** – The requirement to gain planning consent has slowed implementation by 12 months due to the number of pre-application surveys and supporting documents that are required. These are currently being progressed with a planning application expected to be made in around December. Construction is still expected in summer 2024.

- **Lock gate cyclical replacement programme** – two sets of new lock gates are being procured for installation by the BCA this winter – these will be at Lock 10 and Lock 21. This keeps the lock gate stock refreshed in a cycle, so that there is not a sudden deterioration of many sets of gates, as occurred previously in 2009.
- **Mytchett Lake (MIOS)** – a new set of stop plank grooves are planned for Mytchett Lake Road bridge as required by the Inspecting Engineer. The design is with the Inspecting Engineer for approval.
- **Mytchett Lake** – exploratory works are required at the upstream end of the embankment in relation to leakage in the mitre between the railway and canal embankments. This may influence works required in the 2024/25 year if as suspected, the canal edge needs to be completely rebuilt under the railway bridge.
- **Towpath surface** – the BCA have been allocated £30,000 from the SCC capital programme to upgrade two areas of deteriorating towpath surface in well used areas at Brookwood and Pirbright.
- **Lock 25 paddle chambers** – following two years of severe difficulties in being able to pass water downstream at Lock 25 throughout that last couple of years, the upper paddle chambers are both scheduled to be reconstructed. The ability to quickly control water levels between Locks 26 and 25 is considered an important safety measure due to the proximity of the main London Southwestern railway line.
- **Pumping systems overhaul** – the Woodham and St John’s pumping systems are overdue for an overhaul. The BCA have now been reallocated this work after SCC’s Land and Property team were unable to provide a workable solution. The replacement of the St John’s pump is procured and awaiting installation.

Hampshire

- **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 engineers are currently tendering for early contractor involvement so that the technical design can be fine-tuned into a buildable scheme. The contractor’s methodology will affect what consents may be required.
- **Weirs and Sluices** – three new dual leaf weir penstock gates have been purchased for North Warnborough, Farnborough Road, and Norris sluices as outlined in previous reports – this is to overcome defects, improve water management and operator safety. Installation for North Warnborough is procured with installation expected at the beginning of November. The installation of Farnborough Road was delayed due to concerns over budget, but tendering is now progressing. Additional consents are required from the EA for Norris sluice – these are being progressed. It is now expected that Norris and Farnborough Road will be installed in Feb/March 2024.
- **Towpath repairs** – The BCA have been allocated £15,000 to repair an area of Tarmac path that is defective in the Fleet area.

Both counties

- **Culvert Principle Inspections** – around 1/3 of the culvert stock has been inspected by a specialist contractor, with three outstanding. The survey reports have been passed to the Canal Engineer for analysis and specification of any works required arising. The works budget will be drawn from the 2024/25 capital programmes.

The Committee is reminded that the culvert survey was divided into three tranches due to cost (which are drawn from the BCA partnership budget) with only the highest risk culverts being selected for inspection in 2023/24. Surveys of the remaining culverts will be required in future years.