

Progress Report (October 2017 – February 2018 inclusive)

1. Wall-moving project

The project to move back the roadside wall near the car park entrance has been completed. The project was funded by Section 106 contributions from developers involved with the Tiverton Eastern Urban Extension.

Visibility for drivers leaving the Canal Basin car park is now significantly improved, and the road crossing for pedestrians is also safer.



Given the changes to the layout of the car park entrance, the old landscape-orientated welcome sign needed to be changed for a new portrait-orientated one, which provided an opportunity to update the design.



Although there was understandable frustration on the part of local residents at the length of the road closure required to undertake the work safely, the finished job has attracted a great deal of positive

comment and approval from Canal visitors and from the MDDC Conservation Officer.

At present the final stage of the Road Safety Audit process is being undertaken, which may lead to some further adjustments or improvements.

2. Play area

The completion of the wall-moving project enabled work to commence on installing the new play area on the land above. Contractors began work in January and at the time of writing most of the equipment and all of the gates and fencing have been installed. Work on installing the matting, and remaining benches and bin will follow in late February / early March once ground conditions have improved.



An official opening, to be led by DCC Chairman, Cllr Ray Radford, has been organised for 1pm on Wednesday 11th April and all JAC members are invited to attend.

3. Canal Basin car park flower bed

The wall-moving project required the wall between Canal Hill and the public toilets to be repointed and for a number of the bushes in front of this wall to be cut down. In order to open up views of the newly repointed wall, provide a more welcoming 'gateway' to the Canal and widen the space available to vehicles entering and leaving the car park, a new wall has been built to retain a new flower bed.

The new wall and tarmacked strip below has enabled the parking bays on this side to be moved over by 50cm, creating more space at the entrance - especially for coaches which sometimes struggle when cars are parked on both sides. Other faded parking bay lines have been repainted at the same time.



The Canal Manager has discussed possible planting options with the MDDC amenity horticulture team, who have indicated that they may be able to plant and manage the bed as part of their wider role in Mid Devon for a modest fee.

4. Other works around the Canal Basin

A number of other improvements have been undertaken recently or are due for completion during March and April. One that has been completed is the fabrication and installation of new railings and retaining wall beside the gent's toilets. The wall and railings replaced a wooden wall that was rotting and match those on the other side of the building.



The grass beside the bins near the steps is often muddy in the winter and so the Canal Rangers have created a new path to provide better access to the bins. The two old green bins near the public toilets (one of which was vandalised) have been replaced with black ones to match those by the steps.

The orientation panel mounted to the rock at the base of the steps is out of date and the

other rock-mounted interpretation panel at the top of the steps is also very old and faded, and so replacement panels are being prepared. The designers undertaking the work also designed the Visitor Centre displays and so there will be consistency in the design styles.

The toilet bowl in the accessible toilet had been vandalised and has been replaced. Repeated problems with the flush mechanism have also been addressed by repositioning the cistern.

Whilst Canal Hill was closed for the wall moving works, Devon County Council took the opportunity to repair the boundary wall between the road and the garden of The Moorings. The wall was being undercut by spray and the pointing was crumbling. After ivy growth was removed, the wall was repointed and the base was protected from future spray damage by the inclusion of a kerb and a shoulder of cement. A mortar coping was added to protect the wall from water ingress. The work was approved by the MDDC Conservation Officer and funded by a corporate premises budget.



At present, the Canal Basin picnic area contains a mix of different style seats and benches giving it a rather cluttered appearance. A new style of oak seats and benches – the *Woodland Range*, provided by Streetmaster – has been selected and a number of seats and benches have been ordered to replace many of the existing ones in the Canal Basin, with most of the original ones to be redeployed elsewhere along the canal. The new structures should be installed before the Easter holidays.

In response to feedback from visitors who would like to see more benches with backs along the towpath, the *Hawthorn* oak seat (part of the *Woodland Range*) is now being offered to people enquiring about memorial benches along the canal, as well as the basic oak bench which we build ourselves.



There are plans to replace the green parking signs and posts around the Canal Basin car park, many of which are damaged and which are a mish-mash of styles / colours / fonts, with a uniform house style which will be adhered to in future. It is likely this work will need to wait until the new financial year at which point it can be afforded.



All of these improvements should help to make the Canal a more pleasant and appealing place to visit, providing a boost for canal businesses and the wider local economy.

5. Reed management

The ongoing programme of reed management continued this winter with a section on the Sampford Peverell side of Ayshford Bridge being dredged. Due to the lack of available adjacent land to spread the dredged material on, a new technique was trialled which proved effective. An excavator worked from the towpath side and separated chunks of reed growth and set them afloat for the new weedboat to collect and offload on the offside bank. This year only the towpath side margins were dredged and it is anticipated that the offside will also need to be done in a few years' time.



A 10m section near the Ebear dragonfly interpretation panel was also dredged in the same way to provide space for a new landing stage due to be built in the coming months.

6. Towpath surfacing and drainage works at Lowdwells



A section of towpath at Lowdwells had become very muddy and the existing French drain had become blocked in one area. This was limiting vehicle access for the Canal Ranger Service. A contractor was engaged to refurbish the French drain, scrape mud from the edges and re-dress the path with compacted stone.

7. Tree management works

Throughout the winter the Canal Ranger Service has been undertaking annual tree management works. Most of the work has been focussed on the offside banks, using the maintenance barge with the chipper on board, but work has also been undertaken on trees along the towpath side.

Following the intensive willow coppicing work on the Manley to East Manley section last winter, similar work has been undertaken on the section at the top of the Swans Neck this winter, as shown in the photos overleaf. Willows growing from the water's edge have been

treated with ecoplugs to prevent regrowth, whereas willows further up the bank will grow



back and will be managed by coppicing on a rotation period of approximately 10 years.

As well as the usual work of trimming back overhanging branches, much greater effort has been made this year to address longer term tree management considerations. To this end, rangers have been thinning (selecting the best formed and positioned trees and coppicing adjacent trees to give space and light to the selected future standard trees), formatively pruning young trees, and felling a small number of badly formed trees that are only going to present expensive management headaches in future. This work has been guided by advice from an arboricultural consultant who makes management recommendations as well as safety recommendations as part of the routine tree safety inspections.

Tree surgeons have undertaken a small number of works which require climbing or felling large trees. Deadwood has been removed from a number of large oaks. One large dying ash at Greenway car park (suspected ash dieback) was felled and another near Tidcombe Bridge had its crown reduced and deadwood removed. Two large overhanging willows near Beech car park have been pollarded and a group of sycamores growing on a section of cutting at Lowdwells has been coppiced.



A small number of trees were blown down during the storms in early January. Most were cleared by the Canal Rangers, but the largest, near Lowdwells, required tree surgeons and a winching contractor to extract it from the canal.

Ivy growth had become prolific on a number of large trees in the cutting between Waytown Tunnel and Fenacre Bridge. Whilst ivy is very important for wildlife and does not damage healthy trees, it can add to the 'sail effect' of large trees when it begins to extend throughout the crown, making them more prone to being blown over in storms. This winter, ivy has been severed on all the large trees in this section where it had begun to extend throughout the crown. This is a periodic exercise which will be repeated every 5 years.

8. Hedge laying and planting

Two sections of hedge have been laid this winter. Canal Rangers and volunteers laid a section between Manley Bridge and East Manley Bridge (pictured) and a hedgelaying contractor laid a section between the Aqueduct and Crownhill Bridge. The aim of laying this second section is to thicken the hedge at the base and provide better screening of the AD plant at Crownhill. A large number of hedging trees have also been planted to fill the gaps and thicken the hedge. Half of the section has been laid this winter and the other half will be laid next winter. Although the work will actually open up views of the AD plant in the short term, it will provide much better screening in two to three years' time and thereafter.



Lots of other hedge planting and gapping-up is being undertaken along the Canal at present. An 80m length of hedge is being planted near Fenacre Bridge, with half having been completed during a Volunteer Day in early February and the other half due to be planted by students from Bicton College during a work experience day at the end of February.



Further hedge planting will be undertaken by Canal Rangers and volunteers from Blundells School, Tiverton Scouts, Tiverton High School during March. 420 of the trees being planted will be provided for free by the Woodland Trust thanks to an application made by the *Friends of the Grand Western Canal*.

9. Hedge and bank cutting

All of the usual hedge and bank cutting work was completed by a contractor during February, with the exception of a few sections too narrow for his tractor to access, which have since been done by the Canal Rangers using their Kubota tractor.

10. Atherton Way ditch works

The last major project using capital funding allocated for infrastructure improvements following the breach is currently underway. The open ditch which runs parallel to the canal behind Atherton Way and Francis Crescent is being excavated and lined with a cement-impregnated fabric liner. This will reduce the likelihood of the ditch overflowing into the canal or backing up and contributing to flooding problems in Atherton Way during extreme rainfall events. The liner will also make future maintenance of the ditch (which



has to be done by hand) much easier as there will be a smooth and defined base of the ditch to run a shovel along.

11. Badgers in Wilcombe embankment

A badger sett with a family of around 5 or 6 badgers has been present in the embankment beside Wilcombe Primary School since around 2009. In 2010, the Canal Ranger Service submitted a Badger licence application seeking permission to have the badgers relocated, due to concerns about the effect their burrowing could have on the embankment. This application was turned down by Natural England who felt there were other options for managing the effects of the badgers.

Following discussions with the DCC Chief Bridges and Structures Engineer, a second application was submitted in 2011, seeking permission to install a line of steel bars extending to a depth of 3m below water level at 7cm spacings along a length of 20m between the towpath and the canal bank. The aim here was to prevent the badgers from burrowing too close to the canal channel and creating a leak. This application was approved and the work was undertaken in December 2011.

In January and February this year there have been some collapses of burrows on the hedge side of the towpath following heavy rainfall and hedge trimming by the tractor. The most recent of these encroached onto the edge of the towpath and more importantly was located close to the end of the run of steel rods. The Canal Ranger Service will therefore as a minimum be applying to extend the run of steel rods; but an ecological consultant will also be engaged to see if a stronger application for removing the badgers from the embankment can be submitted.

12. Bank repair beside Buckland Bridge

Following a 3m long slip of the bank beside the Buckland Bridge steps in Sampford Peverell, various repair options were considered before a dry stone masonry repair was selected and then undertaken by contractors. It is felt that the dry stone wall provides a long term but affordable solution to supporting this steep section of bank.



13. Maintenance barge decking

The Canal Ranger Service has two old tub barges which are used for maintenance work – the main one with a cab which was refurbished last year and another without a cab that has not been used much in recent years due to rotting and uneven decking. The planks making up this decking ran long-ways along the hull and were inadequately supported, so were prone to warping and breaking.

The old decking has been removed and the hull cleaned out and new bearers have been welded in along the hull, enabling the barge to be decked with shorter planks running across the hull from side to side. This new decking will be installed during March or April and will increase the capacity of the Canal Ranger Service to transport materials, work simultaneously at different points along the canal or provide a barge for contractors (such as tree surgeons) to work from whilst the Rangers work elsewhere on the main barge.

14. Benches

5 new oak memorial benches have been built and installed near the following locations:

- Follett Road, Tiverton
- Snakes Wood
- Greenway Bridge x 2
- Westcott Bridge

There are also orders for two more oak benches and one *Hawthorn* seat.

15. Relaunch of Volunteer Warden scheme

The Volunteer Warden scheme, run in partnership between the Country Park and the Friends of the Grand Western Canal, had not had a co-ordinator for several years and there was uncertainty over how many Volunteer Wardens were still active and what they were doing. A new co-ordinator, Colin Swains, came forward last year and following a meeting with the Canal Ranger Service it was agreed that the scheme would be re-launched.

Colin has been in touch with the majority of existing Volunteer Wardens, many of whom are still active. In order to help encourage more people to take up this role, a new poster has been agreed with Colin, designed by the DCC design team and has been placed in all of the noticeboards along the towpath.

Several Volunteer Wardens and members of Tiverton Litterpickers will be taking part in a Canal litter pick as part of Keep Britain Tidy's *Great British Spring Clean* on the 2nd and 3rd March.

16. Staff training

Members of the Canal Rangers Service have been required to attend a large number of training courses during the period of the report. One of the drivers for this has been an increasing requirement for DCC staff to attend refresher courses every three years. Whilst much of this training is useful and necessary, it has had an impact on the team's capacity to keep up with its workload in the last few months.

Could you be a Volunteer Warden?

Do you enjoy walking the Canal towpath, perhaps with a friend or a dog or simply on your own? If so would you like to become a Volunteer Warden to help keep a watchful eye on your favourite section of the Canal?

There are various ways in which you can help, including:

- Acting as 'eyes and ears' and reporting issues to the Canal Rangers
- Using secateurs to trim back small overhanging branches and brambles
- Helping to keep it litter free

All necessary equipment will be provided and there are no set times or daily commitments, just whatever you feel you can manage.

If you feel you are able to join us in helping to keep this wonderful environment just the way we would all love to see it, then please contact our Volunteer Warden Co-ordinator Colin Swains on 01884 258456 for an informal chat.

17. Green Flag Award / Management Plan

The Canal Manager has made good progress on drafting a new management plan for the Country Park, based around Green Flag Award criteria.

The format is now settled and about three quarters of the plan has now been drafted. A draft will be emailed to JAC members for their feedback in the spring.

The work plan within the existing management plan has been extended to cover 2018/19 and this was submitted as part of the 2018/19 Green Flag Award application.

18. Volunteers

Weekday volunteers (mainly long term volunteers Lee and Craig, but also Bicton College student, Luke, who is working one day per week): 152 days

19. Events

- 10.10.17 Farmwise Event at Westpoint- 15 schools from all over Devon took part in a canal hedgerow tree identification quiz throughout the day led by JR.
- 17.10.17 Devon Recovery Learning Community - providing courses for the wellbeing of people in Devon who have mental health difficulties
– 4 walkers + JR – Fossend to Lowdwells Lock return
- 18.10.17 Walk & Talk – Sampford Peverell - 26 walkers + JR
- 12.11.17 Volunteer Day – 9 volunteers + JR
- 14.11.17 Devon Recovery Learning Community - 7 walkers + JR – Sampford Peverell
- 29.11.17 Walk & Talk – Holcombe Rogus – 22 walkers + JR
- 3.12.17 Christmas Wreath event – 26 Adults & 8 Children + JR
- 5.12.17 Devon Recovery Learning Community - 5 walkers + JR – Canal Basin to Manley Bridge return
- 10.12.17 Volunteer Day – CS – Cancelled due to heavy rain
- 10.01.18 Walk & Talk – Canal Basin – 32 walkers + JR
- 12.12.17 Stover Carols – MB + CS managed car parking at this popular annual event
- 14.01.18 Volunteer Day – 9 volunteers + MB
- 16.01.18 Devon Recovery Learning Community - 7 walkers + JR – Sampford Peverell
- 11.02.18 Volunteer Day – 7 volunteers + CS
- 20.02.18 Devon Recovery Learning Community – 7 walkers + JR – Swans Neck

21.02.18 Walk & Talk – Swans Neck – 34 walkers + JR

20. Schools

26.02.18 Blundell's – 10 students+ 2 staff +JR – Tree planting

28.02.18 Bicton College – 8 students +1 staff + CS - Tree planting

FUTURE PROGRAMME OF PRACTICAL WORKS

- Install new benches and seats in Canal Basin
- Relocate picnic benches elsewhere along the Canal
- Install new landing stage near Ebear Dragonfly Panel and extend Sampford Peverell landing stage to include kayak launch point. Funding for the timber for these landing stages has been provided through County Councillor Ray Radford's Locality Budget
- Finish tree and hedge management works. Finish hedge planting
- Plant up new Canal Basin flower bed
- Repair Canal Basin landing stage
- Replace horse corral in Canal Basin with new one
- Clean up Warnicombe Bridge
- Resurface towpath between Crownhill Bridge and the Aqueduct
- Install fence and gates around tilting weir
- Drain puddles in Tiverton, by Battens Bridge and in section between Waytown Tunnel and Fenacre Bridge
- Install fence and gate at Beech car park
- Clean outlying interpretation panels and stain/oil frames
- All usual mowing, strimming and weed cutting

MANAGEMENT PROJECTS TO BE PROGRESSED

- Complete drafting of new management plan
- Complete review of boating regulations and permitting
- Finalise design and oversee installation of new interpretation panels in Canal Basin, plus new Visitor Centre sign to be fixed on western side of building
- Organise update and reprint of Canal Visitor Guide
- Ongoing discussions regarding Fenacre water transfer system
- Organise Abstraction Licence applications (new legal requirement)
- Ongoing activities relating to Fenacre Water overtopping into the Canal
- Investigate options / submit applications /organise works relating to Badgers at Wilcombe embankment.
- Investigate possibility of applying for funding from Countryside Stewardship Hedgerows and Boundaries scheme and apply if eligible
- Audit signage at bridges and car parks and update / repair as necessary
- Organise agreements for residents parking at Sampford Peverell wharf