

Progress Report (October 2018 – February 2019 inclusive)

1. Badgers in Wilcombe embankment

The badger colony which was discovered in the embankment near Wilcombe Primary School in 2009 has continued to expand and has in the last year extended its burrowing activity beyond the length of canal bank protected by steel rods (see appendix containing a write up off this project which was undertaken in 2011).

Following an inspection by a geotechnical consultant, and discussions with the DCC Chief Engineer (Bridges and Structures), contractors and an ecological consultant, it was proposed that the line of steel rods should be extended to protect the whole embankment. A badger licence application was submitted to Natural England and quotes have been received from contractors. A site visit has also been undertaken with Western Power Distribution concerning safe working below the 11KV lines which cross the canal at this point.

At the time of writing a ground penetrating radar survey is due to be undertaken during the week commencing 18th Feb to establish the current extent of burrows under the towpath, and a site meeting with Natural England wildlife officers and our ecological consultant has been arranged for 26th February. It is hoped that a licence will be issued following the meeting and that the work can be undertaken during March. A verbal update will be given at the JAC meeting.



2. Tree work by contractors

The largest job undertaken by tree surgeons along the canal this winter has been the felling of two Ash trees near Tidcombe Bridge. Both were suffering from Ash Dieback and had to be felled for safety reasons. In the case of the larger of the two trees, several metres of trunk wood was left standing to provide deadwood habitat. A mobile work platform was used by the tree surgeons to undertake the work safely and the towpath was closed with a diversion route waymarked.



Other jobs undertaken by tree surgeons include the felling of a dead willow at East Manley Bridge, removing deadwood from a large Ash tree beside East Manley Bridge, and the felling and stump grinding of two poorly-formed / diseased Cherry trees at Sampford Peverell picnic site.

At the time of writing the tree surgeons are winching out two fallen trees at Fenacre Bridge and Waytown Tunnel. On the recommendation of our tree consultants, a small number of poorly formed or unsafe trees on the offside bank at Fenacre Bridge and a poorly formed oak near East Manley Bridge are also being felled.

3. Tree work by the Canal Ranger Service

Every winter the Canal Rangers and volunteers undertake a complete pass along the canal, working from the maintenance barge cutting back overhanging branches. Last winter, in addition to this the Canal Rangers focussed particularly on the section between the Canal basin and Sellake Bridge, undertaking more intensive management work to coppice large overhanging willows, thin around good specimen trees and formatively prune them. This year the focus for particular attention has been the Sellake Bridge to Ayshford Bridge section.



At the time of writing the barge is working near Holbrook Bridge and the aim is to work up to Lowdwells by the middle of March, ahead of the bird nesting season.

4. Hedgelaying

Two sections of hedge have been laid this winter. A section between the Aqueduct and Crownhill Bridge was laid by a hedgelaying contractor and half of the cost of this work is being paid by Ixora Energy who run the nearby Anaerobic Digester. This is in recognition of the improvement in screening the hedgelaying work will have once the hedge grows back up.

The other section was laid by volunteers working with a Canal Ranger on one of the monthly winter



Volunteer Days. The work here was on the straight section of canal between Manley Bridge and East Manley Bridge. As always, the volunteers did a great job, and received lots of compliments for the work from passing walkers.



5. New information panels in the Canal Basin

Two new panels have been installed in the Canal Basin. They are fixed to large rocks and have replaced some very tired and outdated panels that had been in place since the early 1990s.

At car park level, near TS Hermes, there is a new orientation panel which provides a map of the Canal basin and details of some of the highlights. This should make it easier for visitors to see what is available and find their way, as this isn't straightforward on a split-level site.



At the top of the steps is another new panel which focuses on the historic use of the Canal Basin and in particular the limekilns. It is located beside the only remaining open

kiln and explains how they were used. The main image on the panel is an artist's impression of how the Canal Basin may have looked in its heyday in the mid-1840s.



A £1200 contribution from County Councillor Colin Slade's Locality Budget has enabled these new panels to be designed, produced and installed.

6. Fencing and gateposts

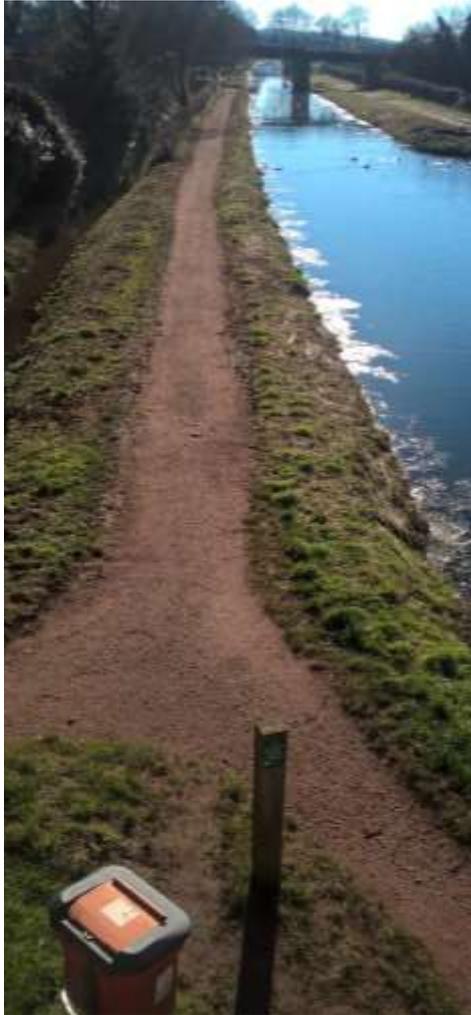
In several locations along the canal sections of post and rail fencing dating more than 20 years old were finally rotting and needed replacement. A local fencing contractor has replaced fences and gates at Beech car park, near Fenacre Bridge.



A section near Ebear Bridge has been replaced and new gateposts installed and the fence at Greenway car park in Halberton has also been replaced.



7. Towpath scraping and surfacing



In many areas along the canal, a depth of grass and mud has been forming at the sides of the path as leaves accumulate and grass edges in. The tractor which is used to cut the banks and hedges each winter often squidges this mud out into the path and leaves a rut on the inside of the path in cuttings. To restore the path to a reasonable width with less mud for visitors to avoid, an excavator contractor spent a few days in early February scraping the sides of the path at the following locations:

- Greenway cutting
- Greenway car park
- Dudley Weatherly Jubilee Lift Bridge (photo below)
- Swans Neck, near the golf course
- Ebear Bridge to Fossend Bridge (photo left)
- Fenacre Bridge to Waytown Tunnel



After being scraped off, the towpath beside the offside end of the Dudley Weather Jubilee Lift Bridge was resurfaced to bring it up to the same level as the concrete pad, which had begun to stand proud and create a trip hazard.

8. Tree and hedge planting

Trees and hedge plants have been planted by Canal Rangers and volunteers at the following locations along the Canal during February:

- Tidcombe Lane steps (Devon Whitebeam)
- End of Follett Road (Devon Whitebeam)
- Manley Bridge car park (Hawthorns)
- Opposite East Manley moorings (Oak and Field Maple)
- Aqueduct to Crownhill Bridge (Oak and Hollies)
- Near Greenway Bridge (Wild Cherry)
- Near Rock Bridge (Bird Cherry)
- Sampford Peverell picnic site (Rowans, Blackthorn and Bird Cherries)





Several of these trees are replacements for trees which had to be felled for safety reasons and a couple are memorial trees. In the past, the Canal Ranger Service has planted a lot of hedge plants (mainly filling in gaps in hedgerows) but very few standard trees as these have been selected and left standing during hedge laying works or have self-seeded and grown themselves on the offside banks.

However, given the large numbers of standard ash trees along the canal which are likely to succumb to ash dieback disease over the next decade, the Canal Rangers are now more active in planting replacement trees after, or sometimes in advance of, felling works.

9. Manley silt trap

Beside Manley Bridge there is an ephemeral stream which drains run-off from Manley Lane into the canal. The stream brings in a lot of silt during storms and each spring a large excavator must be brought in to spot dredge the canal where the stream enters, so that the horsedrawn barge and other boats don't run aground.

In order to intercept this silt before it enters the canal, a new silt trap has been built between the road and the canal. It replaces a small circular silt trap which filled rapidly and was very difficult to empty by hand.

The new silt trap has been designed to be easy to empty with a small excavator and has been built re-using some of the spare concrete bases from the 'All Aboard!' Tivvy Bumper model trail held in 2016. The Canal was also spot-dredged at this location whilst these works took place.



10. Aqueduct repairs

Despite successful efforts to seal a significant leak on the offside of the aqueduct last summer, several minor leaks have continued or have since emerged, leading to the cutting below to lie wet all year round. This hampered the efforts of DCC's Bridges and Structures engineers to carry out a principal inspection of the aqueduct last year, but eventually in the autumn one was carried out and a number of maintenance / repair works have been recommended. These include some masonry repairs to the arches, relining of the aqueduct channel and replacement of the rotting timber fenders.

The relining is the most significant job and would require the canal around the aqueduct to be drained for around 4-6 weeks. Initially this work was programmed to take place this winter, but in early February the Canal Manager was contacted by the engineer organising the works to say that due to various delays and distractions, the work could no longer be completed before Easter (the cut-off date due to impacts on wildlife and boaters) and so would need to be postponed until the autumn.

11. Tilting weir alterations

When the tilting weir was installed in 2017, the control system was intended to automatically adjust the weir to keep canal water levels within a desired range. However, it has proved very difficult to programme the system to react adequately, but not overreact or adjust levels too frequently (and drain the batteries). The Canal Manager did not have confidence in the automatic operation and so the system has been reprogrammed to offer him the capacity to operate it remotely (not something that was previously possible). This is done by logging into a website and setting the percentage of full capacity he wishes the weir to open/close to.

The pre-existing water level monitoring and alarm system ensures that rapid increases in water levels are not overlooked and provides feedback on the effect of opening the weir within 15 minutes. However, there is now no longer the need for staff to travel to Burlescombe to manually open it either for routine water level management or during rapid spikes in water levels in heavy storms. The other key advantage is that the Canal Manager can take into account the rainfall forecast and any other factors and use this information to fine tune adjustments to the weir settings, whereas in the past the automated system was purely reactive.

12. Staining benches

The Canal Rangers and volunteers have taken advantage of some spells of dry weather after Christmas to stain several picnic benches and seats in the Canal Basin.

Normally this work would not be possible until later in the spring, but as the benches must be left to dry for several days, it has been helpful to get this work done at a time of year when there are fewer visitors to be inconvenienced.



13. Pond restoration

On the offside bank between Boehill Bridge and Holbrook Bridge the Country Park contains a small pond surrounded by a triangle of woodland. The pond has suffered from historic dumping of waste potatoes by an adjacent farmer some decades ago and from heavy shading by the surrounding trees. As a result, it lies stagnant with few water plants or opportunities for other wildlife. This winter, the Canal Rangers and volunteers have spent several days coppicing and winching out trees in and around the pond to let more light in and allow more plant life to establish.



14. Daffodil bulb planting

Following the creation of a new flower bed at the entrance to the Canal Basin car park last winter, and the successful use of a wildflower seed mix for providing an attractive and nectar-rich border last summer, the Canal Ranger Service and volunteers have planted hundreds of daffodil bulbs of various varieties to give visitors a colourful welcome during the spring months. Once the daffodils have gone over in late spring, the same wildflower mix as used last year will be sown.



15. New content on visitor centre touchscreen

The Canal Visitor Centre contains a suggestions box and one of the comments that has been made several times is that younger visitors wanted more games to play on the touchscreen system than just the two original ones. The Canal Manager became aware of some bat-related games that had been developed for use on touchscreen systems by the Devon Greater Horseshoe Bat Project and received permission for them to be used at the Canal.



The Canal provides a wonderful habitat for bats and the Canal Ranger Service leads bat walks every year knowing that it is a great place to see them up close. It is currently unclear whether greater horseshoe bats are using the canal (survey work is planned for later in 2019), but the games and information that have been added will provide a fun way of raising awareness about the amazing

lives that all our bat species lead and the things we can do to help them

The games challenge participants to experience life as a bat by ambushing insects, finding the perfect roost, and flying across the countryside at night.

As well as the new games, the section on bats within the touchscreen system has been significantly expanded to provide a range of fascinating details about all the bats that can be found in the UK.



16. Boehill Slipway revetment

The timber revetment at the end of the slipway beside Boehill Bridge started to collapse earlier in the winter and so the Canal Ranger Service and volunteers spent a morning repairing it in mid-December. Some substantial new timber posts were banged in by a fencing contractor and a JCB contractor dredged out the collapsed soil. Once the planks were fixed, the space behind was backfilled with the dredged mud, and most of the posts were trimmed off, leaving two as mooring posts



17. New seats and benches

The Canal Rangers and volunteers have built and installed several new memorial benches and seats since October 2018, at the following locations:

- Greenway Bridge
- Milestone 4 (Swan's Neck)
- Snakes Wood
- Manley Straight

A recycled plastic picnic bench (previously located in the Canal Basin) has also been installed at Fossend Wharf in Burlescombe.



18. Ebear layby

The two laybys on the section of road running parallel to the Canal near Ebear Bridge are well-used by local visitors, but the one closest to the dragonfly interpretation panel had become heavily potholed.

In early February an excavator contractor was engaged to scrape flat and extend the layby and 16 tonnes of road planings were used to resurface it.



19. Country Park Signs

Many of the main access points to the canal feature cast iron Country Park signs. As the decades have passed since they were installed, the paint has begun to fade and flake, and many posts are rotting at the base.

The Canal Ranger Service has recently embarked on a program to repaint them and replace the posts. So far, signs have been painted and reinstalled at Greenway car park and Burlescombe Wharf, with more to follow over the coming months.



20. Annual hedge and bank trimming

The annual trimming of hedges and banks by a contractor was completed either side of the Christmas break – slightly earlier than usual this year, as the dry weather and good ground conditions had allowed the contractor to make faster progress through his hedge trimming workload in the area.

21. Volunteers and work experience placements – 121 days

- 'Little' Craig (88 days)
- Joni (15 days), Joseph (6 days) & Alex (4 days) - Bicton College
- Zak (4 days) – Petroc College
- George, Ed, Nathan and Finlay (1 day each = 4 days) - Blundells Duke of Edinburgh

22. Walk and talks

Wed 7th Nov – 23 walkers

23. Events – 117 participants

11/11/18 – Volunteer Day – Hedgelaying on Manley Straight - 11 people

26/11/18 - Devon Recovery Learning Community Christmas Wreath walk & crafts Workshop - 9 people

1&2/12/18 - Christmas Wreath & Natural Decoration Workshops – 69 people

9/12/18 – Volunteer Day – Hedgelaying near Warnicombe – 6 people

13/1/19 – Volunteers Day – Burning brash, installing posts, tidying depot – 11 people

21/1/19 - Devon Recovery Learning Community walk – Swans Neck – 4 people

10/2/19 – Volunteer Day – Tree Planting at Manley and Sampford Peverell – 7 people

20/2/19 – Bird Box Day – 35 people

Forthcoming practical works:

- Installation of new landing stage near Ebear Bridge, and canoe-launching extensions to landing stages by The Globe Inn and Minnows Touring Park.
- Badger barrier works at Wilcombe embankment
- Installation of new metal handrails at Buckland Bridge
- Replacement of rotting legs on Canberra bomber panel and other sign posts
- Bank revetment work at several locations where erosion is occurring
- Replacement of car park signs and posts in the Canal Basin car park
- Tarmacking of potholes at Tiverton Road car park
- Installation of new cyclist dismount/take care signage at bridges and horsedrawn barge operating area signage.
- Possible resurfacing of Canal Basin to Tidcombe Bridge towpath (if time allows between completion of badger barrier job and start of horsedrawn barge season).
- Completion of annual tree and hedge cutting work by Mid-March
- All usual mowing strimming and weed-cutting work

Ongoing / forthcoming management tasks:

- Organising all works listed above
- Organising Aqueduct repairs
- Abstraction licence applications
- Management Plan
- Boating regulations update
- Development of photo gallery for Visitor Centre touchscreen system.