

Progress Report (March 2020 – September 2020 inclusive)

1. Covid 19

The Covid 19 pandemic has had a huge impact on the operation of the Country Park, including the Canal Ranger Service, canal businesses, recreational activities and facilities available to visitors. It has also had a considerable effect on patterns of use. There follows a brief summary of some of the responses, impacts and effects both during and after lockdown on various aspects of the Country Park:

Canal Ranger Service and volunteers

Staff have continued to work full time on site throughout the pandemic following social distancing requirements and Risk assessments, which meant that during the full lockdown period we endeavoured to work as independently as possible, which meant that tasks involving two or more people had to be postponed. A workstation was set up in the meeting room at The Moorings so that staff didn't have to share office space, and staff members avoided the sharing of vehicles and were allocated a vehicle which they solely used as far as possible. Following the lifting of lockdown measures, social distancing measures have continued but staff have essentially formed a bubble and will work together on outdoor tasks as necessary, although the nature of the tasks during the summer has meant that they have continued to work independently most of the time.

In early March a decision was taken to suspend all working with volunteers and work experience students. From August, one long-term volunteer recommenced occasional volunteering, and several work experience students are lined up to recommence work at the Canal, one each per day, starting in October within social distancing and latest Government advice.

The monthly volunteer days are set to resume in October, but with a limit on numbers and tasks limited to those which enable easy social distancing (such as hedge-laying or hedge-planting).

The lack of volunteer support throughout the spring and summer has made it difficult to keep on top of vegetation maintenance within the Country Park. Volunteers during this period spend a lot of time strimming and Canal Ranger Jo Roberts has worked incredibly hard to keep on top of the mowing and strimming along the towpath on her own. Jo has sought to maximise the available width of the towpath by mowing a wide strip at the edges of the surfacing, enabling social distancing to be maintained.



At the start of lockdown, some people questioned why the towpath was still open as much of the path was less than 2m wide. However, Devon County Council has no legal basis to

close any public right of way due to Covid 19 and so from the outset the Canal Rangers sought to maximise the width by regular mowing of the towpath edges. The annual siding up of bankside and hedge-side vegetation overhanging the towpath was also undertaken a month earlier this year in order to keep the path as wide and clear as possible, as shown in the photo above taken near Battens Bridge.

Canal Ranger Craig Saunderson has spent at least 4 days per week from April to late September operating the weedboat. This was deemed essential even during the lockdown period in order to minimise the risk of fish kill incidents (excessive weed growth makes these more likely in the summer), to avoid the build up of a massive backlog of work, and to keep the canal in a suitable state for fishing and boating once restrictions were lifted.



Photo: Nick Saville

Canal Manager, Mark Baker, has spent much more time than usual helping with practical maintenance tasks in order to make up for the lack of volunteer resources. A lot of his time has also been taken up with Covid-related management activities such as organising signage, safe working procedures, risk assessments etc. As a result of this, and the fact that many other colleagues and organisations are not working as usual, several ongoing management projects have had to be put on hold.

Another big draw on his time this spring and summer has been the other two countryside sites which he has responsibility for in East Devon (Knapp Copse LNR and White Cross), for which he has successfully applied for a Higher Tier Countryside Stewardship agreement covering both sites. Most years (since he took on the responsibility in 2012), they take up about 5% of his time whereas this spring and summer it has been around 50%. This is expected to drop back to around 10% from now on.

Canal facilities and activities

Prior to lockdown, some improvements were made in the public toilets to facilitate more effective hand-washing. An extra boiler was installed to provide warm water for handwashing in the accessible toilet, and Thermostatic Mixing Valves (TMVs) were added to pipes supplying all the hot water taps in the toilet block to provide hot water at a comfortable handwashing temperature, whilst meeting legionella requirements for much hotter temperatures as the water leaves the boilers.

In mid to late March, the public toilets, the visitor centre and the play park were all closed to the public, in line with government guidance. Information on what was closed was provided on the Country Park webpages and on Facebook, and public information posters (image right) were put up at all main access points to the towpath.



Information was provided on the Canal website and Facebook on the restrictions on boating and fishing which came in during lockdown, and then again as these restrictions were eased following lockdown.

After lockdown, there was a large increase in visitor numbers and a decision was taken, with advice from the DCC health and safety team, to reopen just the accessible toilet initially as this presented no issues with social distancing as it is single occupancy room. In addition to guidance posters on safe use and handwashing, a paper towel dispenser and bin were added, and a hand sanitiser dispenser was installed outside. Frequency of cleaning of the toilet room was increased to daily.



As visitor pressure continued to increase through the summer, and long queues started to form for the accessible toilet the ladies and gents' toilets were reopened, with the same posters and hand towel



provision and a daily cleaning regime. No issues have arisen or been reported in relation to the reopening of the toilets.

In line with government guidance, the Canal Basin play park was reopened and the new trim trail in Sampford Peverell was opened in early July. Both are subject to conditions explained by a large poster at the entrance and no issues have arisen or been reported since reopening / opening.

Given the hands-on nature of many of the displays in the Canal Visitor Centre, and its non-essential role, and the fact it is indoors, it has been felt that reopening the centre has not been justifiable, due to the risk of the virus being spread. This is being kept under review and if it is reopened at any point, it is likely to require all of the hands-on elements to be removed or disabled. To date, no complaints have been received about the visitor centre being closed.

Canal Businesses

Initially, when the lockdown commenced, the Tiverton Canal Co and the Canal Tea Rooms and Gardens as well as local pubs and accommodation providers were obliged to remain closed. As lockdown measures were eased, all of these reopened with the exception of the Tiverton Canal Co, which made the decision to remain closed for the year, due to the impact that the virus and the current control measures required would have on demand for and profitability of their services. They are looking forward to reopening in Easter 2021.

Although Minnows Touring Park has reopened, its premises are not open for non-staying visitors and so only residents can buy boat or fishing permits there this year.

As an alternative and also to compensate for the closure of the Holcombe Rogus shop (which sold boat permits) the Sampford Peverell Spar was approached with a view to them selling boat permits. They agreed to sell both unpowered and powered boat permits.

A new canal business has commenced this year with The Coffee Cart taking on the catering concession at Tiverton Road car park. The converted horsebox (photo to the right) has proved popular with canal visitors and the operator has been pleased with business this year and is looking forward to starting again next year (possibly in the spring, but if not then early summer).



Patterns of use

During lockdown, the towpath continued to be fairly busy, providing a popular and convenient place for local people to take their permitted hour of daily exercise. Some of the outlying car parks – particularly Tiverton Road car park – were much busier than usual at that time of the year.

As lockdown restrictions were lifted, the Country Park saw a significant increase in use, with the outlying car parks being much more heavily used than usual and the towpath consistently busy, even at the normally quiet northern end. The exception to this has been

the Canal Basin car park, which has been well-used, but not as busy as usual due to the Tiverton Canal Co being closed for business.

Since lockdown restrictions were lifted, there has been a large increase in the numbers of unpowered boats using the canal. The growing popularity of inflatable and sit-on kayaks, and of stand-up paddleboards has been very evident and the two main permit outlets this year – Wilcombe and Sampford Peverell Spar shops – have sold hundreds of permits between them. Part of the increase in their sales has been a result of the Tiverton Canal Co, Minnows Touring Park and the Holcombe Rogus shop not selling them, but it is mostly down to a large increase in participation in these healthy and inherently socially-distanced recreational activities.

One of the negative impacts of the post lockdown boom in recreational use of countryside sites both at the Canal and throughout the UK has been a significant increase in litter. This has mainly been focussed at car parks and has in large part been due to the purchase of take away food, which is then consumed at the Country Park, with the packaging being left behind. It only takes a few pizza or fish and chip boxes to fill or block a litter bin and in the Canal Basin car park this has led to large amounts of litter being left in bags around the litter bins, which are then torn apart by foxes or seagulls seeking the food remains. In other outlying car parks, it has been just left at picnic benches. This issue seems to have lessened as eat in options have increased in availability and popularity through the summer.

Another negative impact has been an increase in the reported numbers of incidents involving bicycles at bridges. Whilst most appear to have been near misses which have angered or upset the walkers involved, at least one incident resulted in an injury, albeit to the cyclist herself, with no other people involved.

Financial impacts to the Country Park

The main negative impact on the canal budget has been the reduction in car parking income at the Canal Basin car park. However, this has not been as great a reduction as initially feared as the car park has continued to be fairly busy despite the Tiverton Canal Co's temporary closure.

This loss of income has been offset by an increase in boat permit income and by extra DCC funding through a special pandemic-related fund. It is therefore anticipated that the pandemic will not have a significant impact on the canal budget this year.

2. Aqueduct relining

Although the Aqueduct was reopened for boat use in late February, the completion of works was delayed significantly by the lockdown. The contractors Dyer and Butler, eventually returned to finish off the fenders in late June, completing what on the face of it looked like a good job. However, there appears to be an ongoing issue with leakage of water from the aqueduct, and some of the threaded bars which hold in the recycled plastic fenders have slipped out and are standing proud. The DCC Bridges and Structures engineer who designed and supervised the work has been informed and is liaising with the contractor over their return to site to make good these faults.

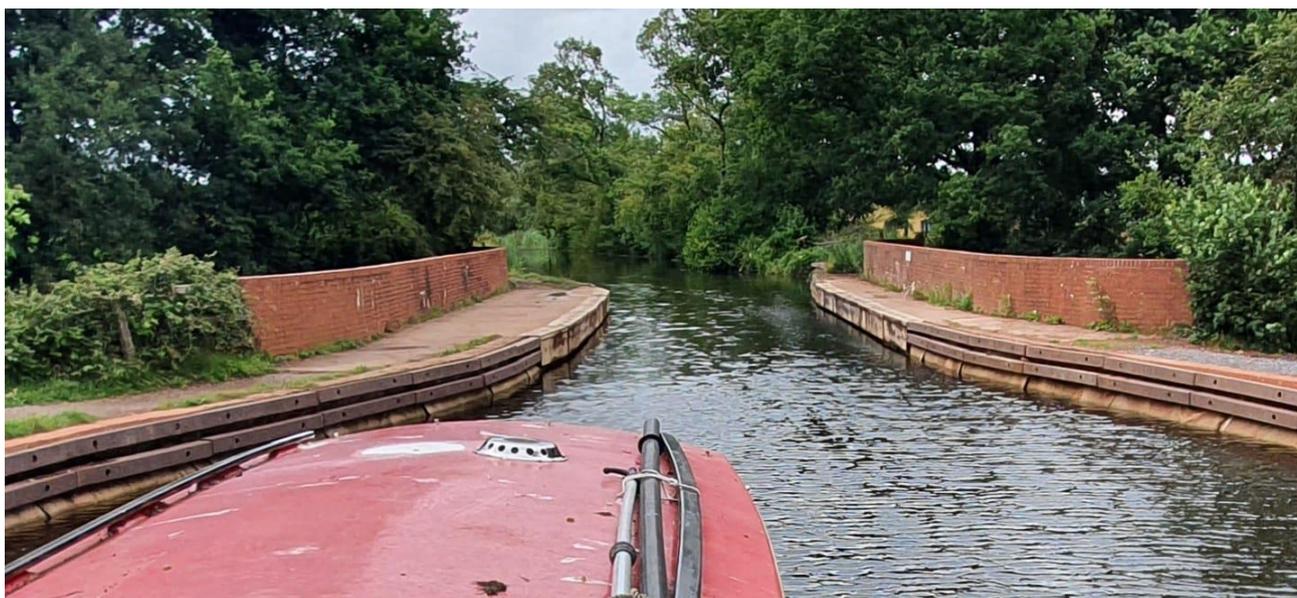


Photo: Philip Brind

3. Trim Trail

A great new facility for the Country Park is a trim trail located in Sampford Peverell picnic site. It was installed by the supplier (Playdale Playgrounds Ltd) in May and opened for public use in July.



The fitness equipment has been paid for by the Sampford Peverell 200 Club, and we would like to thank local residents Rachel Cutts, Frances Salisbury and Ian Adlington for managing the project. The equipment is now part of the Grand Western Canal Country Park and will be maintained by the Canal Ranger Service, who hope that it will help local residents and Canal visitors to keep fit and healthy.

4. Towpath Resurfacing / maintenance

In recent years, the 450m long section of towpath between the Canal Basin and William Authers Footbridge had become prone to puddles and had also been rutted by vehicles involved with the Wilcombe Embankment works.



In March, contractors JB Radford resurfaced this section with compacted limestone scalplings. The work included the installation of a French drain near the Wilcombe Primary School playing field, where the ground can become saturated.

The access point by Marshall Close was widened and a drop-down barrier added to enable maintenance vehicles to drive on/off the towpath at this point.

Some other towpath repair works were undertaken in March, with an excavator contractor scraping the edges of the towpath between Whipcott Bridge and Fenacre Bridge and between Fenacre Bridge and the ditch that runs parallel to the canal some 200m to the south.



5. Car park signage

The latest project in the ongoing efforts to smarten up the Canal Basin and improve the infrastructure has been the replacement of a number of signs in the car park. Many of the existing posts were badly rusted and most of the signs were bent or disfigured in some way.





Funding to improve access information has enabled all of the posts and signs have been replaced and the new signs use the same colours and fonts as the main welcome panel at the entrance to the car park, providing continuity.

The funding has also paid for replacement signs for several of the outlying car parks, where these signs went missing some years

ago. Extra effort will be made to ensure the bolts which fix these signs to the posts cannot be undone. It is hoped that the clear statement that overnight parking and camping is not permitted, will help to counteract the significant increase in campervans staying overnight in Canal car parks which has been evident this summer. These signs will be installed in late September.

6. Fish thefts

In the early summer an issue which caused considerable concern was a spate of fish thefts which were witnessed at several locations along the canal. Taking fish from the canal is theft and the Canal Ranger Service liaised with the Police, the Environment Agency, The Tiverton and District Angling Club and The Angling Trust to raise awareness and to catch the perpetrators.

In early September, the Angling Trust supplied a number of signs which make it clear with pictograms or a variety of European languages that taking / killing fish is illegal, and that suspicious behaviour should be reported to the Environment Agency or the Police. These have been put up at access points to the sections of Canal where fish thefts have been reported or are suspected.



7. Fenacre Water Transfer System

At the March 2020 JAC meeting, a report was provided on the timeline of events and actions relating to this issue, and members were told that Aggregate Industries had agreed to instruct their consultants to collaborate with DCC's hydrology Consultant (Marcus Francis) in order to ensure that the system was as effective as possible in maximising the input of water to the canal from Fenacre Water, within the constraints of hands-off flow stipulated by the Environment Agency.

This work was just about to start when Covid 19 took hold. All of the AI staff who were involved in the scheme were put on furlough (and at the time of writing some still are) and this meant that no progress on the project could be made during the spring or summer. Since August, some of the AI staff have returned to work and the project has recommenced. AI have successfully applied to the EA to move back the deadline for the abstraction licence application to December, which will allow time for the scheme to be worked up.

8. Iona

As JAC members will be aware, thanks to the briefing paper provided in September by Philip Brind, the historic narrowboat Iona was welcomed onto the Canal in late August. Having chosen to cease operating as a horsedrawn passenger barge on the River Wey & Godalming Navigations in Surrey, her owner has decided to retire to Devon and place Iona in the care of the Tiverton Canal Co.

We understand this 70ft long vintage packet boat (built in 1935) will initially be kept as an historic exhibit in the Canal Basin, although she remains fully operational and so could potentially be used for trips at some point in the future. It was pleasing to see what a warm welcome she and her owner were given by the canal community.



Photo: Sheila Taylor

9. Boehill Slipway parking

Parking beside Boehill Slipway has been prohibited since its construction in 2003 as in order to use the slipway, boaters need to drive round under the bridge and reverse back to the slipway, and any cars or trailers parked in the wrong place in the area can obstruct the access required. Given that boaters may have spent a considerable sum on their boat permit and travelled a significant distance it is essential that the one location where they can launch is kept clear.

Various signs prohibiting parking have been installed and then been vandalized or stolen over the years, the latest sign having been installed when the track was recently tarmacked. Initially, after launching, boaters were able to leave their cars and trailers at Minnows Touring Park for a small fee. However, when ownership of the Touring Park changed this option was no longer available.

For the last couple of years the Canal manager has been seeking to find alternative parking sites, and this year has come to an agreement with the owner of the allotment field halfway along the slipway track for boaters to park their cars and trailers in a space beside the allotments. Boaters are given the combination for the padlock on the gate when they buy their boat permit.

Recently the Secretary of the Tiverton and District Angling Club has contacted the Canal Manager to request that a parking space is made available near Boehill Bridge for anglers to use, this being a favourite fishing area with no other parking opportunities nearby. The Canal Manager has agreed in principle to make one parking space available at the toe of the grassy bridge abutment bank, where a car can park without hindering boat launching. The Angling club have agreed to cover the cost of two new signs which will make it clear that there is strictly only one parking space available, in the designated area. A further sign will be added to the barrier instructing boaters where to park their cars and trailers.

10. Boehill Bridge graffiti

Boehill Bridge has suffered from occasional graffiti from time to time, but recently a large amount has been sprayed, mainly at the northern end. One of the Canal Rangers has spent a whole day pressure washing the graffiti off the wall. It hasn't been possible to remove all of it, but most has been removed, as shown in the photos below.



11. Theft of outboard engine

In July the Canal depot opposite Post Hill was broken into and the outboard engine on the maintenance barge was stolen. An angle grinder was used to cut through the security covers and cables and through the mesh on the gates so that the outboard could be passed through at ground level rather than lifted over. The theft was reported to the police. A replacement outboard along with all of the connecting cables and pipes has been ordered. In addition to extra security measures to keep the outboard connected to the boat, the Canal Ranger Service will carefully consider where the boat is moored when not in use. Unfortunately the impact of not mooring it at the depot is likely to mean more time being spent moving it to and from work sites and slower response times when dealing with fallen trees.

12. Westcott bridge damage

In mid-September a parapet wall at Westcott Bridge was damaged, presumably by a tractor crossing the bridge. This has required the closure of the towpath under the bridge as there is a danger the wall could fall onto people below. The cracks are highlighted in red on the photo to the right.

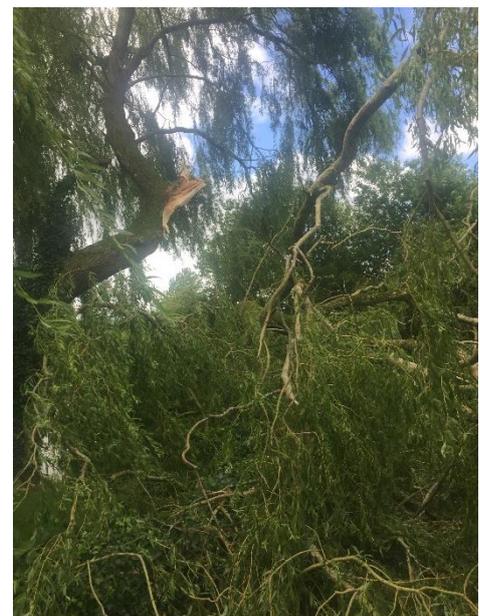
Fortunately, there is a very short and obvious diversion beside the bridge. The DCC Bridge Maintenance Team are organising repairs, likely to take place in early October.



13. Fallen trees and branches

A small number of trees and branches have come down during the summer. Most of the damage has occurred during storms, including several large branches from the Weeping Willow near Tidcombe Bridge (photo right).

No large trees have fallen although a couple of oaks have dropped large limbs. This is known as Summer Branch Drop. Occasionally, apparently healthy and stable trees shed large limbs during the summer for no obvious reason. This phenomenon appears to be associated with spells of wet weather following a long dry spell, as was the case this summer. All of the fallen trees and branches were cleared as soon as possible, ensuring that the towpath and the canal were clear for people and boats to use safely.



14. Ash Dieback felling

Ash Dieback continues to spread rapidly through the Ash trees throughout the country and the Canal's Ashes are being badly affected. Given that there are hundreds of mature ash trees along the canal, almost all within falling distance of the towpath, it is important that the extent of the disease within individual trees and groups is monitored so that felling works can be effectively planned to maintain public safety and to manage resources.

Tree consultants AM Lane were commissioned to undertake a survey of the Canal's Ash trees, and to prioritise felling works that either needed to be undertaken this summer, or this winter. The report was used to successfully bid for DCC Highways department funding for Ash Dieback works.

At the time of writing a number of ash trees have been felled at the following locations: beside Wilcombe Primary School, Snakes Wood, near the Aqueduct, the Swans Neck (near the golf course), Battens Bridge, and near Ayshford Bridge. It is anticipated that in the following weeks around 50 medium-sized Ash trees near Battens Bridge will be felled (with a road closure which will last several days), as well as a large offside tree along the section between Ayshford Bridge and Westcott Bridge. A similar scale of works is anticipated to take place during the winter months.

15. Memorial benches

Two new memorial seats and one memorial seat have been installed during the summer – one beside Milestone 6 near Battens Bridge (photo right), one to the south of Black Bridge in Burlescombe and one on Wilcombe embankment. Orders have been received for a further two memorial seats and one memorial bench and these will be installed during the autumn.



16. Visitor Information Guide

An updated version of the Canal Visitor Information guide was prepared over the winter and printed just prior to lockdown, which immediately removed all demand for the guide. A small number of the guides have been distributed through local shops and a leaflet dispenser has been fitted on the outside of the Visitor Centre, so it is available for visitors there. It is intended to use the large amount of remaining stock during 2021 instead of printing another updated version.

17. Education and events

Due to the pandemic, no Ranger-led events or school visits have taken place this year and none are planned for the foreseeable future. An organised running event is due to take place on the towpath between the Canal Basin and Sampford Peverell picnic site on the morning of Sunday 25th October. This is a commercial event organised by Winding Trails

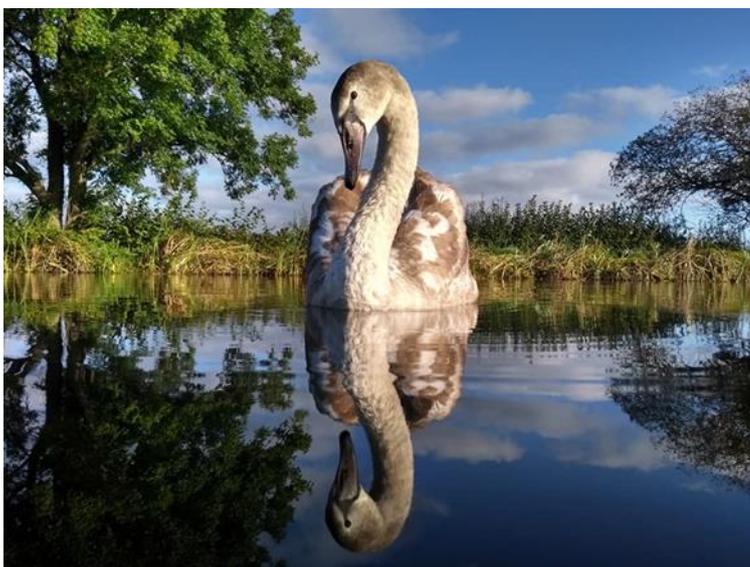
Ltd, operating under a licence with DCC, incorporating measures (such as staggering arrival times and releasing runners in small groups at intervals) to ensure it is covid-secure and meets all the current government guidelines.

18. Volunteers

As discussed in Item 1 above, there has been almost no volunteering with the Canal Ranger Service since March. However, in August a really nice story about a student who had volunteered and undertaken work experience with the Canal Rangers was published on Facebook and was covered by regional media.

Adam Lake, who spent time over the last five years either volunteering with the Canal Rangers or undertaking work experience with them for his countryside management college course, won an international wildlife photography competition with a photo taken at the canal.

His photo of a young swan went up against 15,000 others taken all around the world for the Young Bird Photographer of the Year competition. Adam won the 14-17-year category and was also awarded the title of 'Overall Young Bird Photographer of the Year for 2020'.



Adam won £300 and pair of binoculars for his winning entry, which he took the photo whilst volunteering with the Canal Rangers. He has now finished his college course and is looking for a job as a countryside ranger or warden. The Canal Ranger Service are grateful for all his hard work at the Canal and are sure he will do well in his chosen career.

Future planned works

The following lists outline anticipated potential works over the next six months, but are of course subject to ongoing disruption caused by the pandemic, such as potential unavailability of DCC staff or staff of other organisations due to illness, self-isolation or home-working; unavailability of volunteer support; and unavailability of contractors and supplies of materials.

Practical tasks

- Annual cutting of bridge abutments
- Annual trimming back of overhanging branches and other felling / crown-lifting works
- Installation of landing stage extensions at Holbrook and The Globe Inn
- Bank erosion repairs using daltalok bags
- Ongoing Ash Dieback felling works

- Repair / replacement of handrails at Waytown Tunnel, Whipcott Bridge and Sampford Peverell Bridge
- Installation of new pedestrian gates – one to secure access to Black Bridge culvert and one to fill a gap created in the hedge near Ebear Bridge (allowing access but preventing dogs from being able to run out onto the road)
- Scraping off of topsoil in the Sampford Peverell picnic site community orchard and reseeded with a wildflower meadow seed mix (to be funded by Cllr Radford's Locality Budget)
- Concreting of sections of towpath under Buckland Bridge Sampford Peverell Bridge and Tiverton road Bridge where there are puddles or where the path is currently uneven
- Replace disabled fishing platforms which have been removed
- Fill in ruts and repair fence at Snakes Wood
- Hedge-laying and planting as required
- Planting of several new standard trees in hedgerow to replace recently felled ash standards
- Reinstall Aqueduct interpretation panel (the original legs rotted and snapped)

Management tasks

- Working with DCC engineers on the Asset Management Plan
- Review and scenario-based test of Emergency Plan
- Potential new interpretation panels (subject to funding)
- Fenacre water transfer system
- Organise repainting / replacement of corroded / missing bridge nameplates
- Complete update of boating regulations and procedures
- Green Flag Award application
- Renew discussions with Devon and Cornwall Police over Community Safety Scheme Accreditation for Canal Ranger Service staff
- Terms of reference for Community Patrol Boat – Zoom meeting?