

Progress Report (October 2020 – February 2021 inclusive)

1. Covid 19

The periods of lockdown and tier restrictions during this reporting period continue to have a significant impact on the use and management of the Country Park. Effects are broadly similar to those reported in detail in the October 2020 Progress Report, with Canal Rangers and at times the Canal Manager continuing to undertake practical work with significantly reduced levels of volunteer support. Throughout most of the period, just one volunteer has worked with the Canal Rangers on 3-4 days per week, in order to reduce the Rangers' contact with other people and to maintain reasonable social distancing on the maintenance barge.

As a result, slower progress than usual is being made on the winter tree work and so other projects which do not have to be completed before bird nesting season are being delayed.

The Country Park continues to be busier than usual for the time of year, as local people make use of it for their daily exercise. The public toilets and play park have remained open as per government guidance, and the visitor centre has remained closed.

2. Winter tree work

Throughout the late autumn and winter, the Canal Rangers and volunteer Lee have spent almost all of their time working on the maintenance barge cutting back overhanging branches and undertaking various coppicing, crown-lifting and formative pruning tasks as they go. Work started in Tiverton and at the time of writing work is taking place near Boehill Bridge.

Progress has been slower than usual both because of a reduction in volunteer support and because a more thorough job of cutting back overhanging branches in the section the horse-drawn barge operates in has been made, in the knowledge that the horse-drawn barge will have a new skipper and a bit more leeway would be appreciated this year.



The target is to complete work up to the northern end of the canal by mid-March ahead of bird nesting season, after which other delayed tasks can be focussed on for a month before the mowing / strimming / weed-cutting season starts in April.

3. Tree works undertaken by contractors

Following a survey of ash trees undertaken by tree consultants earlier in 2020, tree surgeons have felled a number of ash trees that were recommended for felling on health and safety grounds. These have included a number around the Swans Neck opposite the golf course, some in Snakes Wood and some near Battens Bridge. Another batch of Ash felling along the roadside near Battens Bridge is due to be undertaken in late February, subject to securing a temporary road closure.

The annual round of expert tree safety inspections are due to be undertaken during April and May and this will identify the next batches of ash dieback felling (based on the extent of dieback evident in the crown and any basal lesions) as well as any other safety works that are required on other species of tree. Inspections were recently undertaken of the three large oak trees near Follett Road, Tiverton and some minor works have been recommended for completion during the spring.

4. Hedge and tree planting

A memorial oak tree has been planted near Manley Bridge, replacing an Ash tree that was recently felled there. A number of other standard trees are due to be planted before the end of February. These include four trees being planted in memory of Jean Hall. A number of Hazels and Hollies are also due to be planted opposite the steps from Follett Road to better screen the canal from any potential future development. A few small gaps in hedges are also due to be planted up with Hawthorn and Hazel whips.

5. Bank and hedge trimming

The annual bank and hedge cutting work was completed by contractor during January, making the most of a cold spell to do several day's work when the ground was frozen. However, there are some sections of canal where the tractor tread has squished mud out onto the towpath and so, as in most years, an excavator operator has been lined up for a couple of days in late February to scrape off the worst sections and ensure the towpath is in good condition with the full width available.

6. Resurfacing the towpath under bridges

DCC capital funding has been secured for work to resurface the towpath under bridges where there are currently large puddles, using concrete. A site visit has been undertaken with a contractor and the work is due to be completed before the end of March 2021.

7. Fishing platforms

The four fishing platforms which had been installed at locations along the canal some 20 years ago to benefit anglers in wheelchairs, are all becoming rotten and unsafe to use. Two have been removed and the remaining two are in need of replacement. In all four cases the steel supports which are bolted to a concrete mass in the towpath, enabling the platforms to be cantilevered over the water, are in good condition and can be reused.

In order to provide longer-lasting replacement platforms, a design has been developed using planks of recycled plastic. Funding for the materials has been provided by Councillor

Slade and Councillor Radford from their locality budgets, and the Tiverton and District Angling Club have also contributed to cover the cost of equipment hire and metalwork. The recycled plastic planks have been delivered and the Canal Ranger Service plan to build and install the platforms as soon as they have time following completion of the winter tree work.

8. Green Flag Award

In mid-October it was announced that the Country Park had been successful in winning a Green Flag Award for the twelfth consecutive year. The score was the highest yet received by the Country Park and was due to an improved score for the management plan.

The announcement by Keep Britain tidy (which runs the scheme) came a few months later than usual due to Covid 19.



In the subsequent DCC press release, councillors thanked the Canal Ranger Service staff who have managed and maintained the park under very trying circumstances.

9. Swans and powerlines

Sadly, there have been several incidents where swans have flown into powerlines in the last six months:

- Two cygnets flew into the powerlines above the entrance to the Canal Basin car park. Both were taken to The Vale vets, where one had to be put down due to the extent of its injuries, and the other was taken to RSPCA Westhatch for ongoing care.
- An adult swan was retrieved from below the high voltage powerlines near Ebear Bridge, Westleigh and taken to RSPCA Westhatch.
- A dead cygnet was retrieved from directly below a powerline near Buckland Bridge in Sampford Peverell.

The Canal Manager reported the incidents to Western Power Distribution and has since had a site visit with one of their technicians. The technician is organising works in April to replace two of the telegraph poles near the end of the canal which will enable the four lines, which are currently aligned vertically, to be bundled up into one thick line which will be easier for swans to see and avoid.

The Canal Manager also provided details of the powerlines crossing the canal which do not currently have any markers on them to make them more visible to swans. The technician has promised to follow this up as well.

10. Sampford Peverell community orchard

In the autumn, the Canal Ranger Service worked on a project to create a new wildflower meadow in the community orchard in Sampford Peverell picnic site. They planted the orchard in 2005, but since then the grassland below had become dominated by rank species such as nettles, thistles, docks and hogweed. The only reliable way of establishing a wildflower meadow here was to scrape off the topsoil containing these plants and their seeds and start afresh, sowing a wildflower meadow seed mix.



They had the help of a skilled digger driver who scraped off the soil and formed a bank around the perimeter of the orchard. The Rangers then raked over the soil to create a good seed bed and sowed the seed, which has established quite well. A little extra seed will be spread on a few bare patches in the early spring.

The meadow will provide a great wildlife habitat, a nectar source for pollinators and an attractive sight for people to enjoy. Some narrow paths will be mown though the meadow to enable public access to enjoy the meadow and pick the apples.



The Canal Ranger service would like to thank Sampford Peverell Parish Council for supporting the project and the local Devon County Councillor, Ray Radford, who funded the work through his Locality Budget.

11. Boehill parking signage

As reported at the October 2020 JAC meeting, the Tiverton and District Angling Club made representations to request that a parking space for one car was made available at Boehill Bridge as it is a favourite spot and they believed this could be achieved without impeding boaters launching their boats. After checking with our informal trail-boating representative,

Adam Pilgrim, this was approved and the Angling Club agreed to fund the cost of some new signage to explain the new parking arrangements. These signs have now been installed.



12. Fenacre water transfer system

Following Covid 19 delays to the progress in designing a new system, with key AI staff members on furlough for much of 2020, the Environment Agency unexpectedly requested that AI withdraw the existing licence application for the scheme (rather than grant the anticipated time extension) and to submit a new one once the design of a new scheme had been drafted. This had the unfortunate effect of cutting all lines of communication between our consultant hydrologist, Marcus Francis, and the local EA officer who had been liaising on what solutions were likely to be acceptable to the EA (as EA officers are only allowed to comment on live applications / pre-applications).

In order to plan the way forward, a video conference was held in December with representatives of AI, their hydrology consultants Wood PLC, DCC (PRoW and Country Parks Manager and the Canal Manager) and DCC's hydrology consultant Marcus Francis. The meeting was positive with AI reiterating their desire to work collaboratively with DCC on a solution which work for the Canal, although the AI Environment Adviser did sound a note of caution about the likely protracted timescale based on his previous experience in dealing with the EA.

In early February, the PRoW and Country Parks Manager requested an update on the state of play and in his response the AI Environment Advisor stated that AI are optimistic that a collaborative approach with all involved stakeholders will result in a positive outcome to this phase of scheme to satisfy the obligations under the s.106 Agreement; that they are currently in the process of agreeing costs to re-engage their consultants who will be required to revise the original proposals that were submitted back in November 2019, that

as this involves significant unexpected costs the business needs to ensure it is going to result in a satisfactory solution and allow the Environment Agency (EA) to issue the requisite licences. He pledged to ensure that as the application progresses all appropriate stakeholders are kept abreast as it develops during this new phase of the project, including when he has a clearer picture of the timescale.

DCC officers will continue to seek regular updates on progress and will insist that our consultant is involved in the development of the scheme rather than just kept abreast of progress.

13. Handrails and gates

DCC capital funding was secured to pay for a fencing contractor to replace rotting handrails at Sampford Peverell Bridge (pictured right), Whipcott Bridge (pictured below) and Waytown Tunnel. New gates were also installed at a number of locations.



14. Silt trap cleaning

The silt trap at Manley Bridge has rapidly filled up during the winter so has been emptied by a JCB contractor in early February. This winter seems to have been particularly bad for silty water entering the canal during heavy rainfall events, with large sections of the canal being discoloured for days or weeks following heavy rain. The worst sections appear to be at the Tiverton end, with silty water entering at Manley Bridge (the silt trap only works effectively during low-flow situations) and from the stream that runs parallel to the canal at Atherton Way/ Francis Crescent, which often overtops into the canal when the culvert grille at the end of the open channel blocks with leaves and other debris.

15. Seats and benches

During the autumn and winter three new memorial seats and one new memorial bench have been built and installed at the following locations:

- New oak bench to replace the old softwood bench 150m north of the Aqueduct
- New oak seat in a new location 200m along the bend from the tilting weir towards Ebear Bridge (pictured below)
- New oak seat in a new location near the western end of Snakes Wood
- New oak seat in a new location 200m north of Battens Bridge



Virtually all of the potential locations for seats or benches between Tiverton and Halberton are now filled and very few potential places exist between Halberton and Sampford Peverell. Several available locations still exist between Sampford Peverell and Lowdswells.

16. Aqueduct relining

Following completion of the work to reline the Aqueduct last year, it was noted that there was still some water leakage from the structure. The DCC Bridges and Structures Team, which designed and supervised the works, were made aware at the time, and have recently contacted the Canal Manager to discuss the intention of the contractor to retrain the aqueduct and rectify this fault. Previously the contractor had indicated that they intended to dig some trenches in the towpath and offside banks to seal the leak, but they now believe retraining the section will be more effective.

The Canal Manager is extremely frustrated that this work wasn't undertaken during the winter and is currently awaiting a programme of works and start date. Mid Devon Moorings and the Tiverton Canal Co have been informed.

17. Car park and Country Park signs

Missing car park name signs have been installed at a number of outlying car parks and a strong adhesive has been used to make it much harder for them to be removed by members of the public.

The ongoing programme of repainting Country Park signs continues. Once repainted they are fitted to new posts and are installed in appropriate locations along the Canal. During the winter repainted signs have been installed at Crownhill picnic site, Sampford Peverell Bridge and opposite the layby on Ebear straight.



18. Battery-powered machinery

Power tool and battery technology has improved significantly in recent years. The two major brands for the chainsaw / hedgecutter / brushcutter / leafblower machinery the Canal Ranger Service uses – Stihl and Husqvarna – have developed ranges of tools and batteries which are becoming widely adopted in both the domestic and commercial markets. The batteries are transferable between machines (although not between brands).

Over the next few years the Canal Ranger Service aims to switch over to battery power for most of their machinery (although not for leaf blowers which deplete batteries very quickly, and there will always be a need to have at least one large petrol chainsaw for crosscutting big logs) and so as and when current machines fall beyond economic repair, they will be replaced with battery-powered equivalents.

In the autumn, one of the petrol chainsaws suffered a terminal fault, and so after much research, consultation and receipt of three quotes, the Canal Ranger Service purchased its first battery-powered chainsaw: a Stihl MSA 220 plus two batteries and chargers.



As well as reducing the use of fossil fuels, the saw has health and safety advantages in that it weighs slightly less, the noise and vibration are significantly reduced, there are no fumes to inhale, and there is no danger of petrol spillages. The Canal Rangers have used it extensively throughout the winter and really like it, using it in preference to the petrol saws for most tasks.

19. Greater Horseshoe Bat Project

In recent years the Country Park has been a partner of the [Devon Greater Horseshoe Bat Project](#). This lottery-funded project led by Devon Wildlife Trust has worked for the last five years to protect and enhance colonies of the Greater Horseshoe bat in Devon – one of the key strongholds of what has been for many years a dwindling UK population. They have sought to raise awareness through engaging with communities and schools; improve feeding and roosting opportunities by working with landowners; and to improve knowledge

of where the bats are through a very successful citizen science initiative. The project ended on January 31st.

In 2018 a series of bat games developed by the project were added to the touchscreen system in the Canal Visitor centre and in 2019 and 2020 the Canal Ranger Service provided a pick-up / drop-off location for the automated bat detectors used in the citizen science project. This project enabled members of the public to borrow a detector and put it out (usually in their garden) for 3 nights during which time the detector would record any bat calls made within 10-15 metres, onto an SD card. The card and a form providing details about the site would then be posted back and the data would then be analysed by a computer programme. A few weeks later the participant would be emailed a report listing the species detected.



The project has been incredibly successful in building up an accurate picture of the distribution and density of bat populations in Devon and has also engaged thousands of participants who were keen to find out what species are found near their homes.

At the Country Park, the detector has been used to survey all of the 1km squares along the Canal at least once, and the more interesting ones twice. In December the Canal Ranger Service received a report from a survey undertaken near Whipcott Bridge which listed several Greater Horseshoe Bat calls – the first such records along the canal. Other species recorded along the Canal include Lesser Horseshoe, Common Pipistrelle, Soprano Pipistrelle, Daubentons, Serotine, Noctule and Brown Long-eared Bats.

The Canal provides a wonderful resource for bats by providing an excellent feeding site with lots of flying insect life sheltered by the trees that line the canal, and by providing a corridor along which they can commute between roosts and other feeding sites. The old stone structures such as limekilns and some of the large mature trees with cavities may also provide roosting opportunities. The Canal Ranger Service congratulates all involved in this successful project and looks forward to recommencing the ever-popular bat walks along the Canal later this year.

20. Connecting the Culm

[Connecting the Culm](#) is a three-year project which aims to make the River Culm and its floodplain more resilient to flood and drought, improve water quality, support biodiversity and habitat, and involve local people and organisations in the process. It is led by the Blackdown Hills AONB in partnership with the Westcountry Rivers Trust and Devon Wildlife Trust.

Roughly two thirds of the Canal lies within the project area and is very much an active and connected component of the



catchment. Water enters the canal from surrounding land and watercourses within the catchment and is discharged from the Canal into the River Lyner– one of the Culm's tributaries.

The Canal Manager has attended a number of webinars hosted by the project in recent months and will be looking for ways in which the Country Park can engage with the project to benefit the Canal and the wider catchment. He will be particularly supportive of any initiatives that the project develops to improve agricultural practice and reduce soil run-off.

The canal has been very brown with silty run-off being washed into the canal this winter (see point 14 above) and the problem is getting worse over time. Pollution of the Canal's water by silt (and the nutrients which bind to the silt particles) is a serious problem. As well as impacting on wildlife, it fuels excessive weed growth and increases the need for expensive dredging works. Hopefully this project can help steer farmers in the catchment towards more sustainable practices which retain soils on the fields.

21. Devon Harvest Mouse Project

Devon Mammal Group is currently running this project to raise awareness of this species and to gain a better understanding of its distribution in Devon. Before Christmas, the Canal Ranger Team and a college work experience student from Stover Country Park took part in a half day training session run by the [Devon Harvest Mouse Project](#) Officer Sarah Butcher.

Sarah brought some 'pet' harvest mice with her for attendees to see while she delivered a short presentation about their conservation status, lifecycle, habitat requirements and management considerations.

They then headed out to a couple of locations at the northern end of Canal, the first of which - near Ebear Pond - was where a harvest mouse nest had been found by a Canal volunteer in 2019. Searching carefully through the large tussocks of grass, they found several nests including a maternity nest.



They then moved on to the field beside Beech car park, near Fenacre Bridge, where after five minutes of searching they found another maternity nest. It's great to confirm that Harvest Mice are present along the canal, and the Canal Ranger Service will bear them in mind when planning works in areas with tall tussocky grass.



22. Volunteers

As discussed in point 1 above, volunteer and work experience support for the Canal Rangers has been significantly reduced during this period due to Covid 19. One volunteer has worked with the Canal Rangers on 91 days and another volunteer has worked with the Canal Manager on four days, giving a total of 95 volunteer days.

Future Programme of works

Management tasks

- Organising spot dredging works on the Swans Neck near the golf course – In late February / early March a long reach excavator on a pontoon will dredge the central channel, placing mud and debris on the offside banks, completing as much of the section under the trees here as is possible in five days.
- Organising the bank repairs at Tiverton Road car park using plastic piling to retain a short section of collapsing bank between the stone wharf wall and the stone bridge hole.
- Complete update of boating regulations and procedures
- Working with DCC engineers on Asset Management Plan
- Review and scenario-based test of Emergency Plan
- Fenacre water transfer system

- Ongoing development of new interpretation panel at Swing Bridge (about the stop gate buried in the mud below the bridge) and an updated replacement of the Ebear dragonfly panel.
- Organise repainting / replacement of corroded / missing bridge nameplates
- Organise and complete Community Safety Scheme Accreditation for Canal Ranger Service staff
- Organise ongoing Ash Dieback felling works

Practical works

- All usual mowing strimming and weed-cutting work
- Ongoing small-scale bank erosion repairs (including the use of geotextile fabric and Deltalok bags on a section of erosion on offside bank at Francis Crescent)
- Landing stage extensions in Sampford Peverell
- Construction and installation of new disabled fishing platforms
- Concreting towpath under bridges with persistent puddle problems
- Tree planting and filling gaps in hedges with whips
- Re-stain seats
- Pressure wash benches, panels and dog bins as necessary