

Progress Report (March 2021 – mid-September 2021 inclusive)

1. Covid 19

Covid restrictions remained in place through the first part of this reporting period, during which time the Visitor Centre remained closed, and the Tiverton Canal Co were unable to operate. The Country Park remained exceptionally busy highlighting the importance of the site in providing recreational opportunities for local communities. When restrictions were relaxed there was a noticeable reduction in the number of visitors using the towpath. However, all of the outlying car parks and laybys continue to have significantly higher levels of use than before the pandemic. Before Covid restrictions were eased, there had been a large increase in the amount of litter – particularly take-away packaging, wine bottles and beer cans – being left in the car parks and picnic sites. This has eased in recent months.

The Tiverton Canal Co resumed horse-drawn barge trips in mid-July and the Visitor Centre was reopened at the same time. The Visitor Centre doors are being left open to aid ventilation and a hand sanitiser dispenser has been fitted at the entrance. Earlier in the year a leaflet dispenser was fitted outside the front door so that visitors could take a copy of the Canal Visitor Guide, and this continues to be well-used.

2. Spot dredging on the Swan's Neck

Boaters and the Canal Rangers had noted in recent years how debris has been building up within a quarter mile section of the Canal near the golf course. This section of the canal has not been dredged in decades and being lined with mature oak trees on both sides, receives a considerable input of leaves, twigs and acorns each year.

DCC capital funding was secured and a contractor was engaged to spend a week spot dredging this section to improve navigation. In order for a long reach excavator to safely access the central channel of the canal, a pontoon system had to be hired in. Its delivery and assembly was captured by a local drone enthusiast who shared the photo below.



Once the pontoon was assembled, the excavator boarded and the weedboat was used to push the pontoon for half a mile to the far end of the section being dredged.



The contractor then spent five days dredging the section, with mud and debris being spread on the offside banks. The work should ensure that this section of canal remains navigable for many years until the next full-scale dredging programme takes place.

3. Ash Dieback tree felling

Sadly, the Ash Dieback disease continues to spread through the Country Park's large stock of Ash trees. Given that most trees along the Canal are within falling distance of the towpath or neighbours' gardens/properties, or are in the high use boating areas, a proactive approach to managing the risk to public safety associated with diseased trees has to be followed, in line with DCC policy.



Last year, a tree consultant was engaged to survey the Ash trees along the Canal and he provided recommendations on prioritising the necessary felling works in order that they are undertaken in a timely and cost-effective manner. Tree surgery contractors have been working their way through the recommended felling and in early March completed a significant amount of felling in a section near Battens Bridge. Here all of the Ash trees between the Canal and the road were diseased and were felled. In order to do the work safely, a mobile work platform was used.

Once the work was completed, a number of native broadleaf trees were planted as replacements, and it is expected that over time, natural regeneration will also lead to new trees filling some of the gaps. Some regrowth may initially emerge from the stumps of the felled trees but is expected to die off quite quickly as the disease reasserts itself. Work has recommenced in September, with a large Ash opposite The Globe Inn being felled.

4. Towpath scraping

Once a section of towpath has been surfaced, grass starts to grow in from the edges and after about 8 – 10 years a depth of soil has begun to accumulate which is then sometimes pushed out into the central part of the towpath by the tractor which cuts the banks and hedges each winter. An excavator contractor was engaged to spend a few days each March scraping off the mud and grass where it was encroaching most on the towpath. Not only does this provide the full width of the path for people to use, but also makes it easier for social distancing to be maintained. The sections scraped this year included:

- A short section to the south of Black Bridge, Burlescombe
- A section between Westcott Bridge and Ayshford Bridge (photo below, left – note lighter shade of the scraped area on right)
- A section between Battens Bridge and Rock Bridge
- Sections between Rock Bridge and Greenway Bridge (photo below, centre)
- Sections between Tiverton Road Bridge and Crownhill Bridge (photo below right)



5. Tree planting

In addition to trees planted as replacements for felled ashes, four trees were also planted in memory of Jean Hall and Joy Yeates. Jean was formerly the Inland Waterways Association representative on the JAC and she and Joy wrote and illustrated a series of booklets about Westcountry waterways, including the Grand Western Canal.

The trees include a Field Maple in the Canal Basin, a Rowan near Tidcombe Bridge, a Hornbeam near Westcott Bridge, and an Alder near Ebear Bridge and have been paid for by the Westcountry Branch of the Inland Waterways Association and some individuals. In June, once Covid restrictions on social gatherings had been eased, a small ceremony was held to unveil a plaque beside the Field Maple in the Canal Basin.



The planting of the tree (which replaces a Rowan blown over by high winds last winter) has been welcomed by the Tiverton Canal Co, as the horse appreciates the shade provided by a tree next to its corral.

6. Bank protection works at Tiverton Road Car Park

In recent years, sections of the bank at Tiverton Road car park between the bridge hole wall and the wharf wall had become undercut and eroded, with some sections (circled red in the photo below) collapsing into the canal.



After looking at various possible solutions, it was decided that recycled plastic piling would provide the most long-lasting and cost-effective for of bank protection at this busy location.

A local contractor was engaged to supply and install the piling with the work taking a week to complete. A timber rubbing board was added to prevent boat damage to the capping and to protect the paintwork of boats that may rub against the piles.

The piling work left a short but quite steep drop down from car park level to the top of the pilings, particularly at the eastern end of the car park. The Canal Ranger Service was concerned that visitors may inadvertently slip down the bank and fall in the canal. In order to prevent this from happening they installed a length of 'knee rail' fence, as shown in the photo below:



7. Fishing platforms

Around 20 years ago, four fishing platforms for wheelchair and mobility buggy users were installed near Crownhill Bridge, Tiverton Road Bridge car park, Greenway Bridge and Ebear Bridge. In recent years they started to rot and become unsafe and so plans were made for their replacement. Although off-the-shelf fishing platforms are available, they are very expensive and don't fit the existing steel frames. The Canal Ranger Service therefore decided to design new platforms, based loosely on the previous design, although this time made with recycled plastic boards which should last longer.

Councillors Colin Slade and Ray Radford agreed to pay for the cost of the recycled plastic boards from their DCC Locality Budgets and the Tiverton and District Angling Club kindly agreed to pay for the fixings and hire of a mitre saw. The Canal Rangers and volunteers then built and installed the platforms.





8. Powerlines and swans

In the last few years, a number of swans have flown into the powerlines at the end of the Canal Basin. Following correspondence and site visits with the Canal Manager, Western Power have bundled the four lines which were previously aligned vertically into one big thick line.

This provides a much-reduced target area for swans to hit and is far more visible. Two poles have also been replaced and relocated behind walls to reduce the risk of being hit by cars.



The Canal Manager is currently awaiting news of further potential improvements to powerlines along the canal – either by bundling or the use of markers - to further reduce the risk to swans.

9. Resurfacing under bridges

Over time, puddles have developed in the towpath under several of the Canal's bridges. In late March a local contractor was engaged to excavate and resurface the towpath underneath five of the Canal's bridges – Manley Bridge, East Manley Bridge, Tiverton Road Bridge, Sampford Peverell Bridge and Buckland Bridge.

A mini-digger was used to scrape out the existing surfacing and a mix of 20mm to dust limestone scalpings was mixed with cement powder to create a dry mix which was laid and compacted. As a result, the surfacing blends well with the existing towpath on either side of the bridge but has set hard and should resist the formation of puddles for many years to come. The photos below show East Manley Bridge before and after the work.



Having seen that the approach works well, the towpath will be resurfaced in a similar way underneath several more bridges this autumn / winter.

10. Fenacre water transfer system

Progress is being made on this long-running issue. Acting on behalf of Aggregate Industries (AI), consultants Wood Plc provided a technical note in June, outlining options based around the different hands-off flow levels which could be stipulated by the Environment Agency. DCCs hydrological consultant in this matter, Marcus Francis undertook further analysis of the modelling and produced a response which was provided to AI at the end of July. The reports are detailed and technical in nature (running to 50+ pages) and so have not been appended to the JAC agenda pack, but the Canal Manager is happy to share

them by email ahead of the next JAC meeting with any member who requests copies. A Zoom meeting has been set up for 29th September during which the respective consultants will discuss and agree on the content of the revised EA water abstraction licence application.

11. Vegetation management

Growing conditions have been very good this summer and the Canal Rangers and volunteers have spent almost all their time, mowing, strimming and weed-cutting. The Canal Manager has also spent considerably more time than usual assisting with this work particularly during the weeks when the Canal Rangers have been on leave, in order to ensure that the towpath and canal remain accessible and presentable.

The late start to the horse-drawn barge season this year allowed the bank flailing between the Canal Basin and East Manley Bridge to be undertaken several weeks later than usual. Unfortunately, the tractor which undertakes this cut got a little too close to the landing stage at East Manley Bridge, collapsing the edge of the bank, necessitating some rapid repairs to make it safe for the first horse-drawn barge trip a few days later.

12. Staining benches

Prior to the Easter weekend, the Canal Manager, a Bicton College work experience student and his communication assistant took advantage of a spell of dry weather to re-stain the seats and benches in the Canal Basin. The Canal Rangers and volunteers continued this work re-staining the new memorial seats with back rests along the towpath in the following weeks.



13. Bank erosion repairs

The Canal Rangers and volunteers have continued to repair bank erosion using deltalok bags. These bags have around double the capacity of a standard sandbag are filled with soil and some fine grass seed. They are stacked with spiked plastic plates between each layer to hold them together and then covered over with a layer of soil. Initially the grass seed will germinate and help the bags to blend in, but over time the bags will become colonised by the wildflowers and grasses present along the canal banks.



The photos show a hole which was filled in close to Milestone 9, near Burlescombe. Several more holes were filled during the spring and this work will recommence during the autumn and winter months.

14. Step, handrail, gate and fence repairs

Repairs have been made to a number of flights of steps leading to the towpath. At Chaves Close in Tiverton, most of the existing steps were replaced, and Rangers have also repaired steps near Tidcombe Bridge and Fossend Bridge.

Repairs have also been made to the handrail at Waytown Tunnel (photo right), where several of the posts were rotting at the base.

At Rock Bridge, rotten gateposts, a gate and a length of post and rail fence have been replaced on the ramp between the road and the towpath.



15. Wilcombe embankment

Following works to protect the embankment beside Wilcombe Primary School from damage by badgers, a temporary screening fence was installed to restore the privacy of the residents in the properties below. The hedge has now regrown to its previous height, restoring privacy to its previous state and so the screening netting has been taken down.

16. Community Patrol Boat

The Community Patrol Boat returned to the water after extensive winter maintenance works on the boat and engine. The crew held a successful meet and greet event and are gaining a lot of public support.

The Canal Manager and skipper have liaised to write a new risk assessment covering all aspects of their work. The Canal Ranger Service have also provided a defibrillator to be carried on board when on patrol.

The crew have purchased a bodycam for personal protection and for recording incidents but use of the bodycam and storage of the data has to comply with Devon County Council's data protection policies and so lengthy administrative procedures are being followed to ensure this compliance before the bodycam is used.



17. Bridge nameplates

The Canal Rangers have begun a programme of repainting / replacing bridge nameplates. Many are corroded and need to be rubbed down and repainted. Several were repainted earlier in the spring and this work will continue through the winter.



In Sampford Peverell, the Buckland Bridge nameplate is missing and the Sampford Peverell Bridge nameplate is badly corroded. The parish council have generously agreed to pay for replacement nameplates and these are currently on order.

18. Boat permits

We continue to see high levels of demand for unpowered boat permits, but there is widespread and increasing surprise and annoyance that we don't have an online purchasing option. Throughout the year, the Canal Manager has been working with DCC staff and a company DCC uses for online sales to create an online boat permit purchasing facility. The company currently runs the www.devonpermits.org website, and the option to buy unpowered boat permits is being added.

Whilst it may seem like a simple transaction to add, the variety of different permit length and discount combinations has been difficult to accommodate within the existing software and so it has taken longer than anticipated to develop a system that works effectively. The system will be launched this autumn and anyone buying a permit online will be obliged to carry evidence of their permit with them to be checked on request (usually in the form of an email on their phone).

The intention is to retain the paper and sticker-based, in-person purchasing of motorised boat permits due to the low volume of these sales, the need to check insurance and boat

safety certificate details, and the benefits of in-person conversations about these requirements, slipway arrangements, speed limits etc.

19. Swing Bridge interpretation panel

Following the breach of Swing Embankment in 2012, contractors undertaking repairs discovered the remains of a timber structure in the mud below Swing Bridge. Careful excavation by the Canal Ranger team, volunteers and an archaeologist revealed it to be an original stop gate that would once have been used to dam off a section of the canal. It is thought to be the only remaining one on the canal and so was carefully documented and then re-covered in mud to preserve it prior to the section being rewatered.



A new interpretation panel has been installed to reveal to visitors what is hidden in the water below.

20. Trainee Rangers

The Country Park has been successful in securing funding for two Trainee Ranger positions through the government's [Kickstart Scheme](#). Positions created through the scheme are open to 18–24-year-olds on Universal Credit, and last for six months with employees working 25 hours per week.

Following advertising, attendance by the Canal Manager at a Job Fayre and interviews, Sam Dabner and Alistair Smith have been recruited and started work in mid-September. The photo below shows Sam on the left and Ali top right, together with Canal Ranger Jo Roberts and long-term volunteer, Craig Snow, having just installed the stop gate panel.



As part of the package, they will receive training to secure their chainsaw, brushcutter and first aid certificates, and together with the valuable on-the-job experience they will gain, they will be in a strong position to pursue a career in countryside management once they have completed the six-month term.

21. Damage in the Canal Basin car park

Two separate vehicle collisions have taken place in the Canal Basin car park in the late summer, causing damage to Country Park infrastructure.

On an evening in late July a car crashed into the parapet wall above the Tiverton Borough Bowling Club knocking a large section of wall on to the flat roof of the club building below. Devon County Council insurance and estates teams are liaising to organise the repair of the wall. The police were informed and responded to this incident.



In mid-September, an unknown vehicle crashed into the litter bin and pay and display signage near the public toilets. The signage was made safe at the time by the Canal Ranger Service and they have since reinstalled the posts and signs and replaced the bin.

22. JAC site visit

The summer JAC site visit was held on the evening of 4th August, and it was a welcome opportunity to meet up again in person and to meet some new members.

Members were given an introduction to the Community Patrol Boat by Skipper Dion Howells and discussed how the boat and its crew can be used to address anti-social behaviour. Dion also outlined their ambitions to find a secure occasional mooring in Sampford Peverell



to allow them to spend more patrolling the northern half of the canal (since the visit two potential mooring locations either side of Sampford Peverell have been identified).

The committee then travelled to Tiverton Road car park where they viewed some of the recent works including the plastic piling bank revetment and knee rail fence, resurfacing of the towpath under Tiverton Road Bridge and a newly decked fishing platform for wheelchair and mobility buggy users.

Finally, the committee visited Sampford Peverell picnic site where they saw the trim trail that was installed last year and the new wildflower meadow that was created last year by scraping off the topsoil and sowing a wildflower seed mix.



The Advisory Committee were impressed with how well the wildflowers have established and were pleased to be among the first to walk a newly mown path through the orchard.

23. Meadow cutting

In mid-September, Canal Rangers cut the wildflower meadows at the Sampford Peverell community orchard, beside Ebear pond (photo below) and at Bamfylde Close. All of these new wildflower meadows have flowered well this year and will benefit from being cut and raked off.



We are grateful to the Sampford Peverell tree wardens who volunteered their time to rake up the cuttings at the community orchard.

The Canal Manager is beginning to look into the possibility of creating another new wildflower meadow on the offside land around William Authers Footbridge.

24. Notable wildlife sightings

There have been a few notable wildlife sightings reported this summer. Ray Jones and another local birdwatcher both reported a [Cetti's Warbler](#) being heard singing at locations half a mile either side of Sampford Peverell. This is the first record of this species at the Canal. Cetti's warblers are steadily increasing their range in the UK and hopefully we will see (or more likely, hear) more of them along the canal in future.

Dragonfly sightings have continued to include [Scarce Chaser](#) and [Hairy Dragonfly](#) but the highlight this year has been a sighting by Ray Jones of a [Brown Hawker](#) – only the second he has seen at the canal in several decades of wildlife watching.



A couple of otter sightings have also been reported during the year, most recently a pair near Westleigh.

25. Azolla

The late summer period has seen an outbreak of Azolla (Water Fern), mainly between Tiverton Road Bridge and East Manley Bridge. There are small amounts of this invasive non-native weed most years in the edges of the canal, but this year the conditions have been right for a more significant outbreak. The Azolla weevil which has been licenced for release for controlling Azolla is now free-living in the UK and has been seen on the Azolla in the canal and so it is anticipated that the outbreak will decline through the autumn.



26. Countryside Stewardship applications

Much of the Canal Manager's time this year has been spent on securing Countryside Stewardship funding for management works at the Canal and at the two other countryside sites in East Devon for which he has responsibility. The Higher Tier agreements at the East Devon sites (Knapp Copse LNR and White Cross picnic site) have entailed much more work but have secured the funding and management of the sites for the next five years.

At the Canal, he has been successful in applying for £9k for a range of hedge planting / laying, tree planting and bankside tree coppicing works over the next two winters. As all of the work will be undertaken by the Canal Rangers and volunteers, much of the funding will be spent on other improvements within the Country Park.

27. Fuel Spillage

On 21 September a boater at the East Manley moorings accidentally pumped some diesel into the canal. A fuel leak had led to diesel collecting in the sump of his boat and he had started pumping it out believing it was just water. As soon as he realised it contained diesel he stopped and contacted the Canal Rangers via Dion Howells.

The Canal Rangers quickly deployed two absorbent booms across the canal to contain the spillage within an 80m section of the canal and put up signs to keep boats from entering the section.



The Canal Manager contacted the Environment Agency to report the incident and the local catchment officer attended in the early afternoon. She was satisfied that it was not a significant spillage and provided advice on the use of absorbent pads to soak up the fuel. The Canal Manager also contacted the Angling Club to inform them of the incident. The Rangers spread out dozens of absorbent pads and left them overnight as the EA officer had suggested. By the following morning there was very little sign of any pollution and the pads and booms were collected in. There was no evidence of any harm to fish or other wildlife. The boater will be recharged by the EA for their officers' time and he has also agreed to pay for the replacement of the Country Park's absorbent booms and pads that were used.

28. Volunteers

During the reporting period the Country Park has benefitted from 158 days work undertaken by volunteers. The Canal Ranger Service intends to resume its winter Volunteer Days on the second Sunday of each month from October to March.

29. Ranger led-visits

School visits led by the Canal Ranger Service have been significantly impacted due to covid restrictions. However, the Canal Rangers did lead visits from the Tiverton ACE school on 19 July and from the Kingswood summer school on 12 August.

Future programme of works

Management tasks

- Get quotes and organise resurfacing of towpath sections as funding allows (William Authers Bridge – Tidcombe Bridge? Crownhill Bridge – Tiverton Road Bridge? Fossend Bridge – 100m south of Black Bridge?).
- Organise resurfacing of towpath under remaining bridges with puddles.
- Complete update of boating regulations and procedures and design/printing of new permits book.
- Liaison with DCC engineers over further repairs to Aqueduct during Oct / Nov.
- Ongoing work with DCC engineers on Asset Management Plan.
- Scenario-based test of Emergency Plan.
- Fenacre water transfer system.
- Organise an update and reprint of the Canal Visitor Guide.
- Organise production and installation of a second orientation panel (similar to the one on rock beside the steps) to go beside the public toilets for visitors entering at that location.
- Organise update and replacement of the Ebear dragonfly panel.
- Organise repairs, improvements and updates to Visitor Centre displays.
- Organise replacement of broken fence and gate at Fenacre Bridge.
- Organise installation of sign and cleft post and rail fence and gates at Sampford Peverell Community Orchard.
- Organise pruning of trees beside Sampford Peverell tennis court floodlights.
- Organise and complete Community Safety Scheme Accreditation for Canal Ranger Service staff and Community Patrol Boat crew.
- Organise ongoing Ash Dieback felling works and a range of recommended tree management works arising from the tree safety inspection undertaken this summer.
- Organise towpath scraping works as required.
- Green Flag award application.
- Ensure ongoing compliance with all relevant H&S policies / guidelines.

Practical works

- All usual trimming back of overhanging branches and crown-lifting of low branches.
- Hedge laying / planting, coppicing and tree planting works as specified in Countryside Stewardship agreement.
- Planting of 50 trees along the canal to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the Country Park.
- Ongoing small-scale bank erosion repairs using Deltalok bags.
- Landing stage extensions in Sampford Peverell.
- Annual strimming of bridge abutments and trimming of the banks and hedges which the flailing contractor cannot access.