

Progress Report (October 2021 to February 2022 inclusive)

1. 50th Anniversary tree planting

During November and December, school children, volunteers and councillors helped the Canal Rangers plant 50 trees along the Canal to celebrate 50 years since its declaration as a Country Park in 1971.

The impacts of the pandemic led to a decision not to organise a big public celebratory event. The planting of 50 trees was felt to be a good alternative for a variety of reasons. Planting the trees will have a positive and long-lasting legacy in terms of the wildlife and landscape of the Canal. Sadly many of the large 'standard' Ash trees within the hedgerows which line the towpath are having to be felled due to Ash Dieback, and so these 50 trees will grow on to become replacements. The trees will also absorb carbon and so will contribute to the current efforts to mitigate the effects of climate change through tree planting.



The tree planting also provided an opportunity to engage and celebrate with local school children and community groups. Trees were planted by:

- The two local DCC (and MDDC) councillors, Colin Slade and Ray Radford, and DCC Cabinet member Cllr Andrea Davis
- Mayor of Tiverton Cllr Sue Griggs
- Friends Chairman, Robert Hodgson
- Children from 2nd Tiverton Beavers and Cubs
- Pupils from Blundell's Prep, Sampford Peverell and Burlescombe Primary Schools



The Canal Ranger Service would like to thank all the people and organisations that helped with this celebration and who contribute to the Country Park's ongoing success.

2. Winter tree work

The Canal Rangers have spent much of the winter working on the maintenance barge cutting back overhanging branches and coppicing or pollarding bankside trees. Last winter the section between the Canal Basin and Halberton was the subject of more intensive work. Most of the work this winter has so far focussed on the section between Sampford Peverell and Waytown Tunnel. At the time of writing (mid Feb) the barge is back in Tiverton, with offside banks (not rented under Garden Agreements) receiving their annual cut. Over the next month it will work its way back out towards Sampford Peverell.



For several days in November, work focussed on an offside pond located between Buckland Bridge and Boehill Bridge. This pond had completely silted up and become overgrown with willows but was restored in 2006. The pond was re-excavated and many of

the willows were removed or pollarded. In recent years, several of these willows have got quite big again, shading the pond and reducing its value for wildlife. The Canal Rangers have re-pollarded the willows at its southern end, letting in more light and allowing a greater variety and abundance of plant and insect life to flourish.



3. Hedgelaying

Rangers and volunteers have spent the November and December volunteer days laying the hedge between the Sampford Peverell picnic site and the tennis courts. Most of the 'laid' stems will continue to survive and grow for many years, and several new stems will bud and grow below the hinge. In this way the base of the hedge is thickened up, creating a much better habitat for a range of wildlife including birds and small mammals.



4. Sampford Peverell Community Orchard

Ongoing works to improve the community orchard have included the installation of a Sweet Chestnut fence, made of morticed posts and cleft rails. The traditional look blends in well and is complemented by a new CNC routed oak entrance sign, which was installed by volunteers in January.



5. Green Flag Award

In October 2021, the Canal Ranger Service announced that the Country Park had retained the Green Flag Award. This is the 13th consecutive year the park has held the award, with the judge's overall score continuing to increase as further improvements are made.

Notably, the score for the management plan increased following the latest review, which adopted the Green Flag Award criteria to focus and structure the plan.



6. MDDC funding

In the autumn, Mid Devon District Council's Grants Working Group undertook a review of the external grants provided by the District Council, including the contribution to the Canal Revenue budget (currently standing at £45k pa). The Canal Manager provided a report justifying the ongoing funding and providing a range of data to help the working group in their assessment. He also provided a PowerPoint presentation about the Country Park via Zoom at one of their meetings.

In early January, MDDC announced that their Cabinet members had approved the recommendations of the Grants Working Group that the grant should stay at current (21-22

levels) for the following two years (22-23 and 23-24). The Canal Ranger Service is pleased and relieved that the funding contribution has been maintained.

7. Tiverton Town Council funding

For several years Tiverton Town Council has been making an annual £4k contribution to the Country Park for improvements made between the Canal Basin and Manley Bridge. This contribution has once again been made this year and will cover much of the cost of resurfacing the towpath between William Authers Footbridge and Tidcombe Bridge, due to take place in March.

8. Fenacre Water Transfer System

At the October 2021 JAC meeting, members were told that a pre-application to the Environment Agency for a Water Abstraction licence was being prepared by Aggregate Industries, with input from DCC's consultant hydrologist Marcus Francis. This pre-application was submitted a few weeks after the meeting, following suggestions by Marcus Francis for further improvements.

Despite warnings that it could be several months before any response may come from the EA, they contacted AI in early January to say that a senior permitting officer at national level had assessed the pre application. He felt the proposed approach to be reasonable and carrying out additional pre-application work would likely duplicate much of that which would be undertaken in the determination of a full application. Therefore, he was of the opinion that it was probably best to recommend the formal application be submitted but suggested it would benefit from running the proposal past the local EA area teams beforehand for their input.

In late January, AI received confirmation that the local EA area teams were happy with the pre-application and recommended submission of the full application, subject to the supply of some further hydrological data. AI consultants, Wood Plc, confirmed that they would be working on preparing the requested data with a view to submitting the full application within the next few weeks.

9. Covid 19

Country Park signage and website headlines have been adapted to reflect the current government Covid 19 guidance / rules as these have changed during the reporting period.

The Canal Ranger Team has been fortunate in that no members of staff or their families have had the disease to date, and so their work has not yet been directly affected through absences due to illness with the virus, or self-isolation.



10. Aqueduct snagging works

Following the recent relining of the aqueduct, there remained some leakage into the cutting below. The likely cause of this was identified as the seals above the returns of the liner to the canal bed at either end of the structure. Re-sealing the ends of the liner was initially proposed by the contractor for summer 2021, but this was pushed back to the autumn in order to minimise the impact of re-draining the aqueduct on boaters.

Once an EA licence for dewatering the aqueduct was received the aqueduct was dammed and a fish rescue was completed, before the section was drained. The clay seals above the ends of the liners were replaced and the leakage stopped. The aqueduct was then rewatered and the dams removed. All of this work was undertaken under warranty.

Boaters and the Canal Rangers have since discovered a 4m x 6m mound of clay and rock extending from the offside bank to the centre of the channel beyond the southern end of the aqueduct, roughly in line with where the dams were installed. It's unclear how this material got here, but certainly

relates to the aqueduct relining works and so the DCC engineer who oversaw the project is currently liaising with the contractor to get this material cleared by an excavator working from the offside bank. In the meantime, the area is roped off to prevent boats hitting the underwater mound.



11. Community Safety Accreditation Scheme

At the end of November, the Canal Manager and Rangers attended a CSAS training day, which was also attended by rangers from Dartmoor and Exmoor National Parks. Topics included key aspects of CSAS such as how and when to use the powers, as well as sessions on some of the key issues which Devon and Cornwall Police are currently looking to address (e.g. modern slavery, county lines drug dealing and child abuse) and signs to look out for and report.

Application forms for Devon County Council to engage in the scheme, and for the individual staff members to be accredited have been submitted and staff vetting is taking place. It is anticipated that the accreditation will be confirmed later in the spring, at which point the Ranger Service's involvement in the scheme and new powers will be publicised. Further ongoing training will be provided by the police on topics like dealing with conflict and personal safety.

Dion Howells, skipper of the Community Patrol Boat, also attended the training and he and his fellow CPB volunteers will be following a parallel scheme run by Devon and Cornwall

Police to become Accredited Police Volunteers. This will provide them with the same powers and training opportunities as CSAS, but is focussed on volunteers, whereas CSAS is only open to paid staff members of approved organisations.

12. Kickstart Trainee Rangers

Trainee Rangers Alastair and Sam are now approaching the end of their 6-month trainee positions and have done a great job alongside the Canal Rangers this winter. They have also made the most of the £1500 training and equipment bursaries which come with the Kickstart positions. Some has been spent on uniforms and chainsaw PPE, but most has been spent on training, with both trainees securing chainsaw, brush-cutter, first aid, and All Terrain Vehicle competency certificates; and with chipper training due to follow later in February. The combination of work experience and training tickets will stand them in good stead to find work in the countryside management sector once their position ends.

A further three Kickstart Trainee Ranger positions are currently being advertised to commence in March although early signs are that there are fewer potential candidates that meet the eligibility criteria and have an interest in applying this time round, and so all three positions may not be filled.

13. Bank / hedge trimming and ditching work

In January a local contractor was engaged to cut the banks and trim the hedges along the canal. Fortunately the weather has been dry and so the tyres of the tractor haven't made a mess, as they sometimes can during wet winters. The 50 trees that had been planted last year were protected, in part, through being marked with orange hi-vis tape.

Another local contractor undertook some ditching work near Fossend Bridge. Sediment is carried into and deposited along this small watercourse and so cleaning with an excavator is necessary every few years to make sure the ditch doesn't overtop into the canal and adjacent field during high rainfall.

Although spreading the mud right beside the towpath isn't ideal, there is nowhere else for it to go whilst its wet. It usually dries out and grasses over nicely during the spring. The adjacent landowner is happy to take the dried-out soil and so either this summer or in the summer after the next ditching operation we will scrape it up with an excavator and pass it over the fence where he takes it away in a trailer to build up hedge banks or fill in hollows.



14. Bankside dredging at Lowdwells

In the autumn a contractor was engaged to pull a fallen tree from the canal near Lowdwells. He used a large excavator to do this, and whilst there he also dredged fringing reed growth which had been spreading out from the towpath side bank towards the central channel.

15. Noticeboard repairs

Following vandalism to the noticeboard at Crownhill Bridge, five new polycarbonate windows have been purchased to repair the vandalism and to replace three other windows which have become permanently 'misted' and difficult to see through. Some of the pin boards which have been discoloured by UV light will also be replaced. Irreparable damage to the noticeboard at Tiverton Road Car Park, means that this one has been earmarked for replacement.

The existing brand of noticeboards are no longer available and so a very well built and attractive alternative noticeboard (photo right) has been identified as the long-term replacement for the Country Parks noticeboards, several of which are in poor condition. However, they are built of steel rather than aluminium and come complete with steel legs and are quite expensive and so it is envisaged that the park may purchase one per year over the next ten years, so that the cost can be spread, unless an external funding source is identified which enables them to be purchased more quickly.



16. Pressure washing in the Canal Basin

In February, a Ranger and volunteer spent a day pressure washing the play park equipment which had moss and algae beginning to grow in lots of nooks and crannies; and the blue poured-rubber surfacing which was becoming quite grubby with lots of use through the winter. They also began pressure washing the moss which had grown along the top of the wharf wall.

17. Visitor Centre vandalism and repairs

In November, the Visitor Centre door was vandalised by youths, with the large, double-glazed panel being shattered. The incident was captured by the centre's CCTV cameras, and the footage was supplied to the police. The local PC who leads on youth crime was able to identify the group and the individual who shattered the glass and has followed up on this with the individuals and the school.

As the youth responsible is 15 years old, the options for addressing his behaviour are limited. The PC has discussed the matter with the Canal Manager, the youth and his

mother, and it has been agreed that the youth undertakes some restorative justice by spending some time working at the Canal Basin with the Canal Ranger Team, possibly doing some more of the pressure washing described in item 16, above. The glass panel was repaired and the cost of this has been covered by DCC's property insurance.

18. Memorial seats and benches

Since October 2021, two new memorial seats (with backs) have been installed near Sellake Bridge and Black Bridge, and a replacement oak bench has also been built and installed near the Globe Inn car park steps. Two more memorial seats with backs are currently on order.

19. Bridge nameplates

The nameplate of Buckland Bridge was missing for some time and the Sampford Peverell Bridge nameplate was badly corroded. Sampford Peverell Parish Council offered to fund replacements and so new nameplates have been cast and were installed by the Canal Rangers in November. A big thank you to the Parish Council for their support!



The Canal Manager has recently asked the clerk of Burlescombe Parish Council if they would be willing to fund the replacement of the corroded nameplates at Fossend and Ebear Bridges. She has confirmed that councillors are supportive in principle and will confirm at their March 7 meeting, once quotes have been received.

20. Canal Basin car park wall repairs

Following significant damage to the wall between the car park and the Bowls Club caused by a car, repairs have now been undertaken, with the cost being covered by the driver's car insurance.

21. Embankment flailing

The Canal Ranger Service endeavours to keep the Canal's highest embankments (near Swing Bridge and Sellake Bridge) clear of scrub so they can be easily inspected, and to benefit wildflowers and reptiles. On both sides of Swing embankment and on the offside of Sellake embankment this is mostly achieved through sheep grazing and occasional brush-cutting. The towpath side of Sellake embankment cannot be grazed and so this has been cut every year or two by the Canal Rangers and volunteers using brush-cutters and pedestrian reciprocating blade mowers.

Two years ago a volunteer slipped and fell whilst brush-cutting this fairly steep embankment. Thankfully he wasn't hurt; however (acting on the 'near miss') the Canal Manager assessed safer methods of cutting the embankment. Having seen the remote-controlled flail mowers being increasingly used on motorway and dual carriageways he thought this may provide a safer option and sought quotes.

As a result, grounds maintenance contractor Glendale Services Ltd was engaged to spend a morning in November cutting the embankment using their remote-control flail mower. As shown in the photos below, this did a good job and another order has been placed for the machine and operator to spend a day cutting Swing embankment in late February.



22. Online boat permit system

Plans to provide a new online permit purchasing system for unpowered boats have been delayed considerably as the developer for the company developing the system has been off sick for much of the winter, but he is back now and details have been finalised, meaning the system should go live very soon. The system will be accessed via www.devonpermits.org which mainly provides a system for online payment of DCC parking permits but will provide an extra option for purchase of unpowered boat permits.

23. Canal Visitor Guide

The Canal Manager is organising an update and reprint of the Canal Visitor Guide. Various small amendments will be made to text and maps, and many of the adverts will be changed. Printing is being scheduled to enable delivery of the new guides ahead of the Easter holidays. Advertising income should cover most of the design and printing costs.

24. Beavers

Since the government decision in 2020 to allow beavers to remain on the River Otter in East Devon and spread naturally, the beaver population within that catchment has grown and some beavers have moved to surrounding catchments. Recently, beaver signs have been found on the River Exe, north of Tiverton. Whilst beavers have the potential to provide significant benefits in terms of water quality, flood alleviation and nature recovery, they can cause problems at specific locations.

Embanked structures such as canals and reservoirs are examples of such locations where beavers will need to be managed (and possibly removed) due to their habit of digging into banks. Typically they will dig an underwater hole in a bank and then burrow upwards to create a chamber. These chambers are often extended over time and if they reach the surface, branches, mud and vegetation are piled on top.

Given that much of the canal is embanked on one side or both, beavers would clearly pose a threat to the integrity of the canal in terms of causing leaks or breaches. Devon Wildlife Trust, who took a leading role in the partnership that oversaw the River Otter Beaver Trial, fully understand the danger that beavers pose to the canal and have offered their support in helping to trap and relocate any which do arrive at the canal. They also offered a training session with one of their beaver officers to look at the field signs so that the Canal Ranger Service know what to look out for and can provide an initial assessment of any signs reported by members of the public.

The Canal Ranger Team spent a morning at Otterhead Lakes in the Blackdowns in mid February where they were shown feeding signs, a burrow and a dam. Feeding signs are typically small branches cut at an angle, and floating, bark-stripped sticks.



Any beavers living on the canal are unlikely to build dams, except possibly in front of any weirs where there is a flow of water – the noise and flow being the trigger to initiate dam-building behaviour.

Beavers are quite a large and conspicuous animal – their feeding signs are fairly obvious in the winter, and late evening sightings are likely in the summer and so it is unlikely that a beaver could exist for long on the canal without being noticed. If they were to arrive at the canal, every effort would be made to trap and relocate them as quickly as possible. Although they are currently quite close on the Exe, there are no likely routes for beavers to take to get from the Exe to the Canal and so colonisation would be more likely through the Culm catchment in the coming years.

25. Talks

The Canal Manager often gives talks about the Canal to local clubs and societies. Unsurprisingly there has been a bit of a lull in this in the last two years due to the pandemic, but in January he gave a PowerPoint slide show via Zoom to the Wellington Rotary Club. The talk was well-received and the Club have since offered a donation of £150 to the Friends of the Grand Western Canal. The club are also interested in offering some practical volunteering assistance, perhaps working with the Tiverton Rotary Club, viewing

the canal as a connection between the two clubs which were once more closely linked, but now exist in separate administrative areas within the Rotary Club organisation. The Canal Manager and Robert Hodgson, Chair of the Friends Group, will liaise with the Rotary Clubs on potential volunteering opportunities.

26. Events

Canal Ranger Joanne Roberts held a series of four [wreath-making workshops](#) on Saturday 11th and Sunday 12th December. Wreaths and decorations were made from natural materials collected within the Country Park. The workshops were almost fully booked and feedback from participants was very good.



In November, Jo led a walk and talk between Halberton and the Canal Basin, but due to poor weather (and possibly Covid related concerns) only nine people attended.

During 2022, as the pandemic hopefully eases, the Canal Ranger Service intend to gradually recommence the programme of events which has been put on hold during the last two years.

27. Volunteers

The Canal Ranger Service has recently recruited several new wildlife and environmental monitoring volunteers:

- One (a recent ecology graduate) will be undertaking monthly water quality checks at watercourses around Fenacre Bridge (including the canal) as part of the Westcountry Rivers Trust's citizen science programme, as well as harvest mouse monitoring at the adjacent grassland beside Beech Car Park.
- Another (who is training to become an ecological consultant) will be undertaking amphibian and reptile survey and monitoring at Ebear pond and Long Pond (mentioned and pictured in item 2, above) as well as water quality testing at the two ponds.
- A third already works as an ecological consultant and is keen to start a dormouse monitoring programme along some of the wooded embankments and hedges along the canal.

The data gathered by these volunteers will feed into ongoing management planning and may raise awareness of issues that may otherwise be overlooked.

The Canal Rangers continue to receive the assistance of a number of volunteers and college work experience students. During the reporting period a total of 102 volunteer days have been recorded.

Future programme of works

Practical works

- Resurfacing sections of towpath between William Authers Footbridge and Tidcombe Bridge, Tiverton Road Bridge and Crownhill Bridge, and Fossend Bridge and a seat 400m south.
- Resurfacing underneath Tidcombe Bridge and possibly other bridges depending on budget situation at year end.
- Improvements to / rebuilding of steps near Tidcombe Bridge (subject to securing funding)
- Remote control flailing of Swing embankment
- Repair of eroding bank beside Manley Bridge hole wall (towpath side)
- Ongoing small-scale bank erosion repairs using Deltalok bags.
- Landing stage extensions in Sampford Peverell.
- Construction and installation of memorial benches
- Re-stain seats
- Pressure wash benches, panels and dog bins as necessary
- Removal of ditch dredgings near Fossend Bridge
- Installation of new bridge nameplates
- All usual mowing strimming and weed-cutting work

Management tasks (* = ongoing works already in progress)

- Organisation of all works listed above
- Working with DCC engineers on Asset Management Plan *
- Fenacre water transfer system *
- Complete update of boating regulations and procedures and design/printing of new permits book *
- Ongoing work with DCC engineers on Asset Management Plan *
- Scenario-based test of Emergency Plan (once DCC Emergency Planning Team have capacity – still focussed on covid at present) *
- Complete the 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 *
- Secure quotes and capital funding for slurry-sealing the tarmac paths in the canal basin and for filling potholes in Canal Basin and Tiverton Road car parks
- Provision of tree and plaque stone for MDDC Chairman to mark Queen's Platinum Jubilee by planting tree near Rock Bridge *
- Organise update and replacement of the Ebear dragonfly panel.
- Organise repairs, improvements and updates to Visitor Centre displays *
- Complete Community Safety Scheme Accreditation process 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 last summer *
- Ensure ongoing compliance with all relevant H&S policies / guidelines *