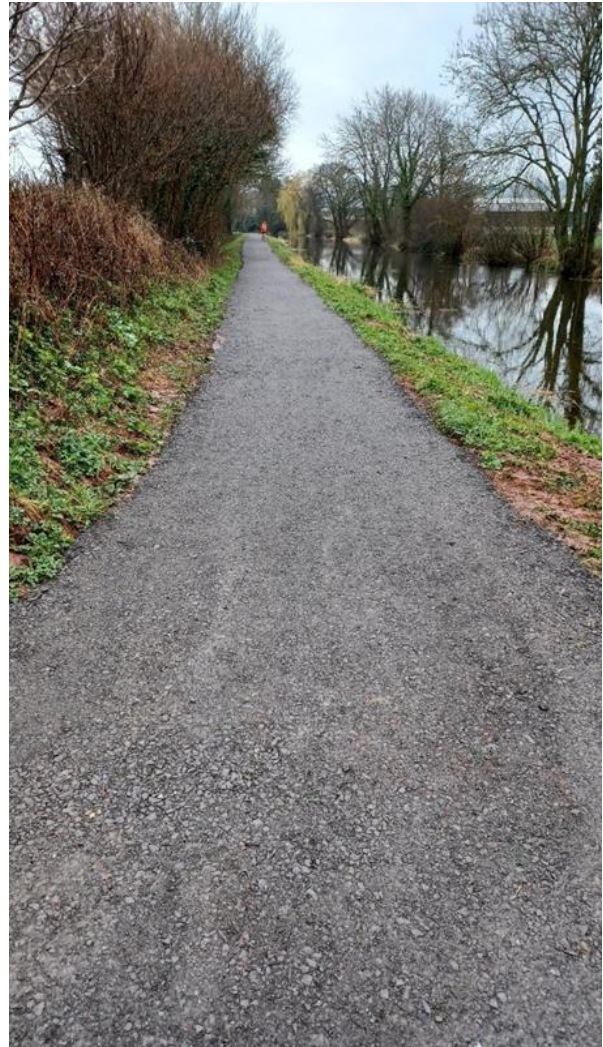


Progress Report (March 2022 to September 2022 inclusive)

1. Towpath Resurfacing

Three sections of towpath, each measuring between 400 and 450m, were resurfaced in March.

In Tiverton, the busy section between William Authers Footbridge and Tidcombe Bridge was previously prone to puddling, but this has now been resolved through resurfacing. The photo below left was taken midway through the works. As well as canal visitors, the school children that use this section of towpath to walk to Tidcombe and Wilcombe Primary Schools will appreciate the improvements.



Near Halberton, a section where the path had been worn down to the liner – between Crownhill Bridge and Tiverton Road Bridge - has been resurfaced as shown above right.

In Burlescombe, a section of towpath suffering from poor drainage and existing surfacing being worn down to the underlying liner, has also been resurfaced as shown in the photo taken during the works, below.



In all cases the path was scraped out at the edges by an excavator and then surfaced to a width of 1.8m and to a depth of 10cm with 20mm limestone scalpings. These were spread evenly and then rolled to compact them.

The Tiverton and Halberton sections went down and compacted well, but unfortunately the extended spell of dry weather in mid to late March meant that that stone was too dry to bind and set effectively in the Burlescombe section and is still quite 'mushy' in some places. The Canal Manager is currently working with the contractor to look at methods for rectifying this during the autumn.

2. Resurfacing under bridges

Contractors have continued to resurface sections of towpath underneath bridges which are prone to puddling. Sections at Warnicombe Bridge, Greenway Bridge and Holbrook Bridge have been scraped out with a mini digger and resurfaced with a dry mix of cement powder and the 20mm limestone scalpings usually used to surface the towpath. This provides a flat, hard-wearing surface which blends in well (as shown in the photo taken at Greenway Bridge).



3. Avian Flu

In July, all five of the cygnets of the pair that nest in Tiverton (known as Albert and Victoria) fell ill and died. The Canal Ranger Service suspected Avian Flu and reported the deaths to Defra and used social media to encourage members of the public to report any sightings of dead or ill birds, recommending that people don't touch them.

After collecting one of the dead cygnets for analysis, the Animal and Plant Health Agency (APHA) confirmed in mid August that the cygnet had tested positive for Avian Flu. APHA provided links to public information posters, which they suggested could be put out in the area of the outbreak, and this was done by the Canal Ranger Service.

Since the death of the cygnets, there have been a handful of other dead birds (three Mallards, a moorhen chick and a sparrowhawk) reported dead, but no signs of a major outbreak. The sparrowhawk has been collected by APHA for testing and results are awaited.

4. Vandalism and antisocial behaviour in the Canal Basin

In May the Canal Basin was the focus of a number of incidents. One of the litter bins was set alight and fixtures and fittings in the public toilets were broken. Fires were also lit in two of the gents cubicles. On the same night, fencing staples and a pike fishing treble hook were scattered in the play park and we understand that litter bins elsewhere in the town were set alight. A fence post was broken a few nights later and the maintenance barge and some Sea Cadet boats were also set adrift.



All of the incidents were reported by the Canal Manager using the online 101 form, but following a lack of any response, he took it up with the police contact he had through the CSAS scheme (see next item). A local PCSO then met with the Tiverton Canal Co proprietor and the Canal Manager and following some patrolling by local police teams, the incidents ceased.

5. Community Safety Accreditation Scheme (CSAS) and Accredited Police Volunteers (APV)

Following the submission of CSAS application forms to Devon and Cornwall Police (D&CP) in February, all of the Canal Ranger Service staff passed the police vetting process. The Canal Manager then supplied some further information that was requested in May, but is still awaiting confirmation that the application has been approved. The D&CP officer responsible for the scheme has apologised but explained that the application has to be signed off by the Chief Constable and that so far it has been difficult to pin either the former or current Chief Constables down on this.

The volunteers that crew the Community Patrol Boat are following a parallel APV scheme which should result in them being given the same powers and training as the Canal Ranger Team under CSAS. They have completed a training day and are currently waiting for D&CP to approve the logo and marketing package for the APV scheme.

A meeting was held in August attended by the D&CP officer responsible for both schemes, the Canal Manager and the Skipper for the Community Patrol Boat. Contents of a Memorandum of Understanding regarding the operation of the APV scheme at the Canal was discussed and a draft version has since been sent out and responded to.

As and when the scheme applications are signed off, a publicity and promotion plan will be followed to raise awareness of the schemes and their benefits.

6. Queen's Platinum Jubilee trees

In his capacity as Chairman of Mid Devon District Council, Cllr Ray Radford, chose a location within his ward beside the Grand Western Canal to plant a tree celebrating the Queen's Platinum Jubilee. An Oak tree was planted close to Rock Bridge near Halberton, complete with a rock-mounted plaque recording the occasion.



On the same day, another Platinum Jubilee Oak tree was planted by the Four Villages Environment Group near Fossend Bridge in Burlescombe.

7. Summer vegetation maintenance

All of the usual mowing, strimming and weedcutting has been undertaken by the Canal Rangers and volunteers. Contractors used a remote control flail to cut the steep slopes of Swing embankment in March. The bankside vegetation from the Canal Basin to East Manley Bridge was flailed by a contractor in mid June to enable the horsedrawn barge to continue operating and the Canal Manager used the Kubota tractor to side up the vegetation overhanging the towpath in early July.

Canal Ranger, Craig Saunderson has been operating the weedboat for 4 days per week for almost all of the period from April to September and will continue with occasional days on the boat until mid-October.



8. Storm damage to trees and incidents of summer branch drop

In March, Storm Eunice did a huge amount of damage to trees in many parts of the country, but the Country Park's trees came through relatively unscathed. However, the Canal Ranger Service did have quite a few branches and small trees to clear up, including this one near Warnicombe Bridge which required the assistance of a JCB to haul out.



Following the drought this summer, there were several cases of Summer Branch Drop. Summer Branch Drop (SBD) is the term describing the failure of mature tree branches in summer (often from oaks), with no obvious cause or way of predicting the likelihood of any given tree dropping a limb.

SBD events often occur after the onset of heavy rainfall following a prolonged dry spell. There is speculation that this weather combination is significant, but the precise mechanism is not understood and it is poorly researched. The branches which fell from oaks along the Canal did so during or in the days following heavy rain.



In the cases where the towpath was blocked, the Canal Rangers and contractors acted quickly to clear the fallen branches and ensure that the horsedrawn barge operation wasn't affected.



9. Ash Dieback

Whilst the spread of the disease continues, the rate of spread seems to have slowed a little this year and in some cases large Ash trees which had diseased limbs removed seem to have recovered somewhat (for example the large offside Ash tree near Tidcombe Bridge). It remains to be seen whether this is a temporary recovery before the disease reasserts itself or something more lasting. However, dozens of ash trees have deteriorated to the point that they do need to be felled or pollarded for safety reasons and the next round of works has been agreed with tree surgery contractors, to take place during the autumn.

10. Badgers in embankments

Badgers are currently burrowing in two embankments along the canal – one near Ayshford Bridge and one near Battens Bridge – both on the towpath side. At the sett near Ayshford Bridge, in April contractors inserted a 20m line of 3m long steel rods at 7cm spacings along the edge of the towpath to prevent any possibility of the badgers burrowing through to the canal.

At the sett near Battens Bridge, a licence has been issued by Natural England to exclude badgers from the sett (there being a secondary sett within a few hundred metres and located away from the canal) and once exclusion is complete, to destroy the sett to prevent reoccupation. This work is currently being undertaken by a licenced ecologist.

11. Green Flag Award

This year the Country Park went through the full judging process (as opposed to the mystery shop that takes place every other year). The judge was impressed by the new management plan (based around Green Flag Award criteria); with the range of improvements that had taken place in the Canal Basin and Sampford Peverell picnic site / community orchard; and the high level of community engagement achieved by the Canal Ranger Service. Judging results were announced in July, revealing that the Country Park had achieved the award for the 14th consecutive year. Members of the JAC attending the summer site visit celebrated the award:



12. JAC summer site visit

Nine JAC members joined the Canal Manager on the summer site visit held on 14th July. After meeting at the Canal Basin, they viewed a range of improvements that had been undertaken in that area (see subsequent items) and discussed the vandalism that had taken place earlier in the year. The next stop was near Ebear Bridge, where Ray Jones talked to the group about dragonflies and damselflies, revealing that a new species for the Canal had been seen earlier in the year (a Lesser Emperor).

The final stop was at Waytown Tunnel to discuss how best to address an issue whereby members of the public have become stuck in the canal between the tunnel and the limekilns. The Canal Rangers have been made aware of two incidents in recent years when dogs have become trapped after entering the canal due to the vertical wall extending above water level and very steep slopes above. Owners have then become trapped trying to rescue them and have needed assistance from passers by to get out.

It was agreed by the group that the best approach would be to keep the bankside vegetation short so that the steepness of the slope is more apparent, and to put out warning

signs at either end of the section. The bank was cut a few days after the site visit and the signs were designed, collected and installed in August.



13.Improvements around the Canal Basin

A number of improvements and repairs have been made around the Canal Basin this summer. Tarmacking contractors resurfaced a number of potholes in the Canal Basin car park. They also installed timber edging and tarmacked the entrance to the Canal Basin Play Park.

The other task they completed was to remove a large pile of soil beside the public toilets and tarmac that area. A new orientation panel for visitors arriving via the ramp beside the public toilets was installed, with design and production funded by Cllr Colin Slade's Locality Budget.



Working together with a local landscaping contractor, the Canal Ranger Service renewed the flower bed beside the visitor centre. Large gaps had formed between the remaining lavenders and none of the replacements planted in recent years had survived – probably because the soil was very compacted. Weeds had begun to take over and the edging boards were rotting.

The contractor replaced the edging boards and soil has was dug over with half a tonne of sand and several kilos of lime mixed in, to improve conditions for lavender. The bed was then covered over with a weed suppressant liner. The Canal Manager then planted 40 lavenders in 1L pots through the liner and covered it over with a blue slate mulch.



The wooden handrail on the ramp beside the Canal Tea Rooms and Garden has been deteriorating in recent years with some small sections of timber rotting. It was not possible to find a matching handrail and so rather than replacing just the rotted section, the Canal Ranger Service had to replace to whole 40m length.

The handrail needed three coats of paint before it was fitted and rather than being screwed on the metal base as previously, the new handrail was thinner and so had to be bolted on. The Canal Rangers also took the opportunity to paint all of the posts

Other improvements have included the installation of an infra-red tap in the accessible public toilet, to improve ease of use and reduce water wastage.



Within the Visitor Centre, some of the hands-on equipment has been repaired following damage by over-enthusiastic use. A number of updates and extra additions have been made to the touchscreen system including a new film about the horsedrawn barge, and in response to some requests in the suggestions box, some new wildlife-themed games have been developed and added.

14. Wildlife survey and monitoring

The Canal provides an important habitat and corridor for wildlife and the Canal Rangers endeavour to support nature through their management wherever they can. An important part of this is wildlife monitoring, which informs understanding of what species are present in the Country Park, makes it possible to see trends over time, and adapt management practices if needed.

Reptiles and amphibians: This year the Canal Ranger Service have a very keen new volunteer, Chris, who has been undertaking reptile and amphibian monitoring at some points along the canal which are not publicly accessible. The amphibian monitoring is focussed on two ponds beside the canal, and the reptile monitoring is focussed on a large south facing embankment. Chris is looking to change career to become an ecological consultant and is gaining lots of practical experience through undertaking these surveys. Both follow current best practice survey protocols and feed into national monitoring programmes, as well as providing us with valuable data.

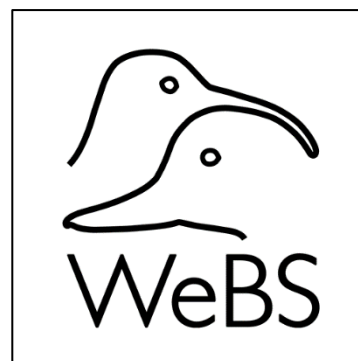
The reptile monitoring required a series of bitumous roofing felt panels to be fixed at points along the embankment, which reptiles like to shelter and warm up under. These form regular monitoring points which can be surveyed every few weeks to check for the presence of reptiles. Chris has found good numbers of Grass Snakes and Slowworms, as shown in the photo below:



Birds: For several decades the canal has been included in the British Trust for Ornithology's Wetland Bird Survey

<https://www.bto.org/our-science/projects/wetland-bird-survey>

The survey involves dedicated volunteers walking sections of the canal roughly once a month on a specific date (always a Sunday) and counting the wetland birds they see. Records are then submitted online.



Two of the volunteer WeBS counters stood down from their roles earlier in the year but fortunately new volunteers have been found to replace them and keep up this long-term survey.

Macrophytes: Since the 1980s there have been a number of surveys undertaken every few years of the Canal's macrophytes (water plants). As well as providing a useful insight into the species present on the canal and the trends in their abundance and distribution, previous surveys have sometimes identified alien invasive species that have arrived at the canal, enabling us to eradicate them before they spread.

This summer surveyors from the Devon Biodiversity Records Centre have spent 12 days surveying the Canal's water plants. The full report won't be received until the winter (as the surveyors are busy undertaking fieldwork in the summer and early autumn and do their analysis and report writing later in the year) but they have flagged up the presence of some new alien invasive species present along the canal. These include a Gunnera and a couple of American Skunk Cabbage in some adjacent gardens, but the really serious one was a couple of patches of Water Primrose near Francis Crescent and Litelbury Road, Tiverton (shown in photo, right)

This plant is listed in Schedule 9 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act (which lists non-native species that are already established in the wild, which continue to pose a conservation threat to native biodiversity and habitats, so that further releases should be regulated) and has been banned from sale since 2014 as it can rapidly take over waterways.

Fortunately there were only a few plants covering a few square metres, and so the Canal Manager was able to enter the canal wearing a drysuit and carefully remove all of the plants, taking care not to leave any parts of the plant behind, as they are able to regenerate and spread from small fragments.

Hopefully the keen eyes of the macrophyte surveyors have enabled the Canal Ranger Service to nip this one in the bud, but they will continue to monitor for any other outbreaks.



15. Fringed Lily

The number of patches of the invasive Fringed Lily has grown significantly in the last two years. Control of the weed is only possible using herbicide (glyphosate) applied by a licenced contractor with consent from the Environment Agency. Cutting has a tendency to cause the plant to spread as new patches can form from just a tiny fragment of the plant.

In fact the recent spread may be due to greater use of weedboat trailing knives by the Canal Ranger Service in order to control Water Soldier. Given this possibility, trailing knives have not been used this year.



An application was made to the EA earlier in the summer, with the intention of spraying the plants at their peak growth period in July/August, but the EA consent was not issued until September. The treatment was then undertaken by Complete Weed Control Ltd. The treatment is still effective in September, but the delay meant extra months of hindrance to anglers and boaters. Next year the EA application will be submitted in the spring with the target of carrying out the treatment in July. It is likely to take several years to reduce the extent of the plant, and will probably never be eradicated as it is not possible to spray every last plant amongst the reeds and overhanging branches along the edges of the canal.

16. Car park maintenance

In addition to the pothole patching in the Canal Basin car park mentioned in item 13, potholes have also been patched at Tiverton Road Car Park. A JCB contractor also spent several hours working in the car park relocating a number of the large rocks which form 'dragonsteeth' around the waterside edge of the car park, ensuring they are evenly spaced and dug in enough to deter people from trying to roll them into the canal. A large erosion gully in the bank was also filled in with rock, clay and soil.



The JCB contractor then travelled to Lowdwells car park where he scraped out the edges of the car park which were becoming very muddy, restricting the capacity of the car park.



17. Gates and fencing

Contractors, Canal Rangers and Volunteers have replaced a number of rotting gates, gate posts and fences during the summer, including gates at Black Bridge and Fenacre Bridge and fences at Swing Bridge (shown in photo below) and Greenway car park.

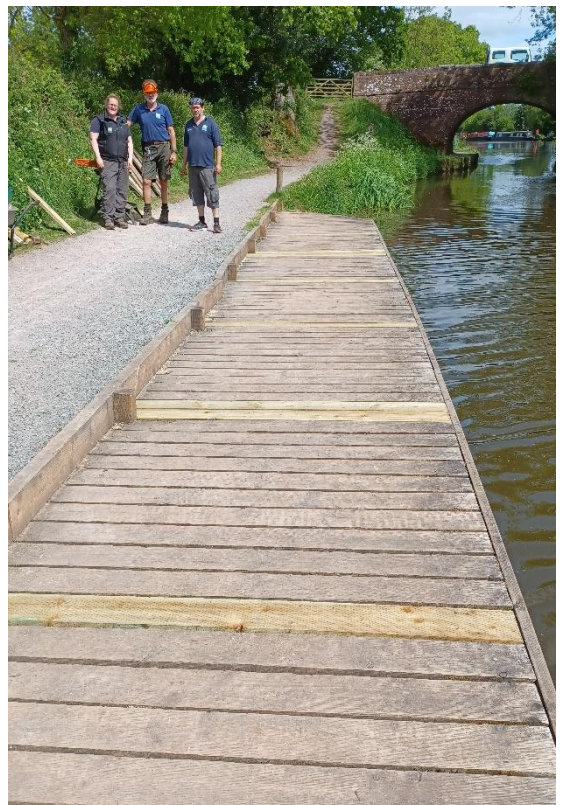


18. East Manley landing stage

This landing stage is used for most of the horse-drawn barge trips, being the turning point for the standard 2 ½ hour trips. The structure of the landing stage below the decking had become slightly deformed by the passage of the tractor that cuts the banks and hedges, and as a result several decking planks had been warped and were standing proud, creating a trip hazard.

In April, the Canal Ranger team spent a day working on the landing stage, making adjustments to the frame and fitting several new planks to replace the warped ones. The deck was also pressure washed to reduce the slip hazard.

The landing stage is now much safer for horse-drawn barge passengers and other canal users, but thought is now being given to a long-term replacement that cannot be damaged by the tractor and requires less maintenance and renewal.



19. Bridge nameplates

Burlescombe Parish Council kindly agreed to pay for the replacement of two of the Bridge nameplates within the parish (Ebear Bridge and Fossend Bridge) which were in poor condition. These were delivered and installed in April. The Canal Manager has recently approached Halberton Parish Council to see if they are willing to follow in the footsteps of Sampford Peverell and Burlescombe Parish Councils and pay for the replacement of two bridge nameplates within their parish (these being Battens Bridge and Rock Bridge). It is anticipated that a decision will be made at their next meeting.

20. Noticeboards and interior display panels

Two new noticeboards funded by DCC PRoW capital funding were delivered and installed during the summer. These have been installed at the Canal Basin and Tiverton Road car park.

Over the coming years it is envisaged that (as funds allow) all of the existing aluminium noticeboards, which are now almost 20 years old and are tatty and worn, will be replaced with this style of sturdy, steel-framed noticeboard.

In June, the Canal Manager submitted a funding application to the Inland Waterways Association's Westcountry Branch for £8340 to pay for two more noticeboards and for the design and production of 11 A2 information panels to be housed within the noticeboards, replacing the existing ones which were made in 1997-2000 and are now out of date. The application was successful and the new noticeboards have been ordered and due to be delivered in the autumn. The Canal Manager will be supplying text and images to the designers of the panels during the autumn/winter, with a target of having them produced and installed before the end of March 2023.



21. Memorial seats and benches

Six new memorial seats and benches have been installed since March at various locations along the Canal and a further three are currently on order. As the benches need to be sensibly spaced and their placement is restricted by practical considerations there are now virtually no available locations between Tiverton and Halberton and very few between Halberton and Sampford Peverell. The point is being approached at which it would be sensible to draw up and maintain a list of the remaining potential locations and then to turn down any further requests once those are taken.



22. Tilting weir control system

The tilting weir at Burlescombe is the main structure used both for managing water levels on a day-to-day basis, and for letting out large amounts of water ahead of / during a storm.



The 3m tilting 'door' is controlled by a 'Greenbox' (circled red above) which incorporates the motor, gears, batteries, solar panel, electronics and transmitter/receiver for receiving commands and sending updates via the website portal. The Greenbox and website portal was supplied and maintained by a Dutch company which has recently lost a major contract in the Netherlands and has folded as a result.

This means that the portal will no longer function beyond the end of 2022 and that replacement parts (in particular the microchip that enables remote control of the unit) will no longer be available. The system could still be controlled manually, but given how critical the system is to the safe management of canal water levels, it has been agreed that the Greenbox needs to be replaced as soon as possible.

The Canal Manager has identified an alternative supplier of an equivalent system (the Dutch company which won the big contract in the Netherlands) and has received quotes from that company and from their UK distributor. Once some queries around remote control of the system have been clarified, it is likely that an order will be placed in late September and the new Greenbox installed before the end of the year.

23. Visitor Guide

The Canal Manager organised a range of amendments to the Canal Visitor Guide ahead of reprinting in time for the Easter holidays. 7000 copies were printed and roughly three quarters of these have been distributed as of mid-September.

24. Fenacre water transfer scheme

At the time of writing, the Canal Manager is awaiting an update from Aggregate Industries and so a verbal update will be provided under the agenda item for this topic at the JAC meeting.

25. Kickstart Trainee Rangers

In mid-March, the Canal Ranger Service said goodbye to Trainee Rangers Ali and Sam who completed their 6-month Kickstart positions. Ali is currently working as a Ranger for the National Trust in North Devon and Sam is working as a groundsman at a golf club.

A new Trainee Ranger, Matthew Getheridge (photo, right) has been employed through the Kickstart scheme since late March and is due to complete his 6-month position in late September. At the time of writing he is looking forward to an interview for a grounds maintenance role with Cullompton Town Council.

The Canal Ranger Service is grateful for the hard work and friendship provided by these three trainees and having gained a range of practical experience and all of the key competency tickets (Chainsaw, brush-cutter, ATV, Woodchipper, First Aid) they are well placed to pursue a career in countryside/greenspace management.



26. Events

- 27th April: Ranger-led Walk & Talk - Sampford Peverell to Ayshford, 24 participants
- 13th July - Ranger-led Walk & Talk - Holcombe Rogus, 22 participants
- Wild Wednesdays: 3rd August - Pollinator Pals, 24th August - Pond dipping and 31st August - Bird box building: all fully booked, 86 children attended, plus parents/carers



- 7th September – Ranger-led Walk & Talk – Swan’s Neck, 21 participants
- 9th September- Bat walk – fully booked, 30 participants

27. Ranger-led school visits

- 23rd May - Blundells Prep - pond dipping - 21 children
- 24th May - Castle Primary - pond dipping - 54 children
- 26th May - St Andrews Cullompton - lifecycles - 49 children
- 13th June - Tiverton ACE school - pond dipping - 13 children
- 22nd June - Bickleigh Primary - pond dipping - 20 children
- 12th July - Home educators - pond dipping - 16 children

28. Volunteers

- 13th March Volunteer Day – Hedge / tree planting on Swan’s Neck, 8 volunteers
- Midweek volunteers – 4 volunteers, 116 days
- School work experience week – 2 students (from Tiverton High and Uffculme School), 5 days each

29. Talks

In July, the Canal Manager gave a talk about the history, management, wildlife and recreational activities of the Canal to the Rotary Club of Tiverton at The Hartnoll Hotel.

Future programme of works

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
- Ongoing small-scale bank erosion repairs using Deltalok bags
- Annual strimming of bridge abutments and trimming of the banks and hedges which the flailing contractor cannot access
- Slurry-sealing tarmacked paths in the Canal Basin (site visit held with contractor in early Sept with aim of completing works in Autumn)
- Installing new noticeboards once delivered and relocating old ones to two new locations (opposite Ebear layby near dragonfly panel and below Beech car park on ramp to towpath)
- Installing replacement bin at Beech car park
- Building and installing new memorial benches (three currently on order)
- Severing and removing worst of ivy growth on bridges
- Raising towpath level above large roots near Waytown Tunnel (Lowdwells side) to remove trip hazards

Management tasks

- Ongoing work with DCC engineers on Asset Management Plan
- Scenario-based test of Emergency Plan
- Organise replacement of Greenbox tilting weir control unit
- Fenacre water transfer system
- Organise an update and reprint of the Canal Visitor Guide
- Organise production and installation of 11 A2 information panels to go in noticeboards, including provision of text and images to designers
- Complete update of boating regulations and procedures and design/printing of new permits book
- Organise update and replacement of the Ebear dragonfly panel
- Organise repairs to public toilet roof
- Liaise with Tiverton Canal Co regarding replacement of electricity box and backboard beside Ducks Ditty
- Promote Community Safety Scheme Accreditation and Accredited Police Volunteers schemes once approved
- Liaise with organisers of potential raft race
- Organise ongoing Ash Dieback felling works and a range of tree management works
- Organise annual cutting of hedges and banks
- Green Flag award application
- Ensure ongoing compliance with all relevant H&S policies / guidelines