

**Progress Report** (October 2023 to February 2024 inclusive)

**1. Lowdwells culvert**

Following the significant flooding of properties at either end of the culvert last summer (as reported at the 2023 JAC site visit and October meeting), work to clear and repair this 130m culvert is approaching completion. A large volume of material had been washed into the culvert during storms in recent years, and over many decades the culvert capacity had also become constricted due to the accretion of material along the sides of the culvert. Contractors have been working to remove this material and restore the culvert to its original capacity. The majority of this work has now been completed, with some 40 tonnes of rock and solidified silt being removed, one plastic garden tubful at a time.

The photo right shows the ‘tide lines’ on the walls and the red line indicates the approximate fill level prior to the works.



The focus is now moving to improvements that can be made to the ditches and highway culverts at the outlet end to reduce flood risk in that area. Designs have been drawn up by DCC Bridges and Structures engineers, who are awaiting confirmation of DCC capital funding before proceeding with organising this work.

**2. Silt pollution in Sampford Peverell**

Throughout the winter a two-mile section of the Canal centred on Sampford Peverell has been heavily coloured by silt runoff from the new Edenstone housing development at Battens Cross, and from erosion in the offside field opposite Minnows Touring Park.

The Country Park Manager has corresponded with several concerned Sampford Peverell residents and with a number of organisations including the Environment Agency (EA), Sampford Peverell Parish Council and the DCC flood risk management team. JAC members Adam Pilgrim and Malcolm Trump were also briefed on the matter ahead of their meeting with MDDC planners, as it appears that planning conditions relating to site drainage may not have been observed.





The Edendale site manager has received site visits and follow-up correspondence from the DCC Flood Risk management team and an EA officer, the latter of whom has also spoken to Edendale's national environment lead. This has secured some hasty improvements in drainage arrangements on the site, but despite this the problem of siltation of the canal persists. Although some of the silt from the site has arrived in the canal via erosion into road drainage on Turnpike, the main issue is that the site drainage has been plumbed into an existing drain that runs to the canal from the adjacent 1990s Paullet development.



Given that the majority of the site has been bare soil all winter with lots of vehicles and foot traffic, creating and spreading mud, every time there is significant rainfall the drainage from the site reaches the Canal before silt is able to drop out of the water in the settlement pond.

On the other side of Sampford Peverell, the field opposite Minnows Touring Park which slopes down to the canal has suffered from gullying and erosion with rills forming at the top of the field channelling overland flows during heavy rain and depositing extremely silty water in the canal at the bottom of the slope.

The Country Park Manager spoke to the farmer about this issue, but he claimed that there was nothing he could do as it had been so wet. The matter has now been referred to a member of a new EA



agriculture team dealing with these sorts of issues and the Country Park Manager is awaiting feedback.

Although the volume of silt that is entering the canal is a problem and will bring forward the time at which the Canal will need to be dredged, the bigger issue in both cases is the input of nutrients bound to the silt that will fuel rapid plant growth over the coming years.

### **3. Mid Devon District Council funding cut**

On 3 November 2023, MDDC announced a review of its Strategic Grants, inviting DCC to supply a written submission and an array of supporting documentation by 24 November, and then to give a presentation at the Community PDG meeting on 28 November. The Country Park Manager responded and gave a presentation at the meeting.

The Community Policy Development Group made a recommendation to cut MDDC's contribution to the Canal revenue budget by 15%. This news was shared with JAC members, many of whom wrote to MDDC opposing the proposed cut. Despite this, the MDDC Cabinet decided to ratify the recommended cut to the Canal budget at its meeting on 9 January. This means that MDDC's contribution will stand at £38,250 for 2024/25 and again for 2025/26 (a reduction of £6750 from 2023/24), with presumably another review in 2026. DCC's 'contribution' to the Canal revenue budget in 2024/25 stands at £76k.

It will be very difficult to sustain this level of funding cut without an impact on standards of maintenance – particularly for unplanned costs /works such as breakages, vandalism and tree failures. The Country Park Manager will continue to apply to external funding bodies for grants for any works that can be presented as discrete improvement projects, such as those discussed in following items within this report, but core funding for routine maintenance is extremely difficult to secure externally.

The Country Park Manager has met with MDDC Cabinet Member for Planning and Economic Regeneration Cllr Steve Keable, to discuss the strategic management and funding of the canal. He has offered his ongoing assistance and advice with helping to secure alternative funding. Cllr Kennedy has been investigating whether the Tiverton Town Council contribution (currently £4k pa) could be increased, and Cllr DuChesne has also sought to secure some funding from Halberton Parish Council.

### **4. IWA funding for visitor centre display improvements**

When the Visitor Centre was built in 2012 there was a desire for it to contain lots of hands-on displays to engage visitors. These included two 'retroscopes' - hand-wound 'film clips' contained on a circular carousel of cards. These proved very popular, but perhaps too popular. They have spent a lot of time out of action being repaired due to overuse or misuse, and despite several design changes it's not been possible to find a design that lasts for more than a year.

Plans have been made to refurbish the units to





contain video display screens operated by push buttons which will play a number of different film clips. The change will also require new electrical wiring to provide power to each location. This change in the displays has been made possible thanks to £3550 funding from the Westcountry Branch of the Inland Waterways Association, and the aim is to complete the work ahead of the Easter holidays.

## 5. Countryside Stewardship Capital Grants

In December 2023, Devon County Council entered into a Countryside Stewardship Capital Grants Agreement with Defra, which will provide government funding for undertaking a range of works in the Country Park up until November 2026. A total of £9206 is available for undertaking agreed works including hedge-laying, coppicing bankside trees, pond restoration and putting up bird and bat boxes.

## 6. Funding application to the MDDC Shared Prosperity Fund

Following the submission of an Expression of Interest form last year and the Country Park Manager's attendance at an MDDC funding workshop, a £10k funding application has been made to MDDC to fund the five remaining new noticeboards required to replace all the existing noticeboards along the towpath (following the replacement of seven noticeboards already) and provide two at new locations (Ebear Straight and Beech car park).

This would complete a larger project which also includes the replacement of the A2 interpretation panels within the noticeboards (already funded by the IWA). These panels are currently at the second draft stage with the designers and should be installed by Easter. A decision on the MDDC funding is expected in the coming weeks, and if successful, the five new noticeboards would be delivered and installed in the early summer.

An expression of interest in applying in the next round of the Shared Prosperity Fund for electrical grounds maintenance equipment (to reduce carbon emissions and noise and encourage more volunteer assistance) is being considered.

## 7. Tiverton Canal Co Tourism Award

Devon County Council and the Canal Ranger Service were delighted to learn that the Tiverton Canal Co had won a bronze award in the Small Visitor Attraction of the Year at the 2023/24 Devon Tourism Awards in November 2023. In a highly competitive category, this was a superb achievement for this small family business.

In the press release which DCC issued to mark the award, Philip Brind, of the Tiverton Canal Co, said: "A big thank you must go to everyone that has worked with us, both past and present, to make this award possible. This award for our tourist attraction, would also not have been



possible if it wasn't for Canal Manager Mark Baker, as well as rangers Craig Saunderson, Jo Roberts and the volunteers that help make up the Ranger Service at the canal. We very much see this award as a win for them too, as they work so hard to keep the canal working, which is so vital for us to be able to run the horse-drawn barge successfully.

"We also see this award as a win for Tiverton, and we would like to thank everyone that's visited the canal over the years and for those that continue to support us and the horses. As this attraction is so very rare in Great Britain, it is our goal to keep the horse-drawn barge going for future generations and the recognition of this impressive tourism award will certainly help us to do just that!"

The award was collected at the awards ceremony by Phil's son Tim and the head horseman Lauren Brinsden-Miles.

### 8. 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the horse-drawn barge operating on the Canal

Planning is well underway for celebrations of this year's 50th anniversary of the horse-drawn barge *Tivertonian* operating on the Grand Western Canal. The Country Park Manager has been working closely with the Tiverton Canal Co, Cllr DuChesne, and officers at the District Council and Tiverton Town Council to plan events and activities to celebrate this landmark.

Celebrations and promotions will include:

- Dignitary trip on the horse-drawn barge on 3 April, following the launch of 'The Flock that Rock' model swan trail in the Canal Basin (all JAC members will be invited)
- Display in the flower bed beside the former Vale Vets roundabout
- Banners in the Canal Basin and Town Centre
- Photo competition
- Release of a new video about the horse-drawn barge
- A big Open Day event in the Canal Basin on Sat 13 July, with displays, music, entertainments etc...



To support the delivery of these activities, an application was made by the Country Park Manager to MDDC's Love Your Town Centre Scheme and funding has been approved for promotional banners and signs in the town centre with the aim of improving links between

the Canal and the town centre. The funding will also help to offset some of the costs of putting on the event.

### **9. Sale of the Ducks Ditty floating café-bar**

The Tiverton Canal Co have decided to sell the Ducks Ditty floating café-bar as a going concern. A purchaser has been found and the sale is proceeding. Philip Brind has agreed to provide some background and an update for JAC members at the meeting.

The County Park Manager has been working with DCC legal and estates colleagues to draw up a new lease for the new owner which ensures no major change in presentation or operation, although the hope is that it be open significantly more often than was previously possible.

### **10. Fenacre Water Transfer System**

Following the October 2023 JAC meeting, the Country Park Manager corresponded with the DCC Chief Planner regarding the lack of action by Aggregate Industries (AI) in progressing this matter. He agreed to follow up and after speaking to local / regional AI officers he recommended that the JAC write a strongly worded letter to AI on the matter in order to give the local / regional AI officers additional supportive material to use when bidding for corporate capital funding to progress the scheme.

This letter and the reply that was received will be shared with members ahead of the meeting along with a recap of this long-standing issue. Two regional AI officers have agreed to attend the meeting to explain AI's position and intentions.

### **11. Holbrook Bridge landing stage**

Part of this landing stage was closed off due to a failed beam. The Canal Ranger Service replaced the rotten beam to enable the landing stage to be reopened and further works are planned to remove a trip hazard where the landing stage joins the towpath.

### **12. Wheeled digger jobs at Ayshford**

Towards the end of November, a wheeled digger contractor was engaged to find and seal a leak from the canal through the embankment on the towpath side near Ayshford Bridge. There are some issues with longstanding groundwater springs flowing onto the road below in this area, which have been shown not to be coming from the canal, but when a new seepage of water emerged on the road, the Country Park Manager divined the route and determined that this one was from the canal.

The digger had to dig to a depth of 2m before the leak was intercepted and was then sealed with puddling clay.





Whilst there at that location the opportunity was taken to widen the approaches to Ayshford Bridge, which were narrow and uneven. This was done by scraping out the path and then resurfacing with a few tonnes of limestone scalplings.

### 13. Hedge and bank trimming

A contractor has completed the annual bank and hedge trimming along the towpath and roadsides. This year they managed to secure the use of a slightly smaller tractor than in previous years, which made it easier for towpath users to pass.



Sections of hedge on Swing embankment and near Tidcombe Bridge have been left untopped as they are being allowed to grow on for a year or two before being laid next winter or the winter after.

### 14. Remote controlled embankment flailing

Woody / scrubby vegetation on the Canal's two highest embankments near Swing Bridge and Sellake Bridge is cut periodically to enable inspection and grazing. The safest way to do this is by engaging a remote-control flail contractor, who undertook the work over 2 days in January. The embankments, with the exception of Sellake embankment on the towpath side, are then grazed by adjacent farmers to help keep the vegetation down.





## 15. Barge-based tree works

The Canal Rangers and volunteers have spent most of the winter working from the maintenance barge, clearing fallen trees / branches, trimming overhanging trees, coppicing willows, cutting vegetation back at bridge abutments and putting up bird and bat boxes. Some of this work forms part of the Countryside Stewardship Capital Works agreement outlined in item 5.

Barge-based work had to be suspended for a week when the Canal froze in January, but as of late February, they have worked from the Canal Basin up to Waytown Tunnel focussing on the most urgent works and are now about to start heading back towards Tiverton picking up what other jobs they can before bird nesting starts in earnest.

One other task they completed whilst in Sampford Peverell was the installation of a new nameplate for Buckland Bridge.



## 16. Hedge reduction and coppicing in Tiverton

Several sections of hedge between William Authers Footbridge and Tidcombe Bridge had become overgrown in recent years. Due to the height of the footbridge, full size tractors cannot access this section, and the Canal Ranger Service's small Kubota tractor which does fit under the bridge could not reach the top of the overgrown hedge. The Canal Ranger Team (assisted by tree surgeons with a chipper on one day) spent two days



reducing the height of the overgrown hedges using polesaws, to bring them into line with adjacent hedges that are being maintained by adjacent residents.

### **17. Ash Dieback-related tree works**

Every year a tree safety inspection is undertaken along the canal by arboricultural consultants. They make recommendations for immediate safety works and also advisable management works at different levels of priority. Tree surgeons listed on Devon County Council's Tree Framework contract are then engaged to undertake the safety and high priority management work. In recent years, most of this has been related to Ash dieback disease.

Although some work was undertaken in the autumn, the tree surgeons made a start on the bulk of this season's tasks in January, with work due to continue in February and probably early March. In many cases, rather than felling the whole tree, they will be removing the limbs which pose the greatest threat to people below, but retaining much of the trunk which will preserve the benefits to wildlife of standing deadwood. Some of these pruned and pollarded trees may even survive the disease and continue to grow.

### **18. Memorial tree at Fossend Wharf**

JAC members may have seen groups of *Wilderness* trailboats on the canal, either during the two National Trailboat Festivals hosted in 2008 and 2014, or during smaller rallies held on the canal, such as the one in 2004 shown in the photo below. JAC members Adam and Jane Pilgrim were involved in organising all of these boating events. On a number of occasions, boaters spent the night moored at Fossend Wharf in Burlescombe. Sadly, one of these boaters died last year and a number of her friends contributed towards the cost of a memorial tree - a Rowan - which was planted at the wharf in January.



### **19. Conservation Area Appraisal**

In February, the Country Park Manager was contacted by the MDDC Conservation Officer to discuss an appraisal he will be conducting for the Grand Western Canal Conservation Area. They have agreed to meet, along with the DCC County Archaeologist and a Historic



Environment colleague working on the Tiverton Eastern Urban Extension, to discuss any threats to the Conservation Area and any improvements that could be made with regard to the Canal's heritage.

## 20. Hedgelaying

Three volunteer days have been held on Sundays during the winter and on each occasion the task has been hedgelaying. Two days were held at East Manley, laying the hedge beside the boat moorings, and one was held near Manley Bridge, laying the hedge around the car park as shown in the photos below.



## 21. Landslip at Greenway cutting

Following heavy rain, a small landslip took place in Greenway cutting with around two tonnes of soil sliding onto the towpath. This was made passable by Canal Rangers the following day and then cleared away by contractors two days later. These small landslips appear to be occurring every year or two and may be the result of wetter winters.





## 22. Greenway edging beam

A small but surprisingly expensive job was completed by contractors at Greenway Bridge. Here the edging beam beside the bridge had rotted to the point that nails and bolts within the beam had become exposed. This is a popular launching and retrieving point for canoeist and kayakers, including the scouts that use the hut above, and so the beam needed to be replaced to ensure their safety. The new oak beam is bolted to the underlying concrete abutment which was installed when this section of canal was relined in 1990/91.



## 23. New Noticeboards

As part of the project described in Item 6, three new noticeboards funded by the IWA were delivered last year. All three have been assembled and one has been installed at Manley Bridge (where the previous noticeboard had become unsafe). The other two will probably be installed in March or April, once the priority to complete tree work ahead of bird nesting has passed.

## 24. Wall repairs

Building contractors have repaired a section of the coping on the wall beside the Canal Visitor Centre (shown in the photo below, taken prior to the repairs). A few metres of coping had come free from the wall, and was breaking up, meaning some of the bolts to which the railings are fixed were wobbly and insecure. There was no immediate danger of the railings failing as they were still fixed together and to points on the wall, but it was good to ensure that the wall and railing are completely secure.



## 25. Volunteers

Sadly, our long-term volunteer Craig has been unable to spend much time working at the Canal in recent months due to ill health, but we are fortunate to have a very keen and able new midweek volunteer named Chris who started in January. We continue to have two work experience students from Bicton College working one day per week.

On 9<sup>th</sup> October, we were very grateful to have 10 students from Blundells School working in the Canal Basin painting the railings as part of the school's Community Engagement Day.

Weekday volunteering = 84 days

- 8th Oct - Volunteer Day – Ranger Office garden - 7 volunteers
- 12th Nov - Volunteer Day - East Manley - 3 volunteers
- 14th Jan - Volunteer Day - Manley - 6 volunteers
- 11th Feb - Volunteer Day - East Manley - 6 volunteers

Weekend Volunteer Days = 22 days

Total volunteering days completed = 106 days

## 26. Walks and Talks

- 7<sup>th</sup> Nov – Talk by Country Park Manager on Canal wildlife at Friends of the Grand Western Canal AGM
- 15<sup>th</sup> Nov – Ranger-led Walk & Talk - Swans Neck - 23 participants
- 13<sup>th</sup> Dec – Talk by Country Park Manager to students at Bicton College

## 27. Events

- 8th Dec - 5th Tiverton Guides - Christmas Wreath event - 17 people
- 10th & 11th Dec - Christmas Wreath event - 61 people
- 20th Dec - Wild Wednesday Christmas Decorations - 22 people





## **Future programme of works**

### **Practical works**

- Completion of annual barge-based tree works
- Completion of tree safety works as specified by tree safety inspection
- Ongoing small-scale bank erosion repairs
- Reed clearance (on towpath side by excavator) between Manley Bridge and East Manley Bridge
- Installation of two new noticeboards
- Repairs to Canal Basin and east Manley landing stages
- Ongoing painting of Canal Basin railings and handrails
- Re-excavation of Boehill Pond
- Re-staining benches
- Building and installing new memorial benches as and when ordered
- Severing and removing worst of ivy growth on bridges
- Raising towpath level above large roots near Waytown Tunnel (Lowdwells side) and filling in gullies to remove trip hazards
- Pressure washing site infrastructure (signs, benches, bins etc..)
- All usual mowing, strimming and weed-cutting work

### **Management tasks** (\* = ongoing / already in progress)

- Organisation of all works listed above\*
- Organisation of events to celebrate 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the horse-drawn barge\*
- Apply for external funding as required / opportunities allow\*
- Organise treatment of Fringed Lily to take place in mid-summer
- Liaison with DCC engineers and contractors in relation to Lowdwells culvert project
- Ongoing work with DCC engineers on Asset Management Plan (delayed due to lack of capacity amongst DCC engineers)\*
- Organise programme of events
- Organise installation of new Visitor Centre displays
- Scenario-based test of Emergency Plan
- Fenacre water transfer system\*
- Finalise production and installation of 12 A2 information panels to go in noticeboards\*
- Complete update of boating regulations and procedures and design/printing of new permits book (stocks of old permit books now almost used up)\*
- Organise update and replacement of the Ebear dragonfly panel
- Ensure ongoing compliance with all relevant H&S policies / guidelines\*
- External funding applications and budget management\*
- Liaison with National Grid concerning high power line refurbishment.
- Commission Disability Access Audit
- Begin review of Canal Management Plan