

**Progress Report** (October 2024 to February 2025 inclusive, listed chronologically)

**1. Hedgelaying**

Volunteer Days have been held on the second Sundays of each month and the task for each one has been hedgelaying. A small group laid a section of hedge near Tidcombe Bridge in October and in November the volunteers continued work at the hedge behind the boat moorings at East Manley Bridge. In December and January work started on laying the hedge on Swing embankment, with several new volunteers joining in and a record length of hedgelaying achieved during the January event. Work continued here during the February event and with 120m completed here that section is finished for now, with the remainder needing to grow on for a year or two until it is ready to lay.



The section of hedge near Tidcombe Bridge laid by volunteers in October



The section of hedge near Swing Bridge after two Volunteer Days in December and January

## 2. Farmwise

Every year Canal Ranger Joanne Roberts attends the Farmwise Devon event at the County Showground near Exeter. The annual event provides an opportunity for primary school children from around the county to understand more about farming in Devon and how food is produced on Devon's farms. It does this by enabling pupils to have a 'beyond the classroom experience' and be able to engage with demonstrations and displays that can provide a 'touch, feel and smell' experience in a safe environment.

Within the event, there is a countryside and wildlife section with activities provided by staff from several Country Parks, Nature Reserves, National Parks and National Landscapes. Jo (bottom left in the photo) ran a popular tree identification workshop using twigs and leaves gathered along the Canal



## 3. Duke of Edinburgh Award

In recent years, many 'D of E' students have fulfilled their voluntary service requirement by spending an hour or so a week for several months litter-picking along the towpath. The Canal Ranger Service provides the litter pickers, bag holder, bags and a safety briefing, and students keep a log and photographic evidence of their work. Through the autumn and winter, five such students have been litter-picking, three of whom have also joined in the Volunteer Days through the winter to fulfil the 'Engaging in a new activity' part of the award. Their assistance is much appreciated. Please also see item 12 – 'Visitor Survey'.

## 4. Bicton College

In October the Canal Manager was once again invited to speak to Bicton College students studying *Land and Wildlife Management*. He gave some background to the canal and then explained the work of the Canal Ranger Service in managing and maintaining the Country

Park. The students will be visiting the canal for a site visit later in 2025 to learn about freshwater habitats and invasive species and see a demonstration of the weedboat.

Two *Land and Wildlife Management* students from Bickton College and one *Countryside Management* student from Bridgwater & Taunton College are undertaking their work experience with the Canal Ranger Service. They generally help out for one day per week, learning new skills and practicing use of a variety of hand tools and grounds maintenance machinery.

## 5. Public access defibrillator

A new public access defibrillator has been installed in the Canal Basin car park Tiverton. It is located in a cabinet on the wall of the public toilets, and is available to provide emergency support for visitors to the Country Park and for the local community in South East Tiverton.

It can be used by any member of the public in an emergency when someone is having a cardiac arrest (where a person's heart stops beating and they are unresponsive and not breathing).



(Left to right): Devon County Councillor Colin Slade, Kathy Trist (Everyys Solicitors) and Will Vine (Everyys Solicitors).

The defibrillator and cabinet have been provided by Jay's Aim – a charity established with the target of reducing the rate of sudden cardiac death among young people in the region.

The equipment has been funded by Everyys Solicitors, and Councillor Colin Slade allocated part of his locality budget to pay for the installation of the cabinet and its connection to mains power. The Canal Ranger Service will look after and maintain the equipment, carrying out checks, and replacing pads and batteries when necessary.

Dan Osborne, Trustee, Jay's Aim, said: "We were delighted to be able to help provide a public access defibrillator (PAD) in the Grand Western Canal car park in Tiverton, following a real team effort by a number of people and organisations. The PAD was generously fully funded by the team at Every's Solicitors following a pledge made at this year's 'Exeter Property Ball'. Its location was suggested by Tiverton Town Councillor, Jason Lejeune, who helps look after many of the PADs in the Tiverton area, and its installation was funded by DCC Councillor Colin Slade using part of his locality budget. As always, we hope that this defibrillator is never needed, but it's great to know that this area of Tiverton is now that little bit safer should an emergency situation needing a defibrillator ever happen. We hope to provide free training for the local community in the coming months."

Training has been discussed with the Sea Cadets and the Tiverton Bowls Club. Steve Pidgeon (JAC member representing the Canal Businesses Group) who is a qualified first aid trainer, has generously offered to provide a training session for the Sea Cadets.

## **6. Barge-based work**

The Canal Rangers and volunteers have been making good progress with the winter work along the offside banks – trimming back overhanging branches, clearing fallen trees and cutting back brambles around bridges. This takes up the majority of their time over the autumn and winter months.



Photo credit: Darren Batchelor

## **7. Agri Environment funding**

The Country Park is currently benefitting from Countryside Stewardship Capital Works funding for hedgelaying, coppicing bankside trees and installing bird and bat boxes. The Canal Manager has attended a number of webinars and has hosted an advisory visit concerning a possible application for a Sustainable Farming Initiative agreement later this year. This could provide valuable funding towards the maintenance of the Canal's

hedgerows and the standard trees along the hedge line. The mapping of the Canal's hedgerows by the Rural Payments Agency was found to be very inaccurate and so the Canal Manager has annotated and sent in dozens of maps to bring the mapping up to date.

The Canal Manager also has responsibility for two other DCC countryside sites in East Devon and so has been following a similar process there with the aim of applying for a Countryside Stewardship Higher Tier agreement to succeed the existing agreement when it ends in December.

## **8. Ditching**

The ditch beside the towpath to the north of Burlescombe Bridge has been cleaned out by an excavator contractor. The arisings are usually removed after every second or third ditching operation, once they start to impinge on the width of the towpath.



## **9. Bank and hedge trimming**

The annual programme of winter hedge and bank trimming has been completed. At the request of anglers, only the plants growing on the banks have been cut – not the stems of the reeds growing from the water. This will reduce the quantity of floating fragments in the water, which can cause annoyance to anglers as they drift around and surround their floats. The main reason for annually cutting the banks is to prevent the development of brambles and given that brambles don't grow from the water, this change should not affect the bankside vegetation.

In early February, there were a couple of instances of vegetable-based hydraulic oil dripping on the towpath from the contractor's tractor. This was cleaned up by the contractor and the Canal Rangers the following day (having been reported on Facebook the evening before).



## 10. Proposed sale of The Moorings

During the autumn and winter, Devon County Council's estates team have been working up proposals with senior officers to 'dispose' of The Moorings with the aim of avoiding repair and maintenance costs and securing a capital receipt for the Council.

The Moorings has been the home of Devon County Council's Canal Wardens and Rangers for over 50 years, and nowadays provides offices, document storage, a meeting room, welfare facilities and two classrooms, whilst in the garden there are moorings for workboats and Sea Cadet boats and three purpose-built pond-dipping ponds.



The Canal Ranger Service were extremely concerned about the potential impact on the services they provide but liaised with these colleagues to work out what the least worst option would be if the sale were to take place, prior to any proposals being made public. Following discussions, the workshops were withdrawn from the proposed disposal and the Visitor Centre was identified as the likely location to provide alternative offices, with one third of the building to be partitioned off with a new internal wall.

In the absence of the space, cover, welfare facilities and pond-dipping resources provided by The Moorings, there would have been an unavoidable reduction in the Canal Ranger Service's engagement with local communities through events and ranger-led school visits if the sale were to proceed, as well as more general impacts on the Service's efficiency.

However, at the DCC Land and Property Committee meeting held at the end of January, Cllr Colin Slade (being a member of that committee) put forward an amendment to remove The Moorings from the disposal list, due to the impacts on management and maintenance of the Country Park and engagement with local communities. Other members of the committee also acknowledged these concerns, the result being that the committee voted in favour of this amendment.

Letters and emails from members of the Canal Joint Advisory Committee who had written ahead of the meeting were also crucial in demonstrating a widespread opposition to the proposal from Canal stakeholders. The Chairman of the committee, Cllr Richard Chesterton

(Tiverton West), recommended to the officers present that they should consult with the JAC on matters that affect the Canal. This decision means that the Canal Ranger Service can now continue to plan their annual events and education programme for the year.

### **11. Memorial benches**

During this reporting period, two new memorial seats have been installed – both replacements for old benches that were no longer serviceable and had to be removed, and both are located between William Authers footbridge and Tidcombe Bridge.

A bench has been built to replace the seat near Crownhill Bridge that was vandalised last year and is currently awaiting a plaque before it is installed. The legs of a memorial seat between Manley and East Manley Bridges have rotted and replacement legs are currently on order. An order has also been placed for a new memorial seat to be located beside the landing stage in Sampford Peverell.

### **12. Visitor Survey**

A visitor survey is being conducted by a student from Wellington School as part of his Duke of Edinburgh Gold Award. The survey largely replicates the questions asked in the last Visitor Survey (2015) and so will show any trends in responses, but has been updated to reflect changes in activities and services available to visitors since then. There is also a question specifically about the new noticeboards, in order to provide evidence in support of the Mid Devon Prosperity Fund award that paid for five of these noticeboards.

The survey responses will help to inform a review of the Canal Management Plan being undertaken later this year.

### **13. Tree works**

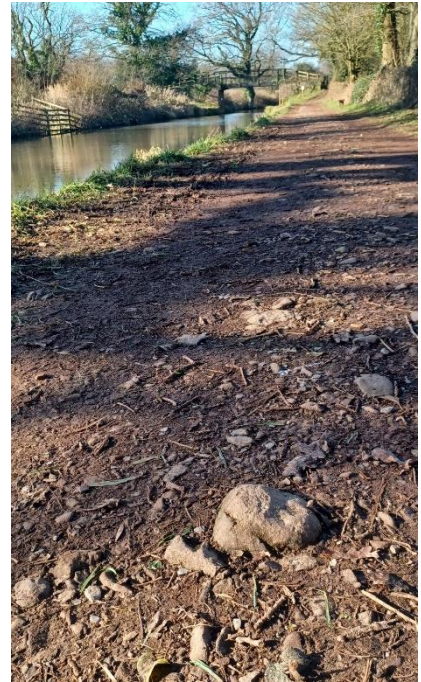
In addition to the usual small-scale, barge-based tree working being undertaken by the Canal Rangers, storms during December and January led to a number of tree and branch failures which tree surgery contractors have been clearing up. At the time of writing all of the safety-related works have been completed, however, there is a considerable backlog of non-urgent clear-up works, as well as works recommended in the most recent tree safety survey report received at the end of January.



## 14. Towpath resurfacing planning

The condition of the towpath surface between Tidcombe Bridge and Snakes Wood has deteriorated in recent years and now has lots of rocks protruding from the surface creating trip hazards (especially near Warnicombe Bridge, as shown in the photo) and many deepening puddles throughout. This has led to a number of reports / complaints from regular users, many of whom are elderly and have limited mobility and/or impaired sight, and for whom the protruding rocks are a real hazard.

Funding has been allocated from the DCC PRoW capital budget to resurface this very popular 1300m section. The Canal Manager has conducted site visits with contractors and sourced quotes and work is due to take place during March. As with previous resurfacing works, the plan will be to keep the towpath open, with banksmen managing safe access through the areas being worked on.



## 15. Wildlife monitoring

The BTO Wetland Bird Survey is a monthly count of wetland birds held at a wide range of waterways around the UK and has been conducted at the Canal by volunteers (and the Canal Manager in recent years) for several decades. Last year one of the volunteers decided to step down and the vacancy was advertised on the Canal Facebook Group. There was a strong response with six people offering to help. In order to make the most of the interest the Canal Manager has passed on the section he covered to a second new volunteer and will now just cover for the five volunteers if and when they cannot complete their count due to illness or holiday. One of the potential volunteers that could not be offered a section at the canal was referred to a vacancy at a reservoir in the Blackdown Hills.

The WeBS volunteers and the Canal Manager had their annual Christmas get together in December, where mince pies and hot drinks were shared in the Ranger's meeting room at the end of the day. The guest of honour was the WeBS Local Organiser for Devon Peter Reay and his wife.

The Canal Ranger Service plans to capitalise on the interest in wildlife monitoring by providing some training sessions on dragonfly and damselfly monitoring for volunteers in the summer. Stover Country Park ran some of these sessions last year and one of the trainers has agreed to help out at the canal this year. The opportunities will be promoted in the spring.

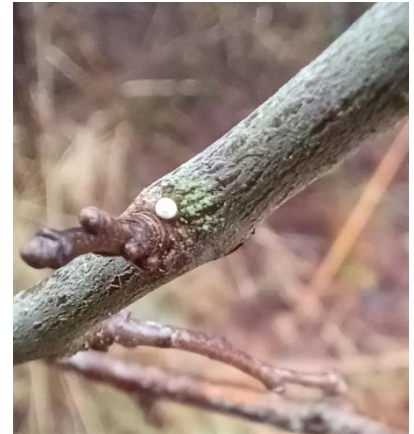
In February a new volunteer that expressed an interest in wildlife monitoring as well as practical work, has spent some time surveying for Harvest Mice and Brown Hairstreak butterfly eggs at the field beside Beech car park,





Burlescombe. The Canal Ranger team had previously found Harvest Mice nests here in 2020 as part of a training session run by the Devon Mammal Group.

The Canal Manager had also recently completed a training session in Exeter on surveying for Brown Hairstreak butterfly eggs (which are laid on young Blackthorn bushes) and so he visited the site with the volunteer and showed him what to look for. After a few hours searching through the tussocks in the field, the volunteer found two harvest mouse nests (which are unoccupied during the autumn and winter months) and will submit the results of his survey to the Devon Harvest Mouse Project. No Brown Hairstreak eggs were found, but this 'none found' result will still be shared with the Devon Biodiversity Record Centre, who are co-ordinating the county-wide citizen science project to build up a better picture of where this threatened butterfly can still be found.



### **16. Fenacre water transfer system**

In early December 2024, the Canal Manager received an email from Aggregate Industries new hydrological consultants, SLR Consulting Ltd, stating that they had been engaged to progress the water transfer system application to the EA and were keen to liaise on the proposals. This welcome news was somewhat tempered by the fact that DCC's hydrological consultant, Marcus Francis, was just about to head to Australia for a two-month holiday. Despite this, information was shared and an online meeting was held involving the PRoW and Country Parks Manager, the Canal Manager, an Aggregate Industries estates officer and the respective consultants in early January. The meeting was positive. The SLR consultant is utilising information previously collated and has a significant amount of work to complete before a draft application can be shared with DCC. However, all are confident that an agreed application can be submitted to the EA in the coming months.

### **17. Lowdwells culvert**

Following completion of the works last year to clean and repair the culvert from Lock Cottage to the road at Lowdwells, the second phase of work to increase the capacity of the channel beside the road and culvert that takes the water under the road has now been completed. The work has been complicated due to a variety of pipes, drains and a water main which either had to feed into the new system or, in the case of the water main under the road, had to be lowered to accommodate the box culvert. The car park at Lowdwells which served as a works depot has been made good and the access track has also been resurfaced with road planings.



## 18. Events

The highlights in this reporting period have been the ever-popular Christmas wreath and decoration workshops run by Canal Ranger Jo Roberts, using natural materials collected along the Canal and from Stover Country Park (the Canal's 'sister' park, which has more conifer). Jo ran four two-hour wreath-making workshops over the weekend of the 7th and 8th December, and all were fully booked for months beforehand, although stormy weather on the 7<sup>th</sup> reduced the number that actually attended.



On Sunday 15th December, Jo ran two Christmas decoration workshops for children, which were also fully booked. The feedback from participants was great so a big thank you to Jo for all her hard work preparing and running these events.



- 13th Nov - Walk & Talk - Swans Neck - 14 people
- 7th Dec - Christmas Wreath - 12 people
- 8th Dec - Christmas Wreath - 37 people
- 15th Dec - Children's Christmas Workshop - 18 children
- 26th Feb - Walk & Talk - Canal Basin – attendee figures tbc.

## **19. Volunteers**

There are several new volunteers that are helping the Canal Rangers with practical tasks on weekdays. There are currently nine regular weekday volunteers, comprising work experience students, retired people, part time workers filling a spare day and people not currently in work. In total during the reporting period they have contributed 57 weekdays of voluntary work.

In addition, the following weekend volunteer days have been held:

- 13th Oct - Volunteer Day - 4 volunteers
- 10th Nov - Volunteer Day - 10 volunteers
- 8th Dec - Volunteer Day - 8 volunteers
- 12th Jan - Volunteer Day - 14 volunteers
- 9th Feb - Volunteer Day - 11 volunteers

Total = 47 weekend days of voluntary work

**Overall total = 104 days of voluntary work**

## **20. Engagement with schools and youth groups**

- 16 Dec - Wilcombe Primary School, Tiverton – Pond-dipping - 42 children

## **21. Talks**

The Canal Manager gave a talk to students at Bicton College on 23/10/24, as per Item 4.

## **Future programme of practical works**

- Towpath resurfacing between Tidcombe Bridge and Snakes Wood
- Spot dredging at Manley Bridge
- Completion of hedgelaying beside East Manley boat moorings
- Completion of annual barge-based tree works
- Completion of tree safety works as specified by tree safety inspection
- Ongoing small-scale bank erosion repairs
- Repairs to Canal Basin and East Manley landing stages
- Possible replacement of Holbrook landing stage
- Re-excavation of Boehill Pond (postponed from last year due to ground conditions)
- 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

**Future programme of management works** (\* = ongoing / already in progress)

- Organisation of all works listed above\*
- Organise treatment of Fringed Lily and Water Primrose to take place in late summer
- Ongoing work with DCC engineers on Asset Management Plan (delayed due to lack of capacity amongst DCC engineers)\*
- Organise programme of events
- Fenacre water transfer system\*
- Organise update and reprint of Canal Visitor Guide
- Liaise with tenants and DCC legal team / consultants on changes to leases
- Complete update of boating regulations and procedures and design/printing of new permits book\*
- 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\*
- Commission Disability Access Audit
- Planning application for the model swan *Rosie* to be reinstalled beside the gift shop and design of panel to go on the gift shop wall behind
- Reviewing Garden and Gateway access agreements and responding to non-payments
- Liaising with DCC staff / partner organisations and contractors in relation to premises repairs and upgrades
- Review of Canal Management Plan (targeting JAC endorsement at Oct 2025 meeting)\*