

Progress Report (March – Sept 2015 inclusive)

1. Canal ‘Stage 2’ works and projects

- **Engineer support** – Two engineers from DCC’s Bridges and Structures Team have for the last 6 weeks been dedicating approximately half of their work time to progressing various Stage 2 projects.
- **Aluminium stop planks** – The engineers have made some improvements to the Canal and River Trust designs for these stopboards and after negotiating some procurement regulation issues (which led to some delays) they have now placed an order with a manufacturer. When the stopboards are delivered, the Canal Rangers and the engineers will trial them at stop plank locations along the canal to ensure that there are no problems deploying them and to gain experience in using them.
- **Tilting weirs** – The engineers have recently been undertaking detailed surveys of the proposed locations for the tilting weirs in order to design the surrounding civils works. The intention is to install the weirs this autumn / winter.
- **Embankments** – The aim is to ensure that the vegetation that grows on the embankments does not impede visual annual inspections of the embankments, to thus maintain structural integrity and to discourage badgers taking up residence.

The best scenario is a grassy embankment. Next best is an embankment covered by medium-sized trees providing a closed canopy that reduces light penetration and therefore reduces growth of brambles and small scrubby bushes. Provided inspection access is possible under the trees then this is acceptable. The worst scenario is an embankment completely covered with thick scrub or brambles as this prevents visual inspection and may encourage badgers.

Over the coming years, a lot of work will be required to open up and maintain inspection access to embankments along the canal. Work has started with the biggest embankments.

This year the Canal Ranger Service has undertaken works and has also been assisted by contractors at Sellake embankment. Scrub and brambles have been cleared on both the towpath and offside banks. On the offside bank the bramble regrowth was sprayed with herbicide, which has significantly reduced its spread. The offside embankment was then seeded with grass seed and then strimmed on two occasions through the summer to knock back the nettles and encourage the grass to establish. Recently the fence around the offside embankment has been rebuilt with a view to enabling sheep to graze the embankment and thereby suppress the re-establishment of scrub without the need for continuous strimming by the Canal Rangers.

This autumn/winter, the remaining scrub on the offside at Swing embankment will be cut back and burned and the stumps will be treated with 'ecoplug' herbicide capsules to prevent them from growing back.

Major relining works are anticipated along the embanked section of canal immediately to the south of Westcott Bridge. It is anticipated that planning this work will become the main focus for the engineers next year, once the tilting weirs are installed.

- **Trees on embankments** – A large amount of coppicing waterside trees on embankments has already been undertaken in the last two winters in order to reduce the threat of leaks and breaches caused by wind-throw, and once again there will be a great deal of work this winter.



Work has already started on the offside banks below Little Tidcombe (the field next to the Tidcombe Hall field, pictured left).

By far the biggest block of work will be along the offside bank between Tiverton Road car park and Tiverton Golf Course.

A tree management plan has been developed for this significant block of

woodland and works will entail the coppicing of most of the waterside trees and a light thinning of trees on the slope and at the foot of the embankment focussing on removing those trees most likely to fail or those which are impacting negatively on better specimens. It is likely that the works will be phased over two winters. Given the large volume of timber to be felled, a felling licence has been applied for from the Forestry Commission.

- **Black Bridge culvert** – the culverts underneath Black Bridge in Burlescombe which carry the stream that runs parallel to the canal act as a bottleneck during times of high flow, leading to flooding of adjacent land and to water overtopping into the canal. At the time of writing, works are shortly about to commence to increase the capacity of the culvert and reduce the flood risk to neighbours and to the canal. The work has been designed by DCC's highway engineers and is being undertaken by Marine and Civil Solutions Ltd, who won the tender.
- **Canal Asset Management Plan** – It is anticipated that the DCC Bridges and Structures engineers will work with the Canal Manager to draw up the AMP next year once the highest priority works (the installation of the tilting weirs) have been completed.

- **New weed boat** – Stage 2 capital funding has been used to purchase a new Conver C485F weed boat. The boat, which cost £61k, was delivered at the start of September following a lengthy trialling and tendering process. Following a training day provided by the distributor, all members of the Ranger Service have spent time using the boat and agree that the boat will significantly increase their ability to keep on top of weed in the canal. The boat has been named *Whirligig*.



- **New tipper van** – In recent years the mechanics who service DCC vehicles had been advising the Canal Manager that the Canal Ranger Service's 2002 LDV Convoy tipper was coming to the end of its working life and would soon be uneconomic to repair. After establishing that Stage 2 capital funding was eligible to be spent on purchasing a replacement to enable reasonable management of the asset, the Canal Manager worked with a colleague in the DCC Fleet Management Team to identify a suitable vehicle. Key considerations



included the tipper function and the payload (for transporting bulky materials and machinery), the wheelbase, width and turning circle (to make sure it could get on, off and along the towpath) and passenger capacity (to enable groups of volunteers and staff to be transported to/from site).

The Nissan Cabstar medium wheelbase double cab tipper was identified as the best fit and fortunately it was also several thousand pounds cheaper than the other tipper vans of its type. The vehicle was collected in June and the Canal Ranger Service is finding it very suitable to deliver their work programme.

- **Snakes Wood coir rolls** - At the end of March, 150m of coir rolls were installed along the eroded towpath-side bank on an embanked section in Snakes Wood.

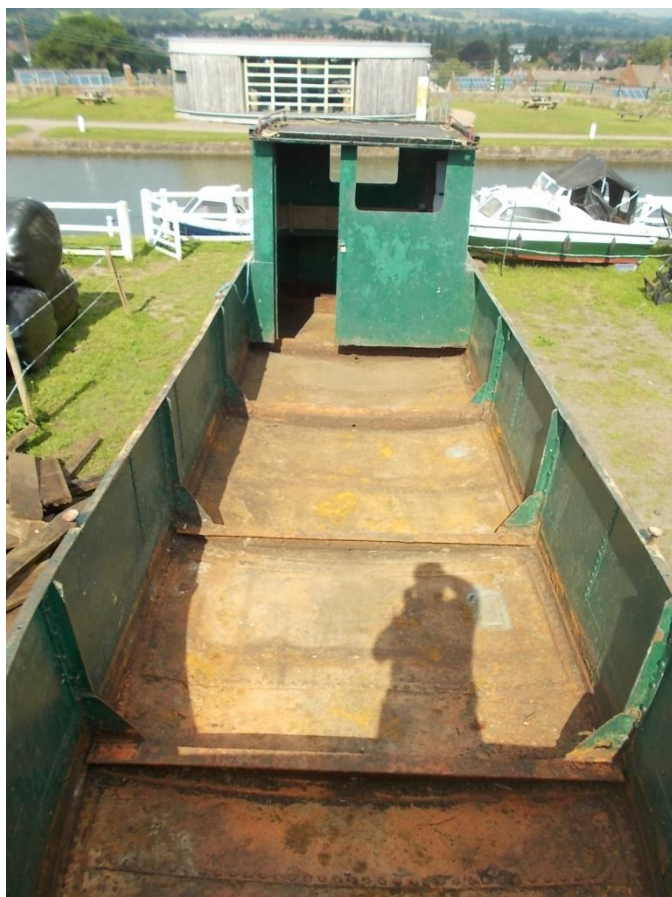


The coir rolls were pre-established with Pendulous Sedge (*Carex Pendula*) which our botanical advisor (Jeremy Ison) agreed would be suitable as it is common locally and is tolerant of shady conditions. Soil was being used to backfill between the bank and the coir rolls.

Ahead of these works, a number of offside Alders had been coppiced and towpath-side trees above the section were crown-lifted in order to reduce the shading that had led to the previous 'naturally-established' vegetation dying out. The plants have almost all survived and should continue to grow and knit together the edge of the bank.

2. Maintenance barge

Following several incidents in recent years in which the maintenance barge has developed leaks and on occasions has even sunk, the Canal Manager felt it was necessary to take the boat out of the water and establish what repairs may be necessary to enable it to continue working safely on the canal. On the same day that Ken Browse used his telehandler to unload the new weed boat from the delivery lorry and lift it into the canal, he also managed to lift out the maintenance barge and transport it back to the Tiverton Canal Co yard.



Philip Brind and a welding contractor he has worked with on several other canal boats in recent years have looked the boat over but feel that the cost of shot-blasting, re-plating and painting the floor of the boat is likely to be considerably greater than the cost of purchasing a new boat.

A further complication is the imminent arrival of a new Work Boat Code, which work boats on UK waterways will need to comply with in the coming years. It is unlikely that the current barge will comply without a great deal of expense. At the time of writing no decisions have been made regarding what works will be undertaken on the maintenance barge, but the most likely target will be to shore up the barge to enable this

winter's tree work to be completed, whilst looking in the medium term for a replacement that will comply with the Work Boat Code.

3. New inspection and minor maintenance boat

In May, the Friends of the Grand Western Canal donated a new Whaly boat and Honda outboard engine to the Canal Ranger Service using funds raised following



the breach in 2012. The Canal Ranger service is very grateful and is sure that the boat will prove to be very useful, particularly in accessing offside banks to undertake works and inspections. The boat has been named *Mayfly*.

Recently it has been used by volunteers from the angling club who were clearing Water Solider from the Canal near Ebear (more on this below).

4. Weed

Weed in the canal has once again been a problem this year and the invasive Water Soldier has continued to both spread (currently extending from Ebear Bridge to East Manley Bridge) and increase in abundance in the previously infested areas.



This has been despite the fact that the Canal Ranger Service has spent more time than ever before clearing weed. The weed harvesting boat has been in operation since early April and has been used over 4 days per week on average since then until the time of writing. After some repairs and adjustments last winter this boat has been remarkably reliable until a week ago (when a fuel pump failed) and so there have been no significant periods of down time awaiting parts as has often been the case in recent years.

Since the new weedboat arrived in early September, it has been used most days and on several occasions both boats have been out working at the same time. It is envisaged that both boats will be used next year in an attempt to keep on top of the weed. Experience to date with the new boat suggests that it will be much faster and more effective at clearing most of the different species of weed in the canal.

During the winter when the stems and leaves of the fringing reeds have died down and their weight is reduced, we will test the effectiveness of the new weedboat in cutting back and removing the root mats of the fringing reeds where they are encroaching on the canal channel.

Following the annual Wildlife Advisory Group site visit in July, it was agreed that the treatment of Fringed Lily between Rock Bridge and the Golf course should recommence. This work was undertaken by a specialist contractor in August and seems to have been very effective with almost all of the plants looking to have been killed off. The WAG will look again at the extent of any regrowth next year before deciding whether further treatment is required.

In mid September, the Tiverton Angling Club conducted a trial beside Ebear Bridge to remove Water Soldier with the help of 15 volunteers for two hours on a Sunday morning. The Canal Ranger Service provided them with a range of equipment to use including the inspection boat *Mayfly*, some lifejackets and some rakes. Prior to the trial the Canal Rangers had been over the area with the new weedboat clearing Water Soldier from the channel.



Representatives from the club reported that a significant amount of Water Soldier had been removed from the section, but that in order to access all of the weed in the margins, they had decided to remove all of the fringing reeds and pile these between the hedge and towpath. The Canal Ranger Service thanked the club for their efforts and following the club's reports on this trial an agenda item has been added for the JAC to further discuss the best way to proceed with the battle against Water Soldier.

5. Fenacre Water Transfer System

DCC officers met with staff from Aggregate Industries in July to further discuss the need for improvements to the water transfer system at Fenacre Bridge. AI indicated their willingness to undertake the improvements. At a following site visit it was agreed that the best solution would be to create a new outfall from the stream below the concrete monitoring weir, flowing into a new ditch which would run diagonally across the AI-owned land and then feed into the ditch running parallel to the road that was excavated by an adjacent landowner prior to the 2012 breach. Work would also be required to protect the ground where this ditch flows down to the canal. By keeping the water in open ditches, it would be far easier to maintain and the angle of the flow (which would be more in line with the flow of the stream) would increase the effectiveness of the system. It was agreed

that care would need to be taken in designing these works in order to ensure that the flood risk to the canal is not increased.

Since the meeting, AI has prepared some designs and has applied to the EA for a licence to undertake the work. At the time of writing a response is being awaited from the EA. If and when the licence is issued, AI has indicated they wish to proceed with the work as soon as possible.

6. Fenacre Farm – flood risk issue

Following action taken by the landowner and their developer to the fields adjacent to the canal DCC carried out some remedial works. Since then our consultants, Jacobs, has undertaken a study to model the impact of the landowner's activities on the canal. This will inform any legal action the county council may have to take in the future.

7. Swan's Neck towpath resurfacing

In late March and early April, one mile of towpath between Greenway Bridge and the wooded section opposite the golf course on the Swan's Neck was resurfaced using DCC Cycleway Improvement capital funding. At the golf course end the work involved widening the path provide more space for towpath users and to enable our maintenance vehicles to safely access this section.



In general the width of the surfacing is a bit greater than is usually undertaken, as repairs had to be made to ruts created by the dumper which ferried hundreds of tonnes of stone along the section. A dozen or so gullies between the towpath and the water were also filled in using large rocks and soil.

The dust content of the stone as supplied by the quarry proved to be quite variable and as a result the section from Sellake Bridge to the golf course ended up with a lot of loose stone chippings on the surface. In order to resolve this issue a contractor with an angled power brush swept the loose stone to the side of the path.

8. Battens Bridge ramp

Having received many complaints over several years about the difficulty of access up and down the ramp and steps beside Battens Bridge, the Canal

Ranger Service have recently organised improvement works to create a new ramp.

The ramp forms part of National Cycle Network route 3, this being a point where the route joins/leaves the towpath. On this basis, DCC Cycleway Improvement capital funding was secured for the works. After establishing that the works would be permitted development and would not require planning permission and after receiving the support for the project from Sampford Peverell Parish Council, a 20m section of hedge and one small ash tree were removed and a medium sized Ash was coppiced. This work was done in the presence of a DCC Ranger from Stover Country Park who has his Dormouse-handling licence – a requirement of the method statement supplied by the County Ecologist.



Contractors then used an excavator to re-profile the hedge bank and create the ramp, and then surfaced the ramp with limestone scalpings and compacted them with a vibrating roller. A handrail was also installed. A post and rail fence along the field boundary is due to be installed by a fencing contractor in the next week. The Canal Ranger wishes to thank the adjacent landowner, Mr Venner, for his assistance in providing access for the works.

The ramp now provides greatly improved access for all users (including mobility buggy / pushchair / wheelchair access for the first time).

9. Towpath bank gullies

Throughout the canal a number of gullies have formed over many years running from the towpath down to the water. These have either been created by water flowing down, anglers digging gaps to accommodate their boxes, or most typically, dogs scrambling out of the water. Many of these were getting close to the reaching the surfaced part of the towpath and thereby presenting a risk to towpath users.

Last year, contractors began work on filling some of the worst of the gullies near Whipcott Bridge (where the cause is water flowing down from the road above) using gabion baskets. Once constructed, they are covered over with soil and evidence to date suggests that they will be effective in the long term in protecting the bank.

This work has continued this year with gullies being filled in by contractors between Waytown Tunnel and Whipcott Bridge, and in Sampford Peverell. In other areas the Canal Rangers have filled in some smaller or less steep gullies using large rocks and soil.

10. East Manley landing stage

Last winter the Canal Manager discovered that several of the planks decking the landing stage at East Manley Bridge were rotten and that many others were approaching the end of their serviceable life. After informing the Tiverton Canal Co and fencing off the rotten section, plans were made with the Tiverton Canal Co to work together on re-decking the landing stage. The Canal Ranger Service supplied the timber and labour, and the Tiverton Canal Co supplied labour and some machinery (nail gun and mitre saw) which significantly increased the speed of progress.



After removing all of the decking it became apparent that some repairs were also needed to the timber frame underneath. These were carried out and the opportunity was also taken to create a proper step down from the towpath onto the landing stage, thereby reducing trip hazards and grass cutting maintenance. The Canal Ranger Service and the Tiverton Canal Co are pleased with the work which has also attracted lots of positive comments from visitors.

11. Silt bund near Rock Bridge

When work was undertaken in November 2013 to pour a concrete invert under Rock Bridge and seal leaks in the bank, a large quantity of silt was dredged from the canal channel and banded up behind a wall of dumpy bags where it then spent over a year drying out. This spring, work was agreed with the adjacent landowner to use this dried out mud to re-profile the bank on the boundary between his land and the Country Park. The bank was then seeded with grass and a hedge will be planted along the boundary this winter.

12. Canal Basin play area

As has been previously reported to the JAC, over several years the Canal Ranger Service has secured funding contributions for a new play area in the Canal Basin from a number of sources and a budget of £50k is now available. Throughout the spring and early summer a consultation was undertaken regarding the type of equipment local children and families would like to see installed.

The next stage is to draw up tender documents and to invite tenders for the supply and installation of equipment. The target date for completion is Easter 2016. There has been a delay in progressing the procurement process as the Ranger who is leading on this project – Jo Roberts - has had to spend far more time this year mowing and strimming the towpath, filling in for the other Ranger - Craig Saunderson – who has had to spend more time on the weed boat.

The writing of the tender specification and assessment criteria isn't straight forward as we have to find an objective way of making what could be quite a subjective decision: what style and arrangement of play equipment best fits the Canal Basin landscape and will provide the best experience for its users? Once it is written and published we are then more or less beholden to follow it through wherever it may lead us, and so it is important that we get this right.

13. Emergency Response Plan

The Canal Manager has drafted a new Emergency Response Plan for the Canal, and has been consulting with key agencies, including the emergency planning teams at DCC, MDDC, Devon and Cornwall Police as well as DCC teams that may be involved in responding to an emergency. At the time of writing a response is being awaited from Devon and Somerset Fire and Rescue Service. It is not intended to be a public document and so will not be appended to this report, but the Canal Manager will bring a copy to pass around at the JAC meeting so that members can pass it around get a feel for its scope and detail. Key partners along the canal will be involved in the process at a later date once the emergency response agencies have all provided feedback.

14. Green Flag Award

The Country Park has once again been successful in retaining its Green Flag Award. As we received a high percentage score following a judging visit last year and have held the award for more than 3 years, we are now in the top bracket of parks that are only fully judged every other year and are 'mystery shopped' by a judge at some point in the intervening year. This year was a mystery shopper year, but as yet we have received no feedback from any mystery shopping that may have taken place.

15. Photo Competition

Since February we have been running a photo competition. Hundreds of entries have been submitted, including around 20 -30 high quality images that may prove

difficult for the judges to choose between. The competition closes at the end of November, with the winners to be announced mid December. More details can be found at www.devon.gov.uk/gwcpphotos

16. Canal Management Plan

The Canal Manager has recently begun the process of reviewing and redrafting the Canal's Management Plan. He feels that the current format, whilst being very thorough and logical in its demonstration of how broad objectives become specific actions, is unwieldy and unlikely to be read or referred to very much if ever.

Given that a new Canal Asset Management Plan is due to be written next year, which will focus on the key infrastructure of the canal, the Canal Management Plan can become a sister document which focuses primarily on issues such as visitor experience, visitor management, recreational use, wildlife, landscape, and such like.

An approach which the Canal Manager has seen successfully adopted at other country parks, where wildlife conservation is not the overriding priority, is to use the Green Flag Award criteria as the key headings within the body of the plan. These are:

- Signage and welcome
- Provision and standards of facilities
- Visitor safety
- Heritage and nature conservation
- Environmental sustainability
- Community involvement
- Marketing and publicity
- Overall management

With some introductory sections about the canal and the strategic policy context (DCC and MDDC strategic plans, UK waterways policy, biodiversity policy, economic policy etc.) and a section on recreational uses, the Canal Manager feels a more succinct and readable plan could be written. He plans to draft the plan during the winter and then circulate to JAC members ahead of the March 2016 meeting for discussion at that meeting. At that meeting the plan could hopefully be endorsed subject to any amendments that are agreed.

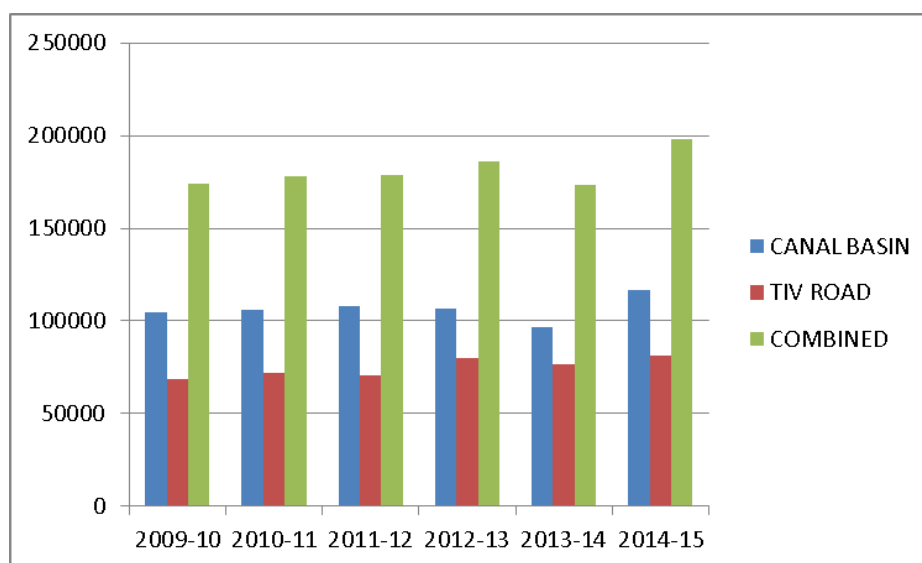
17. 2015 Visitor Survey

Throughout the summer and autumn a Canal visitor survey has been conducted. The same forms as used in the 2010 visitor survey have been used again in order to save on printing costs and to enable direct comparisons to be made. At present around 150 questionnaires have been completed. Volunteers have interviewed canal visitors in Sampford Peverell and at Tiverton Road car park, and respondents have filled in forms stocked in the visitor centre and downloaded from the Canal website. The results will feed in to the review of the Canal Management Plan and will be reported to JAC members.

18. Visitor Numbers

Trends in estimated visitor numbers are based on data collected by vehicle counters installed in the Canal's two main car parks at the Canal Basin and Tiverton Road Bridge. Last year's estimate for the total number of visitors to the Country Park was 260,000.

The annual figures for 2014/15 (measured from August to July annually) have shown a 20% increase in vehicle numbers at the Canal Basin and a 7% increase in vehicle numbers at Tiverton Road car park since last year. Taking an average of the increase in numbers at the two car parks of 13.5% this provides an estimate of total visitor numbers for the 12 month period of 295,000.



Please note: The figures in the chart above show total number of cars entering and leaving the car parks. Therefore to get the total number of cars using the car parks, the numbers need to be halved. However, the government's statistical approach to estimating car occupancy for tourism and leisure visits is to assume two occupants per car, and so the chart shows the estimated numbers of visitors arriving at the two car parks by car only.

A further allowance is then added to take into account all of the other visitors arriving at other locations and by other means (on foot or bicycle, in coaches etc...) in order to provide the estimate of total visitor numbers. We do not vary this allowance of other visitors from year to year, but rather just apply the % increase or decrease at the two car parks to the previous years figures. Although the estimate of the total numbers is debateable, the annual trends are fairly accurate.

19. Benches

New memorial benches have been installed at two locations opposite the golf course on the Swan's Neck. Another bench has been ordered which will replace the softwood one beside the gate at Tidcombe Bridge.

20. Offside bank revetments

The Canal Ranger Service has undertaken repairs to the offside bank in front of two properties on Atherton Way, Tiverton, where the bank was been undercut and the land being rented by the homeowner from DCC (under a Garden Agreement) was unsafe to access.

21. Social media

Efforts have been made by the Canal Ranger Service to improve the Country Park's presence on Facebook, Twitter and Tripadvisor. The Canal Rangers have been given the target of posting at least once a week on Facebook at Twitter to highlight events and activities and to show friends and followers the range of work they are involved in. This summer, Tripadvisor awarded the Grand Western Canal a Certificate of Excellence for gaining consistently high reviews.

22. Events

Having spent a great deal of time organising the bicentenary events in 2014, it was decided to scale back the Canal Ranger Service's events programme for 2015 and focus mainly on an increasing amount of practical site management work. We did however, host a number of events organised by other organisations:

- **Age UK event** - Age UK ran a sponsored walk / cycle and fun day along the Canal and in the Canal Basin on 25th April. Feedback suggests the event had only been moderately successful. The Canal Manager will ensure that a member of staff is working should Age UK wish to hold the event again.
- **Clik Walk** – this annual event was once again held at the canal. The new organisers have done a great job in sustaining and building on the success of the previous organiser and there was a good turnout for this year's event.
- **Bat Walks** – In May, the Rangers led a bat walk from Tidcombe Bridge to Snakes Wood, with 15 people attending. In August, the Mid Devon Natural History Society ran a bat walk which started in the canal basin. One of the Canal Rangers opened the visitor centre in the evening, and those attending were given the opportunity to see some live bats that had been rescued by a local bat specialist.
- **Craft Fayre** – In September the Canal Basin hosted a Craft Fayre. The event was organised by a local trader with 15 different stall holders taking part. A donation of £150 was made to the Country Park and a raffle was also held in aid of the Friends of the Grand Western Canal (who also had a stall).
- **Tiverton Walk and Talk** – Rangers have led four Healthy Walks that incorporate the towpath, with a total of 96 people attending.

23. Talks

Since March, the Canal Manager has given talks to Wiveliscombe History Society and the Rolle Canal and North Devon Waterways Society.

24. Volunteers

Between the start of March and the end of September, volunteers will have completed 254 days of work. This has mostly been generated by two men who have been offered Community Work Placements and who have been working four days a week since May. Hedgelaying volunteer days will continue this winter on the second Sunday of each month starting on November 8th.

25. School visits / youth groups

During the same period Jo Roberts has led 9 school visits comprising 232 pupils from Blundells School, Blundells Prep, Wilcombe Primary, Heathcoat Primary, Castle Primary, Rockbeare Primary and Uffculme Pre-school.

Future programme of works

- Cutting back overhanging branches throughout the canal
- Laying several sections of hedgerow
- Using new weed boat to reduce the width of marginal reed growth in areas where it is encroaching.
- Weed harvesting – seeking to collect as much Water Soldier as possible before it sinks
- Mowing and strimming
- Coppicing trees on embankments
- Hedge and bank cutting
- Crown-lifting low branches above towpath and in front of bridges
- Scrub-clearing to enable more thorough inspections of embankments

Major projects for next 12 months

- Progression of Stage 2 capital works as listed earlier in the report, plus preparation for relining works beside Westcott Bridge and capping of embankment between Burlescombe sluice and double culverts.
- Sharing and testing of Emergency Response Plan
- Drafting of Asset Management Plan
- Analysis of 2015 Visitor Survey
- Review of Canal Management Plan
- 2015 Canal Photo Competition judging and publicity
- Procurement and installation of new play area in Canal Basin
- Interpretation panel improvements in Canal Basin and Lowdwells
- Visitor Information Guide update and reprint
- Possible website upgrade