

Progress Report (Oct 2015 – Feb 2016 inclusive)

1. Stage 2 works

- **Stop planks** – Last autumn, the Canal Ranger Service took delivery of two sets of aluminium stopboards. It is intended that these will be used instead of the wooden stopboards for damming the canal in both maintenance and emergency situations from now on.

Given the high value of the aluminium, a 24ft shipping container was sourced (generously provided by the DCC PRow team) and installed behind the workshops at The Moorings, in order to securely store the stopboards and some other equipment.

The Youngman boards (staging which bridges the canal at the point where the stopboards are installed, providing safe access for staff, and eliminating the need to enter the water) have also been delivered and the last item required for the operation of the new system – chain-hemmed tarpaulins – are due for delivery on 12th April. This day will be a training day with DCC rangers and engineers installing the new stopboards with a contractor experienced in using the system, in order to familiarise themselves with the installation and extraction procedure.



- **Tilting weirs** – Engineers from the DCC Bridges and Structures Team continue to manage this project. A number of complex technical issues relating to the automatic operation and powering of the tilting weir to be located next to the Burlescombe sluice have slowed progress, as have issues at the Holbrook culvert (see item 11 below), but the engineers expect construction work to start in the early spring.

- **Black Bridge culvert** – A stream runs parallel to the canal, within the canal holding, for some 500m in Burlescombe. During times of high rainfall, water often backed up in the section upstream of the culverts below Black Bridge, due to their limited capacity, causing flooding of adjacent land and property and overtopping into the canal. In order to reduce these problems, the secondary culvert has been significantly increased in size, the culvert under Fossend Bridge has been cleaned out and the ditch has been dredged.



The work has necessitated the removal of a large ash tree and the construction of a new length of post and rail fence.

- **Embankment tree management** – Over the last two years a great deal of coppicing of bankside trees has been undertaken to reduce the risk of leaks and breaches being caused by bankside trees being wind-thrown. This work has continued this winter with rangers and contractors coppicing bankside trees at several points along the canal.

A felling licence has been secured and tendering has recently been undertaken for a large block of work along the embankment between Tiverton Road car park and the golf course, on the Swan's Neck. A woodland management plan has been developed for this compartment with the assistance of an arboricultural consultant. Work will involve the coppicing of all canopy trees along the waters edge and the coppicing of less stable/reliable trees on the downslope of the embankment.

Understorey trees will be retained along the waters edge to soften the visual impact. Work will happen outside of the main bird nesting season between before the end of March 2017. Some of the work along the toe of the embankment has already been completed under a separate contract.

- **Embankment scrub removal** – Last winter, scrubby trees and brambles were removed from Sellake embankment. The boundary of the embankment was fenced and it was seeded with grass to enable an adjacent landowner to maintain grass cover and deter the re-emergence of scrubby growth by sheep grazing.

This winter, the same approach is being followed at Swing embankment. A contractor has cut and burnt all of the hawthorns and brambles that were growing on the offside of the embankment, and has treated the tree stumps with herbicide, preventing their re-growth. Rangers will treat any bramble regrowth in the spring with herbicide and will also spread grass seed, to encourage grazing and the retention of grassy slopes rather than scrubby slopes.



- **Embankment levels** – Engineers from the DCC Bridges and Structures team have continued to work with consultants Jacobs to identify low points and weaker areas along the Canal's embankments and to plan works to top these up / reinforce them. Initial investigations by Jacobs did not highlight any critically low or weak sections, but they did make recommendations for further investigation or for repair / topping up works on a number of embankments in the medium term. This work is likely to become the main focus once the tilting weirs are installed.

2. Maintenance barge overhaul

October 2015 Progress Report stated that the Canal Ranger Service's maintenance barge had been taken out of the water and was awaiting repair works by the Tiverton Canal Co. Since then, the boat has been thoroughly shot blasted inside and out, revealing a large number of holes in the boat's hull. Thankfully the majority of the hull still has a good thickness of metal and so by cutting out and replacing the worst sections and filling in the small holes with weld, the integrity of the hull has been re-established.



Following the welding work, the hull has been coated with a thick layer of rust inhibitive paint and then has had a further four coats inside and five coats outside of a high performance paint that should protect the hull for many decades to come. In order to keep costs down, Canal Rangers and volunteers have done much of the painting work and have also helped with pumping out rainwater and sweeping out shot.



At the time of writing preparations are being made to enable a new timber deck to be installed, and it is hoped the boat will be back in the water and ready to use within a month. The Canal Ranger Service wishes to thank the Tiverton Canal Co. for their excellent advice, hard work and efforts made to keep down costs.

3. Gabions under bridges

Stone-filled gabion baskets have been installed underneath Black Bridge in Burlescombe, to shore up the bank which was collapsing into the canal. This is an important location for maintenance vehicles turning onto the towpath, but the shading caused by the bridge above meant that vegetation was not growing well on the bank and knitting it together, as is the case elsewhere.

Gabion baskets have also been installed to fill gaps in the bank on either side of Ayshford Bridge, where the bank was being eroded back towards the towpath.

4. Water soldier

At the October 2015 JAC meeting, it was agreed that a small working group be set up to discuss approaches to removing the invasive Water Soldier from the Canal. The group has conducted email discussions about works being undertaken this winter, and is pleased with progress made by contractors and Canal Rangers.

In order to make clearance of water soldier plants by hand along the edges of the canal, the marginal reed growth has been dug out by an excavator, with the arisings being spread down the adjacent embankment. This work has been completed along the entire offside section between Black Bridge and Ebear Bridge, and along a significant amount of the towpath side within the same section.



This project has been supported by Cllr Radford who has helped to fund the work by making a £1000 contribution from his Locality Budget.

The Canal Ranger Service intends to start using the new weedboat to remove Water Soldier much earlier than usual this year (probably around mid-March rather than late April), as the new boat is able to reach it even when it is on the bottom of the canal.

5. Tree works

In addition to the embankment tree works mentioned outlined above, a number of other tree works have been undertaken this winter:

- **Canal Basin** – The Canal Ranger Service and their arboricultural consultant agreed that a number of trees growing in the garden of The Moorings were either impacting on the structural integrity of the Canal Basin's offside walls; were of poor form and were best removed to allow a better formed tree to succeed it; or were having a negative impact on the local landscape and giving the impression that The Moorings was being screened off and hidden away. As a result, several conifers, a horse chestnut and a cherry have been felled. An excavator contractor will shortly be removing stumps and preparing the ground so as to smarten up this prominent location by returning much of it to lawn, with a few specimen trees dotted around.
- **William Authers footbridge** – similar work has been undertaken on the offside land to the east of William Authers Bridge. Conifers and laurels have been felled, leaving some mature Ashes to grow on, and efforts will be made to kill off the bamboo which is growing along the bank and to establish grass on the previously overgrown litter-strewn land behind. If Water Soldier continues to spread into the Tiverton stretch, as is possible, this land is likely to become a key unloading point for the weedboat.

- **Cutting back offside branches / crown-lifting** – The Canal Rangers and volunteers have been undertaking the regular winter tasks of cutting back overhanging offside branches and pruning low branches above the towpath. In order to allow us to do this work whilst our maintenance barge was being overhauled, The Tiverton Canal Co arranged for a frame to be bolted onto the stern of the previously unpowered tub barge, enabling an outboard motor to be fitted. This has worked well as an interim solution.

Whilst it is anticipated that all of the branches with the potential to cause obstructions will have been removed, it should be stated that not as much progress has been made in removing sections of Willow along offside banks as had been hoped. The main reasons for this are that the Canal Rangers and volunteers have spent a lot of time painting and helping out with the overhaul of the maintenance barge in order to keep costs down; and a considerable amount of time has been spent responding to weather (opening/closing sluices and clearing culvert grilles).

- **Other tree works** – Contractors have felled a large pine tree near East Manley Bridge (on the advice of our arboricultural consultant) and have completed the crown reduction of two offside trees opposite Wilcombe Primary School. A small number of trees have been blown down in the storms this winter and all have been cleared away by the Canal Rangers.

6. Hedge laying and planting

Throughout the winter, Volunteer Days have been led by the Canal Ranger Service with the November, December, January and (forthcoming March) events focussing on hedgelaying. Hedges have been laid near Crownhill Bridge, Sellake Bridge, Watton Bridge, and Sampford Peverell picnic site. 300 hedge trees have been planted to gap up or thicken up existing hedges beside the towpath.

7. MDDC funding

JAC members will be aware that in the autumn of 2015, MDDC made DCC aware of proposals to halve their revenue funding for the canal in 2016/17 and then remove it completely in 2017/18. Such a cut would have had a crippling effect on the ability of the Canal Ranger Service to manage and maintain the Canal, but thankfully MDDC members decided not to adopt the proposed cuts and found alternative arrangements for the funding of the canal, which meant that no cuts would be made in 2016/17.

Several JAC members played key roles in speaking against the proposed cuts in the media and at public meetings, or in making the decision not to enact the proposed cuts and agreeing the alternative funding arrangements - their input was greatly appreciated.

MDDC has written to DCC outlining its intention to arrange a meeting to discuss future funding arrangements later this year. A stronger partnership between the two councils in their funding of the canal would be beneficial for the Canal and the Canal Ranger Service. A great deal of the Canal Manager's time was diverted to

responding to the proposed cuts, at the expense of other important work, such as progressing the new management plan, and some projects were delayed.

8. Canal Play Area

One of the projects that has been delayed as a result of the proposed funding cuts was the Canal Basin play area. In the event of the proposed cuts being made, it was possible that some of the funding earmarked for the play area may have had to be used to make up the revenue funding shortfall in the first year and buy some time to plan a way forward. As a result all work on developing the tender was put on hold until early January at which point MDDC wrote to confirm that funding would not be cut in 2016/17.

At the time of writing the tender documents are now almost complete, and it is anticipated that the play area will be installed in late spring / early summer.

9. Management Plan

The Canal Manager has made good progress in drafting a new management plan. The plan will have a completely different format from the previous plan, with much of it being based around the Green Flag Award criteria. In general it will be less dense, less repetitive and exhaustive (in its explanation of how broad objectives are translated into specific targets and actions) and more focussed on delivering the widely accepted aims of the Green Flag Award.

However it will not be ready for the March JAC meeting as the Canal Manager has had his time diverted onto other pressing issues. A draft must be completed to show Green Flag Award judges when they visit the site sometime between late April and late June, and this will also be shared with JAC members, so that comments can be received and incorporated. The plan will be discussed at the October JAC meeting and will hopefully be endorsed, subject to any amendments that are agreed.

10. 2015 Photo Competition

Last year's photo competition was very successful. 381 entries were received, providing the Canal Ranger Service and DCC with a wealth of great photos to use in promoting the canal for years to come. The competition also received excellent publicity in the local press. Thanks to Cllrs Hannon and Radford for contributing to the prize fund from their Locality Budgets.



11. Holbrook culvert

In early December 2015 Canal Rangers discovered that this siphon culvert had become blocked with stony debris. This was most unexpected as the culvert was cleaned and repaired only a few years ago. After some initial work by the Canal Ranger Service and

the DCC Bridges and Structures engineers to establish the extent of the problem, specialist contractors were engaged to clean out the culvert. This work has now been completed and interim measures have been undertaken to reduce the movement of stone along the watercourse that leads to the culvert, prior to the proposed installation of a new silt trap to be constructed in front of the culvert inlet in the summer, once ground conditions have improved.

12. Fenacre Farm

DCC's Deputy County Solicitor has been advising on the ongoing issue at Fenacre Farm. The PROW / CP Manager and the Canal Manager are working with the legal team in advance of further action. County Councillors and the JAC members will be kept informed on progress.

13. Fenacre water transfer system

The Aggregate Industries Estate Manager responsible for this project suffered a close family bereavement late last year and was off work for a period of time. Although we understand he is now back at work, the Canal Manager has been unable to get an update on the situation regarding the application to the EA for the proposed scheme. He will continue to seek an update and hopes to be able to provide a verbal report on the current situation at the meeting.

14. Atherton Way

A multi-agency meeting was held in early February to look at the continuing issues at Atherton Way. A programme and partnership funding is being worked up to help resolve the matter being led by DCC's Flood and Coastal risk management group. A verbal update will be provided at the meeting.

15. Bank and hedge cutting

Our regular hedge and bank cutting contractor has completed the winter cut and Canal Rangers have followed along afterwards tidying up the bits that he can't get to.

16. Greenway cutting

A small landslip occurred on the towpath side in this cutting following heavy rain in February. An excavator contractor will shortly be assisting the Canal Rangers to remove the slumped soil and re-profile the bank around the slip.

Annual work to coppice a few small sections on the offside slope of the cutting will be undertaken in late February. Work to coppice some of the larger trees on the towpath side will continue after bird nesting, later in the year.

17. Manley car park

The surface around the entrance and gate at Manley car park was becoming very uneven and muddy, and cars wheels were spinning on their uphill exit from the car park,

further increasing the problem. The car park has been resurfaced with another layer of road planings, and is much improved.

18. Re-designed Visitor Guide

Having had more or less the same format and photos in the Visitor Information Guide for the last 6 years, the Canal Manager felt it was time to refresh it as a more modern visitor attraction promotional guide.

There have been three stages in this process. Firstly the Canal Manager has edited out all of the superfluous text which doesn't have to be in guide. Secondly, the professional copywriter from Devon Wildlife Enterprises who researched and wrote all of the text in the visitor centre displays has edited / rewritten this remaining text to make it more engaging and simpler to read. He has also given advice on changes in layout. Finally a DCC graphic designer is currently redesigning the guide, adopting a photo-based front cover and using several of the photos from the recent photo competition throughout.

The new Visitor Guide has several new advertisers (including Knighthayes, Tiverton Museum and Coldharbour Mill) enabling the guide to continue to cover its costs despite the improvements and a larger print run, and will be printed and distributed in the week before Easter.

19. Canal Basin car park

The grassy area beside the limekilns until recently had a line of wooden posts around the perimeter to prevent cars from driving on the grass. In the last year many of these wooden posts have been rotting and snapping off at the base. A new solution has been to remove all of these wooden posts and replace them with some larger posts and lengths of chain between. This approach has two main advantages: the larger posts should last much longer and grass cutting along this strip beside the car park, will be much quicker with fewer posts to negotiate.

20. New website

DCC is in the process of moving all of its webpages onto WordPress – a significantly better website system than the one previously used. The Canal Ranger Service has liaised with IT staff to edit and move over the Canal's webpages. The new site went live in early February and the old URL – www.devon.gov.uk/grandwesterncanal - continues to work and will continue to be the one that is promoted.



21. Benches

Two new oak benches have been installed since October 2015. One is located near

Tidcombe Bridge and the other is due to be installed on the Swan's Neck opposite the Canal depot.

22. Events

- Tuesday 13th October 2015 - **Farmwise** event at Westpoint. Jo Roberts spent the day doing activities with visiting school groups looking at tree ID.
- Sunday 1st November 2015 - **Halberton Scout Hut opening day**. Jo Roberts represented the Canal Ranger Service at this event celebrating the completion of extensive refurbishment of the Scout Hut at Greenway.
- Sunday 8th November – **Volunteer Day**. Mark Baker led 8 volunteers hedgelaying at Crownhill picnic site.
- Wednesday 11th November – Jo Roberts led 18 participants on a **Walk and Talk** near Holcombe Rogus.
- Thursday 3rd December – **Christmas Wreath Workshop**. Jo Roberts led an event for 15 scouts from the Halberton branch of 2nd Tiverton Scouts
- Sunday 6th December – **Christmas Wreath Workshop**. Jo Roberts led an event for 14 members of the public.
- Sunday 13th December – **Volunteer Day**. Craig Saunderson led 10 volunteers hedgelaying near Sellake Bridge.
- Sunday 10th January – **Volunteer Day**. Mark Baker led 9 volunteers hedgelaying near Watton Bridge.
- Wednesday 20th January – Jo Roberts led 28 participants on a **Walk and Talk** near Sampford Peverell.
- Sunday 7th February – **Volunteer Day**. Craig Saunderson led 9 volunteers scrub bashing at Whipcott Wharf (south side).

23. Talks

The Canal Manager has given evening talks to Thorverton History Society and the Bampton Society.

24. Schools / community groups

Eight Scouts from 2nd Tiverton (Halberton) plus parents / leaders spent a day with the Canal Rangers laying a section of hedge, planting hedge plants and three Silver Birch trees at Sampford Peverell picnic site on Tuesday 16th February.



25. Volunteers

In addition to the Volunteer Days listed in the Events section above, midweek volunteers have contributed 183 days work during this period.

26. Staff

A significant milestone was passed on 18th December, as on this day Craig Saunderson clocked up 20 years service for Devon County Council at the Grand Western Canal. The Canal Manager led a small presentation ceremony and thanked Craig for all his hard work and commitment during this time.

Future programme of works

- Complete tree and hedge works ahead of bird nesting season
- Commence Water Soldier removal in mid March
- Refurbishment works to public toilet block, including repairs to timber facias and new doors and locking systems.
- Herbicide treatment of bramble regrowth and grass seeding of Swing embankment and land beside William Authers footbridge.
- Felling of the prominent Weeping Willow growing on the offside bank near Sampford Peverell Bridge. Over many years this tree has been slowly tipping over towards the canal, and the Canal Ranger Service have undertaken considerable pruning to reduce the weight and slow down this process. However, the tree is now at a point where it must be felled before it falls into the canal and damages the bank and adjacent wall with the upheaval of its rootplate. The Parish Council and the adjacent owner were informed of this planned work late in the autumn of 2015.
- Investigation of potential leakage from Canal into gardens at Chilcott Close, near Tidcombe Bridge. Sealing of leaks if any found.
- Coppicing of offside willows between Manley Bridge and East Manley Bridge. This work will begin after bird nesting, later in the year.
- Patching of potholes forming at Tiverton Road car park
- Burning of brash at Greenway car park and field near Watton Bridge.
- All usual sign / noticeboard / fence / gate repairs and maintenance
- All usual weed-cutting, mowing and strimming