

Managing heritage assets: waterways in historic towns

Stratford-upon-Avon Seminar report 8 June 2006

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Waterways are frequently the *raison d'être* for historic towns. Making the most of them was the focus of attention of this event organised by the EHTF with British Waterways.

I am grateful to B&NES Council for paying for me to attend this seminar - and to the speakers for copies of their presentations which I have used in this report. The seminar papers were presented in a glossy folder depicting a colourful street scene – Walcot Street! My interest in attending this event was to see what others were doing that we could learn from. There were seven speakers. The event was chaired by Chris Winter of EHTF.



Stratford developed on the Avon at a fording point and now has a major canal junction which connects the town to Birmingham and beyond. In Stratford the waterways are the focus of attention as one enters the town.

British Waterways has cleverly highlighted the canal as a transport link in a prominent signpost pointing up the Stratford-upon-Avon Canal which says:

BIRMINGHAM 30 Miles 56 Locks 23 Hours
LONDON 132 Miles 185 Locks 85 Hours
YORK 226 Miles 115 Locks 99 Hours
LIVERPOOL 199 Miles 154 Locks 99 Hours

Paul Ogden is Project Director for Stratford-on-Avon District Council's WORLD CLASS STRATFORD project, working in close partnership with other key stakeholders including Warwickshire County Council, Advantage West Midlands, Stratford Town Management Partnership (of which more below) and the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust. Mr Ogden is an energetic and enthusiastic man with extensive experience as a Civil Engineer managing complex multimillion pound capital projects and is Vice-Chair of the West Midlands Culture and Leisure Officers Association.

He described how the Royal Shakespeare Company has a £100m programme to completely overhaul the theatre and that a Waterfront Master Plan was being developed as a supplementary planning document. The whole town had been suffering from decline and they decided to capitalise on the boost for the RSC by simultaneously developing a vision for the town as a World Class destination and bringing it up to a new level.

He made an important point – that as the town declines there is less investment from the private sector which ultimately means less money for conservation of buildings.

The vision for WORLD CLASS STRATFORD: Improving the financial performance of S-o-A for the benefit of local residents and businesses – bringing an overall social and economic enhancement. As a key 'gateway' destination – to bring benefits for the region and ultimately the UK.

By widening the scope to point out the broader benefits S-o-A had managed to get funding from West Midlands.

The town has a population of 24,000, with 3-4m visitors a year of whom 72% are day trippers. Average spend of visitors is £65 a day inc accommodation when the target should be over £100.

Current issues:

- unacceptable quality of experience in a town of international repute (I can vouch for that – I went once before and found it tacky and overcrowded – echoes of Bath??)
- underperformance is detrimental to region and UK
- potential threats to long-term economic wellbeing
- increasingly detrimental to environmental wellbeing
- visitor numbers declining
- visits to key attractions dropped by up to 38% over last 25 years
- local economy performing well below potential
- ticket sales to RSC down by 3.7% a year since 1986

Transport issues

- a walkable catchment (illustrated with a map showing 5, 10, and 15 minute walking radii from the centre of town)
- gaps in pedestrian network (ie impossible to walk certain routes – or difficult road crossings)
- high traffic numbers
- coach arrival – needing better management – currently all the visitors are dropped in an ugly spot and have to negotiate several busy roads (sounds familiar)

Potential for improvement by making it easier and desirable to walk to other attractions and spread activity around the town instead of it all being focussed in one area.

Mr Ogden pointed out changes likely to occur such as an ageing population, warmer climate, longer days, and the need for an evening economy to stretch the day, all of which having implications for waterway use.

His colleague **Jane Elliott**, a Senior Consultant with Urban Practitioners spoke next. She is helping to produce a visionary Urban Design Framework to promote Stratford as a World Class destination: "...a fully rounded experience and environment for residents and visitors, competing with the best in the world."

Glenn Millar, Economic Development Manager in the British Waterways regeneration department then talked in his soft Belfast accent about the importance of the navigable inland waterways. He has been with BW for nearly 30 years, first in transport then recreation and tourism research, now heading up a small unit responsible for:

- assessing the economic and social impacts of waterway projects
- securing external funding to support such schemes
- developing and managing projects under various EU trans-national programmes

Amongst other things he also represents BW on Voies Navigables d'Europe a consortium of European inland waterway authorities with interest in development of canals and rivers for tourism and heritage.

We learned that BW is a DEFRA funded body managing most of the canal network – the Environment Agency being responsible for the flowing waterways ie rivers. BW also depends on income from boat licences – there being some 80,000 boats registered in the UK of which 25,000 are on canals – with 1000 rental boats on weekly hire plus day boats. A major portion of BW income is from canal-side property the value of which has increased by 15 – 20%.

There is a great deal of activity apart from boating. Canoeing is popular, and the banks and tow-paths generate an economy in themselves – angling walking cycling – which means chandlery, fishing tackle, boat yards, pubs cafes and shops all associated with the use and enjoyment of the waterways.

Water is fascinating – and people are drawn to it. Many people are inspired to photograph or paint, or just to sit and contemplate. Canal towpaths as well as being fascinating also provide

good opportunities for gentle exercise. We heard that around 50% of the population live within 5 miles of a canal. Waterways also bring with them all manner of flora and fauna right into the heart of cities, acting as Wildlife Corridors.

In the 18th and 19th centuries the canals were developed for transporting bulk, being constructed and managed by private companies. Many were bought up and deliberately made redundant as rail transport took over. While some were lost there has been an interest in resurrecting those that remain, and there is a wealth of fascinating industrial heritage to be found, especially where canals traverse cities.

The English canals once had a whole culture of their own. The narrow boats that carried goods were traditionally painted with colourful scenes of flowers and castles. These old ways are being revived.

Mr Millar then spoke about 2 projects. In Chester between 1995 and 2001 there had been £20.5m invested in a range of waterside developments including 220 new residential units which brought 35 net additional jobs to local area in shops offices and leisure and about 400 temporary construction person-years (I liked this way of showing the employment benefit).

The Kennet & Avon Canal Restoration was then described. He pointed out that the K&A is THE major waterway of the south, connecting London to Bristol via the rivers Thames, Kennet and Avon where the junction is in Bath. It comprises some 88 miles of waterway locks bridges and tunnels, and weaves through some magnificent countryside and attractive towns.

It operated from 1810 to 1955 when it was closed to through navigation. There was a gradual opening up over the next 30 years through partnership BW, local authorities, canal trust and associations of canal businesses with a grand opening in 1990. However it was not sustainable in the long-term as much of the canal leaked and there was not enough money to do a proper job.

In 1996 a Heritage Lottery grant of £30m secured the canal's future and after a great deal of work repairing locks and resealing it was re-opened in 2003. (Many of us in Bath will recall how sections of the canal were drained for months while this painstaking work took place).

The impact of this expensive restoration on leisure and tourism was carefully monitored over 10 years and it was found that it generated 22% increase in visits with a growth of visitor spend of 59% to £35m p.a. 385 additional leisure and tourism jobs were created while 700 similar existing jobs were safeguarded. Surveys show that the canal is important for 46% of local leisure and tourism businesses.

The impact on development was £375-435m investment in waterside developments along the Kennet & Avon Canal since 1995 with over 1,000 new residential units created and 2,700 new jobs in canalside offices and shops etc.

We also heard about the huge boost to Birmingham's economy with the regeneration of the waterfront which was once a grim dead industrial area and is now a vibrant sparkling leisure complex.

The main point that Mr Millar made was how BW and historic towns could mutually benefit from investment in and promotion of their waterways.

This theme was taken up by **Michele Grant**, director of L & R Consulting with 16 years' experience as a specialist in tourism strategy destination management and regeneration, who gave an inspiring talk about British Waterways' Vision to be regarded as one of the nation's most important and valued national assets by 2012 with twice as many people using the canals. She illustrated their current low profile by referring to Bath's hidden canal approach that few visitors ever see.

We heard about Regional Business Unit action plans for waterways tourism and leisure with a focus on partnership, added value to activities and Priority Sites. The importance of historic towns and waterways was a recurrent theme across the country, with every town looking to

- manage visitors effectively
- maximise visitor economy opportunities
- nurture sense of place and local distinctiveness
- achieve regeneration

Opportunities are

- events & festivals – eg York's Festival of Rivers just set up for July – low budget high impact – see www.yorkfestivals.com
- retail on the water – eg floating markets – a reason to visit
- heritage trails – extend the stay, enrich the experience
- attractive waterside developments – to live work and play
- visitor attractions – making a reason to come to the waterfront

Challenges were

- quality of environment – can it be improved?
- perception of canals (a shopping trolley dump??)
- access – signage – pathways – maps
- rivers v. canals

She highlighted how British Waterways and Local Authorities must get together and build local partnerships to identify shared objectives and share experience.

Howard Dickenson an urban designer with extensive experience in conservation regeneration and redevelopment, most recently working as Design and Conservation Manager for Chester City Council, talked amusingly and inspiringly about PATHS by water SOUNDS of water LIGHTING of water REFLECTIONS on water ART by water, and about all important FUNDING of projects.

He described the Riverside Walkway that has been developed in Chester – an Interreg 111B project with significant Euro input being linked to the theme Water In Historic City Centres WIHCC.

The Chester Riverside Walkway

- links the Cop, the Old Port, the Race Course, Little Roodee and the Groves
- opens up an area of the city not previously accessible to the public
- is an important link in the city's 'Culture Park' initiative
- forms part of the city's flood defences
- provides a valuable recreational resource and access to nature
- encourages regeneration of a former industrial zone
- helps to spread the tourist/visitor load around the city

Why WIHCC?

- Not *just* because it fits with potential source of Euros !
- Because water is the reason for Chester being where it is
- Because water is central to Chester's character and local distinctiveness – the River Dee and the Shropshire Union Canal
- Because its sights and sounds – and the wildlife it supports – are a recreational resource beyond anything which could be manufactured
- Because the waterways form an essential part of the 'Culture Park' concept, as routes and as destinations
- Because the topic builds on the themes of earlier 'ECOSERT' projects based on the canal towpaths, interpretation, cycleways and wildlife corridors
- Because it offers linkages with other local initiatives – Open Space Strategy etc

He described the technical challenges and how they were overcome – in some places by driving piles into the river bed and cantilevering the path so that it was over the water and not attached to buildings on the bank. At one point it was extended to provide an area next to a warehouse as it could be seen as a future waterside terrace for a possible pub/café, even though such a business had not yet materialised – an example of the vision of the project designers. The walkway was already a success with good artwork and benches for people to enjoy.

A Funding Cocktail was concocted totalling £2,493,390 as follows (in £k);

- Sustrans – 95
- Transport Facilities Fund (1) – 80
- S.R.B. – 280
- Wren Mk.1 (Crane Wharf) – 50
- NWDA – 840
- WIHCC (Investments) – 390 – Interreg 3b
- WIHCC (Process) – 50 – Interreg 3b
- WIHCC (promo/interp/feasib) – 30 - Interreg 3b
- WREN Mk2 (Little Roodee) – 50
- County Cycle Fund – 60
- Transport Facilities Fund (2) – 115
- Open Space Fund – 200
- Environment Agency Wales – 200
- ODPM (match funding – but a bit ‘wobbly!’) – 83

Mr Dickenson spoke of programmes for 2007-2013, some transnational ie where you cooperate with organisations in other member states especially the newer nations likely to fund such projects. He recommended looking at Europa website for info on Territorial Cooperation, “preservation and promotion of the cultural heritage”, Regional Policy, Draft ERDF regulation, Culture 2007 – 3 themes of ‘soft stuff’: exchange of people transnational circulation of art/cultural products, intercultural dialogue. More on Europa website under Education and Culture.

He said BE PROJECT LED NOT FUNDING LED be clear about what your organisation wants to achieve, and compare this with what the programme can offer. You may need to ‘bend’ your ideas but don’t break them!

Having solid partners is critical – check them out (track record, staff and financial resources etc). Will there be a language issue? Don’t just shout louder – use professionals (expensive), use your own staff, use a mixture of both etc Strongly recommend you are a CO partner before being a LEAD partner or you may crash and burn...

You will need to work on both local and cooperative activities, you will need to attend meetings, you will need to do a lot of admin, probably including keeping detailed timesheets. Much better to understand all this at the beginning, rather than in the middle, or at the end!

The true cost? Cash yes, but also staff time – you’ll probably need a Project Development Team with project management skills, accountancy and legal expertise.

Finally KEEP IT SIMPLE ! The project application has to be readable – probably by a non-native speaker.

Two further talks ensued – one from **Graham King** about the discovery and dramatic rescue of Brunel’s lost cast iron bridge at Paddington, and the other by **Chris Bailey** about a project to tackle anti-social behaviour in Atherstone where the culprits who were damaging lock gates and letting water out of canal pounds were transformed into guardians of their stretch of canal through an innovative Youth Angling Project.

Lastly I met Professor Ian Heggie, Vice Chairman of the Stratford-upon-Avon Society, whose efforts and enthusiasm have helped establish a really effective Stratford Town Management

Partnership. After much hesitation the businesses are finally on board and they have employed a Manager who organises events, Christmas Market, Lights etc.

IN CONCLUSION

Relevant points that struck me from this seminar:

- **Get on board with British Waterways**
- **Make the most of our COLD water**
- **Hunt for Euros**

My hopes and dreams for Bath...

- Get our act together Stratford Chester and others are getting ahead of the game
- Organise a local conference
- Focus on our fantastic assets – major junction of Avon and K&A canal
- Western riverside development – must make the most of the river
- Somehow persuade Southgate developer to resurrect the proposed wharf
- Look at area by hotel at canal/river junction
- Review Radial Gate – said to be redundant with money set aside by Flood Defence group for redevelopment but have we got our hands on it?
- Consider innovative 'green' schemes such as generating power at weir
- Engage with businesses eg around weir to improve the area and the access
- Support development that enhances riverside eg by Bath Rugby
- Improve signage
- Review waterfront opportunities behind Post Office Depot
- Resurrect the River Avon Corridor Study
- Push on with riverside walkway
- Engage local boat companies to keep banks clean
- Engage supermarkets to keep their trolleys from being dumped
- Reopen lavatories that served canal users
- Give proper support to Bath Festival of Boats
- Consider pontoons across river for Christmas Market in Parade Gardens
- Organise more water events
- Etc etc etc

...and beyond

- Review all waterways in B&NES and look for opportunities

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