



Why Wessex Waterways

Doug Small, August 2018

A question that many are asking

Way back in the 1970s Neil Rumbol 'discovered' the Wilts & Berks Canal, or to be more accurate the North Wilts section of it. Fired with curiosity he set about researching and exploring the lost waterway, until, in 1977, he called a meeting of like-minded people to form the Wilts & Berks Canal Amenity Group (WBCAG). The aim of the Group was to protect and preserve the remains of the waterway, and to restore some sections as public amenities. Members of WBCAG were encouraged to be 'hands-on': and this they did with enthusiasm.

In the years that followed it became apparent that much more of the old canal remained than was originally thought. Being a rural canal, it had in many places just faded into the countryside, and even where infilling had taken place miles of the line were still discernible. By the late 1980s the aim of the Group was changed to one of full restoration, using as much of the original canal line as possible. The plan included the North Wilts and Calne sections.

Along the line of the canal WBCAG Branches were formed, taking on their own responsibilities. They would identify areas where restoration could begin and, with landowner permission, just get stuck-in. The Templars Firs section being an early prime example of what could be achieved by volunteers.

At the same time the WBCAG Council of Management began exploring the bigger picture.

As the years progressed it became obvious to all that the big projects would have to be handed over to contractors, as they were beyond the resources of the volunteers. But this left many miles of canal bed and towpaths in need of restoring and locks and bridges needing rebuilding. Whilst road bridges would have to be tackled by the professionals, the farm accommodation bridges were well within the volunteer's capabilities. Locks, too, could be constructed by volunteers, as has been demonstrated in several areas.

Over the years WBCAG morphed into WBCT (Wilts & Berks Canal Trust), but with the project gaining momentum their management now appear to be downgrading the volunteer's role. Whether this is a deliberate policy, or simply a misunderstanding by the current incumbents as to what canal restoration is all about is not clear. It appears to me that WBCT now see their volunteers mainly as grass cutting, litter picking, tin shakers.

The number of branches along the canal has diminished, and in some areas no branch now exists. At its peak there were ten branches, this is now reduced to five, with active constructive projects in only two of these.

Experienced, willing workers are being lost to other projects, even though the canal still has much to offer them.

This, then, is why I think, the Wessex Waterway Restoration Trust had to come into being. Local groups will identify potential projects, liaise with landowners and source funding. Where practical, and always with landowner permission, new stretches of canal can be opened to the public. Accommodation bridges, locks and culverts can be constructed in preparation for re-watering. And all this at a cost far, far lower than any contractor.

The Trustees of WWRT have been involved with canal restoration for many years and will look for ways to make projects run as smoothly as possible.

WWRT will comply with all Health & Safety protocols, comply with Waterway Recovery Group (WRG) working practices and will be covered by the appropriate insurances.

WWRT intends that its work will be complementary to that of WBCT, keeping the restoration alive in areas where enthusiasm is fading.

So, there we are. Back to our roots, with volunteers involved hands-on in valuable projects. Providing, where possible, public access to areas previously inaccessible. Opening up new habits for

flora and fauna where previously there was only dense scrub. And all the time generating public interest in the restoration.

Let us wish WBCT well with the ambitious major projects, for without them there will be no restored waterway. But let us support these local teams: those little Acorns from which the mighty Oak will grow.

Everyone is welcome to become a member of WWRT. No special skills are required, on site training will be given.

I hope that WBCT will see WWRT as an ally and act in accordance with paragraphs G, H, & I of WBCTs '**Memorandum of Association**' ...

(G) To establish and support or aid in the establishment and support of any charitable associations or institutions and to subscribe or guarantee money for charitable purposes and to affiliate to or accept affiliation from any body with objects similar in whole or in part to those of the Association.

(H) To provide by way of gift, grant, loan or otherwise resources for the development, improvement, arrangement or carrying out of any projects from time to time entered into or proposed to be entered into by any body, group or individual calculated to assist in the promotion of the Association's objects and to commission any projects for study and research into all or any of the objects of the Association and to disseminate the results of any such study and research.

(I) To amalgamate or enter into partnership or into any arrangement for union of interest, co-operation, joint adventure, reciprocal concession or otherwise, with or to transfer its engagements and surplus assets to any body or company established for charitable purposes only having primary objects wholly or partly similar to those of the Association and carrying on or engaged in or about to carry on or engage in any activity business or transaction which the Association is authorised to carry on or engage in or an activity business or transaction capable of being conducted so as directly or indirectly to benefit the Association or to further its objects; provided that the provisions or conditions of the constitution or establishment of such persons, body or company preclude the distribution of its income or property amongst its members or contributors to an extent at least as great as is imposed on the Association by Clause 4 of this Memorandum.

We all only have one aim and that is the full restoration of the Wilts & Berks and North Wilts canals, including the Calne Branch. With over sixty-five miles of canals, approx. 60 locks and dozens of accommodation and road bridges there is plenty to be done.

In an ideal world we would all belong to and support both Trusts.

Doug Small

A personal view.

Supporting the restoration since 1988.