

Wey & Arun Canal News

December 2016

A review of recent events on the Wey & Arun Canal

Canal's bicentenary commemorated in style



Dame Penelope Keith cuts a ribbon to declare Compasses Bridge officially open, followed soon by the first craft to travel under the new bridge.



The Wey & Arun Canal's 200th anniversary was celebrated in style over two days packed with events attended by hundreds of people. From a bicentennial baton relay along the route of the waterway to the champagne-drenched naming of a member's new narrowboat, it was a weekend to remember.

A highlight of the Wey & Arun Canal Trust's commemorations on October 1st and 2nd was the official opening of the new Compasses Bridge at Alfold, Surrey, by actor Dame Penelope Keith.

On the Sunday, around 250 people gathered at the bridge, built by the Trust at the Alfold entrance to the Dunsfold Park aerodrome and business complex as part of a £750,000 restoration project. Dame Penelope – invited to perform the official opening in her capacity as Patron of the Surrey Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty – said she was impressed by the achievement of the volunteers who built the bridge and those devoted to the restoration of the canal system.

In his speech, Compasses project engineer Tony Ford praised the volunteers who worked on the bridge. He said the Trust's Northern Working Party was keen to get on with the next restoration project and revealed that this could be a similar bridge replacing the causeway across the canal at nearby Tickner's Heath.

The weekend's finale was a celebration tea for members and guests at the Sea Cadet Unit by the River Wey at Dapdune Wharf in Guildford, emulating the sumptuous meal staged for canal company directors and shareholders on the day the canal was officially opened in 1816.

Trust life member Paul Barfield had moored his brand-new narrowboat at the wharf for it to be named *Wey-Away* by the Mayor of Guildford, Cllr Gordon Jackson, who poured champagne over the bow.

Cllr Jackson also received a £1,000 donation cheque for the Canal Trust, presented by Mike Lewis of the Guildford and Reading branch of the Inland Waterways Association (IWA).

Going back to the past for Loxwood celebrations

The Trust's bicentennial celebrations began on the Saturday morning at Pallingham Bridge in West Sussex, near where the canal linked with the River Arun.

A bicentennial baton – a scrolled copy of an original canal company share certificate – was handed over for the first stage journey to Guildford along the route of the Wey & Arun Canal, by foot, trip boat, small craft, bicycle and private narrowboat.

At the Canal Centre in Loxwood, bacon bap and afternoon tea cruises were run for the public on trip boat *Wiggonholt* as it took its turn in carrying the baton for two stages. *Wiggonholt* was out again later on for illuminated evening cruises.

Horse-drawn trips on narrowboat *Zachariah Keppel* were popular during the afternoon, courtesy of heavy horse Buddy being loaned by the Godalming Packetboat Company.

Boat crew members turned out in force, many in period dress representing canal workers from the early 19th century. There were historical displays in the Canal Centre and traditional games on the wharf such as bagatelle for younger visitors.



Boat crew members dressed in early 19th century style to run special excursions from Loxwood Wharf on the Saturday.

Tiny insects defeat invasive water weed

Tiny beetles set loose to nibble on invasive weed choking the canal at Tickner's Heath, near Dunsfold in Surrey, have done their job brilliantly. There is now no sign of the floating water fern, which was so dense that it looked like solid ground.

A joint project between the Canal Trust, Arun and Rother Connections (ARC) and CABI (Centre for Agriculture and Biosciences International) released 12,000 North American weevils into the canal in July. The two millimetre-long beetles cleared a carpet of highly invasive plant, Latin name *Azolla filiculoides*, in just a few weeks.

"The exercise has had a remarkable impact on the water fern," said Canal Trust Conservation Advisor Ian Burton. "The weevils speedily removed most of the water fern and have had a comprehensive impact. There is now no sign of the weed."

Azolla is considered one of the most invasive plants in the country. "We acted to try and clear the weed because it had formed a thick mat on the surface of the water, blocking out light and threatening the aquatic flora and fauna," Ian added.

"We are delighted with the work of the beetles. There are no organisms native to the UK that can combat Azolla, but research has shown the weevils to be one of the plant's main natural enemies."

ARC, which is supported by the Heritage Lottery Fund, works with local organisations to help ensure wildlife can flourish in a thriving river system. As part of a programme of work to tackle invasive species across the whole catchment area, project staff identified the floating water fern and provided the funding to purchase the weevils.

All known infestations of Azolla have now been removed from the river catchment. The Trust will continue to monitor the canal to ensure that the plants do not return in the Spring.

Azolla was introduced into the UK from the Americas in around 1840 as an ornamental garden aquatic fern. Some North American weevils also arrived with the imported ferns, and the insect species is now considered naturalised.



The canal at Tickner's Heath with a thick carpet of Azolla before the weevils (inset) were introduced and the invasive weed dying off due to the effect of the biological control.



Walkers explore a historical site on the walk from Shamley Green.

Walks in rain and sun

There were huge contrasts in the weather for the Trust's 2016 Heritage Open Days walks in September. There was torrential rain on the Saturday and pleasant sunshine on the Sunday.

The Saturday group went with Technical Liaison Officer Alan Johnson on a circular route to visit four sites containing relics of the canal and the Horsham to Guildford railway, including three iron-framed bridges.

On the Sunday, another group strolled from Gun's Mouth to the site of Bramley Wharf with Publicity Officer Rob Searle, taking in sections of the original canal in Shalford, Tannery Lane Bridge and Gosden Aqueduct.

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Visitor Centre progress

The Canal Trust is planning to build a shelter area for walkers and cyclists in Hunt Nature Park, the wetland wildlife reserve it is developing at Shalford in Surrey, near where the canal meets the River Wey. The building will be modest compared with the Loxwood Canal Centre, but it will help to raise the Trust's profile as the Bramley Link phase one restoration project gets under way and provide public information on planned work. The scheme also includes boardwalks which will enable visitors and children on school educational trips to explore the park. The Trust is grateful for the grants to help with the cost of the project it has received from Guildford Borough Council and the IGas Community Fund.

Staying up to date

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