

CHAIRMAN'S ADDRESS 2026 AGM

Our formal report on the calendar year 2025 is within the Trustee Report and Accounts which has been produced and has been available on our website and is available here today. In the usual way, that document lists the achievements during the year and the immediate future plans. In what is maybe a departure from usual practice, although we formally report today on the calendar year 2025, this Chairman's Report today will range rather more widely across the future strategy and plans for the Trust as a number of questions and concerns have recently been raised around that by members.

I remind you of what is stated in the Trustee's Report about the Objectives and Activities of the Trust.

"The Trust's objects, [approved and agreed to by members in April 2023] and the principal activities continue to be the restoration, renovation and operation of the Wey & Arun Canal and also the promotion of the canal for navigation and recreation, the preservation, conservation and improvement of the natural environment of the canal and adjacent land and conservation and research into the associated heritage, structures and sites. The aim remains eventually to restore the whole 23-mile length of the canal to through navigation, and also to increase public benefits for those in the area."

"The Trust's strategy is to invest in multiple major restoration activities at the same time. This approach clearly presents challenges in terms of funding and resource allocation, but, if successful, will accelerate the achievement of the Trust's objectives."

"In 2025 the Trust continued to pursue the priorities identified in 2023 and 2024:

- 1. The extension of the Bramley section southwards,*
- 2. Opening up the canal to cross under the Elmbridge Road in Cranleigh,*
- 3. Extending and improving the fully navigable 2km Dunsfold section including a road crossing at Tickner's Heath, and*
- 4. The Alfold/Ifold/Loxwood section, with a substantial improvement in the towpath along Bonfire Hanger south of Rosemary Lane and a reopening of the navigable section as far as Drungewick lock."*

You will hear more detail about the recent and planned work of restoration after the formal part of the meeting. But as has been made clear for some years and has been agreed by members, the current strategy is therefore a multi-site one: to take opportunities when they arise, to open up waterway where possible and public access even where it is not, and to demonstrate to the public at large that the project to restore the canal is feasible and worthwhile so as to encourage further support from all possible parties. This will include, when and where possible, making restored sections available to trip boats operated by WACT and to the public for unpowered boats, as well as opening up the towpath to the public for multi-use, and connecting it with public rights of way. We also improve the ecological status of the land through which we are passing and the varieties of flora and fauna using that land.

The Trust has had a shock in relation to work at Tickner's Crossing. You will recall that the work building a bridge on a public highway was not something permitted by Surrey County Council to be carried out using volunteers (no more than it was at Loxwood). However the tenders when they came in from contractors very greatly exceeded the figures we had anticipated, in large

part we suspect, in retrospect, because of very substantial increases in building and engineering costs in the last 12 months. We are looking to see if it might still be possible to raise the additional substantial sums required, but have had to put on hold for the immediate future proceeding with the tenders because of the very large shortfall between the funds currently available and the cost.

The canal route is blocked by other public roads – Run Common, Elmbridge, Fast Bridge and Newbridge. The circumstances giving rise to the possibility for progress on any of these is different; some are much more possible than others. We remain in discussion with the relevant bodies where that is practical. We take the view that an essential part of this is to show that restoration of canal either side of the blockages is under way or is practicable; otherwise why instal a bridge for navigation?

Land ownership is another major issue in trying to restore the canal, the line of the canal now being in the ownership of a very large number of individuals, many of whom are happy with the status quo. But we are well aware ownership changes and, as we have found, the approaches of owners change. We therefore remain in contact with a considerable number of landowners.

To link with the River Wey is a very large challenge. The so-called Bramley Link involves finding a new route where the canal route has been built over. Whatever plan evolves – and we continue to work on alternative possible plans - the difficulty of multiple land ownership remains at this time and is likely to take considerable time to overcome. Phase 1 – from the River Wey to near Gosden Aqueduct – remains the more readily achievable of the two halves.

In other areas there are issues with SSSIs and with the Environment Agency and the flood plains.

But probably in all of this the greatest barriers to restoration are land ownership and fundraising. There are landowners with lengths of canal bed, or land needed for canal bed, varying between a few yards and a few kilometres. Although considerable progress has been made, most of the line of the canal is not in our ownership despite 50 years' efforts – and the greatest challenge is to persuade landowners of the benefits of a canal through their private property or to give us the opportunity to purchase when that privacy is no longer an issue for them, or if we can provide privacy to them within the restoration scheme. Demonstrating the benefits of restoration is part of our strategy to try to achieve this, as well as showing landowners that their neighbours and other landowners have been content to contribute towards that restoration.

The Trust has, for all these reasons, for a number of years therefore followed the multi-site approach to restoration as opportunities arise.

A member, Chris Jones, has posed a question for this meeting:

“Given that the Bramley Link will not be constructed within the next 20 years if ever, should not repairing, maintaining and extending the Loxwood Operational Section, our

‘showcase’ restoration, become the focus of the Trust’s restoration strategy rather than continuing to restore unusable canal between Birtley and Elmbridge?”

Chris has provided a detailed argument in support of this point of his, and has, I know, shared his thoughts with others.

Although the strategy of the Trust is for the members to decide by majority vote (the Trust is, after all, a democracy) in summary, the Board’s response to this is as follows:

- 1) We accept that the Bramley Link is a substantial issue but we believe that continued restoration of the canal, even if by means of land-locked sections, is an essential part of the plan one day to get through or round Bramley.
- 2) A great deal of effort has gone into maintaining the Loxwood section, although issues remain.
- 3) There are very limited practical opportunities currently for extending that section.
- 4) We do not believe that the canal from Birtley, through Rooks Hill and eventually to Run Common Road will be ‘unusable’. As you will hear this afternoon, when completed this will give a restored section of canal of some 2 ½ km with extended public access on the towpath, with access and availability for unpowered craft and with the potential for trip boat operation.
- 5) In any event opening up the line of the canal, even if not as a usable waterway but for walkers and riders and developing the wildlife potential of it, has value these days in itself in terms of the public interest, and in encouraging others to give to the Trust ownership of further sections, and in raising awareness of the objects and needs of the Trust and its ability to carry out its objects.

There has been substantial expenditure on the Loxwood section over the last few years - new pumps and a new control system have been installed, Drungewick Lock has undergone major repairs, there has been dredging, and canal bed lining was carried out in Long Meadow to address the leaks thought to have been there.. Maintaining water levels however, let us not forget a historical problem, has continued to be a problem and we continue to spend time and effort in investigation. Most recently external experts have been consulted. It is of course frustrating that the section is unusable for boats for so much of the year but the lack of rainfall has been exceptional, even if the ‘new normal’, in recent years.

Another member, Robin Hirsch, has also asked a question relevant to the Loxwood section:

“Due to global warming, drought in Southeast England has become a regular and inevitable feature of our summers. Without urgent action, it will prevent all narrowboat traffic in most summers from now on.

So should the Board actively seek opportunities for building reservoirs to increase the resilience of narrowboat operability, or at least small boat operability, on the section between Rosemary Lane and Drungewick Lock? Surely this should be our top priority from now on?”

Robin also references that he had heard that Peter Foulger, past chair and vice president of the Trust, and another farmer had wanted to build a reservoir for the canal but had been prevented from doing so.

It was determined many years ago that, whatever the Trust might want, access to the canal’s old reservoir at Vachery was not going to be re-established. It is correct that in the late 1990s a

lot of effort went into seeing if it was viable to build a new reservoir on land close to the Loxwood section and to get the necessary permissions to do so. It became apparent that permission could not be obtained because it would be on the flood plain and a possible alternative could not be found. Since then, regulations have tightened up on the construction of reservoirs and their siting.

Not only in the Loxwood area but more generally along the canal we have investigated possible sites for reservoirs, or indeed any other sources of water, and we will continue to do so when the opportunity arises. The Board is well aware of this need, but the possible opportunities are few and far between. We have had to rely on river extraction, and that is subject to EA limits and control, and back pumping at the locks.

In summary, on the Loxwood section, we have achieved less than we would have wanted or hoped to do, the low water levels have revealed that the state of the canal is now not what we would like it to be but we are working on it. An agenda item to plan the way forward with work on this section is included in the next Board meeting. So don't be surprised if there is a call for donations to help with the cost of some of this. .

Building out from Loxwood:

- The Loxwood section, it should be noted, is not a net income generating part of the Trust, and is unlikely ever to become one. Water is a serious issue, having to be pumped up from the river, and with the climate changes we are seeing that water is increasingly restricted in quantity and timing by the EA. This limits our ability to run boat trips.
- Leaking has been exacerbating this problem, and locating the precise location of leaks extremely difficult, and repairing them challenging and potentially very expensive. This continues to be a work in progress and a challenge.
- The cost of maintaining this section is not covered by the income generated from the trip boats, but the trip boats do help considerably in covering these costs. And they are very important in publicity terms.

A property which lies between the restored sections going north, that is between Southlands and Gennet's locks, is not on the market. The Trust has been involved in many discussion with the owners but they have always demanded a very significant annual charge plus construction of a very expensive 40 ton electric operating bridge. Although the Trust remains in contact with the landowners, it was not felt justifiable in economic terms to progress this. The Trust is a charity and must use its assets responsibly and appropriately.

Opening up the canal to the north of that to Rosemary Lane – the Bonfire Hanger section - will exacerbate the water resource issues, and, with its many locks, increase the ongoing maintenance costs once restored, itself at very considerable cost. Boat trips would rarely progress this far because of time factors although, of course, canoeing and paddleboarding would be available. It is intended to keep the pounds in water as far as is possible.

Progress beyond Rosemary Lane is currently regarded as very challenging - because of land ownership issues, SSSI and the need for very substantial engineering works.

To the south of Drungewick there are currently substantial land ownership issues.

Turning away from the Loxwood section, **and into Surrey**, Birtley to Run Common is well advanced in planning, as you will hear this afternoon, and is regarded as practical. The first two phases of this work have been substantially funded by separate appeals and by CIL (Community Infrastructure Levy) grants. It should be noted that the making of these two CIL grants by Waverley BC demonstrates their acceptance that this scheme is worthwhile and a locally beneficial infrastructure project. This will give a usable section of canal of some 2 ½ km with potential public access for trip boat and unpowered craft, and extended public access. The next section to Rye Farm depends on two major landowners.

At Elmbridge SCC want to rebuild the causeway currently blocking the road although there remain land ownership issues. We are in ongoing discussions about this. . Fastbridge to Tickner's (2 km) depends on the Dunsfold Park Development, but, as is well known, is in water and mostly navigable.

There remain a number of confidential discussions ongoing about acquiring other sections of the canal some of which would produce interesting possibilities for restoration of the waterway.

The current approach to restoration is that having only one quite significant navigable section in Sussex as a showpiece

- will not in itself result in the ability to acquire significant lengths of the canal in due course when sought, but
- will, together with other sections of restored canal, demonstrate the serious intent that we have to achieve restoration of the canal, which we need to do if we are to attract
 - o landowner support
 - o political support,
 - o financial support and
 - o wider membership.

At the same time it is acknowledged that we should do all we can reasonably do to restore the navigable section to Drungewick for regular boat trips, and to maintain water levels.

As has always been the case, the strategy of the Trust is for members as a body to decide, but for these reasons this Board is of the opinion that the current strategy for restoration of the Wey & Arun canal is the correct one. But the Trust must remain flexible and open to other opportunities.

And I repeat the request that has been made on many previous occasions - that anyone who is interested in becoming involved in not only managing the restoration but in making these kinds of strategic decisions should apply to join the Board, whether or not their view of the canal is the same as that of the existing Board. The Board is able, under the Trust's constitution (its Articles), to expand membership of the Board at any time, so this can be done not just at an AGM. There is no better way of getting a full picture of the issues involved in the restoration than being on the Board, and at the same time making your contribution to managing the project.

And if you would prefer not to take that step but would consider offering assistance in the running of the Trust in any area that might be of interest to you, then please do contact us – your Trust needs you!