

Wey & Arun Canal News

December 2023

Surrey canal revival celebrations



Mary Creswell, Deputy Lord Lieutenant of Surrey, at the celebration on October 28th

October 28th 2023 saw the opening ceremonies for two new lifting bridges on a 1km restored section of the Wey & Arun Canal at Birtley, south of Bramley, Surrey. This is a major milestone for our future 'Way to the Wey', now only a few miles north – and an immediate benefit for leisure in the area. The canal and its new bridges, together with the parallel Downs Link Path on the former Guildford-Horsham railway line, form the basis of several walks in the Surrey Hills area.

The Trust raised over £400,000 for this project for the public good, with most of the work carried out by volunteers, one of Surrey's largest such projects. Mary Creswell, Deputy Lord Lieutenant of Surrey, presiding at the Birtley No 2 Bridge tape-cutting, said, "What a great achievement and a great asset for Surrey."

The project began in 2017. The identical bridges (No 1 bridge is a short distance further south) were built at Beaver Bridges in Shrewsbury and assembled on site. Each has 4 tonnes of concrete counterweights in the 1.5-tonne overhead beam, despite which the natural position of the deck is 'down', leaving a hydraulic mechanism to do the lifting when needed with little effort (and no use of electricity).

The Canal Trust has developed plans to extend the section further south, towards the former canal lock at Fanesbridge. This work will extend public access to the canal route and create more new footpaths. An application for planning permission is with Waverley Borough Council.

Over time the Trust hopes to create more recreational opportunities by opening up the section to small unpowered boats (canoes, kayaks and paddleboarders). Use by larger boats will be further in the future; after 150 years of disuse there is not enough depth of water and desilting will be needed.



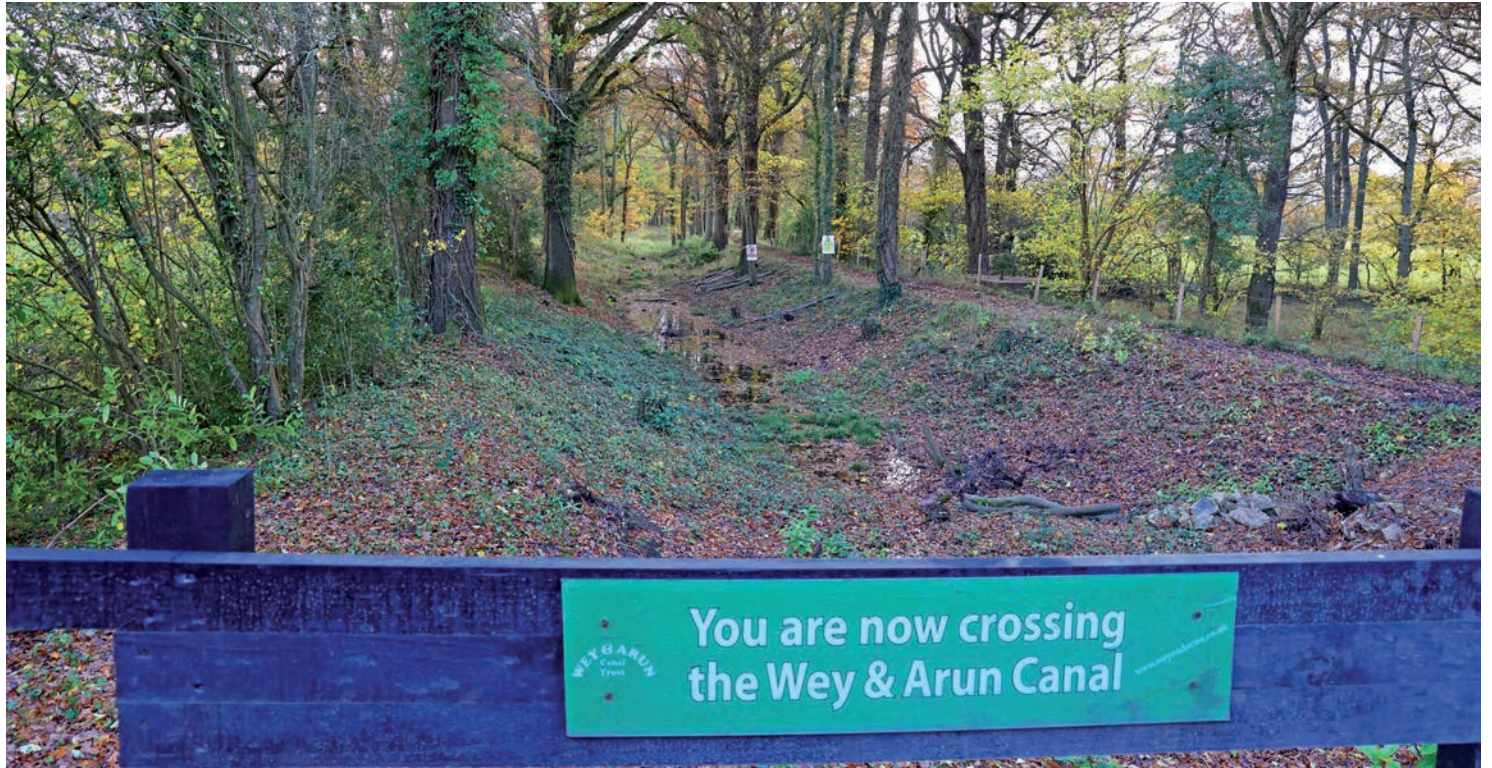
One of the two new lifting bridges



Good news around Sussex-Surrey border

When the canal was abandoned in the 19th century, its route was sold off to neighbouring owners. To restore any section of the canal, the Trust has first to gain ownership. As reported in the last Canal News, we were delighted earlier this year to receive the Bonfire Hanger section in Surrey as a gift. We have now purchased the Gennets Farm section in West Sussex, towards Loxwood. With the Gennets Bridge Lock section in between, already owned by the Trust, we are now in control of a continuous 1.6km of canal route including the rebuilt Gennets Bridge Lock where the canal is crossed by the Sussex Border Path.

Restoring the canal itself in this area will be a £2m project for the future. But we're making improvements right now. The towpath, which is a bridleway, becomes a quagmire in wet weather. We're planning to spend £62,000 to widen it and give it a stone surface. Some of the investment comes from our own resources, but we're actively seeking grant assistance. As a result there will be year-round access for walkers and riders through this beautiful wooded area, further improved by the removal of diseased ash trees. While we assemble funding, volunteer teams have put hard work into making a recognisable canal emerge from the Bonfire Hanger undergrowth.



At the north end of the Bonfire Hanger section

In late November, we were delighted to hear that Alfold Parish Council had granted £5,000 towards the towpath upgrades. It is so encouraging when local councils recognise the canal's value to their communities. More good news was a grant of £10,000 from Loxwood Parish Council to support our boat operation in Loxwood. The summer of 2023 was difficult; malicious damage to pumping equipment in April 2023, plus a spell of extremely dry weather, made it hard to maintain water levels. Thanks to a generous response to our fundraising appeal, we are now 'building back better' so that in future we will use the precious water more efficiently.

Canal questions? Answers on your phone

People who explore the canal usually have plenty of questions - and we're trying to make the answers easy to find. We have already installed small Infoposts at the most interesting spots and now we have added QR codes so that walkers can easily find out more from our website. The information includes canal history, local walking routes, wildlife guides and the improvement work that the Canal Trust has carried out. Thanks to the efforts of our volunteers we are continuing to add new walking routes to our website - the latest covers the spectacular Sidney Wood canal section (near Cranleigh and Dunsfold in Surrey) with its sharp bends and high embankments.



An Infopost at a canal lock site near the Sussex/Surrey border



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