

Wey & Arun Canal News

December 2019

A review of recent events on the Wey & Arun Canal

HRH The Earl of Wessex pays a visit

The Wey & Arun Canal Trust got the chance to show off the Trust's work to HRH The Earl of Wessex KG GCVO in November as part of a royal visit to Birtley, near Bramley in Surrey, organised by Surrey Hills Enterprises.

Surrey Hills Enterprises is a community interest company which focuses on building a strong local economy and tourism industry, supporting rural businesses and environmental sustainability. The Canal Trust was among a group of selected Surrey Hill Enterprises members present, ranging from arts and crafts workers to food and drink producers and tourism organisations.

His Royal Highness met Trust chairman Sally Schupke and director Margaret Darvill, who explained the Trust's aims and ambitions and described the recent restoration work being undertaken at Birtley, including the new bridge and towpath.

Margaret Darvill said His Royal Highness seemed very interested in learning about the canal. "He asked when it was built and where it ran from and to and said he thought it was a tremendous project and such a worthwhile volunteer effort to restore the canal," she said.

Simon Whalley, chairman of Surrey Hills Enterprises, commented that the royal visit "was a wonderful recognition of the growing reputation and development of the Surrey Hills as a hub of innovative, high quality, sustainable, local products and services".



HRH The Earl of Wessex with Trust director Margaret Darvill.

Positive reaction to Elmbridge Road plans

Plans for restoration of the canal and road improvements to Elmbridge Road in Cranleigh were put before the public in October, with an overwhelmingly positive reaction from those who attended the consultation and responded to an online feedback form.

Elmbridge Road, the road that runs into Cranleigh from the A281, has a difficult single-lane stretch and Surrey County Council has identified the section as a priority project, setting aside Section 106 funding (developer contributions) for its improvement.

In conjunction with the County Council, the Trust is proposing widening the single-lane stretch to create a two-way road and footway. The road widening will include a new canal bridge, allowing restoration of the Wey & Arun Canal to continue beneath the major obstacle that the current road represents. This will require the crest of the road to be raised by just under one metre, but sightline requirements for traffic will be met and the whole appearance of the road will be changed and "opened up" from its present enclosed character.

The project has also involved liaising with the adjacent landowner to release land for the road improvements and allow the restoration of some 300m of canal south of the road and alongside Elmbridge Village.

The Trust proposes rejuvenating the existing footpath – to widen it and surface it – for 450m from Elmbridge Road to a footbridge over Cranleigh Waters, and constructing a new short length of footpath crossing the canal to provide the residents of Elmbridge Village with an additional pedestrian route into Cranleigh.

It is hoped full plans will be submitted early in 2020.



Cranleigh residents were able to give their feedback on plans to widen the single-lane part of Elmbridge Road (left) at a recent open day and via the Trust's website.

Volunteers flock from far afield

The Wey & Arun Canal Trust is fortunate to receive support not only from local volunteers, but from visiting working parties travelling from further afield.

This summer the Waterway Recovery Group (WRG), part of the Inland Waterways Association, held three weeks of working camps at Birtley to help build the first of two lift bridges planned for the stretch as part of the creation of a scenic 2.5km circular walk. The series of three week-long working holidays near Bramley in Surrey attracted some 50 volunteers of all ages and experiences, from Duke of Edinburgh's Gold Award students to those from other European countries looking to increase their skills in construction. Returning Canal Camp enthusiasts from restoration groups KESCRG and Newbury Working Party Group made a huge contribution.

Visiting volunteer groups provide the Trust with specialist expertise and in October the WRG Forestry team spent a week removing damaged and diseased trees from three areas of the canal. With their specialist cherry picker, trained tree climbers and cutting experts they safely dealt with some of the many victims of ash dieback seen in our area.



Diseased branches that may pose a danger were removed by the specialist WRG Forestry team.



Fish safety put first

The Trust takes conserving wildlife seriously and when part of the Drungewick section in West Sussex needed draining, a local specialist environmental consultancy was called in to ensure the 8,000-plus fish living there came to no harm.

The team from Aquamaintain used a process called electrofishing to catch the fish in a two-day operation at the end of September. This humane and Environment Agency approved method involves passing an electric current through the water, from a generator onboard a small boat. The field of electricity causes the fish to swim towards the positive charge and become momentarily stunned, allowing the fish catchers in the water to net them and transfer them within seconds into fresh water containers onboard the boat.

From there they are moved to a tank of oxygenated water on the towpath, where they can then be released into another part of the canal, immediately next to the drained section. The process results in no lasting harm to the fish, which return to their natural state within minutes. Pike, eels, bream, roach and carp were among those caught.

The Trust has had to drain the short section of the Drungewick stretch of canal to allow leaks to be repaired.

Harsfold Bridge takes shape

Volunteers have begun work on Harsfold Bridge, near Wisborough Green in West Sussex.

After the canal fell into disuse the former canal bridge at this site disappeared and was replaced by a causeway which carries a farm track and a public right of way. The causeway is the only significant blockage in a 2km section of canal running south from Orfold (sometimes known as Lordings), where there is an aqueduct, an unusual waterwheel and a partially restored lock.

The team has spent the past few months creating a bridleway and footpath diversion, and work on the bridge itself is now well underway, with the aim of completion before next summer.

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The formwork for the bridge's northern abutment.

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