

Wey & Arun Canal News

June 2020

A review of recent events on the Wey & Arun Canal

Milestone moment for Sussex bridge

Volunteers have been hard at work at Harsfold, near Wisborough Green in Sussex on the southern end of the canal, building a new bridge.

Work began in October 2019 to create a crossing in a section which is partially in water and ready for full restoration. The bridge, which consists of mass concrete foundations/abutments and structural steel members forming the span, is being built entirely by volunteers.

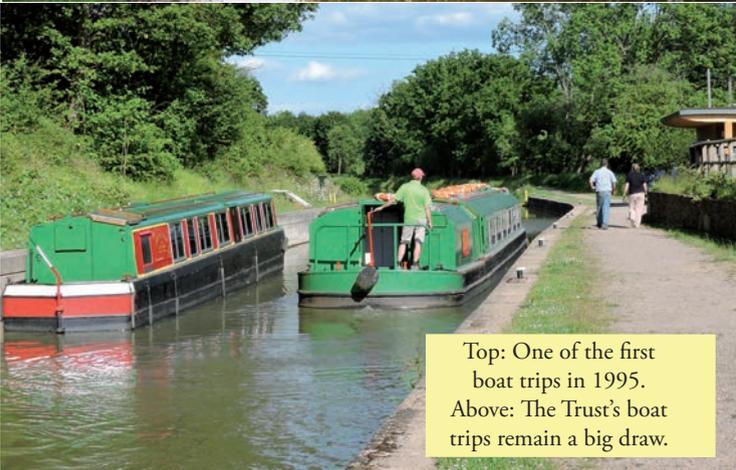
The build has been an interesting one, given that initial excavations for the concrete foundations exposed the substructure of the old bridge; the excavations have all been photographed and documented for posterity. However the surprise find was followed by months of heavy rain, resulting in the flooding of the nearby River Arun. This threatened to engulf the construction site compound and made progress tough going when the site turned into a mud bath.

Initial work focused on the north abutment, with formwork completed by mid-November and concrete poured a week later, followed by foundations for the north flank wall. Work then began on the south abutments, and better weather after Christmas came as a big relief to the team. Flank walls have now gone up on both north and south sides, and in March the team celebrated lifting steel beams into position to form the bridge deck.



Volunteers celebrate installation of the steel beams in early March.

Celebrating 25 years of boat trips



Top: One of the first boat trips in 1995.
Above: The Trust's boat trips remain a big draw.

This year the Trust celebrates 25 years of running public boat trips. When the first fee-paying passengers cruised along the canal back in 1995, few could have imagined that decades on the Trust would be welcoming more than 1,000 passengers in the 2019/2020 Christmas and New Year period alone.

The inaugural boat trip on May 28 was the first time a narrowboat had traversed that part of the canal in 125 years. It was for invited guests only on a 1¼ mile restored stretch from Drungewick, passing under Barnsill Bridge to Baldwin's Knob Lock. The cruise also saw the naming of the trip boat used, *Zachariah Keppel*, after the contractor appointed by the Wey & Arun Junction Canal Company to construct the canal in 1813.

After this first special trip, Trust directors saw the opportunity to raise funds for restoration by charging the public to cruise along the canal, and so the first regular public cruises began. These first trips were for 30 passengers maximum, and also included a guided walk. Back then passengers were charged the sum of £3 for the experience – which in 1995 would have bought them two pints at the nearby Onslow Arms.

Now the Trust owns three trip boats, capable of carrying from nine to 48 passengers and the biggest with an environmentally-friendly electric engine. This year the Trust is set to add to its fleet with a boat that is specially designed to be fully accessible and carry passengers in wheelchairs. Purchase of the Wheely boat has been made possible thanks to a generous donation.

Chairman Sally Schupke said: "Sadly, the coronavirus pandemic has curtailed our anniversary celebrations, but we are still proud after 25 years that so many people can enjoy the beauty of a restored canal and its ever-changing range of wildlife."

Plans afoot for Tickner's Heath

The Wey & Arun Canal Trust has been busy preparing for its next major restoration project: a road bridge at Tickner's Heath, near Cranleigh and Alfold in Surrey.

This is a large-scale project and will involve contractor as well as volunteer input, and liaison with Thames Water to divert a water main. With the construction compound cleared (under ecological supervision) and the topsoil stripped and stockpiled, cabins were moved to their new home earlier in March in preparation for the build.

A new access gate has been installed and a start has been made on installing land drains (as the site is on clay and retains water quite happily). The first stage of main construction will take place later this year (depending on coronavirus restrictions and planning requirements), commencing with a temporary diversion of the road to enable the installation of a footbridge.



Volunteers paint screening in preparation for the construction of a road crossing at Tickner's Heath, Cranleigh.



Boost for towpaths

In an endorsement of the value of the restored section at Loxwood to the community, Loxwood Parish Council has awarded the Wey & Arun Canal Trust a generous £5,000 grant towards running costs.

The funds will be used to repair the towpath in an area particularly popular with walkers, horse riders and cyclists.

Chairman Sally Schupke said: "We know how much the towpath is valued by users of all ages and the grant is recognition of that. It will allow us to continue to offer a fantastic leisure amenity for locals and visitors."

A spokesperson for the Parish Council added: "Restoring the footpaths along the Canal will be a valuable asset to the many parishioners who regularly walk the canal and to those who visit our parish from further afield. The Parish Council is very supportive of the many volunteers who work with the Trust to ensure the canal is kept operational and available to the public."



Photo: Phil Sharpe

The Trust will be hosting a free family festival over the early May Bank Holiday in May 2021, after this year's event was cancelled due to the coronavirus pandemic.

The IWA National Trailboat Festival South, celebrating the Wey & Arun Canal and its restoration, will see an array of trailboats from across the UK take to the water at the restored section at Dunsfold Park on the Sussex/Surrey border.

The festival, on May 1 and 2, is being organised jointly with the Inland Waterways Association, the charity that works to protect and restore the country's 6,500 miles of canals and navigable rivers.

Hedgelaying in action

The Hedgelaying Team has had a packed season. The volunteers begin work in October and finish in March to prevent disturbance to nesting birds and damage to hedgerow plants by cutting when the sap is running.

The volunteers completed laying the section of hedge below Brewhurst Lock in Loxwood, West Sussex.

Part of the work included laying the hedge planted by the Trust in 2007. On the non-towpath side volunteers spotted three adders basking in the March sunshine, illustrating how important the canal is for wildlife. Adders are under huge pressure, so banks with no towpaths and no disturbance are important for their survival.

• The photographs in this edition were taken before government regulations on social distancing, which the Trust, its volunteers and its staff now observe.

