

LOWLAND CANALS USER GROUP MEETING

30 October 2004

**Glensburgh Suite Scribe - Andy Carnduff
Leader - Andy Devenport**

Architecture and Facilities for 2014 A Vision for the Scottish Lowland Canals

The group included 22 participants, too many to allow developed discussion of the proposals made, within the short timescale available; thus limited statements are included here and we recommend that these should be circulated to encourage wider and more thorough consideration of the practices and principles identified. { I did include some additional comment in curly brackets, A.}

1 The canals should be retained as water transport routes from city to city and sea to sea, for the widest possible range of vessels. Wherever possible nothing should be built to restrict the free passage of boats. Everything possible should be done to increase the capacity and range of the canals and to minimise obstructions. No low bridges, no sharp bends, no shallow channel, no width reductions, off-line moorings.

The waterway is the most important future feature of the canal environment.

2 The development of the surrounding environment should be managed through the Local Authority Planning Process, actively influenced by BW with the adjacent resident communities and the waterway-using communities, to ensure that good desirable sustainable and sympathetic construction takes place, in suitable locations.

The widespread growth of immediately canal-side urban sprawl is to be avoided; in particular of large unsympathetic modernistic monolithic structures (such as Edinburgh Quay) and of extensive zones of brick houses with rear private gardens backing directly onto the canal (such as at Temple or Caronshore). BW must take an active role in consultation with intending developers to protect the waterway environment, and should alert their waterways clients to any potential for change so that we may work together to ensure the best kind of development. Where Planning "neighbour notification" is submitted to BW, they should require full and informed involvement with their customers before acquiescing to any adjacent development. An appropriate network of interested local parties and national user groups would be advantageous, to ensure rapid response. Similarly, canal users should monitor the "weekly planning" lists.

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3 The important principle of recreational human access to the towpath bank and wildlife living in safety on the off bank is put at risk by the greed of the developers (and perhaps BW) for higher density and “as much as possible” marketable property as close as technically feasible to the water. This destroys the tranquillity of the unique juxtaposition of public access, sanctuary for wildlife and boating use. All building within the canal corridor should respect this critical and unique space.

4 Any development near the canal should be required by the Local Plan to make use of the canal. The unique adjacent space should not be dissipated by non-canal-related use. Eg if housing or an office is to be built next the canal, there must be related canal use also built, such as off-line moorings, boathouse, slipway or waterfront hospitality facility. This need not be for public use, although that is preferred.

{The Norwegian government successfully applied this principle during the 20th century growth of their oil industry when foreign oil developers were required to invest also a percentage of each project budget in non-oil business in Norway. This has resulted in a very diverse and successful development of the Norwegian general industrial economy.}

BW should take the lead in encouraging Local Authority Plans and Scottish Executive Structural Plans to identify the canal corridor as a protected area in which all urban development must be canal-related.

5 There is a perception that property realises greater revenue to Government and Local Authorities through taxes than the use or presence of the canal and its amenities. This is a narrow, cash-only, accounting perception which should be widened to recognise the contribution to quality of life and the environmental benefits resulting from careful management of the canal area. These in turn improve the community and well-being of the wider area, to an extent difficult to compute in strict financial terms but clearly visible among the residents and ultimately in the value of local property, reduction in crime, attractiveness of commercial location and the economy of the area.

6 The local communities have particular involvement in the canal so their needs and perceptions are particularly to be included in any development. There is an obvious conflict between the present status and any proposed development, which must always be addressed. Local consultation is needed.

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7 The quality of user facilities should continue to be improved. While the new toilet blocks are clean, well-maintained and basically adequate, they do not represent the quality of amenity expected in the 21st century in a modern Western economy. Privacy, furnishings and ambience are very basic. There could be associated hospitality, recreational, maintenance and retail opportunity. There should be 24 hour customer support.

{Should each facility block be developed as a destination point (for walkers, cyclists or boaters) with security of mooring of course with power, water, telephone etc, secure storage facility, transport connection, community and recreational links? A “clubhouse” or “lodge” for visitor use and local activity, employing a resident custodian or steward}.

8 The “Not-for-profit” licence holders must expect guaranteed safe and safely accessible moorings both at their home position and at their remote destinations. Where passenger transfer is to be expected, the wharfage must be kept clear and accessible. This may require special purpose pontoons or designated areas.

9 The development of commercial operations by BW is encouraged. However, BW are not empowered to have monopoly control and must do more to encourage other private operators to compete for custom. The practice of denying (or delaying) access to not-for-profit society boats, or to private commercial boats, within the Wheelsite, is not acceptable. BW should not try to run a monopoly business in this section of the canal. The facilities for transferring passengers, for access to the intersection between the Union and F&C canals and for vehicular parking are to be available to all canal licence holders. If these are inadequate, arrangements should be made to increase the capacity.

10 The style of new property, already developed beside the canal, has not enjoyed admiration by the majority of the canal users or the public, but has been lauded by the architectural industry and urban planners and developers. This disappointing gulf between the people paid to create new buildings and those who have to look at them, and usually also pay for them, needs to be addressed. Within the canal area, BW could do much better in involvement of the local people at an early stage of concept and design, so that “carbuncles” do not proliferate.

As with Edinburgh Quay, we have real concern regarding the Glasgow Branch “North Glasgow” area, fearing a gross intrusion into the classical architecture of the West of Glasgow, and a loss of the outlook from the canal to the Clyde. The setting of the scheduled monument bringing the connection with its historical

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reason for existence, should not be lost within a 21st century ribbon development of high-rise flats un-associated with the use of the canal. It is felt most important that buildings close to the canal should have integration with the use and function of the waterway, whether for transport, recreation, water supply, or commerce. If suitable use cannot be found by one developer, the land should be retained until suitable use is identified. The style and detailing of buildings should have regard for the heritage of the canal. The mass of buildings should not isolate the canal from the larger landscape but should ensure both a view outwards and along the waterway, encompassing security of unofficial surveillance (the Glasgow “hing”) and opportunity to travel the wider waterways of the country.

11 At the same time, the beauty of the canal depends upon the variety of surroundings, the extent of undeveloped land, land use for farming, golf, forestry, as well as the buildings in view. Care should be taken to avoid loss of the openness which so characterises the Lowland canals, giving an escape from the immediate confines of urban life. Part of the consideration of development is the avoidance of it.

12 The proposal for insertion of sculptural artwork at many locations raised the concern that art without purpose is intrusive and uncomfortable. Where art is employed to enhance the environment, it can be enjoyed and its cost justified. Sculpture can be employed to form seating, a feature greatly welcomed by walkers and as such would be more welcome than abstract and unserviceable forms.

13 The practicality of maintenance of the off bank was raised, associated with the occasional need for emergency attendance on that side. The essential need for occasional access must be included in any adjacent development, whether by restricted track or by contractual arrangement with any private landowner. Such access should not create a double towpath as that would inhibit wildlife, but similarly, the development of private ground should not be allowed to do the same. If there is no compelling reason for direct bank use, the adjacent land should not be developed within perhaps five metres of the water’s edge. BW should apply a consistent policy which provides protection.

A Carnduff
31 October 2004.