

British Waterways Scotland

Annual Meeting

on 27 September 2007

at The Hub, Edinburgh



Campbell Christie

We are particularly glad that so many of you have managed to get here and participate in what is an important event for British Waterways Scotland. I am delighted to be joined on stage by Stewart Stevenson, our new Minister for Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change. He will be addressing you later this morning and can I ask you to join me in welcoming Stewart to our meeting today.

I am also joined on the stage by Tony Hales, British Waterways Chairman and to Robin Evans the Chief Executive of British Waterways and Steve Dunlop, Director Scotland.

This is the 8th Annual Meeting of British Waterways Scotland since devolution and this is an important event in British Waterways Corporate calendar as an open forum to raise awareness of Scotland's Canals and their opportunities for leisure, tourism and business. I have to emphasise also it's a listening occasion. We want to hear what you have to say, however, it's not the only opportunity our partners, users and the public have to discuss their needs and issues regarding Scotland's canals with us.

British Waterways Scotland has an extensive programme throughout the year to engage with our stakeholders and hear what our users and partners want to say to us about how we are operating the waterways in Scotland. We decided that we would have a slight change of format this year for the Annual Meeting. There will be an opportunity to ask questions of a strategic nature and of relevance to the Minister after the Minister has spoken and there will be a session at the end of the business when questions of a strategic nature can be raised for Tony and Robin on detailed questions about operations, foliage and so on. We have desks at the back manned by people who can really give you the answers to questions about operations so I hope that you will make use of those question stations.

Before asking the Minister to speak I just want to say a few words about our situation and the support that British Waterways has from the Scottish Government. The new Scottish Government continues to work with us, helping us to unlock the potential public benefit of Scotland's canals by encouraging public bodies in Scotland whose activities are relevant to work with us in partnership. Partnership working was identified in the policy document "Scotland's Canals - An Asset for the Future" as key to ensuring Scotland benefits widely from the investment made in recent years in the canal network. The Scottish Canal Development Group is a Scottish wide partnership which is chaired by the Scottish Government that brings together public bodies with a common interest in contributing to and benefiting from our vibrant canals.

We appreciate the previous Scottish Government's commitments, not only financially, but also its good work undertaken in partnership since devolution to raise awareness of Scotland's Canals and their associated opportunities for leisure, tourism and business. With their support British Waterways has enjoyed the success of turning what was, as many of us will remember a liability into a much-loved national asset.

British Waterways Scotland is at a critical stage in its ongoing transformation and is looking to seize the opportunities leading from the revitalisation of the canal network to make it work better for the people of Scotland. In order to do that we have submitted our business case for the Scottish Government's tri-annual spending review this Autumn. The outcome of the spending review which will cover the period 2008-2011 we are told will be tight, but we believe that British Waterways ticks many of the boxes that are important to the new government in the strategy that they have set themselves for the period ahead.

British Waterways is in a unique position with its activities touching upon so many different government policies such as tourism, leisure, regeneration, economic development, the environment and heritage. This is an opportunity for British Waterways Scotland to demonstrate not only our successful delivery of projects often working in partnership but also our valuable contribution to the Scottish Government's five strategic objectives, essential so that Scotland can prosper. These strategic objectives are to be smarter, wealthier, fairer, to provide safer and stronger communities and greener communities. We think that fits very well with the work that we are doing in British Waterways Scotland and I am pleased now to ask the Minister, Stewart Stevenson to address you. Stewart is the new Minister for Transport and our new Minister. He has very quickly, I think, appreciated the role of British Waterways, he is a sailor, a salt sea sailor more than on the canal but I'm hoping we get him on the canals as frequently as he used to sail competitively on the salt water. Although his constituency is Banff & Buchan and his home is there he has been a long term resident of Linlithgow so our colleagues from Linlithgow Canal Society here today will welcome Stewart to the Canal Society in Linlithgow on any occasion if he wants to see the good work they have been doing there over a long period of time. Indeed it was Linlithgow and the other Canal Societies in Scotland who were there at the forefront of campaigning for the re-opening of the Forth & Clyde and Union Canals in the Millennium Link. Stewart could you address our annual meeting please.



Stewart Stevenson

First of all I would like to thank Campbell for inviting me here today. It gives me great pleasure to be the first SNP Government Minister to attend and speak at a British Waterways Scotland annual meeting.

I would also like to thank Tony and his team, including those on the stage this morning, for a very informative and enjoyable last evening. I am afraid that due to Parliamentary commitments I am not able to stay for the whole morning but I look forward to hearing as much as I can about our canals in Scotland.

I have already been able to make a couple of visits to Scotland's canal network since becoming a Minister. I have been struck by the wide range of work that British Waterways undertakes in Scotland. Not just in the context of the construction, building, maintenance and renewal of these great assets but also its contribution to the wider fabric of Scotland.

It is the breadth of British Waterways' activities which links so well with our Government's focus on creating a more successful country with the opportunities for all of Scotland to flourish, through increasing sustainable economic growth.

We have identified 5 Strategic Objectives - Wealthier and Fairer; Healthier; Safer and Stronger; Smarter; and Greener. Unusually for a single body, British Waterways' activities can, to a greater or lesser degree, have a positive impact on all these areas.

Since devolution, the Scottish Government has made a very significant investment in our canal network. Government grant of over £80 million has enabled British Waterways to deliver a safer and more robust canal infrastructure in Scotland. This has ensured that across the Highlands and Lowlands our canals contribute to the quality of life for communities and businesses alongside canals, as well as for visitors to our canals.

In August I had an enjoyable day out at the Kirkintilloch Canal Festival. Thanks to the Forth & Clyde Canal Society for an all too brief boat trip aboard "Voyager". This was great fun.

Kirkintilloch is a fantastic example of a community capitalising on the rebirth of the Forth & Clyde canal following the completion of the Millennium Link. It was an ideal opportunity to witness at first hand what our canals can offer. I was left in no doubt that the canal is an important part of this community's lives now and will be into the future.

That visit highlighted one example of the tremendous success, value for money and community spin-off of the Millennium Link and Falkirk Wheel project. One of the most successful Millennium projects in Britain. This was delivered under British Waterway's stewardship but with the Scottish Government, local authorities, enterprise networks and other partners working closely together – a good model for the future.

A report on the economic impact of the Millennium Link has just been completed by independent economic development consultants Roger Tym & Partners. This report commissioned by British Waterways and Scottish Enterprise Forth Valley shows that the Millennium Link canal restoration has acted as a catalyst for regeneration across Scotland's central belt. It has helped to deliver over £178 million of investment and over 4000 jobs in the past five years. In addition the Falkirk Wheel, the world's first and only rotating boat lift, has developed into one of the country's leading visitor attractions with 1.6 million visits recorded since April 2003. The magnificent structure has also picked up a host of prestigious engineering and tourism related awards.

The research also shows that over 1,000 new homes have been constructed and 92,000 square metres of commercial floor space built since the ambitious canal restoration started in 1999.

Since the canals reopened, increasing numbers of people have taken advantage of the leisure opportunities on the waterways as part of their drive for a healthy lifestyle. Figures for 2006 show a very impressive 14.5 million visits to the Lowland canal towpaths. I have a little house in Linlithgow where the towpath is just below and so I see all the users.

Increasing numbers of boats have been recorded year on year with over one hundred additional moored boats on the Lowland canals. The commercial boat sector is also making progress with a number of additional commercial vessels on the Lowland canals.

Sensitive development activity across both canals has increased significantly over the past few years with the canal network now playing an active part in the creation of a wealthier Scotland. The impressive mixed-use scheme at Edinburgh Quay is thriving and represents a landmark development at the eastern terminus of the Union Canal.

The Glasgow Canal Regeneration Partnership is pushing forward a long-term plan. This will help to create safer and stronger communities across the Glasgow branch of the Forth & Clyde Canal from Port Dundas to Maryhill over the next 15 to 20 years.

The catalytic effect of the canal restoration on the Lowland canals has not been confined to Glasgow and Edinburgh. A wide range of canal related projects and initiatives have already brought benefits to communities across the central belt of Scotland.

At Bowling a major refurbishment programme has been undertaken to create an events space and a range of boater and visitor facilities, whilst towpath improvements are also being undertaken on the stretch of canal which leads from the village to Clydebank.

Auchinstarry, situated at the mid-point of the Forth & Clyde Canal, has been transformed from a previously degraded site into an attractive, thriving rural location, set within a stunning landscape. The canal has been widened to form a larger basin with 49 new pontoon berths, which I understand were filled within 2 months of opening.

The Clydebank Rebuilt project has placed the canal at the heart of a major regeneration push in the town, and British Waterways continues to play an integral role in the partnership moving forward.

Reference has been made to Linlithgow. In that town the community has embraced the revitalisation of the canal corridor with the town's annual Canal Fun Day now a firm fixture in Scotland's events calendar.

The Linlithgow Union Canal Society continues to introduce the delights of our inland waterways to thousands of people every year, with education at the heart of all their activities. I used to be a member of this and knew Mel Gray well. I was a financial supporter rather than being hands on. There is no doubt the society's new Canal Heritage Education Centre will be a valued new resource for schools in the area.

The restoration of the Lowland canals has also created a green corridor across Scotland from Edinburgh to Bowling. They boast an array of flora and fauna - thriving as a result of environmental improvements in and around the waterway. On the Caledonian Canal, where my wife used to live at Muirtown, the 10 year £20 million lock stabilisation programme has secured the long-term future of the waterway. It has provided a platform to continue to explore the development of a range of leisure and freight opportunities. For the first time in many years the Caledonian is now open for business throughout the year.

Almost 1,500 boat licenses were issued on the Caledonian in 2006/07, up from the previous year, with a significant percentage of visits coming from mainland Europe.

British Waterways, in conjunction with various partners, is looking to develop a number of key destinations across Scotland's canal network. This long-term strategy includes plans to develop Muirtown Basin in Inverness and Fort Augustus on the Caledonian Canal.

Canal side development at Fort Augustus is considered a major opportunity to put the village firmly on the tourism map. 30,000 visits were made to the canal heritage centre in 2006, an increase of 68% on 2005, with around 300,000 tourists visiting the lock flight every year. British Waterways is now looking to build on this strong foundation and further develop rural regeneration and engagement in the area.

In June, the inaugural Splash! Community event at Muirtown in Inverness attracted thousands of visitors. It laid the foundations for similar canal based events in the years to come.

After these success stories I was not surprised to learn that the Helix project is amongst 23 projects short-listed for the Big Lottery Living Landmarks Programme. The Helix project has been promoted by British Waterways Scotland, in partnership with Falkirk Council and Central Scotland Forest Trust. It plans to transform, revitalise and regenerate a 300-hectare site between Grangemouth and Falkirk. It will include the development of an innovative lock structure to rival the innovation of the nearby Falkirk Wheel.

One of only three Scottish projects to make it this far in the process we await with considerable anticipation an announcement in October as to whether any of these Scottish projects have made it to the last eight. I wish BW very good luck.

Canals extend into so many areas of government policy. They contribute to integrated transport, protection of our natural heritage, Scotland's economic regeneration, planning and development. In addition they contribute to Scotland's leisure, tourism and health through activities such as boating, fishing, walking and cycling.

I had the pleasure of meeting with Campbell and Steve at British Waterways' offices at Muirtown basin in Inverness recently. Inverness is Scotland's fastest growing city and I was pleased to hear from British Waterways first hand about their plans for Muirtown Basin and their commitment to close partnership working. An example of this was their engagement with Highland Council and others to identify technically feasible solutions to the proposed new road crossing of the canal at Inverness. This is important for many people in the area.

These are but a few examples of British Waterways' very strong commitment to working with partners to identify opportunities and turn shared plans into successful projects delivered on the ground.

British Waterways plays a full part within the Scottish Canals Development Group, a partnership chaired by the Scottish Government that brings together organisations with a common interest in contributing to, and benefiting from, vibrant canals.

As scheduled ancient monuments, Scotland's canals are a key part of our heritage and it is vital that we continue to develop and protect this built heritage and the natural environment, which surrounds it, for the benefit of future generations.

Finally I would like to take this opportunity of thanking Campbell Christie for all his very considerable efforts over the last 10 years as a member of British Waterways' Board. He has ensured Scotland's interests have been fully taken account of by the Board over that time, as well as contributing to the Board's wider vision.

He was part of the British Waterways Board which oversaw what seemed to many the unlikely dream of the re-opening of the Union and Forth & Clyde canals. It became a reality through Campbell's contribution. This was a truly unique venture, once again linking Edinburgh and Glasgow and the Forth and Clyde by canal. I know from my officials who have had many dealings with Campbell over the years that his warmth and positive approach will be much missed as he goes into retirement from this post.

I am sure others who have first hand experience of his contribution to the Board and Scotland's canals in general will be saying more later this morning. However Campbell may I be the first today to wish you the very best of luck for the future.

Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for listening and I hope that you enjoy the rest of the day and that Scotland's canals continue to go from strength to strength.

Campbell Christie

Thank you very much for your speech and good wishes for my retirement and I fully intend to be retiring on the golf course getting that handicap down. I will resist all efforts to be recruited elsewhere, maybe. Thanks very much for your speech and the commitment you

have shown and the Scottish Government has shown to the work of British Waterways, and your encouragement to work in partnership with all of the other public sector and private sector organisations we are involved with. Without that support and original document from the Scottish Government urging other authorities to work with us I'm not sure we would have made the progress we have made, so thanks very much for that. Perhaps some of you will want to raise some questions with the Minister before he leaves.