



ROBIN EVANS CUSTOMER MEETING

National Waterways Museum, Gloucester Docks, 13 July 2008

Issue Lack of dredging and vegetation clearance on the River Severn, particularly in The Partings, annoyance over the nesting bird season being perceived as taking precedence over user safety, gives rise to navigational problems for the larger vessels, the narrowness of the channel makes it difficult for smaller craft to pass larger craft and sight lines and signage are obscured. Additional dredging may help flood control in this area.

Response This mainly comes down to resources. British Waterways is currently under-resourced to the tune of around £20m per annum. BW is doing as much as it can to raise earned income, to protect government funding and to promote the waterways better to local authorities to attract greater funding from that source. There is no clear solution at present and difficult choices have to be made. BW is striving to ensure that it concentrates its spending where there is the greatest public benefit.

Avoiding vegetation works during the nesting bird season is something that BW wholeheartedly supports and must plan its works outside of that season to make sure that the work gets done and the birds are protected. The local situation is that there are 4 people employed from Stourport to Sharpness on vegetation management and they work to a rolling programme across that stretch. The river section is in the work programme for August/September this year and will be repeated on a 2 to 3 year frequency. There are issues of land ownership and access and BW is working hard to overcome such obstacles where they exist.

The dredging regulations are extremely onerous and BW has had serious disagreements with the Environment Agency in this regard in the past and will continue to work to make such operations easier.

Although there may be flood management benefits to increased dredging there is no additional resource to cover this. Central government applied for European funding to assist with flood relief costs and although a small amount was forthcoming, none of it came to British Waterways.

BW now has published safety standards with regard to visibility and clarity of signage and undertakes to meet these.

Issue: The cessation of the traffic lights presents a real risk to the safety of canal users, has had a very negative impact on relations between boaters and bridge keepers, was poorly communicated and the reason for its introduction has never been adequately explained.

Response: BW is aware of the level of concern locally with regard to the decision to stop using the traffic light system. In response to this, Simon Salem and BW's Head of Safety, Tony Stammers have been down to visit the canal and experience the new system at first hand. The report will be available next week.

BW agrees that it has not communicated the decision or the reasons for it, well and apologises for this. Measures to address this will be put in place.

BW does not share the view that it is currently at risk of a serious incident through the non-use of the traffic lights. There are a number of studies that have indicated that where users are required to use their own judgement

about whether or not it is safe to proceed safety is improved rather than compromised.

The reason for abandoning the system was to remove elements of conflict between different users and to promote safer, easier passage of vessels along the canal.

The findings of Tony Stammers' report will be communicated to users.

Issue: The winter opening hours on the canal are unpopular with users and make the canal and river extremely difficult to use for 5 months of the year. Some users had understood that the winter closure to be a temporary measure and are concerned to learn that it is intended to be continued. There is a view that the 'blank sheet' consultation method being used to elicit wider comment from users is not user friendly and that a 'tick box' system would have been more accessible and provided fuller feedback. Users who were involved in the initial consultation and helped to come up with solutions and suggestions for reduced winter opening feel that their goodwill has been poorly repaid. There were expectations that a number of bridges would be mechanised and converted to 'user-operator' status this financial year and that has not materialised.

Response: There has clearly been a misunderstanding over how long the new proposals were intended to be in place for. The system used during the winter of 2007/08 was clearly 'temporary' as it may be changed as a result of the current consultation exercise, but there will be no more money available for another 3 – 5 years at least and therefore a return to unrestricted 7 day opening will not be possible. The option of booked passage on a 7 day basis could still be explored. Resource issues have meant that the introduction of user-operated bridges has had to be postponed.

Issue: An issue with regard to moorings for people with disabilities was raised.

Response: British Waterways is unable to administratively distinguish adequately between all sectors of society that suffer some kind of disadvantage and as such does not offer discounts on moorings or licence fees for people experience disadvantage of any kind. The case raised by the individual is well known to all the BW people present and has been explored fully through the Internal Complaints Procedure. Although the Ombudsman's summary does not find fault on the part of BW, BW accepts that the customer remains unhappy with the decisions taken and has arranged for a 'fresh pair of eyes' to review the case and hopefully keep a meaningful dialogue open with a view to resolving the issue.

Issue: Some customers feel that the funding and resource issues BW faces have been underestimated and would like to know what BW is doing to achieve an adequate level of income to sustain the waterways into the future.

Response: It may be true that the financial situation is worse than currently estimated, but it's important not to over-estimate the problem or to scare-monger. BW has improved its relations with central government hugely recently and feels that it has achieved a relatively good settlement overall and that the outlook for future funding at this level is secure. BW acknowledges the fantastic support that its supporters gave it to enable it to achieve this outcome. However, there is a real need to secure more funding. Income generated through property development, utilities and all our other commercial activities is not sufficient as we move forward and so we need to look at where BW delivers the greatest benefit. The greatest asset BW has is the waterway network; vast stretches of 'free' open space used by cyclists, walkers,

anglers, birdwatchers as well as boaters. BW believes that the greatest beneficiaries of this network are the communities that live within the locality of a canal or river and that better funding agreement with local authorities need to be developed. Hand in hand with that, work to improve efficiency and drive down cost must be continued. Recent reviews have seen savings of £10m per annum achieved through reductions in staffing levels, amalgamation of waterway units and functions and through reduced office space and overheads. At the end of the day, the waterways are a publicly funded corporation because they are not self financing and it will be for government to decide if it wants to retain them in their current state. At present, the signs are that it does.

Issue: Why can't money raised locally, for example through the Gloucester Quays development or the Bristol Water contract, be spent locally?

Response: BW believes wholeheartedly that spend should be targeted where the greatest benefit is derived/delivered. The income generation potential of the different regions varies hugely and adopting a policy of spending income at the point of generation would result in massive over investment in some areas and the certain closure of other waterways.

Issue: Why was a decision taken to withdraw from the restoration of the Cotswold Canals and not the Driotwich and other restorations?

Response: BW gave a brief history of its involvement with the restoration whereby the original estimates for the project were radically reduced, costs increased a number of times and BW's share increased accordingly. The nature of the Cotswold Canals agreement meant that BW bore the risk for the entire scheme, not just the proportion that it was funding. With the other restorations the financial commitment and the risk to BW are substantially lower and so there has not been the need to withdraw. BW must prioritise the existing network over new projects.

Issue: Most people don't realise that BW continues to hold a lease for the Cotswold Canal – will BW be prepared to hand that over to Stroud District Council?

Response: If Stroud District Council are able to get the Heritage Lottery Fund to transfer the proportion of funding that would have been paid over to BW for the restoration we will be more than happy to transfer the lease.

Issue: The audience were asked about their views on local consultation, in particular the frequency and effectiveness of user forum meetings.

Response: The general feeling was that the G&S User Forum works extremely well, in part because it is externally chaired. It was felt that relations had been better in the past and that the current squeeze on all resources was a barrier to better relations. There was also a general view that promises made were no longer being delivered and that, on occasions, users were being 'fobbed off' or deliberately fed other information to take the heat of contentious issues. Reference to deterioration in relations between boaters and bridge keepers was made again.

Issue: It was felt that the canal users were much better served than river users. River users felt that their waterway was being allowed to deteriorate to an unacceptable level with no sanitary facilities, few moorings and very little evidence of any expenditure on dredging and vegetation clearance.

Response: This split between the maintenance standards applied to canals and river navigations had been raised in other regions and BW would investigate this further as there was clearly a need to maintain both to an appropriate level.

Issue: The audience was asked to comment on the Moorings Tender Trial. Reference was made to the formal consultation currently taking place, copies of which were made available.

Response: There is a general feeling that the long term enthusiasts, who have been instrumental in the bringing back to life of the waterways, are now being priced off the canals. There is widespread discontent that the reserve price for each mooring is not publicised. There is also a feeling that BW is now responsible for 'hiking up' mooring prices through the tender process. Because of the width of the G&S Canal, the issue with long stretches of on-line moorings are not so acute on this waterway as on standard width canals. There is some existing feedback from the G&S User Forum available.

Response to

Response: Details of the 'success' of the trail are included in the current consultation document. Although the reserve price for each mooring is not published, the fact that there is a reserve is made clear. BW has been criticised by the BMF in the past for keeping mooring prices low and this initiative is designed, in part, to address that issue. Although it may be the case that some people are unable to afford a mooring the system is fair. BW is also trying to keep mooring prices down by increasing supply through supporting new marina development. So far, 3,000 new marina berths have been created and the target to create 10,000 within 10 years looks achievable. BW is also applying a reduction in linear moorings to support uptake in the new marinas and meet the requirements of other users.

Issue: Boat licence fees are going up and up..... we are getting less and less.

Response: It is the case that BW (a) needs to attract greater local authority funding so that the financial input from boaters is kept at a reasonable level and (b) BW must provide an appropriate level of service to its customers in exchange for licence fees.

Issue: Is the status of the Acting General Manager one of 'authority', or is it more of a 'caretaker' role?

Response: The permanent General Manager has the full respect and confidence of the Chief Executive which is why he's been charged with driving the strategy for the future. In the meantime, the Acting General Manager is fully in control of decisions for the region.