

TOWPATH MOWING GUIDELINES

24 September 2007



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INTRODUCTION

Towpath management is a key issue for British Waterways and it is important that a high standard is maintained. The grasses and flowers on our towpaths are managed by implementing a mowing regime designed to ensure that our towpaths are safe and enjoyable places to be. The Towpath Mowing Guidelines (TMG) are designed to illustrate a series of mowing regimes that might be employed on a towpath to ensure a more consistent expectation and implementation of towpath vegetation management. Three different mowing regimes are proposed 1) heavily used, typically urban towpath; 2) frequently used towpath, typically in urban/rural fringe; and 3) lightly used towpath, typically in rural locations.

SCOPE AND STATUS OF GUIDELINES

This guide is for all those actively involved in the process of managing towpath vegetation across the whole of our network. It gives clear detail of the various mowing regimes, which might be used on different types of towpath. It is not a hard and fast set of rules, but a Code of Best Practice. Individual mowing specifications should be developed by the local maintenance team in consultation with their Environment & Heritage team.

The way mowing is managed depends on the type of towpath and is therefore influenced by the waterway character, the surface type, the structure, width, type of edging, location and level of use. This makes management a complex issue and one approach cannot be expected to "fit all". There is no such thing as a standard towpath and while this booklet and images are based on towpaths enclosed between the waterway on one side and a wall, fence or hedge on the other, there are towpaths that are very different. Where the area between the water's edge and the next boundary is very wide, sometimes over 10 metres, only the area providing a reasonable corridor at a safe distance from the water's edge should be treated as the towpath with regard to these Guidelines.

These Guidelines do not cover marginal aquatic weed growth, the emergent plants that grow within and up to the edge of the channel.

This forms a valuable wildlife habitat and should be retained except where there are over-riding health and safety issues. The decision how to manage emergent aquatic vegetation is taken locally and is outside the scope of these Guidelines.

Also these Guidelines do not cover woody vegetation, this is being addressed separately within British Waterways. Saplings and shrubs are being removed whilst plans are being put in place to tackle the more substantial vegetation. The full width cut practised on all towpaths will prevent the regeneration of woody vegetation. In addition, offside vegetation management is outside of these Guidelines.

To ensure that contracts where necessary are modified to encompass the Guidelines their operative date will be 1 April 2008.

INFLUENCES ON THE GUIDELINES

There are various legal influences on how we manage our towpaths, including the Transport Act 1968, health and safety legislation, British Waterways Acts, Wildlife & Countryside Act 1981 and the Countryside & Rights of Way Act 2000, which have a particular influence over our management, for example in Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI). In addition British Waterways is committed to ensuring a high standard of work in providing a safe environment, whilst seeking biodiversity gain wherever appropriate.

We have also been influenced by the public consultation we carried out on these Guidelines. The consultation process indicated that intensive mowing regimes were not necessarily welcomed. Other changes have been made as a result of the consultation including a streamlining of the regimes from four to three.

It should be recognised that the growing season and plant growth rates are not fixed, but are influenced by the prevalent weather conditions. The annual full-width cut is best carried out in early Spring before the start of the growing season, but the timing will be dependent on the weather, and therefore the date of the cut will vary year on year.

It is accepted that height is the best measure of when to cut vegetation, but in practice it is difficult to put such an approach in place. This issue

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has been discussed with contractors and we are aware that they programme their work several months in advance and cannot constantly be reprogramming works. The majority of contracts continue to be based on time intervals between cuts. However, by taking a more open approach to looking at desired output we hope to get better results. There is no substitute to building good working relationships with contractors and helping them develop a better understanding of our requirements. Contracts should allow more flexibility in the timing of cuts.

Ultimately, the decision on how a towpath is managed is a local one, based on good knowledge of the towpath types and uses, safety issues and any areas of biodiversity value. With approximately 3000 km of towpath managed by British Waterways, it is perhaps understandable that the approach to management, and indeed the quality of management, has varied considerably in the past.

A poor standard of management is totally unacceptable; the TMG will address this whilst maintaining the flexibility required to manage such a diverse network. It is essential that British Waterways personnel have a sound understanding of the issues, including the views of those who use the network, and that this is transferred to our contractors in order that they comply with our legal and corporate responsibilities.

The TMG will help British Waterways managers, supported by their ecologists, to clearly communicate their requirements to contractors. It will also serve to inform our users what they can expect when they visit the waterways.

Successful towpath management is essential for the business. Our fundamental objective is “to provide a towpath that is safe for all users and to seek to enhance biodiversity wherever we can”. By getting the management right we will achieve our vision of creating a vibrant waterway visited by and enjoyed by millions of people.

HEALTH AND SAFETY

Health and safety is a major consideration; a well-used urban towpath clearly needs more intensive management than a remote rural towpath. Thoughtful vegetation management can reduce risk to visitors; for

example, cutting vegetation can expose risks such as steep embankments and trip hazards, alternatively tall vegetation can be used as a natural barrier. In areas used by higher numbers of visitors such as at formal moorings and around benches, mowing and vegetation management will need to address nettles, thistles and brambles. Extra mowing should be considered in certain locations where there is a need to maintain sight lines particularly on bends, at approaches to locks, bridges and narrows.

Key areas, such as around locks, moorings and access points need more management, Mowing Regime 1, Option 1a provides a regime suitable for such areas.

Cutting through the vegetation to the waters edge at key points can be used to allow anglers safe access and particularly in rural sections. Where tall waterside towpath vegetation can be an issue, a 100 metre cut to the waters edge at 600 metre intervals will allow boaters safe, informal moorings, where they can embark and disembark safely. This ‘to the edge’ cut every 600 metres is a guide and will only be carried out where it is deemed appropriate. We will endeavour to maintain a network where there is a minimum of one safe mooring point in every kilometre and on average every 600 metres. However, mooring points should only be located in places where it is deep enough and safe enough for boats to moor.

Alternative approaches, such as more frequent narrow access paths, cut to the waterside, such as used on the Basingstoke Canal are an acceptable alternative approach for local management.

BIODIVERSITY

We must always meet our health and safety obligations, but in addition we can take advantage of opportunities to enhance the wildlife habitat of the waterway corridor. The towpath is a major resource, like the channel the towpath affords wildlife a continuous corridor to move along unlike many other habitats in Britain that are being increasingly dissected and fragmented.

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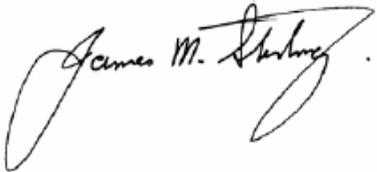
Actions raised in the Waterway Biodiversity Action Plan should always be considered when making decisions about towpath mowing regimes. Where appropriate a more relaxed mowing regime can benefit a host of wildlife. The aquatic margin is of particular value; in this document it is illustrated in Mowing Regime 3, but is potentially an issue on any waterway.

The aquatic margin should be retained and not cut except at key points such as moorings or when woody vegetation is an issue. Good hedgerow management can allow grassy margins to extend whilst creating a more effective boundary of high wildlife value.

Within SSSIs it will be necessary to discuss and agree the mowing regime with the relevant statutory nature conservation organisation. Local contact can be arranged through your Heritage & Environment Manager. Mowing will also need to be modified where protected or rare species, such as water voles, are present.

Cutting late in the year is acceptable, but only based on health and safety reasons, i.e. it was not possible to carry out the full width cut the preceding spring owing to poor weather or unstable ground. The species present may influence this decision as a late cut removes the cover used by water voles and other species over the winter. Where an autumn cut is proposed it will be necessary to have ecological advice and effective assessment of waterway lengths before cutting.

When a structure is no longer used as an access point, such as an unused bridge, the regime will be modified so that intensive mowing is not carried out and wildlife can take advantage of the location.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "James M. Stirling". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large loop at the end.

Jim Stirling

Technical Director

September 2007

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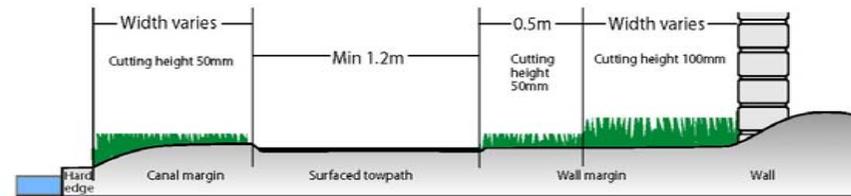
MOWING REGIME 1

Description:	Heavily used towpath, typically an urban area or in well-used "honeypot" locations
Surface:	Hard, e.g. brick paving, tarmac or compacted firm surface (rolled hoggin, stone or ash). Should be suitable for town shoes
Drainage:	Should drain immediately
Surface width:	Minimum 1.2m
Frequency of cut:	Typically every 2 - 3 weeks throughout season
Position of towpath:	Fixed

MR 1b:

Cut to 50mm high from water's edge, extending 0.5m to the rear of the towpath, typically every 2 - 3 weeks throughout the season.

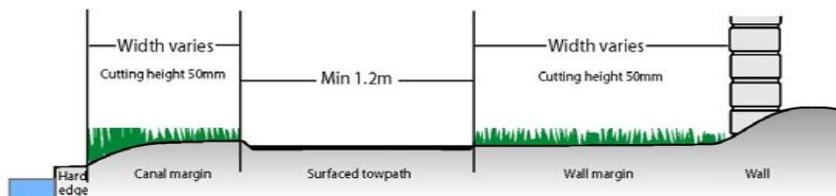
Cut full width to 100mm high at least once every year.



MR 1a:

Cut full width to 50mm high typically every 2 - 3 weeks throughout the season.

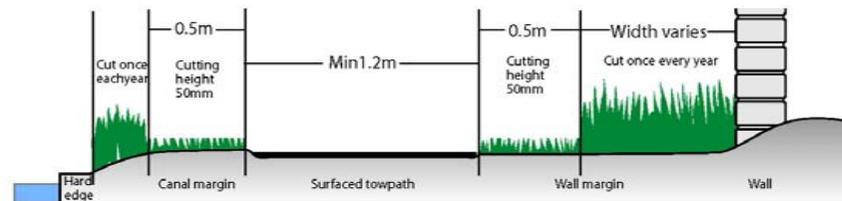
Cut full width to 100mm high at least once every year.



MR 1c:

Cut to 50mm high, 0.5m either side of the towpath typically every 2 - 3 weeks throughout the season, retaining both rear and water side verges.

Cut full width to 100mm at least once every year.



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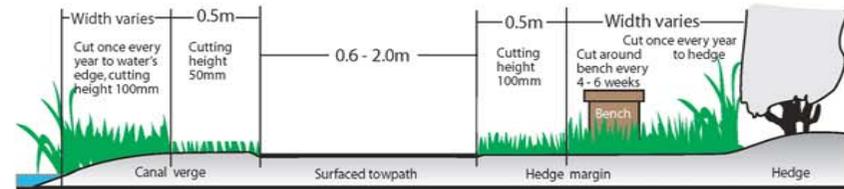
MOWING REGIME 2

Description:	Frequently used towpath, typically in urban/rural fringe
Surface:	Compacted firm surface, e.g. rolled hoggin, stone or ash Suitable for country shoes
Drainage:	Should drain quickly with little ponding
Surface width:	0.6m - 2.0m
Frequency of cut:	Typically cut every 4 - 8 weeks throughout season
Position of towpath:	Fixed

MR 2b:

Cut to 50mm high, on canal side and 100mm high to rear of the towpath, for 0.5m typically every 4 - 6 weeks throughout the season. Cut around bench to 100mm high.

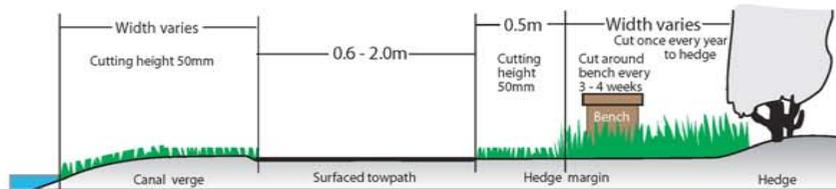
Cut full width to 100mm high at least once every year.



MR 2a:

Cut to 50mm high from water's edge, extending 0.5m to the rear of the towpath, typically every 3 - 4 weeks throughout the season, retaining rear verge. Cut around bench to 100mm high.

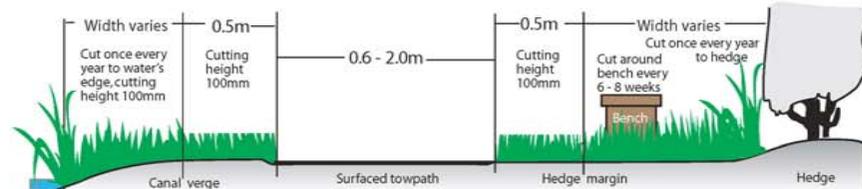
Cut full width to 100mm high at least once every year.



MR 2c:

Cut to 100mm high 0.5m either side of the towpath typically every 6 - 8 weeks throughout the season. Cut around bench to 100mm high.

Cut full width to 100mm high at least once every year.



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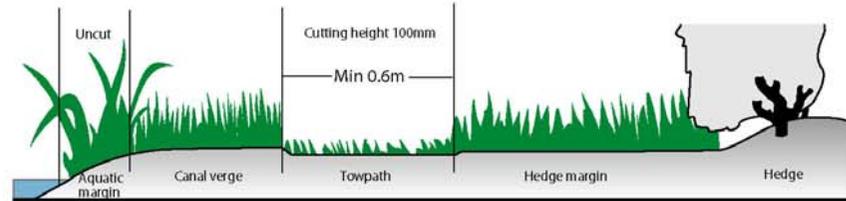
MOWING REGIME 3

Description:	Typically in rural locations, light use by serious walker
Surface:	Grass or naturalised rolled surface. Suitable for walking boots/wellingtons in Winter
Drainage:	Poor or slow
Surface width:	Minimum 0.6m
Frequency of cut:	Typically every 6 - 12 weeks throughout season
Position of towpath:	Dependent on safety, available space and biodiversity objectives

MR 3b:

Cut only the trodden towpath surface, minimum width 0.6m, to 100mm high typically every 6 - 12 weeks throughout the season.

Cut full width to 100mm high at least once every year.



MR 3a:

Cut to 100mm high, trodden towpath and 0.5m either side of the towpath, typically every 6 - 12 weeks.

Cut full width to 100mm high at least once every year.



MR 3c:

Cut full width to 100mm at least once every year.

Other cuts as required.

