

LICHFIELD & HATHERTON CANALS RESTORATION TRUST

Chairman's Report for 2014

Once again it falls to me to take stock of the work and achievements of the Trust in the year ending 31st December 2014. Of course the date mirrors the end of the financial year, with the Trust accounts examined, as usual by Dains, and the subsidiary company by West. This necessary symmetry presents a frustrating challenge to the Chairman. We are already almost half way to the end of 2015 and so much which has happened over that 6 month period must wait for a year before it can be presented to the AGM. Of course, members can refer to our website, Cut Both Ways, and more recently those on e-mail can receive our Towpath Times to keep up to date. However, what follows will keep largely within the timeframe of 2014. Like the best soap operas we will end this report on an exciting cliffhanger.

I have always attempted to draw a pen portrait of the work of our individual directors and highlight what they have done over the past year. I am pleased to report that the input of so many of our members who are not Directors and who do not attend Council is now so high that to single out directors runs the risk of overlooking or down-playing the work of others. It reflects the growing strength of the Trust that the active input of our members has grown exponentially in recent years. In the words, albeit in Latin, which can be found in St Paul's Cathedral with reference to those who built it "if you seek a memorial, look around you". This is a sentiment on which I could never improve and strongly recommend that all of us visit the worksites on the Lichfield Canal and look around you. The achievements are tangibly there for all to see. Let me say, here and now, a heartfelt "thank you" to all our activists.

I will, however, pay tribute to those who sadly left us in 2014. I often referred to Trevor Morris as being, almost certainly, the oldest person actively involved in canal restoration. Trevor died in 2014 and the funeral service was well-attended by members of L&H. We had planned to present him with a commemorative salver to mark the gratitude of the Trust. A slightly amended salver was presented to Edna Morris and was much appreciated. Sadly, Edna herself passed on a very shortly afterwards and we extend our best wishes to John Morris who is a long-term and generous supporter of our work. Also in 2014 we recorded the death of Mervyn

Ainge who had done so much work on the marketing side and in computerising our membership records. Mervyn attended our meetings for as long as he could and has been much missed. Again, the Trust was well-represented at the funeral and our best wishes go to Pat in her loss. It is pleasing that Pat finds strength in continuing to work with our Promotions Team.

I referred last year to the huge number of hours which our directors, officers and supporters devote to Trust business. These are only partly shown in the hours spent in Trust Council. Far more time is spent in smaller meetings to deal with specific issues such as HS2. In addition there are the many meetings with third parties such as the District Councils and Staffordshire Highways. The cost of these meetings is largely borne by the participants and represents considerable financial value to the Trust. For this generosity in financial terms and in time we must record our thanks.

Our quarterly magazine, Cut Both Ways, which was substantially up-rated in 2013 continues to go from strength to strength. It is a major tool in keeping our membership in touch with developments and in communicating with our many supporters such as MPs, councillors and businesses. Our revamped website is most impressive. It not only advertises our activities but also reacts quickly to events and breaking news. If you have not yet discovered it I strongly recommend that you log on soon.

Inevitably, HS2 was an issue of major concern throughout the year. The news here has been something of a rollercoaster and, hopefully, the year ended on a high rather than a low. We started the year with the prospect of there being virtually no impact of the new railway on the Lichfield Canal at Huddlesford. The new line would cross at a height well clear of the canal. We always knew that the complexity of the scheme in that form would have a devastating impact on the Trent and Mersey in the Fradley area. Determined opposition from Lichfield residents and local members of IWA who were concerned about the impact on the eastern side of the city brought about a major revision. While our members welcomed the reduced impact on the canal environment generally the Trust was alarmed that the lowering of the railway profile at Huddlesford would make the original line of the canal track at Huddlesford impossible and the effect on Lichfield Cruising Club would be devastating. A long series of meetings involving several senior directors made steady progress towards

resolving these potentially “showstopping” proposals. The year ended with the prospect that HS2 would work with the Trust and the Cruising Club to reroute the Lichfield Canal from its junction to a point just below Lock 30. Nothing is yet set in stone but the outlook is moderately encouraging.

Our regular work parties have continued on the Hatherton and we remain indebted to Denis Cooper and his team for all they do. We are well aware that our major focus has been on the Lichfield Canal and Trust Council is giving thought to ways in which this can be addressed.

Our main focus has again been on Pounds 26 & 27 on the Lichfield Canal. To conserve funds all the work has been carried out, to a very high standard, by our own work force whose members have toiled on through torrents and storms. Progress has been perhaps slower than we anticipated but this must not be seen as any criticism of our amazingly dedicated and hard-working team of volunteers. The prospect of using a synthetic liner has been put aside as implementation proved too challenging. Clay puddle will now be used right through Pound 27 and a special machine has been purchased to progress this work. The windinghole in Pound 27 has been constructed and the wall is now fully in place. .

At the 2014 AGM I flagged up the importance of the Heritage Towpath Trail which will provide a walking route for the whole length of the canal. An opportunity for major funding failed to materialise by the year end but, in true roller-coaster style, this suddenly reappeared early in 2015 – outside the scope of this report. The project to be financed will see the purchase of the canal track from the A461 to a point west of the aqueduct, the reinstatement of the destroyed Crane Brook culvert and the extension of the walking route over M6Toll. Exciting times lie ahead. Again, we are indebted to a sub-committee of senior directors which continues to devote an enormous number of hours to developing this scheme in the year ahead.

The Huddlesford Heritage Gathering will be held again in September 2015 as this is a biennial event. However, our marketing team has arranged the usual events including a variety show and a quiz. Our President’s annual “Coffee Morning” was held on Easter Saturday, again with its amazing financial outcome. These are good

opportunities for all our members to mingle. We discontinued our use of the retail unit in the arcade in Lichfield as it had achieved all we could hope for at that time.

As ever, an annual report can only scratch the surface of all that has happened through the year. It can also flag up what lies ahead. What it cannot do is to pay full tribute to the work of all our active members. I see the teams toiling in the muddy trenches, the dedicated workers lugging boxes to jumble sales, serving meals at events and generally supporting all we do. They are all keeping the dream alive. Equally there are all the hidden hours of work in informal discussion, writing documents on computers at home or driving across the Midlands to yet another meeting. On behalf of all our members I extend our heartfelt thanks to all these enthusiasts. But, finally, we do not forget the value of our “armchair” membership. To those through personal circumstances or just inclination support us through their subscriptions and donations. Let it not be forgotten that the larger our membership the greater our campaigning impact.

2014 was a year of great challenge. I am sure you will agree that the Trust rose magnificently to the demands made on it. 2015 will certainly be exciting and we are all ready for it.