



Lichfield & Hatherton Canals Restoration Trust Limited

Founder and President: J. Eric Wood

Vice-President: David Suchet CBE

Patrons: Chris Coburn MBE; Dr David Fletcher CBE; Michael Fabricant MP

CHAIRMAN'S REPORT FOR 2011

Once again it is time to review the work and progress made by the Trust over the previous year ending at December 2011. For once, the evidence before your eyes, especially at Tamworth Road, tells you just how much has been done. If you seek a monument then look around you. As ever, an equal amount has been achieved behind the scenes proving yet again that for every hour of work on the ground there has been an immeasurable amount more time spent in committee, e-mails and form-filling. The tangible and visible achievements in Lichfield more than prove the point. The preparation of the annual report to the accountants or examiners and the subsequent report to this meeting gives us a moment to take stock. This is now a major restoration project and its affairs must be efficiently and properly conducted.

As I have stressed in previous years, so much of the work of your directors and officers is hidden from public view. We hold regular internal meetings on specific topics and, of course, exchange many and copious e-mails. Especially over much of 2011 our engineers and environmental officers have held many site meetings with a variety of companies and organisations in connection with the major works at Tamworth Road and in Darnford Park. This is in addition to the regular meetings with officers of several District Councils and with Staffordshire Highways. On the voluntary side, the Trust is rightly encouraged to attend many meetings devoted to important waterways-related topics all of which, though interesting and often useful, are time-consuming and involve considerable travel. Often, the main benefit is the opportunity to exchange views with others involved in restoration projects. We are members of both the Northern and Southern Canals Associations and, of course, of the Inland Waterways Association. Recently, we have become members of the Staffordshire Waterways Group which was set up as a consequence of encounters in the marquee at the Burton National Waterways Festival. We are hopeful that this will be a valuable force within the restoration sector and not just another "talking shop". Its membership covers a wide spectrum with a strong emphasis on restoration trusts of which there is a considerable number within Staffordshire. It also includes two county councillors who are cabinet members with a strong interest in what we are doing. We have attended the last British Waterways AGM and are working to build a strong relationship with its successor – The Canal and River Trust. We have our continuing links with IWA – Vaughan Welch is their nominated Director on our Council – and we are most grateful for all the help and advice he and his colleagues give us.

This is clearly the point at which I also formally record our gratitude to all our Directors who work so hard to ensure that we maintain momentum. Without their support the sustaining of the contacts I have just mentioned would not be possible. It is only when you study the details of what they do that you realise that it is certainly true that those who have retired from their day jobs could not now fit a work schedule into their voluntary activities. All do far more than their job descriptions (if they had them) suggest or imply. David Dixon is Vice-Chairman as well as Land Officer. Over the past year he has increasingly stepped in to support me as well as keeping a most watchful eye on the land portfolio which is a major task in itself. Bob Williams, officially Finance Director, has found himself a much more demanding and wide-ranging role which runs through marketing, fund-raising to unofficial project director.

Sue Williams is our Company Secretary as well as playing a major part in our marketing activities and being the mainstay of our biennial joint boat gathering at Huddlesford. Trevor Morris, surely one of the

most senior people actively involved with restoration, continues to run the membership side with commendable efficiency and has helped to buck the economic depression by recording an increase in our numbers. Mike Battisson has also been a mainstay of our business organising environmental work, supporting our meetings with any organisations and always being on hand to help with marketing. Bob Mullarkey, one of only two directors with a “day job” works hard on the practical side and keeps a close watch on the health and safety side of things. Peter Magee, whilst still running his own company, has continued to display his technical magic with our plant and machinery as well as coaxing the loan of invaluable equipment from his business associates. We have been delighted that Peter Buck, who joined us as an innocent bystander representing Lichfield Cruising Club, has now become a Director and has been a major driving force in our projects at Tamworth Road and now in Darnford Park.

I must also pay tribute to our other officers who work equally hard on our behalf – Geoff Crook with environmental issues, Mervyn Ainge with publicity and Stefan Szulc who compiles and edits Cut Both Ways. They are the tip of an iceberg of helpers who have increased in numbers recently, especially among our work force on the Lichfield Canal. This is a welcome and healthy sign but must not conceal the important fact that, like all voluntary organisations, we always need new members, especially active ones. Age pursues us all relentlessly and there is a constant need to regenerate the Board of Directors to bring in new skills, enthusiasm and resilience. This is especially so on our marketing and fund-raising side where an increasing burden has been falling on a small and diminishing band of enthusiasts. Illness has reduced numbers in this important area and we appeal to anyone who enjoys meeting the public and can spare just a few hours a month to come forward. People can be wary of making commitments but, like swimming, it is lovely once you are in the water. David and Mavis Moore have properly reduced their involvement and so we still urgently need a Director of Marketing and a Chairman for the Trading and Marketing Committee.

We have recently spent a morning discussing our strategy for the years ahead, something we have tended to push aside in our regular monthly Council meetings. We deliberately asked ourselves some of the difficult questions which need addressing. I am very aware that we spend much of our time and effort on the Lichfield Canal, apparently relegating the Hatherton to a secondary position. Much of this is down to prioritisation and time management – we are often hard-pressed. We decided that we are, and must continue to be, a “one Trust two canals” organisation. With more active members we might consider two separate management committees within the Trust but this seems unlikely in the short to medium term. Thus, while we are committed to major projects on the Lichfield we continue to nurture the Hatherton and to safeguard its route and interests until time and resources allow a more active situation.

And so, from people to places. Undoubtedly, the main area of activity in 2011 was based on Tamworth Road in Lichfield. Intense activity from our team of volunteers has transformed the whole “track” from above Lock 25 to the A51. Within this site we saw the contract work carried out by McPhillips to return pound 26 to water. The standard of work was excellent but the outcome was somewhat disappointing due to failings in old brickwork which were not within the contract. Remedial work by Trust volunteers continues with constant monitoring of water levels. An essential part of the operation was the removal of a section of the “Big Pipe” which allowed us to access a steady, if small, regular supply of water. This has led to a series of detailed discussions with the Environment Agency over abstraction rights and the need to maintain the flow to Darnford Brook. Below Lock 26 and onwards to A38 turn and then the A51 our volunteers have built the substantial towpath wall, created a weir by the A38 and continued the construction to just short of A51 along the first diversion from the original route.

Towards the end of 2011 attention turned to Darnford Park which belongs to the District Council just across the A51. With the prospect of a major package for the commemoration of the Queen's Diamond Jubilee with reforestation the Trust has planned a scheme which will lead to major earthworks which can be used later to build locks 27/28 as a staircase and prepare for the crossings of both the major roads. This is the ongoing project for 2012. Applications for funding are well-advanced.

Acquiring land and safeguarding the route are always the first concern of restoration organisations. As we work to complete the first two phases of the Lichfield restoration, as defined in the Atkins Study, we must complete the land portfolio. Much of the route between Lock 24 and Huddlesford is owned or leased by the Trust or is in the hands of supportive councils. Some gaps remain and we are hopeful, that we can soon announce a major land acquisition near Cappers Bridge. We continue in friendly discussion with Lichfield Cruising Club over the section from Cappers Bridge to the junction. In this same area we continue to monitor the published plans for HS2 which do not, at present, seem to be threatening. At the other end of the canal we have been able to keep Ogley Cottage in good shape with the support of an excellent tenant. We are aware of changes of ownership between the top lock and M6 Toll and will make contact with any new owners.

On the Hatherton we have been pleased that there has been no intrusion by the builders at Churchbridge and have investigated the encroachment by property owners at Calf Heath, which although a nuisance will not be a serious problem. We have continued friendly discussions with the owners of Little Wyrley Estate concerning our route across their land. Discussions also continue with Staffordshire County Council as we bid to acquire a small parcel of land in their ownership. I must also pay tribute to Denis Cooper who continues to supervise our maintenance parties on the BW owned section, despite some health problems. We are also grateful to his dedicated team.

There is no doubt much which I have failed to mention and possibly people I have failed to thank and for any such omissions I can only apologise. We approach the silver jubilee of the founding of the Trust and we hope to record this properly in the year ahead. However, it is not the survival of the Trust we really want to stress. It will only be when it can be wound up with its job done that we can really celebrate. I thank everyone, active and armchair members alike, for all their help and encouragement over the past nearly quarter century. Maybe, just maybe, the end of the beginning is in sight.

Brian Kingshott
St David's Day 2012