



All Party Parliamentary Group for the Waterways

General Meeting

“History and Architecture of our Waterways”

Wednesday 11th May 2022
from 9.45 am to 11.00 am by video meeting

Present

Michael Fabricant MP (Chair), Simon Baynes MP, Lord Bradshaw, Lord German, Baroness Golding, Lord Hodgson of Astley Abbots and Baroness Randerson.

Apologies had been received from Baroness Jones of Moulscombe and Dr Liam Fox MP.

Also in attendance were officials from Defra and representatives of navigation authorities and waterway organisations.

Welcome and Introductions

Michael Fabricant MP, Chair of the Group, welcomed parliamentarians and representatives of waterway organisations to the video meeting. Presentations from 3 well known speakers from the field of waterways heritage and architecture were followed by a general question and answer session.

Sue O’Hare, Deputy Chair of The Inland Waterways Association (secretariat) ran through the Zoom video meeting functions and explained how attendees could raise questions later on.

Michael Fabricant MP then introduced the first speaker, Liz McIvor, historian, author and TV presenter, who presented on “the physical remains of industrial waterways and their role in our future landscapes”. After describing her background and how she got involved with presenting TV programmes about waterways history, Liz noted that the earliest settlements were based on access to rivers for food, farming, and later for trade and manufacture. Massive engineering feats led up to the golden age of canal building and the key routes that were constructed in the late 1700s. These were based on regional economics, not designed to be a network, and there were often trade wars between different canal companies. They become joined up but this wasn’t how they were originally envisaged. The landscape and surroundings would have been stark and barren when they were first built.

Liz gave some examples of canals influencing the landscape today, including the former canal and tunnel built by James Brindley at the Wet Earth Colliery and now in a nature reserve popular with visitors, the use of early canals as passenger transport, and the involvement of the Co-operative Movement in the Manchester Ship Canal. Not all canals were economically viable when they were first built, but many, such as the Caledonian Canal, have become viable more recently through tourism, with £1.13 billion direct spend by people visiting that canal these days.

The “Meccano” bridge, built by volunteers on the Manchester Bolton & Bury Canal, is an example of volunteers who have been restoring the waterways since Tom Rolt and Robert Aickman founded the Inland Waterways Association in 1946. A huge amount is owed to the volunteers of the 1960s and 70s who laid the foundation for waterways to be reopened. Support from stakeholders and parliamentarians is essential for this work in looking after the waterways network for leisure, regeneration and economic investment in the regions, to continue.

Michael Fabricant MP then introduced the second speaker. Jo Bell, poet, author and industrial archaeologist, presented on the importance of the culture of our canals as well as the built heritage. The canal system is one of Britain’s great contributions to civilisation. It’s an industrial monument which began the industrial revolution which shaped the world we are living in now. It represents histories which are not often told. As we think about the culture of the canals all that is left of the people who worked on them is the structures that are left and the working boats that carried the cargoes.

Much of the canal trade centred on Birmingham, and people were working on them into the 1970s. The working boat families’ culture is embedded in the boats, as that was all they had. The sense of self as a canal person includes the environment and looking after it.

Jo mentioned the importance of the roses and castles canal art, polished brass, lace plates and rag rugs, crochet and lace. They are portable crafts, and are things that can be made with one hand while steering a boat. The way that water cans are positioned on a cabin roof, and the way that ropes are handled, are also part of the working boat culture. Much of this is invisible to most visitors. This is a choreography of the way that the boats move, and the people move, and the locks are operated. They were very pragmatic traditions and the boat people had a real pride in them. There are still a handful of working boaters delivering coal, and these are the listed buildings of the waterways as surely as the aqueducts and bridges are.

Jo has been living afloat for the last 10 years and wanted to draw attention to the contemporary boat dwelling situation in London as a discrete bubble. The leisure boat industry of the 1970s has moved on to a new residential age of canals, with about 20,000 people estimated to live on the canals. This is the size of a small town, but all moving around England and Wales. It is both national and super-local. There are disproportionate numbers of people who are vulnerable living on boats who need to be taken into account.

The culture is regional. Each canal was built by its own company and has its own signature and style of lock gear, with different architecture.

Jo concluded her presentation by noting that it was moving to live on a boat which started her own creative career. She feels that the boat dwelling community is going to get much

larger – most professionals can now work from anywhere, technology makes this possible, turbulent economy over next few years will see more people moving on to boats, and this needs to be considered by government and decision makers.

Hugh Pearman MBE, architecture critic and author, concluded the presentations by talking about why architects, planners and developers must respond creatively to our waterways heritage. Hugh chairs IWA's London Region Planning and Heritage Group. There are ways to accommodate new developments which can be mutually beneficial and planning legislation can be used to help this. Towns used to turn their backs on the waterways but large developments now want to front the canals.

Hugh talked about the Georgian and Victorian buildings that we associate with the industrial waterways. He gave an example in Manchester where a former warehouse building, Stubbs Mill, has been renovated into workspace. The developers created new waterspace at Ancoats which became the focal point for the development. Port Loop in Birmingham is a more recent development along a canal arm which has some good quality designs. Alperton in London has some large scale tall buildings rising up either side of the canal, providing a canyon effect in west London. This is part of the changing pattern of use along the canals. A smaller scale development in Hackney near Victoria Park has been built to a more interesting design compared to many other waterside developments in the area.

Canal corridors are often linear conservation areas. This provides a degree of protection, but some canals are not covered by conservation areas at all. A proposed development at the former gas works at Kensall Green will include reinstating a former canal basin. In Paddington a proposal for student accommodation overshadowing the basin was recently turned down by the planning authority.

In Swindon a development has included rebuilding a section of the derelict Wilts and Berks Canal, while a garden village proposed for Tring in the Chilterns will see housing built on the green belt adjacent to the canal.

Questions and Answers/Discussion

Michael Fabricant MP thanked the speakers for their presentations, and invited Jo Bell, former Poet Laureate for the Canals, to recite her poem, Springtime at the Boatyard.

The question and answer session included questions and discussion with MPs and peers as well as representatives from navigation authorities and waterway organisation. Among the issues discussed were better ways of protecting waterways from inappropriate development, the uniqueness of each individual waterway, Conversation Area status and other designations, and the cultural importance of the horse in the history of the waterways.

Robert Moreland, Herefordshire & Gloucestershire Canal – noted that the London residential boat bubble also applies to the west end of the Kennet & Avon Canal with enormous pressures on the infrastructure.

Ivor Caplan noted that one of the great heritage features is the uniqueness of each waterway, and asked how this uniqueness can be retained in the light of cost-savings. Liz McIvor said that in her role in maintaining heritage buildings she has found it is much easier to preserve and maintain natural materials over man-made. Jo Bell observed that

including regional specificity in training sessions can help. Hugh noted that he has seen some encouraging local plans recently from local authorities that means the canal aspect needs to be taken account of by proposed developments.

Simon Baynes MP, Vice Chair of the Group and MP for Clwyd South which includes the Montgomery Canal, thanked the speakers. He mentioned the recent successful Levelling Up bid which will see part of the Montgomery Canal restored, and noted that a recent bid for Wrexham to be City of Culture includes the Pontcysyllte Aqueduct. He noted that it was good to see so many people from the waterway community attending these APPGW meetings.

Terry Cavender, Buckingham Canal Society, suggested that parliamentarians should write to the Department of Levelling Up to encourage partnerships with restoration projects in working with local authorities in applications. Simon Baynes responded that restoration societies should make contact with their local MPs as the sponsor of the projects working with the local authorities.

Ken Burgin, Cotswold Canals Trust, suggested more focus on designation. The Cotswold Canal has one of the longest conservation areas in the country at about 18 miles. This is assumed to be a nature conservation area rather than a heritage conservation area, which can cause problems in vegetation control. He suggested a new designation of "sites of special recreational potential" which would allow the protection of the line of canals for future restoration.

John Yates asked how the forgotten hero of canal history, the horse, can be remembered, and noted that horses were pulling the boats for the first 150 of the 250 years of canal history. Jo Bell suggested that any horse-boating features on canals should be retained, and structures not installed that would impede horse drawn boating in the future, eg railings. The quietness of horse boating is a different way of experiencing the landscape and a good cultural intervention could convey this to people. Liz noted that stabling for canal boat horses has often been lost due to demolition and development.

Summary, actions, and closing remarks

Michael Fabricant noted that the next meeting of the Group will hear from Canal & River Trust about their Defra grant review and will take the form of a hybrid meeting.

Michael Fabricant MP thanked the three speakers on behalf of the All Party Group and closed the meeting.

The presentations from this meeting are available on request from Alison Smedley, APPGW Secretariat by emailing alison.smedley@waterways.org.uk.



The Inland Waterways Association provides the secretariat to the All Party Parliamentary Group for the Waterways.