

Gloucester Rally in support of Fund Britain's Waterways

On 30th September Gloucester Main Dock was filled with 70 boats, of which 30 arrived in procession 8 miles from Saul Junction, finally through Llanthony Bridge to start the proceedings. Many of historical significance they soon moored up making a great spectacle for the assembled press, local MP and senior members of Waterways organisations, local and national. Even the Severn Bore made it a special day, a 5 star, first in 4 years, but unfortunately prevented promised boats from Tewkesbury and Upton upon Severn.

There was then a march from the National Waterways Museum around the additional moored boats in Victoria Basin to the North Quay where The Inland Waterways Association and Canal & River Trust had gazebos. The many potentially affected people: walkers, cyclists, disabled, model boaters, paddleboarders, fishermen were represented. At noon, prompted by the ringing of the historic Atlas Bell, all boaters made as much noise as possible, even an air raid siren was heard. There had been a lot of publicity in advance of the event, organised by the small team in Fund Gloucester's Waterways (FGW), but Gloucester certainly heard there was something to visit!

Speeches then followed, the sound system enabling many of the boaters, some 5 or 6 abreast to hear from their boats. Colin Brooks, Chair of FGW set the local scene reminding that budget constraints had already closed the Gloucester and Sharpness bridges on Tuesdays and limited the hours on other days preventing boaters from moving after work in the evenings. This with the deterring information about dredging had significantly limited the number boats visiting the canal, adversely affecting related businesses including the National Waterways Museum. Neilsens, the internationally renowned ship repairers, a major feature of Gloucester Docks, have been unable to have much business for a year as depths are too shallow. All this before the recently announced cuts are effective. Many of those present had been volunteering to restore and maintain the waterways and remember the dilapidated condition in the early 1960s and do not want them to go back.

Colin said: "In England and Wales there are 5,000 miles of navigable canals and rivers; 1,569 locks which require lock gate renewal every 25 years; 53 Tunnels; 3112 bridges; 370 aqueducts and 74 reservoirs – despite around 800m visits each year this total infrastructure contribute virtually zero income towards their maintenance. The Toddbrook reservoir partial collapse in 2019 risking the village of Whaley Bridge was only saved by prompt action. The emergency repairs cost £10m, the permanent repair is costing a further £16m. As a result, CRT now have to budget £25m reserves from annual income for such a similar occurrence - as none of the structures are insurable. Looking at the disaster of the two dams in Libya recently and the loss of life that occurred there, this accounts why a ruptured dam is on the top 10 risk listed by the government National Security Risk Assessment recently published".

Les Etheridge, former chair of The Inland Waterways Association and Fund Britain's Waterways spoke about the national situation and the risks to many sections of the waterways if not maintained. Waterway projects can regenerate both rural and urban areas and improve the lives of millions of people. Waterways are well placed to improve the

health, wellbeing and longevity of the many people living near them, through increased physical activities and social prescribing. Waterways are blue-green corridors that allow opportunities for reconnecting disparate habitats, biodiversity net gain and improvements for wildlife. Thousands of tonnes of freight are moved every year on our canals and rivers. Transporting goods by water can mean lower carbon emissions whilst also removing hundreds of vehicles from the roads. FBW is a coalition of over 70 organisations representing hundreds of thousands of users and supporters of inland waterways. The next event is the Westminster Campaign Cruise on 14 November, and all are encouraged to sign the Petition.

Ken Burgin, Trustee, on behalf of Cotswold Canals Trust spoke of the importance of the waterways for water transfer and the frustration of the funding and volunteer hours over decades to restore canals to link to a potentially closed network.

Adrian Main on behalf of Avon Navigation Trust explained how they have major flood challenges, get no government funding but suffered reduced income in the last year as fewer boats are travelling through to Gloucester.

Richard Parry (CEO) then spoke on behalf of Canal & River Trust explaining the challenges even at current levels of funding and that inflation is increasing costs, before the proposed reductions in government funding. Richard Graham, MP for Gloucester, thanked the organisers and explained that Gloucester Docks were one of the main attractions to the city and pledged his support to keep them operating and looked forward to the Bicentenary celebrations in 2027.

Senior members of Herefordshire and Gloucestershire Canal Trust also attended.

After the speeches senior members of the Canal & River Trust regional team were available in their gazebo to answer the many concerns expressed to the FGW team. Many boaters are anxious that the further increases in licence and mooring fees they are suffering, for reduced hours and facilities. This will result in reduced boat activity which on many canals will allow weeds to encroach and cause navigations to close through silting, towpaths to be impassible etc. Richard Parry had detailed conversations with Neilsens, Richard Graham, lead volunteer of Kathleen & May and was interviewed by the BBC and ITV crews present.

As well as good coverage on BBC, ITV and local press, some positive moves have already started since the Rally, the local Canal and River Trust is willing to support Gloucester City Council's interest in the Docks 200 celebrations. Bessie Ellen, built in 1904 and one of the last remaining sailing ketches, was stuck just outside the docks during the Rally, but coincidentally some spot dredging was done after the Rally and has now made her way into the Dock.