



FUND BRITAIN'S WATERWAYS

Middle Level Commissioners (MLC) Session

Wednesday November 2024 from 10:30 to 13:00

Welcome and Introductions

Paul Burrows acknowledged the contribution of Chris Howes – passionate local boater and MLC Navigation Advisory Committee Chair, who passed away recently and will be sorely missed.

1. Introduction to the Middle Level Navigation

What is the history of the Middle Level navigation, what are the key features and structures and their condition, how is it managed, how many staff and how was the navigation funded before Middle Level Act 2018?

Paul Burrows explained that the Middle Level is part of the Fens of East Anglia, between the North and South Levels, and the Bedford Level. Navigation and flood risk management are intertwined, as the challenges and pressures affect both. The MLC commenced with an Act of Parliament in 1862. They were preceded by drainage commissioners, who wanted to drain land for agricultural purposes, from around 1630. This was incredibly controversial at the time – there were challenges from local people and from commercial navigation. Originally a gravity fed system was used to drain the area with the first gravity outfall at Salters Lode. Welches Dam was the second outfall, created by Vermuyden, providing a connection between the Nene and the Great Ouse. He said that there is a deep history to the Middle Level that started before the golden age of the canals and they are not rivers or canals, a hybrid of the two. They manage controls at the outfall at St German's pumping station (St German's is 90ys old this year). The catchment covers a large area from Peterborough to Huntingdon, with 24 smaller Internal Drainage Boards pumping into the Middle Level system using about 70 pumps..

The whole system could be considered as a navigation structure, 190km of waterways, of which 160km are navigable, and 360km raised embankments. They look after the sluices at either end (Stanground and Salters Lode) and locks at Ashline, Marmont Priory, Horseyway and Lodes End as well as the aqueduct at Mullicourt where Well Creek goes over the Main Drain. Well creek is topped up from the Main Drain by a pump at the aqueduct. The pump will need replacing before too long. There are also plenty of smaller sluices and bypasses. E.g. Horsey Toll.



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The condition of the assets is mixed from a navigation perspective. There is an ongoing lock gate replacement programme – £100k to replace each and ideally they would do one per year. 4 sets of gates need to be replaced. Lots of investment in banks and aqueduct pump needed.

John Revell asked if the majority of the Middle Level is below sea level. Paul Burrows confirmed that yes that is the case. Holme is the lowest area in the country and it's quite a feat to get it raised up to the tidal river due to land shrinkage.

Simon Judge noted that it is important not to separate out navigation and flood defence as this is a debate that uses a lot of energy in other navigation authorities.

Commissioners are anyone who owns over 100 acres and who benefits from the MLC's activity. They have roles and responsibilities for managing the waterways, so they need people to carry out those responsibilities on their behalf. The staff structure has varied over the years, now a purpose-built office in March. The Commissioners also look after the admin and governance for 29 other Internal Drainage Boards (IDBs) as well as MLC. They are a small organisation with 40 staff. In terms of purely navigation focused staff, there are just three, however everyone else is involved in supporting both flood, water resources and navigation activities.

Staff consists of:

- Paul Burrows CEO, figure head for the organisation, on social media etc.
- Business support team who look after issuing licences etc
- Finance team to administer the license fees, payments and undertake accounting
- Ecology and environmental services manager,
- Legal lead clerk
- Chief engineer (with teams who report to her e.g. fitters, M&E team who maintain work boats etc)
- Navigation officer
- 2 two part time lock keepers
- Operations dept: Workforce who operate assets consists of 8 members plus contractors.
- 2 gangs work on vegetation management - one flail mowing and one on channel weed.
- Technical, regulatory team who manage new developments etc.

For navigation we have a monthly catch up to review progress, issues and upcoming plans.



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2. Financial accounts of the Middle Level Navigation

How have navigation matters been funded since the 2018 Act, what contribution is made by boat licensing fees, who provides the major part of the funding and is there any funding from the public purse or individual donations or elsewhere?

The main source of funding is the drainage rate payers i.e. local land owners/occupiers. The MLC receives c £2 million from them. The original Act was just agricultural, but now it's more mixed use e.g. housing and businesses. In the 1970s that role was taken on by district councils who now raise the levy for non-agricultural interests. The MLC receive c£600k from Fenland District Council and c£200k from other local councils. The levy is now woven into Council Tax. The Councils used to get it reimbursed from Central Government but this is no longer the case. Councils are lobbying for a modernised system of funding. The MLC receive some investment from EA and income from smaller IDBs as well as some from developers. They are also eligible for capital flood risk management grant in aid from Defra. In 2018, boat licence fees came in.

Paul Burrows explained he had researched how was navigation funded pre boat licence fee:

In 1848 the Wisbech Canal was opened between Wisbech and Upwell/Outwell. Traffic ceased in 1922 and the canal was filled in. While operating, the regulations were set, and the Commissioners charged £100 for a year's commercial traffic, per vessel. This equates to £10k in to today's money. Navigation was therefore a huge source of investment in the MLC – likely more than drainage rates. When commercial vessels stopped they lost this income, so the navigation went into disrepair, until the Well Creek Trust came about. With the MLC Act in 2018, some income from navigation was restored.

Accounts are published and transparent. Income from boats is around 200k/year, with navigation expenditure around £400k-600k. The MLC is not eligible for any govt grant funding for navigation and can't apply for capital grants for navigation. Indirect funding from Local Government is received via special levies, and they are keen to explore options to get more funding from elsewhere.

Simon Judge asked if there are any heritage assets that could be a source of funding?



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Paul Burrows said that the sluice structures are very old, they could potentially exploit them better and add value through interpretation. He also suggested that it would be good to encourage boaters away from the Link Route. European money in the 90s got the locks extended to allow larger boats through and they are keen to explore more options.

3. Middle Level Boat licensing fees and charges

How have MLC determined the level of navigation charges for boats based on the Middle Level, for those in transit and for those with Anglian passes and CRT/EA Gold licences, what problems have arisen including enforcement and are any changes proposed?

Currently the MLC mirrors the EA charging structure for ease, and to avoid wasting resources on designing a new charging structure from scratch. The Anglian Pass partnership allows unrestricted access to the region and is more efficient than individual visitor licences. It has an annual increase clause woven into it. The MLC had looked at a deal with the CRT/EA Gold licence scheme but determined that there is not enough demand for it to warrant changing the agreement. However, they are looking at a subsidiary deal that gives some of the Gold Licence money back to MLC. It looks likely that the EA are putting up their fees by 9%, and the MLC are considering whether to follow. Paul Burrows said that they think it may be time to disconnect from that now they have enough knowledge. A decision will be made in January. For comparison some drainage rate payers have had an 18% increase.

The 2018 act was quite controversial, and as a result some boats have left the system. But licences are increasing/holding through enforcement and working with marinas, however there is only one officer who also covers the lock keepers' days off so only has 3 days on licences etc. They have had had success in using solicitors, but it is expensive. They are now working with the EA at the borders of the system, not allowing unlicensed boats to pass, and a debt management approach is being trialled as well as an updated boat removal protocol for unlicensed boats, a focus is needed through March town. They also need to work with the police around antisocial behaviour.

Sue O'Hare asked if there is a Continuous cruising policy? Paul Burrows said that there is no requirement to have a home mooring, and some people don't have a mooring and overstay the limit at mooring sites.



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4. Planned improvements to navigation

What improvements to navigation have been made since the introduction of charges, what work remains to be done to achieve the IWA recommendations for the provision of facilities on the link route between Stanground and Salter's Lode locks and when will this work be completed?

Paul Burrows said that new moorings on Ramsey High Lode had been delivered. Lock moorings had been refurbished. 9 new rural moorings, have been installed -cheap quick rural moorings with footpath access. Marmont Priory lock gates have been replaced and they have desilted Salters Lode lock. There has been a focus on abandoned boats, and they have installed visitors moorings and water at their offices. They are undertaking a review of rural moorings, taking recommendations into account and will adjust according to feedback in efficient ways while out doing other work. New locations have been identified. There was a commitment as the Act went through the House of Lords which requires 20% of navigation income to be ringfenced to meet IWA minimum standards on facilities. Fenland District Council provide facilities at March but to meet the minimum standard, would need facilities at either end of the system to meet that. Stanground is easier to resolve than Salter's Lode as they own a lot of the land around it. Vehicles can now get in to install and use facilities, so they are waiting on agreements with Peterborough City Council and weather limitations. They're hoping to also get a welfare unit in there for relief lock keepers. Elsan and rubbish are also planned but no timescale right now.

They are also waiting for permission to get a waterpoint at Salters Lode but are unsure it is the right place for Elsan and rubbish points. The MLC are in discussion with Well Creek Trust to explore opportunities in the villages. Beyond that, other opportunities are being explored e.g. Ramsey, Benwick.

End of garden moorings would be welcomed but the practicality of land ownership is the limiting factor.

5. Denver crossing.

What is being done now to sort out the siltation problems on the tidal crossing before next year's boating season and in future?

Paul Burrows said that anything beyond Salters Lode isn't in MLC control and while they may have opinions on it they can't influence it directly. The EA are planning to desilt ahead of next navigation season, but not sure what the longer term plans are. It has always been a challenge but it has been exacerbated by sea level and bed level rise - silt comes in faster



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than it can be taken out. A climate change risk assessment specific to the Fens was published on 19th November, which paints a stark picture for the future. The Fens will be harder hit than other areas and there are big challenges ahead. Hopeful that the Salters Lode to Denver crossing will be open next year, however a Plan B may be needed if that tidal stretch is no longer navigable and it is wise to have discussion on it, especially with businesses reliant on it. Focus on their side of the navigation.

Paul Burrows explained that the reason the MLC chose not to open Salters Lode until the silt had been cleared was the fear that the silt could have contained a log or detritus that could have risked the guillotine gate being unable to close. The safety of the tidal defence was paramount.

He said there is a bigger picture that is beyond the management of individual navigation authorities. Controlling factors are climate and weather etc not money but we need to buy time to adapt.

Paula Syred said that Fox Narrowboats need the information on next season as early as possible in case they need to refocus their business.

6. Monks Lode

Are MLC's navigation notes and website being updated to include the increased length of navigable water on Monks Lode and should this be publicised more widely?

Paul Burrows explained that John Revell and Mike Daines have explored beyond the limit of navigation at Monk's Lode and this is supported by the MLC. Regulations still apply and the navigation notes will be updated. MLC see it as a good news story and a press release from IWA/MLC would be welcome.

7. Fens reservoir near Chatteris

Are MLC aware of any proposals from the sponsors of the scheme to use water transport during the construction phase and to fund improvements specifically for navigation and are their other possible funding sources for improving navigation as part of this project?

The Fens reservoir will be reliant on MLC so they are working closely with Anglian Water. They see the opportunities are greater than the risk. It will be a new tourism destination and



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they are exploring freight options and navigation benefits as well as ensuring disruptions are minimised

8. Best practice

Are there any areas where the MLC considers it is using best practice and other navigation authorities might be able to learn from it, and conversely any areas where MLC feels it could benefit from other navigation authorities' experience and sources of funding?

Paul Burrows explained that the MLC have not got the capacity to go out and about a lot, but they do share best practice with EA neighbours, and CRT especially regarding facilities and licences, but they have not got the capacity to do more. They put a lot of effort into promoting themselves and the work they do which has been welcomed by boaters.

9. The impact of recent environmental legislation

How has the work of MLC itself been impacted by new Environmental legislation and how does it affect the work of volunteers carrying out improvements and maintenance of on the Middle Level or indeed on other navigations well away from any environmentally sensitive site?

Paul Burrows said that there is a lot of older environmental legislation but the 2020 Environment Act is different because the impetus is now to enhance not just conserve the environment. He said that the ecology of drainage ditches is undersold, they're basically inverted hedgerows. The MLC is keen to enable volunteering, however with a couple of recent pieces of volunteer led activity there have been issues so we need to ensure work is well planned.

Les Etheridge said that IWA's Waterway Recovery Group are happy to support waterways recovery with good H&S best practice.

10. The future

Finally, what does MLC believe to be the major challenges and opportunities for the Middle Level navigation in future years and what would enable MLC to increase the level of public benefit and economic growth in the area around the MLC?



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Paul Burrows said that the major challenge is climate change -it is impossible to separate the impact on navigations and other waterways. Lots of infrastructure is also reaching the end of its life, which is compounded by lack of public investment.

He said that the biggest opportunity is the planned Fens Reservoir which will provide a chance for local towns to embrace their waterways.

Les Etheridge asked what FBW can do. Paul Burrows said the most important thing is to highlight the importance of our waterways – not just funding from Government but also from business. He said it is important not to separate navigation from flood control and water transfer. The local MPs, Steve Barclay, Terry Jermy, Ben Obese-Jecty are all quite interested in the issue.

Thanks were recorded to Paul for his time and commitment.