Wilts & Berks Canal Trust
Notes of the “Open Forum” held after the AGM
on Saturday 17th October 2015

At the beginning of the meeting a number of presentations were made, as below.

- The Reorganisation of the Trust, and the Future  Roderick Bluh
- A Chief Executive’s View  Jonathan Till
- The Proposals for Restructure  Chris Coyle
- A Revised Restoration Strategy  Ken Oliver
- Progress on Masterplanning  Jock Mackenzie

The content of those is on the website, so is not reproduced here. However there were a number of questions to the speakers, which are included here with the responses.

Q. – You mentioned the Chippenham and Calne branches; are we planning to restore those?
A.  Yes, we see it as a strategic site for development as a trip boat site. Kath Hatton pointed out the route back into Chippenham would be different from the historic line, which is now lost.

Q. - With the focus on the strategic sites that Jock mentioned, what will happen to the other areas along the line?
A.  RB responded that these are still seen as very important, and work will carry on, although we will have to apply a degree of prioritisation.

Q. – Under the reorganisation, what will be the process to appoint Trustees and the Executive?
A.  Trustees will be co-opted and nominated, as currently. The Executive posts will have to be filled quickly, and we will invite expressions of interest, followed by interview by a selection panel. The branch chairs will be non-voting members of the Executive.

We hope to have all the details sorted out by the end of the year, ready for an EGM in early 2016 to confirm all the arrangements.

Q. - Given the known difficulties in Shrivenham and the Vale of the White Horse, what are we planning to do?
A.  KO responded that it is a very challenging situation. The Vale of the White Horse Local Plan is entering into Examination in Public, but the entire focus currently is on issues of housing. RB confirmed that he has arranged a meeting with the leader of VWHDC.

Q. - What are the plans for the long term ownership of the canal, and ensuring there is sufficient income?
A. JM replied that there are different solutions and structures for different canals, and we will be developing our plans as part of the Masterplanning. We are already conscious of the need to have enough income to maintain the canal.

Q. - Once we have boats to Melksham, are we planning to push on further north?
A. RB responded that yes, that is very much part of the strategy of building strategic sustainable sections, and then joining them up. An example of this would be joining Swindon and Royal Wootton Bassett.

Q. - Restoring the North Wilts Canal depends on progress by Cotswolds Canals Trust and they are making very slow progress.
A. KO responded that work by CCT is happening at the eastern end, at Lechlade, and issues blocking progress are being dealt with. However it is well known that CCT are giving priority to phases 1a and 1b of their plan, at the western end.

The remainder of the AGM then took place.

After the AGM the presentation of awards was made:

**Pick of the Branches** John Laverick presented the award to MCC Branch.

**Tony Davy Memorial Bowl** Juanita Poulton presented the award to Chris Coyle.

The Award for the branch which had recorded the most volunteer hours was presented to MCC Branch.

The **Tony Davy Award** for the branch which had made the biggest increase in hours recorded was awarded to the Boat Team.

The Chairman thanked John Laverick and Juanita Poulton for making these presentations.

Kath Hatton gave a brief summary of the progress in Fundraising. There is an increasing number of projects which need funding, and some aspects such as studies are less easy to raise funds for.

She went on to highlight WBCT’s participation in the CRT ‘Living Waterways’ awards, where the Heritage Days organised by MCC branch were commended by the judges.

She then introduced the Prize Draw. She was pleased to report that the Draw had generated more than £4,500 for the Trust, which was a highly creditable result. The proceeds will be used towards restoration of the canal.
The 200 Club, which has been running for two years, had again been successful, generating over £2,500 which had been used for equipment purchases. Jeff and Linda Daws had agreed to run it again for the New Year, and members were urged to buy tickets.

There followed an Open Forum of Questions and Answers.

**Q - Can you tell us the number of members per branch?**
A. CC replied that he did not have that information to hand but will publish it in the next edition of *Dragonfly*.

**Q – Given the demographic of the membership, what is being done to attract new and younger members?**
A. RB said that this is a common problem for many voluntary organisations; we are learning about it, and need to develop a strategy for engaging with younger people. It was noted that MCC branch has made strides in this area, and has developed educational materials which could be made available to other branches.

**Q – What is the total membership?**
A. KH replied that it is about 2,650 and there has been a heartening rise over the past year.

**Q – Will water voles be a problem at Studley Grange once restoration is complete?**
A. CC responded that they are only a problem when we want to carry out work, and we take the necessary mitigation measures. KO added that water voles and wildlife in general help with the project, as they are an important part of the overall story of the benefits of the canal.

**Q – In the Reorganisation Q and A you stated that: ‘The Trust may be funded from ‘Advance Payment Gains’ – could you explain, and indicate what level of funding is expected?’**
A. JM replied that financiers for the overall development will provide funding for the Trust, but they are not willing to commit until landowners and other parties have signed up. Detailed negotiations with landowners are about to start.

**Q – Why has the Wanborough PC meeting been cancelled; who ordered this? This is the third time it has happened, and credibility is now lost.**
A. JM replied that the Eastern Villages situation at Swindon is complicated; the situation is complicated by the lack of an overall masterplan by Swindon Borough Council. The Trust’s current preferred route is the best engineering solution, but may not be the best for enabling development needed to provide funding for building the canal. We are therefore looking at alternative ways to
add value. We need to formulate a coherent strategy for presentation to others such as the councils.

**Q – The Vale of the White Horse seems to have its own particular issues concerning political support for the canal, council requirements, and their local plan. How does CoM or the new organisation intend to tackle this?**

**A.** RB responded that we are planning on direct engagement with the council; we are in contact with the leader, Mathew Barber, and want to discuss the overall situation, including priorities for funding and the use of S106 monies.

**Q – The Lichfield and Hatherton Canal Trust seems to have been successful in engaging celebrities to assist with fundraising. Comments?**

**A.** KH noted that Timothy West has been very supportive of WBCT – he did a voiceover in the past. – KO noted that a team is being brought together to raise the profile of the Wilts & Berks, but we need a coherent strategy and story to tell.

**Q – What is the status of the Thames Water reservoir at Abingdon?**

**A.** KO gave an update; the reservoir is still an option, but latest information suggests it will not be in their plans before 2030. The Trust is meanwhile intending to carry on with restoration.

**Q – In view of the need for funding, should we raise membership fees?**

**A.** This is something we look at from time to time, but we deliberately keep the fees low in order to encourage membership. When it comes to political support, or impressing funders, the number of members counts.

**Q – There does not seem to be any advertising in Dragonfly, which would help pay for the costs of producing and distributing it.**

**A.** We have tried in the past, but need to find someone with the skills to lead the campaign to generate advertising.

The Chairman drew the Open Forum to a close.