

Somersetshire Coal Canal Society

Restoration policy – Protecting the Route

The Somersetshire Coal Canal Society is registered as a Charitable Incorporated Organisation (reg no 1207513) with the following objectives:

- To advance the education of the general public in the history of the Somersetshire Coal Canal by carrying out historical research and by providing information in published documents and in public meetings.
- To promote the conservation, protection and restoration to a waterway of the physical and natural environment of the Somersetshire Coal Canal and its structures for the benefit of the general public.

Overview

Canal restoration is always a long-term project, relying as it does on Local Authority and public support, funding and landowner agreement. The Somersetshire Coal Canal Society's approach to restoration follows four key phases.

Works are expected to follow a 'string of pearls' approach where different sections of the route are at different stages of restoration at any one time. The four key phases are:

Protect the Route - to ensure that the historic route, plus any necessary diversions, is protected from destruction or development using local planning legislation.

Conserve - Conservation typically includes vegetation management and the protection of canal structures at risk of further deterioration. Conservation is an essential and ongoing activity as shrubs and saplings growing in the bed of the canal are likely to destroy the original puddling clay bed and any roots that penetrate stone structures have the potential to destroy those structures over time.

Repair – Many of the historic canal structures have suffered significant damage since the canal was abandoned. A programme of repair will be undertaken to rebuild the historic canal structures along the route, many of which are now in various states of disrepair.

Restore - The Society's long-term aim is to restore the full length of the northern arm of the canal to Dundas Wharf to water. Restoration brings all the previous steps together to create a vibrant and positive waterway environment.

Protecting the Route

The Society acknowledges that the restoration of the northern arm of the canal to water is likely to take several decades to fully achieve. Volunteer work parties have already been actively engaged in conservation and repair activities at various locations for some years, with a current focus at Paulton & Timsbury Basins and at Combe Hay Lock Flight & Midford Aqueduct.

Whilst these activities continue to conserve and repair selected locations on the historic route it is essential that, at the same time, the remaining lengths of canal are protected from destruction or development. Where development upon the line of the canal has already blocked the historic route, it is essential that we should agree and protect minor route

diversions to maintain the integrity of the canal. These diversions will be designed in such a way as to mitigate any detrimental impact on local landowners or householders.

The evidence of canal restoration schemes throughout the UK, particularly in rural areas, is that they significantly increase biodiversity, enhance the natural environment and stimulate the rural economy. B&NES planning policy already recognises that the historic remains and route of the Somersetshire Coal Canal are key components of the Green Infrastructure Strategy and have committed to support proposals that seek to conserve and enhance their significance.

The Somersetshire Coal Canal Society has submitted proposals to the B&NES Planning team as part of the consultation phase of the Local Plan to request that the current protection of the route of the northern arm of the canal should be enhanced by extending the area protected from development to include essential diversions that avoid several dwellings that have been constructed on the historic route. Without these diversions it will be impossible to achieve the public benefits that will be brought by returning the canal to water from Paulton / Timsbury Basins to its junction with the Kennet and Avon Canal at Dundas Wharf.

The sympathetic restoration of the Somersetshire Coal Canal to water offers the opportunity to deliver important leisure, wellbeing and environmental benefits within the Cam and Midford valleys. The Society's policy is that this should be achieved, in association with public bodies, landowners and homeowners, in a way that mitigates any disturbance caused by the restoration. While the Society anticipates that the return of the canal to water will be welcomed by the majority of local residents, many of whom will benefit directly from the new waterway and amenities, it is fully committed to respect landowner / householder interests and consents in doing so.

Author: Martin Turner.