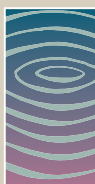


Towpaths for the Future

Seminar Proceedings

20 June 2007

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Towpaths for the Future

Seminar Proceedings
Tullamore Court Hotel,
Tullamore,
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Contents

Foreword	4
Introduction	5
Session 1	
Chair: Dr. Caro-lyne Ferris, Chair of the Inland Waterways Committee, the Heritage Council	7
The regeneration of the Thames navigation, Eileen McKeever, Waterways Manager for the UK Environment Agency	8
The economic value of towpath activities, Glenn Millar, Economic Development Manager of British Waterways	13
Current and future activities on the towpaths in Ireland, Éanna Rowe, Head of Marketing and Communications, Waterways Ireland	17
Session 2	
Chair: Brian Cassells, Inland Waterways Committee Member, the Heritage Council	20
Healthy walking – Slí na Sláinte, Tanya Comber, The Irish Heart Foundation	21
Cycling and walking on the towpaths of the Lagan and Newry Canals, Steven Patterson, Sustrans	25
The potential for horse riding on towpaths, Pat Somerville, Access Officer in Scotland for British Horse Society	29
Waterways heritage for all, Phil Chambers, CEM Ltd (Heritage & Greenspace Consultants-UK)	33
Managing towpaths or walking routes – antisocial behaviour, Edward Moss, British Waterways	37

FOREWORD

The inland waterways of Ireland and their towpaths are a wonderful resource with the potential to benefit the economies of the many counties through which they pass, and the health of the people who live there. Properly managed, they can provide safe areas for walking, jogging, horse-riding, and the development of angling, boating, and other tourism activities.

Hosting this seminar on the future of Ireland's towpaths is very timely as it coincides with an in-depth study, *Valuing Heritage in Ireland*, which identified the restoration of rivers and canals for amenity as the top priority for public spending. 29% of the public wished to see additional funds directed towards inland waterways and the restoration of rivers, canals, and lakes along with their associated facilities.

The study also revealed that people's main motivation to preserve heritage was personal health. When asked why heritage should be protected, 68% felt that protecting and enhancing our natural heritage for walks, enjoyment, and recreation is vital for health protection and physical wellbeing. Carefully maintained towpaths can provide opportunities for many to avail of the health benefits of exercising while enjoying their local heritage.

Towpaths were originally built so that horses could tow boats and barges laden with goods and passengers. Although the waterways are no longer needed for transportation, and their original use has become redundant, towpaths have many other potential uses. There is a renewed interest in the restoration and reuse of towpaths for recreational purposes because the majority of them present safe and level pathways, often in highly scenic areas. This is living heritage.

The towpath and the waterway are inextricably linked. For example, UK studies show that the spectacle of boats moving on the water and going through the locks contributes to the enjoyment of towpath users. Both towpaths and waterways offer economic benefit to the wider community since they contribute to the attractiveness of the area for regeneration.

In sharing knowledge at this seminar we aim, through understanding, to shine the light on and stimulate interest in Ireland's towpaths and waterways, and the communities that are part of this heritage.

Heritage Council Standing Committee on Inland Waterways

INTRODUCTION

The Heritage Council hosted a seminar on the use of towpaths at the Tullamore Court Hotel on 20 June 2007. The purpose of this seminar was to stimulate debate and ideas about the potential of Ireland's towpaths, including maintenance paths on river navigations, and to examine their economic, recreational, tourism, and heritage potential.

This is needed in the light of the near completion of the Royal Canal restoration, the restoration of the Ulster Canal, and the low levels of usage on existing navigations such as the Grand Canal and the Barrow.

The speakers examined the uses made of towpaths in the UK and in Ireland. Topics included the example of the regeneration of the Thames Navigation, the economic value of towpath activities, walking for health, access for all, anti-social behaviour, and current and future activities on towpaths in Ireland. It is hoped that, by presenting a range of experiences from these islands, new ideas may be stimulated for existing and future navigations in Ireland.

The seminar was broken down into three sessions. These were chaired by Caro-lynn Ferris and Brian Cassells of the Heritage Council Inland Waterways Committee. The speakers were: Eileen McKeever, UK Environment Agency; Glenn Millar, British Waterways; Éanna Rowe, Waterways Ireland; Tanya Comber, Irish Heart Foundation; Steven Patterson, Sustrans; Pat Somerville, Access Officer in Scotland for British Horse Society; Phil Chambers, CEM Ltd (Heritage & Greenspace Consultants-UK); and Edward Moss, British Waterways. The seminar ended with a discussion and a field trip to the towpath in Tullamore.



SESSION 1

Chair: Dr. Caro-lynn Ferris, Chair of Inland Waterways Committee, the Heritage Council

Before I invite our first speaker, I just want to say a few words about why we are here and to put today's events into some kind of context. As most of you know, the Heritage Council was set up in 1995 under the Heritage Act. It's an independent body with statutory responsibility for proposing policies and priorities for the identification, protection, preservation, and enhancement of Ireland natural heritage. Within the 1995 Heritage Act, inland waterways are defined as natural heritage, and the importance of inland waterways is also reflected in the fact that it is one of the Heritage Council's four statutory committees.

Since the Heritage Council brought out its first policy paper on inland waterways in 1999, many changes have taken place in relation to this aspect of our heritage. First of all Waterways Ireland has been set up and their environmental unit has been established. The Heritage Council, in partnership with other organisations, has also carried out five waterway corridors studies. However the vision that was expressed back in 1999 remains the same, and that vision was that Ireland's inland waterways and their corridors should be managed in an integrated broad-based way, conserving the built and archaeological heritage features, protecting their landscape and biodiversity, and recognising that inland waterways are a unique part of our heritage that are fulfilling a new role not envisaged for them originally.

We aim to enhance the enjoyment and appreciation of them as living heritage for both our generation and future generations. So the protection and enjoyment of our waterways in Ireland through imaginative, reuse, and interpretation are themes that the Heritage Council strongly promotes. Inland waterways are living heritage and they should enhance the quality of life for the communities living in their corridors, and also for those that use them.

So I think we have an exciting day, we've got excellent line up of speakers, and without further ado I will welcome our first speaker to the platform Eileen McKeever...

THE REGENERATION OF THE THAMES NAVIGATION

Eileen McKeever, Waterways Manager for the UK Environment Agency

Good morning everybody, I'm really pleased to be here in Tullamore. I'm going to give you an overview of how we've changed the way in which we manage the Thames as a waterway over the last six or seven years. First of all, I'll give you a bit of background. The Thames runs from very rural Gloucestershire, in the south part of the Cotswolds, all the way through to the sea at London. It travels through some major tourist destinations – Oxford, Henley, Marlow, and Windsor – so there's a good mix of urban and rural environments. We manage the river from the source in Gloucestershire right through to Teddington, so we are responsible for the non-tidal Thames, after which the Port of London Authority takes over.

To give you a flavour of the amount of money we spend, particularly from a waterways management perspective, my budget last year was £11.3 million. Of that £4.7 million was capital. That was for investment in infrastructure and came in grant aid from the government. A further £3.7 million comes primarily from boat registration charges. We register every boat on the Thames and they pay according to size. Another £2.9 million comes from the service that my team provides to the Environment Agency, looking after flood risk management, pollution control, and environmental protection generally. To put this into context, the Environment Agency covers England and Wales and has 13,000 employees. The Environment Agency spends about £26 million overall on managing the river.

The river is a multifunctional resource. It looks beautiful, and many people wouldn't see it as being managed, but in fact it's a heavily managed river. It has great biodiversity, provides a home for massive amounts of wildlife, and is also a very important fishery. It includes 65 sites of special scientific interest within 15 kilometres of the river, and it flows through many areas of outstanding beauty. It has 44 lock and weir systems and provides drainage for around 10,000 square meters of the south east of England, so it's really important from a flood risk management perspective. It also supplies two thirds of London's drinking water. It is also a really important leisure destination: locally and regionally, nationally and internationally.

We did a major economic study on the value of the river to the local economy at the end of the 1990s. We needed to convince a lot of people that the river was very important to the local economy. The data is seven years old now, so we need to repeat the study, but at that time the river generated £200,000,000 to the tourist economy and contributed over 70,000 jobs. It is not just the boat businesses on the river that matter to the economy, but also the many pubs, restaurants and local towns: the river is really part of their backbone.

At that time the study showed that we had about 28 million casual local visits to the river. As well as that we had about 14 million specific leisure destination and sports visits. Even though it's quite narrow in places, there are 25 sailing clubs. Thames sailing is a particular activity that's very popular, but rowing is probably the most famous sport on the river and 70% of England's rowing happens on the Thames. Put this together with fishing and you've got some interesting conflicts to resolve! We register about 26,000 boats from rafts all the way through to Dutch barges and some very impressive 'gin palaces'. The Environment Agency also manages fisheries and issues rod licences. We

sell about 200,000 in the Thames region; a lot of them end up being used on the Thames. So it's a really important multi-use facility.

Walking is by far the most popular activity because it's completely free. The Thames Path opened in 1996 and is one of thirteen designated National Trails in England. The trail covers 184 miles, longer than the river itself because in London it covers both sides of the river. It's incredibly popular. It's the most heavily used of the National Trails because it's flat and accessible to anyone from a mother pushing a pushchair to a fit 90-year-old. It goes through London, but it's mostly very rural. The management of the path is coordinated by an organisation called Natural England, formerly the Countryside Agency, but there are many organisations involved with it. We're on the management group because it runs along our navigation, but there are also several highway authorities who have responsibilities. In terms of maintenance the highways authorities pay up to 25% and Natural England pays up to 75%. This differs with each local authority, so it's quite complicated.

Natural England employs about five staff and there are a lot of volunteers for maintenance work. Using volunteers has been very successful. One of the five staff members manages the volunteers, who go out under supervision and do a lot of path clearing.

Constant maintenance is needed to keep it up. We own over 100 small bridges and some very large bridges, and last year we spent about a £1 million replacing towpath bridges, so it is an expensive path to run but it gets so much use that everyone believes that the expense is justified. There are parts of the path which are not riverside as the landowners have not allowed access. In these stretches it diverts from the river, although work is still ongoing to create riverside routes. There are also a lot of circular routes to and from the Thames Path.

Every year there is a lot of work done on public safety. Risk assessments are obviously very important and we are continually trying to make the path more accessible. Last year a lot of gates were replaced and now 41% are accessible. However that means that 60% aren't accessible, so there's a constant programme of improving access. We got involved with the National Trails Office and produced a book of ten accessible walks, with maps. This has been really popular, with lots of people downloading the maps from the website.

The last major survey that was done on the pathway was in 1999, (I know that they're planning to do another survey next year). It was interesting to note that almost all of the walkers using the path are doing short walks, of less than one day, and that not many people undertake the whole path as an extended walk over a number of days. This is a bit different from the other National Trails. The majority of users are locals from within a 30 mile radius, and most are over 35 years old. A lot of the users are retired and a number of these are doing long distance walks, probably over a series of days – a day this week and a day next week.

The National Trails Office did a short snapshot survey in 2005 to gauge the popularity of the trail and what was needed to do to improve it: 70% felt that it was very good and had a good experience; 36% liked the landscape and what they saw when they were out there; and 19% said that they liked the peacefulness. This is interesting for us as a navigation authority because we have the dilemma of 'how much do boats on the water attract people to the river and how much do they detract?' A few people among the 19% said that it would be better if they didn't hear boat engines, but overall the majority felt that the boats were an attraction, even though peacefulness was very important to their experience. In terms of what they wanted more of, it was all about access and better information, especially signposting. We still need to do a lot of work on that and we're looking at more innovative ways of doing it.

In terms of what they want less of, fewer cyclists were suggested. The Thames Path is a designated footpath, not a cycleway. However a lot of cycling does take place on the route. Some sections of the path are designated cycleways and there is a Thames Valley Sustrans trail, which includes little parts of the river. The National Trails policy on cycling doesn't come down hard and fast – you look at different parts of the path and decide what is right for that part. They are looking at turning some of it into a designated bridleway, which will then allow cycling on those parts. I know some research done a few years ago showed that a lot of the issues with mixed use, walking and cycling, were actually in people's minds. They were expecting it to be a problem, but in reality it wasn't. As usual it's the few who spoil it for many, although the introduction of mountain bikes obviously made a difference because they tear up the path.

Now I'm going to leave the towpaths and talk about why we needed to regenerate the Thames. Towards the end of the 1990s the Thames as a waterway was in a fairly serious downward spiral of decline. In 1999 we were 77% down on hire boats from the 1980s. This decline was due to several different things, especially changes in holiday patterns and cheaper flights. At the same time there was less investment in hire boats, so the quality of the product was very poor. In the 1950s we had about 200 marinas and boatyards, but now we're down to 46 businesses on the river. This decline was partially due to the price increase in real estate value along the Thames, and lots of boatyard owners deciding to retire rather than run a boatyard. As a navigation authority we took a very laid-back approach until the late 1990s – 'well you know we're engineers, we provide a lovely river for you, and if you don't want to use it that's your problem and not ours' – but thankfully that attitude changed.

We started an initiative called Thames Ahead, which was all about rejuvenating the river; raising money for investment and infrastructure because our grant aid had gone down; promoting the river and telling people about it; and working with others, because even though we had a role we owned very little land and other people had responsibilities as well. That's when we set up this partnership called the River Thames Alliance. From our perspective it was a way to talk to all of the people who are involved in the river and who have some responsibility for it. It's a 78 member organisation, so it was a matter of getting people to think about the river as a whole rather than within boundaries.

There are 25 riparian local authorities bordering the river. Only three of these cross the river. The River Thames Alliance was about bringing those people together. Other types of organisations were involved; Tourism South East is a very critical one for us, and so are the regional development agencies. The Thames Valley is not renowned for being 'poor' so we are not able to benefit from a lot of European or other funding for deprived areas so we all needed to find the investment ourselves.

So we had 78 organisations, all with slightly different opinions and wanting to do slightly different things. We needed to get people to recognise that there was a decline, and that the river was important to their local economy, and that they ought to be doing something about it. There was also the ongoing issue of the conservation/recreation balance. Do we really want all these boats on the river with their engine noise and their boat wash damaging the banks and the wildlife? It was actually quite hard to get some of the groups who were more concerned about the wildlife aspects of the river to agree a vision of the river that included 'healthy growth', by which we mean sustainable development. It took two years to put our Thames Waterway plan together, with objectives to improve access and facilities, and to protect and enhance the environment.

Promotion is the area in which we've been most successful, and I think we've done some really interesting work on very small budgets. We set up a specific sub-group of the River Thames Alliance

to work on promoting the river and raising its profile, mostly regionally, but in some cases nationally. Tourism South East is the statutory tourism body, and we had to spend a bit of time convincing them that the Thames is actually a very key attraction in their region. Setting up a website was one of the first, and probably one of the best things that we did. It's called www.visitthames.co.uk and we run it very cheaply. We've also done a lot of joint campaigns and been very successful at getting media attention because working as part of a partnership allowed the pooling of resources and we got much bigger bangs for our bucks than if each of the partner organisations did it for themselves. This year we've created a brand and this had been really effective. It's easily recognised and presents the river as a both a landscape to enjoy and water to enjoy.

A question that you're probably asking is: 'Ok, you've invested time and money in this, has it been successful?' Well, if our success criterion was to stop the decline in boat numbers, it has been successful. There is still a long way to go, but there has been a 44% increase in visiting boats, and eventually some of these people will stay on the river. Boats based on the river have gone up by on average by about 4%, so that is slow-but-sure progress. The hire industry itself has been interesting, and there are a lot of difficulties around it because land is so expensive long the Thames. Where a boatyard was sold there is probably either a hotel or a house on the site. I know of businesses that are interested in coming back to the Thames but we can't find a site for them. A lot of the existing hire businesses are investing in bigger and more expensive boats because these are the ones that people are hiring out, so that's on the up as well.

Activity on the website is growing, year on year, month on month, and there are lots more river events and a lot more feeling of activity in general. In terms of investment, in 1999 our capital investment was less the £1 million that we had to spend on the infrastructure – with 44 locks that's not a lot – and we're now investing between £4.5 million and £5 million. Increasing boat license fees isn't always popular, but the government wanted the boaters to pay more. We had some difficult debates, and the license fees are actually going up 12% a year for the next three years. That's been very tough. This year we haven't seen the decline in numbers that was predicted, we may see a fall by year three, but it has helped us in our negotiation with the government. Local authorities are investing in their own moorings, and we need to do more work on that. We've got various companies, from hotels to the local train company, investing from £500 to £5,000 in the marketing work. This is the first year we've asked partners to pay and I've been delighted that they are paying, because before now it has been the statutory organisations who've been putting the money in.

Ok – what have we learned? And, if I'd known then, six or seven years ago, what I know now would we have done it any differently? Seven years ago the world was moving on, passing the river by, and the river was being managed as it had been 40 years previously. We really had to take a big leap to the modern leisure industry where you know your customers really well and you know the product that you're selling. The Thames is a great product but we didn't really understand it, we really didn't understand how the customers wanted it, and the trade certainly didn't understand it. They needed to do a lot of work on product development, particularly the hire boats, and we needed to involve others. You don't just go out and say 'come and help us please'; you really have to sell it to them. You have to understand why they might want to be involved and work really hard with them. This was really important and somebody had to take the lead. Actually that was a very critical step that the Environment Agency took as a navigation authority. We're a bit different from British Waterways; we're an authority with regulatory power but we don't own the river, so actually it was quite hard work to convince our bosses that we ought to take the lead.

So we're definitely not finished, but we've made a very good start. We've established a much more market-focused and customer-focused approach. We need to stick to the waterway plan that we spent a lot of time creating, and the partnership needs nurturing. You don't just set up a partnership

and think 'oh there it is' and go away and leave it. I have a member of staff who spends most of their time just keeping in touch with people, cajoling them and getting them involved. We have to respond to customer issues quickly as a navigation authority, and there are always issues to work on. Thank you very much.



Walkers on the Thames Path
© Anne-Katrin Purkiss, the Countryside Agency



Boats on the Thames Navigation at Windsor Castle
© The Environment Agency



The Thames Navigation shows a variety of usage
© The Environment Agency.



Clear signage on the Thames Path
© The Environment Agency.

THE ECONOMIC VALUE OF TOWPATH ACTIVITIES

Glenn Millar, Economic Development Manager of British Waterways

I'm very pleased to be here. Speaking to this conference has made me think about different perspectives on the economic impact of towpath activities.

Most of the economic work we do actually covers the entire waterway, including the towpath. In economic terms it's difficult to differentiate the towpath impact from the impact of the waterway itself. I'm going to try and focus on towpaths as much as I can, but a lot of the figures I'm going to quote actually relate to the overall impact of waterways and not just the towpath. For example we did an interesting little study in 1992 at a very famous lock flight on the Kennet and Avon Canal called Caen Hill Locks and we used various economics techniques to estimate people's willingness to pay to see boats passing through the locks. We found that about 40% of the value that people got from their visit came from seeing boats passing through the locks. In this particular case the interdependence of towpaths and boats for the visitors was very clear. Now this is a special case because they were watching boats in action passing through the lock flight, and the lock flight itself is a very historic structure, so it's very difficult to disentangle the heritage and the impact of movement of boats in this location, but it certainly shows that towpath visitors do appreciate the boats and the boating activity.

I'm going to talk about three perspectives on economic impact. These are different views of how you can look at economic impact. The first is in terms of the navigation authority – what the navigation authority gets out of it and the costs and benefits for the navigation authority. In an Irish context this could be Waterways Ireland, but equally it could be the local authority that manages the waterway,

The second element is the local economics impact, the effect of the waterway on the economy of the local area. Sometimes this is called a re-distributional effect, because if you have a positive impact on one area it means that money is being taken from somewhere else. This is very important in terms of European funding objectives, and often also of the regional development agencies who want to see money going to certain areas to improve the economy of that area.

The final perspective is a much more holistic approach. This approach sees economic impact in terms of the effect on the quality of life of the inhabitants of any country or the area as a whole, which are then measured in money terms. There are various methods for converting the value that people place on a resource into monetary terms, which I'll touch on later.

First off, the direct impact on the navigation authority from the towpath itself is probably limited. The most obvious way to get an economic impact for the navigation authority would be to charge for use, a park permit system or turnstiles on the towpath, but this doesn't make economic sense because the competitors – the local park, the local forest – are free and the actual transaction cost of enforcing it just doesn't stack up economically, never mind the political flack and derision if we tried it!

But there are other ways of gaining some income. The most obvious are angling permits or access agreements with angling clubs. Angling straddles the towpath and the water, and shows the interaction between the two. Another option is charging for wayleaves. For instance, in England, we

charge for fibre optic cables or electricity cables under the towpath. Another form of wayleave might be car parking, which indirectly charges the user. It might also be possible to charge for special events or guided walks, or to set up visitor attractions and visitor centres, although quite often they're very difficult to set up economically. It's possible to sell guides and published information to people and it's also possible to set up direct or joint ventures along the canal, such as pubs and cafés. We've introduced a joint venture with Scottish and Newcastle Brewery to set up a chain of waterside pubs from which we get some income to support the maintenance and development of the waterways.

The navigation authority also incurs costs maintaining the towpaths, but we probably have to incur a lot of those costs anyway since we need the towpaths for access and for the safety of boat users. I think there are heritage reasons for keeping the towpath, and it also acts as one of the banks of the canals. If the towpath crumbles it goes into the water and causes us other problems. Therefore we've got to maintain the towpath and we've got to maintain the supporting structures as well.

The second perspective is local economic impact. This mainly arises when the towpath is used by walkers, cyclists, or sightseers. Visitors to the towpath spend money in shops, pubs, and restaurants, and that leads to what's called 'indirect and induced spend' within the local economy. Those shops and pubs buy from other service providers in the community, and the people employed in those shops and pubs also spend money within the local economy, so it drives up the economic impact within the area. This activity and spend supports jobs in the locality, and it's possible to measure this through what's often called the multiplier approach. You estimate the direct spend that people will make, you use multipliers to convert that into indirect induced spend, and then you use what are called 'employment multipliers' to convert that into jobs.

It's possible to estimate the impact on the locality using this approach, but there's also a second economic impact, which is the 'regeneration effect'. The banks, towpaths, and waterways contribute to the attractiveness of the area for regeneration. People like to locate developments by water because it adds an extra value. In the case of residential developments waterside properties generally command values of 15% – 20% higher than other site properties. In the case of retail or catering type of activities, whenever we're creating pubs we know that there's a market because the canal visitors will go to the pubs. For offices, the impact is probably a bit less but there's quite a lot of evidence to show that an attractive waterside location will sell on faster, so that the developer can make a quicker profit.

I'll illustrate these facts with a case study on the Kennet and Avon Canal, which runs across the south of England between Bristol and the River Thames at Reading. The canal is about 140 kilometres long. Like a lot of canals it went into decline, closed to through navigation in 1955, and was re-opened in 1990. However, we realised the re-opening wasn't sustainable in the long term, so we had to do further investment work (which started in 1996) to secure the canal's future. Eventually the canal was officially re-opened in 2003, so it was almost like a two stage re-opening approach. From 1996 onwards we introduced quite a comprehensive monitoring system to look at the impact of the restoration, and the figures I quote will come from this monitoring system.

If we look at the tourism and recreational effects of the canal over this time period you'll see that activity has not necessarily grown by a huge amount. Remember that the canal was already opened in 1996 – had we started this monitoring process before the early 1990s reopening, we would probably have seen a considerably greater increase in visits – but visitors' spend is growing substantially along the canal corridors. It is now worth about £35 million per annum, and supports about 385 jobs along the corridor. We also estimate that securing the restoration of the canal safeguarded a further 700 jobs. Now these jobs aren't necessarily dependent on the canal itself, most of them would have happened anyway, but they have happened at canal side developments. We surveyed local

leisure and tourism businesses along the canal and discovered that they rated the canal as being very important to their business. In terms of the regeneration effect there's been a lot of capital investment in waterside developments over the time period. We originally forecast that a lot of this would occur through job-generated activity, particularly office development, but the key thing has been residential development. In our forecast we underestimated the residential impact and a lot of what we thought would end up being offices have actually ended up being residential.

We're also interested in non-monetary values, like what the local community thinks of the canal, and we did a series of community surveys to look at how important the canal was to people who lived in the area. You can't actually measure these impacts in terms of money, but you can use surrogate measures to convert what people think about the canal to monetary values. We do this through what are called environmental economics techniques, which are based on a survey of users asking people how much they value the canal and then trying to convert that into a monetary figure.

We did quite a lot of original research in this area in the early 1990s. We haven't done so much since that time, but we've recently updated quite a lot of the work by comparing it to other recreational-use surveys that have taken place in other contexts, and we find the recreational use value of the canal is about £1 per visit, that's roughly what people value their visits. But sometimes on top of that there's also what's called a non-use value of the canal. People like to know that the canal exists even though they don't visit it. Possibly they want to see it passed on to future generations, or they might want to keep it there to have the option to visit in the future. Using the study, we found that the non-use value is about £6 per household. These are quite substantial sums when you add them up in terms of the number of visits that are made. Some very recent work that we've been carrying out in Wales estimates recreational use at about 7.4 million visits per annum to the canal and the value, depending on what measure you use, is between £5 and £7.5 million per year and the non-use value is between £2.5 and £5 million per year.

One of the other quality of life impacts is the benefit to people's health, this could be in physical activity or mental wellbeing, and its economic impact occurs through reduced costs to the National Health Service, reduced absence from work, and reduced early mortality. Again in the Wales case study we estimate that there are potential savings of up to over £3 million per annum in these particular areas, depending on how you measure it. There are also other impacts, some of which are much more difficult to measure in economic terms: the education and training value of the canal; the sustainable transport element, particularly for walking and cycling to work; disabled access, which Phil Chambers will be touching on later; and also community involvement, the value of the canal as a community resource. I know there are quite a lot of people here from the voluntary sector and this element is very important within the work that we do. It's actually possible to place a monetary value on volunteering work and effort on the canal. For instance, Heritage Lottery in England estimates a value of £50 on an unskilled worker per day.

So finally what does all this mean? What does it mean for us from these three perspectives? In the case of Wales, the annual cost of managing the canals – both for us and the local authorities that manage some of the stretches of the canal – is about £3.3 million per year, and the actual direct income that we get from boat licences or from other sources on the canal is only £1.4 million, so in a way the canal is a drain on the public purse. That gap has to be funded somehow from the public purse, and in our case quite a lot of it is funded through grant aid from government. However the canals are supported by 800 jobs locally and the value of the quality of life for the people of Wales lies somewhere between £10 million and £18 million pounds – a very big return on the investment of £3.3 million. There's also an estimated one-off enhanced property value of between £44 million and £74 million from the properties beside the canal.

Now there is some recognition of the gap between the value of £10 – £18 million and the jobs that are supported, compared to the cost of maintaining the canal, through third party investment. That's why we get grants. These grants are either re-distributional in nature, like where we get European money to attract investment to a particular location alongside the canal, or are associated with quality of life issues, like Heritage Lottery funding to develop, enhance and secure the heritage of the canal, or environmental grants to maintain the canal's environment.

I think the important thing is that canals are very positive in terms of their economic impact on the areas through which they pass, and also at a wider level right throughout society. As I mentioned, the towpath impact of this is very difficult to disentangle in economic terms, and I think we need to look at it from the holistic point of view of overall canal management. I think the key point is that the importance of canals has been undoubtedly proved by all the research that's been done over the years. Thank you.



Bugsworth Basin on the Peak Forest Canal, Derbyshire
© British Waterways



Bugsworth Basin, showing recently-installed interpretation panels
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The Grand Union Canal at Foxton Locks, Leicestershire
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The canal-side village of Stoke Bruerne on the Grand Union Canal, Northamptonshire
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CURRENT AND FUTURE ACTIVITIES ON THE TOWPATHS IN IRELAND

Éanna Rowe, Head of Marketing and Communications, Waterways Ireland

I'm delighted to be here with you today at this important seminar, which will stimulate debate and focus much attention on the valued and historic resource that is Ireland's towpaths.

Today I will be giving a presentation on the current and future use of Ireland's towpaths. In order to do so, I first wish to put the work, role, and remit of Waterways Ireland in context. Waterways Ireland is one of the six North-South implementation bodies established under what is commonly known as either the Belfast Agreement or the Good Friday Agreement, but which is properly known as the British-Irish Agreement. Our remit under legislation is to manage maintain, develop, and restore the navigable inland waterways on the island of Ireland, principally for recreational purposes. As a North-South body, Waterways Ireland has also been charged with bringing forward studies and plans on the feasibility of restoring and reopening the Ulster Canal, the last link in the jigsaw if you like.

Waterways Ireland manages navigation from Limerick to Coleraine from Dublin to Carrick-on-Shannon, and from Waterford to Belleek. Navigations under our remit are: the Shannon, the Erne System, the Shannon-Erne Waterway, the lower Bann, the Barrow, the Grand Canal, and the Royal Canal. While navigation is at the centre of our work we are not merely a navigation authority. Based on our remit, we strive to encourage, facilitate, and promote other water based, water related, and waterway activities: canoeing, rowing, angling, water skiing, and wake boarding to name but a few. The built heritage, either directly connected to the waterways (the bridges, stone cut harbours, and lock chambers), or the built heritage which is a consequence of the waterways (monastic settlements, the myriad of stores, mills, and granaries) is also of significance. The unique abundance of flora and fauna of the waterway corridor is also of major importance in its own right and supports other activities such as angling, hiking, and walking.

Waterways Ireland also seeks to encourage commercial activities on the waterways, examples of which include the cruise hire sector, day boat charters, water buses, power boat and jet ski schools, education programmes, tourism experiences, and much more besides. Waterways Ireland also actively promotes the waterways. The marketing strategy developed by the organisation is now on its third year of implementation. It combines both destination and product marketing and is aimed at both the domestic and international markets. Some of the tactics employed include the development of an e-portal, a suite of publications, a sponsorship scheme, advertisement campaign, press and PR events.

However, given the limited resources available to Waterways Ireland in terms of both financial and human resources, the body has developed links and partnerships with many other tourism agencies. In fact, Waterways Ireland has been central in bringing together Fáilte Ireland, the Northern Ireland Tourist Board, Tourism Ireland, Shannon Development, and others. It is currently developing a pilot initiative based on a 30 kilometre corridor from Limerick to Belleek. This is a marketing and product development initiative that, if successful, will certainly be broadened to include other navigations in the future.

So, having put Waterways Ireland in context, I'd like now to give you some background on the present use of towpaths in Ireland. Towpaths are a very valued resource and an important element of Ireland's waterways. To understand this importance one must look at the historical context. Towpaths were used to develop the waterway channels in the late 1700s and 1800s; they gave access for providing raw materials and egress for the extraction of spoil. On completion of that stretch of canal, the towpath provided access from a transportation point of view – we have all seen the pictures of barges being pulled by horses, which used the towpaths. The heritage value of the towpaths and the haven provided to a myriad of flora and fauna, often in built up urban environments, is also significant. With the demise of many of Ireland's hedgerows and the consequent impact on habitats, the waterway corridor is an increasingly important haven for many species of flowers, plants, and wildlife. The towpaths also provide access to navigation, public access, boat access, and work access.

In total Waterways Ireland owns and manages under 700 kilometres of towpath on the island of Ireland, 500 kilometres of which is 'waymarked way'. The vast majority of these towpaths are along the Grand and Royal Canals, the Barrow Navigation and the Shannon-Erne Waterways. As a public body, Waterways Ireland manages the towpaths in a number of different ways providing public access, pedestrian access, and works access. In recent research undertaken by Waterways Ireland some 70% of overall visits to the Grand Canal, the Royal Canal and the Barrow navigation are either for walking or angling, so that really puts the towpaths in perspective.

Towpaths are maintained to different standards depending on the environment which they traverse. For example, in urban areas they are hard landscaped, paved, or tarred pathways and associated street furniture is in place. In rural locations they may consist of gravel or grass pathways. In all incidences Waterways Ireland seeks to manage the natural habitat in a sustainable way. In recent years Waterways Ireland has, with a number of local authorities and local communities, undertaken major capital investment works in urban waterways corridors. These initiatives have created urban amenity areas centred on the waterways and on the communities living adjacent to them.

Towpaths also provide direct access to the waterways themselves and are a means by which boaters can launch vessels. They provide access to the wonders of the built heritage along the waterways, and support a myriad of recreational activities. They have been developed as 'waymarked ways', they link into walking trails, and they provide access for angling. They are also a community resource and a general recreational area.

Towpaths also support commercial activities such as farmers' markets and film locations, as well as locations for press and PR events. The towpaths have also been opened up to a number of utility companies with the laying of phone and electric cables underneath the pathways; this is one area where the potential benefits are yet to be fully exploited.

Waterways Ireland has at its disposal a very valuable asset, one which not only supports recreational activities but also has the ability to self-finance developments. Eager to carefully manage this public asset, Waterways Ireland has launched a pilot study to examine the commercial potential of a section of the Grand Canal in Dublin. At the heart of the study will be the towpaths, their present and potential uses, and their significance as a rural corridor in an urban environment.

In general, Waterways Ireland will consider all recreational uses, it seeks to maximise the tourism potential and the consequent spin-off to local economies. One example of the investment needed in the tourism product is the ambitious signage project which will be rolled out by Waterways Ireland over the next number of years. This project will involve directional, locational, safety, and

interpretive signage on the 1,000 kilometres of waterways that we manage. This is just one example of the future investment by Waterways Ireland in the waterway product. At the same time Waterways Ireland will continue to develop the towpath infrastructure with the relevant tourism bodies, the relevant state and local authorities, as well as the private sector. However this development must be managed in a balanced and sustainable manner, taking into account the urban and rural landscapes that the towpaths traverse. All in all, the future for Ireland's towpaths is more secure than ever before as Waterways Ireland continues to hold the waterways in trust for the people of Ireland. Thanks very much.



Angling along the Barrow © Waterways Ireland



The towpath at Carrick-on-Shannon
© Waterways Ireland



The towpath along the Royal Canal at Binns
Bridge © Waterways Ireland



Using the towpath for canal maintenance
© Waterways Ireland

SESSION 2

Chair: Brian Cassells, Inland Waterways Committee Member, the Heritage Council

Good morning ladies and gentleman.

I fervently believe in the expression that waterways are for everyone and I include walkers, fisherman, cyclists, horse-riding, and all kinds of boating. I have spent 25 odd years with the Inland Waterways Association and it's always been our aim to get everyone to use the waterways. Boats simply add to the life on any waterway. I don't want to be controversial but I have a problem – I don't see towpaths or waterways with Pound signs or Euro signs. I would ask the question: should our main aim in using towpaths and using waterways be to raise revenue? I see their value as enhancing the health of the nation, getting people out and about into the countryside, and improving their quality of life. I see the benefits in reducing hospital waiting lists and charges to the Health Service.

Waterways certainly enhance the quality of life; an inland waterway is a lovely place to be. I want to see the environment improved and protected – reed beds, hedgerows and of course the quality of wildlife that is associated with these – but those in management cannot ignore the user groups and the interest groups that use and benefit from the waterway. There is a tremendous amount of free expertise that should and must be tapped into, hence the importance of liaison, of talking to the interest groups that use the waterway and towpaths. Liaison is imperative to the success of any towpath and waterway.

Our first speaker this morning is Tanya Comber from the Irish Heart Foundation...

HEALTHY WALKING – SLÍ NA SLÁINTE, TANYA COMBER

National Co-ordinator of Slí na Sláinte at the Irish Heart Foundation

Good morning everybody.

I'm going to talk about health benefits of walking trails. I'm just going to touch a little on Slí na Sláinte and look at the current recommendation on health-enhancing physical activity. I'll be looking at why we walk, and the health benefits of walking and walking trails, and how we create supportive environments.

I'm going to talk first about a 'magic pill'. This 'magic pill' is a concept that we promote at the Irish Heart Foundation. It's a pill that, if you take at least five times a week – and 50% of the population don't – reduces your risk of heart disease, reduces your risk of depression substantially, and reduces the risk of most types of cancers. This pill can add at least ten to twenty years on to your independence in older life. So what's the pill? I'm sure you all know it: 'every adult should accumulate at least 30 minutes of moderate intensity physical activity on most, and preferably every, day of the week'. What we mean by that is – get out for a walk for thirty minutes on most days of the week and not just a little stroll, something that raises your heartbeat. Not a power walk, just something that puts a little sweat on the brow, you can still talk to the person beside you. And that is simply the magic pill.

This pill is the basis of the Irish Heart Foundation's initiative, Slí na Sláinte. So what is Slí? It was launched in April 2006 by the Irish Heart Foundation as a physical activity incentive scheme using established community walks. It uses colourful signs at kilometre intervals with associated maps. It's a health promotion tool. We currently have over 150 in Ireland in both urban and rural settings. Out of those 150 routes we have about 75 which were developed post 2000, and I would have contact with every single one of the 75 routes. Every year each route gets an audit form and they are audited by their local communities. In the last six months, and I've been fighting for this for six years, we've taken on two maintenance co-ordinators who are actively working with local authorities around the country to get routes maintained. Some routes which were developed maybe eleven or twelve years ago need to be redone.

We've had some great successes. Meath county council developed the Navan Slí na Sláinte about ten years ago. The town has changed substantially in that ten years, so the route was taken down completely, revamped, and redeveloped, and it is now incredibly successful. The Slí na Sláinte in Nenagh, in north Tipperary (which was also developed over ten years ago), was taken down and a new route was completely re-developed.

The other thing about Slí is that, in the last couple of years, we've developed a new programme called Slí 2. This started off as going into work places and promoting walking, getting people to use the stairs instead of the lift, and indicating three local points – like the bus stop or the Dart station – which people could walk to. We now have virtual Slí routes which don't have directional signs, there are just maps. We're developing one between Lucan and Leixlip. South Dublin County Council and Leixlip Town Council are having two information boards on each side of the Liffey with a route marked out very simply. The signs say: 'from here to Leixlip is 2.2 kilometres, it's a 4.5 kilometre return route, here are the health benefits, here is how long it's going to take you.' This is a very simple, maintenance free, 'virtual' route.

We also have eleven international partners and I constantly get people saying to me: 'did I see a Slí route in Milan?' Yes you did! And: 'did I see a Slí route somewhere in the deepest, darkest depths of Finland?' Yes you did! And the Slí word is on all of those signs.

The ideal route that we develop is between three and five kilometres. An average kilometre will take you about ten to twelve minutes to walk, so three kilometres will take someone 30 – 40 minutes to walk. This is an ideal distance because people aren't going to put it on the long finger. It can be done after dinner in the evening, or before breakfast in the morning. The maps are developed for people who are not good at reading maps. They're very, very simple.

So why walking? Most people are able bodied and it's just a really good way of trying to get people who are sedentary to get off the chair and out for a walk. It's not a very difficult thing to promote, minimal personal equipment and accessible infrastructure in most cases, although not everybody has access to good safe walking routes. And reasonable costs, low personal harm risk, a low environmental impact, and an abundance of health related outcome data.

So why walking trails? The evidence internationally shows it keeps people healthier and it increases community fitness levels. The research shows that when people build walking trails, people exercise more. Roughly 55% of those who use the walking trails in Missouri said that they'd increased their walking since the beginning of using the trail, and even people who were previously inactive found the trail attractive. In a 2003 study, over 70% of walking trail users reported that they participated in other activities, such as walking and biking, since the trails were opened.

In the context of towpaths, towpaths are existing trails. They're there already. So the most important thing about towpath trails, I feel, is that they're well promoted and well maintained. You really do need to market and promote your routes.

So let's go on to what I'm really here to talk about – the health impact of physical activity. Nationally 50.8% of the population engage in regular physical activity. That means that just under half the population is physically inactive. This is borne out by the statistics of childhood obesity and the increase in adult obesity. Between 1998 and 2002 obesity increased to 14% in women and 12% in men. Data from recent surveys indicate that one in five Irish boys and girls are overweight, and one in twenty are obese, so we really are rapidly catching up with obesity in the USA. Physical inactivity is the biggest killer in the United States but it's not getting the media attention that it deserves, or indeed the funding to promote physical activity.

So, among the health benefits of walking, losing weight is a big one, considering nearly 15% of our population are obese. Walking burns calories, it reduces your risk of cardio vascular disease, reduces cholesterol, walking increases the HDL cholesterol which helps move bad cholesterol out of the artery walls, it reduces blood pressure, it helps maintain cognitive function in the elderly, it improves arthritis, it relieves back pain, it improves and maintains mental health, slows the aging process, prevents osteoporosis, and it improves your sleep. It prevents and controls diabetes and it reduces the risk of developing certain cancers. It also improves quality of the air we breathe. I know that the carbon footprints are the big topic at the moment. A family that walks two miles a day instead of driving will in one year prevent 730lbs of carbon dioxide from entering the atmosphere.

This is just information on somebody who is sedentary or inactive versus somebody who is moderately active. If you're inactive your risk of colon cancer is 40-50% higher, your risk of breast cancer is 30% higher, and your risk of osteoporosis and fractures are 30% – 50% higher. The statistic that really

gets me is your loss of independence in old age – you lose it ten to twenty years earlier if you're physically inactive.

So finally, I want to talk about creating supportive environments. With towpaths you have a supportive environment on your doorstep, but I really feel that it's all about marketing, maintaining and promoting your towpaths within the local community. You need to think about how 'walk-able' your community is. If you have a towpath in your community, then your community is extremely walk-able and has a very, very safe place to walk. In terms of connectivity, how does your towpath or route connect to your housing estate? Are you creating links so that people don't have to drive? One of the biggest beneficial public health impacts came by accident and nobody foresaw it. In London, when the congestion charge came in, I believe that cycling went up by over 30%. That had a massive public health impact on London.

I suppose finally I'll just say the challenges are promotion, funding for promotion, and maintaining walks into the future. If you have well promoted and well maintained walkways, people will walk! So that's it from the Irish Heart Foundation.

Thank you very much.



An Irish Heart Foundation advertisement showing dog-walking as a path to health
© The Irish Heart Foundation



Slí na Sláinte

Nenagh Slí na Sláinte - 6.4km



For health benefits you need to walk at a hearty pace for at least 30 minutes most days of the week. You can accumulate the 30 minutes or more over two or three shorter sessions. You should be able to walk 3kms in 30-40 minutes depending on your pace. Slí na Sláinte is a health promotion initiative of the Irish Heart Foundation aimed at encouraging people to walk on a regular basis.

NENAGH UDC
NORTH TIPPERARY SPORTS PARTNERSHIP
NORTH TIPPERARY COUNTY COUNCIL

A map of Slí na Sláinte – Nenagh
© The Irish Heart Foundation



Slí na Sláinte

St Vincent's University Hospital
Virtual Slí na Sláinte - 1.2km



The St Vincent's University Hospital Virtual Slí is an unmarked route and can be started at any point.

For health benefits you need to walk at a hearty pace for at least 30 minutes most days of the week. You can accumulate the 30 minutes or more over two or three shorter sessions. You should be able to walk 3kms in 30-40 minutes depending on your pace. Slí na Sláinte is a health promotion initiative of the Irish Heart Foundation aimed at encouraging people to walk on a regular basis.



A map of Slí na Sláinte at St Vincent's
University Hospital © The Irish Heart
Foundation

CYCLING AND WALKING ON THE TOWPATHS OF THE LAGAN AND NEWRY CANALS

Steven Patterson, Sustrans

Thanks for inviting me to speak today.

Sustrans stands for sustainable transport. We've been in the UK since 1977 and in Northern Ireland since 1995. Our vision is of a world in which people travel in ways that benefit their health and the environment.

We contribute to this vision with practical projects and imaginative solutions. One of the main projects we've been working on is the National Cycle Network. In 1992, fifteen years into Sustrans, our work was confined to Britain and comprised Greenways on railway lines and some towpaths, and the Sea-to-Sea cycle route across northern England. Sustrans had the idea of bringing it all together to form a continuous network called 'The National Cycle Network'. In 1995 we got a large grant from the lottery in England and they insisted that it must be a UK-wide project. That enabled us to open up an office in Belfast and to work in Northern Ireland, and also the border counties of the Republic. The projects really expanded and by the turn of the millennium we were up to 5,000 miles. Now we're at 11,000 miles in 2006. So it's an expanding project and hopefully will extend further south.

There are two types of route: the Greenways or the traffic-free routes, and the red or minor road laneway network that links up the Greenway sections to form the longer distance stuff. They cover three types of journeys: utility journeys, everyday journeys like getting to the shops and getting to work; leisure journeys like going for a cycle ride for a day or an afternoon and also tourism journeys for longer distance touring. Greenways can be useful for everyday journeys, linking people from their houses to their work and schools.

The importance of Greenways is that they're traffic free routes and therefore avoid the main road traffic, which is one of the major deterrents to cycling and walking. They are particularly good for novices. A greenway can also be a biodiversity corridor, a link from the countryside to the urban area, and they also provide an excellent entrance into a town or a village. The majority of users are on the Greenways that emanate from towns and villages. Health is also an important issue. In our research we looked at fourteen sites and found that 75% of users felt that the National Cycle Network has allowed them to increase their regular amount of physical activity and 40% of the users felt that it allowed them to increase it by a large amount.

The type of journeys varies from site to site. Roughly half is recreation and leisure but a significant amount of the journeys are utility everyday journeys. The out of state tourism potential is there, but it's very low at the moment, which is probably more due to the general lack of tourism in Northern Ireland than the quality of the product. To try and get more tourism we've got promotional and infrastructural activity such as the production of the day ride leaflets – you can walk into a bike shop and just pick it up and it's online as a PDF, which saves distribution costs. We've also got a series of interpretation panels. We found these really excellent because they are similar in content to the leaflet but, because they're permanent, you don't need to distribute them. They have a lifespan of twelve to fifteen years. They inform the user where they are in the network and where they're going to go, and also include tourist attractions.

I'll talk a little bit about two waterways in the northeast. They're very different and their user profiles are very different. We found it quite difficult to get an overall path-user number, but at one point the rural section in the Newry Canal gets around 35,000 users per year. The Lagan towpath, which is

very much an urban fringe path, gets about 280,000 users a year at one location. These figures will increase when counts are considered at a combination of sites. So urban and rural are very different in nature.

The four councils along the Newry Canal are very keen to get the canal navigable, so they were keen when we came along to develop the land based activities. In the mid 1990s there were some towpaths for walking, a little section for shared use, and half the towpath was absolutely derelict, although the right of way was still there. It took very significant investment over the last eight to ten years, but it's now a bitmac path the whole way. Part of this is because there's a railway line parallel to it and some farmers have a right to use it to access fields so, since it will be used by agricultural vehicles, we've bitmaced the whole thing from a maintenance point of view. It's part of the long distance Ulster Way walking route, and also one of the waymarked ways that the Countryside Access and Activities Network (CAAN) has been developing, so it's more than just a path for getting from A to B, it's a Greenway with seats, panels, bike racks, and biodiversity. The route also brings economic generation. In Scarva there is a canal store halfway along the canal where they do really good business, particularly on a Sunday. They do lovely home cooking, and it's right on the canal, so they've done really well out of it. We did some analysis of where the users are coming from. They are mostly local people and there were actually more cyclists than walkers: 50% cyclists, 40% walkers and 10% others. 99% of trips were for recreation.

The Lagan Towpath is very interesting. As you would expect there are more walkers (45%) and – I think this is really interesting – still about 30% cyclists. Belfast is not a cycling town, it doesn't have a culture of cycling, but 30% of our 300,000 users are cycling. This is absolutely fascinating because it proves that people will ride a bike if facilities are safe and the routes are continuous. Another interesting fact is that of the 23% of other users, 99% are joggers.

The Lagan navigation has two sections. The Lagan Towpath is a Greenway that runs from Belfast to two miles south of Lisburn, and it's a green corridor right into the heart of Belfast. This towpath is shared use – walkers, cyclists, we don't get many fishermen here. We're very keen to promote a lifestyle that's good for the environment.

We've heard a lot about carbon emissions, our carbon footprint, and really what we're trying to do is create a network so that people can travel about the place in a low carbon and healthy way. This is why, from our point of view, it's no use having a towpath in the middle of the countryside that everybody drives to. It's not really the sustainable healthy way that we think things should be developed.

For this route we were very fortunate with our timing, because at the time we arrived on the scene there was an urban development company re-developing the whole Lagan. The Lagan, if left naturally, is a very smelly tidal river, so the urban development company built a weir that kept the water level up and absolutely transformed the river corridor in Belfast. They also did a network of Greenways right through it; a continuous route with very good road crossings. When we were doing up the towpath we came across badgers so we had to put a metal railing down to protect badgers setts so that the construction traffic could keep working. That's something that you would want to take into consideration if you were creating new towpaths.

I'm now onto the topic of bitmac or dust. Dust paths can be fine at the beginning but they're higher maintenance and suffer from puddles, or become quite churned up and rough. It's often easier to find money initially for capital works than to find it on an ongoing revenue year-by-year basis. A bitmac path, once you lay it down, doesn't need work on it for fifteen years, while a dust path almost needs work on it every year if not every two years. A bitmac path is easier for wheelchairs and families with push chairs, but a well constructed dust path can be fine, particularly in rural areas, as long as it's well drained.

Width is another issue. There has been a lot of talk about potential conflict between cyclists, walkers, and anglers. I think that it's important to be very clear about whether you can or can't cycle. You have to have very clear communication. We've been very lucky because we had a lot of capital grants so we were able to make improvement to the paths and make them wider. We were able to take them to about from 1.2m to about 2.25m -2.5m. So we weren't plonking cyclists down on a narrow path, and that helped significantly. Barriers are a big issue because there is a rise in the number of small motor bikes that parents like to buy their kids. Barriers partially exclude those, but if you've got a kid with a small motor bike their dad will often lift it over. So the barriers are only partially doing what they're meant to do, and they're bad for wheelchairs and mobility scooters, cyclists and for allowing cleansing equipment through. And, in terms of signage, subtle signage in wood is preferable on the towpaths. Links are crucial, especially links to towpaths from housing.

Working with communities, for various reasons, is absolutely crucial. We've got 70 volunteer rangers – it's interesting and they are absolutely invaluable to the maintenance of the network and to the work of Sustrans. Every town and village has got a few rangers to keep an eye on the paths and they report to the authorities if there's a fault, like a tree or a sign down, or a seat vandalised.

I think that there is a great opportunity in the Republic. I think we're becoming an unhealthier nation, I think kids have less access to the countryside but people have more time because they're living longer. I also think that there are great opportunities for tourism. If Sustrans can in any way help you and offer constructive advice, we would be only too pleased to do so. Thank you.



Cyclist and walkers happily coexist on a suitable section of towpath © Sustrans



Mixed usage on the Lagan Towpath © Sustrans



The National cycle network in Northern Ireland and the border counties © Sustrans

THE POTENTIAL FOR HORSE RIDING ON TOWPATHS

Pat Somerville, Access Officer in Scotland for British Horse Society

Hello everybody, thank you for having me today.

I want to talk today about riding on towpaths. You might wonder is this myth or is this reality? Well in Scotland it's actually reality. In Scotland we have multi-use access. We as riders, cyclists, canoeists, cavers, and walkers have a statutory right of non-motorised responsible access to most land and inland water in Scotland.

This includes:

- Forests, woods, farmlands – enclosed and unenclosed – field margins and fields in which crops have not been sown
- Urban parks, open spaces within towns and cities, country parks and other managed open spaces
- Mountains, moorlands, hills
- All government departments, including Ministry of Defence areas, NHS Boards and local authorities
- Rivers, lochs, canals, reservoirs, beaches, and coastline

The onus is on the access-taker to be responsible and to decide if it is responsible for them to go there. This legislation covers, on the riding side of it, everyone from happy hackers to competitive people trying to get out of the arena and give the horses a break. It lets them hack along county roads, paths, and farmland. Not everybody is an able bodied rider, we have a huge disabled riding fraternity in Scotland as you do in Ireland so it gives them the opportunity too, and it also takes in carriage drivers, although they have different issues.

The three principles of this legislation, the Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2003, are based on firstly 'respect the interests of other people'. You always need to think about other people, whether you're a walker, thinking about fishermen on the towpath, or a rider thinking about fishermen, cyclists, or walkers. Secondly, you should 'leave the environment as you find it', and thirdly you must 'take responsibility for your own actions'.

- Respect the interests of other people by being considerate and aware. Respect the privacy, safety, and livelihoods of those working in, living in, or enjoying the outdoors. Put yourself in their shoes!
- Care for the environment by looking after the places you visit and enjoy. Leave land as you find it; take any litter home with you.
- Take responsibility for your own actions by realising that the countryside is not risk free and act with care at all times for your own and your horse's safety and that of others.

Now I think that horse riders are probably better at taking responsibility than other people because we are looking after our horses. Unlike most walkers and cyclists, most of us have full public liability insurance so if something does happen we've got insurance behind us to help us. I think that many local authorities and other public bodies don't realise this.

One of the main problems is that of preconceived issues. This is all about what the public think, rather than what the actual situation is. People get worried about lots of horses in a group. Big horses are much more frightening than ponies, and people that hack out on their own tend to be on horses rather than on ponies. One of the concerns is that when you're riding up behind people, people may not realise that you're there. It's the same with cyclists coming up behind riders. They're encouraged to ring their bell, but ringing bells is not cool I understand, so we encourage cyclists coming up behind to shout 'hello' or 'cooee' or 'I'm coming through'.

What frightens the public?

- Not hearing riders approaching
- Speed of approach
- Lots of horses in a group
- Big horses
- Toffs on horseback
- Dung on multi-use tracks
- Erosion of tracks

One of the things that we encourage in Scotland is getting off your horse and kicking the muck to the side. I think that's important if you are promoting a multi-use path. You have to get your local riders involved. Some of them will say 'oh I can't get back on', but they can all let down their stirrups and get back on; it's just they're lazy in some cases, or they may be disabled in some way.

We talked earlier about erosion of tracks. Again it's up to the individual rider to decide whether they should be riding on that track. In Scotland if the track gets muddy in the winter you don't ride on it in the winter, you might ride on it if it's icy, you might ride on it in the summertime, but you make your decision whether it's responsible for you to take access at that time on that path.

If there is proof that there has been mess or a problem, then there are various ways to look at that and sort it out. We all have issues with a small minority of people – whether they're walkers, cyclists, riders, or disabled – who are always going to be a pain in the neck. Infringement of the law could be an issue. Our legislation is only three years old and we're still working through that. One of the biggest things about this legislation in Scotland is that you don't keep the farmers and other land managers back from their work.

What irritates the land manager?

- The mess – potential or actual
- Disrespect
- Infringement
- Keeping them back from their work

So why do we want to ride on towpaths in Scotland? The same reason as we want to ride on towpaths in Ireland. It's safe, it's interesting, and it's off the roads. This is one of the biggest issues for horse riders, there are eight police-related horse incidents in the UK every day – that's horses or riders that are injured or killed. It doesn't include the minor accidents, which go unreported.

Surfaces on towpaths are usually quite good, whether they're bitmac or whether they're whindust. They go somewhere, so although they're linear we can perhaps use another path to come back around and make a circular route. But not all canal towpaths are suitable. The Union Canal in Scotland has small narrow routes which in the main are just not suitable and we don't promote them because of the risk of someone falling into the canal – pedestrian, cyclist, horse, or rider. Most canals in Scotland have sheer sides with very few places to get your horse out. If a cow or bullock falls in they tend to shoot it first and haul it out later. Obviously we don't want to do that with our ponies.

I'm in the middle of writing guidance about riding on towpaths with British Waterways in Scotland. Getting entangled in fishing tackle is also one of the issues. The problem of barriers that are unsafe to negotiate is also something that we're working on. This doesn't just affect horse riders it affects the disabled and cyclists as well. Gates will stop other users from getting through, but they don't stop motorbikes. Motor cyclists will get in if they want to, by lifting a scrambler over the gate, or by cutting the wire.

Low bridges are something that we're discussing with a local canal. They are putting in mounting blocks at either side so that we get off at the bridge, walk the horse through, and get on using a mounting block. Abuse from other users is another of the big issues that we get, although one that works both ways as you can imagine. It's very easy for walkers to yell or shout at the horse riders 'you shouldn't be here'. We just want to go out and enjoy the horse and just have a stress-free ride. When hassle and intimidation happens we just want to go back, and I don't think that's fair.

Riders do think about health and safety. You may think that we can't have horses on multi-user paths – that it's just an accident waiting to happen – but people understand that the countryside is not risk-free. We do a risk assessment every time we get on our horses – we think about what the weather is doing that day, whether it's windy, whether it's icy. I ask myself: is my horse suitable for going on a towpath? Is he likely to shy at that Tesco bag in that hedge and leave us both in the canal? People do that automatically before they get on their horse because they love their horses and they don't want anything to happen to them.

In terms of responsibility, the rider has to be aware that they are riding a big animal that has its own mind. We watch out for other livestock, and we understand privacy and curtilage, which is all part of the land reform legislation of Scotland. Courtesy applies to every user, not just riders. We promote dismounting if necessary, but please remember that a rider is usually more in control when they're on the top of a horse than standing beside it.

Guidance is one of the most important things that we have to think about in terms of multi-use. If you explain to people why they should just walk a horse, why a cyclist should ring his bell on a towpath, why a fisherman should not put all his tackle all over the path, then people understand. If you've got helpful rangers and volunteers who are not just going to say 'do that' but 'this is why you shouldn't do it', you get a much better clarification and response.

What is Scotland doing about it?

- Guidance
- Signage
- Understanding
- Helpful rangers
- Barrier modification
 - Which also helps disabled users
 - Mounting blocks

Teamwork is one of the biggest things in Scotland that makes the legislation work. The local councils, National Park Authorities, recreational users, Ramblers Association, Cycling Scotland, Sustrans, Cyclists' Touring Club, we all work together. We communicate, we network, and we consult. I think if you are half way there with that, this is not going to be such a big issue anywhere in the world. Thank you for your time.



Horse riding on towpaths need not be incompatible with other usage

WATERWAYS HERITAGE FOR ALL

Phil Chambers, CEM Ltd (Heritage & Greenspace Consultants-UK)

I really feel that it's important to emphasise from the beginning that we're talking about integration and inclusion. I was particularly pleased to be invited to speak today because I think that this is a very diverse seminar and it's looking at a lot of things. Very often disabled people like me get invited to presentations and seminars particularly on the needs of disabled people and I would much rather be in a generic group like this, talking about the needs of disabled people equally and practically within that context.

So who are 'the disabled'? I put it in inverted commas there, because clearly there's no homogeneous group called 'the disabled'; we're part of a wide and diverse group and full members of society. As a wheelchair user I'm very obviously disabled, and I often think that the wheelchair user is the first person we think about, because the blue badge parking badge has become the international symbol of disability. But 'the disabled' also includes people with mobility impairments and people who can walk short distances. You may have someone who's had a stroke or a respiratory problem, their needs are also very important in terms of physical access, but also for information about outdoor opportunities too. The Institute of the Blind in Ireland estimate that something like 48,000 people have sight difficulties. If we're talking about signage, their needs are for information. Someone with a visual impairment may be able to negotiate a stile with support, but they would need to know that it was there – so information is very important.

Never underestimate the value of information because it provides people with an informed choice. Not everywhere is going to be accessible to disabled people; it's just not possible. But what I do want to know is – what can I and what can't I get to – so that I can make a choice. I don't want to waste time going to a place and find that it's inaccessible. I'd rather go elsewhere.

People with learning disabilities have particular needs in terms of interpretation. They need information presented in a way that's appropriate to their needs. Sometimes it's helpful to use visuals as well as text. Very often people with learning disabilities prefer pictographs and non text information. When it comes down to it, many of us would prefer that sort of information too. So if you're thinking of prioritising a budget, try and look at how best you can use your information to benefit the widest group possible.

Among that group there are also TABS (temporarily able bodied). I'm sorry to say – that's what you guys are. I'm already disabled, I know all the skills and I'm cool about it, but it's going to creep up on you guys eventually, a few years from now! But don't worry about it because there's a great opportunity for you here. Don't worry about equality; don't worry about diversity; just think about yourselves. Make sure that you get really good access in there because in twenty years time, in ten years maybe, you're really going to benefit from it. If you get an opportunity to put a ramp in, or better interpretation, in a few years you're going to use it.

The National Disabilities Authority in Ireland estimates that the 8.3% of the Irish population has a disability within the remit of the Disabilities Act 2005. That's a lot of people, and it's probably many more than perhaps most of you would have envisaged. If we take the population of Dublin as just over half a million we're talking about 41,000 disabled people.

These 41,000 people have all got families and friends. If I was going to visit a waterside site I'd probably go with my wife and children. If that site wasn't accessible you wouldn't potentially be losing one customer or one income opportunity, you'd be losing a minimum of four. If you don't provide access for one person with disability, in effect you're affecting much larger numbers. And if you are a waterside facility that is looking to develop revenue, that's an important point to be aware of.

If we come a little closer now to Tullamore, there are probably about 1,000 people with disabilities living in the town. So if we're talking about access to the towpath, there are about 1,000 people that may not have access to it at the moment (although I'm sure that's not the case and that you have pristine access onto the towpath). Looking at the wider community, within about 60 kilometres from here you've probably got something like another 31,000 people, which means that there are probably more than 2,500 disabled people. That's a lot of people at the moment that may not have access to your services. The challenge is to provide that access for that amount of people and potential customers.

Tullamore also has a tourist agenda as well with many commercial visitors, and some of those people will have disabilities. If this venue had not been an accessible place that I could get into, they would have had to find either an alternative speaker or an alternative site, and this place might have lost this whole booking today. So providing good access is providing good business as well. I don't think people realise how much money they lose because they're not accessible.

The legal framework I think says that 'the whole or part of the waterways heritage should be accessible to people with disabilities and for them to be able to access that with ease and dignity in as far as is practicable'. I think that the salient phrase here is 'in as far as is practicable'. I think someone mentioned 1,500 kilometres of towpath today, and I know that British Waterways in the UK have 2,000 miles of towpath. No one would expect all of that to be accessible.

I wouldn't want to be able to get to every bit of the waterway, and I suspect that nobody here would either. What I, and I guess you would want, is a fair and equitable opportunity, and that's really what I want to promote to you. Don't think that you need to make everywhere accessible to everyone all of the time. You don't, you need to be providing a fair opportunity.

The BT (sponsored by British Telecom and agreed in consultation between countryside managers and disabled people's organisations) Countryside for All standards of accessibility, which might provide a benchmark for you, looks at path quality in terms of width and gradients. People know about a ramp and a linear slope, but perhaps not a cross slope; the way that the towpath slopes across. It's surprising how many towpaths have cross slope. Cross slopes make it very difficult for cyclists and people with mobility impairments, and people who are pushing buggies. The cross slope doesn't always need to be steep if it is just simply for drainage, so if you're looking at any of your sites, have a look at the cross slopes because they can be quite a restriction.

Another thing to think about is a clear walking tunnel, an area of about 2 metres by about 2.2 metres. This is essentially a tunnel around you so that you can walk safely. If you think of a blind person, maybe with a dog or sweeping with a cane, their biggest concern is something actually hitting them in the face. So if you have a policy of providing a clear walking tunnel, then people will know that they're safe, and if you promote it to them that this is one of your principles, then they're much more confident to go and use that waterway. Confidence is the thing that gets people out there and the greater their confidence the more they'll use your facilities.

In terms of guidelines, statistically it seems that disabled people spend more time on the web than other members of the population, so certainly think about promoting your services through the

web. It's crucial to all of us to have useful information and it's surprising how many websites aren't accessible to people with visual impairments, or often to people with learning disabilities, because of the way that information is presented. It's actually illegal within the act not to have an accessible and useable web site. It's ironic really that if we think about being sued under a Disability Discrimination Act we usually think about a building, but actually most of the cases worldwide have actually been about website accessibility. Dublin City University recently found that 94% of corporate websites were not accessible to disabled people and they could actually have been sued. This is something that you could just check with your webmaster. Make sure that your website is usable. If you simply ask people with a visual impairment to have a look at it, they'll give you some feedback, and this could be a quick fix route to providing very good information to people.

The principle of least restrictive access is based on the idea trying to ensure that most people are able to gain access to most places, not necessarily all places. If they can't, then there may be alternatives you might promote to them. It might be about presenting the heritage in a different way that meets their needs, but the thing is about less restrictive access. Essentially you're not going to get access everywhere for everyone, but that doesn't mean you do nothing. What you do is to try to provide access for as many people as possible. That's really the criteria to work to. Sometimes what is a barrier to one disabled person is not necessarily a barrier to another. For someone like me a flight of steps would be an absolute barrier, but some disabled people who use wheelchairs can actually walk two or three steps, so it may not be a barrier to them.

So don't prejudge what people can and can't do. Think about changing the environments to meet as many needs as you can, but also think about maintaining the character of the waterway. It would be wrong to change the character of the waterway just to make it accessible to a disabled person, because you would negate the very thing that the disabled person wanted to see in the first place. Don't just change things for the sake of it, only change something if you're actually going to improve it and provide something better.

Obviously when we're talking about waterways and towpaths, we're talking about conservation issues, the topography of the waterways, lock flights, natural heritage, and archaeology. There are all sorts of things that you have to consider, and access is only one of them. There are compromises to be struck in terms of what's the best approach and to be able to provide access for as many people as possible.

I think what I'm really saying to you is that you can't change impairments, I'm a disabled person, I was in a car crash, I'm always going to be a disabled person, you guys can't do anything about that, well if anyone is up for it we can have a quick chat but I suspect you can't. What you can do is not worry about my disability or anyone else's disability, but think about changing the environment, think about making environments accessible, don't try to sort out everybody's disability needs, but think about how we can provide inclusive environments that benefit everyone and, if you take that away with you, it will be more than helpful.

Thank you.



Access for all on the Thames Path, UK © Anne-Katrin Purkiss, the Countryside Agency



Riverside wheelchair usage © Anne-Katrin Purkiss, the Countryside Agency

MANAGING TOWPATHS OR WALKING ROUTES – ANTISOCIAL BEHAVIOUR

Edward Moss, British Waterways

My name is Edward Moss and I work for British Waterways in Gloucester on the Droitwich Canals and the Cotswold Canals restorations. British Waterways looks after 2,200 miles of canals around the country and is the third largest owner of Listed Buildings in Britain (the largest and second largest owners are the National Trust and the Church). Now about three years ago I moved to work on the Droitwich and Cotswold restorations and what I'm going to try and do is answer two questions: 'does mixed use of the towpath spell the end of civilisation?' and, if it does, 'how can we all restart civilisation?'

To put this in context, we used towpath surveys to ask: 'has your enjoyment been spoilt by other users?' Although the vast majority (79% of people) say no, 17% of people on the towpath, on the Cotswold Canals particularly, said that their enjoyment had been spoiled by other users. The reasons that their enjoyment was spoiled were broken down in different ways. There is an element of vandalism, there is an element of antisocial behaviour, and there is a lot about other users.

So why are people there in the first place? The main reason for people visiting the canals on the Cotswolds is for walking with the dogs, closely followed by walking for pleasure. The other activities are cycling (because it is a pleasant route between two places, and because it is a short cut from somewhere to somewhere else) and fishing, although the figures for this are surprising low. The national figures show that the vast majority of people will go and walk along the canal for pleasure, and then they are evenly split across the other user groups.

Now, going back to the reasons for dissatisfaction, personal safety is one. People have a fear of attack and muggings, a fear of the dark, a fear of obstructions, and uneven and slippery towpaths, including when there's no fencing to protect them from the edge and the barriers on the towpaths are too narrow. But there are also psychological barriers (like the perception that the canals are dangerous) and there are intellectual barriers. When people don't actually understand what's there and why it's there, this is as much of a barrier as not being able to get there: 'I don't understand it. What does it mean to me? Why should I go there?'

So what can be done about it? The overriding principle is managed, varied and sustainable use through policing, marketing, and promoting projects, physical improvements, and outreach work. There is an emphasis on doing these things in partnership, British Waterways will often work very closely with, for example, local authorities, and Sustrans. The two canal projects that I work on are two partnership-led projects, the Droitwich Canal restoration project has five main members in it: the local authorities, the Waterways Trust, and the Local Canals Trust. The Cotswold Canal has seventeen partners in it, similar sorts of groups, local authorities, and local canal enthusiasts. It's a bigger canal and it encompasses more and members of the Countryside Landowners Association (CLA) are part of the Cotswold Canal Partnership. So there is a good range of people involved in a lot of the work on the canals.

Now just to bring you back to policing, it can be taken in different senses. There's obviously the formal sense of policing, working with the police. I used to work on the south edge of Birmingham

and one of the canals that we managed was the Worcester & Birmingham Canal that ran into the centre of Birmingham. We used to have problems with anti-social behaviour and we still do. When on a boat, I had stones thrown by local young people and was actually shot at, so I have witnessed it directly. I'm not going to promise that we're ever going to wipe those issues out, but there are various solutions. One of the projects that we did on the Worcester & Birmingham Canal involved working with the police. We had four officers on a canal boat which cruised repeatedly past one of the hotspots where some of the local young people from the high school were throwing stones at the boats as they came past. Over a period of two weeks we had three different incidents and each time we arrested the young people who were caught doing the stone throwing. Now that did have a significant effect and the incidents were reduced over the following year but it's obviously a short term solution as it's not possible to spend all your time policing the canal.

There is also natural policing, which comes from promotion of the canals and trying to get more people using them. If there are more people using them, there's less likely to be anti-social behaviour. Somewhere in between the natural policing and the formal policing is a staff presence, working with paid staff and volunteers so there are eyes and ears out on the canal. This involves talking to people, engaging with those who potentially might be carrying out the anti-social behaviour, and trying to make sure that it is limited as much as possible.

There are different reasons for carrying out marketing and promotion campaigns. Some of the examples focus on reducing litter, increasing respect for other users, and trying to reduce dog mess. British Waterways had a poster campaign to try and counteract dog fouling, and it was very successful in raising the profile of the issue through, some said, very shocking imagery. One of the events that we had on the Droitwich Canal involved some local residents and staff going out and picking up rubbish. The feedback that we got from local people was very positive because they liked to see it clean. This level of positivity was heightened as they had been involved and so had a sense of ownership on the project.

I've mentioned physical works as a way of trying to reduce vandalism and make the canals more accessible. If a particular bit of canal is a very narrow area, there could be potential conflicts between different user groups. The solution is about making it accessible to all whilst realising that there is a balance between those different groups. Part of the Droitwich Canals' towpath is a Public Right of Way – you can't cycle or ride a horse along it and that's protected by law in this particular section of canal. What we're trying to do is link in to a local Sustrans route which runs very close by to make sure you can cycle on one section of the canal, nip on to the Sustrans route around the Public Right of Way, and then get back on to the canal.

Trying to make sure that as many people can get to the canals as possible requires some physical works. Newbold Tunnel on the Oxford Canal is a 300-400 metre long tunnel, pitch black, on the boundary between Rugby and the countryside. It's got a great towpath through it, you can see the other end, but the perception is that it's dark and horrible. A lighting project was established to make the towpath safer, more accessible, and easier to use. The lights have to go off at dusk because it's a bat feeding route, but it has vastly increased the use of that section of the canal. It has since become a bit of a destination for people and it has reduced vandalism by increasing the number of people going along – natural policing.

With regard to visitor management issues, the way we aim to try and reduce some of the visitor conflict on some of the canal is to take the approach of zoning different areas. We advertise key gateway sites with promoted levels of access and facilities (car parking, cycle routes etc.). There are other sections that we don't necessarily promote because they are well used by local people,

and to promote them to general day visitors would impact too greatly on the sites. So our visitor management plans talk about zoning and gateway sites along the canal. It's about sympathetic development: putting the right facilities, in the right sites in the right places and ensuring that we promote them as effectively as possible.

Linked in with the visitor management activities, British Waterways' Waterways Code is a good leaflet, a national leaflet that deals with respect for others users. The Droitwich project tries to include as wide a range of towpath users as possible. The main aim is to create a linear park, promoting the fact that there is something for everybody. It links in to public footpaths and cycleways, it links into local communities so that people can get to the canals in lots of different ways and use it in lots of different ways.

Towpath interpretation that is done by local people engenders a sense of ownership – 'if it's mine then I'm not going to damage it'. One of the recent projects that we did with the local schools involved creating artwork along the canal. They created a mosaic in Vines Park, which is something that will leave a lasting impression on the canal and something that they got a huge amount out of it.

Here's another example. The Edstone Aqueduct is the longest aqueduct in England and one of the earliest cast iron aqueducts in the world, with a towpath running alongside it. It's pretty impressive! The restoration took place three years ago including an interpretation project to increase access to the casting process and design of the aqueduct. We took a cast from the handrail and made an exact copy of it along the towpath in cast iron. An artist worked with the Women's Institute and with the local youth club, and the local women and children drew their images onto the pieces of board. The artist carved the images and they were cast in iron, so the children from the youth club and the ladies from the Women's Institute have left their images cast in iron alongside a cast iron aqueduct. They were taught about the casting and so understood the heritage construction and restoration process.

The heritage and the environment is not just a physical issue it's also a social issue. The Working Boats Project was about restoring ten working boats and telling their stories. In Droitwich we work with local schools, the resource is called the 'WOW Resource' (Wild Over Waterways). The website has safety resources and curriculum resources, some canal specific and some very general available for anyone to use.

Local volunteers can include wardens and rangers, people on the bank out there potentially working with education and promotional events, or even doing physical work like bank protection. Volunteers include existing groups and partner organisations. We've got a very successful partnership with a local open prison that is heavily involved with training on the Cotswold Canals.

You may have heard of the quote from Freeman Tilden about interpretation. 'Through interpretation we get understanding, through understanding we get appreciation, and through appreciation we get protection.' To illustrate this phrase, I want to tell a quick last story of the canal in Stratford-upon-Avon. There was a section of towpath where we had problems with drug users. We worked with the local school to improve the towpath, and this young lad called Jack was one of the children involved. Afterwards Jack's mum came up to us and said: 'you've created me a bit of a problem really because every time we go to Stratford, Jack always asks if we go and see his bit of canal'. And I see that as a real positive outcome. The canal and the canal restorations are about people. They are about using the canals in as varied and managed and sustainable way as possible.

Thank you very much.



School children work on the mosaic project for Vines Park © Alison Ogle



The lighting project at Newbold Tunnel, Rugby © British Waterways



A completed towpath © British Waterways



Mosaic artwork along the canal at Vines Park, created by local school children © Edd Moss