

Flooding of A421 Shows Need for Waterway



Picture: BBC website

The recent flooding on the A421 near Marston Moretaine shows how helpful the Waterway would be in providing resilience against such events. Not only will the Waterway be designed with capacity to absorb run-off in these extreme events, it will link the lakes at Stewartby and Brogborough to provide additional capacity. Also, of course it will be designed to move water rapidly away from this area using high-capacity pumps where necessary.



Picture: BBC website /
Kate Bradbrook

Not only would the Waterway help prevent such occurrences, it would be a major assistance in recovery should such an event happen anyway. At the time of writing, the flood on the A421 is being cleared, slowly, by using tankers with relatively small capacity. Another problem is also finding somewhere suitable to empty them. As the route is fairly close to the A421 it would have been possible (though not easy) to set up pumps to transfer the water directly into the Waterway. Major traffic problems have been caused in and around Bedford by this flooding, and (again at the time of writing) it is expected that re-opening the road could take weeks. Although the cost of building the Waterway is substantial, it could have saved a great deal of money lost to this disruption. (See also pages 3,6) ●

View from the Chair



Simon Clewlow
Trust Chair

In the past flooding was an event which, once passed, was often regarded as 'water under the bridge'. However, when the floodwater gets 'stuck under the bridge', as can be seen from the article elsewhere in the newsletter on the 3-week A421 closure, it can no longer be seen as something to be forgotten or ignored. Indeed, as I write, water levels in the rivers are again approaching record levels courtesy of Storm Bert. The key word seems to be resilience, or rather a lack of it. This is becoming increasingly evident as weather events, undoubtedly associated with climate change, show us how fragile our infrastructure can be.

And this absence of resilience provides the latest siren call for the positive benefits of the Waterway to be championed.

The quote that BBC Three Counties Radio used from my interview in October reads, "The problem we have in this country is that quite often we've got too much water and other times we've got too little water. What the Waterway will provide is an opportunity to better manage that situation so that when there's too much water we can store it and not allow it to go where we don't want it and when there is too little water we can release the water and allow it to go where it's needed." This message is gaining traction. Within a week, the new MP for Mid Bedfordshire was hailing the Waterway as a much needed piece of infrastructure to help combat the increased risk of flooding and its serious consequences for the local economy.

Brickdust BMK video on YouTube

We have discovered a new video on YouTube about the Waterway, produced by Brickdust.



So I stand by my assertion that the time for this project has now come. There is currently a lot of focus on different bits of infrastructure in the vicinity of the Waterway route. I and the other Trustees are working hard to ensure that the planning of the East West Rail line and the Grand Union Canal Water Transfer scheme are not only cognisant of the Waterway route but that these schemes actively recognise its benefits and facilitate its delivery.

In order to hold our own when consulting with the promoters of these well-funded projects the Board has taken the decision to allocate some of the funds raised by the boats to update the economic and business case for the Waterway as well as commission the first design study along part of the route for more than a decade. In both cases it is important that information is presented in the form that decision makers will take seriously. This in turn will, I'm sure, enable the Trust to punch above its weight when it comes to negotiating the best outcome for the project in our discussions with those who we hope will one day be our partners. This is especially so when I look around the membership of the Trust and its Trustees and see the skills, expertise and enthusiasm to make the Waterway a reality in the foreseeable future.

So, although the Autumn flooding played havoc with the cruising schedule on the Great Ouse (and subdued our much wanted and appreciated fund raising), the greater awareness of the impact of our changing climate has been to the overall advantage of the Waterway - perhaps it is true to say that every cloud has a silver lining. ●

We have not yet established contact with Brickdust but are pleased to see the message getting spread around, particularly amongst younger people.

If you want to look at the video (and I recommend that you do), it can be found at:

www.youtube.com/watch?v=gXe4h-3_GLk

Brickdust has clearly done his research, and provides a pretty accurate picture of our plans, together with a few quirky observations of his own as he follows parts of the route.

We hope that we can work with Brickdust and other social media content creators as the project develops. ●



Flooding prompts BBC interview



The A421 flooding resulted in Alex Pope of BBC News interviewing Simon Clewlow. Below is the text of the resulting article, and we show the top of the relevant web page. The URL is included at the end of the article.

Alex Pope

BBC News, Bedfordshire

Reporting from: Kempston Mill

11 October 2024, 07:07 BST

The chairman of a charity started 30 years ago to build a £300m waterway says "the time for this project has come" after heavy rainfall caused flooding and a major road to shut for two weeks.

Simon Clewlow, chairman of Bedford and Milton Keynes Waterway Trust (BMKW), said connecting the River Great Ouse in Bedford to the Grand Union Canal in Milton Keynes meant water could be held "where it is wanted".

He said the waterway park would "mitigate the impact of flooding and mitigate the impact of water shortages".

It would provide leisure activities as well as a chance for nature to "recover", he added. "We believe that the time for the waterway has come."

Mr Clewlow said some of the biggest issues over the past few weeks locally was "managing floodwater and surface water".

He explained one section could link Stewartby Lake with Brogborough Lake, which is less prone to flooding, "so it doesn't come down the Marston Vale and flood the A421".

It would hold "the water there until flood levels drop and released back to Stewartby Lake".

Part of the A421, by Marston Moretaine, in Bedfordshire, closed on 22 September for two weeks after a month's worth of rain fell in under 48 hours.

The chairman added that the scheme, which was initially due to cost £200m but had since

risen to about £300m, had the support of the three councils it would pass through, namely, Bedford Borough, Central Bedfordshire and Milton Keynes.

The next stage is to build "a demonstration section of the waterway in the Wootton area of Bedford", he said.

He said the rest could be build in sections as some infrastructure was already in place and the scheme had been included in local planning applications.

"The project could be the game changer when it comes to enabling nature to recover. It would provide a continuous thread through the three boroughs", Mr Clewlow said.

"We have the opportunity to mitigate the impact of flooding and mitigate the impact of water shortages, provide much more water resilience to everybody, not just within the area between Milton Keynes and Bedford but beyond and into Cambridgeshire."

The original article can be found at:

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c1k7gllc284o>



Maintenance of the Landing Stage

The Kempston Landing Stage was constructed on land leased to the Trust and as such it is our responsibility to maintain it (Julian Armitage writes).

During the floods last winter (2023), damage occurred to the banks and ramps as well as some erosion at both upstream and downstream ends of the platform.

Having obtained quotations from contractors, we decided to use Elstow Landscapes. The works had to be done during August, when it was very hot. Consequently, the newly laid turf was in danger of wilting in the sun. However, a team of volunteers took it in turns to water the banks by dipping a bucket in the river and keeping the grass moist.

The grass is now well established and the banks appear to have survived the recent unseasonable floods. You can see in the photograph that the water has receded but the landing stage is still flooded.

The scour stabilisation was achieved by installing Nicospan protection and that too is still in place.

Let's keep our fingers crossed for the rest of the winter.

Fields Road Progress

After completing the survey, our next task was to identify a competent designer, who could advise what was possible, suggest alternatives, and give us cost estimates.

Tom Tagg has been trying to do this for some months and finally AECOM have shown interest in the scheme. This is fortunate since our partners in this endeavour, Bedford Borough Council have a framework agreement with AECOM and so are supportive of this initiative. We are currently waiting for AECOM to submit their initial proposals for "Discovery" prior to us authorising them to proceed with any further work.

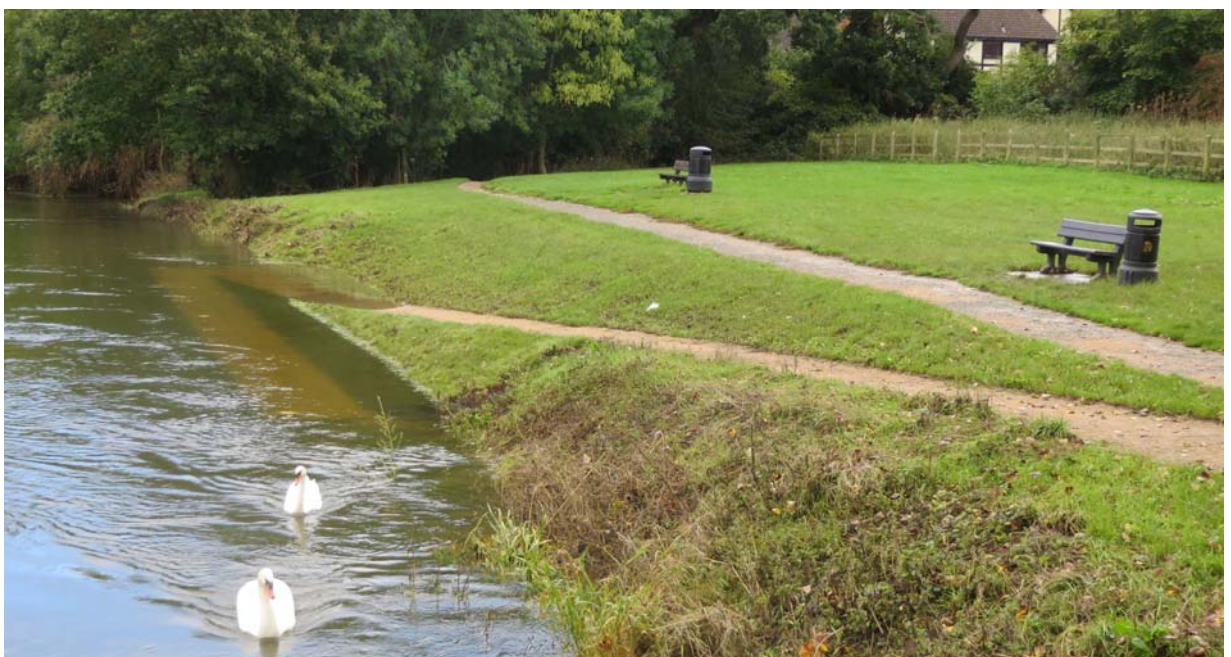
Marking the route

Steve Waring has submitted suggestions to the Council, in response to their initiative, for signs to be erected at the proposed crossing points within Bedford Borough where the Waterway would cross Bedford Borough Roads.

Cycle Way to the north east of Fields Road

Julian Armitage and Chris Fox had a Teams meeting with Andrew Prigmore from Bedford Borough Council and were told that section 106 money was now allocated to construct the section of the National Cycle Network route 51 just east of Fields Road.

Andrew undertook to send us an annotated plan of the scheme showing the route proposed which will now enter the design phase. This is positive progress, showing a close involvement between the Council and the Trust. ●



The landscaped landing stage, still underwater after recent rain

Fenny Stratford Bollard



The Trust has continued to promote improvements at the Grand Union end of our route and nourish our canalside communities (John Best writes). Our community boat *Electra* was introduced in 2021 to raise awareness of the Waterway Park project and also to delight the people of Milton Keynes. She has brought great joy through the choices people now have for a day out, particularly where these treats can be shared with groups who couldn't otherwise afford it, through the "family specials" contributions made by on-board guests. Over her first four seasons she has carried over 8800 people. Now that's success!

The *Electra* journey isn't just about delighting passengers. The Trust wants to see waterways fit for the 21st century and *Electra* is an early adopter of electric propulsion and all that goes with it. Gliding silently along between green banks is a memorable experience. It's reassuring to know we're being kind to the planet. Finding new ways to live with batteries and not relying on familiar diesel brings its own occasional problems, not least in the lifecycle of the equipment. *Electra* has overcome all of these and continues to run an extensive and constantly refreshed cruising programme.

One of *Electra's* challenges is meeting the expectations of canalside parishes. When the Trust was raising funds for a Milton Keynes community trip boat, we were delighted that nearly all the parish and town councils the Grand Union Canal passes through were keen contributors. But that did mean that all wanted their fair share of cruising, from Bletchley & Fenny Stratford in the south, to Wolverton & Greenleys in the north, and eight more in between. One of our challenges is making sure there are enough electric charging points along our cruising routes to support an intensive programme. We started with a second charging bollard in our home base at Campbell Wharf, so we could recharge between cruises without having to return into the marina; an existing charging bollard at Great Linford allowed us to start and finish cruises to the north; and, over the summer, the Trust has overseen introduction of a service bollard at Fenny Stratford providing electric charge and water.

This project has been an exemplary collaboration between partners. With funds from Bletchley and Fenny Stratford Town Council and from the Canal & River Trust, the project has involved volunteers from *Electra*, the Trust, Buckingham Canal Society and the IWA Waterway Recovery Group, overseen by Buckingham Canal Limited (the trading arm of their Canal Society) who have the requisite skills and authority. The bollard itself was complet-



Terry Cavender of Buckingham Canal Limited adding the finishing touches to a smart, blue charging bollard.

ed in time for the Fenny Canal festival in August and the team are now liaising with neighbouring residents over the winter on landscaping and signage in time for the spring cruising season. The team are also working on similar charging bollards at Cosgrove and Wolverton Park, and upgrading all of them for disabled users. Marine electric propulsion is well behind automotive, but it's catching up . . . ●

On 16th October, the adjournment debate in the House of Commons was on the Bedfordshire flooding. It was introduced by Blake Stephenson, the MP for Mid Bedfordshire,



He referred to it being Flood Action Week, and wanted to “raise an issue that is front-of-mind for so many of my constituents”.

Mr Stephenson went on “Two months-worth of rainfall in 24 hours caused considerable damage to property and risks for people, especially the elderly or vulnerable, so I thank all the first responders and council workers who worked tirelessly to support my constituents.”

Richard Fuller (North Bedfordshire) added that “flooding issues have been persistent in places such as Harrold, Clapham and Great Barford, and, most recently and quite devastatingly, in Tempsford and Wyboston in my constituency” and mentioned the initiative of Tom Wootton, “Mayor of Bedford, ... to get a comprehensive approach from all the different agencies that can help residents with their flood response.”

After referring to constituents and farmers (nationwide) who are struggling with the recent weather, Mr Stephenson mentioned “the most high-profile victim of our recent flooding was the A421, which was closed for weeks after more than 60 million litres of water collected in a dip in the road at Mars-ton Moretaine” (see pages 1, 3)

After talking about the work of the Internal Drainage Boards and suggesting the government “bring into effect schedule 3 to the Flood and Water Management Act 2010” he went on “We must also consider the benefits of nature and nature-based solutions. Natural upstream solutions would help capture water and absorb some of the worst impacts of flooding. The **Bedford and Milton Keynes Waterway Park** is a great local example of a project that has the potential to remove water during flooding - and, indeed, to deliver water when it is most needed during droughts - and we must press ahead and deliver it at pace”.

In reply Emma Hardy (The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs) said that she was happy “to talk about IDBs” and “hon. Member mentioned one of my favourite words, which is SUDS, or sustainable urban drainage systems ... as well as schedule 3 of the Flood and Water Management Act 2010. I am

pleased he pointed out that it dates from 2010 and has still not been enacted. It is important that we look at sustainable urban drainage”. As readers will be aware the Marston Vale proposed development would create a section of the Waterway as part of the SUDS for that project.

Although the minister did not specifically mention the Waterway, she said that “We are determined to turbocharge the delivery and repair of flood defences, to improve drainage systems and to develop natural flood management solutions. We are investing more than £1.25 billion this year to scale up national resilience through building new and improving existing flood defences” - perhaps some of that money could be directed at our project to help ensure that the region has “water where it’s wanted”.

On Tuesday 6th November, Mr Stephenson tabled a tourism debate in Westminster Hall. This largely focussed on the proposed Universal development.

He chose to preface his comments about the opportunity offered by Universal as follows,

“We have some fantastic opportunities to grow our tourism industry in Bedfordshire. They include the **Bedford [&] Milton Keynes Waterway Park**, which would run through the Marston Vale, near the villages Brogborough, Marston Moretaine and Wootton in my constituency, connecting the Grand Union canal and the River Great Ouse. This project will attract 750,000 visitors, create nearly 1,000 jobs and bring in an extra £26 million to our local economy.

“We need to ensure that this project is delivered to a high standard, as quickly as possible, to seize the benefits it will bring to our economy. Government support would help us to deliver this project faster and I hope the Minister will ask his officials to look at how the Government could assist in delivering this project of regional significance.”

He then went on to say “However, the Waterway Park is not the biggest potential boost to our local tourism economy. The site that used to be the world’s largest brickworks, at Stewartby in my constituency, which once fired the bricks that built our nation, now has the potential to power our local economy again, as the home as the Universal UK theme park project.”

Simon Clewlow commented “As you can see, the Waterway again got a mention and to be bracketed with Universal by the local MP is, to say the least, great news - it really seems as though the message is getting through!” ● *(our emphasis)*

MK Canals & MK Canalside Endowment Fund



2024 saw the pensioning-off of the MK Canalside Forum, a sounding-board for all interested in the fortunes of MK navigable waterways. It also saw the emergence of two new features to succeed it.

The MK Canalside Forum was set up by the Canal & River Trust in 2016 as part of preparations for MK's 50th birthday celebrations the following year, and was chaired by longstanding BMK Waterway Trustee John Best who, at the time was regional chair of the relevant CRT region, at that time the SE region (since reorganised away). The MK Canalside Forum oversaw a sustained programme of activity during the year, including a quarterly newsletter, an artist-in-residence appointed with an Arts Council grant, a whole lot of animation and activities throughout the year, culminating in an Illuminated Boat Parade in December, celebrated at a canalside cultural event with The Parks Trust in Campbell Park - so popular they had to spread it over two days!

The Canalside Forum continued after 2017, attended by a range of waterway and community organisations and raised the profile of all MK's waterways, including the BMK Waterway Park plans. When in 2018 CRT reorganised and John reached the end of his 6-year term, the Forum continued independent of CRT, meeting quarterly in venues along the canal including several of the canalside parish and town councils. Over many years unsuccessful attempts were made to get formal designation of the canal corridors in planning, heritage and environmental documents. The cases were

made but the authorities didn't bite, a situation which continued through lockdown. From the early days the Forum was a champion of our community boat project, accounting for the extensive financial support given by parish and town councils when *Electra* emerged. This continued with the funding campaigns for the *Electra* Welcome Centre. Finally in 2024 the participants recognised that more focused resources were needed than a quarterly update among stakeholders, and agreed it had run its course. There was no space for an unresourced voluntary body without constitution or funds.

As the result of the programme in 2017 and the arrival of *Electra* and her extensive community-facing cruising programmes, the climate in 2024 is very different to 2016. Emerging from MK's waterway supporters are two new features.

A new charity, MK Canals, has been set up to focus expressly on resourcing, enabling and delivering projects on the ground. Initially they are focusing on the range of new electric charging points with disabled access, for example, and projects with Wolverton & Greenleys Town Council.

A new fund has also been set up with MK Community Foundation, that will focus on projects to help people and communities engage more with their waterways, including the BMK Waterway Park - The MK Canalside Endowment Fund. MK Canals will be looking for more Trustees, while the MK Canalside Endowment Fund will welcome anyone who knows (or is) a benefactor supporting activities by canals. ●



Christmas came early in 2017, with MK's first Illuminated Boat Parade for MK's 50th birthday

Bedford River Project

The Trust is pleased to be involved and support The Bedford River Project, a multi-disciplinary arts project collaborating with diverse communities celebrating the River Great Ouse.

Through workshops in schools and in various community settings, which included cruises on the John Bunyan boat, the project inspired students from local schools and artists to explore their creativity and connect with the river in meaningful ways. Their work culminated in an exhibition expressing their interpretations of the river through music, poetry, stories and visual art. Earlier in the year, Directors of the Trust assisted with judging the submissions and attending a ceremony to celebrate the project where prizes for the best contributions were awarded. ●



The book produced in association with the project

Anthea Davis Barclay (above) and Beryl Bennett (top) at the ceremony

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