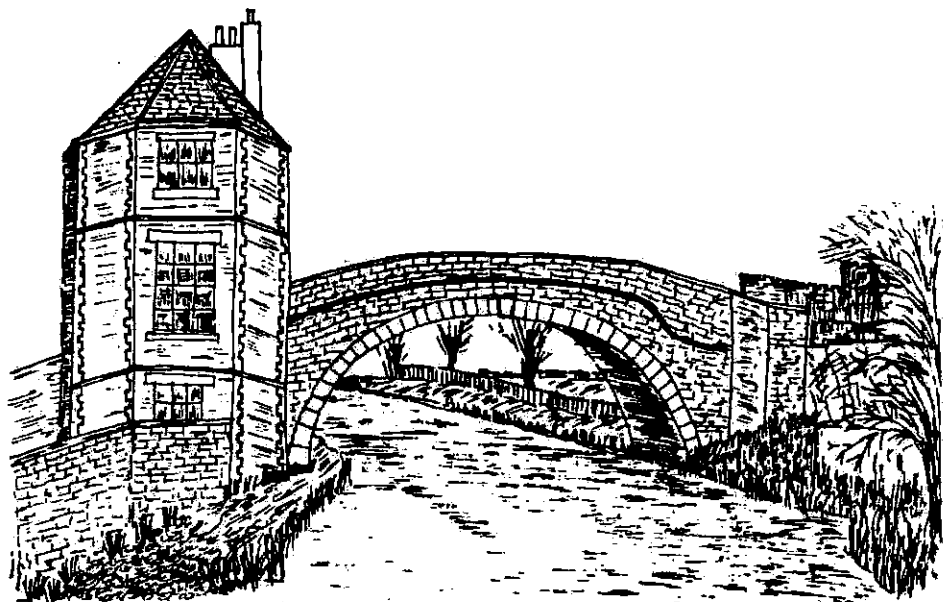
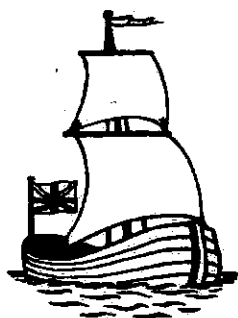


# THE TROW

The Official Magazine for members of  
the Canal Trust.



*Nutshell House and Bridge  
Stonehouse.*

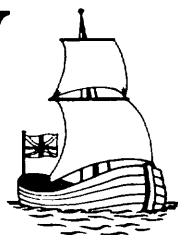
**Stroudwater, Thames & Severn  
Canal Trust Limited**

**10p.**

**No. 30**

**June 1980**

# THE TROW



The Official Magazine for members of  
the Canal Trust.

No.30 June 1980



Due to pressure of business and shortage of time this will be a very short editorial... suffice it to say that we are appealing for money even more than usual (see Secretary's Report)... and I therefore have pleasure in handing over the rest of my space to our worthy Treasurer, who submits the following anguished plea:-

## 300 CLUB

'My exhortations to members to support the 300 Club and thus help provide the Trust with the financial resources it so vitally requires has resulted in the princely total of 20 participants from the ranks of your silent and inactive hundreds. Surely you can

do better than this! I always used to think that people joined the Trust because they supported its aims and efforts. So what about putting £5 a year to support that commitment, at the same time having the chance of winning a prize in one of our quarterly draws. All I need is your money! This quarter's winner of £5 is Richard Veevers, our Civil Engineer.

Mike Reynolds'

\* \* \* \* \*

So there you have it. Other ways of parting painlessly with your money are mentioned on various pages of this issue.

Closing date for contributions to the September issue is August 10th.

RON NOTT.

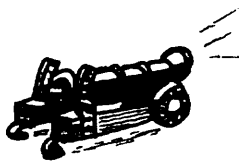
Our cover picture is one of four new drawings by Andrew Bain bridge which he has drawn for the Trust and are the subject of our new packs of notelets - pack of 8 (2 of each drawing) plus envelopes 40p (55p by post from Sales Dept)

## TROW ADVERTISING RATES:-

Personal Sales & Wants: 5p per word (Box Numbers 25p extra)  
Block Adverts: Quarter Page £2.50  
Half-page £5.00  
Full page £10.00

A discount of 10% will be given to all paid-up Trust Members. Please note no advertisements will be included unless they are prepaid.

## Secretary's Report



Should you be wondering why this 'TROW' has dropped through your letterbox later than you anticipated, I am afraid that I must take the full blame, as Ron Nott has now been reduced to utter frustration leading to dire threats against my person - and I'm twice his size - in his incessant demands for copy.

As I remarked in my last report, the fortunes of the Trust are on the upsurge. This has resulted in increased pressure on those of us intimately connected with the Trust's progress. I don't know about the others, but I have at last managed to mow my lawns for the first time this year (26th May), due to the pressures of organisation and meetings connected with your Canal Trust and its programme.

When I started my notes for this report I jotted down 15 separate items which I initially considered should be included, all of current importance, so here goes.

**Plant Site:** By now any member who has read his 'TROW' lately will be aware that our immediate priority is to obtain a suitable plant maintenance and storage site. After much effort we have at last managed what, to the Council, appears to be the ideal. It is in the Stonehouse area with both road and canal access, with suitable planning permission, and could be a site that you can all be proud of. Now the crunch. It is for sale. The cost, including a building, is approximately £17,500. This money we feel must be raised in order that the Trust can have a secure base to carry on its work and grow in the future. Whilst it can be argued that this sort of money could be better utilised in restoration of the canals, unless we have a suitable base for our operations restoration will surely come to a halt. Furthermore, by the purchase of such a site we are declaring our commitment to the monumental task ahead of us. The Trust, and that means each member, has to find this money. It is our future which is at stake.

**May 11th:** Where were you on 11th May? For over 300 sponsored walkers they were enjoying the pleasures of the Thames & Severn Canal between Stroud and Daneway, raising funds for our restoration programme. Our regulars were in position marshalling, catering and selling. Our friends from the Scouts and other voluntary organisations were walking, raising money both for their own funds and for us. We even had a sponsored teddy bear. But our members seemed to be somewhat thin on the ground. So our sincere thanks to all of you who did make the effort and had sore feet the next day. We were pleased to see you and talk to you. Incidentally, if you were unable to attend why not do as others have, either organise a small fund-raising function, or send a donation to the Treasurer, Mike Reynolds.

**Eastington:** Congratulations to Jon Willis and all those who have assisted him on the Stroudwater at Eastington. The Proprietors of the Stroudwater Navigation have expressed their pleasure and satisfaction at the excellent work that the Trust has carried out on the initial stretch between Pike Bridge and the railway. This work has been virtually completed within its programmed time. 'Now we move to Ryeford', Jon tells me, where he has vacancies for workers to clear another mile and a half of undergrowth, overgrowth, sideways growth, mud and a few other unmentionable objects... What he is really looking for are fresh faces and people willing to

help organise visiting working parties. Any odd skilled worker able to lay bricks for nil rates of pay is welcome.

Coates: Will all members please note and bring to the attention of any friends that entry to Sapperton Tunnel is not permitted without authority from the Bathurst Estate. Whilst inspection of the tunnel can be carried out by competent persons, it is not the spot to go for walks or joy trips. We have to emphasize this fact as the Trust has recently had to spend a considerable sum of money and the services of some of its most skilled members in closing off the entrance to the tunnel behind the Coates Portal, due to the irresponsible behaviour of alleged enthusiasts entering the tunnel without permission.

Bowbridge/Ham Mills: After many years of work it is to be hoped that by the time you receive this 'TROW' there will be water in the whole of the Bowbridge/Ham Mills Section of the Thames & Severn, and that the brickwork on Bagpath Bridge will have been completed by Don Mann and Julian Osborne. This does not mean that the work there has been completed, but that at last the amenity value of this section has been enhanced for the time being.

Social Activities: We have recently received several comments from members regarding the lack of both social activities and non-working party meetings for Trust members. The Council has attempted, particularly last Winter, to fill this void, with singular lack of interest by the membership as a whole. Obviously the method attempted was not satisfactory. Is there someone out there who might possibly read the 'TROW' who would be interested in attempting to remedy this apparent vacuum. If so, please contact me NOW.

Thames Branch: Elsewhere you will note the formation of the Thames Branch of the Trust. This is a properly constituted part of the Trust and has been formed to concentrate on the Eastern section of the Canal from the tunnel to the Thames, and hopefully to encourage recruitment and enthusiasm of members in that area. They have our encouragement and assistance, and hope that they are able to fulfil their promise.

Sales: Summer has arrived. Where are Ron Nott and Dinah Davidson? They are on the sales bandwagon, appearing at Coates on Sundays and at various shows and events throughout the area and beyond until the Autumn. The Trust sales stand has built up an enviable reputation for its variety and quality of goods, and can supply you with the majority of popular canal books and items of interest. If you see the stand go and make yourself known. You will always find something of interest.

Dredger: NO, the dredger is not yet in the water, and we are making no excuses. Alan Jones and his small select team, who have the most unglamorous job on the canal, have continued to work their miracles under the most adverse and trying conditions, due to the uncertainty of the plant site. Much of their time which could have been usefully employed on the dredger has had to be spent on carrying out the unrewarding manual labour of clearing space for the new owners of the piggery, with the consequent loss of valuable dredger and plant time. Somehow we must make it clear that we desperately need all the assistance we can get from you, the membership. The provision of an extra pair of hands can make the difference between a job being done and a job not being completed and having to be

started again and again. Alan has several interesting projects for any of our members with a mechanical bent, and maybe 20 or 30 hours time to devote to them. Why not contact him and possibly organise a small group of friends to assist you to help him. Alan swears the dredger will be in the water and operating at Ryeford before the next 'TROW' appears.

Boat Trip: All aboard the Gloucester Packet, Saul Junction to Gloucester and back, on Saturday, 19th July next. Leave at 1.30 pm. Return at 7.00 pm (Saul). Tickets: Adults £2.00 Children under 12 £1.50. Beer and light refreshments, convivial atmosphere.

The second part of the Gloucester and Berkeley Canal, for those who went on last year's successful trip. Numbers are limited to 50. Advance bookings to be confirmed with me.

Note: If there is sufficient interest or over-booking a trip will be organised for the following week-end, destination either Gloucester or Sharpness, by majority vote!

Come along and bring your friends. It's a day out.

Gloucester 400: The Trust Sales Stand will be at the Gloucester Docks 400-year Celebrations on 21st/22nd June. We hope to see our members there.

DAVID H. BOAKES.

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*           S.T. & S.C.T.L. CANAL BOAT TRIP
*
*                   on the
*
*           G L O U C E S T E R   P A C K E T
*
*   from Saul Junction to Gloucester and return
*
*                   with Docks visit
*
*                   on
*
*   SATURDAY 19th JULY 1980 at 1.30 p.m.
*
*                   returning at 7 p.m.
*
* Tickets available from
* Trust Secretary
* GLOUCESTER 740525
*
*           A d u l t s :   £ 2 . 0 0
*           C h i l d r e n : £ 1 . 5 0
*
*           P L E A S E   B O O K   E A R L Y
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## SALE OF LONGBOAT

I was saddened to read Mr M.J.Bristow's uninformed letter on this subject in the last 'Trow'. He may have drawn different conclusions had he known more of the facts.

The boat was purchased for £56.25 in June 1976 from BWB after lying sunk in Gloucester Docks for some years. In October 1976 Bill Joy and Michael Ayland, our then Chairman, who had arranged the purchase, arranged for cramage and transport. Mike Ayland tells in his Chairman's Report in Trow 16 (Dec. 1976) of the impossibility of delivering the boat to either of the Trust's worksites at Bow-bridge or Coates. The boat was therefore placed alongside the Stroudwater at Pike Bridge, Eastington. Cost of cramage was £106.54 but the low loader and police escort were provided free of charge. By early 1978 the boat had lain at Eastington untouched except for some painting by Bill Joy, despite appeals for volunteers to work on it; our existing volunteers were fully occupied on our worksites and maintaining other plant. The Trust was as usual short of funds and it was apparent that we had several items of unusable plant which could realise cash. A dumper and the boat were to be sold and the monorail restored for use.

The Council considered the fate of the longboat in some depth and the following facts emerged:-

1. The bottom and most of the knees would require replacement to make the boat usable and reliably water-tight owing to heavy corrosion. An estimate of £1000 was obtained for steel to replat the bottom which was far more than the Trust could afford and moreover no volunteers were available to carry out the work.
2. How could we use the boat after restoration? As a mud boat it would be too weak to withstand a full dragline bucket dropping on to it without further considerable modification and strengthening. As a trip boat it would have to pass Board of Trade inspection to be viable and in our opinion this would not have been obtainable without high expenditure.

More importantly, however, the Trust had nowhere the boat could be taken and launched as owing to its length of 70ft and the size of low loader required to move it, it could not be brought to the canal bank at either Bowbridge, Ham Mill or Coates. The Trust had no permission even to commence work on the Stroudwater at that time. We considered cutting the boat in half and using metal from one part to repair the other but this suggestion was rightly dismissed as it would mean effectively destroying a piece of history.

In view of all this the Council decided to sell the hull to recoup our expenditure on this abortive venture. The sale was not aided by BWB's proviso when selling to the Trust that the boat could not be put on their water until it had passed an insurance inspection. Additionally, the cost of cramage would be likely to be around £200 plus the even greater cost of hiring a 90ft low loader requiring a Police-escort to take it to its new destination. It was also known that the hull would have to be strutted and braced before it could be safely lifted again. Mike Ayland tried for some months to find a buyer and eventually it was sold for £150 to a Mr Warren in May 1978. Members must judge for themselves whether they think the Council 'blundered', but I would remind them that Mr Bristow's £1000 hull still lies gently rusting away at Eastington two years after the sale. Could it be that the buyer, on discovering the probable cramage, transport and rebuilding costs, found he did not have such a bargain after all?

MIKE REYNOLDS  
Treasurer.

# Readers' Letters

Letters to the editor are welcome, but they should be as brief as possible. We reserve the right to shorten letters for reasons of space. Where possible, please give a day-time telephone number.

Dear Mr Nott,

Having just read in the March issue of the 'Trow' of the visit to the Tunnel in 1933/34, I turned up some notes I made on March 7th and 14th, 1957, when two other acquaintances and myself travelled the length as far as possible from Coates end. We had to climb over a roof fall at Mark 74 which left sufficient headroom for us. At Mark 102 there was a 'shield' like the top of a railway engine cab, fixed up to the roof at one place, intended to throw the water to the sides of the tunnel and clear of the boats. It had long since rusted through and the water cascaded straight down. We found a dead mole and a black bowler hat which was submerged in the very clear water. The hat disintegrated completely at the first touch.

Marks were at every chain (22 yards). Some natural rock, some brick, some stone and brick arching, some cement at the sides where the pipes were set to allow water from the underside to flow off the sides and into the canal without forcing up the clay in the middle of the cut. Complete block at Mark 154 and we could get no further. 9.15 am in. 3.30 pm at block. 6.45 pm out of tunnel. Feet badly cut by thin pieces of stone from the roof which had stuck into the clay. Feet were cold and we did not feel these sharp slate-like pieces which cut us like knives. We wore swimming costumes and a pullover. Dragged the light collapsible boat most of the way with food, a spade, camera and other items. In those days it was 'black and white' and the flash camera and I have never been a photographer at the best of times.

I walked sections of the canal a number of times 25 years ago and am pleased that much work has since been done towards re-instatement. Wishing you every success.

73 Willoughby Road,  
Bridgwater, Somerset.

Yours sincerely,

JOHN MAXWELL.

SALES NEWS Many thanks to Norman Powell of Johnson's Office Equipment Ltd, Gloucester, for a generous donation of items for disposal on our Sales Stall. Also to various members and friends for magazines, books, stamps, etc., which we are exchanging for ready cash!

We have two additions to our own Trust Reproduction Postcards - No.3 is another view of work in progress at Daneway in the early 1900's showing a steam-driven cement-mixer or stone-crusher in the background, and No.4 is a view of Wallbridge, Stroud, taken in 1889. Price is 12p each, or the complete set of four cards issued so far can be had for 45p - add 12p for postage and packing.

In addition to the sales items mentioned inside the back cover of this 'TROW', the following books are available at the moment:- Stroudwater Canal (Michael Hanford) £8.95; Britain's Canal & River Craft (Paget Tomlinson) £7.50; Fishing Canals (Ken Cope) £5.95; Narrow Boat Painting (A.J.Lewery) £5.50; Inland Waterways (Charles Hadfield) £2.50; British Canals (Charles Hadfield) £4.95. All obtainable from the Sales Section - add 40p postage and packing to each order.

# Working Party Reports



STROUD Now that spring and summer are with us and the cold days of winter hopefully gone until next year, there seems to be a little more optimism in the air. The progress made in the last few months has encouraged this optimistic view even more.

Eastington. The main job of general clearance which we committed ourselves to 18 months ago is now complete and on time. We have also in the last few months started on repairs to the brickwork on the Roving Bridge and commenced clearing silt from Newtown Lock (sorry, Upper Nassfield) with the aid of the Wolf crane, which is now fully operational. Also a problem we had last year, when we tried pumping the lock, of too much water, has been solved by the discovery of a culvert, complete with working paddle gear, at Bonds Mill. This enables us to now control the flow of water through this section. Most of this recent work has been achieved by visiting parties from London W.R.G. - my thanks to them for all their efforts.

Ham Mill. Once again we have started laying bricks on the parapets of Bagpath Bridge, a task we hope to finish by mid-summer. Within the same time we hope to install two dams. One at Ham Mill Lock and one at Griffins Mill Lock, and to this end work has already started but the finishing date is very much dependent on the labour available, so please contact me if you wish to see two stretches of canal back in water. We have, as walkers will have seen, installed a seat at Bowbridge in commemoration of Miss Crane who was a faithful member for some years before her death in a road accident.

The Easter Grand Slam was once again a great success with daily parties of 20-plus tackling numerous jobs from bricklaying, tree clearance and lock clearance. Thanks to all who made the weekend such a success.

Future Work Parties Meeting at 10.00 at our Eastington worksite:-

June 8th	June 22nd	July 6th	July 20th
August rd	August 17th	August 31st	

For other dates, contact me.

JON WILLIS  
82 Chatsworth Avenue,  
Tuffley, Gloucester GL4 0SD  
Tel: Glos. 416694

\* \* \* \* \*

CERNEY WICK. Now that the summer has arrived work can recommence on Cerney Wick Lock. This year's programme includes the dredging of the main part of the chamber utilising the Priestman Cub. Once this has been done the chamber can be pumped dry and scaffolding erected so that brick and stonework repairs can be continued. Much of the brickwork is in need of attention, especially at the water line, where ice has caused extensive damage. Before the lock can be cleared, however, the Trust has to beg, borrow or buy a clam-shell grab for the Cub, so if anyone reading this knows of one, please contact Sue Hilton (Poulton 256) or myself forthwith.

Dates of working parties - 10 am to 5 pm approx - see next page:-



Working Party Reports - continued

Saturday & Sunday 7th & 8th June

Saturday & Sunday 19th & 20th July

Saturday & Sunday 16th & 17th August

Please come along and join in - NO previous experience needed - come and learn a new skill or utilise an existing one. Accommodation for individuals or groups will be found if notice is given. For further information write to me or ring Poulton 256.

3 Gas Lane, Cricklade,  
Wiltshire SN6 6BY

KEN BURGIN

S O C I A L E V E N I N G

The Thames End Branch invite anyone interested in canals to an informal Social Evening at "The Spotted Cow" Inn, Marston Meysey, Nr Fairford, on 30th June at 8.00 p. m.

Drinks on the lawn if the weather permits

COATES The fine weather at Easter meant that for once the planned jobs could be carried out as intended, for despite the presence of 18 inches of water in the tunnel, the grill is now firmly in place some 30ft inside the entrance. The memorial seat was also placed in position near the foot of the ramp.

WANTED A lengthsman to keep an eye on the Coates site now that the current works have been completed. This is not an onerous task - more of a pleasure really - but in order to keep the are looking at its best small regular maintenance jobs will be necessary. These consist in the main of keeping the green area above the Portal under control, and keeping the towpath clear for the general public to use. For any major jobs such as channel or tree clearance a larger workforce will be available. As you see, it is not vital that someone nearby need necessarily take on the position, but it would mean that labour need not be diverted from other working sites - important in time, energy and effort. I hope that someone will feel able to tackle this job, and look forward to hearing from you.

The Trust Sales Caravan at Coates is badly in need of an external coat of paint. Our good friend Dave Davidson expended much energy recently washing the green slime off, which had been left by a wet winter, and thus putting many younger members to shame who had merely remarked what a state it was in! Painting is however now necessary, and anyone who feels they would like to tackle this job should contact either David Boakes or myself. This is a worthwhile job, since the caravan is a 7-day a week advertisement for the Trust on this important site, and the sales revenue there is quite considerable.

\* \* \* \* \*

Transport from the Swindon area is usually available to most of the Trust worksites. If you would like to come along one day to see what is going on please contact Dave Lewis on Swindon 693952.

\* \* \* \* \*

Visit to the Mont Four intrepid volunteers set off for the terrors of the Welsh Marches one early Saturday morning in March in search of the famed Montgomery Canal on whose future many restoration hopes are pinned.

We met up with a Shropshire Union Canal Society working party at Careghofa and spent the next two days engaged in the timely occupation of barrowing mud away from a choked side pond between the two locks, to which access with machinery was not readily feasible. The weather was on our side it seemed, with the rain keeping its distance and the bitter wintry North winds relatively subdued - all in all it was a thoroughly enjoyable weekend, and we certainly made a few new friends in that part of the world.

There are tremendous problems to be overcome there, but the results to date are impressive, enhanced by the sight of British Waterways Board working hand-in-hand with the volunteer workforce. To summarise progress: approximately 10 miles of canal from Welshpool to Careghofa dredged, and five locks restored to date, with two more in prospect shortly; Vyrnwy aqueduct and approaches given an overhaul and facelift; and in addition the WRG effort at the Welsh Frankton junction. The lowered bridge problem is still with them, but the signs are there for the solution to this and the eventual long term opening of the waterway. If you find yourself in that part of the country do go and have a look at the canal - I think you will be suitably impressed.

If you are interested in future away working parties please contact either myself or Dave Lewis (Swindon 693952).

Swindon Jumble It is intended to organise several Jumble Sales in June/July in Swindon to raise funds for the Trust. Volunteers are in demand to help run the Sales and any assistance at all will be greatly appreciated from members and friends in the area. If you have any Jumble to donate, or are able to help, please contact me. Address and phone number below.

Collection Jars There will shortly be available a number of half-gallon size collecting jars suitably decorated with Trust labels for display in appropriate places. These are designed both to attract a few more pounds to the coffers and to publicise the Trust's existence. If you are aware of any prospective display places, please contact a member of the Trust Council.

8 Churchward Avenue,  
Swindon, Wilts.  
Tel: Swindon 32524

DAVE PILLINGER.

THAMES END BRANCH

The Committee of the Thames End Branch was at last officially voted in at the last Spotted Cow Meeting; this business being completed after an informative talk by our new Chairman, Mr. K. Burgin, on canal restoration in general with particular emphasis on our part.

The new Committee comprises the following:-

- |           |   |  |
|-----------|---|--|
| Chairman  | - | Ken Burgin, 3 Gas Lane,<br>Cricklade, Wilts.                                     |
| Secretary | - | Sue Hilton, "Nettledown"<br>Church Street, Meysey<br>Hampton, Cirencester, Glos. |
| Treasurer | - | Chris Hall, Five Elms,<br>London Street, Fairford, Glos.                         |

Committee Members:- David Lewis, Pete Chadwick, George Savage,  
Alan Barlow, Jim Hilton, P. May

Anyone wishing to discuss and help with projects in this area should initially contact Sue or Jim Hilton on Poulton 256.

On the working party front, work is due to recommence at Cerney Wick lock in June (see elsewhere in this issue for dates).

The big news is that landowner negotiations for a new stretch of canal running northwards from the Spine road towards South Cerney for approximately 2 miles are now sufficiently advanced for us to start work.

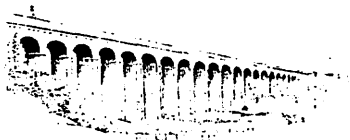
The first working party is set for 20th and 21st June and this new section of canal includes both the Wilmoreway Lock and Bridge and Humpback Lock. Mr Bill Savage is organising this event and any volunteers for tree-bashing and brush clearance should contact him on Cirencester 2201.

\* \* \* \* \*

Success comes with effort - the more people involved, the faster the progress. As usual, we need navvies, fund-raisers, people to man displays and exhibitions, people to help with the mountains of paperwork that will need to be done as the work expands, etc., etc.

Join in and have FUN,

KEN BURGIN.



VISIT FROM THE STAFFS & WORCS.

Several committee members from the Staffordshire & Worcestershire Canal Society visited the Stroudwater Canal in February last and were shown the work of the Trust by Council members and friends.

When the fourth attempt to build a Stroudwater Canal was started in 1774-5 officers of the original Staffordshire & Worcestershire Canal Company were instrumental in loaning navvies, engineers and two committee members to the struggling Stroudwater Company.

The recent visit therefore concentrated on the prospects of the canal society repeating the imaginative efforts of their predecessors by assisting the work of the Trust at a crucial time.

Discussions are continuing between the Trust and the Society on the prospects of financial and/or physical assistance with restoration. This may centre on the Nassfield Lock area at Newtown.

\* \* \* \* \*

RESTORATION OF BARGE-YACHT 'DINAH'

Some of our readers are no doubt aware that for the past 8 years or so the former East Coast barge-yacht 'DINAH' has been quietly mouldering away inside a lighter, first at Sharpness and latterly in the timber-ponds near Purton. She was recently purchased by Mr A.de la Mare of Worcestershire for restoration, and in return for a generous donation to the Trust from him, I was able to organise a small band of willing helpers to clear her of much accumulated and evil-smelling rubbish and remove other extraneous matter including deck-rigging and a very heavy and obstinate engine which was installed, I believe, during the Second World War.

This work was carried out at the end of March, and a fortnight later she was successfully lifted out of the lighter and placed on a low-loader to be taken to Ipswich, where restoration is now in progress. Her new owner hopes to have her back in service in a year or two, sailing in her original waters, and possibly on charter to holiday-makers from time to time. She was built at Rochester, Kent, in 1887, and is believed to be the last of this type still in existence. What a pity the same could not be done for a Severn Trow!

My thanks for some very hard, dirty and unpaid work, to Albert Bainbridge of Cashes Green, his two sons Andrew and Richard, his two fellow enthusiasts from the Saul Boatowners' Club, and not forgetting my own son Andrew. I have two photographs of the operation which may get into the 'TROW' at a future date, but if anyone is interested to see them, please contact me.

RON NOTT.



## A HOLIDAY TO REMEMBER

There is no doubt about it - the French canals are superb and make an unusual and fascinating holiday for anyone interested in waterways. We shall certainly go back again, and for less than £40 a week each it is cheaper than staying at home.

There is for a start the marked contrast with British canals. In France the canals are invariably well maintained and have friendly keepers at most locks only too delighted to work the locks and supply you with fresh garden produce. The lack of a common language and our own hazy knowledge of French proved no problem, as local people enjoyed practising their broken English and helping our faltering pronunciation. The other contrasts include the weather - the sun blazed down for almost the entire fortnight - and the excellent choice of inexpensive food. And what food! There are wines (at 40p a litre), cheeses and pates which make enjoyable and easy picnic lunches on deck. Even meals out at cafes and restaurants were both reasonable and appetising. We fed ourselves well and ate out two or three times for about £12 - £15 each a week.

The boat we hired was a well-converted 9-berth ex-River Avon grain barge, the 'PISGAH', which had a large and comfortable saloon, dining room and kitchen, four double and 1 single cabins, shower and toilet, as well as acres of deckspace for sunbathing. At the height of the season it cost us less than £40 a week each and that included the services of a friendly skipper (from Birmingham) with a weakness for bacon and eggs which he fried up in his own self-contained cabin separate from the main accommodation. If hirers prefer, the crew can provide breakfasts and probably lunches but these are so easy with French food it hardly seemed worthwhile for us. Nevertheless, with meals out in the evening at reasonably priced local cafes, the boat can be used as a hotel boat if required.

Our journey of discovery began near Nevers on the Loire Lateral Canal with regular glimpses of chateaux through the trees. From Decize we joined the secretive and beautiful Canal du Nivernais, climbing through cornfields and woodlands to the summit at Baye where several large lakes feed the canal. The narrow summit pound is not usually wide enough for 2 boats to pass but with the end of commercial traffic there was no need to wait. We passed through a succession of deep limestone cuttings and short tunnels hidden away from the public gaze. Huge banks of blackberries among the tree-lined cuttings proved irresistible. Emerging from the last of the 3 short tunnels we began the long descent to the River Seine at Fontainebleau through delightful Burgundian countryside.

About a decade ago the Canal du Nivernais was threatened with closure as the small locks proved unsuitable for modern-sized commercial boats. Afraid of losing their canal, towns like Clamecy built luxuriously-appointed showers, toilets, shaver points and baths on the canalside to encourage pleasure traffic. Now there is a growing interest in holidays on this canal - mostly British and Americans - and in another decade it could easily become one of the most well loved cruising grounds in Europe. So far the French had not really thought of using their canals for pleasure and still stand slightly puzzled but interested at the sight of 'les Anglais' using them and having a marvellous time. But it is obvious the idea interests them and it is only a matter of time before they join the overseas visitors on their own canals.

So my advice to anyone interested in waterways is to discover the French canals for yourself while they are still peaceful. They are different, stimulating, friendly and hugely enjoyable. It is a holiday I recommend without reservations. If anyone is interested in the details of 'PISGAH' I will gladly send them the name and address of the firm we used if they will write to me, Michael Handford, 6 Spa Lane, Hinckley, Leics LE10 1JB tel 0455 611508 or at Studio Flat, 52 Park Street, Bristol BS1 5JN tel 0272 297587. A stamped addressed envelope would be appreciated.

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