



Save our Waterways

**Minutes of the Strategy Meeting
at Stafford Boat Club on 10th February 2008 at 1100 hrs
Venue: Stafford Boat Club, Maplewood, Stafford ST17 4SG**

Present: Howard Anguish (NABO), Neil Arlidge (SOW), Julie Arnold (IWA Stoke on Trent), Ivor Caplan (RBOA), Richard Carpenter (NABO), Peter Caswell (IWA Milton Keynes), Will Chapman (SOW - Chairman), Martin Clark (SOW), Tony Collins (IWA Milton Keynes), Eddie Hunt, Bill Joyce (IWA Grand Junction), John Keyes (JCBY), John Laidlar (Stafford BC), Roger Millin (SOW), David Pearce (AWCC), Simon Robbins (NABO), Philip Sharpe (IWA Lichfield), John Slee (SOW), David Stevenson (SOW), Will Wilkinson, .

Apologies: Nick Atty, Eugene Baston, Sue Day, John Evans, Clive Fennell, Debbie Figueiredo, Paul Fortescue, Tony Haynes, Ron & Mary Heritage, Barbara Hodgson, Andrew Instone-Cowie, Louis Jankel, Paul Le Blique, Beryl McDowell, Lynda Payton, Michael Shefras, Simon Weightman, Vaughan Welch.

1 Introductions.

1.1 Will Chapman welcomed everyone to the meeting. He said that SOW aims to try to deal with issues not covered by other existing user groups. It was not set up to destructively criticise either BW or DEFRA, but to campaign to maintain the waterway system currently under threat as a result of government finance cuts.

1.2 Everyone was invited to introduce themselves.

1.3 Will C. welcomed in particular John Laidlar of Stafford Boat Club, and thanked the Club for providing the meeting room, free of charge. Club members responsible for providing the lunch were thanked unanimously. Neil Arlidge (SOW Treasurer) collected £5 per head towards the food costs during the lunch break.

2 Proposed Objectives identified at the last meeting

2.1 Government to move BW from DEFRA e.g. To the auspices of the Department of Communities and Local Government.

2.1.1 Will Chapman was pleased to note that Jonathan Shaw MP, (Parliamentary Under Secretary of State at Defra, with responsibility for the waterways) has actually been making some positive initiatives. These include obtaining invitations for 5 members of BWAf to present user opinions to KPMG's British Waterways Review and setting up the Interdepartmental Working Group for Waterways, with representation from the departments of Culture, Media and Sport, Transport, Health and Communities and Local Government and the Treasury As such SOW was prepared to wait before pursuing this objective.

2.1.2 Phil Sharpe agreed that these are good signs. David Pearce said that a move is unlikely, and applauded the interdepartmental committee. We should be supporting this.

2.1.3 David Stevenson referred to Harriet Harman MP's reaction to British Waterways pulling out of the Cotswold Canal Partnership. Commenting on the fact that such decisions have a profound effect on the region or locality, she had said she would be bringing the question of British Waterways to the attention of her right honourable friend the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government.

2.1.4 Simon Robbins reported that John Edmonds, chair of IWAC, had said government sees no good reason to move BW. However we should maintain a watch on the situation. Phil Sharpe agreed that the DCLG would be a more logical home for BW, but EA would still remain in a department concerned with the environment. There are only 2 ½ full time staff posts for BW in Defra, remarked Simon, hardly a sign of passion for the waterways.

2.1.5 Peter Caswell said irrespective of which department BW is in, the crucial thing is that more members of the general public take an active interest in the waterways. Roger Millin said that our efforts can make a difference.

2.1.6 **It was generally agreed** that Jonathan Shaw had made a good start. We should ensure that the consultative meetings with user groups continue – he had said six-monthly – as well as the Interdepartmental ones, and David Pearce suggested that we should be asking for the next date, preferably before the summer recess.. Keep a watching brief.

2.2 Government (or the Environment Agency, who are responsible for flood control) should reimburse BW for expenses incurred in flood control. This should be done during the current year so that BW's maintenance program is not further compromised.

2.2.1 Simon, again referring to John Edmonds' comments, wondered if all that would happen if BW was reimbursed would be that the EA would suffer. Phil said we are asking for extra money. Howard Anguish said that as the situation was extraordinary we should be requesting money be taken from government's contingency funds, not BW's general funds.

2.2.2 Will C. quoted the situation where work had begun on site for the rebuilding of Vale Royal lock but contractors had to be withdrawn because of the financial consequences of the Mon and Brec breach.

2.2.3 Peter asked if BW themselves had made enough noise about the flooding cost. Martin Clark wondered why they had not gone to the Welsh Department for funds, since it affected tourism and local businesses.

2.2.4 Simon emphasised that they would have to ask for the money. Money is available. Especially in a bid based system, there are always odd bits left around if people ask the right people at the right time. EA seem good at this in contrast to BW. Neil Arlidge concurred: BW don't have the right people in place. He compared BW's position with the stable position of Waterways Ireland, which has a fixed 7 year funding budget, 15% of which is from the UK Treasury.

2.2.5 Ivor Caplan said that last summer's flooding is not going to be a one-off. Flood control costs will be ongoing. Howard acknowledged this, but insisted that BW need to be pushed to seek access to contingency funds. Julie Arnold exemplified the Caldon Canal, where BW was responsible for only a part of the flood control management.

2.2.6 Will Wilkinson drew attention to the funding shortfall resulting from the extra expense incurred on the flood work. More preventative maintenance than BW is currently doing is

necessary to stop more floods having devastating effects. Simon and Tony Collins reminded the meeting that conversely BW had reduced culvert checks because of the Mon & Brec breach. Neil referred to the Rotherham culvert which had threatened the nearby dam.

2.2.7 Howard said we should be asking that BW get the money for last years unplanned flood costs and more money recognizing their future flood control costs. Roger said we should be talking to Jonathan Shaw about this '*now*'. Simon said we need to build a communication channel with his department civil servants: Sarah Nason and Jane Redrupp.

2.2.8 John Keyes reiterated that BW should be chasing government about flooding costs.

Whereas Defra had found contingency funds for Avian flu and Foot and Mouth, they had refused to draw on the same funds for the waterways. BW's management culture is not good at getting money. At the same time some MPs believe that the money BW is being given is not being used effectively, and whilst it is certainly the case that the waterways are in need of proper secure funding, BW should not be awarded any more money before the public have an absolutely clear idea of how they spend what they have got already..

2.2.9 Tony said we ought to be talking to the Insurance Companies, since flooding affects them. Phil said we and BW need to be wary of over hyping the flood danger, since it could lose public sympathy. Neil suggested BW ought to be communicating with ABI. Simon suggested Michael Stimpson might be prepared to give us advice on this. Howard suggested BWAf.

2.2.10 **It was generally agreed** that contact should be made with Defra and the Insurance Industry regarding BW claiming flood control costs: not only last summer's costs, but also to establish future contingency plans. Simon would ask EA for a view/advice.

2.3 **Local Authorities to have a statutory obligation to bear the costs of:** **(i) fly-tipping (ii) vandalism (iii) towpath maintenance.**

2.3.1 Will C. said that BW spend £3.7m annually on towpath maintenance and £2.3m on removing rubbish, cleaning graffiti and effects of vandalism. Surely this should be local authorities' responsibility? There are 200+ riparian authorities so the average cost per local authority (£30,000) would be relatively minor in comparison to the average local authority spend of £200 million (0.015%) Although this has been the subject of discussion for at least 40 years, this was one area that Robin Evans, (BW Chief Exec.) asked for users cooperation at the recent license consultation meetings. We need to get local people to see the problem. Neil asked if BW are actually in contact with local government authorities themselves.

2.3.2 Bill pointed out that farmers have to pay to have rubbish removed from their land. Simon talked about volunteers litter-picking in London. Local authorities won't do anything. In response to Eddie asking if there was an agreed demarcation between towpath and bank, it was generally agreed that attaining agreement on this is fraught with difficulty. Residents will lead campaigns. Tony highlighted the IWA clean-ups which BW are happy to support with practical help.

2.3.3 David Stevenson insisted that central government should be persuading local authorities to maintain the towpath and reduce these anti-social activities. There are good examples of local authorities caring for their local canals and the rest should be encouraged to follow suit. Will C. said getting enough local stories into the local press will (and did) get noticed by the national press.

2.3.4 Phil said local planning authorities should be involved. Julie said dealing with hot spots should be part of the planning vision at the initial planning stage. Martin mentioned the waterside areas 'sponsored by' local businesses on the Huddersfield Narrow Canal. Bill spoke of how Wyvern Shipping care for Leighton Buzzard's waterfront. Simon instanced a London Sainsburys store that has a planning requirement to clear up the towpath bordering the store. Neil said some authorities set a good example. Will C. said we should share and obtain good and bad examples for the campaign.

2.3.5 Phil pointed out the value of towpath maintenance by BW providing free towpaths for walkers, nature lovers and cyclists. Local authorities won't take on those costs unless a precept is applied by central government, and there will be a wide range of quality of compliance.

2.3.6 David S. said if people are interested in something they will do something. Julie suggested Local Canal Rangers paid for by BW. Comparison was made with the lost lengthsmen.

2.3.7 Highlighting the relevance of the DCLG, Simon instanced examples of Neighbourhood Management schemes where local landowners, for example, were involved. Regional government is a potential resource. London has spent £3-4m on towpaths. Development agencies have pots of money.

2.3.8 Neil suggested volunteers could be empowered by independent charities. Julie said the waterways need to be repositioned back in their communities. Since the reorganisation, BW has lost touch with its local users and groups, and lost the grassroots support which is invaluable. John K. said we need to get across to the public that they are getting the waterways on the cheap, and David S. added MPs need to realise that too. Peter said that we ought to write to local councillors too.

2.3.9 **It was generally agreed** that we must encourage local authorities and local people to take more active interest in their own waterways. Only then will BW's huge expenditure on rubbish, graffiti and vandalism repairs be reduced.

2.4 In the medium term, Government to appoint a BW Board Member with specific responsibilities for representing leisure users' interests and seeking alternative sources of income. In the immediate term, BW to assign said responsibilities to an existing Board member.

2.4.1 Will C. said most large private companies have user representatives on the board these days.

2.4.2 John K. said that it would hard to find good management practice in BW. Their accountability is last century quality. The best option is to remove the whole BW board. In a conversation with two MPs at Portcullis House, John reported that they believe BW is good at harvesting funds but poor at spending money – i.e. they are inefficient. There are three key people who have caused major problems and who need to be removed for the good of the waterways and the company. It was agreed that this is beyond SOW's remit. An effective regulator is needed.

2.4.3 Phil said that is a very dangerous route to be taking. We should be monitoring BW's outputs, as John Edmonds has said. Then we can push for better results. Simon agreed and said we should be calling BW to account for their financial efficiency. This appears absent

in BW at the moment, though other organisations do this as a matter of course.

2.4.4 Will C. referred to the BWML accounts which show itemised income, but non-itemised administration expenses of £4m. When asked, James Froomberg (chairman of BWML and commercial director of BW) said that the details are “commercially sensitive”. Will C. hoped the KPMG would deal with some of this opacity which was also evident in recent BW Annual reports.

2.4.5 Howard warned against targeting individuals, which might harm our cause. Simon suggested that OFWAT/OFCOM scale regulators are out of scale for BW. Instead small networks of scrutineers are necessary. Local hospitals and schools have stakeholder representatives on their boards; so should BW – several, not just one. Howard suggested that the BWAFA chairman should be on the board as a start. Alternatively, IWAC should advertise for appointees.

2.4.6 BW should be monitored by a local auditor. Simon recommended the Audit Commission, as opposed to the National Audit Office. The former deal with local government, health, housing, community safety and fire and rescue services. [They are “an independent body responsible for ensuring that public money is spent economically, efficiently and effectively, to achieve high-quality local services for the public.” - website]. Their KLOEs (Key Lines of Enquiry) are particularly effective.

2.4.7 **It was generally agreed** that we are “Save our Waterways” not “Save our British Waterways” and BW self-policing is no longer acceptable. In pursuit of transparency there should be one or more external appointees to the BW board.

2.5 Endorse BW's decision to practice Zero tolerance on unlicensed boats. (Not adopted as SOW Objective)

2.5.1 Will C. said the report showed this had been a recurring issue in the BW licence public consultation. [mentioned 25 times].

2.5.2 Roger said BW's own figures show that although licence fee collection had improved, that was not leading to repeat collection in subsequent years. In fact collection rates had dropped back.

2.5.3 Simon pointed out that in Housing Associations anything under 98% collection was totally unacceptable.

2.5.4 John Slee said the BW licensing department needs monitoring. He knows of many cases, including his own, where licences had not been dispatched many weeks after the due date, despite early application, but had been sent out the next day when the licensee chased BW.

2.5.5 Phil said zero tolerance was not possible. John S. said that although 100% collection is impossible, a policy of zero tolerance on unlicensed boats is. The two are not the same.

2.5.6 Bill said that BW are employing mooring wardens in the Midlands, to good effect.

2.5.7 Will C. said we should correct the misconception that those on Housing Benefit do not have licences issued; according to Robin Evans (at the Northwich licence consultation) they do. Display of licences should be compulsory. Roger suggested BW patrol officers should post temporary licence stickers on boats not displaying licences if they are known to be

licensed, to give users a true idea of who is and who is not licensed.

2.5.8 It was generally agreed that this issue is very important.

2.6 BW should ensure that there is appropriate input from all types of stakeholder before the KPMG report is finalised. Stakeholders believe that there are areas of concern that are not part of the brief given to the review team. In particular, we would like the review to examine whether there is any conflict of interest with BW being both a trading entity as well as being the operating body. For example, where it competes with its own stakeholders (marinas & moorings) and where it has a responsibility to preserve heritage sites whilst also being active in the sale and development of property.

2.6.1 The meeting noted with satisfaction that the Minister's intervention resulted in stakeholder representatives having an opportunity to present their views to the KPMG review team before the BW review report was finalised.

3 Implementing the Strategy

3.1 Using the BW Asset list

3.1.1 Will C. used his laptop to show that the BW Principal Assets list is now loaded onto a SOW database. This shows the canal structures with their status graded from A to E and the date of last inspection. Filters are available to list details for specific features, e.g. Specific canals, culverts, locks, only 'D' and 'E' grade assets. Members who wish to help by surveying specific canals can request listings from Will.

3.1.2 A SOW supporter is developing a map, cross referencing the database and showing constituencies. This will enable users to let their MP know of poorly maintained structures.

3.1.3 Phil pointed out that Yard Lock at Stone (no.28) on the Trent and Mersey, whose wall had collapsed on 10th December 2007 causing a stoppage, had been rated 'C – Fair' and inspected on 17th February 2007, showing how arbitrary some of these gradings are. They seem to be only visual inspections.

3.1.4 Will C. said BW are not actioning all the 'D' and 'E' structures. Each A-E grading has a secondary classification ranging from 1-5, which relates to the consequences of failure. BW plan their maintenance schedule on the combined rating. Phil pointed out that whereas before the recent cuts the maintenance backlog was going down, it is now rising, due to the cuts, the Mon and Brec breach and last summer's flooding. This had led directly to BW's disastrous withdrawal from the Cotswolds Canal Partnership.

3.1.5 Apparently the Asset List used by SOW is current to November 2007. but there are examples which suggest that many of the inspection dates are not accurate. Eddie said that the Walsall lock gates had all been replaced between 2000 and 2003, but this did not appear on the list.

3.1.6 Having seen how the Asset List highlighted the fragile state of the network, Simon asked why BW are unwilling to declare the full picture of the maintenance problem. Will C. believed that BW feared that doing so would be explosive. Simon said that therefore we should be drawing public attention to it. Will C. drew attention to the fact that when Keith Langston (Towpath Talk) had obtained the current copy, he had been asked by BW to be careful with the use of the information.

- 3.1.7 Will C. then showed that through FOI we also have a BW Listed Structures list, a list of Scheduled Ancient Monuments, and 1028 pages of Non-Principal Assets. We have an ongoing project to integrate these into the main database.
- 3.1.8 Will C. then demonstrated an on-line program (a project in process) which would enable individuals to easily create a letter or email to their own MP. The program used a database extracting statements from documents such as Waterways Tomorrow, BW Annual reports and other Government publications and asking questions highlighting current deficiencies. Two letters to the same MP were produced showing the random nature of the output. Julie suggested that users could ask for a letter targeting a particular interest e.g. Towpaths, walking, canoeing etc.
- 3.1.9 The ease of use of this facility could easily result in government departments (Defra) being forced to recruit extra staff to reply to a deluge of enquiries. Earlier in the campaign Defra had to bring in a extra staff to handle letters generated by campaign supporters.. At that time SOW had the support of 314 MPs (48.6%). Phil wondered if this would inconvenience MPs. Will C. replied that we should use our democratic right to lobby. Communities can use it if they wish. John K. emphasised the need for communities to retake ownership of their canals. Will C. noted that anglers have suggested that their presence on towpaths makes neighbourhoods safer.
- 3.1.10 Will C. said that nevertheless we have to be careful how we use the Asset List. There was a concern that Remainder Waterways could risk closure if it was perceived that they posed a threat to the locality. For example, Eddie had taken pictures of structures in poor repair on the Wyrley and Essington Canal, which had been posted on the SOW Website. They have since been removed, because of concern expressed of negative publicity. Phil believed they ought to be reinstated, and would speak to the objector to argue the case. John S. asked if local IWA branches should be asked to have editorial responsibilities for such reports on the SOW website. It was thought that BW no longer take note of the Remainder Waterway distinction when scheduling essential repairs.
- 3.1.11 Neil said MPs ought to be aware of the important heritage aspect of these canals. Julie suggested that local groups could be notified when letters are sent to MPs. Will W. suggested SOW ought then to be registered under the Data Protection Act.
- 3.1.12 Simon questioned if MPs were written to would there be a fight between areas for funding. He reiterated the danger that if funds were further stretched Remainder Waterways might well be threatened in the same way that the Cotswolds Canal project and Mon and Brec repairs had been affected financially, leading to wider closures. Will C. replied that our goal is to raise awareness both among MPs and the general public, and thence to the government.
- 3.1.13 Neil cited the top lock on the Grantham Canal, which BW were thinking of filling in with gravel because they could not afford to repair the unstable lock chamber walls. Bill said that some MPs are just not interested., but Phil said we have to get the message across. David S. pointed out that many people have a relationship with more than one MP and should be communicating with them all. Peter added MEPs.
- 3.1.14 Ivor warned that the Asset List could be have negative repercussions with MPs if used without care. Simon referred back to the social consequences of failure e.g. flooding. It would be easy to lead local residents to have negative feelings if they felt threatened by the nearby canal.

3.1.15 David S. stressed the importance of keeping on communicating with MPs. Phil said we should repeat that 'flat cash' is just not good enough.

3.1.16 **It was generally agreed** that the Asset List should be used with care to demonstrate to MPs, MEPs, the public at large, and thus to government, that the present under-funding situation is untenable, and unsustainable.

3.2 **Using the media** - Tow Path Talk offer a 4 page supplement.

3.2.1 Will C. explained that Keith Langston (TT) had offered SOW a 4 page supplement to "get the message across". He suggested that an editorial board of 6 members drawn from different user groups should draw content together, with perhaps a meeting to finalise it. This acknowledges that the existing SOW group needs help from outside its core, and is not trying to go it alone or set up in competition to any other group. The supplement could be included in the next edition of Towpath Talk, subject to breaking news.

3.2.2 Phil enquired about editorial rules. David P. suggested everyone present should write something and then the editor could be just that. In reply to Julie, John S. said that the minutes should be available within 24 hours of the end of the meeting, subject to no unexpected interruptions. Phil suggested that the editor would need us to provide words and pictures. Peter recommended a list of topics be drawn up and volunteers be invited to contribute.

3.2.3 Simon said that the core would be a version of the minutes. Individuals could then contribute related pieces. Howard said that for example navigation issues might well be the remit of someone from NABO. Bill said we could not invite everyone to contribute because some who came to the first meeting were not present at this meeting. David S. suggested that when the minutes had been distributed, a list of topics could be drawn up and people could choose a topic to contribute less than 200 words (say). These could be sent to Will C. or Keith.

3.2.4 Roger explained that the idea of sharing input across group representatives was in an attempt to be democratic. Neil agreed we are trying hard not to upset any of the groups. Julie suggested that once Keith and Will had the minutes they should draw up a topic list and ask for contributions. Simon said that representatives had complete confidence in SOW's activists. They are doing what others cannot do. The supplement won't be the final word on the campaign, but will be the starting pad for a relaunch of the campaign.

3.2.5 **It was generally agreed** that SOW had the support and confidence of supporters and should be trusted to produce the supplement working with Keith. Expressing gratitude for that, Neil said that any helpful volunteers would nevertheless be appreciated.

4 Any Other Business

4.1 David P. said that the groundswell generated when SOW was formed had been excellent. Some felt however that for SOW to continue it needed a constitution and membership. Will C. repeated some of SOW's principles regarding formalisation:

4.1.1 We are not in competition with any other user group.

4.1.2 We do not intend to poach members from other groups.

- 4.1.3 Rather we hope to be all-inclusive.
- 4.1.4 We are at pains not to do anything which would upset other user groups.
- 4.1.5 The only reasons for seeking a formal constitution is to obtain access to government and other waterway-related bodies e.g. BWAF (British Waterways Advisory Forum) and to create a source for funding its expenses.
- 4.2 David P. suggested keeping any constitution simple.
- 4.3 Ivor said that an advantage of SOW having a membership would be that it might attract other waterways users and enthusiasts who do not yet belong to a group. Phil noted that in any case it is SOW's intention to fulfil its purpose and then disband, even if that took more than a year!
- 4.4 Richard said that clearly SOW has costs, and a small membership fee would help to defray costs, such as banners. He advocated obtaining sponsorship and said he might be able to help obtain some. Towpath Talk might be prepared to obtain advertisers for the supplement, whose fees could be given to SOW. Will C. said that TT had offered a regular SOW newsletter insert, and this might work. He would be prepared to produce these at cost.
- 4.5 Roger asked if SOW is too sensitive to potentially upsetting others. Howard repeated that user groups are grateful that SOW is doing what they cannot due to time constraints. David P. said AWCC would be happier if SOW had a constitution, and does not consider SOW a threat in any way, as long as it continues along the current lines. He contrasted the past experience with the National Navigation Forum.
- 4.6 Bill said that he believed that IWA's Head Office had no problems with SOW's activities. Tony said that as far as he knew none of the IWA branches had a problem with what SOW is seeking to achieve, and how. In fact the two meetings had been excellent opportunities to air opinions openly. Julie said that such overlapping is beneficial.
- 4.7 David S. who is investigating constitutions for SOW said that SOW wonders if there should be classes of membership. Initially we favour an executive and general membership. A £5 annual membership should cover our expenses. To date the SOW "executive" had given their considerable time and energy on a voluntary basis and would continue to be volunteers.
- 4.8 Phil said that he had been asked to keep an eye on SOW in case they are a loose cannon! As such ad hoc is good.
- 4.9 David S said that SOW would be judged by what they did. So far this had met with general approval.
- 4.10 John K. said that JCBY (Jericho Community BoatYard) had had a similar situation. They had formed a limited company with shareholders paying £5 per annum. The directors were voted on democratically each year.
- 4.11 **It was generally agreed** that SOW should formalise its structure, with a constitution and membership.