

Devizes meeting 6.3.13

*Tony Stammers (Canal & River Trust) and Stuart Fisher (Paddlers International)
continuing issues raised at the May 2005 meeting at Stoke Bruerne*

1 Tunnels

SF welcomed the extended list of tunnels available for use by canoeists and the safety advice note forming the first sentence of the footnote, suggesting this note could be displayed at tunnel mouths.

SF suggested that no tunnel should be banned until CRT staff had carried a canoe over a proposed portage route and satisfied themselves that this is safer than going through the tunnel. AS agreed that portage routes should be clearly marked, both for canoeists who choose to portage and also for walkers and cyclists. SF said posted maps not easy to remember and temporary maps (eg Macclesfield) may be in non waterproof ink so washed away. SF suggested canoeists might follow powered craft through longer tunnels in order to be observed in case of problems and to ensure collisions could not take place with oncoming boats. SF made the following observations:

Bruce (Kennet & Avon, permitted) - turn under railway makes portage impossible for most canoes.

Some tunnels had been permitted for racing in unstable boats with people trying to overtake but were not permitted for users of more stable boats at a relaxed pace:

Maida (Regent's), crossing A5 Edgware Rd (AS said being reconsidered, agreed may be an issue which can be addressed by educating local youth groups)

Islington (Regent's), passing through Islington market and over red route A1 dual carriageway with central barriers, needs light controlled pedestrian crossing at least.

Foulridge (Leeds & Liverpool), now light controlled tunnel, portage through housing estate, beside reservoir and over steep sided channel which could be mistaken for canal.

Other tunnels:

Preston Brook (Trent & Mersey), light controlled.

Harecastle (Trent & Mersey), light controlled, portage route through middle of gypsy camp with aggressive dogs and unwelcoming people.

Standedge (Huddersfield Narrow), portage route over moors with cliffs, firing range and reservoir to gardens blocking access to road or along 60 mph A62 with no footway. (AS said towing horse and minder had got lost on moors here.)

Crick (Leicester Line), following vent towers leads through hedges and over ditches and barbed wire fences.

Braunston (Grand Union), kissing gate overgrown with stinging nettles shows little used.

Blisworth (Grand Union), along 60 mph minor road with no footway.

Wast Hill (Worcester & Birmingham), portage through extensive housing estate, past university playing fields, school, rough ground, broken down fences, easy to get lost.

Shortwood (Worcester & Birmingham), wide, portage route ploughed up.

Tardebigge (Worcester & Birmingham), wide, portage route through field with threatening horses, across 70 mph A448 dual carriageway with central barrier, risk of wind blast catching canoe or paddle, resulting in major road traffic accident.

Dunhamstead (Worcester & Birmingham), wide, short, no landing points, problem is novice users from local powered craft hire base, maybe novice hirers should turn away from tunnel until they have some experience. (AS said already being reconsidered.)

Netherton (Netherton Tunnel Branch), wide, twin towpaths.

Dudley (Dudley No 1), used only by electric trip boats, long portage over high hill through town centre.

2 Locks

SF said locks need adequate take out and relaunch areas

Sloping grass ramps better than platforms, SF to produce photo and drawing.

Height can be problem, eg Liverpool Link. AS agreed with Liverpool Link issue.

Portages to be as short as possible although cannot be helped at long locks such as Cromwell (Trent). Those concerned with water turbulence need longer portage options but others do not.

Abrasive surfaces, especially GRP, can damage hands, arms, chests, seats and knees after repeated portages. (AS mentioned problems of slipping, especially for ageing powered craft users. GRP mesh surfaces allow wildfowl guano to be pushed through to water below.)

Doncaster (Dun Nav) takeout platform supported from underneath with nothing to hold canoe steady against while taking out, chicken mesh rusting and breaking up at chest level, brambles preventing landing on bank. (AS suggested hammering in a couple of pieces of scaffolding pole at edge of pontoon to hold canoe steady against.)

SF concerned about dangerous signage on Trent, eg Gunthorpe, where all craft directed to left where there is only high sheet piling. No reference to boat rollers on right of weir. AS agreed Hazelford very difficult, maybe use left bank of river beyond weir but approach to bank currently obstructed by reed growth.

SF found Severn unfriendly with poor take outs, not permitted to cross Holt lock to relaunch. Bevere and Diglis used to be shot in races but not now. SF climbed down face of Bevere Weir in low water. (AS said restriction on shooting weirs was not imposed by CRT, maybe race organizers.)

SF claimed some locks very high downstream, eg Bow (Lee Nav) with tide out.

SF concerned that security fencing at Mexborough (Dun Nav) required portaging round outside.

SF noted that some locks including Buckby (Grand Union) and Doncaster (Dun Nav) have re-entry down slot to water, too narrow to hold boat alongside and sometimes too deep to hold boat overhead or not possible with heavy boat.

Buckby (Grand Union) has alternative of People Pipe under A5 with 90° bend and up steps at end, so boats have to be lowered on end over railings.

SF noted Hell Meadow (Leeds & Liverpool) has wall rising for long distance on left before lock and unofficial notice on right banning landing on what appears safest route beside bywash. (AS said this may not belong to CRT.)

3 Slipways

SF said slipways must be wide enough to allow full length of kayak to reach land. Ynysbwlllog (Neath) is an example where this does not happen and concrete walls all around are high. At least 5m needed or else ledge alongside to allow paddler in centre of boat to reach dry land. Paddlers International had been in contact with WRG to explain issue.

4 Commercial canals

SF was seeking confirmation from CRT that commercial traffic is not incompatible with small craft and that reintroduction of commercial traffic should not result in small craft being displaced. Large vessels with professional crews are often safer than large recreational craft in inexperienced hands. Some designated commercial waterways now carry very little commercial traffic. AS noted large craft changing river side for particular depth issues had resulted in collisions with recreational powered craft who were unfamiliar with the manoeuvre and its reasons.

SF commented on wharf edges which have worn to rounded profiles, making grip at launching difficult. AS noted where the top of a ladder was overhung by wharf decking.

SF had had to use moored work barges as launching platforms at Mexborough (Dun Nav) and Limehouse (Regent's) because of lack of alternatives.

5 Towpath fences

SF expressed concern at gates between towpaths and roads on the Kennet & Avon, flush with the road, and asked for the reason. At Hamstead users are trapped on the road with canoes, bikes or pushchairs on a blind corner, needing to cross three times if gates are to be opened and closed. If considered essential they should be inset by at least 5m to allow a double racing kayak to get clear of the road. Contrast with Mountsorrel (Soar) where traffic is obscured by a blind corner one way and humpbacked bridge the other but towpath users can step off the road quickly.

SF objected to inward sloping gaps which obstruct portaging canoeists, horses, motorbikes, cycles, wheelchairs, rucksacks and obese people. AS said no more of these would be installed and SF called for them all to be removed.

SF noted cycle shaped holes in fences on the Wigan flight (Leeds & Liverpool), including bottom slots too narrow for a motorbike tyre. Cyclists invariably did not use these, lifting bikes over or round barrier ends over the water. At Poolstock (Leigh Branch) this involves shuffling a couple of paces along a barrier above the water while carrying a bike. Agreed that this was a crude way of stopping motorbikes. SF suggested repeated obstructions to cyclists not likely to endear them to CRT when their support is sought.

The Grantham Canal has a number of new barriers along the towpath beside the unrestored central part of the canal. SF suggested a different priority is needed for use of funds. AS thought they may not have been placed by CRT.

6 Controls

Brewery Gut on the Kennet in Reading has one way working controlled by lights. SF noted the push button is too high to be reached from a canoe and recessed in a metal ring so it cannot be struck by a paddle, presumably ignored by racing canoeists. AS commented that a ring around a push button is characteristic of machinery controls.

SF concerned that any CRT staff can order a boater off the water. Safety involves water conditions, state of the boat and ability of the canoeist, of which the canoeist will have more knowledge than the staff member. A case at Sawley (Trent) had involved high water, actually safer because the staging was less high above water than usual, and an experienced paddler heading to play on the weir by the M1, much more onerous conditions, the paddler later relauching at the next lock where there were no objections. AS said the CRT approach is not usually forceful unless a matter is serious enough to need a police presence. Agreed that advice of hazards should be sufficient. SF cited Caledonian Canal notices of using weirs and river sections 'at own risk' as being examples of good practice.

7 Future EA issues

Paddlers International will have a further list of concerns if CRT take over EA waters. Scottish canals were not discussed this time but SF had few concerns north of the border.

8 CRT name

SF had asked whether 'River' included all 65,000km of river in England and Wales or just the river navigations for which BW had been responsible and had received conflicting answers from different people. AS thought it was only the river navigations. A CRT van outside the door had an ambiguous message to the public to find out about their 'nearest river'. Defra have been unable to produce evidence that the right of navigation has been removed from rivers across the country. If the right is accepted, who will be responsible for navigation if not the CRT or EA?

9 Representation

SF was concerned that representation of canoeing was by British Canoe Union staff with limited personal experience of the canal network. As with other representation, such as on the rest of the rivers and on marine issues, having BCU employees seems to take precedence over direct experience. AS thought that £90,000 paid by the BCU for compulsory licences for their members bought them a place at the table.

Stuart Fisher