

The Basingstoke Canal – a talk by Roger Cansdale

13th February 2017

Roger Cansdale is the press officer and talks organiser for the Basingstoke Canal Society and gave us an interesting and insightful talk into the history and challenges associated with the canal. The society has its origins back in 1966 when a number of concerned individuals began working to get the largely derelict canal transferred into public ownership before the existing owners could sell the urban lengths for redevelopment. Thanks to their efforts since then and the support of both Surrey and Hampshire County Councils approximately 90% of the original canal is navigable today.

The canal was approved by an act of parliament in 1778 and was to connect Basingstoke to the River Wey and then onwards to London. This required 37 miles of canal and 29 locks to be constructed to rise almost 200 feet as it headed west from the River Wey to Aldershot. It then required a tunnel of almost 1.5 miles under Greywell Hill.

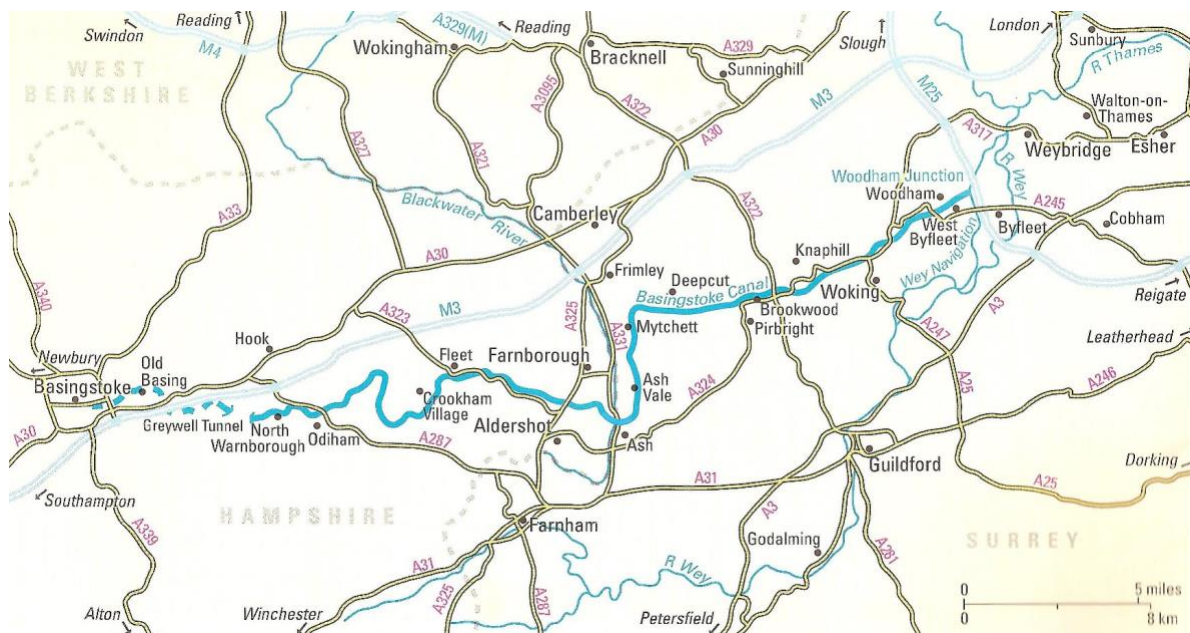


Figure 1 - Route of the canal

Construction was delayed until 1788 due to the financial burden of the U.S. War of Independence but once started the canal was finished in 6 years and opened in 1794. At that time the charge for moving 1 ton of cargo from Basingstoke to London was 12 shillings. Timber, flour and chalk were the main cargoes to London and coal and fertilizer were returned. The canal was never commercially viable and plans to connect it to the rest of the southern canal system via the Kennet and Avon canal never came to fruition. The canal did enjoy brief periods of profitability when the London to Basingstoke railway was built in the late 1830s and when the Aldershot military camp was built in 1855. In 1869 the canal was declared bankrupt and put up for sale.

There followed a period where the canal passed through the hands of several less than scrupulous owners who were fraudulently selling shares in the venture. The canal was taken over by the army in the First World War to transport munitions and there was only local commercial traffic after that with goods being moved between Basingstoke and Woking.

In 1923 the canal was purchased by Alec Harmsworth, a Thames waterman, who established a boat building and boat rental business turning the canal into a mainly recreational facility. This was the most stable commercial period in the canal's history. In the 1930s a roof fall occurred in the Greywell tunnel which deteriorated over the following 20 years until it became completely blocked. The tunnel has been designated a site of special scientific interest by Natural England so is unlikely ever to be re-opened.

Alec Harmsworth died in 1947 and the canal was sold by auction two years later. The new owners appointed Mrs Joan Marshall to be the canal's General Manager and she ran it for the next 15 years with a few employees and many volunteer with most of the funding coming from a contract to supply water to the gas turbine plant at Pyestock. This contract ended in 1964 and lack of canal maintenance after that led to its derelict condition identified by the founders of the Basingstoke Canal Society in 1966.

The following years showed the society battling with the then owner over the transfer to public ownership and during that period two serious canal breaches occurred, one of which in 1968 flooded the Farnborough airport on the eve of the air show. By 1976 both Hampshire and Surrey County Councils had used compulsory purchase legislation to buy their portions of the canal and the work to renovate it commenced.



Over the next twenty years a massive renovation project was funded by the two County Councils with many innovative techniques being developed including the use of a steam powered dredger. The main problem with dredging was what to do with the mud. Eventually barges were used to haul it away but work was still slow and dredging 20 yards of canal would be regarded as a good weekend's work. During this period 29 locks and 118 lock gates were rebuilt and the canal finally reopened in 1991.



The canal is currently in the joint ownership of Hampshire and Surrey County Councils who provide funding with additional monies coming from the Riparian Districts such as Rushmoor Borough Council.

The canal suffers from a number of problems some of which have existed during its entire history: -

1. Not enough water. Unlike many canals this one was designed with no summit level reservoir but is instead supplied by natural springs which are seasonal in nature. In some years when there has been a dry spring the canal ceased to operate as there was insufficient water to fill the locks.
2. Not enough boats. Boat licenses are one of the canal's income streams but there is not enough boat traffic, partly due to the water problems above.
3. Not enough money. All public sector funding is under pressure with priorities for spending having to be carefully considered by the authorities.
4. Maintenance backlog. Canals require a great deal of maintenance and there is a large need for volunteers to help with keeping the towpaths clear and the locks operational.
5. Invasive species. These incur maintenance problems and threaten other naturally occurring flora and fauna: -
 - a. American signal crayfish
 - b. Mink (who have killed all the water voles)
 - c. Floating pennywort (a plant that grows rapidly and needs constant dredging)
 - d. Japanese knotweed
 - e. Himalayan balsam

The water problem is being tackled by installing “back-pumping” equipment to take water from the River Wey back up the canal system to ensure the locks can continue to operate even in dry seasons. This is an expensive process and is very dependent on volunteers to do the work. Investment continues and two new boats have been recently purchased to provide access to the waterway for more people. The canal relies heavily on recreational users such as boaters and fishermen as well as the thousands of runners and hikers who enjoy its tranquillity.



The long-term future of the canal is most likely to require a transfer of ownership to The Canal and River Trust. However for this to be realistic the trust would need some sort of endowment from the current owners to provide funding for maintenance. This might take the form of land and buildings rather than cash and discussions about this are ongoing.

Meanwhile the Basingstoke Canal Society is always looking for more support, both financial and from volunteers, and is particularly interested in getting more young people involved. There is a Tuesday work party working to maintain the towpaths and details can be found on the Society's web site as can information about joining the society and access to its newsletters and Facebook page.

<http://www.basingstoke-canal.org.uk/>

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