

Kennet and Avon Users' Group Meeting Transcript

- The chair, Mark Stephens (BW), welcomed everyone to the meeting, expressing pleasant surprise at the number of attendees.
 - He introduced Becky from the KA trust who will be taking minutes this evening.
 - He reminded the attendees that there was a consensus last time that we should be taking minutes in future, as they have previously not been taken in meetings.
 - Damien Kemp from BW, who will be dealing with Mooring related issues and an update on the mooring strategy, was also introduced. He will be filling in for Sally Ash, who was unable to attend this time.
 - Suzy Mercer was introduced, who will be dealing with non-private boating issues.
 - We will be concentrating on action points and progress from the last meeting
 - As far as notes go Mark distributed them to all the contacts he could find from the Devizes and Gloucester office as well as all the email addresses that he was given.
-
- Mark asked last week for items for the agenda and specific queries that would people would like to raise.
 - No one raised anything
 - He asked if anyone has any issues they would like to raise now. There were a couple:
 - A request was made to cover cruise-way status, which Mark explained he will be covering later on.
 - A request was made to cover water levels which Mark stated that he will also be covering later.
 - Customer services excellence accreditation was mentioned, and it was asked if BW was going to try to go for it. Mark said that he hasn't heard about it, but that he will try to find out about more about it.
 - The recent clean-up operation down near Foxhangers was mentioned, in particular the large amounts of dog mess in bags in bushes that was removed. "It is obnoxious to everyone in general and this is coming from members of the public. Anything you can do about this would be very much appreciated as this is getting beyond control". Mark acknowledged that there is a general problem but that there are some hotspots, including Foxhangers.
 - It as mentioned at last meeting that Mark asked for reports about problems to be sent to him. A number of people have mentioned and sent reports that apparently Alison is looking at. It was requested that an acknowledgement could be made as nothing has come back to the users, particularly when they have emailed their comments in. Mark said that he does his best to respond to everyone, but that apparently there has been (and possibly still is) a problem with an email address enquiries@kennetandavon.britishwaterways.co.uk that is maintained centrally. This was where a lot of emails were going to and they weren't being forwarded on, so Mark never saw them. An attendee stated that he made sure that the people he spoke to were all emailing Mark personally, but even then no response was made. Mark said he couldn't account for it and that he would speak to the member outside if necessary to try to find out what went wrong.

Update from last meeting

- 3rd sector:

BW has been talking about moving into the charity sector. Mark explained that this will work similarly to the NT and the Woodland Trust. The top reason for this is that as it stands and with the contribution that BW get from the government, which is a diminishing grant every year, there is not enough to sustain and maintain the canal system properly. Looking at the next 5-6 years if BW were to have a frozen and so effectively reducing grant, then around 2016 they would have to start

closing down sections of the canal system. So they are looking at a different way to fund it. Another thing they are doing is to look at BW's property, from which it generates income through rent and sale/resale. Selling this property is really only a short term solution. They have had to fight very hard with gov. and treasury about keeping the property portfolio. We don't know what will happen after the election either, maybe they will try again. BW would need the property to maintain this 3rd sector status and become self-sufficient. That's the big update for today, I have tried to summarise it as best I can but there are bound to still be questions.

- It was asked if that will take away the commercial status from BW as otherwise they won't be able to take donations. Mark confirmed that this is the case.
- It was then asked if this will help generate a national navigation authority. Mark said that that is not their aim, and that the actual mechanics of how it will work is still being discussed and worked out. He is quite convinced that this is the only way forward.
- It was asked if the treasury will start taking money from BW when they are then a charity.
- Mark explained that it will effectively be a contract with the government, and BW will be providing a service to the community, including the local residents, cyclists, walkers, etc., which is why there is a government grant currently. A contract going forward would have to safe-guard what BW currently get.
- One of the attendees (M) was asked about the future of the grant – would it be maintained long term? Mark Stephens stated that he can't say what will happen after May. BW can't leap to that or any other position without support from central government.
- It was asked if the privatisation ideas have now been binned. Mark confirmed that this is the case.
- It was asked about the time-scale. Next month is obviously uncertain, but we could potentially have some kind of semblance of the board of trustees by the end of 2011, could be up and running by the end of 2012, which is very quick.
- Mark explained that BW are getting 70% of what they need, so they are hoping to get 30% from charitable donation. Mark was asked what the 70% is actually from and how much that actually is in real money? He stated that he will get on to that later as it is a significant figure.
- It was asked if this means that volunteer staff will be replacing professional staff. Mark said no. We can't offload this to a volunteer community. NT have professional workers too – not everyone is a volunteer. Mark couldn't give details as they haven't been set out yet. Mark said that we have had consultants who specialise in this who have looked at the figures and they have said that this is a good way to go, so that's why BW are going this way.
- Mark explained that BW wouldn't be generating their income just by collecting donations in a tin.
- It was asked about what will change about the protection given to liveaboards if BW switches to being a charitable body? Suzy explained that trading activities, such as the renting of moorings, would have to be dealt with by a separate trading arm, as legally a charitable body can't do that sort of thing.
- Mark said he was unsure about how the FOI would apply if BW changes status. It was pointed out by a confident member of the floor that FOI would still apply to a charitable body. Mark said that he would have to check this but that it made sense.
- Mark confirmed that BW would still be obliged to maintain the canal whatever happened.
- Mark apologised for not having all the details, and expressed his concern for the consequences should this not happen.

Local (K&A) update

- This follows on from the third-sector aim. This is in part recognising the fact that the K&A trust is quite a mature organisation. In terms of being open about what it costs to run the canal and what the priorities are and should be, Mark is already engaged with the trust. Things that BW do here

will be repeated across the country should they be successful. Mark is interested in engaging with everyone who works, lives and uses the canal. He explained that although it is a national direction for BW, the K&A is quite special as it has been identified as an area where BW can try this out. This is good as BW get the opportunity to engage with volunteer organisations on the K&A first.

•BW have just been through their business plan. Our year ends end of March. Mark reports that the K&A has done quite well this year, coming within £44 of their budget. Any money that isn't spent is lost, so effectively only £44 was lost. This is really very good as BW used pretty much all the money they were given for spending on the K&A. This, Mark hopes, is encouraging for us (the attendees) as it shows that BW are doing a good job here. The money they have to spend this year is just shy of £4 million.

•Mark gave an overview of how the canal is funded:

•Nationally, there are 11 waterway sectors containing different canals. He and his colleagues have the Kennet & Avon and the and Bridgewater & Taunton canals. The central system uses averages to try to guess how much of the central budget each waterway should get – they use things like the number of car parks, moorings, length of canal, etc. The government has only agreed to give 70% of what the model tells us BW need, which is why BW are saying that they need to find another 30% - this is actually a fairly large chunk of money!

•Mark then tried to give an idea of where the money goes:

• Labour/payroll – around £1 million

•Lock gate replacement – ours are some of the worst in the whole country - ~£700,000

•Operational building £300k

•Power consumption £400k – mainly pumping water (back-pumps)

•Conservation, vegetation - £300k just to get everything to the state it is in now.

•Mark explained that £4 million is a relatively small budget and gets eaten very easily by fairly minor things. For example, they required £10-15k of work recently to replace a gate at Semington, which means other things slip as only the higher priority things can be dealt with, and then only if there is the money.

•Mark was then asked about spending on dredging. He explained that he doesn't have the figures for this with him, but there was no dredging last year that he is aware of. In any case dredging and lock gate money is dealt with nationally.

•Mark hopes that this gives us a sense of scale.

•He explained again that across Easter BW had several impromptu repairs, including the aforementioned lock at Semington, where a boat took a lock gate off, and Bradford on Avon where water was leaking out of the lock. All of these things are expensive.

•Mark was asked if BW will be pursuing an insurance claim against the hire company (Sally Boats) whose hire boat damaged the lock at Semington? Mark confirmed that they will be attempting to recover the money if they can.

•It was asked if the computer model has a contingency for those sorts of things? Mark said no, it doesn't factor any kind of contingency in. If there is any contingency at all it is held centrally as it might be needed elsewhere on the national system – these sorts of things can't be predicted.

•It was asked if there is a reason why the water level was so far down during the last week? Mark explained that the pump at Bradford on Avon is not working and is due to be replaced either next week or the week after. It was then asked if BW could not at least make sure that the water level is higher next week so that the questioner could make the return journey?

•It was asked if Alvechurch will be contributing to the costs of repairing the damage to the bank at Hilperton where it has been damaged by boats manoeuvring? Mark said he wasn't sure about this, but would make a note of it.

•It was then suggested that the notices about keeping locks empty are causing confusion and many

inexperienced boaters are leaving the top paddles open too, causing the pound to drain. This will be contributing to the power consumption, and in any case should really be dealt with.

- Mark explained that there are currently things happening to the signage to try to make it clearer. He also said that he doesn't understand why some locks are drained, so he will be investigating this for his own sanity too. Some things seem to be due only to tradition, at least for the last 5 or 6 years. Mark is fairly new here so it is taking a while for him to work it all out.
- It was then stated by other attendees that the language of the current signs can be somewhat obscure, which is fine for many who know already, but hire boaters who are inexperienced are getting confused, so this really does need to be dealt with sooner rather than later.
- Mark was then asked about problems with Church lock at Great Bedwyn, which is leaking very badly. A sensor is there near the lock so is it measuring this? If so, why has it been left for so long? Mark said he doesn't know, but will look into it.

- Mark asked if there were any further questions before he moves on?
- One attendee (R) who runs a business on the canal, asked if the telemetry on the water levels at the moment set up so that everything is set 'down' due to the pump not working at Bradford on Avon?
- Mark said no, the water level and the amount of pumping is not relative.
- R explained that he asks because he found his boat was touching the bottom all the way to Bradford from Foxhangers last week. He made this trip so he could get a good idea about what sort of state the canal is in. He also said that he is sure that the average water levels are down on what they used to be. The other problem is of course the amount of silt, which just makes it worse.
- Mark said he wants to talk about that in a more general waterways context, and that he appreciates the input. Apparently this was a big point made at the last meeting, so he will let us know where he has got to with this.

A quick stoppage works update

- A number of stoppages happened over the winter period. A number were finished on the run up to Xmas, such as those at Aldermaston.
- Caen hill refurbishments were delayed due to the freeze as they couldn't rescue the fish with all the ice on top of the water. This caused BW to lose 2-3 weeks, so they couldn't change as many gates as they had hoped. They will now be added to next year's program instead and are being stored at the top of the flight in one of the pounds, as they do better if kept in water.
- Dukes Bridge, Reading is going to be closed for a bit.
- Mark explained that BW will be looking at replacing another 4 sets of gates at Caen Hill, Dunmill, Monkey Marsh, and a few others towards the Newbury end. All will be done at once if possible to try to maintain the water level at that end. He's hoping a through route will be maintained. Everything will be published on Waterscape so that people can comment on the closures. Mark says he is all ears if you have objections or suggestions. Obviously we need to replace lock gates and don't want to close the canal for too long, but it does need to be done.

Works progress

- Hilperton piling and stoppage works have been mentioned
- Work at Burghfield and Hamstead has been pile work and bridge repairs. It is slow but they are making good progress now.
- There are also unplanned works like Caen Hill and Semington, and of course Bradford. This latter was meant to be a 1 week inspection but it became 2 weeks. Mark thanked everyone for being so understanding. They know what the problem is now so the engineers at central are looking at how

they will fix it long term. That will all happen next stoppage season.

- Hungerford Marsh swing bridge is being replaced but they've not finished yet. Previously you couldn't open it on your own.

Mooring consultation update

- At this point, Mark handed over to Damien, who stated that he will unfortunately probably be as Brown to Mark's Nick Clegg. This brought several smiles. He then explained that, as we probably all know, there have been two consultations about mooring policy and strategy.
- Local mooring strategies BW got less feedback from, although the majority of respondents came from the K&A.
- There was also a good response for the main consultation. Both consultations ended at the end of January.
- The local mooring strategies were looked at in house, and BW have finally reached a point where they are looking at publishing the results.
- A data analyst has drawn up a shiny presentation document that Damien received a final draft for recently, so he will be looking at this soon – he has one each for national and local mooring strategy.
- BW will be meeting with all of the major boating organisations, NABO, IWA, etc. who responded to the consultation and who have a lot of members in the area with volunteers who will look at and assess responses. They will draw up conclusions for the BW executive directors to look at. *This will affect all canal users.*
- He explained that they will be going ahead with a local mooring strategy, as they believe that it was endorsed.
- The first pilot was run at the western end of the K&A, between Devizes and Bath.
- BW will have a sort of virtual consultation panel and Damien is contacting the organisations already mentioned for nominations for the steering group. He hopes that the groups will ratify this and BW are still talking to the boating organisations about how they will deal with this process.
- Damien was then asked if there was a consensus on the local mooring strategy? He answered that he is certain that there is.
- He also confirmed that he did involve anglers, including Devizes anglers association.
- It was explained that BW are way behind their original program. They should be at interim report state, but are not there yet. Damien said that he expects that the steering group will be in place in June, but obviously it will take a while. It is also hoped that the implementation of their strategy will be in place by the end of this year.
- There will be a combination of invitation and people who have a vested interest in the waterway who will be part of the steering group. Either someone would nominate themselves or a group of people would nominate someone to represent them. The nominations panel will then choose who will be on the steering group.
- Next, it was asked if Damien has decided what the steering groups will actually decide?
- - He said that he has been thinking about it in detail. In essence, it will be about where boats will be allowed to stop and for how long.
- Someone at this point observed that BW has already come up with some ideas, and will these be what the steering group will be looking at or will they be making their own ideas? Damien said it will be a “hands off” approach from BW: They will advise on technical capabilities.
- Damien then went on to explain that nationally they got 163 responses out of ~35,000 boaters who pay licenses. It was suggested that this might be because BW didn't have proper publicity and did not approach the boaters properly, nor did they leave enough time? Damien agreed that this is a

poor result, but made no comment on the methods used.

- It was pointed out that local mooring strategies was not a consensus in favour, as out of 98, 5 didn't give an opinion, 73 said no to it and only 20 said yes. "This isn't a majority." Damien answered that it was weighted, and so big organisations who represent large numbers of people obviously got more weight.

- Mark then asked why they bothered to ask individuals – most of whom said no. Damien said that it was necessary to involve the organisations too – with so many boaters he thought that BW could have got much a better individual result. It was then remarked that this produces a skewed response.

- Damien stated approached all the organisations. The local RBOA rep (Richard) pointed out that no one approached him about local mooring strategy. Damien explained that BW requested and received a response from Rex, the RBOA chairperson.

- It was felt by the floor that the statistics really don't seem to reflect reality and that they are skewed.

- Damien said that organisations have to have a louder voice than individuals, as they represent more than one person.

- It was then suggested that BW are doing a disservice to the democratic process if they ignore individual responses.

- Damien said he is happy that the groups represent their members.

- This was disputed, and it was suggested that many organisations didn't pass the information on to their members adequately. Damien said he couldn't comment on that.

- It was asked that, even if we do have this mooring investigation, if we haven't changed the law then what difference will it make? The lady asking the question went on to explain that someone was able to moor near the site where she paid for a winter mooring for ~18 months without paying, and this meant a lot of lost revenue for BW. She said that how can it make any difference if there is no enforcement? It is unfair on those who pay, who are wondering why they bother if other people are not paying and not being pursued. What is the point of any research on any mooring if there is no enforcement? Why are BW not enforcing the 14 day rule? No one has seen any patrol notices in months.

- Mark said that he will be raising this issue with Russell later on.

- Mark then said that there appears to be a bit of a gap between what Damien and the floor consider a consultation to be. He feels that some explanation is required, although he hasn't read the consultation yet. He stated that he will read it.

- Damien said he is happy to reconvene at another time to dispute this. He also said that the responses are not weighted. "They are pretty much pro-rata.. One response counts as one response."

- Richard (RBOA) said that we (presumably the RBOA) had a meeting recently with Sally Ash and Damien and several others, and asked if we could have another meeting when the document is published as it would be quite wise so that we can get into the nitty gritty of this.

- It was then asked if representatives from boat clubs will be invited? The gentleman asking said they discussed their response with their members (the Canal Taverners Boat Club). A lot of them didn't reply individually as they felt they were already responding as the club. Damien said he is happy to take up Richard's suggestion and that he would like to involve Wiltshire County Council and BANES.

- It was then announced by a representative for Wiltshire County Council that there will be a meeting for all these views to be publicly aired. Damien will be at this meeting too.

- It was asked what the terms of reference of the proposed steering group will be? The broad spectrum was originally much wider. The questioner (Keith Rossiter of Bathampton Parish Council) then said that, as a parish council they are worried about whether they are going to be

involved? They are also unhappy that it all seems to be very, very confused, and it should not only involve how long boats can stop for or where. Damien explained that he is dumbing down exactly what they are going to be doing. The steering group will need to factor in all the other things, like water and other facilities, that affect the boats staying there.

- The feeling was that not everyone is being involved.
- Damien said he intended to have everyone who uses the canal one way or another to be represented on the steering group.
- At this point, Damien was asked about how those who do not belong to any group will be represented? As a license payer and boater, the lady asking said that she is upset that no one will represent her and that she has not been written to. She also said that she feels that there are not sufficient moorings. “Don't license boats unless there are moorings for them.” “Half the people on moorings never use their boats, they are just stuck there.” This goes for 14 day moorings too, as we need more of those too.
- Damien said he hopes that this will be looked at by the steering group too.
- It was asked if BW could also do some dredging as it is getting silly as there are a few places that have been dredged, but it is the mud flats where people have drowned, where people are forced to use a gang plank as they can't get close enough to the bank to moor safely. “If we were working in industry they would close it down.” The state of the locks is awful, especially near Newbury.
- Mark agreed that health and safety are important, and made a note to look into this.
- It was asked how many boats there are on the K&A? Damien said he can't tell us off the top of his head, but Suzy said that the number was around 2000 (certainly between 1900 and 2000).
- It was then asked if Damien thinks that the Devizes-Bath stretch is actually manageable by the steering group, as if you are committed to representing everyone then a lot of people will be on that steering group? Surely 20+ people would be silly.
- Damien said that this is a fair point.
- Maintenance is an issue here and that there aren't enough moorings, and those that there are are not in good enough condition. “I'm not the person to ask about recent history of the K&A”. In essence there would be 2 steering groups for two different parts of the K&A.
- It was asked if this is because there was a consensus that there was a need for a steering group? Surely the proposed area is too big.
- Damien explained that he doesn't think it is too big, but it will have to depend on how many people put themselves forward to be on the steering group. He's open to suggestion in a couple of weeks' time once BW have an idea of who is going to be available to be on the steering group.
- It was stated that surely a more general policy is needed? Sub-groups are not really going to be helpful as different solutions are going to cause problem spots. BW need to be able to commit to whatever is decided and give the resources to whatever is decided or it just won't work.
- Damien agreed that some general policies will be needed but that it not all areas of the canal are the same.
- It was asked if we could move on, and also explained that we were told some years back that the K&A was at saturation point, but there are a lot more boats on the K&A now. The gentleman asking also reminded those present that the marina being built at Foxhangers will only be for 300 boats and it won't be residential as that isn't part of the planning application. Therefore it is likely that the majority of the boats will be new boats, increasing the problem for everyone else.
- Damien said he couldn't commit to anything.
- Andrew (the NABO rep) then asked if each steering group will have its own chunk of the budget?
- Damien said no, not really, but didn't seem very sure.
- Mark then stepped in, explaining that to him it seems like a bit too much detail at this point, as BW are still looking at what will be spent on what.

- It was then suggested that surely the steering group can't do much if they have no budget, so what's the point?
- A request was made for an open meeting with Damien and Sally where these issues can all be aired.
- Mark agreed, saying that this sounds like an excellent idea. We have a lot of things to talk about and we don't want to focus purely on moorings here [in this meeting]. He went on to say that he felt that we haven't had the opportunity to discuss this properly. It seems like we've not had anything apart from this meeting to voice our concerns. Mark agreed with a suggestion that he would read the consultation.
- A complaint was made that this meeting was being hijacked by individuals when surely it should be groups here only. Mark stated that it seems like a lot of people here are not represented by groups.
- Mark said that we should move this discussion to a separate meeting about the mooring consultations.

- At this point, someone asked how BW are intending on informing users who do not belong to a group. Are they going to send a newsletter out? Damien said originally a letter was put on every boat, but BW can't do this for every bit of news. Damien said he is happy to chat afterwards if people are unhappy that they aren't being included. Damien then asked about the BW noticeboards? Another of the attendees stated that people ignore them as they tend to be years out of date (a lot of people in the room nodded at this). Damien said he will try to make sure that people are informed by email and phone/text as well as by noticeboards in future.
- Mark thanked Damien for his contribution.
- As Damien returned to his seat, someone wittily suggested that Damien should make sure he switches his microphone off when he sits down.

- Mark said that it was a valuable thing to see Damien grilled like that as many things have come up that don't seem to have been addressed. He doesn't think that the two major areas, moorings and how BW is run, really quite fit together in the same meeting as they are very large subjects.
- Mark noted that many people are here who are interested in different parts of each issue.
- Mark asked if we were to somehow have a specific user-group meeting which was more mooring-orientated, would that help?
- This suggestion was met with general agreement.
- Damien also agreed that it would be useful to have a moorings-only meeting.
- It was mentioned that after an extended consultation process, then BW should come to such a meeting with a good idea of what those responses are and what they want to do so that we can discuss the decisions that BW has already made.
- Mark then said that Damien as he has just come here to give us an update on where BW are so far, not to give us an idea of their decisions. He agreed that there have been some problems with how clear it has been.

Enforcement

- Mark then asked Russell if he had anything to say?
- Russell said that since November's restructuring he is basically looking after the B&T, K&A and London. This means that they have lost one of their enforcers, so they are doing their best with the data checkers and have been concentrating mainly on the license evasion. In the south license evasion rate is more like 4.7%. Two new enforcement officer have just started. Next week they will join the other 900 people who are already out there. "You have been warned".

- The point was made again that none of this is any good if BW aren't going to actually enforce anything. It has taken 18 months to pursue one individual case! If this reflects the entire system then it is ridiculous. She is told that it is very difficult to pursue.
- Russell assured her that when they have the man power they will be able to enforce, but with the reshuffle everything has been difficult. Overstayers notice when there is a lack of enforcement and abuse it. At the moment BW need to look at what they can do. There is no income for them from people overstaying on a 14 day mooring as they don't generate money from them.
- The lady asking the question then commented this isn't about income, this is about enforcing the rules! Russell answered that there are only about 3.5 of them to do the enforcement at the moment so we they overstretched.
- Another person asked if Russell was still leaving boats alone that are going through the legal process, and Russell said that this was easier as BW know where they were, rather than having to go out looking for them.
- Russell said that with the data checkers, they will be much more able to enforce. He acknowledged that it is hard to tell if anything is being done when they are going through the system of enforcement as many people will fight it using the legal system, and there is no sign on the boat that anything is going on.
- It was asked if BW will be enforcing the 14 day rule rather than threatening to revoke the licences of boaters who obey the law, ie the 14-day rule but do not cruise according to a guidance note (the Mooring Guidance for Continuous Cruisers) which is not part of the law and so not enforceable? Russell said they are trying to concentrate on the troublemakers, as they are short on resources, and that they are dependent on information from canal users.
- Russell said that he could not confirm that he won't pursue boats that are not on a progressive journey and that boats must obey the licence terms and conditions.
- It was suggested that you come against section 5 of the human rights act if you try to force people to move.
- Mark said this was really for the mooring meeting, as it is a huge issue.
- Russell was thanked for his contribution.

- Mark said that the two things that he really just wanted to cover at this meeting was picking up on the action points from the last meeting, which were on the notes from the last meeting.
- Progress points – he wants to explain why he is doing what he is doing, whether we agree with it or not. There are about 9 of those.
- He also wants to go through the K&A 200 celebrations. He'll put the notes on the minutes of this meeting, which will be out in 2 weeks rather than 5 months this time.

- Mark asked if there was anything else to cover?
- Someone asked about cruiseway status.
- Mark said that the update from his supervisors would be towards the end of this year when that journey would be complete. He acknowledged that it had been stated every year for several years that it will be complete at the end of the year, and he is saying no more than that.

Progress points

Water levels

- These were mentioned earlier in the meeting.
- True enough the non-return valves in the pumps at Bradford weren't working, so they have been

replaced. A new pump is due for delivery. The old one has been taken away. New one should be here next week or the week after. BW are confident that they know why the lock was leaking and they have a strategy to fix this probably by some sort of grouting scheme. Bradford is probably the most heavily used lock in the system, and Mark apologised for keeping it closed for a few extra days this year.

- Mark said BW have a water resource team who focus on waterways with poor water supplies. The K&A has been identified as one of these, so as a consequence the team will be looking at where all this water is going. This means that hopefully Mark can start to reduce the running costs of the canal.

- The Caen Hill pumps alone cost around £140,000 a year to run. Ways have been identified to make the pumps more efficient, such as putting new inverters on them.

- Also he wants canal users to be more aware of the cost of the water in the canal as it isn't free, so please spread the word about closing paddles and sharing locks if you can. This will help to save money that can be spent elsewhere.

- It was asked about the various windmills that used to lift water from the local rivers to the canal. It was also suggested that a grant from the carbon trust could be used. Mark agreed that it is worth looking at, but reminded everyone that for the entire history of the canal there has been a shortage of water. Renewables are something he wants to investigate.

- A small point was made about the misuse of locks – could hire boat companies highlight this to their hirers? Mark agreed that he needs to look at this and get in conversation with the trade group.

- He then suggested that really experienced boaters need to set a good example. He thinks that boaters going through a single gate encourages inexperienced boaters to try to do it and wear out the lock gates faster. Mark is worried that hire boats really shouldn't be trying to copy this sort of thing.

- A gentleman asked about Bradford on Avon (BoA) lock, which is really busy, and which now has Oxford Narrowboats using the basin above, which has traditionally been used as a winding hole. This means that those who need to use the facilities at the top of the lock now need to go through the lock to wind. In addition, there is no longer a lock keeper at BoA, so could the hire boat firms or a volunteer man the lock during peak times?

- Mark said that he is aware of the problems with winding, and that he would look into the idea of manning the lock.

- Suzy then stood up to say that she is delighted to welcome David (who is attending this meeting) and his team of the Oxfordshire Narrowboats.

- In terms of the moorings there she is happy to say that they actually went down and put boats in position in the basin and checked that a 72 foot boat can wind with a boat on the water point. As a result they are sure that a skilled, experienced boater can turn a 72' boat in that space. David is aware that his boats may get bumped a bit.

The dry dock facility at BoA.

- David spoke about this – he is doing work on it and it will be available from 21st May and will still be a DIY dock.

- This was met with approval from the floor.

Mechanical and electrical issues

- Mark said he has completed the report on this and that BW have a program for replacement.

- He explained that Crofton became unstuck with a pump failure last year. It has been replaced a more reliable pump that can easily be replaced with a hire pump – this is covered by their service agreement. This pump is better as the old one had old, unusual connectors.

- Mark was asked if the BoA pump was an old German one? He said he didn't know.

Weed and Reed growth

- A lot of work has been done on the towpath side but not all it has been done yet. Mark is not happy that some areas of the canal is not really easily navigable due to reed growth.
- He found that on the B&T a weed cutter doing nothing. This has been changed and seasonal staff will now be doing weed cutting.
- Bramble and hedge growth was causing problems on use of the towpath. The main complaint was from debris left on the path that has caused injury to dogs and punctures on bikes. They have acknowledged that there is a problem. He has been trying to engage volunteers for this too.
- Offside cutting - the boat that does tree cutting has been doing other work but is now starting to look at the problem and has been trimming growth at Kintbury and is on its way to Reading. It is not going fast enough yet as there is so much to do. Jobs are being prioritised, but work is going on.
- An attendee then said that what is being done is appreciated.
- Towpath erosion was mentioned as it is getting pretty bad in some places. Mark agreed that this is a huge problem and there is a fair bit of work to do still.

River Avon

- The River Avon users group raised this one.
- Mark said he was mindful that this forum has not really addressed the river very well in the past.
- Mark has visited once and will be visiting again.
- He said that the Avon is quite a different environment from the canal, so probably not suited to this forum. As such he will report back to this meeting and engage with the concerned parties separately.
- Moorings on the Avon – there has been a phenomenal growth in unofficial moorings on the Avon of late, with landing stages, etc. that are not in many cases safe. Mark said that we have a responsibility to address these. (Progress point 9).
- Mark asked if there were any other actions that he has missed?
- Some asked if water levels might be raised irrespective of the pump maintenance so that boats were not so affected? Mark answered they are still working out where it is all coming from. Interestingly when the lock gate at Semington was broken it was found that more water than usual was in the Semington-Bradford pound. This suggests that the pump at Semington is taking too much from the Bradford-Semington pound, so Mark is investigating.
- Someone then said that the water level is lower than what it was two years ago.
- Mark said he's not found that the level has dropped in the last two years, but BW have the data so the group will look at it when they start assessing this.
- Richard (RBOA) asked about the problems of getting stuck due to a lack of water at Semington. Mark answered that he needs to look at boat movement around the canal.
- Another person then asked if as well as water levels, are silt levels are being monitored?
- Mark said not at the same time, no, although a national survey is being done. He said he will make a note of which areas are being dredged.
- Semington Marsh reed banks require a run up to get over!
- Mark then said he has nothing else he would like to say this evening. He will distribute the

Thu 29 Apr 10

minutes in the next two weeks.

- Mark thanked Mike and the K&A trust for the use of the building and those present for making the effort to attend.

- Mark said if you find anything email him directly. His email address is:

mark.stephens@britishwaterways.co.uk

The meeting ended.