

STAFFORD RIVERWAY LINK

(A Community Interest Company)

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Patron:- The Lord Stafford, DL, FRAGS

President:- David Kidney

Vice President:- Jeremy Lefroy MP

Objective: To promote the restoration of the historic river and canal waterway linking the county town of Stafford to the national waterways network for the benefit of the community and all interested groups.

Newsletter No 23
April 2016

Hello to all our SRL members,

It is some months since I felt a need to write a newsletter. Frankly, there was little to report on and although we did have some work parties it was often two steps forward and one back as red tape et al had prevented much progress. For those who did make it to the work parties, often the weeds we had cleared had regrown and the site of the cottage etc would appear to have been interfered with. Never anything dramatic but just a little soul-destroying. **However.....**

.....I can now report on progress and write with renewed enthusiasm!

We have just completed a week-long work party. A week makes it worthwhile to beg, borrow or steal big machines. In our case, we borrowed, and our grateful thanks go to Stafford Boat Club for allowing us the use of the digger and dumper. The Riverway Link caravan was also on site all the time as was our own boat, 'Thistledown' as 'hospitality' bases and allowed us to remain overnight. SRL publicity material was very visible and leaflets were available for passers-by. The main plan was to dig out enough of the basin for it to be very obvious to folk that things are happening and that there will one day be water linking the canal and The Sow and there will be boats returning to

Stafford. Of course the expertise of volunteers is varied so other things happened as well. I hope I now have your attention, so read on for the story of 'the week'.

Day 1, Saturday, saw the arrival of the caravan, the boat, the digger, dumper and cars and people. A real bonus was, that at some point in the morning, a second boat arrived and moored up. We welcomed a complete newcomer, Chris, who joined in enthusiastically, then joined literally and is now a member and best of all stayed until Friday. Chris also became a self-appointed security man for the evenings when we returned home as opposed to staying on 'Thistledown. John M. was on the digger and Alan, on the dumper, deposited the earth and rubble to a point allocated by the landowner. Some of us then spent our time searching through the mud for whole bricks which we salvaged for future re-use. I was one of these people and although it sounds a little mindless, I really enjoyed it. It resurrected memories of searching for shells in the sand as a small child. There was something very satisfying about knowing the bricks can be re-used and also the sheer physical side involved walking, bending, lifting etc. No need for gym membership and I slept well that week.

Other folk were involved in a variety of tasks. The boundary fence between the farmer's land and the towpath was mended and strengthened. The stile includes a dog-friendly opening as well. This was part of our commitment to the land owner as

he does have cattle on that site, though for all of our week he had 're-housed' them so we could work unimpeded and also leave the access gate open. A good part of the foundations of the lock cottage have been secured. Geoffrey and Yvonne have cemented several courses of bricks so 'the footprint' of the building can be seen but vandals will be less likely to cause damage. Loose brickwork on the remains of the original canal bridge over 'The Link' has been repaired and made sound. Again, this is outside the boundary of our fenced site but is relevant to the long-term project and we had become increasingly aware that the structure was being slowly demolished. Much of this seemed to be because of geo-cache enthusiasts. In repairing the wall, we have left a geo-cache space so hopefully, by respecting each others hobbies and interests, no further damage will occur. A sleeper which had been unearthed has been recycled as a bench for weary passers-by. It is sited beside the stile. Those, then, were the jobs undertaken.

As ever, in life, there were hiccups. Towards the end of the week the dumper took on a mind of it's own re starting. The first day of such inconsiderate non-functioning it refused to start whilst in the gateway of the fenced site. It was positioned very neatly so one could not get a wheelbarrow through on either side. Despite repeated trying it would not start. Eventually it was unceremoniously pushed backwards through the gate by John M. on the digger. Later it was restarted only to refuse again the following day. On that day we resorted to calling out a friendly specialist breakdown man. That day also saw the digger 'get stuck' Good humour, rubble shifting and brute force eventually got the problem sorted. In reality, we lost half a day from the clearance schedule. By contrast, the gods looked favourably on us re the weather, with lots of sun and little rain, though it was a bit cold.

As with all volunteering work, people came and went according to their other commitments. No matter if one was there long hours or short, there was a good sense of camaraderie all week. Tea/coffee breaks were enhanced by the addition of 'CAKE'. John P. and I attended an IWA meeting on the Wednesday evening in Lichfield. As it was

their last meeting until the autumn and they knew about our work party, we were donated cakes they hadn't used (good best before dates...) Our workforce demolished them appreciatively. Drinks and biscuits were on the house, as it were and we all brought our own lunches along.

One of the most pleasing aspects of the week was the interest from walkers. Many people stopped to ask about the project. There was interest across the generations. Older people had memories of what had gone before. One gentleman returned with a photo, taken in the 1950s, which he has donated. One guy had his two children with him. The young lad said he could be a digger driver for us in the future and he and his sister talked of having a canalside tea shop. What vision from a couple of pre-teens. Then there was the couple having a house built on the Tixall Road area and had seen all our activity and come to see what it was about. Their house currently has a roof on and may be ready for occupancy by July. They are keen to join us in the future and have given us their email. Our SRL leaflet-box was attached to the stile post and many leaflets were taken. We hope to receive some new members in the next few weeks.

By the following Saturday much of the work planned had been dealt with in a satisfying way. The site was tidied up and made as safe as we could. At this stage the landowner put in an appearance. Some discussion ensued and it was decided that some extra work on the levelling of the spoil was required. This resulted in a one-day work party the following Tuesday and our thanks go to yet more volunteers who attended that day to ensure we had a happy land owner at the end of the work.

Hopefully, some of you reading this report 'wish you were there'! Don't be disheartened – there is so much more to do in the future. There will be ongoing work parties, some just a day, some over a weekend and hopefully more when we can offer a complete week again. You will, as always, receive emails with details. Let's be realistic – we can now see a shape to the basin; we have an outline to the cottage; we have an enhanced surrounding area but the vision includes WATER and therefore there

is much more to be done. Whenever there is 'more to be done' there is red tape to contend with. We still need surveys; we still need approvals; we still need money; we still need publicity; but most of all we still need **YOU**.

I have overlooked mentioning some other visitors during the work party week. We had two couples visit in camper vans to see how things were going but were unable to stay long enough to participate in a hands-on way. However coffee and ginger cake went down well and the moral support is always appreciated. Also, John P. and I had encountered Phil Sharpe at the IWA meeting mid-week and Phil visited our site later in the week and offered advice and encouragement. Another spin-off from that IWA evening was that on our last working day River Canal Rescue 'released' one of their guys to join us all day and a second chap to join us in the afternoon. RCR were doing the talk for the IWA night and of course the RCR base is directly opposite the SRL site, as indicated on 'our' signpost. It was great to have help from their staff.

As well as the work update, there are a few other items of note

John Potter is handing over membership secretary to Peter Moore as from the end of April. John has taken on this role for a couple of years but chasing up members who have forgotten to renew impinges on our probable 'boating season'. We keep technology to a minimum when away from home – indeed last year we looked at our computer just twice in eight weeks. Our thanks to Peter for taking over this. John is still 'site manager' and will keep arranging work parties and emailing this info to you all via Peter.

Alan of dumper driver esteem has a health 'blip'. We wish him well and thank him for his contribution to the work party week. I hope to be making him many more cups of tea in the future.

SRL committee members continue to attend the Staffordshire Waterways Group meetings held in Stafford that bring together interested parties from many waterways projects. Lack of communication is so often the cause of misunderstandings in all walks of life so meetings like this can only be good.

There is a newly formed canal volunteer group who have adopted the stretch of towpath from the SRL signpost Eastwards to Lodgefield Bridge

(Bridge 102) There is a small overlap of personnel involved in both groups but again, this can only be beneficial. A point to note already is that some of the sandier 'diggings' from the SRL basin make ideal material to use on the towpath, which last winter became so muddy as to be dangerous. The Baswich Canal Group has bought a few tons of this for future use. SRL have gained financially as this material would otherwise have been spread with the muddier stuff. The Baswich group has gained as they paid a nominal sum which was probably less than buying in from outside.. A win win situation without a doubt.

I think I have covered everything of recent interest and hopefully SRL members will feel inspired once more.

All those on last years membership will receive this so a timely reminder that if you haven't renewed your membership, please do so. Not only do we need your enthusiasm and your presence at work parties, we do continue to need funds so all membership subs are important.

Best wishes from us all and let's make enough happen to fill another newsletter before too long,

Veronica Potter