

STAFFORDSHIRE AND WORCESTERSHIRE CANAL SOCIETY

ENQUIRY INTO RESTORING

THE STAFFORD BRANCH CANAL / SOW NAVIGATION (1976)

Researched and written by

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The possible restoration of Stafford Branch Canal was the subject of some discussion by members of the Staffordshire and Worcestershire Canal Society in 1976.

The discussion was initiated by R M Blakey who wrote a letter to the Editor of *Broadsheet*, the Canal Society's magazine. His letter appeared in the January edition¹. He asked whether it was still possible for the Stafford Branch to be restored. He did not know what condition it was in but was sure it would provide some interesting cruising if restored. The Editor invited comments.

S Coxon wrote a detailed reply in the March *Broadsheet*².

"I read with interest R M Blakey's letter (January *Broadsheet*) concerning the Stafford Branch of the Staffs & Worcs Canal. Although I realise all time and money is currently needed to keep open the main-line (or at least to keep it 'cruisable') I consider that the Stafford Branch could be restored easily in comparison with some of the restoration projects now taking place.

"I enclose a rough map³ of the branch which I hope will be of some use. The biggest part of the work would be in constructing a new waterway at Baswich to connect the canal and river. This would entail digging a channel about 150 yards long, and the construction of a new Baswich Lock.

"Saint Thomas' Weir would probably need strengthening and/or raising. I think the only other work required would be a mile and a half of intensive dredging as all of the bridges excluding a light wooden structure adjoining two car-parks are of adequate height. (Riverway and Fairway have ten or twelve feet of headroom).

"The towpath is in better condition than most canal towpaths. One thing which might make things difficult is a proposed new road, known as Stafford Inner Relief Road⁴. This road is planned to cross the river about two hundred yards east of Green Bridge. The height of this new bridge would be all important.

"I think that this project, if at all possible in future years, would be of great advantage, not only to boaters, but also to the people of Stafford, who could see narrow boats moored from the main shopping street, or even working boats unloading at Stafford Wharf, which is still intact.

“The local Sea-Cadets would benefit greatly, as their headquarters is adjacent to Riverway Bridge. Who knows? They might even volunteer to help, if they see the advantages of a navigable waterway running past their door, and connected to the main canal system.

“This is just an idea that might possibly become reality in the future, but if so it could provide a number of moorings off main-line and good publicity for canals in general if boats could once more reach Green Bridge.”

Roger T Squire, in his Chairman’s Report⁵ for 1975-1976 at the AGM on 14 June 1976, said that he would again give the Society two aims for the coming year, one being “an examination of the case for a Canal into Stafford.”

One member of the Society who was very enthusiastic about this was Bernard Rogers, the committee member responsible for “Trips and Cruises”. On Sunday 11 July 1976 he walked the entire route, recording and photographing its general condition.

This is his Report⁶ to the Committee:

Initial Report on state of the Stafford Arm (Sow Navigation)

Locks

St Thomas Lock non-existent; originally a single lock with a mean drop of 6ft. 6ins.

Aqueduct

Non-existent. This was needed to span the drainage channel.

Roving Bridge, at Junction with Main Arm

Non-existent.

Pound between Junction and Lock

Only traces of sandstone walls visible.

River Sow Navigation:

Towpaths

Excellent condition throughout with only two places showing signs of collapse, these being in close proximity of the second road bridge.

Bridges

All bridges are in first class condition (newly erected). The footbridge and Bailey Bridge in Stafford Wharf may be a restriction to headroom.

Feeders

Apart from the main source, there are at least six feeding points along this stretch of the river.

Weirs

Both weirs are in excellent condition and would require no attention.

Waterway

Depths vary from 6ft. to 1ft. (drought conditions). Shallows are mainly silt brought down by feeders. The usual collection of rubble has accumulated immediately beneath bridges. Weeds are abundant but most are surface or light clingers which would respond to through navigation after initial clearance.

Development

The new ring road is being constructed over the river next to the riverside centre, but as the footpath is being preserved, it would seem that a bridge rather than culverting will be used to span the river.

From my brief inspection, I can see no reason why a more detailed inspection cannot be made with advances to B.W.B. for approx. costs on lock and aqueduct, (there is one at Longdon on Tern), also a roving bridge. An approach to Stafford Council may also be made.

At the Committee Meeting on 23 August 1976 Bernard Rogers reported that: "A trip is to be arranged for Stafford Councillors as soon as possible at northern end of canal, to be linked with possibility of opening up Sow Navigation". Mr Rogers had walked the towpath and felt that restoration might be feasible; the lock and aqueduct would have to be completely reconstructed. A towpath walk was to be arranged for committee members and others interested on Sunday 19 September at 10.00 am. They were to meet at the short stay car park at Stafford town wharf. Notice of this was to go in *Broadsheet* and be announced at the monthly meeting.

In the meantime, on 6 September Bernard Rogers wrote to Dr J Ian Langford, a prominent member of the Society, about these events. Ian Langford replied on 17 September:

"I was delighted to hear you are exploring the possibility of reopening the Sow branch. As you may know, this is a project I should very much like to see accomplished; in my view it is one which should have been tackled long ago.

"I imagine the first step is to carry out a detailed survey of the river and site of a connection with the Staffs & Worcs. It is essential to know the magnitude of any engineering works at an early stage and to obtain a realistic costing for the restoration. Simultaneously, it would do no harm to secure the interest and support of local councillors and council officers; your proposed cruise will help achieve this and make them aware of the advantages of such a scheme. Also, attempts would have to be made to ensure that proposed road schemes,

service pipes, etc, do not interfere with the eventual reopening of the navigation. Alan E.⁷ has already written to the County Planning Officer concerning a gas pipe to be laid near the site of St Thomas Lock, which presents an immediate threat.

“These preliminaries would of course require the committee’s approval, but I imagine this would be readily forthcoming. The above suggestions would not necessarily involve the society in any long-term commitments.”

Ian Langford also stated that he had no information on the Sow Navigation other than what was in his *Staffordshire & Worcestershire Canal Towpath Guide*⁸ that had been published two years before.

No mention of the walk was made at the next Committee Meeting (27 September) – Bernard Rogers sent his apologies but at the following Meeting (25 October) he gave a very upbeat report: “Mr Rogers has further investigated the possibilities of reopening the Sow Navigation. His approaches to Severn-Trent River Authority were very well received and they are thought to have money to spend on improving the river. The water level has been maintained and a new bridge to be built allows for navigation.”

However, by the next Meeting (29 November), the mood had completely changed. A terse entry in the Minute book stated: “River Sow Navigation – Mr Rogers had a meeting with Mr Tremellyan of the Severn-Trent Water Authority and was told that the level of the river will be dropped by three feet to cope with flood water from the Stafford area. The implications of this mean that the project is very unlikely to be feasible.”

In his retiring Chairman’s Report⁹ for 1976-1977 at the AGM on 13 June 1977, Roger Squire said that in September 1976 the Society had held an “exploration of the Sow Navigation from Stafford to Baswich, which it was hoped would be the start of a revival of a re-instatement for navigation. However, a grandiose scheme by the Severn-Trent Water Authority to prevent the regular flooding of parts of Stafford town by lowering the river will mean that any such ideas will now never reach fruition”.

References and Notes

- (1) *Broadsheet* January 1976 Volume XVIII no.198 page 14.
- (2) *Broadsheet* March 1976 Volume XVIII no.200 pages 14 & 15.
- (3) There was no sign of a map in the Archive File.
- (4) Stafford Inner Relief Road is now known as Queensway.
- (5) *Broadsheet* July/August 1976 Volume XVIII no.204 page 3.
- (6) *Staffordshire & Worcestershire Canal Society: Trips and Cruises 1976-1980*.
- (7) Alan E Emuss, a member of the Conservation Committee.
- (8) *Staffordshire & Worcestershire Canal Towpath Guide* by J Ian Langford (1974): Goose & Sons Publishers. ISBN 0 900404 22 1.
- (9) *Broadsheet* July/August 1977 Volume XIX no 215 page 2.

Sources of Information

(A) Wolverhampton Archives & Local Studies

(i) *Staffordshire & Worcestershire Canal Society: Broadsheets (1976)*. Ref: D-SWC/9/3/13.

(ii) *Staffordshire & Worcestershire Canal Society: Broadsheets (1977)*. Ref: D-SWC/9/3/14.

(iii) *Staffordshire & Worcestershire Canal Society: Copy of Minutes (May 1972 – May 1977)*. Ref: D-SWC/2/6.

(iv) *Staffordshire & Worcestershire Canal Society: Trips and Cruises (1976 – 1980)*. Ref: D-SWC/7/4.

(B) Telephone conversations and email correspondence with Mr A W Gregory, Staffordshire & Worcestershire Canal Society.

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