

## **Opening Speech to Restoration Workshop 10 May 2014 by Les Etheridge IWA National Chairman**

Good morning and welcome to this IWA and CRT Restoration workshop “Water Adds Value”.

I hope you find the day both useful and enjoyable as we are planning making this an annual event provided, of course, that you find it of value.

We have apologies from Richard Parry and Tony Hales both for very good reasons. Tony is at the Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park where for the first time since restoration public boats will be cruising through on an IWA cruise organised by St Pancras Cruising Club. It’s excellent to see boats using these waterways again albeit currently on a limited basis and yet again it shows how important water can be to the regeneration of an area.

I could say that I have paid Richard not to be here today but that doesn’t quite sound quite right! Richard is taking part in the Montgomery Canal Triathlon and I wish him well particularly given his comment that his request for sponsorship was a bit late in the day rather like his preparation for the event! I imagine he’s going to be rather more tired at the end of the day than we are. Seriously though isn’t it excellent to see the CRT Chief Executive supporting the inland waterways in such a positive way?

We have run a few joint IWA and CRT workshops but this is the first focusing solely on restoration.

IWA has long been involved at the forefront of restoration and I was reminded of this when reading the Stratford upon Avon Canal Society newsletter of July 1985 which was looking back at the 21<sup>st</sup> anniversary of the reopen inch of the canal in 1964. It included a quote from the very first SONAC’s Newsletter of July 1958 which referred to a meeting in Stratford at which a resolution was passed that IWA and the Canal Society should press for preservation and restoration of the canal.

Times have changed but IWA is still around providing support and encouragement to the restoration movement in many ways for example through the Waterway Recovery Group, our Restoration Committee and specialist support such as our Consulting Engineers.

In the long and distant past British Waterways and its predecessors were the enemies of restoration but that has now all changed and it is really good news that CRT are now fully supportive of restoration.

I believe that we all achieve more by working together and indeed that has been the theme of our last two joint conferences and over the last year IWA and CRT have been working together to see how between us we can better support restoration.

Both organisations are committed to sustainably restoring and increasing the size of the network. Of course, the economic climate currently makes restoration very challenging and funding is much more difficult than at the time of the millennium when so much progress was being visibly made.

Funding might be difficult but what we do have is incredible enthusiasm and commitment of volunteers and we know what that has achieved over the years. My first real exposure to this enthusiasm and commitment came at the 1981 IWA National Festival at Leeds where people were going round with stickers saying the impossible dream. Just how impossible that dream was confirmed to me a few years later. I went to a meeting when one of the top engineers in British Waterways gave a presentation on the reopening of Blisworth Tunnel in August 1984. In the questions at the end of the meeting he was asked about the chances of reopening Standedge. His answer was very straight forward and he said "it would simply never happen". I recalled his statement when steering my boat through a few years ago and thought how glad I was that waterways restorers had impossible dreams and then just made them happen.

The words of David Hutchings "We were not experts therefore we did not know what could not be done" still encapsulates for me what waterways restoration is all about. It is that single minded determination that gets waterways restored and overcomes all the obstacles that get in the way. I see

that spirit alive and well amongst many restoration societies and it gives me great confidence that we will see many future successful restorations.

The aim of the workshop today is to support the further development of a strategic approach to restoration – selling and promoting the benefits of waterway restoration. In particular we want:

- Local groups to know what strategic support and help is available and for local groups to let us know what further support they need
- To further develop networking between groups recognising the opportunities that already exist through the Southern and Northern Canals groups.
- To share good practice and acknowledge success.
- Develop specific actions to take away and deliver

So we need feedback from you to help IWA and CRT improve the support available.

Every restoration is different in terms of the problems and challenges it faces but there are also many similarities and the chances are that somebody out there has faced the same difficulty and more importantly knows how to overcome it. Through networking at events like today's and through sharing issues we can help one another move forward. We live in an electronic world and sharing issues with the whole group no longer needs to wait until we all get together at events like this.

Through the Waterway Recovery Group IWA provides very practical support. For example in 2014, there are 24 canal camps plus weekends. Add into that all the additional work done by the WRG regional groups and it adds up to a very large amount of practical support for restoration. This is vitally important work for IWA and I hope you get real value from the considerable investment IWA puts into WRG.

This workshop builds on the success of last year's voluntary sector conference which many of you attended. Key actions were agreed specifically for restoration. CRT and IWA have been working together to progress them

1. We have pooled resources to create a small restoration team based at CRT's Fazeley office who are responsible for providing strategic support to local groups
2. Together we have organised today's conference on restoration- which we hope will become an annual event. However that depends on making sure that you get value from it and so we need your input to ensure we are providing what you need and want.
3. We have created a LinkedIn forum. This is a simple and effective electronic way of sharing best practice, pooling restoration information and also asking for the benefit of other people's experience and expertise. This forum is in its infancy but for example there have already been questions such as the solution to towpath surfacing in rural areas liable to flood and what is the experience of using plastic sheet piling for bank protection and moorings. Good answers have come back and with more members the forum will get better and better.
4. CRT has also created dedicated restoration web pages within its' website and these link to the already well established restoration information available on the IWA website
5. CRT have commissioned research from University of Northampton to produce a high level document to highlight benefits of waterways for all parties to use to 'lobby' local councilors, planners etc and we'll hear more about this shortly.
6. A short video has been produced as a joint venture highlighting the economic benefits of waterway restoration a very useful and simple tool that can be used to show the huge benefits that waterways can provide.
7. IWA is refreshing and updating the information we have available online.

Restoration doesn't just happen. It needs the hard work of volunteers who give their time, knowledge and passion to ensure the conservation and restoration of the nation's heritage. It relies on the determination and commitment of people who refuse to be beaten when obstacles are placed in their way. There are lots of examples in the history of waterways restoration of very different people who simply refused to give up and just made things happen and, of course, we are all incredibly grateful to them for what they achieved. I know we don't lack for similarly minded people in 2014 but we can make it much easier for them than it used to be.

*Those involved in the waterways are now basically all on the same side and want to see waterways restored and developed. Also we have much better ways of working together and sharing expertise to support and encourage one another.*

We want to ensure that IWA and CRT provide you with the best possible support.

Today's agenda is full and challenging and your input today is important in shaping the actions that further develops that support.

I know that in years to come people will continue to look back and say look just how much the waterways movement managed to achieve and how well it managed to overcome the problems of reduced funding that the recession caused. Funding opportunities will improve and we must be ready to take advantage. But let's never forget that in restoring a waterway we must ensure it has a sustainable future.

Thank you.