

A call to arms....

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It all started a couple of years ago when I was laid up following a hernia operation and I read Tim Wilkinson's "Hold on a minute", Rolt's "Landscape with Canals" and Peter Chaplin's "Waterway Conservation" in rapid succession. The latter you may not have heard of - I got mine from a "bargain book" stall at a garden centre - but it demonstrates what can be done with modern materials (steel piling and all!) when combined with a bit of common sense and clever, simple landscaping to create a wholly natural effect. (Peter Chaplin is of course related to Tom Chaplin, author of "A Short History of the Narrow Boat" and "Narrow Boats at Work".) What struck me most however was the exact similarity of attitude concerning the waterways between these three men. One got the idea that if they ever met they could move mountains.

This was the start of my own real thinking on waterway philosophy. I only got round to putting this down on paper a couple of newsletters ago. It was very much a personal thing at the time but I have been greatly flattered by the attention it received - both from individuals and in the waterway press. (It's also reassuring to know that people read the newsletter!)

I have always been surprised by people who wanted to know where I went when they know I have been boating. Even today, when pleasure boating is more socially acceptable than it was in the sixties, outsiders still do not really understand why anyone would wish to boat around Birmingham. To me it is because the place is irrelevant (apart from the wish to gratify occasional short term objectives). What matters, as has been said before is not the *arriving* but the getting there. This has more to do with the inner workings of the mind than what merely passes before the eyes and is what inspired so many early waterway writers and activists. It was not merely to achieve a physical ambition but a mental one.

Recently, during a 'flu bout, I read Aickman's "The River Runs Uphill" and received a video of "The Bargee" as a birthday present. Both are masterpieces.

The Bargee (for those that don't know) is a film of the life and loves of the skipper of a pair of British Waterways narrow boats (played by the late Harry H Corbett) and his mate (Ronnie Barker) in the *very* last days of the BW fleet. Along with Eric Sykes, as an early pleasure boater, and many other well known thespians, this film is not only a historic joy of a way of life which had all but already ended, but a still valid satire on the relationship between those who own and love historic craft today and the "outsiders" view of the general public and many "country cottage" boaters now. Your local WH Smith will get you a copy (double billed with "Rhubarb" - another short comedy with Eric Sykes) if interested.

Going back to my main thread, it is easy to see why Rolt and Aickman "fell out" - nearly causing a terminal rift in the fledgling Inland Waterways Association. Rolt was obviously a man who thought largely as he went along. Aickman, on the other hand would gather his thoughts, decide on a course of action and take it. Both styles have their strengths and their drawbacks. Those who think as they go along will be more adaptable to changing circumstances, but may be drawn off at a tangent or put off by unexpected difficulties - as I believe Rolt was. Those who decisively follow a predetermined course of action will not be swayed by what they see as trivia and will use surprising extra strength to overcome problems. The negative side is that they are likely to be seen as stubborn or arrogant - as was Aickman.

Regular readers will know that I am a great advocate of the reconciliation, rather than the confrontation, school of life. To me the cause of the Aickman/Rolt division was that the balance

shifted too far from what must have been a delicate relationship from the outset. It worked in the beginning because of the desperate situation the waterways were in at the time. There wasn't just the *risk* but the *probability* of most of the waterways being closed -in fact almost all of what we think of as the *cruiseway* network would have been lost, along with the historic craft to which this club is dedicated. The early days of the IWA were no time to be involved in a Big-Endian/ Little-Endian controversy such as Gulliver was faced with in Lilliput. Rolt and Aickman clung to each other to keep on top of the fence where they had common ground. They later fell on to their respective sides.

Rolt's practical nature saw the greatness of what they had achieved and sought to build on and consolidate this foundation, in terms of both leisure and commerce. Aickman on the other hand felt that only the first part of the battle was won, for the saving of the waterways for future generations was only part of Aickman's Vision. It was the whole of Rolt's.

Aickman, as I have already said, thought extensively before pursuing a distant and difficult objective - but he knew his limitations. He wanted, like so many members of mankind before and since, to change the world, and society, for the better. This, of course, was an impossible task for one man. He chanced upon the waterways and realised that this was one place where he could make a useful impression and he was optimistic that others would fulfill a similar role in other aspects and areas of society.

Many waterway organisations are currently going through “What now?” phases. Many canal societies are having to adjust from being restoration societies to societies whose role has to be changed with the completion of their primary task - with varying degrees of success. A unique case was that of the Peak Forest Canal Society which actually wound itself up - although reputedly by accident! - following restoration of that waterway. This club has adopted a new role - that of educator - in addition to its constitutional ones, and this is bringing us a new respect in the current waterway scene. Elsewhere, local canal societies and so on keep a “watching brief” on their chosen waterway and are well involved in local user group meetings. All this is very valuable stuff - fundamental to maintaining the status quo. The erstwhile, all dominating, all powerful Inland Waterways Association on the other hand is relegated to an umbrella role. Rolt's Vision is achieved! - but the IWA appears unhappy in this role - if anything things have gone too far. The umbrella role doesn't really work. The problem is that the setting up of external bodies and the consequent devolution of power (and members!) means that the umbrella has too many holes, not enough substance and authority. The subsidiary organisations which have been nurtured under its wing now assume power in their own right. The reaffirmation of the IWA's aims under David Stevenson went some way toward redressing the balance and it is to be hoped this can continue. There are, after all, many national waterway organisations but only *one* which has aims which encompass the aims of them all. So what next?

Dare I say Aickman's Vision? I have always been appalled that the IWA sought to approve Aickman's manuscript for “The River Runs Uphill” prior to its publication some years ago. I don't think it would happen today. Ironically he actually compliments the IWA on its success. The completion of the Rolt Vision leads naturally into a continuation of Aickman's but his confrontational attitude has often been dismissed as inappropriate for today. Possibly, but I see no option when faced with *external* authorities who have their own ideas of what the waterways should become.

In my earlier article I pointed out my view of where the Rolt Vision is in danger of going wrong. For those that missed it, the substance of this is that today's waterways should be seen as a former transport system mostly used for leisure *NOT* a leisure medium that once happened to be

used for transport. The danger in the latter is that anything goes whereas in the former, everything must be capable of coexisting with and not in conflict with its original purpose. Eg, picnic benches and shrubs between towpath and hedge - ok!. Picnic benches and shrubs between towpath and bank - conflict with original horse towage. This is actually a *very* simple principle - but it needs to be remembered. Another simple example; Railings on busy lockside/bank edges = inconvenience for boaters and danger for onlookers (who frankly shouldn't be too close - there is too much of danger) Railings (say) 3 metres/yards from lockside or 1 metre from other banksides = security and safety in segregation for all! Another example - a new pub/hotel. Build something to represent and old warehouse, neat brick paved quays with plenty of bollards, plenty of space for the public to watch the passing "barges", then that is exactly what they will do - pass! On the other hand build something modern if you like, discreetly separate it from the moorings with a hedge or a line of trees (provide some decent beer!) and boaters will feel safe in that the new is trying not to interfere in "their" world, the new is not trying to force itself upon the old; it is *giving* and not, as so often happens, taking.

It is my belief that *only* by maintaining such a strategy, and keeping one foot *very* firmly placed in the roots of the past, can we relate to the present and prevent the waterway system becoming a linear theme park. This needs constant reminders from all who care about the waterways today and must be the basis for any Campaign for Real Canals. Let me just state however, once and for all, that I have no objections to modern developments providing they follow this basic principle. I am very much against the idea of new developments which are made to look like old ones. This is an architectural sop which is too often used to buy off "environmental" objectors. It forgets that today's waterways are the *sum* of 200 years of history. Any attempt to freeze it in time is therefore killing the concept of a living waterway - instead it becomes an exhibit, an anachronism.

Let us therefore continue to develop our waterways, but in such a way that they will continue to *inspire*, rather than merely amuse, those who chance upon them. Let us hope that this inspiration will in turn lead those people who receive it to play their part in achieving Aickman's Vision.