

## High tech vs Low tech or Preserve vs Develop?

Chris Deuchar  
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Having access to Electronic Computer mail facilities, (commonly called E-mail) I occasionally use this method to communicate with other members. One member recently responded and commented how paradoxical it was that a modern innovation such as electronic mail should be used in the administration of a club involved with historic narrow boats. Quite so - I agree but at the same time it occurs to me that once again this touches on the "preserve 'em or develop 'em" arguments in narrow boat restoration and waterway heritage.

For those unacquainted with the dilemma, there are two basic schools of thought. The first argument goes that narrow boat transport finally died in the 1960's and that boats ought to be restored to a) original condition, or b) to something like their supposed heyday condition of around 1940. Wooden bottoms should only be replaced with more wood, square nails should be specially obtained for planks, and chalice should only contain horse dung and not the bull variety. etc

The second school believes that we should imagine that mass narrow boat carrying has continued up to the present day and that modern techniques and materials are permissible as they are only part of a natural progression in the development - not only of the narrow boat - but of waterway transport. Subscribers to this view will replace wooden bottoms with steel, replace canvas cloths with PVC. Etc etc.

Personally I believe both views *complement* rather than contradict each other and there are a large number of variants between these two extremes which suggest many others support my position. The situation is rather less clear however when it comes to waterways heritage.

Most waterway enthusiasts fully support the conservation of features such as Foxton Locks and Stoke Bruerne which have managed to remain largely unspoilt in spite of hordes of tourists. Paths and car parks have been added admittedly and litter bins are not "original" canalside furniture but the general canal environment has barely changed in thirty years. On the other hand developments at Gas St, Fazeley and proposals at Watford Locks and Banbury leave one aghast. What causes such diversity of treatment?

I believe that the answer lies in the basic way one views the waterways. What *should* be the case is that they are viewed as a water transport medium that is used (mostly) for leisure. Where things go wrong is where they are viewed as a leisure medium that once happened to be used for transport. If you can't see the importance of the distinction then re-read as necessary. If you still can't see, then I will spell it out. Viewed as a transport medium, all modern development must be capable of being related to, and not in conflict with, that original function. Viewed as a leisure medium - almost anything goes!

We enthusiasts have not helped with some of the terms we have used such as "opening up" canals and "linear parks". "Opening up" to an enthusiast means to reopen for boats (and other compatible pursuits), but to a council or developer it means knocking flat

everything around it so that the canal is *exposed*. “Linear park” to an enthusiast means an almost untouched waterway where nature is allowed to take its course provided this doesn't interfere with the prime function, to a council or developer a “Park” (whatever its shape) needs picnic benches, flower beds and twee fences. Don't misunderstand me, I'm not averse to the odd flower bed etc in an *appropriate* waterside place, what I object to strongly is having my linear waterway environment exposed in such a way that people can no longer experience the original historic magic. Anyone got any ideas for replacement phrases for the 90's? “Navigising” perhaps and “longitudinally managed envirosystem” (“laterally challenged aqua-reserve”?). Gosh that chalice goes a long way once you spill it!

Ironically, some councils go too far. Environmental officers complaining that dredging destroys too many reeds and even a council objecting to a householder who had planted marigolds along the towpath side of his concrete garden wall! (Their decision was that the marigolds must go and that the towpath would be landscaped. **Landscaped!???** ...a towpath???) Interestingly the Environmental Protection Act (1990?) may provide a legitimate let out for dredging in the section on “nuisance”. I had written down an exact quotation but I've mislaid it and so will have to rely on memory. The gist of it was that nuisance (in the strict legal sense) would be caused if any watercourse (eg every part of our waterway system), not generally used for the carriage of freight (eg the “cruiseway” and “remainder” waterways), was allowed to become choked with rubbish or weed so that drainage or other functions were impaired.

This would seem to provide British Waterways with a statutory mechanism to dredge a waterway to the desired specification regardless of council or other recommendations to the contrary. BW have never had a reputation of over-dredging (!) and will obviously wish to keep the canal lining intact so I really don't see that any long term ecological damage is likely. The other side of the coin is that there would also seem to be legal redress against BW for causing a nuisance to vessels by failing to *unchoke* the waterways. Hmmmmm....

As for landscaping towpaths I am at something of a loss for the need. An organisation called The Groundworks Trust (I think - there are several variations nationally) has done much well intentioned work on the waterway environment. Unfortunately some of this work appears to have been misdirected and I have had reports of what amounts to near vandalism. In one case a classic example of an iron rope-worn bridge guard was removed locally in such a “tidy up”. This was particularly sad as we were in the habit of sending school parties to look at this remnant of the horse drawn age. Trees and totally inappropriate shrubs (and railings) have been planted between towpath and water - yes, the horses may be gone but this is a good example of the *wrong* way to view the waterways. This is a case of seeing the waterway purely in leisure terms rather than a transport system *used* for leisure - not to mention the problems which may be caused to any unfortunate having to bowhaul their boat! There is also an allegation that surplus towpath stone has been tipped into the canal. Ordinarily one probably wouldn't notice but this is allegedly at a winding hole where every inch counts. If you know of any more let us know and we will investigate and, if such problems appear widespread, will endeavour to provide appropriate education. I suspect ignorance is the greatest offender here.

To backtrack a little, in the last issue I suggested we have an ongoing review of bank protection and towpath methods. Even if you want to keep an eye on things yourselves, please let me know of any unusual treatments and I will then endeavour to get these photographed (say annually) to provide a comprehensive record for future recommendations.

(Just for the record, I'm a steel bottom and PVC cloths but *old* style Gas St man. Ok?)