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A new vision for canals and waterways: *The Leisure Review* round table

There are 2,000 miles of navigable inland waterways in England and Wales. 'The system' has a chequered history which has seen canals go from industrial artery to a byword for neglect and dilapidation to a thriving leisure resource. With significant aspects of the management of canals and rivers being moved from a quango to a charity, *The Leisure Review* convened a round table to discuss the implications of the change.

The woman in charge of a trim, little narrowboat called Grace waiting to use Wardle Lock in the centre of Middlewich was in no doubt: "The new charity won't make any difference at all". This considered view followed a discourse on the state of the lock mechanism and its maintenance, criticism of the proliferation and behaviour of hire boats, and a few rather plaintive reminiscences of the days when lock keepers would sell you "eggs and all sorts". The shades of the good old days are omnipresent on the canal system but the transfer of their management from BW, formerly British Waterways, to the Canal & River Trust (CRT) offers a new future, a future which is being formed as we speak.

The people *The Leisure Review* chose to speak about it represented a cross-section of the many parties with an interest in the outcomes and, with our usual restaurant venue swapped for the bijou constraints of the managing editor's shared narrowboat, the NB Symphony, the debate was honest, direct and far-reaching.

Alan Platt is an accountant but it is his role as regional chair and trustee of the Inland Waterways Association (IWA), and also a member of CRT's area partnership, which sees him squeezed into Symphony's saloon between Vince Moran, the operations director for CRT, and Nick Reeves, whose role as executive director of the Chartered Institution for Water and Environmental Management (CIWEM) gives him a keen interest in the care of Britain's waterways.

Reeves is also a noted controversialist and his opening sally, which suggested that the change to a charity was an overtly political act designed to remove spending from central government's budget, brought a bristling response from Vince Moran. Whatever cynics might suggest, Moran explained, Gordon Brown's Labour government "began the process and the Conservatives picked it up as fitting quite nicely with their third sector agenda". Having established the history of the transfer, Moran did acknowledge that "from our [BW's management team] point of view this was a wave we could not resist riding. We had to jump on that wave and paddle like hell because it was the right thing to do. There can't be anything more exciting than what we're about to do; something genuinely transformational."

While Alan Platt's demeanour was less overtly enthusiastic, he did own to a growing confidence that the new way of working would bring dividends. "While the new arrangement is not a merging of equals, from our perspective at the IWA the plusses come in light of arguments for a waterways conservancy, a genuine public ownership of the waterways rather than ownership via the state which is so indirect as to be negligible. We welcome that." Asked to explain how things have changed as the IWA has always been voluble, he suggests, "In reality we have always talked to BW but now we're at a round table rather than across an oblong one. We'll not be doormats but I don't think that's what CRT want."

The relationship between the new charity and the various groups who use the canals and rivers is key to the success of CRT with "accountability" an important factor. Moran did a quick sum: "We used to be accountable to a minister but now we're accountable to about 150 individuals and we've got to work with that.

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There's the board of trustees, about 10; a council of about 35; then the 11 local waterway partnerships, each with 10 or 12 people on them and they all have a stake in what is happening in the waterways."

Functioning as he does in the rarefied air of Westminster, Reeves sought to nail the issue of accountability by suggesting that "you are still going to be publicly accountable because charities have to be answerable to the Charities Commission and you are now going to have to demonstrate public benefit." Moran's response was to compare the situation before and after the transformation. "If 'our minister' decided tomorrow that social housing was the most important thing on the agenda, we could argue but we'd have to do it. As a charity we will have to be able to demonstrate that we're fulfilling our charitable objectives in everything we do but we won't be subject to political short-termism."

Talk of government soon turned to Reeves' favourite Aunt Sally, the ownership of the public realm and politicians' cavalier attitude towards it, and again Moran defended BW's, and what will be CRT's, viewpoint: "Let's not be too critical of the government and the idea of public ownership. Public ownership has done fantastic things for the waterways. The government has put a lot of money in and will continue to do so. We've been able to turn what is a government grant at the moment into a formal contract; guaranteed. The certainty of 15-year funding – and it's not as much as we'd like but it was never going to be – is fantastically positive."

"That was one of the main things for us," agreed Platt. "We were scared, for example, that they were going to take the property out [of the new charity] and that would have totally scuppered the finances. You'd be massacred cost-wise and end up with some serious maintenance problems."

Warming to the theme of how things can only get better, Platt continued: "It used to be that every other year there would be a 'night of the long knives' and the middle managers we were dealing were getting brassed off having to apply for their own jobs. Now we have a very positive attitude and are looking forwards to some stability."

The CRT will control a property portfolio of £500 million – which has caught the eye of successive governments – and under the new arrangement the trust will be able to create income that is ploughed straight back into looking after the canal and river network, a situation which Moran, like Platt, is very positive about: "As part of public sector we've been operating in the context of uncertain funding. It is really difficult to plan or to work productively and effectively in that context. We wanted to try to move away from that, taking greater control of our own destiny and we believed – and it's fact now – that putting canals into some sort of charitable envelope would engage the public of this nation in a better and different way with the canals being looked after by a public body."

Although the money is fundamentally important, Platt also wants to see some a culture shift: "The big challenge now, having got the money sorted, is to get BW to have a culture change, to accept that they are in a different environment." He does acknowledge that progress has begun at the political level but that "it's the bloke punting his boat moaning that the dredging hasn't been done and that the lock needs painting who needs to be convinced". Keen as he is to see the message getting to permeate to the towing path, Platt accepted that "there is something intransigent about your average boater; and your average fisherman".

Talk of the ordinary person on the towing path encouraged boat-share owner Mick Owen to introduce the subject of volunteering. He quoted the woman from NB Grace whose dismissal of volunteering, which is already at significant levels through organisations such as the IWA, is "just a way of saving money".

Moran's response was to ask pointedly: "What do you want to deal in: facts or anecdote?" His response perhaps reflected the degree of cynicism which surrounds the big society agenda in general rather than just the CRT's unlooked for association with it but Reeves was emollient, explaining that "there is a lot of cynicism around the 'bonfire of the quangos' and big society; people are suspicious".

Platt too sought a balance: "There are lots of societies on the waterways that work together. Some get on and some don't." However, he too is not enamoured of the big society as it is being presented "because someone is saying 'You should all be volunteers'. My response? 'What the hell do you think I've been doing all these years?'"

Moran was happy to supply a few facts to counter any threat of anecdote dependency. "The canal and river network gives UK plc £500 million of benefit a year according to an analysis of the government's own statistics. Within that, volunteers are one of the three key human resources required to manage this network which, let's not forget, is a risk-based network. Its 200 years old, man-made and water retaining. You do not take that lightly unless you're an idiot. We need a direct labour force, focused on things that are expert to waterways. Things that need doing but require less expertise – such as grass cutting – can be done by people whose focus that is and that work is out to contract. Both direct labour and contract labour are absolutely vital but both are increasingly supplemented by a volunteer workforce. Last year there were 35,000 volunteer days. Go back five years it was nil; nil recorded anyway."

The question of what those volunteers might do is again answered with alacrity by Moran: "There is so much to do. I have 50,000 defects to repair at any one time on the network. They are not all urgent. We tend to concentrate on the 20% most urgent of them. Any volunteer group can find plenty to do which is non-urgent and I am not talking about litter-picking."

A quick discussion on bridge repairs, the need for pointing and the inevitable maintenance of lock mechanisms leads to Moran to knock down another two myths: "Volunteers can do anything. We've got engineers, heritage advisers, building surveyors. And speaking of myths, it's a myth that volunteers are going to replace employees. We would not get any volunteer on board if they thought they were going to put someone out of work and we have made a public commitment to our workforce that no one will be made redundant as a result of volunteering."

With time running short – time and tide wait for no-one after all – Reeves linked the 15-year contract CRT have been offered to the much-vaunted increase in waterways usage and to the capacity-building among volunteers needed to cope with increased interest and demand, adding the question of whether the list of defect will increase significantly with more usage. Moran sweeps up both enquiries: "The vast majority of defects are small and not critical and we will be able to rely on volunteers for work which doesn't need to be done tomorrow. But the system is finite and there is a growth in the number of people wanting to use it. Now that's elastic in some places because with walking, fishing and cycling there are no jams. If more people want to go boating – and there are 35,000 boats on the system now – then we've got to steer them away from the honey pots such as the Montgomery Canal."

Only a few hours cruising from where Symphony is moored a short staircase of locks can cause boats to wait hours to go through and the queue in Middlewich around the time of a local folk and boat festival gets longer as the weekend approaches but, according to Moran, such waits are not boaters' prime concern. "I came here from a presentation on a customer survey which had 3,000 responses," he said. "We asked about congestion and the facts suggest that, overall, it's not a massive issue."

Given the presence of Mr Reeves, it would have been impolite not to touch on some of the environmental issues surrounding the waterways, many of which are summed up by the Montgomery restoration project. 'The Monty', a spur off the Llangollen Canal, is a site of special scientific interest because of the floating water plantain it hosts. The plant, as Platt puts it, is "precious to environmentalists" and someone needs to balance the demands of "boaters, restorers and environmentalists". On the subject of plantain and other protected environments, Moran admitted that "there can be some problems on occasions but the charity acknowledges its environmental responsibilities and that's why you have committees. But canals are basically for boats; not solely or exclusively, but a canal without something floating in it is a water channel."

Canal folk seldom rush but with lunch threatening to become afternoon tea the debate had to be forestalled. Having thanked our guests for their time and their candour, *The Leisure Review* reflected that clear priorities have to be respected and the management of the Canal and River Trust have set out their own with admirable openness. Whether they can convince the woman at Wardle Lock to get on board with them waits to be seen.

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