

Report to the Harbour Board 15th December 2022 from the Harbour Master

Since the last meeting of the Board we have experienced some unseasonably warm weather, our water users were still plentiful as far as early to mid-November, since then the poor weather arrived to remind that the depths of winter will soon be upon us.

Winter work on customer's moorings has started. Hopefully the last of the winter buoys will be changed by Christmas, then we will take all our customers moorings into the buoy store compound where they can be cleaned and serviced before going back out in late March.

Port Marine Safety Code compliance

It is anticipated that funding for the application to the Department for Transport for a Harbour Revision Order will be approved at full Council on 13th December and we hope to enter the expression of interest shortly to enable the process to begin.

Vessels at risk in the canal

Unfortunately a large vessel sank in the canal on the 30th of October, the MV Johnny Eager, a former fishing trawler sank at its berth on Gabriel's Wharf. A member of the public phoned in to inform the Exeter City Council control room at 07.45am and we had a member of the team on site within fifteen minutes. Fortunately, the member of staff had the presence of mind to immediately close the King's arms lock gates to prevent any pollution being blown into the main river.

All the Waterways team reported to work and our specialist contractor Adler & Allen were also called out.

Unfortunately, a considerable amount of diesel fuel had escaped from the hull but the team very quickly had a first line of defence boom around it to capture as much as we could and when the contractors arrived they put out a more substantial barrier. After that, the Waterways team started clearing up deposits of oil in the reeds using absorbent pads and the contractor started to skim heavy and emulsified oil from the surface using a specialist device.

Three other booms were deployed in stages along the canal up to the basin and the spill was very quickly cleared up. The Environment Agency were kept informed at every stage of the clean-up, press releases were issued and user groups of the canal were similarly kept updated.

The vessel was raised on the 8th of November and lifted onto the quayside at Gabriel's Wharf. Because of the size and weight of the vessel, a 300 ton crane with spreaders completed the lift. The hull is in a very poor state and it is unlikely to survive intact from being lifted again onto a trailer to go for disposal so we have approached a demolition contractor to make a plan for dismantling on site.

This work can only be done with the agreement of the Environment Agency and permission for a licence can take up to three months. As Harbour Master, I have expressed concern about the fragility of the vessel and the close proximity of the main diversion road going to Double Locks. Currently the vessel is sat on blocks, supported by steel legs and surrounded by Heras fencing with clear warning signs. Hopefully the boat can be disposed of relatively soon, however to dismantle the hull, the road would have to be closed and that cannot be done until the contractors building the new railway halt at Marsh Barton have finished at the site.

The owner of the boat has not responded to any attempt to get in contact with him.

A request to the City Council's legal department to start the financial recovery process has been made.

A number of vessels in the canal have been assessed as being at risk. To help reduce the risk going forwards we have re-written the seasonal storage contract and in future we will insist on seeing proof of insurance.

Turf moorings

42 metres of extra pontoon have been installed at the Turf and also laid a line of six 'trot' moorings that will be used as extra space for boats mooring up for the winter to help spread the load from the pontoons. If this initiative proves to be worth doing, we will extend the line next year.

Bascule bridge failure

Once again the lifting bridge at Countess Wear has failed and this time the engineers from Devon County Council have advised that the fault is more serious than the one that made the bridge unworkable for most of the summer season. Before the current fault was discovered we managed to get one convoy of vessels up to the basin, some of which have now been lifted out onto the quay for storage.

The failure of the bridge means that we will be unable to bring anymore vessels up to the basin for the near future. This failure means that our customers will not be able to have their boats lifted out at the Quay for essential maintenance or surveys etc. and inevitably this may have an impact on our reputation. The Canal Manager is in regular contact with the bridge engineers and they are fully aware of our position with this issue.

Aids to Navigation

Our Aids to Navigation will be checked by a night passage up the river as soon as the weather allows. This is to make sure that all of the lights are working to the correct sequence as published in the sailing instruction.

The new 'safe water' buoy is still waiting to be re-positioned (at the time of writing) and as soon as the poor weather abates we will ask our contractors from Teignmouth harbour to come and lay it in position at the start of the channel into the River Exe.

A new Isolated Danger buoy is soon to be placed in position to mark the wreck off Starcross Pier.

The canal team have started the winter maintenance work. The pontoon decking at Turf has started to be replaced in areas where the old wooden slats have started to rot out. We are using a plastic recycled material as replacement surface, this will not rot and give many years of trouble free use.

Inspection of the chains controlling the lock gates at Turf will need to be done this winter and we hope to do that once we have the correct safety measures in place.

Normal cutback of foliage is programmed to start as winter takes a grip, similarly drainage ditch clearance will be completed as time allows and canal bank repairs will be programmed in also.

In the river the team have made a start carrying out the winterisation of our customers moorings, we have made a huge leap in clearing out the buoy store in readiness for the anticipated refurbishment of the building.

Topsham Ferry

The causeway on the canal side has been shored up with cement bags to help prevent under scouring. The build-up of mud on either end of the landing

continues to be a problem, we are considering methods of moving the materiel in the spring.

The Topsham ferry will continue to run over the Christmas period (excluding Christmas Eve and Christmas Day) and the service will cease for the winter after New Year's Day. The service will start again toward the end of March/early April depending on the weather at the time.

On-going issues of concern

Staff working in vessels that are not Marine Coastguard Agency (MCA) coded continues to be an area of concern. However, we are going ahead with the chartering of a correctly coded workboat for our moorings and Navigation Aids servicing work and we are looking to purchase a rigid hull inflatable boat (RHIB) that is capable of being coded to act as a smaller workboat/patrol boat.

The refurbishment of the Buoy Store has still not started but we hope that work will start in the near future although a start date has not yet been confirmed.

Staffing

A member of the river team is still on long term sick leave and we have employed a casual member of staff to assist.

We also have a new member of staff at the canal who has already made a valuable contribution to the team.

Grahame Forshaw

Harbour Master December 2022