

**From the Cut and Trust, Journal of the  
Stratford on Avon Canal Society, No 4, 1964**

**SAVING THE CANAL**

In the Bulletin No.49 of the Inland Waterways Association, published in January 1956, there was a request for local members to form a Protection Committee for the Southern Section of the Stratford upon Avon Canal, At that time the possibility of closing the Section was being discussed by local Councils and reports were reaching the local papers. The appeal drew replies from people in Stratford and Henley in Arden and, after some letters to the local Press, others came forward including the remaining committee members of a boating club known as the Stratford Canal Club. The Protection Committee was duly formed, in July 1956, and the Stratford-on Avon Canal Society developed logically from this, being formed on the 17th November 1956.

Members of our first Committee had examined the Canal carefully during the previous summer and one of their first decisions was to try to navigate it. None of us had then heard of the Railway and Canal Traffic Act of 1888 but the I.W.A. Bulletins had frequently referred to canals being closed as a result of lack of use. We thought that the Canal would probably be the safer for being used once in a while. We knew that all the locks were in a bad way and that the last three miles of the canal were either dry or overgrown because very little water was getting past lock 40. However, above that lock it seemed that a canoe would have quite a reasonable passage and we set about trying to borrow one.

Some Members of the Committee were in favour of trying to get official sanction for the proposed trip, in the form of a canoe licence at the (then) Standard rate of 2d. per mile, without use of locks. No-one thought we had much chance of obtaining a licence and it was argued that it would be better to make the trip without any such formality,- and offer to pay if challenged. In spite of this not unreasonable argument the formal approach was decided upon and, unknown to us at the time, it was this decision that was to make possible the saving of the Canal and its subsequent restoration by the National Trust.

Obtaining the licence did not, after all, prove to be as difficult as we had expected. After a long conversation on the telephone and a personal visit to their local office British Waterways agreed to issue it. We had to assure them that we were aware of the difficulties and that we were prepared to take the Canal as we found it. The first licence was issued from Stratford to Earlswood although the boat was only taken as far as Hockley Heath. A second licence was issued later for the return journey.

The trip began on the afternoon of Saturday the 9th of February, 1957 in a heavy planked canoe loaned by Mr. Dalziell of the Malthouse Boatyard.

The trip started from his slipway on the River Avon at Stratford and, with two members of our Committee on board, the canoe was paddled past the Theatre to the steps alongside the Bancroft Gardens, carried round lock 56 and launched on the Canal Basin.

Overnight and from one weekend to the next the boat was left in various canal-side gardens or farm buildings, the complete return trip taking six weekends. Apart from the really difficult stretch between locks 51 and 40 the trip was nothing abnormal for a canoe trip on a canal with a fair number of locks. There was a great deal of floating said submerged debris but the canoe was a very heavy one designed for rough use on rivers and was not affected. On the return journey we were joined by two canoeists in a canvas boat and they had to be very careful indeed to avoid damage. Our picture No.1 shows the party crossing Edstone Aqueduct on the return journey. We were asked twice by British Waterways employees about the licensing of the boat, once almost as soon as we had started, at lock 54 and again at lock 21,

A year passed before the official moves to close the Canal began in earnest and caused the campaign to save it to gather speed. A historic public meeting organised by the Inland Waterways Association was held in April 1958 and in July the Coventry Canal Society mounted at Wootton Wawen a Rally of Boats which they brought by road to Preston Bagot.

A great deal of public interest was aroused and brought about some delay in the County Council's application for a Warrant of Abandonment. But the application was made after all, on June 11th, and the notices appeared on August 15th along the towpath and in the local papers. The Act of 1888 allows the abandonment of a Canal if it has not been used for navigation during the previous three years and also in other circumstances. We were therefore delighted to see that the Council's application was based only upon lack of use. Our solicitors wrote at once to the Ministry of Transport on this matter. We were told in reply that, if we could produce evidence of navigation, for example by the production of toll receipts, then the Minister would not be able to proceed with the Application. It really seemed that we were home and dry before the opposition had hardly started but, on the other hand, it was only a canoe. We were advised not to rely upon the interpretation of 'navigation' but to campaign for such public support as would make a public enquiry necessary. Everyone even remotely connected with the saving of the Canal will remember the drive to obtain the maximum possible number of valid objections.

The Society's objection was submitted by our Solicitors together with the vital toll receipts and with other evidence which we had collected. The official total number of objections submitted was 6,111

When the last day for the receipt of objections had passed the next move lay with the Minister of Transport. But some aspects of the campaign continued from the momentum of the effort already made; notably a repeat, in October, of the highly successful rally at Wootton Wawen, and in December a request came from B.B.C. to cooperate in the production of a feature for the programme 'Tonight'. Picture No.4 shows our Chairman being interviewed on the towpath by Mr.Fyfe Robertson.

The inevitable lull in the campaign during this waiting period seems to have had an interesting side effect as there have been references recently, in the Press and elsewhere, to 'a canoe ticket issued to some unknown person'. But the terms of the letter giving the Minister's decision and received by the principal objectors on the 22nd of May 1959, made the reason for the decision

quite clear. It said that the Minister had been advised not to proceed with the application "because it has not been established that the section of the Canal had been disused for navigation within the meaning of the said Section 45 for at least three years before the date of the said application".

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