

HILLINGDON'S CANALS – HIDDEN ASSET AND GOLDEN OPPORTUNITY

Introduction

Hillingdon has more miles of canal than any other London Borough, but its enormous potential has yet to be fully realised. The Hillingdon Canals Partnership was formed more than 12 years ago by the Council, the then British Waterways and other key partners including the Inland Waterways Association, Hayes Town Partnership, Sharks Canoe Club and Stockley Park. Its remit was to promote the use and improvement of the canal through Hillingdon. Much has been achieved but there is still more to be done. That is why the Partnership was heartened to learn that the Residents' Services Select Committee had decided to organise a cruise between Yiewsley and Hayes and I was pleased to be able to help in securing the use of the Elsdale vessel.

What does the canal have to offer?

The main line of the Grand Union Canal runs virtually the whole length of the Borough from Harefield in the north down to Uxbridge, Cowley, Yiewsley, West Drayton, Stockley Park and through Hayes Town before leaving the Borough and heading for Brentford and the Thames. The Paddington Branch runs from Bulls Bridge near to the Hayes By-pass and north through Yeading and into Greenford before joining the Regents Canal and proceeding into central London and beyond. A small stretch of the Slough Arm is also in Hillingdon.

As everybody will know, the canals were originally built to carry freight, but that role has dwindled to virtually nil. Now they are used almost entirely for leisure boating but their main impacts on the Borough are as a:

- Key element of the drainage system.
- Green corridor that enhances the environment.
- Walking and cycling route that can be used for exercise and transport.
- Part of important town centres that can add to the street scene.
- Generally quiet place that aids relaxation and good mental health.
- Opportunity for volunteering in litter clearing and local improvements.
- Source of water for cooling adjoining buildings.
- Part of the Borough's history.

What is remarkable is how few residents know what the canal has to offer. Indeed, many hardly realise that it exists as anything other than a water channel that they might glance at occasionally when crossing a bridge.

The stretch of the canal from Harefield to Cowley has a wonderful environment and needs little but careful protection. However, visitors to Hayes or West Drayton Town Centres would hardly know there is a canal and boaters passing through would hardly know there are town centres to visit.

The Council's contribution

The canals are now run by the Canal and River Trust which is a national charity responsible for all the canals in England and Wales. The Trust relies heavily on the involvement and support of partner organisations including local Councils.

In Hillingdon the importance of the canal to the infrastructure and the environment has long been recognised in strategic planning and this is reflected in the Borough Plan.

The Trust has had a long-term programme for the improvement of the towpath through the length of the Borough and for a number of years it received financial support from Transport for London. As a result of the pandemic TfL was forced to cut that funding but the Council stepped in by negotiating and facilitating Section 106 agreements with developers to generate the money needed for the improvement of nearby stretches of towpath. Much has been achieved and unimproved gaps will gradually receive attention as further funds are forthcoming from already approved developments.

Section 106 and Chrysalis funding were used for a project in Hayes Town Centre that replaced high walls above the towpath with railings. The area had previously been a haunt for drinkers but, by making it more open, there has been an improvement in the situation. Unfortunately, for financial reasons, the Council has not been able to proceed with the boardwalk scheme on Botwell Bridge that would have opened up views of the canal for users of the Town Centre and made the towpath more welcoming.

Planning have worked with individual developers to ensure that new buildings make more positive use of the canal frontage and this has happened very effectively at a number of locations including Stockley Park and the former Nestles factory site in Hayes.

The Council has provided funding to enable the engagement of consultants by the Trust for a number of canal-side improvements which have been identified in full consultation with members of the Canals Partnership.

Ward budgets have been used to help fund the Hayes Canal Festival which has been a very successful initiative attracting around 2000 people from the diverse local communities to come and experience a range of water-based and land-based activities.

Waste Services have often helped with the collection and disposal of rubbish collected from towpaths by volunteer groups such as Hillingdon Litterpickers, Hayes Muslim Centre and the Hillingdon Gurkha Nepalese Community.

Individual primary schools have worked with the Trust's Learning & Skills Coordinator to deliver presentations and sometimes boat trips for local children to learn about the history of the canals and their environment. These sessions have also been an opportunity to highlight issues of water safety.

As a result of anti-social behaviour emanating from an over-staying moored boat, the Canals Partnership initiated a protocol to set out the respective roles of the Trust, the local Police and the Council and this was agreed by all three parties.

The above list is not exhaustive and there are probably many other initiatives and activities of which I am not aware. However, the important point to make is that there has never been an overall plan or programme for the Council to get the most out of the canals for its residents. As far as I am aware this has not been within the remit of any Council department or officer.

What more can be done to exploit the potential of the canal?

Whether or not the Council sees the need for some sort of overall plan there are still a lot of steps that can be taken to make further improvements. A number of issues came up during the boat trip by Committee members including:

Use of the towpath for led walks.

Now that the quality of the towpath has been substantially improved there are good grounds for making more use of them through led walks. Both the Trust and the Council have programmes, and these could be more closely coordinated. In some parts of the country towpaths have become a central part of social prescribing with distances being marked out for people to reach as part of an exercise regime. Hillingdon could explore something similar.

Improved signage

During the boat trip we saw various examples of information boards that have been subject to graffiti and are also old and decrepit. Attractive well-designed boards are one way of informing people about the canal and encouraging them onto the towpath. Regrettably, the Trust's budget for a replacement programme has had to be cut. Opportunities are being taken to encourage developers to pay for such boards near to their sites but is there perhaps scope for Ward budgets to be used for this purpose?

Graffiti and tags

At a number of bridges and other locations we saw unsightly graffiti and tags. In some parts of the country professionally designed projects have resulted in

attractive displays that have then not been subject to graffiti. Is there scope for something similar in Hillingdon?

School involvement

Mention has been made of the fact that some schools make use of the excellent curriculum materials produced by the Trust but unfortunately the previous boat trips provided by Hillingdon Narrowboats have been curtailed for financial reasons. There is probably potential for more schools to be involved in using online materials or by organising school visits and the Canals Partnership intends to make contact with schools that are not currently engaged. Members with links to schools within a reasonable distance of the canal might also be able to help.

Elsdale

The boat we used for the trip was originally built by Groundwork Trust as a floating classroom. In the days of the Hillingdon Community Trust, it gave grants to schools to enable them to take children on trips free of charge, but that funding source eventually dried up as did a grant from the National Lottery. By being electrically-operate the boat was way ahead of its time but the lack of funding led to a deterioration in its condition and for a number of years it was rented out as a temporary church in east London. It is now back in west London under the management of the Sharks Canoe Club and a mooring space has been secured at the Nestles development in Hayes. The Sharks are in the process of devising a business plan for 2024 and although the Council may not be able to help financially there may be other ways in which it could assist.

Canal-side improvements

Mention has already been made of a number of canal-side improvements that have been devised by the Trust in consultation with the Canal Partnership and with funding for consultants being provided by the Council. A list of these projects is attached for information.

Implementation of these projects depends on the identification of further funding, and this is going to be challenging. Any help that the Council can give in setting up opportunities with developers or other potential sources will be much appreciated by the Trust and the Partnership.

Canal festivals

The Hayes Canal Festival has been very successful in raising the awareness of the canal by local people. It has provided a range of activities and entertainment for families at no charge, and it has also been a very good way of bringing diverse communities together. As mentioned above, some funding previously came from Ward budgets but by working with developers the Canals Partnership

has secured £20,000 a year from Colt Data Centre and their contractors. Is there any scope for starting similar events in other town centres?

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