



INSTITUTE OF HISTORIC BUILDING CONSERVATION

Graham Thomas
DEFRA
zone 3/B5
Ashdown House
123 Victoria Street
London
SW1E 6DE

Mr David J Chetwyn, MA, MA, MRTPI, IHBC
Vice Chair
Institute of Historic Building Conservation
142 Richmond Street,
Penkull,
Stoke-on-Trent,
Staffordshire,
ST4 7DU

Tel: 01782 413896
Mob: 07974 099635
E-mail: vcpolicy@ihbc.org.uk

9 July 2004

Dear Sir

British Waterways Policy Review 2004

I refer to the above consultation document.

The Institute of Historic Building Conservation is the professional body representing conservation specialists and practitioners in the public and private sectors in the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland. It has around fourteen hundred members divided between fourteen branches. The Institute exists to establish the highest standards of conservation practice, to support the effective protection and enhancement of the historic environment, and to promote heritage-led regeneration and access to the historic environment for all.

The IHBC is pleased to comment on this matter and regrets that built environment professional groups were not included on the list of consultees. Given that British Waterways' ownership of historic building is second in number only to the National Trust, and that Canals have a key role to play in delivering sustainable regeneration, it is clearly essential that specialist staff from relevant built environment professions be involved in the review process. The IHBC would request that it be consulted on any future documents of this nature.

In response to the four issues raised by the consultation document, the Institute would make the following comments:

How well has British Waterways met its objectives as set out in its Framework Document, "Waterways for Tomorrow" and "Scotland's Canals: an asset for the Future" over the past five years?

The past five years have seen dramatic transformations of sections of the canal network. Canals are often a focus and catalyst for urban regeneration, with numerous high profile examples in Manchester, Nottingham, Birmingham, Walsall, etc. Design and heritage-led approaches have often been used in the development of canalside sites, and this has helped to make areas more competitive and increase their attractiveness as places to live, work and invest. Canals have also played an important role in the diversification of the rural economy. High profile restoration and engineering projects have contributed to tourism and economic vitality, examples including the refurbishment of the Anderton Lift (a Scheduled Ancient

INSTITUTE OF HISTORIC BUILDING CONSERVATION

Monument) and the construction of the Falkirk Wheel. British Waterways has often entered into partnerships or worked closely with local authorities, RDAs and other public bodies to secure the regeneration of under-performing areas.

Tourism is an especially important role for canals. In many places, tourism is a major growth sector of the economy, helping to offset losses in traditional manufacturing. The canal network also attracts overseas visitors to the UK.

Sustainability is of key importance. Canals have also contributed to urban sustainability by providing improved and relatively safe facilities for cycling and walking. Inner city waterway frontages are often a focus for mixed use development including 'city living', new leisure uses, and other economic activities, often based in historic buildings and areas.

British Waterways has often provided valuable expertise to the voluntary sector. The achievements of the voluntary sector should not be underestimated. These include canal restorations, management of heritage visitor attractions, organisation of festivals and rallies, etc. British Waterways can often provide specialist advice and assistance that would otherwise be beyond the means of voluntary organisations.

The canals also have value for nature conservation, education, and general quality of life. These are important work areas for British Waterways.

The heritage value of the waterways and associated structures is fundamental to all of the above roles. It is therefore essential that British Waterways provide an exemplar in its heritage management role.

How well do the Government's objectives for British Waterways as set out in its Framework Document, "Waterways for Tomorrow" and "Scotland's Canals: an asset for the Future" meet current needs and do they need further definition?

The Government's objectives for British Waterways are still as relevant today. The recognition of heritage value is welcomed. However, more emphasis needs to be made of the key role played by that heritage to creating more sustainable places. The benefits of design and heritage-led approaches to regenerating areas should be emphasised. There is also a need to recognise the role of British Waterways in encouraging the reuse and regeneration of heritage assets not in their control, such as canalside industrial sites, etc.

The following should be emphasised as key objectives for the future:

- Facilitating and delivering design and heritage-led regeneration
- Creating more sustainable places and communities
- Providing an exemplar in heritage management
- Partnerships with the public, voluntary and private sector, including the provision of specialist advice and services

There is clearly a need for the Government to commit realistic funding to realise such objectives. The Government should be expanding the role of British Waterways and raising the sights of the above documents.

How well do the services and functions of British Waterways meet the needs of its customers, visitors and stakeholders?

The IHBC welcomes the establishment of posts with responsibility for environment and heritage for each regional business area. However, the Institute is concerned that not all regions have employed design and conservation specialists to fill such roles.

An area where British Waterways has been particularly effective is in providing training in heritage skills, based around its training centre at Hatton Lock, near Warwick. This has focussed attention on the value of traditional building skills both within and outside of their organisation. Capacity building and skills are obviously of crucial importance and this facility is an exemplar of best practice.

The recent loss of the DEFRA grant compromises the ability of BW to continue the above work, to fulfil its objectives and to be an effective partner in the delivery of regeneration, enhancement and conservation initiatives. The redundancies resulting from the recent review have resulted in a loss of

INSTITUTE OF HISTORIC BUILDING CONSERVATION

specialist heritage advisers and introduced greater inconsistency between the skills levels of different regions. This will lead to a lowering of quality standards and failure to respond to opportunities. At a time when the canal network is playing such a key role in the renewal and improvement of so many parts of the UK, this is a cause for concern. It is clear that British Waterways is in a lesser position to meet the needs of its customers, visitors and stakeholders as a result of the cuts.

How could British Waterways improve its service to and relationship with its customers, visitors and stakeholders?

There is a need for British Waterways to modernise and expand its services, in recognition of the expanding role played by the canals in education, regeneration, economic development and creating more sustainable places. There is a need for a clear forward-looking vision, a commitment to expanding its partnership role, and for certainty over the availability of long term funding. Adequate funding is essential to ensure a full complement of specialist staff, to maximise the effectiveness of the organisation.

Whilst British waterways seeks to move to managing canals on a self sufficient basis, this should not be at the expense of the more pro-active roles of the organisation. It is important that decisions are made against the wider social and economic context and not on purely inward-looking considerations of waterway management. British Waterways must be a major player and facilitator in the delivery of urban and rural renaissance. This may require an ongoing commitment of public funding.

Conclusions

There have been considerable achievements and success in recent years, with canals playing a central role in the social and economic development of many areas. There is now a risk of undermining such achievements by failing to appreciate the wider role of British Waterways beyond waterway management and failing to provide proper funding.

There is an urgent need for DEFRA to become aware of the role being played by canals in delivering high value and more sustainable urban and economic regeneration in both urban and rural areas. Rather than cutting funding, DEFRA should be seeking to expand British Waterways' pro-active roles, to build on the successes of the past decade.

Yours faithfully

Dave Chetwyn
Vice Chair