

THE KENNET & AVON CANAL GUIDE

Number One — HISTORICAL BACKGROUND



CAEN HILL

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FOREWORD

This Kennet and Avon Canal Trust new booklet paints a dramatic picture. It shows how private enterprise built a successful canal system only to see it destroyed commercially by another form of enterprise.

It also outlines the indecision and lethargy of those who controlled the canal's future leading to neglect and a breakdown of the system.

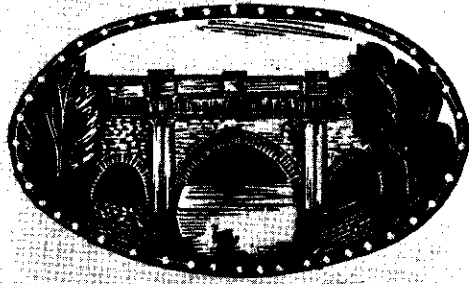
However, the tenacity of a few people, who would not allow this unique waterway to die, shines through. The booklet serves to remind us of the efforts of those who, even in their darkest days, kept their vision and their spirit alive.

There is still a lot to be done. Having read of the past, who dares to say that the goal of those doughty fighters cannot be achieved.



**Sir Frank Price,
Chairman,
British Waterways Board.**

9th October, 1973



1 — *In the Beginning . . .*

THERE are three ways to Bristol. One has the choice of Inter-City comfort at 90 m.p.h. as the train speeds westwards from Paddington. Alternatively, you can drive yourself at 70 m.p.h. along the newest route, the M4 Motorway. The third route is the slowest and best, the gentle highway, the Kennet and Avon Canal.

The Canal was constructed in three sections: —

- (i) The River Avon Navigation.
- (ii) The River Kennet Navigation.
- (iii) The Kennet and Avon Canal Navigation.

The River Avon Navigation from Hanham Mills, near Bristol, to Bath was the first section to be completed. Authorised by an Act of 1712 (10 Anne, c.8), the eleven miles followed the course of the river almost entirely, though six locks were constructed. The Navigation was opened to traffic from 15 December, 1727, when the first barge arrived at Bath. The Avon continued as an entirely separate Navigation until 1796, at which time the Kennet and Avon Canal Company purchased a majority of the shares in the river. Thereafter its fortunes were bound up with those of the canal.

The River Kennet Navigation from High Bridge, Reading, to Newbury was authorised by an Act of 1715 (2 Geo. I, c.24) and completed about 1723, though an additional Act for an extension to the time permitted for construction had to be obtained in 1720. Unlike the Avon, the Kennet Navigation was partly river and partly canal, the course of the river being followed for only seven miles of the eighteen and a half miles involved. Consequently, more locks were needed, twenty in all being constructed to overcome the rise of over 130 ft. between the two towns. The locks were built to very large dimensions, 122 ft. by 19 ft., in order to

take the "Newbury" size barges of about 110 tons burthen. This Navigation, too, passed into the control of the Kennet & Avon Canal Company, who purchased the shareholding in 1812.

The Kennet & Avon Canal Navigation from Newbury to the junction with the River Avon was authorised by an Act of 1794 (34 Geo. III, c.90) and completed in December, 1810, after no fewer than five other Acts, in 1796, 1798, 1801, 1805 and 1809 had been obtained in order to raise money and make variations to the route. The cost, originally estimated at about £214,000, had snowballed to almost £1,000,000 by 1810. The fifty-seven miles of the canal included seventy-nine locks, two major aqueducts and a tunnel.

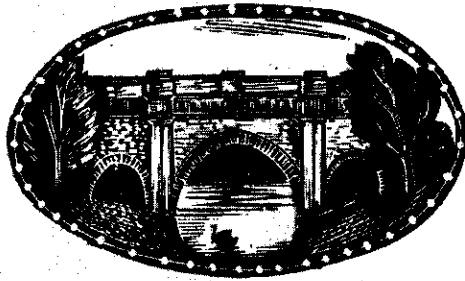
Another canal, the Somersetshire Coal Canal from Paulton and Radstock, joining the Kennet & Avon at Dundas aqueduct, was opened in 1805. This was built as an outlet for the coal traffic from the Somerset collieries and provided a source of considerable traffic for the Kennet & Avon.

The Kennet & Avon Canal Company paid its first dividend in 1814. Four years later seventy 60-ton barges were working on the canal, apart from narrow boats. The average time from Bath to Newbury was 3½ days for each journey. Traffic continued to increase, the net tonnage receipts rising accordingly from nearly £26,000 in 1816 to over £48,000 in 1840. The peak of traffic had now been reached, for the London to Bristol railway line opened in June, 1841, from which date both receipts and traffic fell alarmingly.

In an attempt to reduce costs the number of staff employed was reduced, whilst the maintenance of all but essential jobs was deferred, but all to no avail. At last it was decided that the only way to save both the canal and the shareholders' money would be to sell out to the canal's biggest rival — the Great Western Railway Company. The terms of the sale included an obligation to make an annual payment of 6s. (30p) per share to each shareholder. The future of the canal was safeguarded by section 27 of the Great Western Railway Act (No. 1), 1852, which stated that the canal was to be kept open and in good repair for the use of persons desiring to use it.

The transfer took place on 30 June, 1852. Though the object of the purchase was to eliminate competition, at first the G.W.R. tried to run the K. & A. as an efficient concern. Within the space of ten years that policy had changed, all efforts being concentrated on their railway, whilst a general reduction in the standard of maintenance on the K. & A. became evident. At the same time, in order to cut their losses, tolls were increased and continued to rise at frequent intervals.

The effect of a continual rise in costs, plus indifferent maintenance, deterred many boatmen from continuing to use the canal. Another cause in the loss of traffic was the gradual working out of the coal seams in the Somerset collieries. These were closing one by one, and traffic on the Somersetshire Coal Canal decreased to such an extent that that Company went into liquidation in 1893, all traffic ceasing in 1898. A similar fate befell another canal joining with the K. & A. — the Wilts. & Berks. The Wilts. & Berks. had been opened from a junction with the K. & A. at Semington and ran via Swindon to meet the Thames at Abingdon. Opened in 1810, it was at first reasonably successful as a means of transport for agricultural goods, though it never recovered from the blow dealt to it by the building of the London and Bristol railway line which ran parallel to its course. By 1906 all traffic had ceased on the Wilts. & Berks.



2 — Decline and . . . ?

THE decrease in traffic caused the K. & A. to make a loss for the first time in 1877. A profit was never to be made again. The high tolls had succeeded in driving away practically all through traffic, the last load being carried from Bristol to London in the 1890s. The Royal Commission on the Canals and Inland Navigation of the United Kingdom (1906-9) noted that the tolls on the K. & A. were higher than those on any comparable waterway in the country. Despite these difficulties a fair amount of local traffic remained, chiefly between towns such as Reading and Newbury, Newbury and Hungerford, Devizes and Bath, etc. The First World War led to a reduction in traffic, though the canal was used as a means of moving a number of motor boats from London to Bristol for service overseas, whilst troops were trained at Devizes locks prior to operating boats on the canals of Belgium. The end of the War and the start of the "motor age" led to many returned ex-Servicemen setting up as village carriers, making inroads into what canal traffic remained. Traffic was still further discouraged in 1920 when the G.W.R. increased the tolls on all its canals by 150%.

In 1926 the G.W.R. sought powers to abandon the canal. This proposed closure was subsequently dropped, primarily owing to the strength of the opposition which ranged from landowners to County Councils. Instead, an attempt was made to catch up with the arrears of maintenance, some lock gates being renewed and dredging undertaken.

Despite these improvements there appeared to be a policy of discouraging any potential traffic, either commercial or pleasure. Letters remained unanswered for many weeks, whilst the administration of the canal was centred on Paddington — nearly 40 miles from the nearest point of the K. & A.!

Certain large sea-going yachts and motor cruisers did make passage from London to Bristol or *vice versa* via the canal in the early 1930s,

thus saving a 600-mile journey via the Bristol and English Channels and avoiding the treacherous coasts of Cornwall. Notable amongst these craft were two ex-Salter Bros. pleasure steamers *Gaiety* and *Hurley*. The *Gaiety*, a vessel 65 ft. long with a beam of 11½ ft., took a week from Reading to Bristol in 1929, having aboard a crew of three. She is regarded as being one of the largest vessels ever to pass through the canal. The other steamer *Hurley*, followed the same route some two years later.

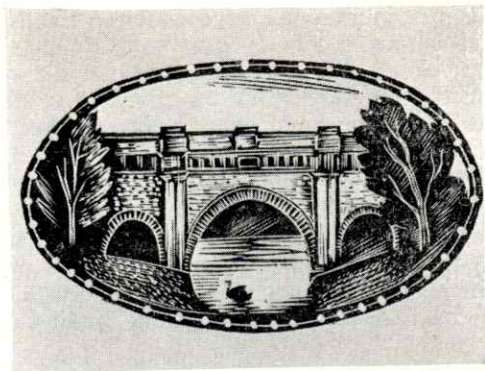
In 1931 the large wharf and basin at Newbury was sold to Newbury Corporation, a part having been filled in some time previously. In its heyday this Basin was capable of taking ten of the large "Newbury" size barges; now all that remains is a small public wharf close to Newbury lock.

The improvements in maintenance and dredging were not followed by the replacement of some of the swing bridges on busy stretches. To this day at least one swing bridge carries an "A" class road, whilst several others are used by "B" roads. In most cases this means some minutes' work for the boatman to operate jacks in order to swing the bridges and allow passage for his boat. The reaction of motorists who have to wait whilst this operation takes place can well be imagined!

By the mid-1930s only one trader remained at the western end of the canal—Robbins, Lane & Pinniger Ltd., timber merchants of Honey Street — though a few traders continued to operate in the Reading area.

Incredibly, the canal was not used during the Second World War. Instead of using this vital link to the west, the authorities concerned favoured sending traffic via the English Channel. The requirements of the Armed Forces reduced the number of men available for maintenance, and at the end of the war much deterioration was evident. In 1947 a small motor launch made the first voyage through the K. & A. for many years, averaging about 2 miles per day. At first, gangs of maintenance men had to assist each craft through the canal, but the gradual increase in traffic soon improved the "going" to the extent that a skilled navigator was able to manage without much assistance.

A change of ownership occurred on 1 January, 1948, when, by the provisions of the Transport Act, 1947, the canal was transferred to the Railway Executive. Subsequently it was to come under the control of the Docks and Inland Waterways Executive, upon the formation of this latter body in 1949.



3 — *Battle for Survival!*

THE trickle of traffic from 1947 onwards had become more frequent and as an experiment the n.b. *Westminster* went through the canal to Avonmouth, returning in the space of eight working days to Newbury with a load of 10 tons of grain. This was the first working boat in Newbury for over twenty years. The success of the *Westminster* in 1948 encouraged a Newbury man, John Gould, to purchase a pair of working boats, and so in 1949 the *Colin* and *Iris* appeared on the canal.

The scene changes to Whitsuntide, 1950. The outlook appeared to be more promising. A Boat Rally had just been held at Newbury, John Gould had obtained a contract to carry regular loads of turf spit to Hampton-on-Thames, whilst a second boatman, John Knill, had obtained a contract to carry salt from Cerebos Ltd., Northwich, Cheshire, to Newbury in his boat *Columba*. The first loads of both contracts had been delivered; John Gould was back at Newbury, whilst John Knill was *en route* to Newbury from Northwich with the second load.

On Wednesday morning, 31 May, 1950, the crews of the boats returning to the Thames from the Newbury Rally were surprised to find that locks and swing bridges had been padlocked overnight. A stoppage had been declared without prior notice, affecting the length from Heales Lock (No. 93) to Burghfield Lock (No. 103), both locks inclusive. Arrangements were made for the boats returning from the Rally to pass through the stoppage but John Gould, who was then employed on local work in the Newbury area, was unable to complete his contract to carry loads of turf spit, whilst John Knill had to unload his cargo of salt at Reading for onward transmission to Newbury.

Protests were made by many bodies but all to no avail. The most disturbing feature of all was that no date was given by D. & I.W.E. as to

when the repairs would be completed, or even if any repairs were contemplated. Eventually a local M.P. asked a question in Parliament about the stoppage. As a result, the D. & I.W.E. issued a press notice in late July stating that the repairs were more serious than had been imagined and that it would be impossible to complete these and reopen the canal until the middle of 1951.

More and more people became interested in the future of the K. & A., and in 1951 the Kennet and Avon Canal Association was formed. During its first few years, together with the I.W.A., the K. & A. C.A. was to fight a defensive battle to attempt to avoid any further deterioration of the K. & A.

The years 1951 to 1954 saw length after length of the canal out of action. At the Reading end, traffic could get no further than Fobney Lock owing to repair work at Fobney Sluices. To get even as far as Fobney was a matter of great difficulty as boats had to negotiate the girders at Bridge Street Bridge, Reading. These girders had been placed in position in 1947 to supposedly strengthen the bridge. No one had realised that the headroom on the canal was thus restricted to 4 ft. at that point — less than half the statutory minimum. By regulating the flow of water at County Weir, Reading, it was possible to increase the headroom to 6 ft., provided that prior notice was given, but this still severely restricted passage to all but the smallest craft. These girders were finally removed in December, 1966. The section from Burghfield to Heales Lock remained under repair throughout this period to 1953, though in mid-1953 the length from Reading to Sulhampstead was reopened: a total of $6\frac{1}{2}$ miles of navigation. At Newbury both Greenham bridge and Higgs lock were out of action, restricting navigation to a length of $1\frac{1}{2}$ miles. Further west, Hungerford Marsh lock was damaged, the long pound from Wootton Rivers to Devizes was almost impassable due to lack of dredging and low water levels, all locks from top lock, Devizes, to Bradford were closed, whilst a two-mile stretch from Avoncliffe to Limpley Stoke was dewatered following a fissure in the canal bed. Claverton Pump, the main means of water supply at the Bath end of the canal, failed in 1952 when some teeth stripped off the driving wheel and, to preserve the water level, Bath locks were closed.

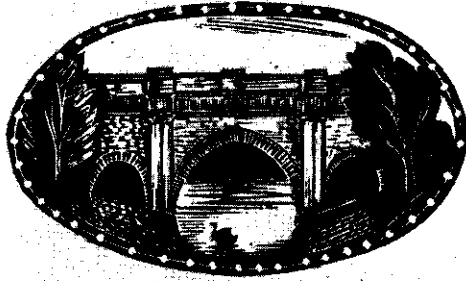
With no prospects of any repairs enabling opening the canal in the near future, John Gould issued a Chancery Division writ against the British Transport Commission to enforce the statutory obligation of the B.T.C. to keep the canal open and navigable. Later in the same year Willow Wren Carrying Co. Ltd. issued a similar writ against the B.T.C. Before the cases came to Court, the B.T.C. published the findings of a Board of Survey which had been set up on the orders of the Minister of Transport, to investigate the present and future use to be made of Britain's canals. It recommended that the B.T.C. be relieved of the

liability to maintain such stretches of the canals that were not used commercially or which were uneconomic, the K. & A. falling into this category.

Then rumours began to circulate that the K. & A. was to be closed for all time. Rumour became fact when the British Transport Commission (No. 2) Bill was published in late 1955. The K. & A. Canal Association commenced a massive campaign against this latest attempt at closure. Public meetings of protest were held in each large town on the route of the canal and a petition against closure was prepared. The petition was limited to those living near the canal, to show the strength of the local feeling. This petition with 20,000 signatures was carried by canoeists along the canal and presented to the Minister of Transport in January, 1956.

The main action by John Gould against the B.T.C. was heard in October, 1955. Previous to this, he had applied for an interim injunction to prevent further deterioration of certain sections of the canal. The Judge, in the exercise of his discretion, declined to grant the interim injunction. When the main hearing took place the Judge commented unfavourably on the attitude of the B.T.C., who admitted that they were in default of their statutory obligation to keep the canal navigable. The parties concerned came to a limited form of agreement, John Gould to receive an immediate payment of £5,000 in respect of damages to 31 December, 1956, or until the Parliamentary Bill for closure received Royal Assent, whichever was the earlier. Almost the whole of the £5,000 was used by John Gould to cover the costs of petitioning in Select Committee of the House of Commons against the Private Bill, which had been promoted by the B.T.C. to take away the rights his High Court action had sought to maintain.

The B.T.C. (No. 2) Bill came up for its Second Reading in the House of Commons on 14 March, 1956. The House did not approve of the proposal to extinguish navigation rights and decided that the canal should not be allowed to deteriorate any more until the findings of the Bowes Committee were announced. (The Government had earlier taken note of the growing interest in canals and had set up this Committee of Inquiry to examine the future of the system of Inland Waterways).



4 — *Preservation for Restoration*

THE Bowes Committee published their report in July, 1958. The Kennet and Avon Canal was the only waterway to attract a separate section, in which it was observed that the canal was "pre-eminently a case for redevelopment." The setting up of an Inland Waterways Redevelopment Advisory Committee was also recommended.

The Committee, as recommended, was duly set up by the Government in 1959. The K. & A. Canal Association prepared their own scheme for redevelopment of the canal, copies of which were sent to the Committee and to members of the House of Commons and House of Lords.

The Transport Act, 1962 finally hived off inland waterways from the remainder of the British Transport Commission's activities and set up an entirely new authority in charge of the nationalised waterways — The British Waterways Board. The new Board also took over the duties of the Inland Waterways Redevelopment Advisory Committee as from date of constitution, 1 January, 1963.

The fate of the K. & A. was discussed by Parliament at intervals. Every three years, the "standstill" in deterioration came under review and for various good reasons an extension of the time limit was granted on each occasion.

An Interim Report of the new British Waterways Board was published at the end of 1963. It noted that "restoration merits sympathetic, careful and urgent consideration," and suggested that restoration might take two stages — Stage One from Reading to Devizes and Dundas to Bath, leaving the problems of Devizes Locks and the dewatered section as Stage Two. To that end they commenced discussions with the Kennet and Avon Canal Trust (the old Kennet and Avon Canal Association having been converted into a limited liability Trust in 1962).

The discussions between B.W.B. and the K. & A. Trust produced agreement in principle of the work of restoration and cost of financing it. The proposals were then submitted to the Ministry of Transport for approval.

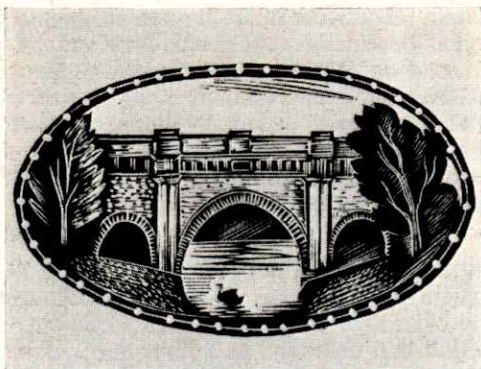
Since that time several General Elections have taken place which have inevitably delayed official reaction to the restoration plans. The results of a comprehensive survey of the state of the canals was published by B.W.B. in December, 1965. Called "The Facts about the Waterways" it showed that the inescapable minimum expenditure required for the canal system was £600,000 (at 1965 prices) per year even if, wherever possible, canals were to be eliminated. The additional cost required to maintain canals for pleasure boating standards would be some 50% higher.

In a mention of the K. & A. Canal, the Survey said that it required restoration expenditure, and hinted that extra revenue would balance extra expenditure in this very special case.

"The Facts about the Waterways" also showed that the annual cost of maintenance of the K. & A. as a navigable canal, compared with the cost of eliminating the canal, or converting it to a water channel were not very different. It also noted that, as the Avon and Kennet sections were river navigations, there was no case for the elimination of either section.

The long-promised Government White Paper on Waterways was published in September, 1967. It stated that it was intended to maintain practically the whole of the existing canal network for use by pleasure craft. Encouragement would be given to the voluntary societies interested in the waterways and an Inland Waterways Amenity Advisory Council would be formed, to advise the Minister of Transport on any proposals to extend or reduce the network and on proposals for restoration schemes.

The Inland Waterways Amenity Advisory Council commenced its work in the Spring of 1968. The Chairman of the K. & A. Canal Trust, General Sir Hugh Stockwell, was appointed a member of the I.W.A.A.C. by the Minister of Transport, and later he became its chairman. The Trust quickly submitted its scheme for the restoration of the canal. This was duly considered and in September, 1968, the *Newbury Weekly News* reported that "the Advisory Council gave the scheme a warm reception and agreed to urge the British Waterways Board to carry it out."



5 — *The Work of the Trust*

THE preceding chapters dealt mainly with the history of the canal. This chapter shows what restoration progress has been made since the formation of the Kennet & Avon Canal Association in 1951.

As already referred to, the early years of the Association were devoted to a defensive battle to try to preserve the K. & A. from further deterioration. Often this appeared to be a losing battle, but the turning point came when the canal faced the greatest danger — the threatened closure in 1955. At last it was seen that the K. & A.C.A. were a body of people who really cared about the canal. The monster petition of 20,000 signatures, the Public Meetings of protest about the closure and many other activities of a like nature showed that not only did the K. & A.C.A. care about the canal, but that they meant business in their efforts to retain it for the use of all. This proved to be the turning point in the history of the Association and from then onwards things began to improve. Today one can look back with pride on “years of achievement,” though much remains to be done.

In 1955 only two lengths of the canal were open to navigation — $7\frac{1}{2}$ miles at the Reading end as far as Sulhampstead Lock, and the 11-mile River Avon section from Bristol to Bath. In addition, a small stretch of $1\frac{1}{2}$ miles of navigable canal at Newbury was open. On this stretch John Gould (Waterways) Ltd., had a fleet of mobile houseboats and the passenger launch.

Contrast the position with that today. The infamous “girders” at Bridge Street Bridge, Reading, were removed in December, 1966, the bridge being rebuilt to normal headroom. The major task of rebuilding Sulhampstead Lock was completed in 1968, being financed entirely by the K. & A. Canal Trust at a cost of over £5,000. The work was under-

taken with the help of prisoners from Oxford prison, supervised by British Waterways skilled maintenance staff. This was the first time prison labour had been used on B.W.B. property, though they had previously helped in the restoration of the National Trust section of the Stratford-on-Avon Canal. The use of prison labour offered a great "breakthrough" for future projects of this nature, the prisoners being usefully and constructively employed on a task of value to the community rather than the soul-destroying job of sewing mailbags.

A slight set-back occurred when the rebuilding of Sulhampstead was under way, with the news that Burghfield Lock was out of action. Though originally closed for major repairs in 1950, only a "bodged-up" job was completed at that time, and as a result the lock soon ceased to be usable. This has now been rebuilt by British Waterways, and the canal is open for some 8½ miles from Reading.

At Newbury 11 miles of canal are at present open to navigation from Bulls Lock. Passenger boats make regular trips along this length from Newbury to Hungerford. A major achievement has been the reopening of the canal from Crofton to Devizes, a distance of 18½ miles. A growing number of private craft are in evidence, and have been joined by the passenger carrying paddle boat, *Charlotte Dundas*, between Devizes and Pewsey and *Kenavon Queen* between Bradford-on-Avon and Semington. Both are owned by the Trust and run entirely by members.

The Trust has wisely mobilised the resources of Youth Clubs and Schools towards constructive pursuits, and with their aid cleared the canal of fifteen years' growth of weed and rubbish. More recently Borstal Boys have been helping in this work. Launches, operated by the Junior Division of the Trust, are constantly at work on the canal. At present the new purpose-built paddle-boat, *Jane Austen*, runs each weekend from the top lock, Bath, to Bathampton and beyond on pleasure trips. In 1973, John Knill & Sons also started passenger boat operations at the western end.

The River Avon section had a few minor repairs made to the locks, and now produces an increasing amount of traffic each year.

Perhaps the most useful and constructive achievement of the Trust has been the co-operation with British Waterways which has resulted in the expenditure of the annual maintenance budget on constructive work on the canal. Ten years ago the maintenance gangs spent much of their time trimming hedges and cutting grass whilst lock gates rotted away. Today things are different, the hedges may not be so neat, but there is a great improvement in the maintenance of the canal.

Another way in which the Trust has been able to assist was through its system of volunteer lengthsman. Originally each lengthsman was allocated a stretch of some three miles and undertook to walk this length and report on any change in the condition at least once per month. In actual fact, most lengthsman covered the ground weekly, so an up-to-date report of the position was quickly available. This task required training and knowledge, so that the B.W. staff were not worried unnecessarily, but on the other hand were informed when anything appeared to be seriously wrong. A similar system now operates with volunteer lock managers who also carry out routine maintenance of restored locks and keep the surrounding areas tidy.

In the course of its existence the Trust has acquired a considerable amount of maintenance plant, and its membership includes many experts in the field of canal maintenance and engineering.

The Rebuilding of Sulhampstead lock in 1968 at the expense of the Trust marked a turning point in the restoration of the canal. Since that time more and more sections of the canal have been restored to navigation. Local authorities have given or promised over £40,000, whilst private contributions amount to over £50,000, all going towards the restoration work.

Orders placed with British Waterways Board for further work will mean that by late 1976 over 71 miles of the K. & A. will probably be once more open to navigation (85% of the total length of 86½ miles). Similarly, 58 locks will once again be working (65% of the total of 106 locks). Even more important is that the original 5 miles cruiseway at Newbury will be extended to 37 miles via Hungerford and Pewsey to Devizes. An exciting prospect!

A splendid donation of £50,000 has been granted by a private donor towards the reopening of 9 miles length separating the Newbury Cruiseway from the Reading Cruiseway.

After over 20 years of battles to restore the canal, the Trust are proud of what they have achieved to date. Much remains to be done but with an energetic Chairman, a competent Council and over 4,000 members, plus an enormous amount of goodwill both inside British Waterways and with the public at large, how can we fail?