

# Join the dots...



Half a century after the original plans to reopen the Shrewsbury and Newport canals were thwarted by demolition of parts of the route, a new scheme is making progress on what is now a very tricky job – thanks to a 'little by little' approach

WORDS AND PICTURES BY MARTIN LUDGATE

**I**t's a case of joining the dots," says Bernie Jones, Chairman of the Shrewsbury & Newport Canals Trust. And watching a party of Waterway Recovery Group volunteers in action at Meretown Lock, on the east side of Newport, you can sort of see what he means.

A formerly heavily-overgrown 100 metre length of dry canal bed has been cleared of vegetation, and one group of volunteers are removing the remaining tree-stumps and burning them on a large bonfire. Meanwhile, another team are using an excavator and two dumper trucks to clear out a filled-in lock chamber, while a third crew are at work with a smaller digger plus spades and shovels, excavating a trench along the canal bank. They're putting in a water pipe so that the dry length of canal can be re-watered and, when the lock's

restored, it will be possible to connect it to a longer section of canal running from below the lock into Newport town, which is already in water.

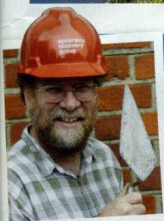
Neither of them are long sections of canal, but by linking them up in this way, the Trust aims to gradually create longer restored lengths. That's what Bernie means by 'joining the dots'. It's a sensible approach, given that this is a difficult restoration with numerous major blockages along the route. That wasn't always the case: a surprising number of the passers-by who stop to chat with the volunteers (and to express their enthusiasm that something is finally happening on the canal) remember the first proposals to restore the canal in the early 1960s – when it would have been relatively straightforward, but the plans were stymied by British Waterways' unwillingness to backtrack on its

plans to sell the canal off.

Several subsequent proposals to reopen the route (consisting of the Newport Arm of the Shroppie and the Wappenshall to Shrewsbury length of the Shrewsbury Canal) have also been frustrated for various reasons over the decades. So it's very good news that the latest scheme looks set to at least put its first short section back in water soon, even though the obstacles that will eventually need to be overcome are formidable.

Head the other way from the Meretown worksite and you immediately come to one of those obstacles. The A41 Newport bypass cuts the canal at close to water level. But SNCT is looking at plans to get under it – it might be that Meretown Lock is restored with a lower rise (or even with no rise at all, like the former stop-locks sometimes seen)





**Martin Ludgate**  
Restoration Editor

## Two steps forward, one back

AT LEAST THE two steps forward are big strides – the Lottery grants for the Shrewsbury & Newport and Pocklington canals. Sadly, the one step back – damage to a newly restored lock by floods on the Cotswold – is doubly frustrating, coming when contractors and volunteers are toiling to keep the Phase 1a length on track in straitened financial times. It's easy to look at it and criticise the professionals for not taking down and completely rebuilding what looks a very dodgy wall. But I couldn't put my hand on my heart and say I've never helped patch a lock where it might turn out with hindsight that dismantling and rebuilding was really needed. I'm sure lessons will have been learned: we don't want any more of these upsets as we complete this length over the next year or two

*Martin*

Opposite: Meretown Lock emerges from the infill. Top left: volunteers installing a pipeline to feed the restored length above Meretown Lock. Above left: looking towards Newport, with the pipeline installation on the right. Above: clearing the length above Meretown Lock

and the length above it excavated to a deeper depth, so that a new navigable culvert can then take the canal under the road. Alternatively a 'drop lock' under the A41 (like the one to the west of Glasgow on the Forth & Clyde) might be considered. A decision is needed soon, because it will affect the work to be done on the lock when WRG returns in the summer for a whole week's camp.

Either way, the aim for the medium term is to join up with the next 'dot' – a section of canal not far the other side of the A41 at Forton, where SNCT (together with local group the Newport to Norbury Canal Restoration Community Interest Company and WRG) has already carried out initial clearance. It's an interesting site – the canal passes through a Thomas Telford skew bridge and crosses a small aqueduct which it shares with a minor road – and the Trust hopes to start by re-watering a 120 metre length.

Not far east of there, the canal begins its steep ascent up to the Shropshire Union Main Line at Norbury Junction. Some of the upper locks have been destroyed (and the top one turned into a

dry dock) but several in the middle of the flight have survived, overgrown but in fair condition, and a good deal of clearance work has already been done.

There's still a lot to do, but more landowners are coming around to the idea of supporting the restoration. Bernie is optimistic that his 'join the dots' approach will see progress in the coming years – leading, in due course, to the prospects of a 'Destination Newport' opening from the main line downwards.

But it isn't just the eastern end where there's progress. As you will see in our news pages, a bid for almost £1m for the transshipment warehouse at Wappenshall has cleared the first hurdle, and secured an initial £72,000 of development funding. And while this money isn't going to fund restoration of the actual canal, Bernie stresses that it's still a very significant step forward.

Wappenshall is where the Shrewsbury Canal – engineer Thomas Telford's first canal – meets the Newport Arm of the (then) Birmingham & Liverpool Junction Canal, which was Telford's last canal. The transshipment warehouse was



# RESTORATION



Top left: volunteers working at Forton between the skew bridge and the aqueduct. Above left: locks below Norbury Junction after initial clearance. Above: Forton Aqueduct

needed because the canals were built to different dimensions (the Shrewsbury took trains of tub-boats about 20ft by 6ft which fitted the locks four at a time; the Newport Arm was built for standard narrow boats of around 70ft by 7ft; the locks between Shrewsbury and Wappenshall were later widened to 7ft).

The building bears the hallmarks of Telford's design, it's within an easy drive of the large new town which bears his name, and the Trust thinks it would be a fitting place to commemorate the great engineer's life with an exhibition. It would bring together artefacts (some are already assembled at Ironbridge but

with nowhere to display them) – as well as providing a community centre in an area which lacks such facilities. And, all being well with the stage 2 funding bid, that's the plan for the next few years.

While the warehouse restoration and conversion won't contribute directly to the restoration, Bernie believes it will attract visitors from Telford town and elsewhere, generating publicity and support for the canals – while alongside the HLF funded work, the Trust's volunteers will continue restoring the adjacent lengths of waterway. They've begun clearance of the Humber Arm not far away, and in yet another example of

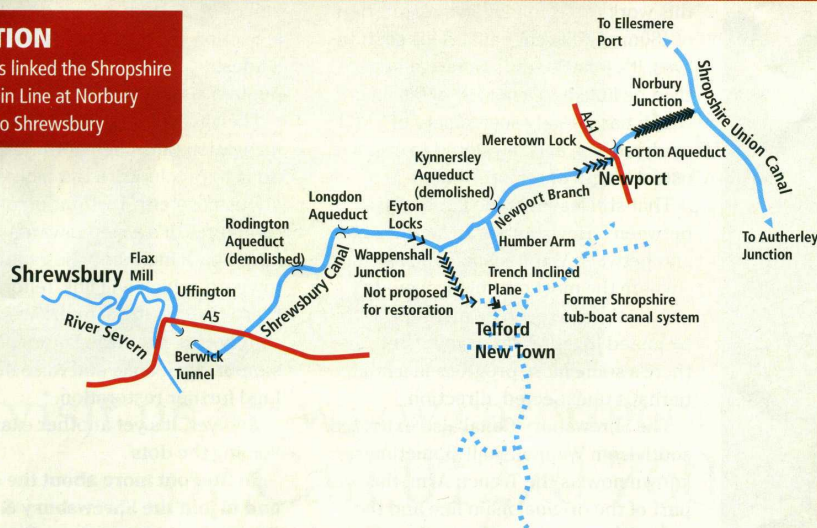
the 'join the dots' thinking, they aim to link this to the length by the warehouse to create a 3-mile restored section.

The Trust already has plans to put a boat on this length – well, two, actually. A small push-tug called *Bittern* is under restoration by SCAT, Shrewsbury College of Art & Technology. Working with SCAT's Martyn Goodwin and also with Telford College of Art & Technology, the Trust envisages a passenger boat built as a replica of an original tub-boat (there's one at the Ironbridge museum to copy), propelled by the tug. This tug-plus-tub combination would not only recreate a historic feature of the canal, ▶

## THE ROUTE

### LOCATION

The canals linked the Shropshire Union Main Line at Norbury Junction to Shrewsbury



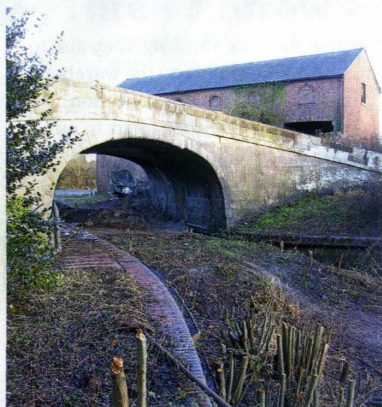
### DISTANCES

Newport Arm 10 miles 23 locks.  
Shrewsbury Canal Shrewsbury – Wappenshall 15 miles 2 locks



## RESTORATION

If you want your project to be featured EMAIL [editor@canalboat.co.uk](mailto:editor@canalboat.co.uk) OR CALL 0118 989 7215



Above left: Wappenshall Warehouse before restoration. Above: inside the warehouse, with loading equipment still in place. Middle left: the restored junction bridge at Wappenshall. Bottom left: one of two surviving guillotine gates near Trench planned for restoration

but be easier to transport between different restored lengths than a single craft, and could turn round anywhere, making trip-boat operation easier. Bernie hopes to see the Warehouse, restored canal length and trip-boat all up and running in around three years.

But there's more. Right at the west end of the canal, in Shrewsbury, restoration of the canalside Flax Mill (a historic structure of international importance, as the first iron framed building in the world and, therefore, the father of the skyscraper) has been supported by a £14m HLF grant. The second phase of this work there will involve restoration of 180m of adjacent canal. This section (yes, it's join-the-dots time again) can then be linked to a nearby 400m length which has already seen plenty of SNCT work parties, and rewatered to create a useful length of restored canal.

That still leaves some large gaps – between Shrewsbury and Wappenshall, and between Wappenshall and Newport – where the most optimistic wouldn't expect there to even be many 'dots' to be joined together for a while. But there's some more progress in a final, perhaps unexpected, direction.

The Shrewsbury Canal also extended south from Wappenshall. Sometimes known now as the Trench Arm, this was part of the original main line and the original function of the canal, to connect

collieries in what is now the Telford area (and which was once covered by a system of small tub-boat canals) to Shrewsbury. This section of canal was never widened from its original width of approximately 6ft. Some extra-narrow boats 70ft by 6ft were built to pass through the flight of nine locks, but at the southern end was the Trench Inclined Plane, which would only ever take one 20ft tub-boat at a time.

Not surprisingly, this part isn't a high priority for restoration. However, several of the locks survive – two of them with substantial remains of the unusual guillotine bottom gates – and, thanks to a 'Section 106' planning agreement with a housing developer, £100,000 is to be put into conserving these locks.

The aim isn't to reopen the locks to navigation (although nothing will be done to preclude it). But neither is it just about 'cosmetic' restoration of heritage structures. It's a step towards creating a linear park including the canal and towpath, which will link Telford town via these historic locks to the Wappenshall warehouse, help bring more people in to support the canal, and raise income to fund further restoration.

And yes, it's yet another example of 'joining the dots'.

**To find out more about the canals and to join the Shrewsbury & Newport Canals Trust, see [sncanal.org.uk](http://sncanal.org.uk).** CB