

Chairman's Report for 2013

This annual report is an opportunity for the Chairman and the Board to take stock of what has been achieved in the year ending 31st December 2013. I note from our minutes that the Council of Management had met 284 times since the inception of the Trust (and its former entities) with meetings lasting, on average, for 3 hours. This makes 852 hours or 36 days or more than 1 whole month of 24 hour days. That is a great deal of talking and we can only hope that the outcome has been commensurate. Of course, this only scratches the surface of meetings attended by directors and officers over that period and I would not hesitate to double the figures to get an approximation of their total input. Your directors and officers have devoted many hours of their lives to the service of L&H through 2013 and I commend to you all their hard work.

I always attempt the invidious task of paying tribute to members of Council individually as it is only right that members should know what they do. Last year I referred, of necessity informally, to the enforced retirement of our Company Secretary, Sue Williams, who suffered a debilitating stroke. As ever, it is only the departure of someone who is close to being indispensable, that reveals their true worth. Sue was for so many years the voice and the beating heart of the Trust and supported to the full all its many endeavours. She attended the major shows, organised events such as the AGMs and knew everybody. We struggled for several months to cover all the tasks she had undertaken as routine. We are delighted that she has regained much of her health and we wish her continuing recovery in the times ahead.

We remain enormously indebted to Bob Williams as our Finance Director. This is a title which modestly conceals the huge range of responsibilities which Bob takes on, not least his part in taking our sales operation to a wide range of shows. He has now pulled back from the practical restoration of the Lichfield Canal but I must pay tribute to all he has done in this area, especially when we needed engineers and those with practical experience. He is concentrating on identifying sources of major funding and we are grateful to Geoff Crook for his work in this area and with planning matters.

We have been fortunate to enlist the services of Dora Hancock as our new secretary and will continue to give her every support as she settles in to her major role. We are already benefitting from her advice and help. David Dixon has continued as Vice-Chairman and Land Officer. Once again, these are seemingly innocuous job descriptions but even a cursory glance at the Minutes will show just how much work David undertakes with HS2 being only one part of his portfolio.

This 2014 AGM would have seen the retirement from Council of Trevor Morris but it is sad to report that he died peacefully at home on 9th May at the age of 89. He had handled membership issues for so long and for many years had supported work parties on both our canals, latterly being noted for his skill in recycling used bricks. Trevor must surely have been one of the most senior persons actively involved in canal restoration having been with us from the very early days and in touch with members to the end. The membership register has been transferred to a computer database to Mervyn and Pat Ainge for their work in this area. Peter Magee still works his magic on our mechanical kit and supports our work parties. Bob Mullarkey keeps his eye on the health and safety side and we are pleased to see him in good health again. Mike Battisson has returned to a more active role and has organised planting and other horticultural work.

On the ground it has been Peter Buck and Terry Brown who have taken our work forward speedily and with professional efficiency. The main focus has been at Tamworth Road where the intention is to put much of Pound 27 into water by the autumn of 2014. Only by visiting the site can you appreciate what has been achieved. Peter, as our engineer, has planned the next steps forward and has introduced innovations to the design. Terry has organised and motivated our expanding work force to make huge steps forward and we are greatly indebted to him and his team. We must also mention the Welsh Male Voice Choir concert in Lichfield Cathedral which he set up and the coast-to-coast fundraising walk he undertook.

We have been joined by John Bryan as a director who has taken on our marketing and sales operation, now rebranded, and extended his remit to our temporary retail unit in central Lichfield. This latter has benefitted from the input of several directors and especially Mervyn Ainge. Vaughan Welch, our IWA nominated director, has continued to make valuable contributions to our discussions from his many commitments elsewhere.

Our quarterly magazine, Cut Both Ways, was substantially up-rated in 2013. After much discussion we decided to opt for full colour and our Editor, Stefan Szulc, has risen magnificently to the challenge. The slightly increased cost has proved more than justified and we are back among the leaders in this field. We are also pleased that Paul Marshall has taken on the important task of running the website which has now made great advances under his skilful management.

Thus we move to the progress made, or at least the tasks tackled, in 2013. Inevitably, consideration of HS2 and its likely impact on the Lichfield Canal has taken up many hours of director time with meetings attended in many locations. We have worked with IWA and CRT to ensure that the line of our canal is not compromised by the new railway. There have been many twists and turns on this journey and although we are now moderately

confident that all will be well we will maintain vigilance and pressure. We are well aware of the high stakes involved and the strong feelings among the wider public.

Our regular work parties have continued on the Hatherton and we remain indebted to Denis Cooper and his team for all they continue to do. It is also pleasing to report that one of the CRT support teams is doing excellent work on the Hatherton. Several director site visits have been made to the Hatherton and progress has been made on purchasing several parcels of land at advantageous rates. We are happy that recent house construction at Churchbridge has been contained within the agreed site.

Our main focus has been on Pounds 25, 26 & 27 on the Lichfield Canal. To conserve funds all the work has been carried out, to a very high standard, by our own work force whose members have toiled on through torrents and storms. There is now a good prospect of putting another section in water where traditional puddle clay will be used rather than a new synthetic material which is still undergoing production trials. The brickwork in lock 26 has received much attention and will soon be fit for purpose. Public access has not been overlooked and significant improvements have been made both at Tamworth Road and from Lock 18 to the bypass.

A major project, currently in the planning stage, will be the Heritage Towpath Trail. In essence this will open up the whole Lichfield Canal to the public (where ownership allows) and will generally raise public awareness. A much more ambitious scheme had to be scaled back as projected funding did not materialise.

On the funding front we have been encouraged by steps forward made through our membership of the Staffordshire Waterways Group. This is a county-wide initiative intended to showcase and help the many restoration schemes within Staffordshire. It may be some time before the detailed work can bear fruit but it is only through long-term financial planning that we can have any hopes of finding major financial support through inroads into the emerging Local Enterprise Partnership.

2013 will always be remembered for the amazingly successful Huddlesford Heritage Gathering. The biennial joint effort with Lichfield Cruising Club has a record of success over the past decade. The bold decision to hold a two day event put a huge strain on our team but proved more than worthwhile. The weather was magnificent and public attendance far outstripped expectations. The financial result was also good. We are grateful to all who helped but especially to Jan Horton for the Trust and to Frank Weetman for the Club. It was so good to see Sue Williams there as this had long been her project and owed so much to her inspiration.

Towards the end of the year we were given the temporary use of a retail unit in the centre of Lichfield. This is for promotional use and not retail sales. It has attracted a great deal of public interest and has enabled us to spread news of our operations far beyond our committed membership. It is this kind of renewal which organisations such as ours, now into our 26th year so desperately need.

An annual report can only scratch the surface of all that has happened through the year. It cannot do justice to all the work, seen and unseen, done by our members at all levels. It cannot show the work and time taken, often in dreadful weather, to set up a stand at a show or to organise a social event. It cannot show the hours spent in meetings, before a computer screen or driving across considerable swathes of the country. This is the opportunity, each year, to express our deep gratitude to all who do so much to achieve, ultimately, the restoration of two very important canals. We also acknowledge the support of the majority of members who are “silent”. They are rarely seen but the income from their subscriptions and donations is our bread and butter which we need and put to good purpose. A strong membership base gives us negotiating power, something easily forgotten. Thus to you - all silent or vocal – active or inactive we thank you for enabling us to move forward to another year.