

CYCLE BARRIERS ON THE STOURBRIDGE ARM CANAL Agenda Item

No: 7

A Report

The Stourbridge Arm Canal is an offshoot of the Stourbridge Canal. It runs for about a mile from the Stourbridge Basin, Stourbridge to the Wordsley Junction Bridge where it joins the main Stourbridge Canal. From here travellers can either go north towards Merry Hill or Fens Pools or South to Kinver and Kidderminster. Those travelling due east cross a recreation ground and thence by Kinver Street and Foxhills Road to Kingswinford. It is regarded as one of Dudley's flagship walking and cycling routes.

A group of cyclists, led by Stourbug, Stourbridge Bicycle Users Group, and Dudley Friends of the Earth are protesting about the RADAR barriers on the canal towpath impeding their progress. They are campaigning to have them removed or modified to enable cyclists to cycle more quickly and more conveniently.

(See the attached newspaper articles.)

A short description of the canal towpath

The route begins at the junction of Canal Street and the towpath where there is a gate across the width of the carriageway. It is in two halves.

The first half is 0.6 miles long and along most of its boundary there are factory units. There are breaches in the concrete fencing which allow access to the towpath. The first RADAR barrier is at Coalbournbrook Bridge on Wollaston High Street. Here there is a stepped ramp with a channel at one side to enable cyclists to push their machines up or down. On the other, Northern side, of the bridge is a ramp which allows disabled users to access the towpath.

Between Coalbournbrook Bridge and Junction Bridge the canal is 0.54 miles long. A wooden fence now forms the boundary between the towpath and the housing estate which lies between the river Stour and the canal. At points where the roads on the estate meet the fence, holes have been forced through to the towpath and in two instances the fence has been removed altogether.

At the Wordsley Junction Bridge there has been a considerable amount of vandalism. The parapet of the bridge has been thrown into the canal; the fingerpost which was recently refurbished at a cost of £5,000 has had the fingers ripped off; the fencing at the end of Smallshire Way has been removed and the house at the end of Essington Close has had its garden trashed and the fencing removed, with concrete posts broken off.

There are another three RADAR barriers, two at Chubb's Bridge where there are two ramps, one of which is suitable for disabled access. This is where Richardson Drive joins the canal. The other one is at Longboat Lane Bridge where there is one ramp which is not suitable for disabled access.

The general state of the towpath surface is good, although at the time of writing some of the vegetation at the side needs cutting back.

Users of the towpath – legal

In all there are five groups of users.

1. Pedestrians- this includes walkers and hikers, joggers and people using pushchairs.

2. Cyclists – most of whom ride mountain bikes. There is a considerable number of recreational cyclists at weekends.
3. The disabled – the towpath being wide and flat is ideal for disabled scooters.
4. Fishermen and other sportspeople. Angling is very popular along this stretch of canal and it is also used by canoeists.
5. Narrow boat users.
6. Properties on the towpath. There are four properties at the junction between Chubb's Bridge and Longboat Lane Bridge. Junction Cottage has its own access point complete with a gate.
7. Rare users. Emergency services and vehicles may, rarely, need to access the canal. Even without any barriers being present, access would be difficult for all but the smallest vehicles.

Illegal users

Motorcyclists – this includes trail bikes, mini motor bikes, mini quad bikes, and on one occasion the author encountered a Lambretta scooter driven by a nine year old whose face only just topped the handle bars. Many of these machines are not licensed or insured (I think you will find that none will be insured – this used to be an offence of 'Driving elsewhere than on roads' under s38 RTA 1972 but that legislation has no doubt since been amended. However, implicit in the offence is that the vehicle has no insurance. It is highly unlikely the riders would find anyone else to insure them for riding along the towpath – in fact I'd go as far as to say it is not on)* and because they carry no number plate are hard to identify. The chief dangers are damage to the surface of the path, collision with other users causing death or injury, the commissioning of crimes and the nascence of noisy, unbaffled exhausts.

It is because of these antisocial elements British Waterways have installed the RADAR barriers on the towpath.

Points to consider

General

- The towpath is of finite dimensions, thus the more users there are the more pressure is put on the space available all user groups. Therefore the needs of each group cannot be considered in isolation.
- By far the largest user group is pedestrians. It is used during the rush hours by parents taking their children to the local primary schools, and at other times of the day there is a constant flow of pedestrian traffic. Because groups can spread across the towpath conflict can occur between them and cyclists. Some groups, often as not MTBers, use the path as a racetrack and are the source of near hits and poor public relations. Some people regard the barriers as being useful as a form of 'speed humps' because they slow down these inconsiderate riders.
- When there are large numbers of fishermen all users can come into conflict with fishing poles and other tackle. Canoeists have to be careful that their gear does not block the pathway.
- Narrow boaters rely on the towpath for moorings and communications, often by bicycle. For a moored boat security is important. Antisocial elements and criminals using the towpath are a constant source of worry. (The same is true for the householders.) Consequently the majority of boating people want the barriers to remain permanently closed.

- Disabled – how are they affected by the current RADAR barriers?
- Some authorities believe that removing the barriers will actually increase security. Larger numbers of cyclists will be encouraged to use the towpath and it will become ‘self-policing’, thus deterring the antisocial elements. This is open to question, **it is also extremely naïve (it doesn’t work like that around here)*** because there will be quiet times especially in the evenings and this then gives opportunities for anti social behaviour.
- “If motorbikes do appear, we have a police force in place with the necessary powers to confiscate”. The police and British waterways staff are already overstretched. While the police are patrolling the canal, the criminals are elsewhere taking advantage of their absence.
- One view is that a better way of controlling access is to place barriers at the access points rather than across the towpath. There are two drawbacks. First emergency vehicles will be hampered/delayed reaching the towpath. Secondly, if the barriers are circumvented, antisocial elements have an untrammelled run from one end of the towpath to the other.
- British Waterways are keen to develop towpaths for tourism. Opening up the towpaths will help to boost this aim.

{From the boating and towpath walker’s point of view of view I certainly would not want to see removal of the barriers. They do serve as a deterrent to the motor cycle brigade. I have no problem with most cyclists on the towpaths. I do have a problem with those few who go about in bunches at great speed. I think that they are as potentially dangerous as the motorcyclists. It would be useful if cycles were fitted with a warning horn or bell. I fitted one to mine. As I have said, I have no problem with most cyclists who use the towpaths, indeed, I am one myself. Not so much these days but I have cycled the canals extensively. Personally, I have not found the RADAR barriers a problem. Perhaps the answer would be to have different barriers that opened and closed automatically, perhaps actuated by a swipe card or a device on the bike. I can see problems with power for the devices but it may be that solar power or wind power could be used, although how do you make them vandal proof?

The things could be funded by selling the actuators, changing the codes annually if income needed to be generated. I can hear the shouts from here about being charged to use the towpath but they do have to be maintained. It costs me over £1000 per year to license & insure my boat for canal use with mooring fees on top of that. It seems that the boaters pay heavily for the use of the canals but no one else pays a lot. (Graham Whorton – Chair Birmingham Canal Navigation Society.)}

Types of barrier

1. At the junction between Canal Street and the towpath there is a single pole gate. At the side is a channel which allows bikes and push chairs to be pushed through.
2. The other four barriers are the RADAR type. They are sited where there is a ramp allowing access to the canal. A channel allows bikes etc to be pushed through. Where the bikes are laden with panniers, are larger or longer than normal the dimensions difficulty is experienced in manoeuvring them through. At times the cyclist has to resort to bodily lifting the machine over the barrier, a source of great frustration when he has to do it several times in a short distance.
3. “K” barriers have been proposed as a reasonable substitute for RADAR barriers. They are of an ‘A’ frame shape, whose width can be adjusted to allow through bikes and disabled scooter but bar motor bikes. The drawback with these is that they do not prevent mini motor bikes from passing through. (See the images at the end of this paper.) **It is difficult to envisage a barrier that would prevent these, they are so easy just to lift over anyway.***
4. Two other comments on this type of barrier.

On the whole I am very reluctant to see any barriers as they will deter people from taking up cycling. Although these barriers may be the best compromise they will not stop the mini motorbikes which are often the problem. Every stop that a cyclist has to make is equivalent to another 100m on the journey. Once it is thought to be effective there a tendency for too many to be installed on the same route. This is the situation on R45 at Leapgate (which is near Stourport on the Staffs and Worcestershire Canal.

(This comment is from Alan Couchman who is the former Cycling and Walking Officer for Worcestershire)

The other comment below is from Ed Dursley who is with Worcestershire's Highways Department.

The hyperlink shows a variant on the A frame motorcycle barrier which strictly speaking is not DDA compliant as it will not allow double buggies and tricycles through.

As well as breaking up a cyclist's progress as Alan mentioned, such barriers can end up being areas where youths congregate - making it intimidating to get through.

We will be leaning on partners to try and get them removed in the future.

5. There are other types of barrier which are available. Further research is needed to assess their effectiveness.

NB – comments marked “*” are from Graham Fisher OBE.

The cyclists' case as reported in the local Press



Some of the assertions made in the newspaper articles need correcting.

1. “Barriers are often sometimes so badly designed...” The barriers are a standard design that has been in use for many years. It is a compromise designed to both prevent and allow vehicles to pass through. Most cycles can pass through relatively easily. The difficulty arises when non standard bikes are involved. Fortunately they are rare and most cyclists do not experience too much inconvenience. (It could be said that it is the design of the bicycles which cause the problem! Sadly, one design will not fit all circumstances.)
2. “..it is generally avoided by cyclists..” At weekends, when the author has made most of his observations something like twenty plus cyclists per hour have been seen using the towpath. Before statements like the above can be made, statistics supporting this argument should be produced. Are there any? (Perhaps British Waterways or Stourbug could conduct a census of cycle usage throughout the week. With more accurate information a better case can be made.)
3. “I am not convinced that motorbikes on the towpath are any more prevalent...” The counter argument is that the barriers are doing their job.
4. In a previous article on the web this route was referred to as “the highly publicised but barely used Stourbridge to Kingswinford cycle route.” This is a misnomer because it is a *walking* as well as a cycling route. It is not “barely used” because during the rush hours cyclists are observed using the canal towpath as well as Wollaston ‘rec’ and Bradley Road. Indeed pedestrians are making full use of this route.
5. The language used is very emotive and obscures the issues at stake.

Erroneous statements such as these do not help to further the cyclists’ case.

Cyclists in protest at towpath barriers



Members of the Stourbridge Bicycle Users Group (StourBUG), who are angry about the number of locked gates along the towpaths in and around Stourbridge and Wollaston

ANGRY cyclists fed up with the lack of access to Stourbridge's canal towpaths blocked barriers in a protest demonstration.

Around 40 cyclists descended on the Stourbridge canal over the weekend to draw attention to the problem.

Members of Stourbridge Bicycle User Group, Stourbug, and Dudley Friends of the Earth met by the Wollaston Road Bridge on Stourbridge Canal to demonstrate how many safe and scenic routes are inaccessible to riders.

The protesters claim many canal towpaths and disused railway tracks make perfect cycling routes, but barriers designed to keep motorcyclists out are preventing pedal cyclists from making the most of them.

Russell Eden, founder of the 130-strong Stourbug group, helped organise the protest with members of Stourbug.

"It has been an issues for a long time - going through all these barriers is a massive inconvenience for cyclists," he said.

"Members of our group have tandems and trailers or specially adapted hand bikes and they can't get through the barriers.

"This is a wonderful route that is ideal for cyclists and should provide a faster, safer alternative to the A491 Stourbridge to Wordsley road but instead it takes twice as long as we have to stop and dismount every few minutes," he added.

Unfit

Guy Sheppard, spokesman for Dudley Friends of the Earth said some of the barriers are designed so that bikes can't get through at all - forcing cyclists to lift them over.

"That's not an option if you are physically unfit," he said.

The protest coincides with a Dudley's

£4.5million bid to become a 'healthy town' under the Government's Healthy Community Challenge Fund.

If the bid, by Dudley Council and Dudley Primary Care Trust, is successful, the town will see huge investment to combat obesity and encourage residents to lead healthy lives.

"If Dudley wins this bid it will be a golden opportunity to open up the off-road cycle network to lots more people by either removing the barriers altogether or making them more user friendly," said Mr Sheppard.

A spokeswoman for British Waterways, which manages the canal and its towpath, said barriers had been put up because of the increased number of motorcyclists using the towpaths who were endangering canal users.

She added that British Waterways consulted with the police before the barriers were put in to reduce anti-social behaviour, but the barriers were under constant review.



The two images above show “K” barriers in action.
For more information go to <http://www.kbarriers.co.uk/default.htm>

Conclusions

Taking all the above factors into consideration, the following are the options which are available.

1. Maintain the status quo. The barriers remain closed in order to maintain security for canal users. The drawback is that it may continue to deter at least some cyclists from using the towpaths. There are also negative implications for the development of tourism and promoting healthy lifestyles.
2. Keep the barriers and issue keys or swipe cards or licenses to use the barriers. The user pays an annual fee for the ability to open the barrier when they need to use it. The problems of misuse, loss of key and enforcement are major considerations to be taken into account.
3. Open or remove all the barriers on a permanent basis. Users will then be able to travel unimpeded. The danger is that antisocial elements will take unfair advantage of the situation.
4. Open the barriers on a trial basis. This should be done discretely and should be strictly monitored first on a daily basis, then weekly, then fortnightly and so on. At the first sign of trouble they should be closed immediately. Question: who does the monitoring?
5. Keep the barriers closed for the time being. In the meantime, all the interested parties should either investigate suitable and acceptable alternatives to the current barriers or set up a design team to build their own barrier which will be acceptable to all cyclists.

Signed

David Woodruff – Vice Chair Dudley Borough Local Access Forum