

CYCLE BARRIERS ON THE STOURBRIDGE TOWN ARM CANAL

SUMMARY

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 tow path 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 tow path

The route begins at the junction of Canal Street and the tow path 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 two breaches in the concrete fencing which allow access to the tow path. 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 tow path.

Between Coalbournbrook Bridge and Junction Bridge the canal is 0.54 miles long. Richardson Drive and Rushall Close run more or less parallel to the tow path. A wooden fence now forms the boundary between the tow path 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 tow path and in two instances the fence has been removed altogether. In several places there is a considerable amount of vandalism and litter.

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 finger post which was recently refurbished at a cost of £5,000 has had the fingers ripped off and burned.



Wordsley Junction



Detail showing vandalised fingerpost

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.



Missing fence posts at the end of Smallshire Way



The vandalised house at Essington Close

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.



Litter

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

Users of the tow path – legal

In all there are eight groups of users.

1. Pedestrians- this includes walkers and hikers, joggers and people using pushchairs.
2. Cyclists – most of whom ride mountain bikes. There are a considerable number of recreational cyclists at weekends.
3. The disabled – the tow path being wide and flat is ideal for disabled scooters.
4. Fishermen and other sports people. Angling is very popular along this stretch of canal and it is also used by canoeists.

5. Narrow boat users.
6. Properties on the tow path. There are two blocks of properties, known collectively as “The Junction”, at the junction between Chubb’s Bridge and Longboat Lane Bridge. Junction Cottage has its own access point complete with a gate. There is another access point at the Western end of the properties.
7. The Stourbridge Canal Trust. When it was agreed that the towing path could be used as a cycle route, the Trust was involved with the Local Authority in delicate negotiations. At the time of writing (November 2008), the protesters do not appear to have contacted the Trust before staging their demonstration on September 27th 2008.
8. 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. (In fact 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 tow path.) Because they carry no number plates 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 presence of noisy, un baffled exhausts.

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

Points to consider

General

- The use of the tow path as a cycle route is the result of an agreement between Stourbridge Navigation Trust, British Waterways and Dudley MBC. The towpath has been upgraded to cycleway standard with the help of a HLF grant with a view to its being multi-use by the public.
- The Stourbridge Navigation Trust is a private, charitable limited company.
- The tow path 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.
- Using returns supplied by the provisional copy of the Dudley ROWIP, cycling is a minority activity on the Dudley tow paths, albeit a sizeable one. Pedestrians outnumber cyclists by three to one.
- The cyclists who report difficulties negotiating the barriers are users of fairly esoteric machines e.g. tricycles, tandems and child carriages. These are a minority within a minority. Further, most if not all these cyclists are local users and are aware of the obstacles on their routes. It can therefore be argued that they should plan their routes accordingly.

- Narrow boats navigating the waterways encounter their own barriers in the form of locks. This slows them down considerably. This is accepted as a normal part of canal life. Cyclists should accept tow path barriers as being a normal part of canal life and adjust their speed accordingly.
- By far the largest user group is pedestrians. This tow path 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 tow path conflict can occur between them and cyclists. Some cyclists' 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 tow path for moorings and communications, often by bicycle. For a moored boat security is important. Antisocial elements and criminals using the tow path 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 tow path and it will become 'self-policing', thus deterring the antisocial elements. This is open to question, it is also extremely naïve because it doesn't work like that in this area because there will be quiet times especially in the evenings and this then gives opportunities for anti social behaviour. (See the next comment below.)
- The alternative view is that opening the barriers will cause a *decrease* in numbers cycling the towpath. If motorcyclists gain access, the danger posed by them to other towpath users, especially those with young families, could deter them from using it.
- Residents who live by the Coalbournbrook stretch of the canal report considerable disturbance caused by motorbikes riding up and down the towpath. This has a detrimental effect upon their health. There is a suggestion that an extra barrier be installed below the ramp at Coalbournbrook to prevent access by motorbikes, thereby improving residents' quality of life.
- The police have the power to confiscate and destroy illegal machines on the towpath. The problem is the police and British Waterways staffs are already overstretched. While the police are patrolling the canal, looking for motorbikes, 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 tow path. There are two drawbacks. First, emergency vehicles will be hampered/delayed reaching the tow path. Secondly, if the barriers are circumvented, antisocial elements have an untrammelled run from one end of the tow path to the other. In the case of the Town arm, the

topography of the towpath is such that emergency vehicles would experience great difficulty in accessing the towpath without the presence of access point barriers.

- With the benefit of years of experience, British Waterways favour the current type of barrier. It is the best method of barring motorcycles from their towpaths. The latest version is especially strengthened to withstand angle grinders.
- The health, safety and welfare of those who live and work permanently on the canals, and those who live in adjoining properties is of paramount importance. They have to live with the consequences of whatever decisions are made by others.
- British Waterways are keen to develop tow paths for tourism. Opening up the tow paths will help to boost this aim.

{From the boating and tow path 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 tow paths. 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 tow paths, 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 tow path 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 s that the boaters pay heavily for the use of the canals but no one else pays a lot. (Graham Whorton – Chair Birmingham Canal Navigations Society.)}

Types of barrier

1. At the junction between Canal Street and the tow path 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 this, 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.



Barrier at the junction of Canal Street and the tow path



A RADAR gate (at Long Boat Lane Bridge)



Wild life is also threatened by antisocial elements

The cyclists' case as reported in the local Press

WWW.STOURBRIDGENEWS.CO.UK
OCTOBER 9, 2001

Cycling supported

TRANSPORT campaigners staged a protest in Stourbridge to encourage more cycling on canal towpaths and disused railway tracks.

Stourbridge Bicycle User Group (Stourbug) and Dudley Friends of the Earth say the routes are safe, fun places to cycle – but many people are prevented by barriers designed to stop motorbikers.

The protest on September 27 involved nearly 40 cyclists and it comes as the borough launches a £4.5m bid to combat its growing obesity problem – partly by encouraging more people to cycle.

Guy Sheppard, Dudley Friends of the Earth spokesman, says the barriers are sometimes so badly designed that bikes will not go through them, forcing cyclists to lift them over.

He said: "That's not an option if you are a child or physically unfit. If Dudley wins this bid, it will be a golden opportunity to open up the off-road cycle network to lots more people by removing the barriers altogether or making them more user-friendly."

Russell Eden, Stourbug founder, said the mile-long towpath between Stourbridge and Wordsley has six barriers along the short route and it is generally avoided by cyclists despite being one of Dudley Council's primary cycle routes.

He said: "I'm not convinced motorbikes on the towpath are any more prevalent than elephants in my garden."

"It's just not right to deny access to a majority with legitimate access because of a minority without it."

What is the real problem?

Albert Einstein once said, "If you define a problem correctly, you are halfway to solving it."

The trick is to find the problem.

So, in the case of the Town Arm barriers, *what is the problem?*

The problem is the antisocial elements and their motorbikes and other illegal, motorised vehicles.

British Waterways' solution is to erect barriers to keep them out.

This has the 'knock on effect' of impeding other, legitimate towpath users. It is a truism that when you solve one problem, you create another.

In a situation like this, the answer is compromise. Are the benefits in peace, quiet and safety worth the cost of erecting barriers?

British Waterways use the current design of barrier because it is the best compromise between keeping out motorbikes, letting pedestrians and most cyclists through, cost and effectiveness against vandals.

In reality, this is a problem which is almost irresolvable.

British Waterways have indicated many times in the past that they will not, under any circumstances, open the barriers on the Town Arm. They own the land and they have the last word every time.

Compromise good will and consideration on all sides will go a long way to ameliorating the frustration that some towpath users may feel.

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.

ALTERNATIVE BARRIERS

THE 'K' BARRIER



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 tow paths. 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.
6. Develop the following as a route in its own right and use it as an alternative route which runs thus:
 - From Coalbournbrook Bridge cycle up the ramp to Richardson Drive. Along Richardson Drive to the junction with Chubb's Bridge. Take the ramp down into Rushall Close and along Smallshire Way. At the end of Smallshire Way cross onto the canal towing path. (This last depends on British Waterways and Dudley agreeing on who owns which part of the boundary here.) The canal towing path is shorter by some 150 to 200 metres.
 - The advantages of this route are three barriers are cut out of the route. Although marginally longer, the time taken to ride it is shorter. It is drier for cyclists during wet weather. It maintains the status quo, leaving room for future negotiations.
 - The disadvantages are that the scenic views of the canal are lost. The turn from the Coalbournbrook ramp into Richardson Drive is very tight; care must be taken as traffic can be approaching from three different directions.

One Further Consideration

In future, when the local authority draws up its walking and cycling maps up it would be useful if the position and type of barrier was marked on the map. Users could then plan their journey accordingly.

Signed

David Woodruff – Vice Chair Dudley Borough Local Access Forum

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