

Stratford to Warwick Avon Navigation ~ the ‘South Warwickshire Ring’

The Project Challenge

To extend and improve the navigation capacity of the River Avon between Stratford upon Avon and Warwick – linking up with the Grand Union canal in Warwick and South Stratford canal to create a new ‘South Warwickshire Ring’ leading to an increase in tourism, local enterprise and transport links.



Background

Holidays remain the main reason for international visits to the UK, accounting for 13.9 million visits, a rise of 2.1% compared with 2014¹. The impact on the UK economy is significant with earnings from overseas visitors reaching a record level of spending of £22.1 billion – an increase of £0.2 billion (1.0%) over 2014.



Documented evidence² shows that whilst a small number of visitors enjoy the canal holiday experience in England, this sector is not widely known as part of an international tourism offer. One canal boat hire company quoted by the Canal and River Trust (CRT) indicated that only 7% of their clients are from overseas. Of these just over half are from the EU, with a further 25% from the US and 10% from Australia and New Zealand. VisitBritain research

indicates that major tourist markets such as Germany and the US do not associate waterways holidays with Britain – this is a strong ‘niche’ market to attract and capture.

The popular tourist towns of Stratford upon Avon and Warwick are both connected to the River Avon and the Midlands canal system and are well-placed to capitalise on the tourism and enterprise opportunities that waterways can offer. Many visitors and local people already undertake longer barge and boating holidays either from Stratford or Warwick, or from other wharves on the Warwickshire Ring which includes Birmingham, Stratford, Coventry and Grand Union Canals.

With new infrastructure commitment, partnership working and investment there is the potential to develop the ‘South Warwickshire Ring’ as a new circuit on the Midland river and canal network, enabling shorter 2-3 day circular canal trips between Warwick and Stratford as well as day adventures - and extending to longer barging holidays on the Warwickshire Ring. This project would promote both historic towns as a new hub for waterways tourism. It would ensure longer stays in South Warwickshire boosting visitor numbers and the local tourist economy.

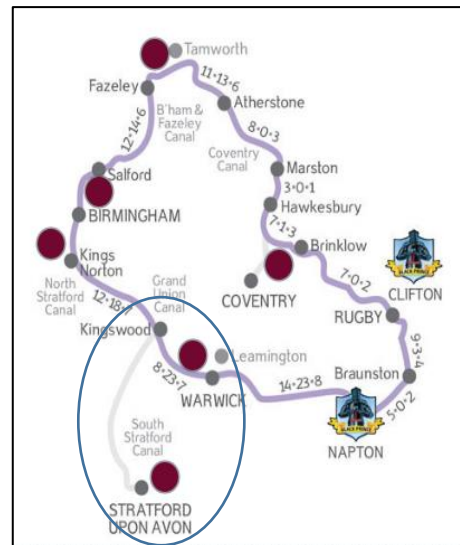
¹ Travel Trends 2015 ~ Office for National Statistics

² Canal and River Trust 2015

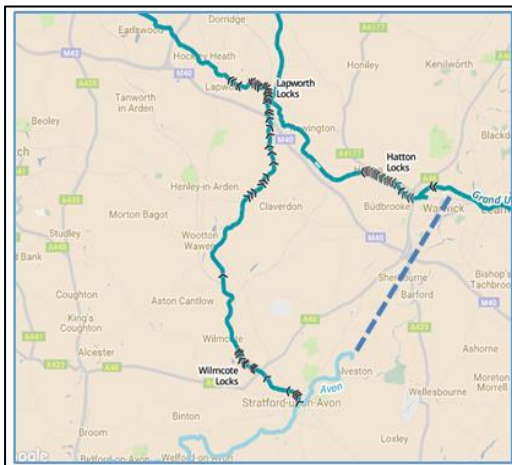
Current Situation

The Stratford Canal has a Northern and Southern section. The Northern runs from the Worcester and Birmingham Canal at Kings Norton to join the Grand Union at Kingswood. The Southern connects the Grand Union Canal at Kingswood to the River Avon at Stratford upon Avon via the Wilmcote flight and three unique iron aqueducts.

From the Stratford basin, canal boats and cruisers can navigate south down to the River Severn via Evesham, Pershore and Tewkesbury and eventually back into the Birmingham canal system (the ‘Birmingham Ring’). However only a short distance of the Avon upstream of Stratford is currently navigable, meaning there is no passable river route from Stratford to Warwick to re-join the Grand Union Canal.



The Infrastructure Proposal



The Avon Navigation Trust (ANT) is seeking support from the local authority stakeholders (Warwickshire County Council, Warwick and Stratford District Councils) to open up the Upper Avon to navigation and create the ‘South Warwickshire Waterway Ring’. Over 250 years ago, navigation was possible from Tewkesbury all the way to the outskirts of Warwick along the Avon³. The renovation of the 46 miles of the Lower Avon allowing navigation between Tewkesbury and Stratford was completed 43

years ago – considered by many as a great technical achievement. A feasibility study has been commissioned by the ANT to investigate the technical case for and environmental impact of restoration of the 12 miles of the upstream section of the Avon from Stratford to Warwick. This stretch has been identified by the Association of Inland Navigation Authorities (AINA) as ‘one of the few missing broad inland navigation links’ between the estuary of the Severn and other major English estuaries (Mersey, Humber, Thames, Wash).

The Opportunity

This project is timely. A new regional initiative⁴ is currently under way to promote the ‘Warwickshire Ring’ as a stronger tourist destination offer – encouraging extended stays and greater connection with the English countryside, its market towns, heritage and history.

³ Daniel Defoe and others reported navigation nearly to Warwick in the 1700s.

⁴ “Discovering the mighty rivers and majestic canals of England” ~ Visit England / Discover England Fund call for project bids 2016

By opening up the Upper Avon to navigation and with further investment in the canal basins in Stratford upon Avon and Warwick, this would add value to the Warwickshire Ring. It would extend South Warwickshire’s existing tourism offer to UK and overseas visitors by encouraging less adventurous barge holidaymakers to make day trips or undertake the shorter South Warwickshire Ring as part of a longer stay in South Warwickshire.

Marketing Birmingham Ltd reports that Trip Advisor ratings show a high level of top quality visitor feedback for UK narrowboat holidays which is seen as a high quality holiday product - yet figures indicate that waterways-based holidays remain ‘under-appreciated’ by core overseas markets. This project presents a new opportunity to add to the existing international tourist reputation of the two world famous medieval market towns.

A new approach to waterway holidays could be adopted which would attract longer stays in Warwickshire and enhance the visitor experience beyond the popular tourist venues of Warwick Castle, Shakespeare’s Birthplace and the RSC Theatre. This could include provision of a more flexible and ‘tourist friendly’ offer e.g. ‘door-to-door’ journey capability; fully serviced on board provision; language translation for basic boat hire familiarisation; integrated on-board/off-board packages to encourage wider contact with other tourist venues across the county.

The Benefits

Interest in the Upper Avon navigation project has been led by the Avon Navigation Trust (ANT) – the statutory navigational authority for the River Avon. The Trust, run by a like-minded and enthusiastic group of professionals and volunteers, is committed to achieving the extension of navigation on the Upper Avon and linking to the Grand Union Canal. The project would create a ‘linear water park’ with enhanced wildlife sites, better walking and cycling paths, integrated angling facilities and riverside camping. It would provide wider access to the public to travel through some of the finest landscape in England.



As a major infrastructure project it would maximise the existing canal basin venue in the centre of Stratford upon Avon, and would add a new interchange at Warwick between the Avon and the Grand Union Canal. The new navigation route would add value to the very successful River Festival held in Stratford upon Avon every summer which could be extended to Warwick. It would revitalise the waterways, have a significant impact upon the local and regional visitor economy, and create a wealth of new enterprises and local jobs. Indications are that the project could realise around £650m of local tourism benefit⁵.

⁵ Shakespeare’s England estimate ~ perscom

Prospective Stakeholders

- Avon Navigation Trust
- Stratford District Council; Warwick District Council; Warwickshire County Council; town/parish councils
- Canal and River Trust (CRT); Inland Waterways
- Shakespeare’s England and Visit Britain
- StratForward; Warwick Chamber of Trade
- Commercial boat operators; landowners



Initial actions

The Avon Navigation Trust has opened a series of high-level discussions with council officers to highlight challenges and opportunities related to the Upper Avon Navigation initiative. A Feasibility Study⁶ undertaken by Halcrow has identified the main technical, economic and environmental issues. The Canal and River Trust (CRT) has provided data to support the economic value of waterways⁷. An economic impact study is now required to provide evidence of demand and identify funding sources. The Trust welcomes support from Stratford and Warwick Districts Councils, Warwickshire County Council, CRT and other stakeholders to enable the project to be developed further.

Potential issues identified

- Infrastructure costs of project – new locks and Warwick connection to Grand Union Canal
- Possible resistance from landowners e.g. Charlecote Park (NT) and Warwick Castle
- Feasibility and cost of new canal link at Barford
- Environmental impact on Upper Avon
- Local reaction to increased water traffic



Proposed next steps

- Gain ‘in principle support’ from potential council stakeholders to gain commitment and approval to proceed further.
- Engage with a wider stakeholder group e.g. Shakespeare’s England; the Canal & River Trust, community groups; riverboat operators; landowners to gather interest and understand the main drivers, opportunities and challenges.
- Commission an ‘Opportunities Review’ in support of the Technical Feasibility Study for the Upper Avon (Halcrow) which would provide a funding plan, along with evidence of the added value to South Warwickshire, its businesses and communities of opening the Upper Avon to navigation and establishing the new ‘South Warwickshire Ring’ Project.

⁶ ‘Feasibility Study for Upper Avon Extension’ Halcrow Ltd 2014

⁷ ‘Water Adds Value’ Report CRT and University of Northampton 2014