

# SWANSEA CANAL SOCIETY

## CYMDEITHAS CAMLAS ABERTAWE

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### FESTIVAL WALK 2003

#### Pontardawe Festival events.

The society was active during the Festival week with a number of events taking place. On the 12<sup>th</sup> August a slide show was presented at the Pontardawe Inn. The topic being the history of Pontardawe in which the Swansea Canal figured considerably. Considerable interest was shown by those attending and support was engendered for the canal in the village.

On Festival weekend the society had a stall in the craft market where we displayed a small exhibition of historic canal photographs and also picturesque images of the canal in summer time and wintertime. Local "pop" bottles, bottle labels, old calendars, local history publications and post cards were sold which raised money for the society. Three new members were enrolled. Thanks to all who manned the stall over the weekend, Meryl, Jude, Colin, Grant, Barbara T, Lynne, Barbara A, John, Felicity, Clive.

A walk was advertised for the Sunday 17<sup>th</sup> August led by Clive Reed and David Evans. Grant Duncan acted as safety officer. The route was along the canal from Pontardawe to Godre'r Graig and was very interesting for those taking part. The visitors who accompanied the party on the walk were mostly festival goers or residents of Swansea. None of them had known of the existence of the Swansea Canal prior to the walk. We pointed out the original canal overbridges, historic buildings such as the Pontardawe brewery, foundry, St Peter's Church, the last surviving Swansea Canal barge, Ynysmeudwy Basin, and Ynysmeudwy Pottery.

David proved to be very entertaining, his manner is extremely friendly but he is also very knowledgeable of the canal environment. Below St Peter's Church he made the party aware of the importance of the canal towpath lamp standards, in the evening, the lights attract moths which in turn attract bats !! The bats roost in the spire of the church directly above the canal. The offbank vegetation below the church is home to Teal's and Mallards.

Beyond the foundry the canal is in pleasant countryside. Above the offbank are houses with large gardens. Many residents have bird tables which attract dozens of small birds. The canal, tree cover and the gardens act as a corridor for Sparrow Hawks who feed on the small birds. The towpath side of the canal is rich in wild flowers and shrubs. Not all native species, Japanese Knotweed, American Balsam, Buddleia, Willow Herb. All attractive when in bloom.

Above Ynysmeudwy Ganol bridge David pointed out the dead standing trees which are home to Spotted Woodpeckers. On the opposite side of the canal is small wood which has a pair of resident Tawny Owls. We did observe a female mallard with a seven chicks, a lovely site to see. Unfortunately, along this section of canal are Mink which have taken all the Moorhen chicks this year. At Ynysmeudwy the canal verge was full of Water Forget me Not, Willow Herb, Meadow Sweet and Honeysuckle.

We entered the Local Nature Reserve at Ynysmeudwy and forced our way through the overgrown towpath for about half a mile before giving up. Brambles, nettles, and other vegetation had beaten us. There were pleasant surprises in seeing dragon flies, herons, and a very old Oak tree which David estimated at about 200 years old. It was probably an acorn when the canal was being built. All who came on the walk enjoyed themselves and learnt a lot about the canal environment and the superb flora and fauna which inhabits the area.

Thank you David, we are looking forward to the next such walk.

### **Byron Griffiths story of life on the Swansea Canal.**

This account is a very interesting record of the people who worked on the Swansea Canal in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and on barge construction and operation. Little was known previously about how barges actually worked on the canal. Byron Griffiths' account about the ends of the barges about eight feet in length being kept as void spaces by shifting boards, and retained as empty spaces to hold excess water and also as the working space of the bargee is important information. His information on rudder shape is the only account on this part of barge construction. No rudders or information on them has survived in any documentation. The hard physical work of unloading barges is typical of the work in pre-mechanisation days. Forget the idealic cinema film portrayal of life as a bargee, Byron did it. It was hard work. Memories such as these form part of the Swansea Canal archive.

### **Waterways Regeneration Partnership**

The Swansea Canal Society called a meeting for the 2<sup>nd</sup> October at the WDA offices Penllergaer Swansea, to bring all Partners together to discuss the future of the 35 mile regional Waterway, which consists of the Swansea Neath Tennant Canals and the River Tawe and its tributaries. Since the publication of the £14,000-00 W.S. Atkins study in May 2002 which came to the conclusion that the whole 35 mile scheme was practical and achievable, very little has been done since that time by any of the Partners in taking the scheme forward or suggesting restoration plans. The Swansea Canal Society has been promoting the project to councils and has also been protecting the canal corridors from any adverse development via the Unitary Development Plans. The society has chaired all meetings and provided secretarial backup for over three years in its attempts to keep the project active. No one Partner has agreed to lead the project and take it forward. British Waterways has gone through a major reshuffle of offices in the regions and south Wales is now controlled from Cheshire, but it retains an office at Govilon near Abergavenny. The local councils support the project in principle but lack the resources to implement the scheme. They will not lead the project. Neath Canal Company also expects British Waterways to show more leadership and they also expect British Waterways to lead the scheme. This is being a bit unfair on British Waterways who are only responsible for the Swansea Canal and not the Neath and Tennant Canals. The problem arises with funding the scheme. The government sets guidelines by which British Waterways spends its finances, it is not allowed to restore certain canals which fall into the category of Remainder Waterways such as the Swansea Canal. Local councils do not have surplus finances to spend on such restoration schemes and if councils restore a section of canal, councils are responsible for the maintenance of that section, and the much vaunted Objective 1 initiative does not fund major projects like the canal project. The Atkins Report identified that the entire restored 35 mile waterway is self financing, but it all has to be restored to make it viable. **A Catch 22 situation.**

One way forward was suggested, appoint a Project Officer to seek funding and to work with all the partners, councils, WDA, funders and the volunteer societies. The Project Officer would use the Atkins Report to design projects and to seek funding to implement those schemes. This suggestion did not gain the support of the councils who felt that money spent on a project officer could be better utilised in practical restoration projects.

To sum up, funding the scheme is a major challenge. It has been suggested that small projects are carried out when funding becomes available and that the current Partners meet to decide what those schemes are and how to fund them. This will take many, many years to bring the waterways to full restoration and to be of economic benefit to the whole region. The Partners have been requested to study the Atkins Report anew and for them to meet on the 4<sup>th</sup> December 03 to see if any progress can be made.

It appears to be a long process but the canal society is still campaigning to bring the scheme to fruition. Clive Reed.