

Navigation Related Opportunities

On the Billingham Skirth

Prepared for

for the Village of Billingham



Church Street Bridge Billingham Skirth

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1 Introduction & Background

- 1.1 This paper has been produced as the result of a personal recreational visit to the Lincolnshire Waterway System and the town of Sleaford in particular, in April 2015.
- 1.2 The visit was prompted by past and proposed tourist related waterway developments being progressed by the Lincolnshire Waterway Partnership and the Sleaford Navigation Trust which have produced outstanding community benefits in the Witham area over the last few years.
- 1.3 Billingham was selected as the (currently) closest 'Head of Navigation' to Sleaford from which public transport would be available.
- 1.4 During the course of our parties stay at Billingham I was struck by several inconsistencies in relation to the towns appreciation of its riverside.
In principle the village did not appear to be benefiting either socially or economically from its waterway asset.
- 1.5 Because of my professional interests in Cultural Heritage Management and its economic and public health effects on rural & urban communities (both in the UK and overseas) I made it my business to investigate why such a significant asset was not being developed for the benefit of the local community.
- 1.6 Conversations with waterside residents revealed that they had an overwhelming desire to see better use being made of the Skirth and its flood banks.
- 1.7 Our boat a 58 x 7 foot narrow boat also attracted much attention from residents (and traffic passing on Skirth Road) who were also asked for their opinions on the use of the riverside.
- 1.8 All commented that it was good to see boats moving on the navigation.
- 1.9 Several lamented the condition of the channel and its width and also commented that in the past boats had been able to turn below Church Road Bridge.

- 1.10 Negative comment was also made about the current method of dredging (Long Reach Back Actor) as opposed to that used in the past (Drag Line) which it was claimed did not keep the drain clear of accumulating silt.
- 1.11 Several members of the public mentioned a group called the Billingham Skirth Regeneration Society (BSRS) which had been carrying out Skirth related community projects.
- 1.12 I had been aware that the BSRS group existed from reports in the national waterway press.
- 1.13 For professional reasons their existence was also a contributing factor in my choice of Billingham as our destination.
- 1.14 Several residents, also believed that the group had been stopped from progressing their improvement plans by uninformed influential individuals in the locality.
- 1.15 I make no comment on the negative feelings expressed to me.
- 1.16 As a result of the overwhelmingly positive comments in favor of improving the riverside, made by the community members I had met, I attended the Parish Office and expressed some personal observations on the current state of play, to staff in the Office.
- 1.17 As a result of my discussions with the Parish Clerk I was asked to offer some comment on the opportunities which the towns riverside presented for community benefit.
- 1.18 The following is a brief examination of some of the opportunities that improvements to the navigation could bring to the community.

2 Disclaimer

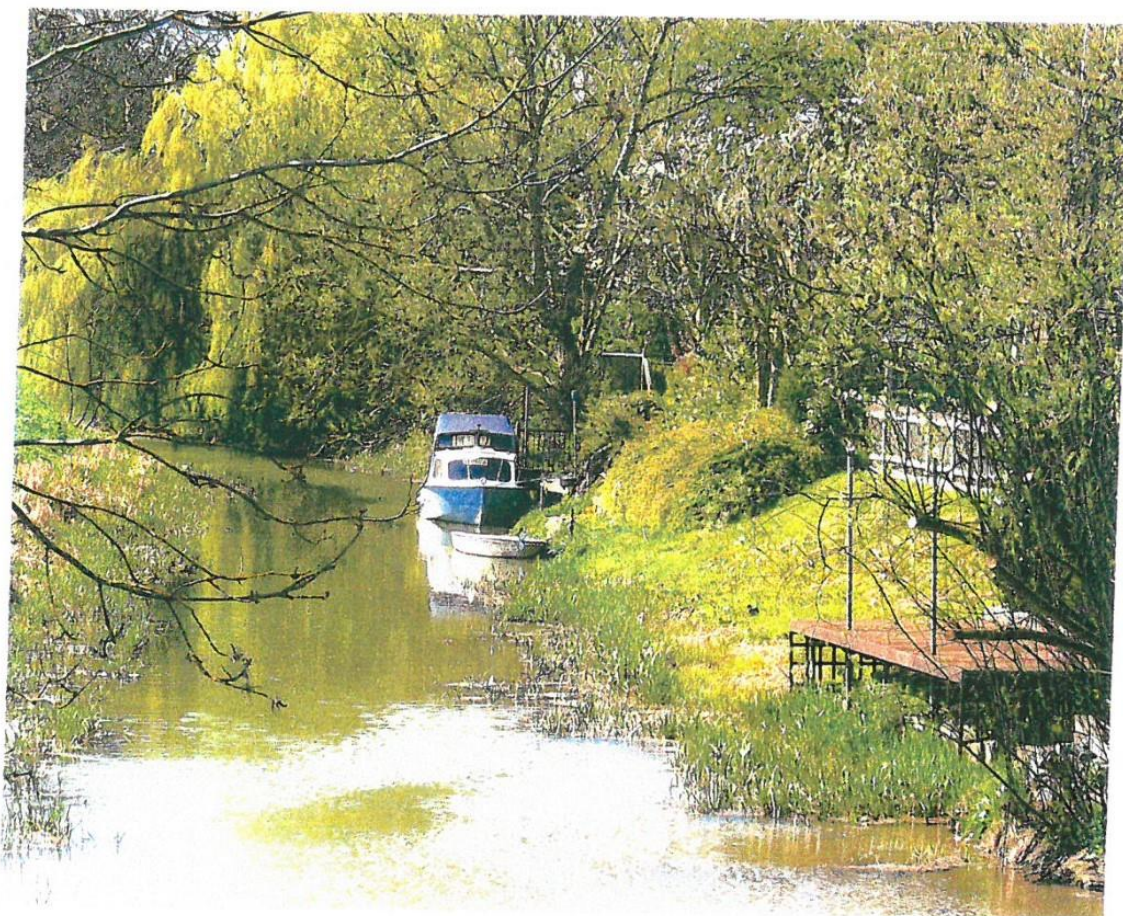
This paper is for discussion only.

- 2.1 The paper is based on
 - a. Comments from members of the general Billingham community I interviewed in the village.
 - b. Discussions with staff in the Parish Office.

- c. A casual visit to the location over the course of a four day visit and the personal experience of the writer both in the UK and overseas.
- 2.2 It is not intended to be an academic study of the waterway and its environs.
- 2.3 Only the section of river from the River Witham to the Old Village Wharf just upstream of the High Street Bridge has been reviewed
- 2.4 Only core benefits are discussed.
- 2.5 Potential economic outcomes have also been touched upon engineering & hydraulic factors have not.
- 2.6 In the main, comment on the ramifications of flood defense works have been omitted from this paper.
- 2.7 Comment, on the reinstatement of traditional levels of river dredging and current contrived river naturalisation have been omitted.



The Old Village Wharf now silted up.



Billingham Skirth above the old village wharf area

3. Existing Waterway Categorization

3.1 As the result of investigations and recent modeling made in regard to other isolated navigations,¹ which are, either prospering, struggling or failing², the Witham System falls into the definition of a Group 1 Waterway.

3.2.1 Group 1 Waterway. "Self-Sustaining"

Generally in excess of 30 miles of navigable waterway.

Navigable waterways, having a critical mass or sufficient elements of commercial or general interest to provide a

¹ Waterway separated from the national waterway system by physical blockage or tidal water.

²Montgomery Canal Management Study. July 2013 (A Group 3 Waterway)

reasonable immunity to degradation due to unsympathetic management.

3.2.2 Group 2 "Contingent"

Generally between 16 and 30 miles of navigable waterway.

Navigability, landscape features and items of interest have a greater influence on sustainability than those in Group 1.

This size of waterway may struggle to attract business related stakeholders who can support the advocacy groups that such a waterway needs to prosper without significant financial support.

3.2.3 Group 3 "Dependent"

Generally between 10 and 15 miles of navigable waterway.

Waterways under restoration or complete which require a significant level of financial assistance in order for them to provide a meaningful social economic or recreational benefit, or to archive Group 2 status.

3.2.4 Group 4

Generally less than 9 miles of navigable waterway.

3.2.4.1 Group 4a "Haven"

Waterway responding to a specific need, such as the provision of repair facilities, amenity use or winter mooring provision. The Lydney Canal would provide such an example.

3.2.4.2 Group 4b "Restoration"

Waterway under restoration, but of insufficient length to support private boat patronage.

3.2.5 Although the system is self sustaining the existence of three factors work against its development.

3.2.5.1 The existence of the tidal waters of the River Trent which discourage inland boaters from making a visit to the area.

3.2.5.2 The existence of small sea locks at Boston which due to their design make their use very tide dependent by inland craft with a sea going ability.

- 3.2.5.3 The perception that the long and boring Witham Navigation does not compensate for the inconveniences associated with the tidal transits.
- 3.2.5.4 The inclusion of a new large lock in the proposed tidal barrier at Boston would dramatically improve the situation at 2.5.2 and with the improvement of the navigability of the Skirth Billinghamay could expect to benefit from some of the spin off from this development.

Note **No new lock is currently included in the Boston barrier plans.**

4. Contextualisation

Even though the Billinghamay Skirth forms part of a self sustaining waterway system, generally it would seem that a relatively short dead end isolated waterway such as this would require some form of visitor attraction or draw card which would entice visitors to it.

- 4.1 On such a waterway, a relatively minor boating inconvenience can have a significant impact on the number of boating tourists visiting the location.
- 4.2 It is difficult to assess just which individual factors associated with dead end waterway usage is responsible for an increase in a waterways sustainability, as almost all isolated waterways by their nature are unique.

However four factors are common to all locations.

- 4.2.1. Boats, moving and manoeuvring, in the public eye. This always creates a desire in land-based visitors or residents to linger and thereby create a relaxed atmosphere. This lingering often creates a waterside spend. The short restored arm adjacent the Bridge at St Neots on the Great Ouse provides a good example of this.
- 4.2.2 Visiting boats need services and repair facilities thus supporting employment in the local small scale engineering sector. The dead end, Town Arm of the Stourbridge Canal, provides a good example of this.

- 4.2.3 Boat crews generally require food and beverage resupply. This provides direct local retail employment.
- 4.2.4. Boat crews require shore based social, recreational and entertainment facilities, this provides both skilled and unskilled employment opportunities in the local hospitality industry.
- 4.2.5 In regard to the Skirth, the most obvious factor for consideration would appear to be the opportunity to break a relatively long and (some say) boring trip along a wide dead straight and often windswept waterway.

5. Local Ancillary Benefits

- 5.1 It will be recognised that the larger the crew or passenger list the greater the economic benefit to the host port or town.
- 5.2 In today's economic terms, the most attractive element of this waterborne trade in relation to a local waterside community is that the retail services are "Internet proof". (IPR)
- 5.3 In waterway terms this trade also helps to create local commercial stakeholder groups who have a financial interest in safeguarding the health and prosperity of the navigation and the infrastructure that supports it.
- 5.4 Size and diversity in such groups is essential for effective lobbying but even a small dynamic group or an individual can make a significant difference.

6. The Right of Navigation

- 6.1 There is no dispute over the Right of Navigation on the Skirth, this is confirmed by a minimum of three factors.
- 6.1.1. The navigation is ancient and therefore benefits from its status as existing 'since time immemorial'.
 - 6.1.2. The channel was at one time tidal and on occasions it is still affected by tidal factors
 - 6.1.3 Public access was confirmed by the local Enclosure Act.
 - 6.1.4. The Right of Navigation means that even though land each side and below a waterway may be owned by an individual the public have a right to navigate over it.
In effect the boating rights on the Skirth are similar to those of a public footpath on land.

7. SWOT Analysis

As is often the case, a brief SWOT Analysis immediately reveals that the Skirth's greatest strength in waterway terms, its remoteness, is also its greatest weakness.

7.1 Strengths

In waterway terms the Village is located just off mid way between Boston and Lincoln. The length of the River Witham is open and runs between high banks, its landscape is often commented on for its lack of interest.

- 7.1.1 In terms of boat travel time, this is represented by the following.
 - 7.1.1.2 By Cruiser
 - a) A days cruising from Burton Waters or Lincoln.
 - b) Half a days cruising from Boston.
 - c) Half days cruise from Bardney Moorings.
 - d) A few hours from Chapel Hill Moorings, on the Slea
 - e) A few hours from Dogdyke Marina.

- 7.1.1.3 By Narrow boat
- a) A long days cruise from Lincoln.
 - b) Late start cruise with an overnight stop from Lincoln.
 - c) Half-day cruise from Boston.
 - d) Half-day cruise from Bardney or Martin Dales Moorings.
- 7.1.1.4 It can be seen from the above that Billingham could make both a good weekend destination or a mid journey stopping point between Lincoln and Boston.
- 7.1.1.5 It is also common practice for boat crew to travel for short distances at weekends, say 1-3 hours, for a Sunday Lunch returning to base in the afternoon or late evening.
- 7.1.2 Billingham contains a good Co-Op and Post Office and thus makes a sensible location for taking on stores and breaking a journey.
- 7.1.3 The village is serviced by two Pubs which often provide a gathering place for boaters. Week-end Sunday Lunch meet-ups. etc.
- 7.1.4 A regular Local Bus service provides access to Sleaford and a National Express service provides access to its national network.
- 7.1.5.1 Sleaford Railway Station provides access to the National Rail Network.
In conjunction with the bus service the rail service can be very useful for boat crew joining or leaving a boat.
- 7.1.5.2 Sleaford is an interesting & bustling centre with a local market.
- 7.1.5.3 Sleaford has a number of Tourist attractions which could attract cruising visitors via Billingham.
- 7.1.6 The village contains some pleasant buildings but its streetscapes are not outstanding.
- 7.1.7 In relative terms the waterway is deep.
- 7.1.8 The name "Skirth" is interesting and in term's of advertising it is memorable.

7.2.1.1 Weakness

7.2.1.2 The village;

7.2.1.1 To the casual visitor little appears to be going on in the village.

7.2.1.2 The urban area suffers from a lack of a general feeling of wellbeing.

7.2.2 The Skirth

7.2.2.1 In its approach to the urban area the waterway has become very narrow.

7.2.2.2 The view of the narrow Skirth from adjacent roads suggests that like many other waterways in the area the Skirth is not navigable.

7.2.2.3 No mooring rings, landings or general boating type facilities exist on the Skirth.

7.2.2.4 No signage relating to the existence of a navigable waterway is visible adjacent to the waterway or adjacent roads.

7.2.2.5 No interpretation signs relating to the history of the waterway are visible adjacent to the Skirth or the adjacent main roads.

7.2.2.6 No information or name signage is provided at the entry to the Skirth from the main river.

7.2.2.7 No advertising signage is provide at the entry to the Skirth from the main river.

7.2.2.8 The existence of the Skirth running through Billingham is not advertised in, local or county tourist information.

7.2.2.9 The two boat turning areas have silted up and no turning area now exists in the village or below Church Street Bridge.

7.2.2.10 The low bridge at Church Street prevents many boats from progressing to the Old Wharf.

7.3 Threats

7.3.1 The village.

7.3.1.1 In similar villages a lack of outside stimulus or commercial endeavor has led to a gradual decline in local services, pub closures, school closures, shop closure and an accelerated ageing of its population resulting in the evaporation of many community groups.

7.3.2 The Skirth

7.3.2.1 A lack of recreational use of the waterway could lead to the reduction in the small number of social benefits it now provides.

7.3.2.2 Open water access to the Witham could be sealed as has happened in other areas.

1.1.1.1. The Low Church St Bridge could be replaced by a tunnel as has happened in other areas.

1.1.1.2. Lack of effective dredging could lead to flooding due to the rivers reduced capacity to retain flood water in time of heavy rainfall.

1.1.1.3. Despite denials, the loss of river capacity due to silting has been a significant problem on the Somerset levels.

7.4 Opportunities

7.4.1 I have been informed that the village has many unseen social problems such as those related to loneliness, the traditionally low agricultural wage and rural isolation.

7.4.2 If the village falls under one of the many deprived area definitions several of the opportunities and projects set out in this paper lend themselves to improving social inclusion as well as providing economic and public health benefits.

7.4.1.2 It is likely that the above socio-economic factors make the village eligible for a number of central government grants which could be used to develop some of the ideas put forward in the document.

- 7.4.3 An opportunity exists to morph the village street finger post signs program into a regional waterway related sign program as part of a public art program.
- 7.4.4 From what I have been told the original Regeneration Group were doing just this type of work but in a very unofficial way. Reinvigoration of this group should be encouraged.
- 7.4.5 Self starting groups provide enormous social benefits to a local community often by generating a sense of self worth in residents who feel they are on the scrap heap of life.
- 7.4.6 Through community endeavor an opportunity exists to attract both waterborne and land based tourism to the village at low cost.
- 7.4.7 A significant boost to the local economy exists through the business opportunities as setout in Item 3 above.
- 7.4.8 Of particular significance to a local economy is that boaters can provide a continually revolving captive market for waterside goods and service providers (IPR).
- 7.4.9 Easy access to boating facilities could encourage the development of good quality homes in the area.
- 7.4.10 It should be noted that the boating sector of the tourist market can provide a significant per person spend.

In other locations, this has allowed small towns to punch well above the economic weight of similar towns without water access to this market.

8. What next

- 8.1 Change management, is a problem in all aspects of life, however it seems most difficult to deal with in communities with a high number of retirees who have little else to do other than contemplate potential negatives in life.
A well run regeneration project can provide that "something to do" and provide positive expectations.
- 8.2 From the brief amount of time that I have spent in the village it seems obvious that some form of public community

reconciliation needs to take place between those who have been improving the village environment via its river and those opposed to change.

8.3 Use of the river as the basis for regeneration.

8.3.1 A first step in this regard must be the lifting of the profile of the Skirth in its own right.
This profile building needs to be seen in both a local and regional context.

8.3.2 Obtain funding for.

- a). Good quality, Information signs, Interpretation boards and directional signs in the village and on the riverside.
- b) Good quality "Billingham Skirth" name sign at entry from the River Witham.
- c) Mooring Rings to Church St Bridge abutments and flood walls adjacent to Skirth Road.
- d) The erection of finger post signs at other suitable locations up and down river.

8.4 Organise for.

- a). Waterway Guide Books, Local Maps and Directories to revise publications to promote Billingham its improved waterway and its local business.
- b). Local businesses to erect an advertising sign to advise craft on the Witham that services are available in the village.
- c). The channel to be dredged.
- d) Silt build up at Church Street Bridge to be removed.
- d) The provision of appropriate access to moored boats within the village.
- e) The re-creation of a boat turning area below Church St Bridge and above High Street Bridge.
- f) The local history group to develop for publication a short history of navigation in the village.

8.5 Arrange for.

- a) An event or events within the village suitable for bringing locals together, or for bringing outsiders and tourists to the village.
- b). Waterway events should be coordinated with other Lincolnshire happenings including the Lincoln Waterway Partnership, Sleaford Navigation Trust and the Inland Waterways Association.

8.6.1 Some events & projects which could be considered may include:

- a) A Stilt Walking Competition.

One of the village finger post signs relates a story of how farmers came to market on stilts.

This presents an opportunity to resurrect an old skill by having an annual stilt walking event.

Initially such an event could be reinforced with professional stilt walkers, or start with only children.

The aim would be to design the event to include all ages within the community in addition to outsiders.

- b) Themed market in conjunction with some other event.
(In addition to the existing Car Boot sale)
- c) A local Photographic Exhibition of past waterway related life in Billingham and other Witham waterways and Ports.
- d) A simple boat Rally on an annual basis.
- e) An annual Duck Race from one of the village bridges.
- f) Some form of annual canoe event or raft race.
- g) Some form of Triathlon, event, say, Canoe, from, Billingham Old Wharf to the Witham Bank, Run to White Cottage along Witham Bank, Bike back to Billingham Market Sq. via Walcott.
- h) Up grade Village Web site to include navigation history of the Skirth and a welcome to boaters.

- 8.6.2 The above list includes events which will require much organisation and some financial support, others are virtually at no cost and require little organisation beyond personal enthusiasm and advertising.

9.0 Conclusion

- 9.1 The immediate and potential economic and social benefits to the Billingham Village community from the restoration of the Billingham Skirth, greatly exceed any costs, which may be incurred by such action.
- 9.2 The short and long term opportunities presented by the proposals in this paper should not be seen as only local to Billingham.
- 9.3 The benefits would stretch from Lincoln in the North to Sleaford in the West, Boston in the South and could also include the Witham Navigable Drains area.
- 9.4 The proposals if developed should be seen as being of significant and diverse regional economic benefit.
- 9.5 The restoration of Billingham Skirth should be seen as strengthening the attraction of traversing the long stretch of less than interesting open water between Lincoln and Boston.

Thus this element of the proposal has a national significance in that it would add to the Witham's list of attractions available to boats contemplating traversing the tidal river Trent or the Wash to get to the system.

- 9.6 If current plans for the Boston Barrier were modified to include a sea lock significant additional benefits would accrue to Billingham.

End