



GLOUCESTER & SHARPNESS CANAL REMOTE-CONTROLLED BRIDGES

Boaters and Marinas Focus Group Meeting Note 16 April 2015

Attending:

Boaters and Marinas

Martin Turner	IWA
Bob Hallam	Cotswold Canal Cruising Club
Steve Lacey	Boater and Diesel Engineering Services
Mike Stone	Boater (CC)
Bob & Cheryl Ford	Saul Marina
Phil Golding	NABO

CRT

Nick Worthington	CRT Waterway Manager
Darren Parkinson	CRT Principal Electrical Engineer
Rob Eaton	CRT operations manager
Madge Bailey	CRT Consultation project manager
Shaun Brown	CRT operations supervisor
Nick Cooke	CRT bridge-keeper

Meeting note also to be sent to:

Roger Holmes	IWA
Brian Williams	Sharpness Marina
Maria Nash	CRT Mooring Manager

Key points (some points have fuller information than was said at the meeting to provide further info to attendees)

Can anyone download the app? What's to stop someone misusing the system?

Only boat-licence holders can download the app - a check is made against their customer details. Each time a bridge sequence is triggered, the system records the boater's unique app code. In the unlikely event that a boater misused the system, e.g. by triggering an opening and deliberately not going through, the control centre could get in touch with them. We would obviously make allowances for genuine mistakes. The app can be downloaded to several devices per licence-holder for family and friends.

If CRT customer system is temporarily down, the check against customer details cannot be made. In this case we will still allow the app download and check the customer details later.

What about customers buying short-term licences?

CRT short-term licences are issued on site on the day and are a paper licence with no system checks against customer details. We will need to configure the system to allow the customer to download the app probably by giving the licensing agent such as Saul Marina a customer number which will allow multiple downloads.

Can the app stream other information?

Yes, it can tell the user if a bridge is held for an ambulance, issue strong stream warnings, warnings of large craft navigating in the area, and other canal info.

We need boaters' help to get the short wording right on the app's messages, and maybe symbols where possible

From how far away will the Wifi at a bridge pick up an approaching boat's app?

The maximum distance is approximately 400m. We can adjust the signal strength and hence distance as required at each bridge and need to agree the configurations and appropriate timings with both canal and road users. The boater can make the request at any point between the set distance and the bridge.

What about bridges that are close together – could a request trigger both bridges? E.g. Rea and Sims, Purton Upper and Lower.

At these bridges the app could give the boater the option to request which bridge they want to open. It would be possible to configure the app to request both bridges, with one opening staggered after the other.

Traffic lights

Some craft can go under the bridges with higher air draft without needing the bridge opened. They must request a green light via the app, and confirm they do not need the bridge opening and the app must inform them of this process (or at least say 'the bridge will not open but you must wait for a green light'). Visiting boaters need educating about this so they don't ignore the red light.

Green light will make boaters feel it is safe to motor on through under bridges and at junctions. They must be educated that it means proceed with caution and assess if it is safe.

The lights will be the 'safe zone' and will not change as a boat is passing them.

Post-meeting note: The boating trade focus group raised concerns about traffic lights (two greens). A group of CRT staff (including Head of Safety) and boating reps are meeting on 16 June to consider the issue.

What if two boaters travelling in opposite directions request an opening? The app will deal with the requests in the order they were made. Therefore the first boater will be told to proceed when they get the signal and it is clear to do so. A second boat making a request (from either direction) while the bridge is swinging open would also be told to proceed when signalled and clear to do so – the control system would then know to expect two (or more) boats and the amount of time the bridge is held open would be increased to allow for this. However this is subject to the maximum opening time that has been pre-set for the particular bridge, which will be agreed by the advisory group. Therefore a boater making a request at the stage where the bridge is fully open to canal, and any previous boat is passing / has passed would be told to wait if the opening time required would exceed the pre-set time. They would have to wait for whatever the agreed minimum road open time is.

What if several boats want to come through? Do they each need to request the opening and can they all go through? The bridge will be configured to stay open for a pre-set time. On some bridges this may be enough for just one boat to pass, on others (e.g. with less road traffic) it may be longer. The canal light turns red after the pre-set time. The bridge will then close if the laser has been cleared by the last boat (if a boat is still going past, the system waits for it to clear the laser.) Therefore groups of boats simply need to obey the lights. If a boat is taking too long to pass through i.e. it does not clear the laser after the pre-set time, the control centre is alerted to an obstruction and will be able to identify the boat causing the problem.

Smart device ownership

Concern that not enough boaters will own a smartphone or tablet. However this may be the incentive they need and ownership among the older generation is increasing. Alternatively boaters can contact the control centre by phone or VHF radio. There will also be two-way intercom help points at each bridge similar to those found at railway stations.

Saul and Sandfield

The group focussed on Saul as a problem area – boats arriving from different directions, boats swinging left to then turn right etc. We recognise it is complex and want boaters to help us configure the sequences and robustly test and refine it. We could configure the app for the boater to confirm if they are heading north or south. We won't go live until we are fully satisfied and the bridge-keeper will still be on site to start with.

If eventually the Stroudwater Canal opens and it is simply too busy with boating traffic, it may be that staff have to man the site if that's safer.

Canal opening hours

Strong support from the group for opening the navigation seven days a week all year round, rather than 5 days in winter currently. Strong support to extend the hours that bridges can be operated each day, preferably dawn til dusk. The current limitations are a major cause of frustration for boaters and limit the attractiveness of the G&S for cruising. It also potentially affects the case for opening the Cotswold Canal. The consultation will explore demand and also road users' views. Each bridge can be pre-set with its own opening hours and any limits e.g. max number of openings in any hour.

Customer education and advice

The group stressed the need for wide-reaching education and a long lead-in time. Points made:

- Gloucester and Sharpness Locks to issue info / leaflets / educate. Useful to record boat numbers entering Gloucester Lock this season and how many have a smart device.
- CRT to install public Wifi at Gloucester and Sharpness Locks so boaters can download the app
- River Severn Guide has been updated – can include G&S bridge info when needed
- Get Nicholsons updated
- Prepare boaters in advance as they travel down the River Severn – lend them a DVD at Tewkesbury that can be handed back at Gloucester
- Videos on Youtube
- Boaters need to download the app early and not wait until they need it
- IWA will promote among their boaters; Saul Marina will inform their other marina customers
- Local boaters would become boating buddies to help new boaters and demonstrate how it works
- CRT plans demonstration days at Sandfield – would be good to have boating buddies there too
- Will be promoted to users at Lydney Harbour, Sharpness Port, Avon Navigation Trust and beyond
- Bridges will be converted to remote-controlled gradually, probably one per month which allows people to get used to the new system

Will this definitely happen? Sandfield Bridge will become fully remote-controlled later this year. We plan to phase the remaining bridges over the following 2 years. With any scheme of this scale, there is always a possibility that the plans might be deferred if, for example, the funds required have to be diverted to essential repair work that arises. Also, the aim of the public consultation is to fully consider every concern, suggestion and issue raised as we plan to set up the system, and ensure there are no major issues or obstacles. Therefore it is not definite but we are keen to implement it.

What are the plans for the current staff and having a CRT presence on the canal?

We know that people value our bridge-keepers and they do an important job, however, we have to balance this with the fact that the current set-up is an inefficient way of working and extremely costly for the Trust. Decisions to make changes like this are not taken lightly as we fully understand the impacts such changes can have for people, and on our staff.

Staff are involved in the process – we have briefed them and they are represented on the focus groups. We employ 12 full-time staff and 18 seasonals (who we would no longer recruit). Some staff will be in the Bridge Control Centre, bringing their experience to the operation of all bridges. We also need a core team to check and maintain bridges, respond to issues, mobilise and send to bridges if necessary etc. The new Control Centre will provide our team with a bird's eye view with the CCTV at each bridge and we can communicate with boaters in a number of ways.

These changes will be gradual since the plans to change to remote-control would be phased over 2 ½ years so staff will not simply be withdrawn. We also anticipate that a growing number of local volunteers will be out and about on the canal, providing a friendly presence, giving information to passers-by and doing other jobs to help improve the waterways. The Trust has seen a big increase in volunteers over recent years and has staff dedicated to engaging volunteers.

Overall views

Bob – comfortable with idea, but with provisos about education and Saul

Cheryl – to everyone's advantage to have longer opening hours; incentive to switch to smart device. Good to have the standard phone option for people who can't use app; other 'impatient' customers will be happy to trigger bridges at the press of a button.

Steve – positive about longer hours; boaters have other communication options, cruising clubs tend to have VHF

Phil – beneficial – better service but put efforts into preparing the visiting boater and worried about job losses - please handle the staff issue well

Mike – good idea but some boaters won't want change or want to lose staff

Feedback on emerging operating protocols

Those attending were happy to respond by email to drafts circulated by CRT

Advisory Group

Those attending were happy to consider being reps on the Advisory Group to provide ongoing review and advice throughout implementation.

Volunteer boaters to develop the protocols, configurations and test the set-up

Those attending were happy to help