

RESTORATION FEATURE

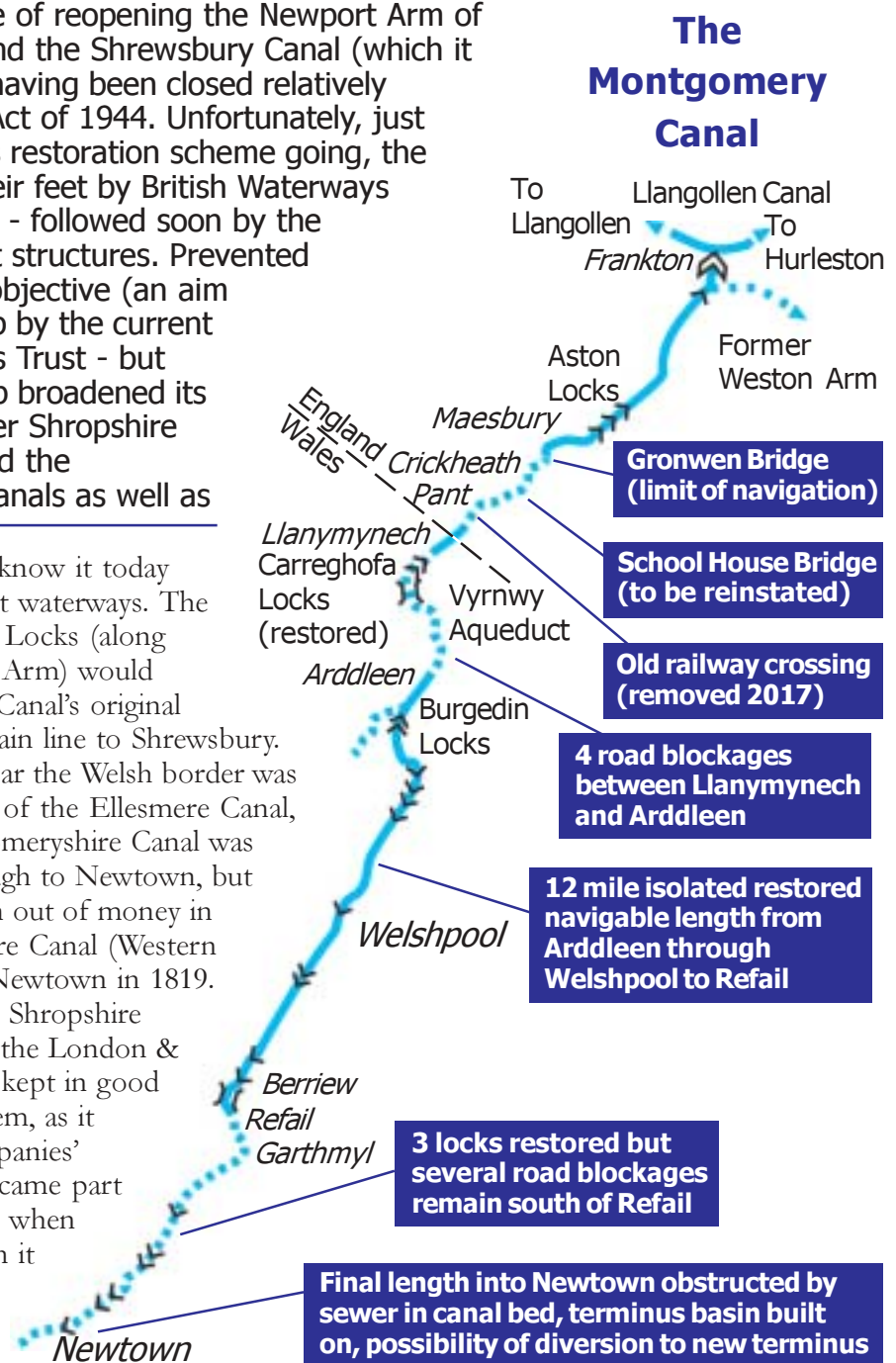
In our second restoration feature, we take a wider view of another canal

Restoration feature: Montgomery Canal

The restoration back-story: Another canal, another major road scheme. Rather like the Cotswold Canals, the subject of this issue's first restoration feature, the birth of the Montgomery Canal restoration also coincided with a threat to its future as a result of a road project. But whilst the damage to the Stroudwater Canal from the M5 motorway is only now finally being put right, the threat to the Mont from the Welshpool Bypass plans of the late 1960s was successfully headed-off at the time.

But let's go back a little further. In the early 1960s, a group was formed with the objective of reopening the Newport Arm of the Shropshire Union Canal and the Shrewsbury Canal (which it connected to), both of these having been closed relatively recently by the LMS Railway Act of 1944. Unfortunately, just as they were trying to get this restoration scheme going, the rug was pulled from under their feet by British Waterways selling off chunks of the canal - followed soon by the destruction of some important structures. Prevented from achieving their original objective (an aim which was eventually taken up by the current Shrewsbury & Newport Canals Trust - but that's another story) the group broadened its aims to cover the entire former Shropshire Union network (which included the Llangollen and Montgomery canals as well as

The Montgomery Canal as we know it today was actually built as four different waterways. The first half mile including Frankton Locks (along with the long-abandoned Weston Arm) would have been part of the Ellesmere Canal's original planned (but never completed) main line to Shrewsbury. The next section from there to near the Welsh border was built as the Llanymynech Branch of the Ellesmere Canal, and opened in 1796. The Montgomeryshire Canal was planned to extend the route through to Newtown, but only got to Garthmyl before it ran out of money in 1797. Finally the Montgomeryshire Canal (Western Branch) completed the route to Newtown in 1819. The whole lot became part of the Shropshire Union system, which came under the London & North Western Railway - but was kept in good condition and worked hard by them, as it penetrated into rival railway companies' territory. Eventually in 1923 it became part of the LMS Railway, and by 1936 when a breach occurred below Frankton it was little used. The breach was never repaired and the canal was abandoned in 1944.



Montgomery Canal

where (fingers crossed) things are really going to move... the Montgomery

the Shropshire Union Main Line). It renamed itself the Shropshire Union Canal Society (SUCS) in 1966, and looked at instead restoring the Montgomery Canal, which had been closed under the same 1944 Act (although it had actually been unused and unusable for rather longer, after it burst its banks below Frankton Locks in 1936 and was never repaired).

So when the Welshpool Bypass was proposed, and a route for the new road was chosen which would obliterate the canal through the centre of the town, SUCS was ready to fight it.

A major protest event and working party was organised, which became known as the Welshpool Big Dig. Over a weekend in October 1969, 300 volunteers including SUCS, local residents and other waterways supporters, and by the end of the weekend they had a boat floating on the canal.

This helped to see off the threat from the bypass scheme, but that didn't mean it was going to be a straightforward restoration. Elsewhere on the canal there were already numerous places where road bridges had been demolished and the canal culverted, while two lengths had been allowed to run dry.

However the Welshpool Big Dig, as well as achieving its protest aims, kick-started the restoration project and led to a programme of work to restore a seven-mile isolated length through the town.

This length was the focus for work in the early years, including the first lock restoration at Welshpool Town Lock followed by Pool Quay, Bank and Crowther Hall locks.

SUCS' volunteers then moved northwards to completely rebuild Carreghofa



Harry Arnold

How it started: the Welshpool Big Dig in 1969

Locks and then Burgedin Locks during the 1980s.

Unfortunately it wasn't all good news though, with what was widely seen as a very misguided decision by the authorities (despite their efforts to justify it) to demolish Williams Bridge, a minor road bridge, and replace it with a low-level culverted crossing. And this happened as late as the late 1970s, just when it seemed like the tide had turned in favour of restoration and there would be no more blockages created. Despite protests the bridge was indeed destroyed - but amid sufficient bad publicity for the authorities (it even made the front page of *The Times*) that it looked certain to be the last new blockage created. And so it has.

Meanwhile visiting volunteers from WRG (which hadn't even been in existence when the restoration started) had got involved with the restoration of Frankton Locks, the first flight at the north end of the canal, where it connects to the Llangollen Canal and the rest of the waterways system.

And having completed Frankton, the visiting volunteers moved on to restore the next flight down, at Aston Locks - and to

build the adjacent nature reserve in the early 1990s.

Nature reserve? Yes, already the 'nature versus navigation' issue on the waterways had kicked off, and one place that it was being raised was on the Montgomery Canal. Without going too far into it (and for all that filling the column inches in *Navigators* might be a challenge in the coming months, I don't think repeating all the arguments on both sides of this particular debate would make us many new fans!) there were those on the nature conservation side who took the view that the preservation of biodiversity and of the Montgomery's rare aquatic plants in particular was sufficiently important that it couldn't be sacrificed so that people could go canal boating; on the other side the supporters of reopening to navigation took the view that if they hadn't saved the canal and begun restoring it, there wouldn't be any biodiversity left to preserve. And while the nature conservation view was supported by the powerful legal protection afforded by designation of canals as Sites of Special Scientific Interest (and other similar designation), the navigation interests could counter that the regeneration benefits of reopening (which were the basis of local authority support for it) would only be realised if people could actually use the reopened canal.

As I said, I won't go into the Montgomery's particular nature issues too deeply, but the (very) long-term upshot was that all parties eventually agreed to a Conservation Management Strategy (CMS) which gave none of them exactly what they wanted (and therefore was probably as good an agreement as it could be). And in the meantime WRG got to build a nice nature reserve by Aston Locks, providing an alternative habitat to replace any nature interest lost by the restoration and use of the locks.

Meanwhile, SUCS' volunteers had finished yet another set of locks at Burgedin, and headed for the far end of the canal where they rebuilt Brynderwen and Byles locks. And the tide had genuinely turned as regards main road blockages (helped by a rather unusual campaign event, where SUCS and the Inland Waterways Association Shrews-



Steve Davis

John Craven and other dignitaries open Aston Locks, 2003

bury & North Wales Branch held a 'Dinghy Dawdle' which involved the Police holding up the traffic while all the participants carried their boats very slowly across a main road!), with the authorities replacing several culverts with new bridges and BW restoring more locks, extending the Welshpool length to a total of 12 miles of continuous navigable waterway.

At the English (northern) end of the canal the locks at Frankton and then at Aston were reopened, while the length in between them which had suffered subsidence was rebuilt, and a new lock commemorating WRG founder Graham Palmer was built (to correct changes in level caused by the subsidence), allowing visiting boats to access the first seven miles of the canal from 2003.

And that's still as far as it's got. Not because folks have been resting on their laurels, but because the next section, the infamous 'Pant dry section', won't hold water and has had to be laboriously re-lined with a waterproof membrane overlaid with a protected bed of stones, for every inch of the way. One section was funded and done by contractors, while more recently a very welcome Lottery grant is paying for a section including a new winding hole at Crickheath Wharf plus more nature reserves and other works, but the majority of the lining work has been a long slog for the SUCS volunteer team (see progress update p26-27). However it's getting within sight of completion...

Where are we at now? To gauge the current state of restoration on the Montgomery, let's take a trip along the entire length of it, starting at Frankton Junction.

The first seven miles including Frankton Locks, the Graham Palmer Lock and Aston Locks, are fully navigable and visited by plenty of boats from the Llangollen. They're subject to a booking system and a maximum limit on boat movements per year, but under the CMS this will increase, and just recently the Frankton lock opening hours have been doubled to four hours a day.

The length open to boats ends at Gronwen Bridge beyond Maesbury, the limit of navigation since the Aston Lock reopening in 2003. But two further lengths have since been completely re-lined and put back in water - from Gronwen to Redwith Bridge, and on from there to Pryces Bridge. So why aren't they open? Partly because of the requirement for fringe vegetation (which is encouraged by the type of bank lining used) to be allowed to become established before the canal is put in use; but largely because there would be nowhere for boats to turn round. The length that SUCS is currently working on, from Pryces Bridge to Crickheath, will connect it to a full-size winding hole (turning point) which has been built and funded by the Lottery grant at Crickheath Wharf. There, the historic wharf walls which once allowed boats to interchange with tramways leading to the stone quarries have been restored, and it will make a good terminus for the canal when this length is completed in the not-too-distant future.

The next two miles from Crickheath to just short of Llanymynech are also currently dry, and also includes one serious obstruction in the form of a low level road crossing at the former Schoolhouse Bridge - of which more later. It did have another blockage, an old railway embankment at Pant, but a WRG Northwest mini-camp a couple of years ago dealt with that.

A length through Llanymynech has been restored, and is home to a trip-boat, based in a heritage area which includes the surviving Hoffman Kiln (a rare type of limekiln) and a reconstructed length of tram-

way. It's also a politically important section, as it straddles the Welsh border.

The trip-boat length ends at a minor road crossing at Walls Bridge, one of four road blockages in the next four miles - the others are Willams Bridge (another minor road) and two crossings of the A483 at Maerdy and Arddleen. Dealing with these last two will be tricky - it's a main road, and raising it to provide navigable headroom would be expensive, if it's even acceptable to the road authorities at all. Lowering the canal wouldn't be easy either. There's also a major aqueduct over the River Vyrnwy requiring attention. But on the plus side, the only two locks on this length at Carreghofa have been restored by SUCS.

The good news is that from Arddleen onwards the canal is now continuously restored and navigable all the way through Welshpool and on to Refail - a total of around 12 miles and 11 locks.

Beyond Refail there are a further six miles in water to just beyond Aberbechan. There are several road blockages (including more crossings of the A483), but SUCS have restored all three locks on this length at Brynderwen, Byles and Newhouse.

This length ends where a feeder supplies it with water from the Severn, and the final two and a half mile length including the last three locks climbing into Newtown is dry. Not only that but the canal bed is occupied by a sewer, and the terminal basin has been built on. But see later..



Waiting for the boats: Byles Lock, restored by SUCS

So what next? As we've already mentioned, the SUCS team will (once the current restrictions are lifted) carry on with their work to line the canal from Pryces Bridge to Crickheath Wharf, enabling the length from Gronwen to Crickheath to reopen, and adding another mile and a half to the navigable length at the English end. But plans are already in hand to open the next section.

The 'one serious obstruction' we mentioned - the missing Schoolhouse Bridge - is the subject of a funding Appeal led by Montgomery Waterway Restoration Trust (a partnership organisation bringing together SUCS, IWA, local authorities and other bodies involved in the canal) which is well on the way to raise the necessary costs. Meanwhile MWRT has been doing the detailed planning, recruiting skilled volunteers for project management, and working towards a rebuilding project which (subject to current issues) is set to rebuild the bridge during 2021. Although the basic structure will be built by contractors, the aim is that volunteers will do as much as possible - brick facings, earthworks, parapets, towpath and so on - and that WRG Canal Camps in summer 2021 will be an important part of this. Watch this space!

Reopening this two-mile length to Llanymynech will also require some more

channel lining work. At some point between Crickheath (where the canal definitely won't hold water without re-lining) and Llanymynech (where it already is holding water) there must be a change in the underlying ground conditions that make the difference between whether or not it will need lining. And that will determine whether (as MWRT's John Dodwell suggested) we could see boats through to Llanymynech within five years.

And then what? Get to Llanymynech, and it's just a four mile gap between there and the 12-mile navigable length through Welshpool. But as we mentioned it will be an expensive one, although MWRT has plans for how to deal with the obstructions. And with the canal navigable to the Welsh border, it may well prove easier to attract support and funding from Welsh bodies, such as Powys Council, the Welsh Assembly, and the Mid Wales Growth Deal funding pot.

Beyond Refail there are further blockages, as we mentioned above - and getting back into Newtown wouldn't be easy at all. But recently Newtown Council has expressed its enthusiasm for the idea, and there are optimistic suggestions of the town's 750th anniversary in 2029 as a target date.

Martin Ludgate

To find our more and to support the appeal see restorethemontgomerycanal.uk



Next year's job: Impression of the completed Schoolhouse Bridge and (inset) as it is now