



ANNUAL MEETING 2008

Tony Hales, Chairman, British Waterways

Good morning Ladies and Gentlemen and welcome to our 2008 Annual General Meeting.

The wonderful waterway network that we enjoy today was of course founded in the eighteenth century. The Eighteenth Century also saw the notorious South Sea Bubble when the coffee houses of London were full of sharks, spivs and charlatans pedalling unimaginable fortunes, built on debt, derivatives, and empty promises of fools gold. We have come a long way since then, with better education, better regulation, and learning that fast buck greed has its come uppance or have we ?! This Annual Meeting is not about the state of the national economy, but, clearly, with unemployment rising, house repossessions rising, and government budgets under the most severe pressure, we must be realistic how we plan and how we, as a waterway movement, communicate to governments and the public at large about our wonderful heritage, its future and how we seek to safeguard and fund that future. This is a time for calm reason not shrill demands.

Now, in today's meeting, I want to look back at what we have achieved, where we are today and then this afternoon, I want to start the debate about where we go - what sort of waterways do we want in the future, how do we value them, how do we fund them, and how are we best structured to deliver the strategy?

But returning to history and a history that exists in the lifetime of some of us. The waterways were nationalised in the 1947 Transport Act and have been effectively in public ownership since. However, nationalisation in its early years can hardly be judged a success if you loved canals. It did nothing to protect the canals (or for that matter the railways) from closure and disrepair.

20 years later, the Transport Act was a significant step forward - much campaigned for by the IWA and others. Recognising that the Act incorporated most (though not all) of the IWA's objectives Lionel Munk, then IWA's chairman, wrote 'The Government now accepts the value of the amenity canals. That is of paramount importance.' That quote is from the IWA Bulletin number 86 published in January 1969.

Of course, 'amenity' was 1960's policy speak for what we would now call leisure and tourism or perhaps recreation. It was an very important shift of attitude and has helped to protect the existing network ever since, even if it did not come with any corresponding guarantee of funding!

In the year 2000, John Prescott launched 'Waterways for Tomorrow', effectively the first government policy pronouncement on the waterways of any stature since 1968. The policy brought recognition of the waterways up to date in that it recognised the outstanding contribution they could make to regeneration and the environment as well as their 'amenity' role. Once again, the policy was, shall we say, less explicit on financial sustainability.

Now, 20 years after the '68 Act, and 8 years after the launch of *'Waterways for Tomorrow'*, Ministers have wisely asked civil servants to 'refresh' the policy. Speaking of Ministers may I take this opportunity to thank Jonathon Shaw MP for his contribution as Waterway Minister at Defra, he showed a genuine interest in the waterways and was a real catalyst in bringing the many interested parties together across government. Let me also welcome Huw Irranca - Davies as our new Minister for England and Wales. We look forward to taking him out on the waterways and briefing him on the wide public benefit that we deliver. In Scotland we have had great support from our Minister, Stewart Stevenson MSP and I thank him for all his interest and real engagement across the whole range of our activities not least the Helix project. Coming back to the refresh of policy, this gives us a real opportunity to engage both with Ministers but the widest number of stakeholders in 2009.

Of course, the government isn't the only one with opinions about the waterways! The BW Board are extremely keen to agree a strategy update, as we see a window of opportunity presented by the *'Waterways for Tomorrow'* 'refresh' and the fact that a new Comprehensive Spending Review period is looming. We believe, ladies and gentlemen, that now is the time to lay out a vision for a sustainable future for the waterways up to at least 2020.

Both Board and government will be seeking your views and the views of other stakeholders, such as local authorities, on the development of strategy during 2009. Right now, the BW senior team is hard at work and presented some ideas on 'direction of travel' to the Board last week. The Board has asked for more fully worked up ideas in November.

With that process started, we thought a little stimulating pre-discussion of some of the big issues would be useful. That is why we have set up this afternoon's session and rather grandly called it *'Waterways for the 21st Century'*. We thought it would be useful to hear a few very different points of view, which is why I am delighted that this afternoon I will be able to chair a panel made up of Carole Souter, Chief Executive of the Heritage Lottery Fund, Richard Fairhurst, Editor of *Waterways World*, John Edmonds, Chair of IWAC and last, but not least, John Gummer, an ex Secretary of State at the Department of the Environment who took a keen interest in waterways in his time there and has continued to do so.

I am really looking forward to examining again the values we bring to society they are many - heritage, environmental, flood alleviation, tourism, leisure, health, sport, education, regeneration, social inclusion, and just yours (the nation) to enjoy anytime.

My goodness, in these times the ability to use and enjoy that beautiful public space in an urban or a country setting, for everyone and for free, is a real national treasure. But lets return to the future later.

Last year the repair and maintenance programme continued at a pace with the single biggest challenge, the repair of the Mon & Brec, and the biggest setback, the breach at Stourbridge. The Mon & Brec is progressing well and I hope, that after spending my birthday this year in the rain on the Stratford Canal, to be back next year for my birthday on the Mon & Brec.

While maintaining the current network is our clear number one priority, we remain committed to supporting the expansion of the network, albeit such expansion must be funded from third party sources. We cannot fund but we can advise and assist funding and we can project manage. The first part of the Manchester & Bolton Canal was opened last month including the Margaret Fletcher Tunnel, in memory of a tremendous campaigner. I am delighted that the contract for the Droitwich Canal has been let and work is progressing well. I have spent several afternoons walking its length with my dog and was so impressed with the real team work between the British Waterways boys in blue, the contractors and the indefatigable guys from the Waterway Recovery Group working their hearts out in torrential rain to restore this lovely waterway. In Liverpool and London the links from the Leeds & Liverpool Canal to the Albert Dock, and from the Thames to the Olympic Village, are nearly finished despite the discovery of a huge wartime bomb. I am delighted that most of the funding for the Helix project in Scotland is secure and that we continue to see a stream of visionary projects come forward. Robin will give further detail on the progress of these schemes.

Amongst all this excitement, the Board is well aware of the different views on bollards, signs and boater pricing issues. No-one argues against the importance of safety, and for Directors, this is both a very serious moral and legal issue. It is the interpretation and communication of safety that is the issue. Robin has discussed these issues at many face to face meetings and while different opinions continue to be held, I will commit the Board to seeking more face to face dialogue on these issues. I am asking each board member to attend at least one regional meeting in the next 12 months as well as the national meetings they attend. The Standards Advisory Panel set up to include boaters, our own operational staff and engineers, will also be a help. BAAF is another important forum but do invite us

also to your Associations' National and Regional Meetings, we cant do them all but will do our best to attend the major ones. It is clearly preferable for the waterway movement as a whole to deal with differences face to face and then to use our various external channels to promote public and government support for the waterways. We need that clear voice to gain support on the big issues such as funding, town and country planning, and environmental legislation, not least the right to water. Simon Salem tells me there are 20 times the number of people supporting birdlife than waterways, so that's a challenge. Through advertising, public relations and most importantly, word of mouth, we must do more in particular with local government.

Let me also thank our staff for some excellent work last year, and in thanking all of them highlight two teams who were recognised in our awards for excellence. Anthony and Michael Bush were given the National Customer Service Award last year for their prompt attention to address an emergency call out from the owners of the Nina Christina. The engines and inside of the boat were submerged when they arrived. They quickly calmed the obviously very anxious and distressed owners and then pumped out the boat and refloated it. Incidentally their dad also worked for BW. Give the guys a round of applause please. The second team I would ask you to recognise are Julian Rasen, Rachel Harris, and Stuart Gadsby for their excellent work on repairing and restoring Drakenholes Tunnel on the Chesterfield Canal. This tunnel has been skilfully restored so it will last another 200 years but the casual observer would only know the work is recent from the absence of vegetation. Great job and many thanks. Just two examples of the skill and dedication put into their work by our people.

Finally, no reflection on the past year could be complete without reference again to the economic downturn. I can assure you that BW is not immune from the effects of the downturn. It affects our joint ventures, our licence and moorings income and our potential government funding. However, I can also assure you that the Board and Executive team have a prudent, resilient plan in place for the next three years with a strong focus on

managing the cash. We will weather the storm, albeit not without effort and some pain. History shows again that nothing is new – back to that IWA 1969 bulletin quoting Lionel Munk. He wrote ‘We for our part must appreciate, particularly in the present most difficult economic circumstances, that finance is of overwhelming importance. We shall expect the Board to use and develop the waterways effectively and energetically. We must appreciate that their efforts must be made within the financial limits which will exist.’

The Board has challenged its excellent executive team to tackle big issues, including driving for further cost effectiveness. I know they will not shirk that challenge.

I believe we can all work together on the big issues whilst hammering out lower level disagreements, but I know it will not always be easy. I want to go back one final time to 1969 again to show the mountain we must climb together on big issues – nowadays we are all talking about getting better understanding, involvement and support from local authorities and yet in a different article that year The Association commented on communicating with local authorities. ‘It might have been thought with some justification that after our conference at Oxford for local authorities, the spread of knowledge and understanding would have been fairly rapid and constant – certainly in places such as Stourport’. Speaking of a plan to celebrate the canals bicentenary in 1970, Councillor James said, ‘as for the canal itself, that is nothing to be proud of. The Bewdley people who told Brindley that they did not want his stinking ditch 200 years ago were probably right’.

Well we have all had the last laugh on Councillor James – just look at rejuvenated Stourport today – with help from HLF – I am not just saying that because Carole Souter, their Chief Exec, is here – thanks for coming Carole – but because it was a fantastic project and a good example of what we all want to achieve and was a worthy winner of the BURA Award for outstanding achievement. However we still need more support and indeed financial support from local authorities.

I've enjoyed working with history today. It's fun. But history is also our challenge – I am determined that history will judge us as waterway enthusiasts who worked for and achieved strategic change, who did not settle for the narrow view, and who built a sustainable, safe and expansive future for BW's canals and rivers - just like our predecessors 20 or more years ago.

Thank you very much for listening.