



Preserving and Promoting Horseboating

www.horseboating.org.uk

CHAIRPERSON'S REPORT, JANUARY 2011

I welcome the new members to the Horseboating Society (HBS) and I send greetings to all others who have supported the HBS in the past or present. The HBS was founded on 19 January 2001, so we have now reached our 10th anniversary, having completed ten busy years of horseboating and campaigning. We are certainly "on the map", known to other organisations, but still in our youth compared to some others. We have achieved so much, but there is still much to do to keep going or to reach more goals. I invite you to renew HBS membership in 2011 to join in with the HBS as we celebrate our anniversary. The need for the Horseboating Society seems just as great as ever, from the time when it was set up.

We are a national organisation with the aim of preserving and promoting horseboating on our national network of canals (and rivers). Unfortunately most rivers are not navigable by a horse-drawn boat due to the growth of abundant trees between the towpath and water impeding the use of a towing line. In 2010, there were only 4 commercial companies in Britain giving horse-drawn passenger boat trips, as sadly Bywater Horse-drawn Holiday Cruises was no longer operating. The decline in horse-drawn commercial passenger craft has not stopped, since about 15 companies in the last 30 years or so has been reduced to just 4. This is very regrettable because each company gives great pleasure and education about waterway heritage to many passengers each year. In 2005 the HBS made an Official Complaint to BW, with a promise from BW "that it would not happen again" where BW might be found lacking in its support to a company. Yet BW still has not grasped its lack of support at a strategic level and much improvement is required on their part. BW "shut the stable door after the horse had bolted" in the case of Bywater Cruises, dredging the scours in the Montgomery Canal only after representation from the HBS chairperson to BW directors. So now with only 4 commercial companies, not much of the national waterway network can be horseboated by them. This is where the HBS committee comes in.

The HBS arranges journeys on the national system, but currently mostly based in the northern half of the UK, where it just so happens that there are now no horse-drawn passenger boats. Even this was addressed slightly in 2010 with a few trial passenger trips on the Rochdale Canal. The HBS has tried "to mop up" recent closure of commercial companies: with Maria (Ashton Packet Boat Co 1978-1999) on many journeys for all ten HBS years; boating on the Rochdale Canal (in place of Calder Valley Cruising); and using Vixen (Foxton Boat Services, until 2008) in the south and north for projects and trial passenger trips. This is not truly a satisfactory way forward however, as relying on voluntary crew means horseboating on fewer days than commercial companies and there is much administrative work involved in travelling on different canals, seeking crew, and arranging lunchtime and overnight stops. To be more sustainable, the HBS might need to look at helping to set up more commercial ventures. The HBS committee would like to hear from any persons interested in helping to try to resurrect the passenger carrying operation with Sian (Bywater Cruises) on the Montgomery Canal or elsewhere.

So what went on in 2010? HBS members supported the journeys and projects, assisted by new crew, many of whom became HBS members. We attended several waterway events, and also ran our own.

On the Huddersfield Narrow, we offered legging events at Standedge Tunnel and guided walks over the tunnel top. These are gaining in popularity, there being 60 members of the public on one walk following boathorse Bilbo. Our event with a St.George and the Dragon theme was very successful at Tunnel End, and BW have invited us to run this again. Our treasured member Ronnie Barnes aged 91, took the role of King in the story, receiving another fabulous themed cake at Standedge when we emerged after legging the 3 and ¼ mile long tunnel. Not only did we have cake from Christine Bergin, but two full barrels of beer from local breweries to share with the crowd who welcomed our arrival.

In the South Midlands, we again attended the Braunston Historic Boat Gathering, legging through Braunston Tunnel. At the Gathering we gave demos of boathorse harnessing in the idyllic BW Stop House Garden. We are invited to return to this event in 2011. We were horseboating again with the GUCCCo butty Angel, courtesy of HBS member Sheena Bourn. A pleasing development was that Rick Muir and Joanna Peck brought Gypsy Queen along for her first attempt at horseboating. This went well with support from me and members from the south. G.Queen has much experience in harness already.

We attended the first two-week Marple Festival on the Peak Forest Canal, with horseboat Maria, and were involved in the national Heritage Open Days. The local BW manager made the long journey home with us, working the Marple lock flight, legging Hyde Bank Tunnel, and steering for some of the route.

We were invited to join in the Rochdale Canal Festival again, sponsored to make a complete passage of the 32 mile canal with its 92 locks, passing through Manchester city centre, to Rochdale, over the Pennine Summit, then via market towns to Sowerby Bridge. We continued around the South Pennine Ring to Standedge Tunnel to winter Elland and Vixen, ready for the tunnel bi-centenary in April 2011.

The plan for 2011 is to repeat some journeys and events if funding allows, but also to concentrate especially on two major events in the north-west. One is the 250th anniversary of the celebrations held to herald the success of the original Barton Aqueduct on the Bridgewater Canal, and the other is the 200th anniversary of the opening of Standedge Tunnel on the Huddersfield Narrow Canal. "Towlines" indicates much of what is planned, but visit the HBS website for updates and amendments. In 2012, it is hoped to undertake the very long journey from Leeds to London, the HBS having been invited to take part in the first international Festival of the Working Horse, to be held in Windsor Great Park. Recently, as HBS chairperson, I was invited to meet the festival patron, HRH the Prince of Wales, who warmly congratulated those of us present on maintaining traditional skills working with draught horses.

We still believe that our HBS aim is very much about being seen travelling on the open network, rather than only doing demos at events. Yet waterway event organisers tend to want to only pay for days at their events, rather than days taken to horseboat there. At many events, it is not even possible to operate a horse-drawn boat, often due to numerous moored boats obstructing our towline use. I ask all members to consider ways forward, whether they could help the HBS such as by donations, legacies, sponsoring a day of horseboating (£250), acting as a fundraiser for a particular project, seeking grants for longer term work, or even purchasing a suitable horse, boat or shares in a boat etc.

In 2010, the HBS committee meetings were held usually each month, and were attended by only the main officers of chairperson, secretary, and treasurer working harmoniously together. The committee has recently been strengthened by Glynis Henville, a life member, agreeing to act as membership secretary, and we also have some members as reps in their areas. For the HBS reps, we have: Scotland is Tim Lucey, North is Sue Day, Midlands is Jayne Bradley, South is Rick Muir. Members help as committee, reps, website manager, craft workers, photographers, crew, at events, with boat care.

The HBS still needs help from members to attend waterway authority meetings, especially regional British Waterways meetings, to represent our interests about issues such as towpath resurfacing, vegetation management, and obstructions like motorbike barriers and railings etc. There are 11 BW regions, and meetings are held in the autumn and spring. Please do consider this and contact us if you could offer to attend those meetings which will be in your region. You might be attending anyhow. Could you formally represent HBS while there? It is a good time to meet and network with others.

The HBS membership is made up from about 100 members as individuals or organisations like the commercial horse-drawn passenger craft companies or like horseboat owners such as the Boat Museum Society and the Saturn Group. Well done to those who have taken out life membership or put their membership on standing order. This makes the task of the membership secretary much easier. For others, please do consider taking out life membership or setting up a standing order. Subscriptions are due from January 1st, and forms for new or renewal of membership are enclosed and are also on our website. The annual subscription (£10) is kept at the same rate to encourage membership, but donations are very gratefully received. Income from subscriptions is almost immediately swallowed up by insurance and the like. A great 10th birthday present would be your life membership (£100)! I look forward to meeting and hearing from you in 2011. Our AGM is April 2nd. Do please come if you can.