

Canal Report

All the Scottish canals are reliably open for business, but will be closed for maintenance at different times and places during the winter. For detail on any aspect try to contact www.scottishcanals.co.uk or www.waterscape.com or phone BW at Falkirk on 01324 671217 and ask. I have difficulty with the web pages!

The essential feature is that for canalling to be relaxing takes a lot of time. BW like us to stay and enjoy the facilities, which are improving steadily, like secure moorings at Auchinstarry or swish toilets at Kirkintilloch, and improving pubs along the way: and pay for the privilege. If you want to get through as smartly as possible, to zip from West Highland week to the Lands of Loyal regatta for instance, you need to inject some motivation or a firecracker into the BW organization. The bankstaff will be great company, will work like Trojans, help with all sorts of problems from fuel blockages to fish suppers, but will still expect you to spend more time in the track than you would expect. To ensure a swift passage, tell BW office before you enter, and tell everyone you see once inside that you intend to catch the tide on exit on the date you have planned. Even then, as each bank team takes over, make sure they all know your intention and ask them to call ahead to the next crew so they are forewarned, otherwise you will be expected to take a day or two longer than necessary, and feel frustrated. You may even phone me, and get BW blasted out on their day off to open a swing bridge here or there, to make that critical tide. Ask Tommy Smithereen!

Elsewhere, the Scottish Executive have confirmed regular payments of about £11m pa to keep BW(S) going, plus an extra £3m this autumn to help with a couple of problem areas such as the clearance of wrecks from Bowling harbour, completion of lock work on the Calley and automation of some bridges. The trial on the F&C is to operate two of the bridges next year from the control room at the wheelsite, using CCTV and telemetry. Sounds good.

Depth in the F&C is generally 1.8m and dredging work continues to clear any reported high spots. I don't like them relying on customers to report dredging needs, but they do, so if you bump anything, make sure to report its location, formally.

On the Lowland canals, there have been 14 million of tow path users this year, over 50 000 paying passengers on trip boats and canal society boat cruises, including charter boat users, hundreds of sophisticated fishermen and ladies, over 350 permanent mooring licenses issued, the same number of visitor licenses, and 144 transit licenses issued. This explains why BW concentrate on bankside facilities and maintenance, such as surfacing of the towpaths, but still reminds us salties that to increase the number of attractive, interesting, valuable seagoing customers, BW must get better at ensuring the water is the depth they say, and that transit is achieved in the time the skipper wants, usually 2 days, and that the aquatic plant growth is managed to ensure a clear navigation channel (which it was this year except for a bad bit near Bowling where the weed is unique in the world and protected).

Remember that depth and headroom are both limited. Know your yacht's dimensions before entering the Carron or Clyde estuary and do your own calculation for tide and current. The entrances are both straightforward if you follow the Skippers Guide and watch the buoys and depth gauges. The cranes at Carron and Bowling are fine, if a bit slow on the manual winding, and BW do try to control your planned timing for the rigging work, so you do need to keep them on their toes and be ready for excuses, but you can still reliably transit from Kirkintilloch to Bowling by 4.00pm, put the mast up, and sail to Holy Loch on the evening ebb. The same to Granton; or in reverse. You can also take three or four days, enjoy a few pints and a posh nosh on the way, and arrive at Inverkip cool and relaxed, ready for the "Scottish" next weekend.

Give it a try in 2006.

Andy Markate.