Hello,

Please find below an assessment of the present situation in regards to Boats Maintenance Facilities on the Lowland Canals.

Combined with that assessment (which depicts a dire situation) is a proposal for a Temporary Maintenance Scheme that would allow many boats of the Lowland Canals to be maintained without suffering any more from the lack of facilities.

The following presentation has already been sent to many boat owners, many of whom have responded very positively to this letter as it is finally addressing a major issue for them…

* **Boats Maintenance facilities on the Lowland Canals- where are we now?**

As you are certainly aware, there is a necessity for periodic maintenance to be carried on the hull of any boat and there is a real difficulty in undertaking such operations in the current time and with the available facilities on the Lowland Canals.

This is a particular issue right now on the Union Canal where no facilities allow for mechanical work to be carried out on hulls (i.e., grinding, blasting, sanding,…), even if a steel hull needs such at times and the ageing fleet of boats on the Lowland means that replating could have to take place on several boats in a near future.

**Most dry docks are purposely designed for maintenance of boats and it is sad and a great shame that at this moment in time the existing facilities cannot be used with all their potential.**

In most instances there is a need to access the bottom plate of the boats for inspection/maintenance issues and sadly the Floating dry dock at Falkirk does not allow for such access.

**I can only hope that the running bodies (i.e. Seagull Trust and Scottish Canals) realise that they desperately need to work together and invest in those existing facilities to improve the situation and accommodate for the boaters to use them,** but lets’ look at the other options right now and consider an alternative temporary measure that I would propose…

One escape from being tied to dry docks is the use of external space on dry land.

On the Forth and Clyde Canal, only the Stables provides a slipway that is on an incline which makes it not ideal. The other options are escaping to the River Clyde and reach a place like Sandpoint Marina or on the F&C is a lift at Steven Kelvin on the River Caron (just after the Kelpies) but he is now only operates in a limited manner as living overseas most of the year. He does 2 series of lifts of boats per year: One set of lifts early April and another one in September. It might be of interest to some boaters but not to all…

Even though I tried to make things moving over the course of nearly one year I have received little support from SC.

To my surprise I found out at the last Lowland Canals User Group meeting (end Nov 2020) that Scottish Canals was looking for funding to revamp the old IRN Bru factory by Loch 16 on the F&C Canal to make it a Boat maintenance hub (boat lift, sheltered facilities in the old IRN Bru factory…). I knew that SC was refurbishing the sheds but never in the many months of talking about my plans was a mention made about SC themselves planning about such scheme.

This plan of finally making facilities is fantastic news (if it is to happen) but it is a at least a 2 years kind of project and it might be not even happen if no funding is being found.

Given the scale of such high investment, a couple of questions would come to mind.

-Will Scottish Canals consult the boating Community about this project to make sure that the design is fit for purpose?

-To absorb such high investment cost, how much will the boaters be charged when they will come to use those facilities? Forcing high prices would be very unfair for the boaters.

**In my view, the decision of undertaking major investments in brand new facilities when there are some readily available ones has to be done very carefully…**

Existing facilities (i.e. dry docks) are already set in various locations of the Lowland Canals and those would be perfect for the purpose of Boats maintenance as they are already presenting all the necessary features to undertake decent work. All they would need is some investment to improve them and make them fit for purpose.

**It is essential that the owners of those privately owned facilities (namely the Seagull Trust) review the way they are proposing the use of those facilities to finally allow the boaters to use them easily, safely and in all parts of the Lowland Canals (Union Canal and Forth & Clyde Canal).**

A few ideas: -Should SC negotiate with the charities to take control of (or share) the ownership of those facilities and assist in the investment to upgrade those? (instead of creating brand-new facilities?)

-Should the Boaters be allowed to control those facilities for a few months every year and organise themselves? (I doubt that it would be accepted)

Regardless of the solution, I believe that a general discussion should be opened very soon between Scottish Canals, the Seagull Trust (or any other charities that could be involved like the F&C Canal Society…), the Boaters and any businesses that could be part of the running of those facilities (like myself or any other business dealing with Boats maintenance).

Still, the big issue right now is the Union Canal where there is nothing right now that is suitable for decent maintenance of the hull of boats (that includes the bottom plate or the keel of boats).

* **Pilot scheme – Multiple lifts**

 As it stands now, the best option as I see it is if a series of lifts were organised in one event, possibly on a monthly basis. This really depends on the scale of demand and the flexibility of the ones involved.

Shared in such way, **the cost of multiple lifts could become a very viable option for the boaters**...

Individually, boat lifts are horribly expensive as there is a lot of paperwork for one operation and the insurance is high but if grouped, boats lift become drastically cheaper.

I personally think that Scottish Canal, as a service provider, should be doing a lot of this groundwork or they should be at least involved and/or assist the making of such kind of emergency operation so that the boaters can keep their boats in a good enough shape and afloat.

It would be so nice if SC was willing to be involved and assist the making of this one-off temporary scheme…

**I personally feel that SC should subsidize such kind of scheme (to render it viable if needs be and cap the cost for the boaters to keep the maintenance cost reasonable) as this could be a good temporary way of doing things until suitable facilities are made available.**

The advantages could be multiple… as any work would be done in a less compressed timescale (better quality), the application of any coatings would finally be given the chance to fully cure before being put back in the water (very rarely the case if there is a lot of work on an old hull and only 1 week dry docking), full or partial replating of hulls could finally be considered for several boats (impossible in covered dry dock), and decent corrosion protection of the base plate finally possible.

Managing to erect a cheap and strong temporary cover for some boats would be a premium but the practicalities and cost implications of such challenge could be that it is not a viable option, but it can be considered (maybe one shelter that can be moved from one boat to another…?).

* **Work on hulls – eco-friendly Mechanical preparation**

Having worked on many hulls over the years, I think that I have a gained a good understanding of the effects of corrosion and the methods needed to mitigate it and treat it.

The methods used to treat corrosion and paint on hulls are often problematic and the surface preparation needs to be carefully done to avoid any risks for the environment as dealing with coatings that could become pollutants if left to go in the Air of the Canals.

Instead of considering Grinding and shot blasting as the main methods for hull preparation, I am now looking at an alternative method which would involve a **very high-pressure washer to be a lot eco-friendlier** as allowing the stripped paint and any corrosion to fall under the boats once removed. The falling dirt would only need to be scooped and disposed of. A bit of filtration and separation of the water and debris and that could be it.

There would still be a bit of grinding but a lot less than done in the past for a hull preparation… The pressure washing would be followed by the treatment and sealing of the bare hull.

I have been considering the development of some tooling which could make the process of dealing with the bottom plate in an easier/safer way and I would hope that some funding might be available as aiming to reduce pollution in the process of Blacking a boat.

Getting SC to collaborate and assist with those things would be useful as they might know of certain types of funding for this eco-friendly incentive…

* **Logistics and economy of scale**

All the details would have to be looked at, but it could maybe work if 4 boats (maybe more!?) were to be lifted in one day, one after another, lets’ say at the start of April and the same crane would be contracted at the start of the following month to undertake the launch of those maintained boats. Another set of boats could be lifted out of the water as soon as the berthed boats are back in the water and such rota could be repeated 3 or 4 times if needs be.

 So, simply presented, the more boats take part, the cheaper the cost for each boat in the abovementioned scheme.

Let me explain with numbers.

If only 4 boats are interested, then it would be a 2 contract lifts operation.

Each boater would pay the cost of 2 contracts divided by 4 boats (=1/2 of the cost of one contract lift).

Now, if there are 12 boats that are part of it, then it could maybe be done with 3 lots of 4 boats (4 contract lifts altogether…)

Each boater would then pay the cost of 4 contracts divided by 12 boats (=1/3 of the cost of one contract lift).

Please note that those costing forecasts are only indicative and only presented to highlight the economy of scale and the cost reduction associated with a higher number of boats taking part in this scheme, but it could be a different ratio.

Obviously, any alteration of the number of boats involved and the number of lifts would affect the cost sharing ratio… so, the mere, the better!

A calendar of lifts would have to be planned carefully to accommodate for larger boats to be lifted at the same time (if a larger crane is needed for certain vessels, then similar sized boats should go at the same time to try to size the crane to the closest needs…).

As well, Boat owners wanting to lift a boat out for a possible shipment can make use of those multiple lifts to lower their costs (and lower the cost of the boats lifted for the maintenance at the same time as sharing the same bill!). The same could apply for any boat on a trailer needing a lift in the water…

SC could work in conjunction with that plan to possibly launch (or lift out) some of their own boats, thus lowering the costs for their own expenses and lower the costs for the boats taking part of that scheme as sharing the costs…it would make complete sense.

* **Location?**

I see the slipway at **Stewartfield Park in Broxburn (Union Canal)** as a good option for that pilot scheme to work.

It is certainly not “ideal” as the isolation of this site could be subject to vandalism but it has a large solid hard standing and it is not in the vicinity of houses. No power though…

The small slipway wouldn’t really be used but the hard standing around is a great platform for such scheme.

I only recently found out that the land belongs to West Lothian Council. I contacted them, presented the methods associated with the lifts and the maintenance scheme and their response was quite positive. They responded to my query the day after I contacted them, and I was amazed to see such efficient and positive response…

As well, I have met with the manager of the Lifting Company "Forsyth of Denny" who positively responded to my query as I explained this whole scenario of multiple boats lifts. There would be an economy of scale if multiple boats were craned in the same slot...so if the operation is well prepared it could even be a cheaper way for the boaters to get their maintenance done. That is my hope anyway.

Some form of fencing and cameras might be required to maintain the safety of such site when left at night…or much cheaper option if there was always a couple of boaters staying on their boats during the whole period to reduce the risk of vandalism and theft on site.

Another potential site could be the **parking lot opposite the Park bistro (near Narrowboat Farm), East of Linlithgow.**

As well, I only recently found out that this piece of land is only partially owned by SC and I must discuss with the restaurant owners to see if they would accept the use of their overflow car park for 4 months.

In my view, this would be a much better site than Stewartfield Park in Broxburn (access, safety, power nearby…).

* **So, who is in??**

I have asked most of my customers about 1 month ago who would be interested in taking part in this Maintenance operation (if it happens) and I have **already 20 boats** who would be interested in taking part (including my own boat!).

I would like to stress that my goal here is not to make money but to mainly facilitate and organise something useful for the boaters in general (them being my customers or not).

For the amount of time that I am spending trying to organise that scheme, I won’t get much in returns in terms of money. The point is to make it cheap for the boaters to be able to afford this desperately needed operation.

Even if I am managing the overall lifting scheme, I want to emphasise that the maintenance itself could be undertaken by anybody (the work being done by the boat owner or contracted to a business like mine or any other business), as long as work methods are satisfactory and safety measures are adhered to ensure the safety and smoothness of the operation.

At the end of the day, I am hoping that a system can be made where boaters can pass through a less stressful process of preparing and blacking a hull while achieving a better end result and such at a reasonable cost.

If the process is too onerous, too complicated and if I still don’t get any support from SC, I will leave it completely and someone else can deal with organising such but as far as I'm aware nobody is doing anything now to find a practical solution.

**This is urgent matter. The boaters need something done now, so I hope that my proposal of boat lift will be considered seriously and assisted by many.**

**In the long run I strongly believe that the existing dry docks should receive the investment they deserve and their running methods changed to allow them to be finally used to their full potential by all the Boaters.**

Please do not hesitate to contact me if you think that something else could be proposed urgently and work better than the Emergency plan proposed for Boats Maintenance.

Hoping to be heard and that this paper will encourage a constructive discussion...

Regards.

Pierre Potel

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Captain of the Canal

for Ronnie Rusack

From Glasgow to Ratho, Bowling to the Forth

did ever a waterway weep so

for the passing

of one such soul?

Was there ever such gentle reassurance for one and all,

warm encouragement to boat, to blether

to join a common cause?

Was there ever a captain of such standing

who knew neither stoop in the greeting of this lowly boat beginner

nor kow tow to princess or power?

Cast off your ropes and sail the conversation

of our struggling canals.

On every stretch and pound, straight and turn

the water parts beneath our bows with promise.

Here is where you’ll hear that deep delighted captain’s greeting,

the gruff chuckle of adventuring cheer,

that certainty that he held dear,

that waterways?

They will always be here.

A salute from Bev Schofiel