Waterways History Research: Progress, Prospects, Problems and Limits

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This is partly based on a paper that concluded the Waterways History Conference in October 2013. It is presented here with, in part, the hope that it will inspire discussion.

This article reviews some aspects of the present position of research into inland waterways history. It considers progress since 1997, outlines factors that could encourage or limit future progress, and submits suggestions for new developments that might encourage new research. Articles in this Journal rarely feature the word “I” extensively, but this has to be an exception, as it expresses my personal opinions rather than (remotely) any policy of the Society. “I” also applies to personal reflections on, and recollections of, the more recent history of the Society and events organised by it. Whilst I usually hesitate to provide trenchant personal opinions, I do so in an attempt to encourage the overcoming of the “problems and limits” in the title.

Anecdotes, attacks and caveats

My hesitation is compounded by experience of one or two students of transport history whose pronouncements have, often inadvertently, discouraged those who are already involved and committed. While much history rests on careful evidence, often from archive documentation, assessed and weighed, a mere anecdote can sometimes be telling. I recall an early RCHS conference on the writing of transport history, held in Morecambe in 1990. At the end of this, one participant, the late Brian Lamb, stated something to the effect of “well, you’ve put me off; you’ve made it all sound so difficult”. I heeded Mr Lamb’s concerns thereafter; one should try never to put researchers off. I do hope that none of my comments here or elsewhere will discourage anyone from continuing, or embarking upon, any form of transport history research and writing. My main concern here is for those who do not pursue research, but who might be persuaded so to do in different circumstances. I must stress this caveat: do not be discouraged by anything in this article, and if you feel discouraged, please stop reading! There are few enough scholars in the field already; all that I hope is that new ones will be added.

Before beginning the pleasant task of discussing progress, it is worth considering a notorious attack on railway history enthusiasts made, in an after-dinner speech at National Railway Museum event in August 1993, by Neil Cossons (then) of the Science Museum. Sir Neil (as he became the following year) attacked the current state of railway history, asserting that “there is now virtually no scholarly research or publication.” Scholarly
history was seen as peripheral to the interests of many railway enthusiasts, whose “knowledge of railways is minimal”. He went on to allege that “The movement is narrow and sectarian in outlook…There is no visible foundation in scholarship or published research. Railway history is not highly regarded or even recognised in the broad spectrum of historical studies and there is no obvious advancement of knowledge, or interpretation to a wider audience”¹ One question is whether such strictures (and possible solutions) could be applied today to waterways history. I do not attempt to review the quality of existing historical research here (this would require a separate piece), and do not comment on any waterways equivalent of the railway preservationists who formed the main focus of Neil Cossons’ comments. However, it is possible to apply his more telling points about the lack of regard for railway history inside the railway enthusiast scene, and the apparent isolation from wider studies of history, to waterways history as well. I explore some implications of this later.

Progress: the Waterways History Research Group

Following the death of Charles Hadfield in 1996 (and his de facto ending, in 1978, of much research into waterways history), Paul Sillitoe, who had been Archive Resources Officer at the Boat Museum Trust, perceived that waterways history might be stagnating.² It is very much to Paul’s credit that he called a formal Waterways History Conference in Manchester in 1997. Originally, it was envisaged that only a few people would attend, but in the end so many applied that a larger venue had to be secured, and even then some interested parties had to be turned away.

I recall providing the opening paper at this conference, somewhat brashly alluding to the Society’s founders in suggesting that we needed to go beyond Clinkerism and even Hadfieldism. I defined “Clinkerism” as the pursuit of accuracy but strictly within the narrow frame of the (railway) line and its operations, without reference (for instance) to any economic or social impact, or wider roles for transport. “Hadfieldism” was more loosely defined, as a focus upon the company history of waterways, with a somewhat limited approach to the period since nationalisation. While some seemed to feel that Charles Hadfield had completed most waterways history, so that there was little more to do, my contention was that there were further agendas to be pursued and fulfilled.

At the final session of the 1997 conference, someone suggested that a new society should be formed to support and encourage those who were interested in waterways history. As I felt that this could compete with the RCHS, and would involve much administration, I made the counter-proposal that a new special interest group should be formed. This became the first Interest Group to focus on “research” as opposed to a highly
specialist area of transport. What might follow seemed very uncertain, but it seemed very small-scale at the time.

It is sobering to turn to some of the views expressed at that time. In a paper in the following year, I suggested that

If I was to stand here in 10 years time, to discuss the progress of the Waterways History Research Group, I could be discussing how a small initiative led to the revival of a major field of serious research, with major publications, professorial chairs, and so on.

As a pessimist, I fear that I could be standing here bemoaning yet another false dawn, explaining how the bright hopes were soon dashed. As a realist, I think that the latter is more possible, but I hope that many of you will prove me wrong. I am sure that the small-scale development which has been launched will prove strong enough to survive in low key, and strong enough to form one of the foundations of a major new growth. The latter is up to people beyond this room - and up to all of us.³ (my italics)

What has happened since? It is a pleasure to record that, in its own terms, the Waterways History Research Group has been a major success; 15 years later, it even spawned a friendly imitator on similar lines, in the Railway History Research Group. By the summer of 2014, 108 Occasional Papers had been published, with the “Notes and Queries” section a lively source of observations which has led to history that could now be described informally as “crowd-sourced”. With some inevitable exceptions, many detailed queries have been resolved. Perhaps too few contributions in Occasional Papers or Notes have been developed into articles for the Journal, but the potential remains.

It is fascinating to see the range of subjects raised through the Waterways History Research Group, and the manner in which many queries are resolved – history being written collaboratively and in collegiate fashion. This is very different from some academic work, where tribalism, rubbing the opposition, condescension, hostility and aggression can feature. I have been very surprised at how much interesting work has resulted, but very pleasantly surprised. Several factors have contributed, not least the development of communications technology, both in the dissemination of papers (sometimes on a weekly basis) and in the submission of contributions. But the biggest factor has been the efforts and dedication of our co-ordinators (especially the current one, Pat Jones), and the contributors who have helped to develop the WHRG into a secure environment for researchers. I suspect that there is much work that would not have been carried out without the WHRG, or
would have completed at a slower pace or with (more) incomplete results. For much of the RCHS’ history, the model of researcher and author has tended to be the “lone wolf”; this is not always the best approach in this context, although lone wolves remain welcome!

There is much besides the WHRG, and the increasing representation of waterways history in the *Journal* and other RCHS activities. For example, the Modern Transport Group has featured some waterways contributions, and more could follow. The annual *Waterways Journal*, founded, coincidentally, in the same year as the WHRG, has also served to encourage detailed research. There are other online sources, such as Jim Shead’s pages, Canal World Discussion Forum and the railway-canal yahoo group; no doubt there are others.

Commercial publications have also enhanced the outlets for publication; *NarrowBoat* is a dedicated quarterly magazine that supplements the monthly *Waterways World* and others. It would be invidious not to mention the regular Waterways History Conferences, and Waterways History Workshops. Coverage in general transport bodies like T2M and the workshops regularly hosted (until March 2014) by the Institute of Railway Studies and Transport History at York has been limited, but these have opened up possibilities.

Book publishing has not continued on the lines set down by David & Charles in the 1960s and 1970s, but numerous publications, many with extensive photograph collections, have enhanced the history of individual waterways. Far less has appeared that would correspond to the analytical and theoretical concerns of much academic history.

Prospects and Potential

Whilst it is always dangerous to predict the future, some suggestions and speculations may be made. A major change over the last 17 years has been in communication – the ability to access online information rapidly and to disseminate rapidly and widely one’s findings, for comment and amendment. In the recent past, work in archives could be back-breaking, or at least induce RSI in writing fingers and wrists. The pads of paper with scribbled pencil notes can now be largely consigned to history, because of the greatest note-taking invention since writing itself – the digital camera. This has enabled archive visitors – when authorised – to bring home images of archived records, for perusal and cogitation during the writing process. And, without over-labouring this, one result is a major increase in productivity. Physical note-taking, judging what details might need to be accessed for future use, takes considerable time – but much time is saved by taking large sets of photographs. In future, even this may be viewed as a primitive development. We are only at a beginning, as the National
Archives and (hopefully) elsewhere continue to digitise records. Already British Newspaper Archives (for a fee) and (where public libraries make it accessible) The Times archive (1785-2008) can be accessed online, while an online search for photographic images can throw up many results. And, obviously, digital photography enables the capturing of innumerable images in field studies, involving no marginal expense of multiple additional images.

This should make it easier both to research and to write about the results. It is possible that new online-only publications will arise, both journals and books. Already substantial numbers of books are being sold (or given away) in a variety of electronic formats. Without diminishing the Journal that is the RCHS flagship, I would hope to see the additional emergence of new types of online journal; these will be discussed below.

Much of my focus here is on potential new researchers, and would stress that much research could be carried out by those with no background in, or long-term experience of, waterways. Up to a million undergraduate and postgraduate students in the UK annually need to produce an academic dissertation, while a much smaller proportion pursue long-term supervised research, some towards doctorates. Many academic employees are now obliged to produce publications and, as with students, much more research has to be carried out. Of course, the vast majority of this must be unrelated to the small field of waterways history, but there is no reason why many more people should not pursue such history in order to produce work for assessment or compliance. Although the somewhat private work involved may remain within the higher education institutions where it is generated, the ability to disseminate copies electronically means that far smaller amounts of valuable work will be destroyed or locked away in university libraries or stores. Since the conference, the article by Lucy Lead in the July 2014 Journal, based on her B.A. History dissertation, has exemplified this possibility. Hopefully many more will follow.

It is possible that the need to produce a more public history will encourage funding bodies to part or fully-fund new research work. I am aware of recent research supported by the Arts and Humanities Research Council, and experience could lead to further work – and public involvement. Applications to the Heritage Lottery Fund have often necessitated historical research work in order to justify heritage-related projects, and there is no reason why this should not be disseminated to encourage further work. Government-backed heritage bodies like English Heritage and Cadw have supported historical research in the past and, I would submit, the Canal and River Trust, the owner of the third largest collection of listed structures in England and Wales, should be interested in fostering research into the history of the waterways now under its stewardship.
One further positive force, again partly opened up by communications technology, is the greater facilitation of collaborative work. The sole researcher/author/editor may still have their place, but it can be much easier to share research, duties and insights. This could extend from the tracking down of individual details, an activity for which discussion fora are particularly helpful, or the wholesale joining-together of the work of two or more researcher/writers. One could focus on research, and another on writing, or other models and processes could be adopted, including students of more general history working with those with specialised history backgrounds. At the very least co-operation, rather than competition, could prevail. I would conclude with a plea that future work should be collegiate; commercial possibilities are so limited, and there are so few active researchers, that work need not reflect competitive personal ambitions or the direct promotion of individual specialised disciplines.

Problems and limits

Much of what is outlined above could seem distant from the enthusiast work carried out by many RCHS members, and might draw in researchers only for limited periods and purposes. However, the potential is such that I would hope that in (say) 2030 the WHRG will still be thriving, and that much new research will have been carried out and published. While many would share those hopes, several notes of caution need to be sounded. Obviously not all of us will still be functioning in 15 years time, although hopefully everything we have done will be archived somewhere, and will thus live on, maybe to inspire new researchers.

Back in 1997, I asserted that “…there is little sign of a rising generation of serious historians”. Nobody contradicted this at the time, and I would again assert now that there is no sign of any rising generation. A “rising generation” in 1997 would have meant people then (perhaps) under 40, and thus people now under their mid-50s. No detailed data seem to exist, but attendances at any meeting about waterways history would suggest that the scattered under-50s participants do not form any coherent cohort. There are many possible explanations for this, but the evidence seems clear, and complacent responses are not helpful. We are a long way from “schools” of research, in which the work of one group of researchers inspire, directly or indirectly, further researchers, so that research and writing is propagated.

One cause of pessimism, and one possible factor in the severely limited involvement of younger researchers, is the disappearance of so much field evidence. I still find it bizarre to consider how much has disappeared since I first encountered canals in infancy, just over 50 years ago. So much of what I might have glimpsed then, or might have seen, has simply vanished. Not only is there almost no carrying on smaller inland
waterways, the people, the factories, pits and power stations, the very kinds of commodities to be moved, have all gone bar a few reminders. Archaeologists of the modern may soon be required, not to interpret what is still on the ground, but traces of what might have been. We have to write the history of waterways in the eighteenth century without much empathy for sights, sounds and feelings. Increasingly, we won’t be able to do much better for the twentieth century, even though, fortuitously, most routes and structures survived various attempts at extensive closures from the 1940s to the 1970s. There remains a pressing need to record, record and record again, both what remains in the field, and oral evidence from those who can shed light on what remains.

Cheaper and reliable audio(visual) recording equipment should make this easier. However, one problem is what we are attempting to record. Who knows any more what questions to ask, what they should record, what meanings lie in what they are recording? And indeed, what should be done with the mounting records of what has been recorded – all those interviews with older boatpeople, for instance? Happily, many of the latter have been stored, supplementing the growing amount of written evidence; but it remains to be interpreted.

Several other factors in the relative disinterest of under-50 potential researchers can be discerned. The lack of career possibilities has driven many to research items of use in future employment; employment opportunities in waterways history are minimal. The extensive demolition of much adult education provision in the past 15 years has also been unhelpful. Perhaps the very presence of an older generation of researchers dissuades younger ones from joining them; not only may there be a feeling that new ideas will be unwelcome, but also it may seem that the existing opus of research is dominant. Again, there are no higher education courses that handle waterways history directly, no possible careers in this area, and very limited openings for publications in academic journals. It is difficult to see how most waterways history studies could be written so as to meet the approval of academic journals; even the Journal of Transport History, valuable as it is, is very much concerned with mobility history and with work of international application. The academic mentors who might exist, to encourage new students into waterways history, are few and far between. It is ironic, therefore, that whilst in the 1950s few people under 50 had heard of canals, until a new generation became interested from the 1960s onwards, by the present decade most younger people know about waterways, but few seem interested in investigating their history. It may have to be conceded that the study of waterways history (and railway history and industrial archaeology for that matter) has ceased to be fashionable, if it ever was, and one could set up a substantial legacy for the next generations that will not, in reality, be appreciated. Should this prove so, at least some of that legacy can be useful to existing researchers in the meantime.
One further barrier, but one that need not feature if different uses of history are able to co-exist, is perhaps best characterised as that between history and heritage. It may be best not to evoke and revive a debate that is itself passing into history. However, it may be that serious researchers are deterred by the apparent dominance of a genus of populist history over that which is rooted in rigorous research. I would seek to dismiss any dichotomy here between populist approaches that represent popular interests, and a serious history that is the sole preserve of a narrow elite. Populist history is here seen as serving the interests of (relatively) powerful elites that see waterways “history” and “heritage” as marketing tools, and often promote views of history that both ignore contrary evidence and present a complacent view of a romanticised past. If only a small elite is interested in more rigorous and critical views of waterways history, this is not an exclusionary powerful elite, but one based on sheer lack of numbers! When publishing and public history seems to be dominated by populist interests and approaches, this may deter scholars who realise that their voice will not be heard or welcome.

Sadly, this populism included, until more recent intervention by RCHS members, much of the online material propagated by the Canal & River Trust which assumed management of the former British Waterways navigations in 2012. It may be that better materials will encourage the development of history built on research evidence; this need not be in opposition to the more generalised materials promoted by the Trust for popular interest, since I am, hopefully, not alone in the feeling that authentic history can be more interesting and engaging than false history. Hopefully others will see virtue in this view.

This threat from populism was not addressed by Neil Cossons, whose main attack focused on enthusiast history that focused mainly on locomotives and upon obscure details, rarely employing or reflecting a wider or deeper historical narrative. Waterways enthusiasts have a somewhat different orientation to the historical than those who might seek to operate railways or locomotives. However, there are those whose enthusiasm for waterways history lies with the unearthing of extensive details which are not always linked to a wider history. The danger from this and populist approaches, taken together, can be a form of institutionalised trivialisation of the historical.

The substantial improvement in materials that are accessible electronically has brought benefits, but ones that may be diminished by limits on accessibility. This has been partly prompted by legal motives related to licensing, so that much material that is available to university employees and students cannot be accessed by outsiders, even those who pay (as I have done since retirement) for external membership of university libraries. Fortunately, some university libraries provide at least one open-access computer for library visitors. These
significant restrictions can be accompanied by paywalls that insist that researchers should pay for access. This is perhaps inevitable when much of the market lies with those in pursuit of family history research, sometimes for commercial ends, rather than researchers into history. Services like British Newspaper Archives are thus subject to charges. Perhaps more libraries and archive facilities will subscribe to such services, but in (seemingly) an era of near-permanent public expenditure constraint, this would not seem hopeful. A further feature of such constraints is limited and reducing opening hours for physical archives; hopefully the example of the National Railway Museum’s Search Engine, wherein opening hours were drastically cut in 2014, will not be emulated elsewhere.

A satisfactory future for waterways history research may well rest, as I have stressed, on the attraction of new researchers (and indeed the continuing support of those who are already committed). However, there is a potential gulf between the various fields of academic history (and other academic disciplines/studies) and current waterways history practice. At worst, mutual suspicion and disdain characterise practitioners from both areas.

An anecdote may illustrate the views of some academics. On a rare occasion where I obtained limited funding, in 2001 I attended a conference entitled Landscapes and Politics. One speaker, an urban theorist, presented a fascinating study of urban Bermondsey, introduced by a fellow-academic (I will call this person “Dr Smith”), who described her study as “local history”. Afterwards, I approached Dr Smith and suggested that maybe the term “local history” held the wrong connotations, as parochial, particular, and potentially trivial, and the response was to agree: “I could have bitten my tongue out for saying that”. I was emboldened to say that local history could be the subject of valuable academic study, as indeed could my own field…of transport history. At that, Dr Smith blanched visibly, murmured “oh yes”, and got away as quickly as possible from this anorak, no doubt thinking that I was going to launch into a description of engine numbers or discuss the difference between a Josher and a snubber!

This perhaps illustrates some academic perceptions of railway and canal history, as itself parochial, concerned with trivia, and focused solely upon the entertainment of enthusiasts. In turn, some transport history enthusiasts see academic scholars as condescending, patronising, and obscure, pursuing theoretical agendas and analyses far removed from railway and canal history. Happily, many enthusiasts and academics display a measure of mutual respect, and some have feet in both camps. Little seems to be usefully served by the
maintenance of separate camps, and while there is some need to defer to the divergent interests of professional disciplines and enthusiasts, the differences should not present undue distinctions of status.\textsuperscript{10}

Where can Neil Cossons’ structures be placed within these considerations? His comments indicated intense irritation with the railway history enthusiast, a figure whom, he suggested, had little interest in history and no place among scholarly general history. The implication was that the enthusiast was dominant, crowding out scholars who might pursue more serious history, and drawing a justifiable academic condescension towards the study of railway history. I do not feel that there is such a stark divide between enthusiast, academic and professional waterways history, and that the former do not dominate to the point of exclusion. Indeed, as I stressed above, I hope that no enthusiast ever feels the need to withdraw in favour of more academic approaches. I trust that enthusiast work will continue, but in concert with new entrants who may pursue different agendas with varied interpretations, from backgrounds which may not reflect longstanding involvements with waterways. As I suggested in 1998, “a major new growth…is up to people beyond this room - and up to all of us.” All that can be asked of enthusiasts is that they welcome “people beyond this room”, who may well have different priorities.

My partial doubts about Neil Cossons’ attacks lie with a need to defend history enthusiasts from the stricture that they should possess expertise and resources that may well be unavailable to them. I hesitate to quote my own earlier assertions, but no one responded to my own attack on unwarranted assumptions:

Why is it that so many of us assume that the same individual should be expected to assimilate all secondary sources, define an agenda, complete fieldwork, investigate primary sources, analyse, interpret and judge, and write the results into intelligible form? Could it be that one diligent researcher might be best to specialise in one or two aspects of this process, and leave the rest to others who can be co-researchers and co-authors?\textsuperscript{11}

It is possible that one could be lambasting researchers for not being able to access university library resources, or being unable to travel to distant archives. Or, worse, they could be criticised for lacking the skills, background and knowledge (or indeed interest or willingness) to produce academic economic social or political history, or engineering, architectural or environmental history. While such attacks would be unjustifiable, those who possess such skills should be welcomed, with, indeed, their path into the field firmly smoothed. The creation of new forms of access should also assist existing and enthusiast researchers. In the final section, I will suggest some means by which accessibility could be enhanced, before evaluating these.
Two Modest Proposals

My feeling is that while there is much potential in better technology and access, there remains both a lack of personnel and inspiration for future scholars. I do not feel it appropriate to emulate Neil Cossons and to provoke controversy among waterways historians, if only because their numbers (unlike railway enthusiasts) are so limited. However, his strictures involved the formation of the Institute of Railway Studies, to academic commitment and appointments, and to the encouragement of a wide cohort of students. If the political and financial climate favoured the appointment of academic researchers and tutors (my “professorial chairs”), I would be advocating such moves. However, it is possible to envisage something on a smaller scale, whose realisation could be achieved in stages.

What is now needed, I submit, is a Waterways Study Centre, or rather two, one in physical form, one provided and accessed by electronic means.

The latter would comprise a website, or group of websites, which would bring together a range of varied resources. This would include, where available, links to digitised archive materials (expanding as more and more materials are scanned and made available); freely accessible publications on waterways history, and on transport, engineering and general history; and materials on research support, problems and methodologies. While much depends on the development of licencing of electronic resources, in the present circumstances it is possible that vast electronic journal resources, currently locked behind publisher paywalls, could be made accessible from the physical Waterways Study Centre. The electronic centre would not just cover history (a word deliberately omitted from the proposed title), but would cover all aspects of inland waterways, including studies of engineering, environmental factors and policies, tourism and leisure. This should make it useful to those involved in current operational issues, not just conservation.12

This would enable potential history students to find a range of materials, available ab initio. The website(s) could easily details areas that require new research, with an appreciation of both the scope of time necessary for completion, and the kind of materials that might be needed. Research could proceed to identify unexplored areas, sources and literature for others to investigate. Importantly, substantial progress on research could be made using electronic resources alone, from which the need to consult physical archives could be identified. This could well remove some of the uncertainty that attends the inception of much research.

Accompanying this would be the development of a physical Waterways Study Centre. I would envisage that this would need to be located in, or close to, an established archive of documents and other artefacts. (Given this, only one or two current locations seem appropriate, but ideally existing facilities could be
expanded!). This would, in Newby’s phrase, aim at “the integrated provision of archives, libraries and study space”.13 It would, in a sense, contain parallel materials to those on the electronic archives: a substantial library of books on waterways history, but also selected texts covering current issues, other forms of transport history, engineering, economic, social and environmental history, and discussions of on research problems and methodologies. Of course, the physical Centre would provide access to the electronic WSC materials, and it would be possible to consult physical archive materials alongside materials that provide a background to history. Physical access to charge-based electronic sources could also be available – such as Questia, British Newspaper Archives and many others. This would, if possible, remove the present restrictions of researchers to students, staff or associates of higher education institutions.

One condition of the use of the physical WSC could be the deposit, in electronic form, of the results of research (where these are not subject to copyright limitations). This would enable new work to be read and assimilated, rather than destroyed, as is the case with much assessed student work. Finally, this might provide a congenial environment for study, in what can be a very lonely solitary activity, perhaps where there are other students, other researchers and those interested in waterways history.

If someone was to review this suggestion in a decade or so, much of the above might seem naïve, such is the pace of change in information and communications technology. Already much material is available simply by consulting British Library theses or the electronic collections of the National Archives, and, if the necessary funds are applied, it may be that the keeping of original documents will increasingly be a matter for archive conservation rather than the consultation of materials that have been digitised.

These proposals may themselves seem utopian, but I would go further. It seems that many works relevant to waterways history, like my own Charles Hadfield: Canal Man and More (1996), are now outwith the realms of future print publishing. Of course, this applies to almost all journals and magazines, and it may well extend to most railway and canal history books. It might well be fitting that these publications achieve a worthy afterlife in freely accessible digital form. Ready access, rather than any need to travel a distance to inspect a specific publication, or requesting it via library services, might inspire greater interest.

Finally, my proposal for a Waterways Study Centre implies the provision of facilities for individual students. The institutional response to Neil Cossons’ complaints turned towards the founding of a much broader approach to education. The Science Museum agreed to part-fund the creation of a new Institute of Railway Studies (“and Transport History” was later added). This included the appointment of a professor, other teaching staff, academic taught courses, supervised postgraduate research and external seminars and workshops.
Founded in 1995, this fostered much scholarly work, often on much more wide-ranging lines than other forms of transport history work. Whilst the Institute has since been restructured, it provided some elements of a model that could, given suitable funding, be followed.\textsuperscript{14} If it proved impossible to finance and appoint permanent academic staff, the WSCs would still be able to host seminars and online means of discussion of provisional findings and interpretations, and thus help to advance the subject of research. Whether this could lead to a new shape to an emerging discipline of waterways history, or at least encourage the addition of new approaches, must be left for further consideration. In one sense, this would fulfil one of the wider purposes of the Waterways History Research Group.

I suggested above that new journals would be helpful in order to encourage new researchers; without the ability to publish, much work will simply not appear. I would suggest two different journals, both of which would be electronic from the outset. One would disseminate very detailed research results that would exceed normal print journal limits, while the other, more controversially, using the philosophy of open-access journals, would present academically refereed articles. Neither would supplant the RCHS Journal.

The former journal would present the very detailed materials which many history enthusiasts would like to produce. It would be possible for these to be updated and rewritten as further materials were unearthed, and an appropriate form of the journal would be a series of developing web pages, rather than an electronic version of a print journal.\textsuperscript{15} These published details could be used as partly refined materials for more academic studies.

The latter, academic, journal would encourage the publication of scholarly articles based on rigorous research and analysis. It would involve the appointment of referees, as with most academic journals, the consequent delay involved, although means could be developed to speed the process and avoid unnecessary delays between writing and publication. It would attempt to publish both high quality narrative history and new interpretative work. Its very availability, without print journal limits upon length, might foster more research into waterways history. By providing an outlet for the publication of new research, it would encourage researchers who had been encouraged by the resources and environments provided by the two waterways study centres. Whether this would then lead to the development of a “new waterways history” and whether this would help to include waterways history within the “broad spectrum of historical studies” is another matter. As a confirmed pessimist, I concede that it might be that, even if the essential infrastructure provided by these new centres and journals could be established, there would be still be little new research. At the very least, this would assist the small number of existing researchers.
My discussion has attempted to explore the notion that new researchers could be recruited from academic quarters, and that new means of support – a new infrastructure, in effect - could encourage research by easing the processes of research and publication. This does not mean that new scholarly work would be generated, but simply that part of the infrastructure to encourage such work would be available.

Some further means of encouragement can be sketched. Very large sums of money could enable the employment of people to teach and to lead research and, indeed, to pay for research. My proposals have to assume, regretfully, that no such sums will be available.

Only modest finances are needed for various helpful developments. One is to continue and enlarge the present range of seminars and workshops by various bodies, with emphasis lying on research possibilities as well as the publication of completed research. It is possible that modest annual prizes could be awarded for dissertations of high quality; my feeling would be that rather than these being competitions for the best, prizes could be awarded to all (or none) work of sufficient quality and relevance. It would also be possible to offer small grants for suitable investigations whose subject would be identified and specified in advance. Bodies like the Canal & River Trust already make significant use of volunteers, and a number work on archive records, but it might be possible for the Trust or other bodies to actively seek volunteers to carry out research, specified or open, and to offer them the same support as those who list records or clear vegetation. The enlistment of history enthusiasts (in local history, for instance) into waterways history could be actively sought.16

Online and printed materials that encourage guidance over research and writing could be more widely available.17 Finally, it would be possible to consider some sort of short courses, or perhaps create new modules for use in higher education, which could be delivered to interested parties.

These are among many potential suggestions, to which should be added anything that publicises waterways and the possibilities of waterways history research.

Some conclusions

My suggestions for two Waterways Study Centres, and for two new publications are put forward to indicate what might be needed to begin to encourage new researchers into the field. They do not represent concrete proposals to be implemented by the RCHS or other bodies. In a sense, these are similar to Neil Cossons’ representations, if perhaps less trenchant. Without some sort of initiative, the barriers to wider forms of research and possible personnel will remain, and perhaps solidify further.
The WHRG and other means have supported the continuation of enthusiast waterways history, but without the direct fostering of more scholarly research that would contribute significantly to general history. Barriers to further research do not represent the exhaustion of existing accounts or sources, or even the limited places for publication. They lie partly in the (inevitable) limited skills and knowledge of existing practitioners, and in the failure to attract in significant numbers of new personnel who could develop new insights into history. It is possible that the latter could be encouraged by the development of new forms of support, like the centres, journals and other initiatives sketched above. While the 1997 conference embodied pessimistic expectations, the WHRG resulted and new work followed; it may be that this review brings forward similarly unanticipated developments. Consideration of the scope of possible topics, subject areas and interpretations must await further articles.

There are other means by which further waterways history research could be fostered, but I hope that my limited tentative proposals, and the discussions on which these are based, may lead to some debate. Perhaps the future of waterways history research (and indeed research into other transport modes) necessitates such a debate.

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2 He would later become Head of Archives and Records to The Waterways Trust, between 1999 and 2003.
4 Obviously, the quality of some work may be adequate for formal assessment but fall short of standards for wider dissemination, but I have certainly viewed (and assessed) many dissertations that were of value to a wider audience.
7 My experience of teaching students in water and environmental management (many of whom were mature) was that many had experienced waterways through boating or towpath walking, so that many details did not have to be explained. However, interest seemed to stretch no further.
9 Published as Elizabeth Lebas, From beautification to sustainability: the inner city as political landscape, in Mark Dorrian and Gillian Rose (eds), Deterriorialisations: revisioning landscape and politics, Black Dog, London, 2003.
10 I should stress here that there is a further boundary between academic historians and academics from other fields who are students of history; and indeed between long-term career academics, short-term academic students and those who are/were part-time and/or retired. Many RCHS members have experienced higher education, and could be viewed as “academics”, yet their interest in waterways (and other modes) is that of enthusiasts.
If such studies were to be developed, they would, in time, provide historical records and thus prove of historical interest.

Newby, op cit, p.6


An analogy with a print publication could, perhaps, be drawn with the very detailed publications of the Industrial Railway Society.

In making these points I do not suggest that the RCHS or C&RT should be the body that brings these to fruition, but obviously they might be able to contribute.

I have tried, in a very limited way, to encourage archive investigations in a series of articles in NarrowBoat, and in a series of pieces, flippantly titled “Thoughts of a Waterways Heretic”, in the Boat Museum Society’s journal, Re:Port. The latter are included on my personal website, accessible at [http://josephboughey.wordpress.com/on-waterways-history-writing-thoughts-of-a-heretic/1-looking-for-inspiration/](http://josephboughey.wordpress.com/on-waterways-history-writing-thoughts-of-a-heretic/1-looking-for-inspiration/), and onwards.