



# The Consuta Trust

The advancement of education in the history of steam launches, by preservation, maintenance and exhibition of the steam launch **Consuta**

## Consuta Trust Newsletter - Autumn 2023

Dear Supporter.

What an interesting year we are having, starting with the re-launching and steaming of Consuta, then some very variable mid summer weather. The most exciting adventure so far must surely be the journey along the Kennet and Avon Canal at Reading, ending up at our own private mooring in Kintbury. It's a few years now since I have made this trip of 30 miles and thirty locks, and had forgotten just how varied and delightful the Kennet scenery is.

We had first needed to arrange a boiler inspection before the trip, this was successfully accomplished on 3rd August, the safety valve had been adjusted, and now starts lifting at 175psi and does not exceed 185 even with force firing. Once completed we decided to start moving Consuta to the K&A on Friday 11th August, little or no rain was forecast for the next few days, so fingers crossed.

So why did we decide to make this trip? several reasons, partly because we were having difficulty sorting out a Thames boat licence, due to some recent changes to the EA Thames Boat Registration requirements. Previously we had only needed a private boat Safety Certificate and had just renewed this in April as a private one, also there is no registration category for the steam launch Consuta type operations on the new EA forms? However the main reason was that a base at Kintbury would have the advantage of having my handy engineering facilities to complete some of the detailed work still needed.

The Kennet trip was to be done over two or maybe three days, with the help of our volunteers. At the start I was quite apprehensive about the trip but I needn't have worried, after all Consuta had already been as far as the Cuning Man Inn at Calcot. The Kennet was an early river barge navigation between



Reading and Newbury before being extended in 1810 as canal joining the River Avon at Bath. Several of the old river locks still exist on the Kennet river section and are 120ft long by 17 ft wide, whereas the canal and some of the replacement river locks are now only 72ft long and 14ft wide.

3D Marine had kindly provided a skipper for third party Thames boat movements, so Consuta didn't even need a visitor licence for the Thames section. We were in steam and out on the river by about 10:00am, surprisingly the boat traffic seemed quite busy particularly at Mapledurham lock which was unmanned. The "self service" seemed to be the cause of a holdup, and

eventually we went through with the third lock operation. Some of the modern Thames gin palaces are very large these days and their usual two person crews don't even seem to want to work unmanned locks, fortunately our crew didn't mind.

We were cheered through Caversham lock by boiler inspector David Jeffrey now working as assistant lock keeper, who said "Blow your whistle". Finally turning off the Thames onto the Kennet at about 1:30pm.

The river passage through Reading is a fascinating journey of contrasts. After leaving Blakes lock there is a long straight section with modern office development, Blakes is the first on the Kennet but is actually controlled by the Thames authority. The back channel by the abbey ruins would have been more interesting but unfortunately has lower headroom than needed by Consuta. At the end of this straight section there is a gentle arched stone bridge (London Street main road), where Consuta needed to be in the very centre to pass safely through.



Boat traffic on the next section is controlled by a one way traffic light system. Claudia (from 3D Marine) used our boat hook to operate the push button located just before the bridge. This one way traffic system is because of the restricted width, twisty course and strong currents, previously known as the "Brewery Gut". Perhaps these lights are not necessary now as this section had been widened a little during the development work for the large Oracle shopping centre,

however sadly no mooring option.

After the Oracle we reached County Lock which only has slight rise of 12". I've always wondered if this lock was really necessary – the photo above shows the weir on the right.

The river then passes the back gardens of some old Victorian terrace houses followed by about a mile through Reading's modern industrial section. Despite this, the development is not obvious and seemingly the waterway is just a normal natural countryside river habitat with the occasional kingfisher and dragonfly flitting by. The Kennet usually has a bit of a current which on this occasion was fairly low say about 1mph. We were surprised to see John Emmett on the tow path a short distance above Reading County Lock, but John said he didn't want to be picked up; probably just as well I suppose, as it might have been difficult getting safely into the bank with the current.



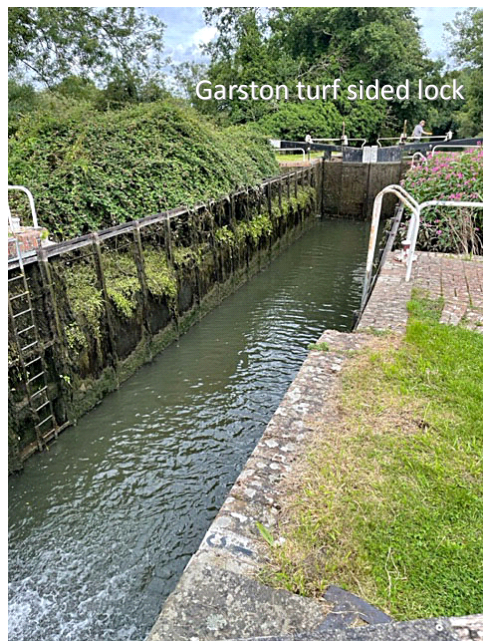


The Reading industrial river sec-



The Cuning Man moorings

We eventually reached Fobney lock and the Fobney pumping station, water for Reading is extracted from the river just above the lock. The next lock is Southcoate lock followed by the extensive Burghfield island boat moorings and then the Cuning Man Inn where we stopped a short time for a drink. Sadly there was no time for a meal, our passengers had been warned to bring a packed lunch. After Burghfield lock there is a very winding river section which then passes under the M4 to Garston Lock. This, an early turf lock, and is a rather uncomfortable one for Consuta as the vertical side bars are only a few inches above the water when full (OK for flat sided narrow boats I suppose.) so Consuta needs careful holding off



Garston turf sided lock

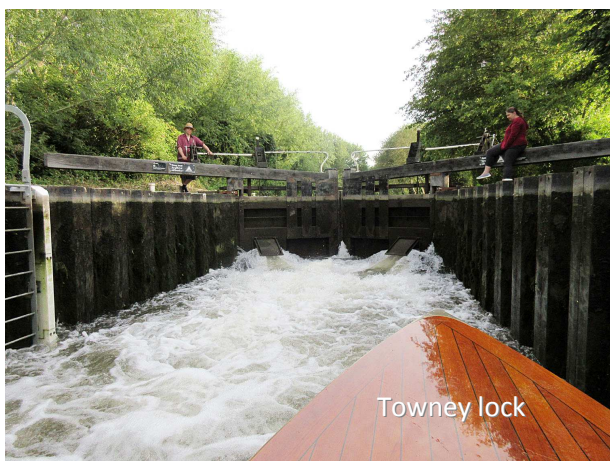
The next reach overlooks the large Burghfield Sailing lake created after 1970's gravel extraction, however this can't be seen while sitting in Consuta. We reached Sheffield Lock just south of Theale at about 3:40pm, this lock has a small rise of about 2ft and has interesting scalloped side walls, the lock is immediately followed by the first of several powered swing bridges.

All major Kennet swing bridges are now powered so it's just a simple case of insert the key and press the open button so wonderfully easy and very quick compared to the earlier double worm handle driven bridge jacks (300+ turns with the windlass a bit like using the hydraulic Thames locks after hours).



Theale Swingbridge

Despite the earlier slow progress on the busy Thames there was very little boating traffic on the Kennet at all, so we were making good time after leaving Reading.



Towney lock

Some of our crew (four I think) decanted here. John Emmett had kindly offered to transport people back to Beale Park to collect cars. Paul and Anne had parked their people carrier at Aldermaston for our end of day re-positional transport. Aldermaston wharf was our intended destination for the first day but was still some distance off. The next section in the late afternoon had some delightful cruising with three swing bridges and four locks. Actually one of the locks Ufton Nervet is no longer used as deemed unnecessary for the restoration. The final lock for the first day was Towney, and is one of the deepest and restored with horrible sheet pile sides. All the Kennet locks have gate paddles, fortunately they

now have deflector plates on the top gate discharge openings presumably because water could cascade into open front boat cockpits if too close to the top gates. Yes on this lock we certainly treated the paddle opening with some caution.

After Padworth swing bridge Consuta stopped for the day at a good mooring, about a half mile from Aldermaston, time was now 7:20pm.

The weather predictions for the Saturday had indicated that there would be some heavy rain in the morning. So we had been considering whether to have a day off on Saturday and resume on the Sunday? All agreed, I think some of us were rather tired and maybe not looking forward to an early start on Saturday. This upset Zac's plans as he had his camping kit ready for an overnight stay on Consuta. So it was Saturday off but an early start on Sunday.

There was quite a lot of heavy rain on Saturday morning, so a good decision.

Mark had advised anyone joining us on Sunday that they could park cars at Kintbury and catch the first train of the day at 9:40 am which would reach Aldermaston about 25min later.

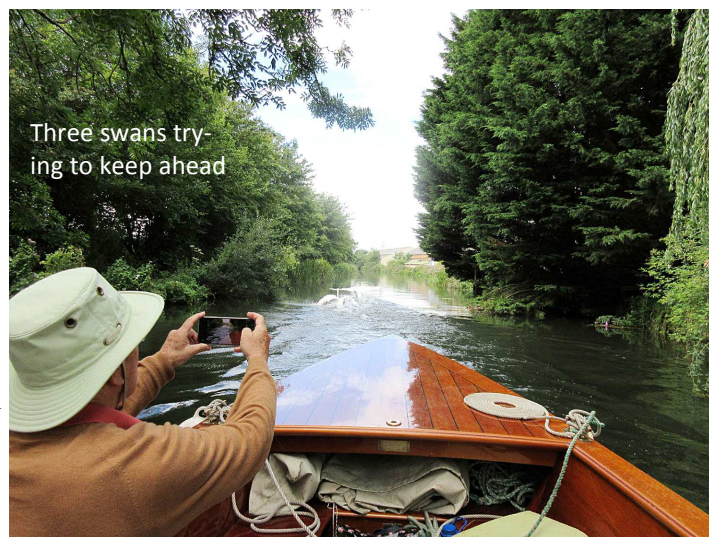
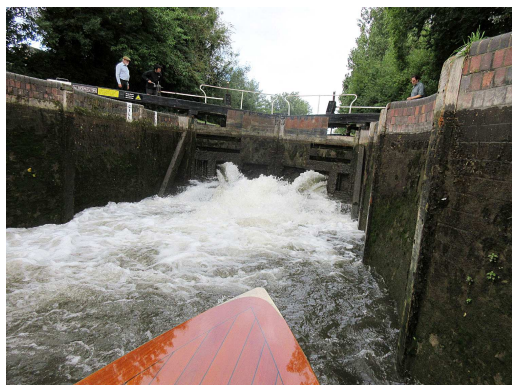
Most crew arrived early at our Padworth mooring to remove covers and raise steam. Working pressure was raised quite quickly, and after passing through Padworth lock we arrived at Aldermaston just as the impressive lifting bridge was rising, now that was good timing? The boat coming through the other way was crewed by some Danes who were aiming to get to Windsor.

Aldermaston lock is another interesting scalloped edge large river lock with an 8ft rise, the original Kennet locks have quite varied styles. As we were still missing two of our crew we waited above the lock tooting our whistle, yes soon saw them running to get on board. John told us the train from Kintbury was late at Aldermaston! I don't think we can complain, as it was a Sunday service also there was some sort of strike action.

The next section is about 2½ miles long leading to a swingbridge and the Rowbarg Inn at Woolhampton (the train station here is called Midgeham – confusing isn't it but apparently so named because Woolhampton might be confused with the midlands Wolverhampton station?).

The entrance to Woolhampton Lock had been giving me some concern because the river current flows across the lock entrance at 90 degrees. Therefore we arranged shore held bow and stern stabilising ropes but these were not needed. Consuta drove smoothly into the lock chamber with no problem at all, I wondered if Consuta's shallow draft had helped.

The next few miles rolled by very quickly and we soon reached the Colthrop industrial development on the outskirts of Thatcham. Three large but young swans caused some amusement as they hadn't learnt to



let boats pass, so kept flapping in front of us for about a mile. We eventually reached Monkeymarsh Lock, a long modern rebuild of an original turf sided lock, it looks quite natural now but when first restored in 1990's, some carefully laid turf on the sloping concrete sides just floated off into the lock chamber. As you may see Consuta's gunnel fortunately did not float above the steel side posts when the lock was full.

Another fast flowing river section carries the navigation close by the Newbury race course, then after Bull's and Ham locks into the centre of Newbury. Paul volunteered to do a bit of quick shopping and get some Cornish



pasties at Lidl's or Tesco. Both are situated very close to the navigation, then rejoin us at the next lock Greenham. The pasties were warmed up on the exhaust silencer and most welcome for those who didn't bring lunch. We also picked up Lucy who had decided to rejoin us for the last part of the trip.

The river through the old part of Newbury is quite narrow with a fast flowing current just before a low main road bridge and Newbury Lock. We met a boat coming the other way, fortunately just before the really narrow section.

Newbury lock used to have some unusual

lever operated side sluice panels for filling and when used the lock filled very fast, almost like going up in a lift as I remember, these sadly had been removed probably for safety reasons. A man on an electric bike came onboard for a short distance and I was later told he had been engineer on Windsor Belle a few years ago.

We were now on the 1810 canal section where all locks are the same size (72 ft x 14 ft), and with only seven locks remaining before Kintbury.





The last powered swing bridge when leaving Newbury is by the attractive West Mill cottages. The waterway now is mainly canal but the River frequently joins and leaves the canal.

We quickly passed three more locks arriving at Copse Lock following one of the last river sections after Hampstead Marshall, and was confronted with a major problem. The top gate of this lock would not close and investigation indicated that something on the lock sill was stopping one upper gate from shutting properly. Time was

spent poking around with a boat hook but this only confirmed there was something at the bottom of the gate which just could not be dislodged.

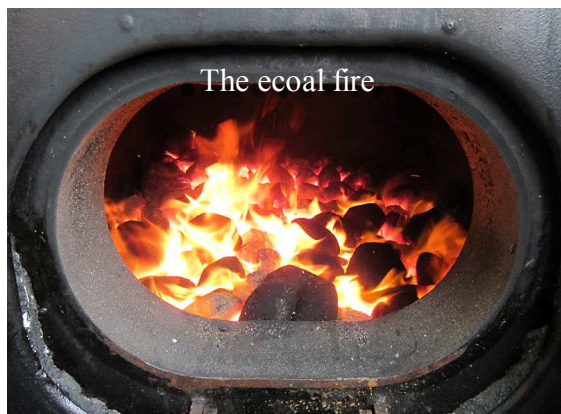
After various suggestions, Mike finally said there is only one way to do this then stripped off, jumped in, and dived underwater, quickly coming back with a waterlogged section of wood removed from the

gate sill. Eureka! the gate could now be properly closed, wow wasn't that simple? Fortunately we had a couple of large towels on board for "Our Hero Mike" to dry off.

The short pound to the next lock was about 2ft lower than normal, possibly some time earlier a boat had forced passage through despite the seriously leaking gate.

We gingerly moved along, with the prop occasionally touching bottom in the low water, there was only Dreweats lock now before Kintbury. Arriving at Kintbury lock, we were confronted by a bit of a crowd, surprised to see a steam launch and asking many questions. Probably had seen us as we passed the Dundas Arms Inn just below the lock.

Once through the lock, after passing some boat moorings, we were then able to back down easily to our millstream mooring arriving at about 7:40 pm. What a great journey thoroughly enjoyed by all, and by the way it never really rained during the whole trip.



Two types of fuel were used, Ffos y Fran Welsh steam coal for the Thames and Ecoal ovoids, (apparently made from Crushed Olive stones). I'll give more details in our next newsletter about the tests of the several coals we've tried and also some engineering work updates.

Best wishes,

Brian Smith 20th September 2023