

Handling Foot and Mouth Disease for Waterway Recreation

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In the early days of the Foot and Mouth outbreak, British Waterways (BW), which cares for a 2000-mile nationwide network of canals and rivers, recognised the severe impact this would have on the lives of people who work or live by the waterways and those who use them for recreational purposes. Connecting the great urban centres that developed during the Industrial Revolution, waterways also pass through wide areas of rural and farm land and many outbreaks of the disease occurred close to our network.

The crisis began in February and BW kept the position under constant review, preferring to keep all the waterways open until closures became inevitable. But on 2nd March, the difficult decision to close most rural sections (about 70%) of our network to both boaters and all other users was taken. A major factor in this decision was the stance of local authorities. Around 30% of our towpaths are designated rights of way, and most local authorities were using their special powers to close them. Eventually, some 600 miles of towpaths were closed by local authorities. In addition, they asked us to shut our own permissive access paths and stop navigation.

We recognised the implications this would have for our users and identified the groups who would feel the pressure most keenly: hire hotel and trip boat operators, waterside businesses, farmers, individual boaters, local authorities and communities and general towpath users. It was clear that some of these groups had conflicting interests and that a key challenge for BW would be to balance their concerns.

A crisis team, headed by BW operations director Stewart Sim, was established drawing together

different areas of expertise throughout the organisation. After the first meeting on March 2, the group met regularly to ensure a rapid and consistent approach to the developing situation. It was recognised that we should work in concert with related organisations and Howard Pridding, Director of the British Marine Industries Federation (BMIF) was also a full member of the team.

From the first it was decided that our approach should be based on:

- listening to the people and groups affected;
- taking the best and most up-to-date independent scientific advice;
- communicating frequently and clearly with those concerned; and
- effectively backing up all internal decisions out on the patch through our local staff.

It was agreed that our overriding aim throughout would be to minimise damage or inconvenience to all concerned. In particular we sought to recognise the interests of the tourism industry, while retaining the confidence of the farming community. Some 160 million visits are made to the waterways each year and visitors help support around 55,000 jobs. In addition to the wider boating industry (there are nearly 400 different companies operating hire boats, trip boats and restaurant boats), the waterways support numerous businesses such as pubs, shops and restaurants which depend on tourism to survive.

Into Action...

Initially our users expressed anxiety and confusion about what was open, what was closed and what actions they should be taking. Not surprisingly, we were bombarded by calls and emails and were prepared for this. We immediately extended our office opening hours and made staff available to

answer users' questions. We also set up special facilities on our website to keep people updated. Traffic increased by 50%.

As the financial year was drawing to a close, the renewal of hireboat licence payment quickly became an issue – a real problem for operators whose cashflow was affected. To ease the situation we delayed payment of hireboat licences to June.

Re-opening the waterways safely and responsibly was the top priority and to help us achieve this with the support and understanding of the farming community we commissioned ADAS, the well-known and respected agricultural and environmental consultancy, to devise a risk assessment procedure for the waterways. It was vital that this would be acceptable to MAFF and the NFU and once we had their confidence we began to assess all our waterways. Four teams of ADAS representatives and local staff worked continuously for eight days to complete their survey of the whole waterway network, including 4,000 miles of boundary and adjoining land.

As soon as a stretch of waterway was cleared to open, we re-opened it, putting in special precautionary procedures, such as disinfection facilities or signage indicating appropriate actions. The Environment Agency and Manchester Ship Canal, among others, followed our example and used exactly the same method of risk assessment procedure as the one devised with ADAS. All well and good, but the key to success was making sure that our users were informed and felt confident that they knew not only what was happening, but what they should do to help.

Boating is not a slow-moving, low-tech backwater these days and more than 12,000 individuals and companies registered on our special email update service, which gave regular information on canal openings. The updates gave detailed information about the additional special measures that were to be taken at certain high-risk locations and listed stockists of 'Steril Tabs', which boaters were able to use on board to disinfect footwear. British Waterways'

website was constantly updated giving information on closures and openings on all canals and also detailed advice on the precautions that boaters should be taking. In addition, throughout this period we kept up continuous communication with the broadest range of our users. Along with telephone calls and face to face meetings, we sent out four letters and detailed briefing packs to:

- hire and hotel boat operators;
- riparian MPs;
- local landowners;
- BW staff; and
- The 12000 users registered for email updates.

The waterways began to re-open for boating on 28 March and by 4 April, the whole network was re-opened, except at locations still closed by planned engineering works (unconnected with Foot and Mouth). In parallel we began risk assessments at major visitor sites and angling facilities at reservoirs and rural towpaths. Four popular angling facilities opened and rural towpaths began to re-open from 2nd April. In fact towpaths presented a complex challenge. Used for recreation by a wide range of people including walkers, cyclists and anglers, in certain locations they are accessible only via footpaths crossing farmland. Before re-opening, our assessments with ADAS had to make certain that these locations presented no risk of spreading infection.

On 12th April 2001, just before Easter, Deputy Prime Minister John Prescott visited our historic lock making workshops at Bulbourne on the Grand Union Canal near Tring in Hertfordshire to announce that 1000 km of canal towpath were now open. Remarking that it was possible again to walk 40 miles from Bulbourne into the heart of London along the towpath, Mr Prescott said: "I am delighted that British Waterways is opening up its canal towpaths wherever they can do so safely without undermining efforts to stop the spread of Foot and Mouth disease. Canalside attractions and hundreds of miles of waterways and towpaths are now open to visitors. I urge people to take advantage of this and visit.

Where Are We Today?

Foot and Mouth disease certainly hasn't gone away and we cannot afford to rest on our laurels. As autumn approaches the possibility of flare-ups cannot be ruled out. On writing this (12 July, 2001) all of British Waterways' 2000 mile network is open to boating except in a few places where engineering works are being completed.

In addition, 1900 miles of towpath and river walks are open walkers and other visitors. ADAS continues to assist us in assessing the risk associated with re-opening commercial offline fisheries, popular visitor centres and rural towpaths to walkers, anglers, cyclists and other visitors.

What Have We Learned?

In July British Waterways held a special meeting for key staff who had been involved in handling the Foot and Mouth crisis as it developed. The aim was to identify what the organisation had done well and why, and the areas where it could improve. Generally it was felt that we had coped well, and that a key to this 'success' was the early appointment of ADAS to assist and guide our programme of risk assessments. By bringing outside expertise on board at an early stage we were able to roll out a speedy and authoritative response programme. We recognise that in future situations, the importance of identifying and working with the right expert body from the earliest possible stage cannot be underestimated.

Electronic media has permanently changed the way in which we will deal and respond to a crisis. The phenomenal response to our website and the emails received during the peak of the crisis confirmed the important role that effective electronic communication has played during the Foot and Mouth outbreak. Communication was generally perceived to have been a success. We received many letters and emails thanking us for the clarity and accuracy of information available on our website, through the email updates and from our customer services team and local offices.

After a winter of floods and rising water levels, we were already aware of BW staff's commitment and flexibility – often working through the night to ensure that property and land was safeguarded. The Foot and Mouth crisis demonstrated once again that staff were determined to go the extra mile, with people giving up weekends and evenings to operate helplines and complete ADAS assessments.

The crisis also helped us to identify areas where we can improve – notably in terms of communicating throughout the organisation and in recognising the 'trickle down' impact that a challenge like Foot and Mouth presents. This is best illustrated by the response of many dog walkers to the closure of canal towpaths. Suddenly they found themselves with nowhere to exercise their pets and this became an unforeseen and hotly debated issue,

Looking to the Future

Foot and Mouth may be with us for some time yet, but we are confident that we have the right procedures and organisational structures in place to continue to respond if necessary.

The disease has certainly made a dramatic impact upon the holiday hire boating industry and we are now working with other waterway organisations including the Broads Authority, BMIF, and The Environment Agency, to promote inland waterways as a prime way to rediscover the heart of the British countryside. Waterway Holidays UK (www.waterwayholidaysuk.com) is the umbrella body supported by these organisations established to achieve this.

Probably the most important challenge facing British Waterways today is to help rural businesses and tourism to regroup and re-establish. We are determined to rise to this.

For further information about British Waterways visit the website at: <http://www.britishwaterways.co.uk>