CONSERVATORS OF THE RIVER CAM

An Organisation in Crisis – Update June 2025

The Organisation

The Conservators of the River Cam is an organisation, designated a Body Corporate, and has been created by an Act of Parliament which governs the remit and financing of the organisation. The most recent being the 1922 River Cam Conservancy Act. 13 Conservators are appointed by a combination of organisations, the Environment Agency, Cambridge City Council, Cambridgeshire County Council and Cambridge University Senate. There are currently 3 full-time officers and 2 part-time officers employed by the Conservators to manage the day to day requirements of the organisation.

Background

The organisation is relatively small with income streams limited by the Acts, the majority of which are from the fees charged for annual registration of vessels on the water, with no public funding. Most of its assets and infrastructure are ageing and requiring increasingly expensive maintenance and repairs, with replacement beyond the financial capacity of the organisation. In 2024 survey reports on both Baits Bite and Jesus Lock Islands (outskirts of Cambridge & central Cambridge) were commissioned and the conclusion drawn by the survey was that the structures required urgent temporary work in the first instance to stabilise to prevent collapse and that ultimately a full structural rebuild would be required. Should the lock islands fail, the result would be the lowering of the water levels of the river significantly, making navigational access impossible, particularly above Baits Bite Lock. This would impact the City, local businesses, residents, ecology and more.

The Conservators have commissioned temporary stabilisation work to begin on one of the locks most key to keeping the navigation open, however they do not have the funds to stabilise the other lock island or undertake any further rebuilding work. The Current Business Plan of the Conservancy acknowledges that there is a need to explore other income sources, however the urgency now required to address the financial vulnerability of the organisation has superseded this plan.

The lack of sufficient funding has been highlighted as a threat to the organisation, acknowledging that the lock islands are not the only aspects of the organisation which require significant financial resources to sustain its operational capacity, fulfilling the remit of the Acts and relevant health and safety responsibilities.

Initial Considerations:

- Short-term financial requirements relating to the current threat to the infrastructure on the Cam, the Conservancy cannot undertake any significant work to resolve the threat to Jesus Lock Island without the threat of insolvency.
- All expertise has to be bought in, including: legal advice, engineering, project management etc.
- The requirement for a statutory review of the Acts and Byelaws, particularly related to funding, with a view to seeking financial support from local communities who benefit from the resource.
- Whether there was any interim financial support that the Conservancy could tap into from Cambridgeshire County Council, Cambridge City Council, Environment Agency or Defra to address

the urgent matter of Jesus Lock Island, and support in the requirement to rebuild both Jesus Lock Island and Baits Bite Lock Island in the next 5 - 10 years.
- What the long-term organisational requirements are and what will they cost in the future.
- What would the future of the Conservancy look like if it failed to maintain enough income to support its statutory requirements including resourcing appropriate maintenance and repair of infrastructure and assets and staff.

Ongoing Considerations:

A. **Short-term financial requirements relating to the current threat to the infrastructure on the** Cam the Conservancy cannot undertake work at both lock islands without becoming **insolvent.**

- Risk: Temporary Stabilisation failure vs unaffordable cost of rebuilding islands.
- Risk: Failure of Baits Bite lock island vs increased costs in excess of £1.6 mil. At which point overspend results in a failure to remain a "going concern"/liquidation vs cancel project.
- Risk: Failure of Jesus Lock Island vs being unable to raise sufficient funds to stabilise/rebuild.
- Risk: loss of navigable river vs loss of river level. Stabilisation over cheaper closure solution to reopen navigation.
- Risk: Other asset/infrastructure failure outside of the lock islands creating an increased and unaffordable financial burden for the Conservancy to fund.
- Risk: project failure.

B. Mid-term financial stability.

- Review options re. essential ageing plant, equipment & boats, all near or past end of life
- Securing funding to rebuild lock islands or find alternative solution.
- Consider commercialisation opportunities (expansion or consolidation)

C. Long-term viability and sustainability of the Conservancy

- Review/New Conservancy Act – Governance, income generation
- Review/New Byelaws – streamline, essential, with teeth
- Review of Towpath & Land purpose, sale, lease, hand over to another organisation/authority.
- Explore opportunities to work with partners to provide ongoing solutions to the core statutory functions: Assets, Infrastructure, towpath.

Initial Strategy & Actions:

- In the initial months (June/July 2024) the Conservancy informed the local authorities, Defra and Environment Agency of the emergency at the lock islands, and impact of the significant costs. Assistance was requested, including funding and professional expertise relevant to the situation.
- After initial approaches with both Cambridge City and South Cambridgeshire District Councils, in late 2024, matched funding of £12,500 was committed to recruiting a Business Consultant to build a business case for external funding and review the requirements of the organisation and its provision.

- In December 2024 and January 2025, meetings were held with local MP's D Zeichner and Charlotte Cane, both offered their support to the efforts of the Conservancy in seeking a partnership approach to solving both the short term solution and long term survival.
- The Conservators went through a number of changes in appointments January 2025, and agreed to restructure is governance including the decision-making structure, dissolving all the historic committees and appointing an Executive Team of 3 Conservators, changing meeting regularity and increasing the involvement of members.
- The Conservancy has continued to engage with: Environment Agency, Cambridgeshire County Council & Cambridge City Council. A joint collaborative meeting has now been arranged for early April, to look at a match funding approach to the survey. It is hoped that this may also begin a partnership approach to dealing with the findings of the survey.
- The Conservators acknowledged that they are unable to consider repairs at Jesus Lock Island, and are presenting their accounts as a going concern for the next 12 months in this way, without any financial commitment to its repair. Staving off the issue of insolvency.
- The Conservators aim to present the work of the Business Consultant, once completed to as wide an audience as possible including the riparian Cambridge Colleges.

Further Actions:

1. Investment funds: to afford work at Baits Bite lock island instruction has been made with investment companies to liquidate all Conservancy capital, worth @ £800,000.
2. All Conservancy fees increased by 5.1% for 2025
3. Analysis ongoing, regarding streamlining the organisation initiated: capacity, affordability, assets, infrastructure, contracts, requirements. Focus on statutory organisational priority – navigation (plus Health & Safety).
4. Engagement with DEFRA, local MP's, Cambridge City Council, Environment Agency, Cambridgeshire County Council & University: appealing for both financial and expert support.
5. Engagement of reputable project management team to have oversight of the Baits Bite Lock Island project.
6. Engagement of reputable H&S, design, build and review contracts for Baits Bite Lock Island.
7. Joint Party group (multi agency/authority) formed to address Jesus Lock Island securing match funding for survey.
8. Procurement of 2nd Jesus Lock Island underwater survey, to take place June/July 2025
9. Collaboration & regular meetings with Joint party & emergency services group around risk and response to possible island failure.
10. Engagement with external parties to look at solutions for Conservancy assets directly related to its core functions.
11. Collation of relevant and useful information about the organisation and challenges faced for the wider public and other external stakeholders.
12. Valuation of Conservancy land assets obtained including Clayhithe Office and worksite.
13. Regular monitoring of Conservancy financial forecasts which include the Baits Bite Lock Island Project costs to ensure all expenditure is managed appropriately and any risk of insolvency is understood in advance.

Conclusion

It remains our opinion that unless specifically instructed by state or court, the necessary funding required by the Conservancy to ensure long-term survival will not be made available. A national review on infrastructure and its funding is required, enabling struggling waterways and navigations to look after this invaluable asset.

The Conservancy may yet need to be incorporated into another organisation or simply become unviable and inoperative as it is unclear how the organisation may secure the necessary income stream to avoid similar crises in the future.