

Evaluation of the National Lottery Heritage Fund Supported Project - *'Our Crofton Story: its Buildings and its People'*



Final Evaluation Report -Vol 1

To Kennet and Avon Canal Trust

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Foreword

In September 2017, we set off on a three year journey to tell "Our Crofton Story: its Buildings and its People". A key driver was the need to conserve and restore our Grade 1 listed building, dating from 1809, which houses the oldest working beam engine in the world that is still in its original location and capable of performing the task for which it was installed. But by developing its interpretation, activities and visitor facilities, we were also aiming to encourage a wider group of visitors and volunteers to enjoy this unique industrial site, located in the heart of the Wiltshire countryside.

As we now reach the end of the project, we can look back at what has been achieved with pride. We now have a restored weatherproof building, with significant roof repairs, external repointing and treatment of damp and timbers, with an electrical system which meets current requirements. As part of the 'Mechatronics' project, we have installed sensors which use 21st century technology to monitor the operation of our 19th century engines. We have delivered new accessible and family friendly toilets and a disabled ramp to allow better access to the buildings; new interpretation panels throughout the site and video screens showing the engines in operation; and improved facilities around the grounds including a play area, additional picnic tables and cycle racks and new fences to ensure the safety of visitors.

The project has also enabled the Trust to employ a Learning and Community Engagement Officer, who has started developing a programme to provide online resources and encourage school visits. And we have started recording oral history records and developing a virtual archive.

Because of the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, the Crofton site was only open for a limited period in 2020, and the engines were not steamed. So visitor numbers were far lower than in a normal year. Despite that, we have gained valuable experience about operating the site in a new way, taking full benefit from the new interpretation, and have received very favourable feedback from both volunteers and visitors. Without the discipline of the project, it is likely that we would not have been as successful in our planning and opening for the 2020 season.

Now we look forward to building on that experience as we plan to steam again in 2021. We will continue to develop the initiatives started as part of the project as they become 'business as usual' for Crofton, as we work to develop ever closer links between Crofton, the canal and the community.

None of this could have been achieved without the commitment of the Trustees of the Kennet and Avon Canal Trust, the dedication and hard work of all the volunteers and staff at Crofton, and the funding, advice and support of the National Lottery Heritage Fund. We thank you all.

Chris Bolt - Project Manager 2019-2020

Pam Weeks - Crofton Branch Secretary, and Site Manager 2020

Executive Summary Evaluation Report 'Our Crofton Story: its Buildings and its People' National Lottery Heritage Fund Project



'Our Crofton Story: its Buildings and its People' (OCS) has been a c.£900,000, three year project (2017-2020), grant financed by the National Lottery Heritage Fund ('The Fund'), through National Lottery Players. Crofton Pumping Station is owned by the Kennet and Avon Canal Trust (KACT), a charitable company. The Evaluation looks at the achievements of OCS, how the original aims of the project have been met, considers what has gone well, and why, lessons learned and what could have been done differently. The review measures the success and impacts of the Delivery Phase through its implementation, delivery of outputs and emerging outcomes and impacts.

Overall, this project has very successfully succeeded in delivering the planned scheme on time, under budget, with strong fundraising; achieving virtually all its outputs and beginning to have impact on the outcomes for heritage, people and communities as proposed at the start.

The overall vision for the project is to conserve and restore Crofton Beam Engines whilst developing its interpretation, activities and visitor facilities to attract a wider and more diverse audience, thus securing its future.

Over the three years of the project, many achievements include:

- 208 years** as Boulton and Watt engine functioning – the world's oldest Beam Engine still capable of doing its original job in its original location.
- 70 Volunteers** worked on the site over 3 years
- 10,500 hours, or 1,400 days** of time given
- £220,000 value** of this match funded time - comfortably exceeding the £86,500 volunteer time input figure included in the original bid
- 14,000 visitors** over 2018, 2019 and 2020 seasons
- of which 1,760 visitors** in limited summer 2020 following Covid-lockdown re-opening
- 4,000 replaced slates** to the Boiler House Roof and Café roof
- 3,750 bricks repointed** in the West Wall
- 43 number** of new display interpretation panels around the site telling its story
- 77% of summer 2020** visitors were new to Crofton
- 91% were fairly or very satisfied** with their summer 2020 Covid-impacted visit
- 6 oral memories** recorded and archived so far
- 2,895 social media followers** across Facebook, Twitter and Instagram (up from 1,050)
- Social media and websites visited** from as far as USA, China and India
- #1 of 16 things to do** in Marlborough on Tripadvisor ratings November 2020 (and #15 of things to do in Wiltshire)
- 1 Crofton Beam Engines** site looking a lot more welcoming.

The funding application stated how Crofton offered *"a far more diverse site capable of telling the stories of major developments in transport, the canals' key role in enabling the industrial revolution and the social history of the community that built and supported the site."* This has been vindicated by the activities, interpretation and visitor feedback as well as collaborations that the Trust have put in place over the past three years. Sharing the site's social and community heritage has been as important as the conservation of the building and industrial technological aspects of the site.

Analysis of what has been achieved during the project and by its completion, set against the **original Objectives**, the **Approved Purposes** and **Outcomes for Heritage, People and Communities** shows overall high success. **Most components rate successfully achieved as high to very high**, along with some middling achievements, including aspects still being delivered.

“On our narrowboat, after 10 weeks trip, this is the highlight.” (Visitor 2020)
“..the COVID-19 situation has [shown] our Volunteers have helped out and discovered that they can carry out visitor facing activities as well as ‘traditional’ engineering ones.” (Member Project Management Group)
“A Crofton that’s fit for the future and will still be there in 10, 20 years’ time.” (Trustee)

This is a strongly volunteer led canal and industrial heritage site, based on fifty years of volunteers’ saving, investing, operating and improving the historic building and Beam Engines. As paid site project staff have been engaged through the OCS scheme, there have been some tensions between the ethos of a few longer involved volunteers and the new recruits in terms of how to go about delivering what is best for the site. This also manifested itself with some relationships with external professional contractors. However, the project team leadership has proven strong and effectively delivered the scheme. The coronavirus impacts in the final year have had an effect of nurturing a fresh upbeat approach to site operations and enthusiasm of those involved into the next phase.

Achievements

There have been numerous successes of the project and the volunteer team, including:

- Delivering the final year activities and interpretation with the major impact of coronavirus and restrictions on social behaviour
- Fabric of the building repaired and restored, preventing further deterioration and possible collapse, including new Boiler House doors and asbestos removed
- Electrical installation brought up to modern standards
- Staff toilet relocated, with new welcome desk to provide improved facilities
- Toilet block extended and modernised, facilities for disabled visitors and families including baby changing and toddler steps, with other access improvements for less mobile visitors
- New interpretation panels installed within the buildings and through the grounds
- Video screens installed to show historic and more recent films of the engines in operation
- ‘Mechatronics’ installation extended, additional sensors to monitor operation of the engines
- Improved facilities in the grounds, with new picnic tables, cycle racks and litter bins
- A new play area, with equipment directly related to the canal and engines
- Safety improvements, including a new fence to protect visitors from a steep bank down to the railway and from the leat during events
- Learning and Community Engagement Officer appointed to develop formal and informal learning offers, both onsite and remotely
- Staff development, with a young member of staff progressing from volunteer, through Project Assistant to Assistant Site Manager
- Increased use of website and social media connecting to potential and ‘virtual’ visitors
- Oral history recordings made, and documents scanned for virtual archive
- Strong fundraising throughout and still at the end; generating additional match funding from other organisations, with a project brought in under budget and with good financial controls
- Organisational and governance growth in skills and confidence in managing the site and projects by the volunteers running Crofton, especially with those taking the project through the final year into full delivery.

Over the three years, **the majority of the c.70 volunteers have been involved directly**, contributing towards elements of the project: managing project delivery, or visitor guiding, input to the interpretation panels’ content, installing fencing and picnic benches, supporting learning and family activities, new archive research and recording former workers’ memories, social media content, website and marketing actions – some being new volunteers working at Crofton.

More than 30no. volunteers and staff have been through additional training, whether it has been: learning about the boiler operation, working with the postgraduate Mechatronics students to use

modern sensors to monitor older mechanical systems, customer care and visitor welcome training, coronavirus secure site training, recording people's oral histories, digitisation and archiving.

There were some problems throughout the project with the **approach to developing Interpretation content** and design of the replacement and additional graphic panels. This proved one of the most contentious strands of the project and was demanding in time commitment, changes and impacts on relationships between volunteers and paid personnel.

Throughout the project's earlier years, the **Activity Plan was not seen by Trustees and the Management Group as being as major a component of the whole project** – the focus of attention was on the capital works and then interpretation. This has had some effect on slippage of programmes being developed and delivered, limiting the new audiences reached.

Some activities such as **outreach events and oral histories and archive recording** tasks have under-delivered, having been held back due to conflicting priorities on staff and volunteer time, then with Covid-19 impacting on the quantity achieved and limited audience growth.

Learning programmes for schools and colleges have been delayed due to the other volume of demands on the team delivering activities and interpretation. This is now being addressed with a dedicated staff resource building linkages into the education community.

Over the three years, visitor surveys show **high praise for the volunteers and staff**, knowledge, friendliness and the quality of visitor experience provided on in-steam and non-steaming days.

The scheduling of **more 'family friendly' themed events** on steaming weekends, along with activities has seen an increase in visits with children, and new first time visits, linked to the nature of the events, and more social media promotion through broader channels of communication.

93% of visitors surveyed during summer 2020 were **'fairly or very satisfied' with the Covid-secure site arrangements**, giving many positive comments.

Confidence in the site - **"That was the first time that I'd bought my dad out in 6 months [in 2020 Covid era]."** (Volunteer/visitor)

A **return to steaming in 2021** was highly desired by visitors and volunteers, many intend to return **when the site is in steam and the café is open again** for refreshments, both much missed in 2020.

Looking ahead, at the closure of the funded project, most **Outputs** have been delivered, but not all are yet **fully making impacts on the Outcomes**. With delays in scheduling and coronavirus halting various tasks in 2020, **many outputs need the longer term to make a difference**, building over time.

Lessons Learned and Recommendations

- Significant time commitment is needed to manage a project by volunteers, alongside paid Project Management staff. Losing continuity of key Trustees and Project Managers affects how new personnel have to learn the scheme, build relationships and change decisions
- Managing building and interpreter contractor relationships, working alongside volunteers, takes much time and planning and needs the volunteers to be 'brought along' with the elements of the programme that are dependent upon external contractors
- Working closely with the Heritage Fund personnel assisted the project and management team through a process by sharing issues and taking on board external recommendations for professional advice
- Arguably the Trust should have been held more conversations with the Heritage Fund to highlight tensions and seek guidance at pinch points in the project
- Strong management oversight is needed in planning tasks around site operations that juggle the presence of the public, contractors and when many engineering volunteers are present only on certain days of the week
- Engaging the right person to research and copywrite text and explain processes to ensure the appropriate character, personality fit and skills to tell the site's stories with the right tone of language, understandable to the broadest of 'casual', non-knowledgeable audiences

- Development of content by committee does not work when too many people are involved trying to share technical detail. To grow new audiences, the priority is to provide basic level principles for the casual interest visitor
- In 2021's marketing activity, give high profile to 'people elements' of the site - of the Covid-secure measures, visitor friendly attraction. Use proof from this year of visitor comments, and photographs of site safety and happy families
- The benefits of reaching out to the community and schools has resulted in a recently appointed Learning and Community Engagement Officer post. Funded from Lottery and additionally from central K&ACT budgets, this is an enhanced two-year, part-time commitment to raise engagement and learning along the whole canal, not just at Crofton.

Legacies of the Project - Outcomes for Heritage, People and Communities include:

Physical site conservation

"Gives hope for the future, rather than gradual decline." (Trustee)

"...improving the environment for volunteers and visitors." (Volunteer)

Economic sustainability

"... the organisation needs to learn how to be self sufficient and earn more." (Volunteer)

"I feel marginally more optimistic about the future here." (Volunteer)

Management and organisation

"It has prompted us to do better documentation for the future – our successors will have a 'Hayne's Manual'." (Volunteer)

"The Heritage Fund project has also driven much needed organisational change, made Crofton much more outward looking and gone a long way towards reconnecting it with the Canal it serves and the Kennet & Avon Canal Trust of which it is a part." (Volunteer)

Interpretation and visitors

"The improved interpretation signage has increased accessibility and the project has helped secure the site... brings our steam heritage to life for future generations." (Volunteer)

"Hope that people with interests other than engineering alone are encouraged to seek out Crofton." (Volunteer)

Coronavirus and volunteers

"We survived! It's really impressive that the Crofton team of volunteers has kept this going during these weird times." (Trustee, with respect to 2020 coronavirus impacts)

"A living legacy, with a new bank of Front of House volunteers, they are enthusiastic, new and looking forward to doing more in the future." (Member of Project Management Group).

Skills and Self-benefits

"I gained a lot of confidence into writing grant bids and working with volunteers. It built me, that experience has made me more confident in my post." (Former Site Manager).

"Have been exposed to activities that I would never have imagined otherwise and met all sorts of people, both volunteers and members of public." (young Volunteer).

In summary, reviewing the project deliverables, wide ranging consultation feedback and the emerging Outcomes, it is clear that through a Heritage Fund grant the Crofton Beam Engines site has been successfully preserved for future generations. Building works have extended the life and quality of the engines and housing. It is now a much better managed site, with new facilities for staff, volunteers and visitors and providing a quality on-site and outreach experience. This is broadening its appeal both to visitors to the historic location and to the wider community. Volunteers are increasingly engaged in roles beyond engineering that reflect the site's wider social and community value. Substantial volunteer hours have been essential to the project success, through managing the bid and delivering the many varied tasks and as part of the major match funding contribution by the Trust.