

# NEWSLETTER SPRING 2008

[www.swindoncivictrust.org.uk](http://www.swindoncivictrust.org.uk)

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civic  
trust

Welcome to our latest newsletter. The big debate in Swindon seems to be focussed on the route of the canal through the town centre. Views seem to be completely polarised. For example, I believe that this is a one off opportunity to rescue Swindon Town Centre by giving it a water feature. My colleague thinks it is a ridiculous idea that should be dismissed immediately.

Pages 2,3 and 4 set out three options for the canal. I would point out that the only option that has been costed is Option 3 presented by the Leader of the Council. We are seeking feedback by 1 July.

There is an update on the Mechanics Institute on page 5. Very late news is that the owner of the building has withdrawn his appeal against the refusal of his planning application.

The Jefferies Land Conservation Trust would like you to consider writing to the Council before 12 May and a suggested letter appears on page 6. They have also set up a Land Fund to raise money to purchase the land around Coate.

A reminder that membership renewals are now due – a form is available at the back of the newsletter. It would be beneficial to us if you could complete a Gift Aid declaration. We are also in need of a couple more trustees to help us to shape the future of Swindon.

**For a visual record of  
Swindon see:**

[www.SwindonGallery.org.uk](http://www.SwindonGallery.org.uk)

## Objectives

- To promote environmentally sustainable, high quality standards in local planning and development in Swindon.
- To protect and improve special features of historic and public interest in Swindon
- To help local people to inform themselves about Swindon's geography, history, and communities, as well as the decision-making processes which affect the built environment
- To encourage participation by community groups, and by individual Swindon residents, in fulfilling these aims.

## The Committee

We are always looking for people who want to help us fulfil our objectives so if you are interested in helping then please contact one of the committee.

Colin Henderson Donald Brunwin  
Karen Leakey Martha Parry

Tel: 01793 520592 or E Mail:  
[info@swindoncivictrust.co.uk](mailto:info@swindoncivictrust.co.uk)  
[www.swindoncivictrust.org.uk](http://www.swindoncivictrust.org.uk)

**Copies of this newsletter  
are available in large  
typeface.**

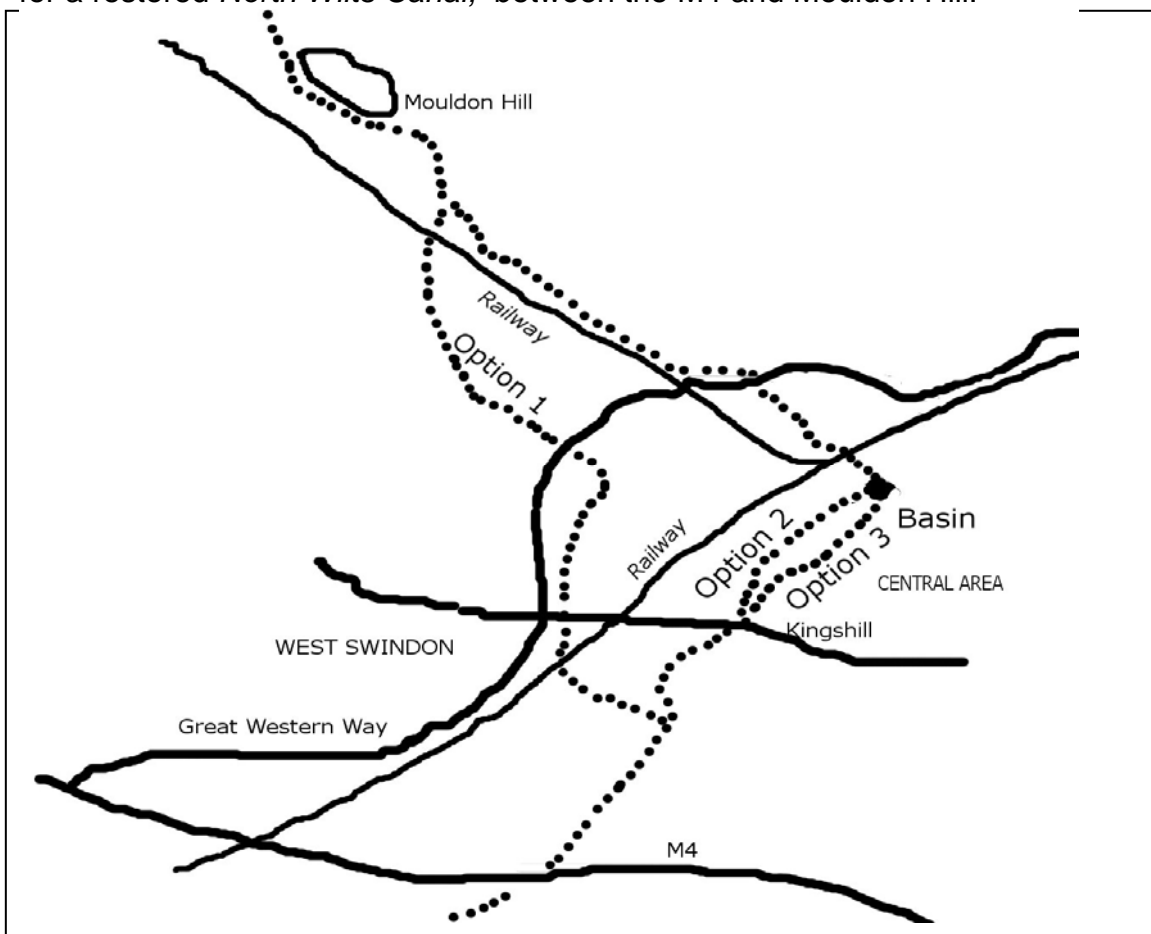
# Finding a Canal Corridor Through Swindon

By Donald Brunwin



The proposed canal through Swindon is an essential piece of a puzzle, which would re-open a 19<sup>th</sup> century Southwest regional canal network, that once linked the *Wilts and Berks Canal* with the *Thames and Severn Canal*. The linking 'piece' flowed across greenfields, at the foot of Swindon Hill 30 years before Brunel and Gooch pinned Swindon to the GWR (and global) map. Known as the *North Wilts Canal*, its original junction with the *Wilts and Berks* was adjacent to today's Debenhams, where Fleming Way now runs with cars instead of water.

In the new canal restoration proposals, the junction will now be near the M4. However, a route around or across Swindon Town Centre is still critical to the completion of the whole puzzle. The map below shows three possible routes for a restored *North Wilts Canal*, between the M4 and Mouldon Hill.



The canal's early route is reflected in the names of "Canal Walk" and "Bridge Street", as well as by several prominent 'bumps' in the road, where canal bridges rest buried (at the top of Milton Road, and in Station Road for example). The underlying canal alignments, and the hillside elevation nearby, together go a long way to explaining the challenges experienced in today's central Swindon traffic circulation system, which was made one-way in the 1970's, in an effort to cope until further infrastructure could be afforded. The canal and its junctions near Debenham's and at the Magic Roundabout were still in place, though derelict until 1959. The generous width of Fleming Way is attributable to the Canal's Former position. In a similar way, Great Western Way is a legacy of the massive GWR sidings formerly located there. Therefore, the present challenge of rationalising Swindon's traffic flow is itself a consequence of the historic setting of the canal and railway which opened Swindon up to expansion in 1810 and 1840.

If Swindon is to have a new canal as an amenity for residents, and as an attraction for visitors, then some very sharp thinking will be required by all parties. In an effort to help discussions along, a description follows of the three routes proposed thus far:

**Option 1** is based on a proposal by consulting engineers, Scott-White & Hookins in 1994. This would branch from the original route at the foot of Kingshill Road and head for the low lying River Ray Valley to the north of Swindon. It would use two existing bridges to pass under the main railway line and connect back to the original route near Moulden Hill. It passes through mainly green areas, including along the edge of the Shaw Community Forest, and would provide a wildlife corridor. The main obstacle to this route is where it has to pass Sainsbury's carpark.

In using this route there would be an opportunity to double back along the original route, under the main railway line, to Station Road, where a new turning basin could be created across from Bridge House; I do not think this opportunity was considered in the 1994 version of the proposal.

**Option 2** has been promoted by the Leader of Swindon Council, Rod Bluh. It would by-pass the original route, now in the main Central Shopping Area, using a new route down Westcott Place and Faringdon Road, to a new canal basin at the end of Fleet Street. A Route Study was carried out in 2007 by consulting engineers Halcrow Group Limited. This showed that the route was feasible, but also high-lighted the technical issues involved, and the high costs in resolving them. Service and Sewer diversions are estimated to be £15 million; the total cost around £50 Million for about a mile of canal (1.5km). Although this section has no major structural obstacles in its way, there has been a general sense of apprehension expressed that this route would disrupt traffic flows, and people's lives, as well as impose, by its traffic consequences, upon the character of the Railway Village Conservation Area, which itself is part of a proposed World Heritage Site.

**Option 3** would follow the original route through the Central Shopping Area, turning into a new basin at the end of Fleet Street. From there it would mainly

follow the original route under the mainline to Mouldon Hill. Whilst this route would cause less disruption to traffic and people living in its vicinity, it would need to pass through the main shopping area.

An opportunity does not appear to have been considered there, and might meet with opposition by commercial tenants, to convert the flanking shops into a two storey mall, with the canal running through the ground floor, with access across at first floor level. This could link up with the Regent Place proposal and run first floor access across the entire shopping complex.

A canal through a canopied shopping centre would certainly be unique, with plenty of “wow-factor”. If a canal down Faringdon Road can be expected to increase shop-keepers profits by £8 million per annum, as Halcrow estimate, then how much more might it increase them if it ran right through the centre? As routes 2 and 3 would run through the urban area of Swindon, the route needs some interim planning protection, in order to safeguard it from major developments being built in its way until the money is available for the canal. This needs to be enshrined in planning policy. Any Faringdon Road route policy protection may only have a short life, as there is concern that the policy could blight this area if it is not acted on quickly.

### **Options Appraisal**

Maybe the best way forward is an Options Appraisal, comparing all three routes, so that an informed decision can be made, and the chosen route provided with the long term planning protection it requires. It may take quite a while to raise the sums of money needed to complete the canal.

The Swindon Civic Trust has an opportunity to present its comments to the Planning Inspector on the 1st July and would like to hear from members with their views on this subject. If you have anything you wish to be raised please e-mail [donald@swindoncivictrust.org.uk](mailto:donald@swindoncivictrust.org.uk). If there is enough interest in holding a fact finding event, we might consider a “*Looking at a Canal in Swindon... Together*” event, using the approach that worked so well when the SCT was first formed in 2002.

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### **Swindon Civic Trust Events Programme**

Thursday, 24 April: John Ball. How to turn Swindon into the butterfly capital of Europe

Thursday, 5 June: Holly Huber - SBC Community Planning Forum

Monday, 1 Sept: Swindon Civic Trust AGM and talk

A tour of the New Library is planned for November.

## **The Mechanics' Institution Current Position**

The Mechanics' Institution Building is listed Grade II\* based on its national Architectural and Social Heritage value. It is in private, commercial ownership. Its owner wishes to demolish a significant portion of the building and replace it with a multi-storey hotel. He says that this is the only way the building can be developed commercially. Two planning applications for a hotel tower in the centre of the building have been refused on the grounds that they do not enhance the heritage value of the building. A further application has been made to demolish the original 1853 section of the building and the 1930's stage tower. This demolition accounts for two thirds of the building. This application was refused by the Council. The owner has now gone to Appeal and this Appeal will probably be heard in August. The New Mechanics' Institution Preservation Trust Ltd is a Building Preservation Trust and a registered Charity has held the opinion from its outset that the layout and nature of the building do not lend itself to commercial redevelopment. The impact of the work needed to modify its structure would be too great and would destroy its heritage value. The Trust has proposed an alternative proposal to use the building as a multi-functional community facility and venue. To achieve this the building would require to be owned and run by a not-for-profit organisation. This the Trust would be prepared to undertake. The Trust has gained Listed Building Consent for this use, which involves on a small proportion of modification to the existing structure. In this regard we are

supported by two of the statutory consultees, The Victorian Society and The Theatres Trust. We have all made representations to the Planning Inspectorate regarding the Appeal and will be giving evidence in support of an alternative way forward for the building.

English Heritage are also not in favour of the owners proposals. They say he has not produced enough evidence to support his case for such wide-scale demolition. However they do not publicly express a view on how the building could be re-used.

Should any members wish to comment please contact [martha.parry@gmail.com](mailto:martha.parry@gmail.com).

**NB: In the last few days the owner of the Mechanics' Institution has withdrawn his appeal.**

### **The Building of the New Swindon Railway Village**

Illustrated talk by John Cattell (co-author of *Swindon: The Legacy of a Railway Town*)

### **Followed by: Update and Q & A session about the future of the Mechanics' Institution**

By Daniel Rose, Chair of the New Mechanics' Trust

**Lawn Community Centre  
Friday 16<sup>th</sup> May 2008  
7.00 p.m.**

**Cost £3 including tea/coffee  
Advance booking advisable  
Contact Janet Flanagan, 523048**

**Objection deadline – 12 May 2008**

The following objection letter could be sent as a response to the Swindon Core Strategy consultation (a link to the full SBC documentation can be found on the blog <http://jefferiesland.blogspot.com>)

To: Forward Planning Group  
Freepost SCE5251  
Swindon Borough Council  
Premier House  
Swindon, SN1 1SX.

From: Name:  
Address:  
Postcode:  
Tel No (home):  
Tel No (work):  
Email: Date:

**Swindon Core Strategy Preferred Options Draft, March 2008**

I disagree with Swindon Borough Council's draft spatial framework for the borough and its preferred option to allocate land at Coate/Badbury Wick ("Commonhead") for the building of 750 houses and for 15 hectares of business use. This option should be deleted from the Swindon Core Strategy and a policy put in place that protects the high landscape value of the area.

I am one of 35,000 people who signed the Save Coate petition in order to protect open countryside between Coate Water and the Downs from development. Swindon Borough Council pledged that if no university wished to develop at Coate, there would be no houses built. Once again, assurances to protect this unique countryside are being broken and I have no faith that any buffer land left around Coate Water won't become a building site when circumstances change.

The proposal conflicts with advice elsewhere in the Swindon Core Strategy that supports protecting and enhancing historic landscapes. Coate and Badbury Wick are steeped in history given their roots in pre-history. The significant cultural and literary importance of the landscape that influenced Richard Jefferies' writing, is unique. Key fields of significant archaeological importance to the north of Day House Lane (opposite the Richard Jefferies Museum and Day House Farm) that date back to the Neolithic period are included in the proposed development area. The area also includes fields of major Medieval significance at Badbury Wick. Day House Copse, a local nature reserve and ancient oak woodland, would be surrounded by a housing estate isolating wildlife from Coate Water and the surrounding countryside. The views from the Downs and Coate Water cannot be "respected" if the fields are urbanised. The hospital is already a major blot on the landscape and we were assured that the hospital was a one-off building in this area. Day House Lane has a unique rural quality and it is used by walkers, joggers, ramblers, cyclists and horse-riders for recreation on a regular basis. Development near Junction 15 of the M4 is inaccessible and remote from Swindon town centre. It is unlikely to attract a regular bus service and will encourage car-based commuting.

I am appalled that Swindon Borough Council is proposing that land in this area should be developed further – this is nothing less than vandalism.

Signed

JEFFERIES LAND CONSERVATION TRUST

At the Jefferies Land Conservation Trust AGM on 2<sup>nd</sup> February 2008 it was agreed that the only secure way to protect the countryside under threat from development between Coate Water and the Marlborough Downs land is to buy as much of the farmland as possible and to put the land into conservation use.

To this end a **LAND FUND** has been set up with this goal in mind. The task ahead is daunting but Coate is worth saving for future generations to enjoy. A special donation and gift aid form can be obtained from:

e-mail: [jefferiesland@tiscali.co.uk](mailto:jefferiesland@tiscali.co.uk)

tel: 01793 783040

The Jefferies Land Conservation Trust  
c/o Pear Tree Cottage  
Longcot  
Faringdon  
Oxon SN7 7SS



**Friday, 9<sup>th</sup> May 2008**

The Memorial Hall, Station Road, Wootton Bassett.

**Doors open 6.45 pm**

**Debate starts 7.15 pm**

(Free nibbles, tea and coffee; cash bar.)

**“HOW WILL CLIMATE CHANGE  
AFFECT THE COUNTRYSIDE?”**

The debate will be chaired by:

**THE RT. HON. LORD (Tom) KING OF BRIDGWATER CH**

With Panel Members:

**Mr Jeremy Birch**

Friends of the Earth on airport expansion

**Mr Chris Gingell**

National Trust

**Dr Richard Pagett**

International Environmental Expert and Oceanographer

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## New Members / Renewal

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All Members receive mailings and may vote at General Meetings. Membership is renewable on 31 March each Year.

**"I wish to support the Swindon Civic Trust" Registered Charity No. 1095031:**

Signature: .....

Name: .....

Address:.....

.....

Postcode: .....

Telephone: .....

E Mail: .....

I enclose (delete those inapplicable):

- £5 for Annual Membership
- £2 for Unwaged Annual Membership
- £ donation

I am a new member/renewing member  
(delete as applicable)

Please make cheques payable to:

Swindon Civic Trust

Post to: SCT Membership  
C/O Kate Brailsford  
19 Prospect Place, Swindon SN1 3LQ  
E Mail:  
[membership@swindoncivictrust.co.uk](mailto:membership@swindoncivictrust.co.uk)

*giftaid it*

### Gift Aid Declaration

The Swindon Civic Trust is a registered charity and if you are a taxpayer you can help us by signing the declaration below. This will allow us to claim tax back from the Government on the membership and any donation you have paid (28p in the pound).

Name: .....

Address: .....

.....

Post Code: .....

I want the Swindon Civic Trust, registered charity 1095031, to treat the annual membership fee and all donations I make from the date of this declaration until I notify you otherwise, as a gift aid donation.

Signed: .....

Dated: .....

### Next Edition

The next edition of the newsletter will be issued in July/August 2008 and the deadline for submissions is 14 June 2008. You can e-mail these for the attention of Rob Brailsford at [info@swindoncivictrust.org.uk](mailto:info@swindoncivictrust.org.uk)

We would be pleased to hear your comments on the Newsletter or from anyone who wishes to contribute to the debate over the future of Swindon.