

Dibden Bay deadlock - a way ahead?

Recently, when members of parliament asked for more information on the use of inland waterways and coastal shipping, the chairman of the industry lobby group "Freight by Water" responded.

"We need to raise the profile of the water options for freight in this country- the coast, rivers and inland waterways such as the canals. We are under- using them and they are available at little extra cost. For example you can build a new motorway at millions of pounds per mile, whereas we have a coastal motorway that is there now. We have over 100 ports, so let's use them to greater effect. We need to get more container journeys off the road and on to water, so we anticipate growing coastal distribution of containers ".

Speaking at a recent "Freight by Water" seminar, the UK shipping minister gave an assurance that the government continues to be committed to *boosting* British coastal and inland waterways as part of a strategy to cut carbon emissions from transport and he sought more research into alternatives to road transport. Indeed, the minister stated categorically "We would like to see more freight transferred to water" Despite this, the use of waterborne transport is decreasing, hence the concerns of the lobby group.

Throughout mainland European ports the use of barges to transport containers from the ship' side to inland destinations is commonplace but, in the United Kingdom, there is considerable resistance to this and although it is deemed to be cheaper and faster to move the container by road transport the cost estimate ignores the very significant costs of wear and tear on the roads and the cost of delays (and inconvenience) caused to other road users. Motorists using the M3, M25 or A34 - to mention but a few - will be aware of the huge number of lorries transporting a single container from the discharge port to its inland destination. During the "Dibden Bay" controversy much was made of the impact that such a development would have on local traffic conditions with terrifying forecasts of the number of container lorries per hour adding to atmospheric pollution and to the already, at times, chaotic road conditions in the approaches to the New Forest and beyond. Various proposals to overcome these real problems were tabled; few were realistic, all were extremely costly and none satisfied those who were opposed to the extension of Southampton's container handling facilities to a new port on the Waterside. Shortly afterwards, a Government backed decision to develop a new facility on the lower Thames - the " London Gateway" project on the site of the redundant Shellhaven refinery was deemed to be more than capable of meeting the *national* need for increased container handling facilities and so, for the moment, Dibden Bay has been put on the "back burner".

Container carriers, like passenger carrying ships, will continue to grow in size and undoubtedly this will result in even deeper draughts when fully laden. The cost of the *maintenance* dredging need to permit the 24/7 operation of these huge ships will be horrific and for a port like Southampton with a lengthy waterway approach (and already unable to offer deep draught navigation at all states of the tide) this will be especially so.

An aerial view of the Port of Southampton shows, very clearly, that IF the port is to expand then the lost logical site for any such worthwhile expansion is Dibden Bay. Indeed, over many years millions of cubic metres of the "spoil" accumulated during the dredging of the Solent and approaches have been deliberately deposited there to build up a foundation for the proposed docks development. Understandably, Nature has intervened and the area is now the natural habitat for many species of birds and animals and there are some who fear that any disruption to their environment would result in, at worst, their demise or, at best their abandonment of the local area. Others are more realistic and believe that the present inhabitants will simply move a few miles up the road and continue to enjoy life as hitherto.

Undoubtedly, the traffic problem presents the greatest challenge and so, IF the Port of Southampton is to enjoy the expansion so essential to the local economy then, almost certainly, a more innovative approach is needed.

It is axiomatic that IF the traffic congestion and pollution problem can be overcome or reduced substantially then much of the opposition to the development of Dibden Bay will subside so, how might this be achieved? The only way is to abolish the *need for vehicular traffic* by replacing it with *seaborne traffic*.

What if many of the containers presently being sent by road from the container port were to be loaded on to barges, sent the short distance from there to Dibden Bay, and re-loaded on to smaller "short sea" vessels for delivery to many of the small ports around the United Kingdom (and mainland Europe) capable of handling such craft ?

Many of these small ports would enjoy a rejuvenation of immense value to them and their environment, the Waterside would no longer be subject to the threat of increased traffic congestion and pollution, and coupled with the pending increased use of rail transport, motorways throughout the country would see a welcome reduction in wear and tear and a much improved traffic flow. The shallow(er) draught vessels would obviate the need for expensive initial and maintenance dredging and the local economy would benefit. It has even been suggested that empty or light boxes might cross the short stretch of water suspended from a continuous overhead wire gantry for almost direct delivery to the smaller ships. The scope for innovation is immense.

Today's environmental considerations have dictated slower steaming speeds and imposed changes in the "just in time" delivery philosophy that has governed container shipping operations for so many years. Now is the time to act.

