



40 Years of the Conservancy

Chichester Harbour Conservancy was formed 40 years ago. Here, *Ian McIntyre* recalls the public pressure that led to its formation, and looks ahead at some of the challenges likely to face it over the next 40 years

Imagine yourself back in 1971. Norway had just begun extracting oil from the North Sea. For the third time, astronauts had landed on the moon. And the British parliament had finally voted to join the European Community.

Little noticed by the national media, another Bill had been passed by Parliament in that year which was destined to have a big impact on this corner of Britain - the Chichester Harbour Conservancy Act, 1971.

For the first time, the whole harbour was to be managed by one authority. It is interesting to note that the Conservancy wasn't a 'quango' imposed on a reluctant population by central government, but a body set up after a good deal of pressure from people living and working around the harbour.

With the harbour split between two counties - Hampshire and West Sussex - each local authority had some responsibility for managing its own area, but with no-one in overall control.

As far back as 1896, Warblington UDC (now Havant Borough Council) was designated by a parliamentary order as the Emsworth harbour authority. Meanwhile, to the east, the Chichester Corporation Act in 1938 confirmed the

city as the authority for its section of the harbour, and a manager was appointed.

This split management worked well enough in the quiet years of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Commercial use of the harbour was declining, leisure sailing had not really evolved, and the harbour was not recognised as an environmentally important area.

All this began to change in the early 1920s. There were four sailing clubs in the harbour by then, and they needed navigation marks so their members could safely cruise and race. The clubs set up a joint committee with the object of mapping out 'a complete scheme of buoys and booms from the harbour entrance inwards, and then to discover ways and means of realising that scheme'.

The research completed, the clubs then laid the buoys and withies they needed, and paid for them themselves.

After the Second World War, with the interest in leisure sailing growing rapidly, there was concern that the harbour might become a 'parking lot' for boats, with the main channels becoming congested with moorings. The local authorities had been quick to realise there was money to be made from leisure sailors.

The sailing clubs had by then formed themselves into the Chichester Harbour Federation, and they eventually decided to ask local authorities to stop laying moorings to avoid overcrowding.

In parallel with the growth in sailing, there was much greater interest in the natural environment by the early 1960s, and in 1964 the harbour and much of the land around it was designated as an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty.

It was time to take a fresh look at how the harbour was managed. At the instigation of the Federation, and support from other pressure groups, the two county councils appointed a working group to study the situation. After much debate, this resulted in the promotion of a Bill in Parliament to create what was to become the Chichester Harbour Conservancy.

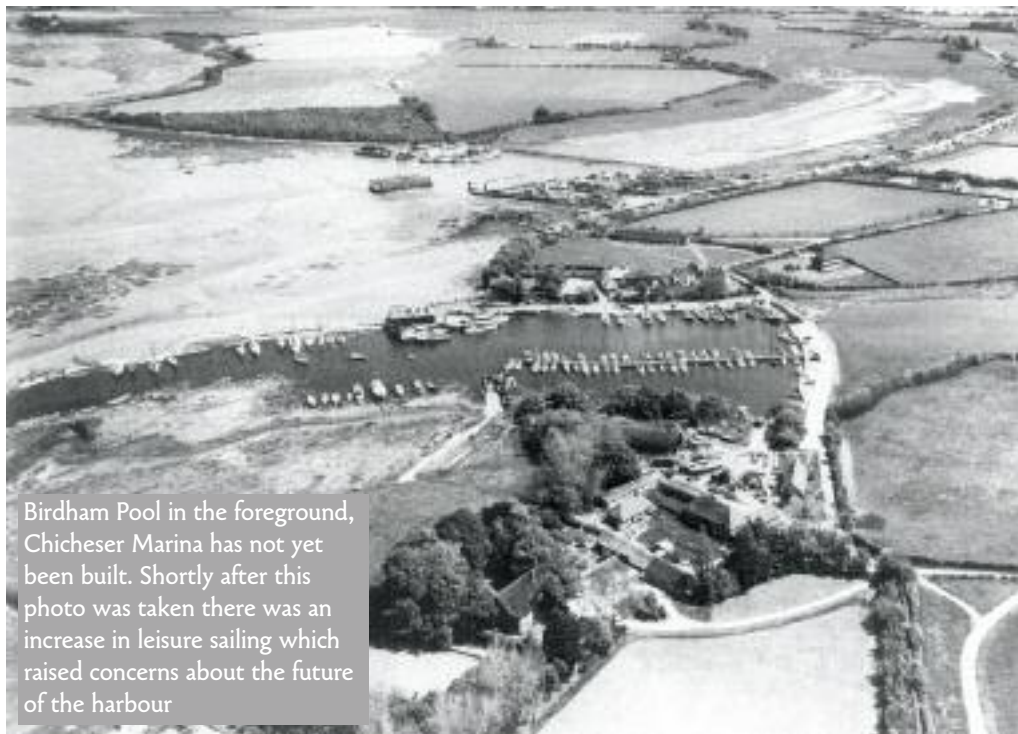
Its first meeting was held on 21 October 1971 - Trafalgar Day - and one of its first actions was to form an Advisory Committee, to represent the interests of harbour users - in-

cluding fishermen, farmers, sailors and environmentalists. It was set out in the Act that almost without exception, all matters to be decided by the Conservancy should first be considered by the Advisory Committee.

This proved to be a good system, and 40 years on it is still the way in which the Conservancy operates. Its 15 members are appointed by the four local authorities round the harbour, and the Advisory Committee. The four principles which guide the Conservancy's management practices are:

- ▶ sustainable stewardship
- ▶ the integration of land and water
- ▶ positive rather than reactive management
- ▶ striking a balance between interest groups

The first Chairman of the Conservancy was Vice-Admiral Sir Geoffrey Thistleton-Smith. In his history of the harbour, John Reger wrote that the Conservancy's success in bringing together such a wide range of harbour interests owed much to his central role in creating a fund of goodwill in its early years.



Birdham Pool in the foreground, Chichester Marina has not yet been built. Shortly after this photo was taken there was an increase in leisure sailing which raised concerns about the future of the harbour

Chichester Harbour is seen as a success story by other AONBs in the country. There has been pro-active leadership on issues affecting the harbour, and the Conservancy has benefited from sound advice by the knowledgeable people representing harbour interests on the Advisory Committee.

Roger Bleasby, who chaired the Advisory Committee for six years, believes that the Conservancy has been a force for good because it has been consistent in achieving a sensible balance between the needs of harbour users, and the need to protect the harbour environment.

Looking ahead, what are the major challenges which the Conservancy will have to face over the next 40 years?

Talking to half a dozen people who are deeply involved in the protection of the AONB, four key points emerge:

- ▶ development
- ▶ pollution
- ▶ shortage of funds
- ▶ pressure on the water - with power boats, high speed dinghies, cruisers and canoes all jostling for space.



the changing shape of boats may cause future pressures on the water

Robert Macdonald, Chairman of Chichester Harbour Federation,

thinks there is a worrying prospect that we will need to finance further work to secure East Head, during a period of restrained public expenditure.

Richard Craven, Deputy Harbour Master, foresees more extreme weather and rising sea levels causing problems when there is less money to maintain and improve sea defences. Afloat, there is the challenge of accommodating the changing needs of sailors, with ever faster and less stable racing dinghies, many more RIBs, and a proliferation of canoes and paddleboards which may impact adversely on wildlife close to the shoreline.

Sir Jeremy Thomas, Chairman of Chichester Harbour Trust, thinks the main challenge will be to protect the natural beauty of the AONB from cumulative degradation, and to balance the differing needs of humans and wildlife. He foresees a demand for more and more houses, and the need to deal with the various forms of pollution that people bring with them - overcrowded roads and sewage discharges into the harbour being two of them.

Robert Macdonald, too, believes that the waste water treatment system in the AONB is in desperate need of major improvements by the water authority, to prevent lengthy periods when pollution flows into the harbour.

Alison Fowler, AONB Manager, also thinks development plans are a big issue. It is not just large scale developments, she says, but replacement buildings and large extensions which can have a significant and long lasting impact on the AONB.

This, she adds, is why the Conservancy invests so much time and effort in trying to influence pro-actively both large and small scale planning within and around the AONB.

Martin Rhodes, immediate past-Chairman of the Friends of Chichester Harbour, anticipates the Conservancy managing more land through the Chichester Harbour Trust, but with restrictions on public finance preventing the recruitment of more staff for stewardship and maintenance of the land.

This may require some re-organisation of the Conservancy, he thinks, to make more use of volunteers – ‘a sort of ‘Big Society’ with a combination of the existing successful Harbour Watch and Friends of Chichester Harbour working parties, under the management of a small Conservancy team’.

There is general agreement that protecting the natural beauty of the harbour, and balancing the different needs of the many people using the harbour, must continue to be the main priorities. And this will get progressively more difficult, with yet more pressure from growing numbers of people who want to live, walk, work, ride or sail in the smallest and perhaps most vulnerable AONB in the south-east.