

Bembridge Harbour Advisory Group (BHAG) - update 6th July 2020

The last full meeting of the Bembridge Harbour Advisory Group was on 7th February 2020.

Due to the COVID-19 Lockdown from 23rd March, the next meeting, scheduled for 23rd April, did not take place. As an interim, Malcolm Thorpe issued update notes to BHAG on 24.4.20.

These further notes cover the same headings and also take into account the Minutes of the meeting held on 7th February.

BHAG membership:

HJ Bennetts - Nigel Bennet
St Helens Parish Council - John Coleman
Bembridge Angling Club - Alan Deeming
Brading Haven Yacht Club - John Meher
Local marine businesses - Jim Robinson
RNLI - Mike Samuelson
Bembridge Harbour Authority - Malcolm Thorpe
Bembridge Harbour Authority - Fiona Thorpe
BHA Operations & Safety Manager - Gordon Wight
Bembridge Harbour Users' Group - Michael Toulmin
Bembridge Parish Council - Liz White
Bembridge Sailing Club - Hazel Wilson
Bembridge Business Association - Tim Woodcock

1 / 6.7.20 Matters arising from Meeting of 7th February:

Note: Tim Woodcock is stepping down from the BBA. David Groom or another BBA representative to be confirmed.

3. b) Channel Navigation and Safety

The tide height measurement numbers, due to be reinstated in March, will now be reinstated as soon as possible.

5. Bembridge Marina Dredging / Footbridge

The EA footbridge was refurbished in February and is fully accessible.

6. MMO/Houseboats

MT not aware of any further action by the MMO. Work on Day Dawn (red houseboat) has now recommenced. As reported elsewhere, new houseboats now occupying plots 3 and 4.

7. South Channel Entrance/Exit

Potential for 2nd entrance channel still being investigated.

2 / 6.7.20

We are delighted that following the further easing of lockdown restrictions announced by the Prime Minister on 23rd June, we have been able to receive overnight visiting yachts with effect from Saturday 4th July.

3 / 6.7.20 Current Inner-Harbour Dredging Programme

Until a week ago, we were well on course to complete dredging at Bembridge Marina by the end of June; unfortunately, progress was seriously hampered by weather preventing the hopper barge from going to the Nab Tower on eight planned occasions. Completion is now scheduled for Friday 12th July. Once completed, pontoons and services need to be reinstated, and resident boats returned from temporary berthing on the Duver pontoon.

We will then carry out some dredging work at BBS and the Duver pontoon prior to the arrival of further finger pontoons as below.

We realised that as soon as overnight visiting yachts were allowed, we were likely to be inundated with berthing requests; we have been surprised as to the extent – demonstrating the popularity of Bembridge as a destination. The weekends of 4th/5th and 11th/12th are full, with waiting lists for all and also some mid-week (although the bad weather 4th/5th resulted in many cancellations).

Berthing space on the Duver pontoon is temporarily being used for resident boats from the Marina – hence the restricted spaces available.

To maintain safe social distancing, rafting will not be taking place unless by prior request and consented by family groups or social bubbles; this creates a further capacity restriction.

4 / 6.7.20 COVID-19 impact and safety measures

Like all businesses, the Pandemic and its resultant lockdown has had a significant impact at the Harbour. Our permanent staff were furloughed from March 24th and interviews had just been concluded for 6 seasonal staff members before lockdown began – at this stage, the employment of these seasonal staff remains on hold.

A number of staff were brought out of furlough in order to complete preparations for dredging to begin on 1st June; we now have a full staff complement from 1st July.

Routine safety checks of all BHA/BBS sites continued throughout the lockdown and contact with customers and Harbour users was maintained via email and telephone.

The Harbour has been fully COVID-19 risk assessed, with appropriate safety measures in place for social distancing, and enhanced cleaning and hygiene across the site; we welcomed short stay visitors during June, as per Government guidelines.

Safety measures have been installed on the water taxis, which for the time being will be for the use of Harbour customers only, with a restriction on the number of passengers. Please note that there is a new hand-washing station at the top of the Duver pontoon gangway, with its use being actively encouraged for those using the gangway in either direction, Café customers and any other members of the public in the vicinity.

5 / 6.7.20 Duver Marina Facilities

The complete refurbishment of our visitors' shower and toilet facilities was completed immediately prior to lockdown and is available to all visiting boats and berth-holders, with COVID-19 safety measures in place. We have used a combination of toilet and shower cubicles, as well as separate units to maximise the capacity potential of the space available. To date this refurbishment has received extremely positive reviews whilst also being a stop-gap ahead of a new facilities complex to be constructed as soon as planning approval is granted. It is an enormous

improvement of what was there before and brings us closer to the standard we want to provide to our customers.

The Galley Locker is now restocked and fully open.

The (slightly relocated) Duver Café has been modified, with a new “take-away” service hatch and plenty of outside seating to enable social distancing. They will be partly open from 4th July, and fully open as soon as possible. The Harbour marquees will be erected shortly and made available in inclement weather with the front and sides being lifted for plenty of air flow together with the BBQ’s being fully prepared for the summer.

6 / 6.7.20 Promotion

During the lockdown period and continuing, MT has offered Harbour presentations via Zoom to mainland yacht clubs who have been running regular talks for their members. This has been a very worthwhile exercise, proving popular with the clubs, well supported, and a hugely valuable promotional tool for the Harbour, with the ongoing benefit for the wider economy of Bembridge and St Helens. These promotional presentations are currently being held twice per week.

7 / 6.7.20 2020 Events

Bembridge Gig Fest and Rock the Boat in June were cancelled, as previously notified, and we have now taken the decision to cancel the Family Fun Weekend (including Saturday’s music event and fireworks display. BHYC have confirmed that the Great Paper Boat Race is also cancelled).

However, as bookings are already in place for the event weekend, we may offer a small number of activities which can take place safely in family groups/social bubbles, such as sandcastle building etc. Details will be posted on the website event page.

In consultation with Bembridge Sailing Club, we have taken the decision at this point to also cancel the Bembridge Harbour Charity Dinner Dance, which was due to take place on Saturday 3rd October.

8 / 6.7.20 Entrance Channel dredging

As is well known, Nigel Bennett and his family have been involved with dredging the entrance channel for what seems like forever. However, all good things can come to an end, and as reported in my update to BHAG of 24.4.20, Nigel and Jane have decided to retire and close their business down.

Whilst there has been a lot of unnecessary conjecture regarding their reasoning, we would like to put the record straight. The email and letter below from Nigel, dated 28th April 2020 and copied to all BHT Trustees on 1st May, is self-explanatory. The extract from BHT’s Letter to Members April 2020 (2), which remains unchanged on their website, in the full knowledge that it bears no resemblance to the truth, speaks volumes for the current attitude and tactics of BHT:

From: Jane Bennett <jane@hjbennett.co.uk>
Sent: 28 April 2020 14:30
To: malcolm@bembridgeharbour.co.uk
Cc: 'Fiona Thorpe' <fionathorpe@btconnect.com>
Subject: Bembridge Harbour

Dear Malcolm,

It is such a shame that we have all been prevented from the chance to meet-up and talk about important matters!

This appears to have led to some misconstrued notions which is unfortunate. I attach a brief statement we had intended issuing when the time was right but Covid-19 beat us to it!

I would like to put the record straight and say that at no time have we had a “falling out” over the renewal, or not, of the lease with Bembridge Harbour.

As you are aware, I have been under extreme pressure from external sources, quite unrelated to the Harbour. Therefore, it was a relatively simple decision to bring forward our retirement.

I sincerely apologise for any damage caused by events.

Please feel at liberty to quote me.

Kind regards

Nigel Bennett
H J Bennett Limited

01983 873415
jane@hjbennett.co.uk
www.hjbennett.co.uk

Dear All,

In recent months, we have taken a long hard look at the many factors affecting both our lives and our business. It is with some sadness and a great deal of hope for the future, that we have taken the decision to bring forward our retirement plans.

Our intention is to prepare the Company for closure in the coming months. Sadly this has brought about the departure of many excellent people from our firm and we wish them all the very best for the future.

Among many difficult decisions, foremost was the cessation of our lease with Bembridge Harbour. This has been the most important factor of H J Bennett for over eighty years so will understandably come as an enormous shock to many, not least ourselves and Malcolm and Fiona.

We can honestly say, that our lives have been a lot easier in regard to this aspect of our work, since they took over the Harbour. We have worked very closely with Malcolm, especially in recent months. He has been unfailingly supportive and generous throughout and we cannot thank him enough.

We will continue to work closely with Malcolm and Fiona, and hope to be able to offer them a little of the kindness and friendship they have shown us over the years.

We would like to extend our thanks to those who have supported us and our endeavours over many years.

Sincerely,

Nigel & Jane Bennett

April 2020

Extract from Letter to BHT members published on the BHT website in April 2020

Dredging

“... we are deeply concerned by the announcement by Nigel Bennett that he will cease gravel extraction operations from his yard on Bembridge Point. He and Malcolm Thorpe have been unable to agree satisfactory financial and legal arrangements, and Nigel has therefore decided to discontinue the business. From what we understand Nigel was a willing party in these negotiations, withdrawing only when Mr Thorpe’s position would have made Nigel’s untenable”.

Going forward, the Bennett’s site has been cleared of all plant and equipment and we are currently in on-going discussions with a dredging company to take over the dredging operations in the Entrance Channel. Further information will be made available as soon as possible.

9 / 6.7.20 Remodelling of Duver Pontoon

Over the years the Harbour has been recognised for boats rafting out on both sides of the Duver pontoon and as we have built the business up, this has enabled increased capacity for rallies and general visitors. We subsequently attracted and facilitated a different market in 2015 when we added our Premier finger pontoons.

We all now find ourselves in a new situation, the impact of which is likely to be long-lasting. In order to be able to maintain social distancing, and to keep our customers and staff as safe as possible, we have decided to alter our berthing arrangements by installing more finger pontoons along both sides of the main spine pontoon, enabling us to offer individual berths with direct access onto the main pontoon without crews having to cross over other boats.

We are due to receive 36 finger pontoons this coming week subject to weather, to be installed at the earliest opportunity. This is a further significant change of emphasis for the Harbour which we believe will be appreciated by all our customers.

There will still be a minor degree of rafting, subject to request and consent for rallies and family groups / social bubbles.

10 / 6.7.20 BHUG and the Groyne

You will already be aware of the statement we made to BHUG on 16.6.2020. Whilst regretting any unintended confusion as to its origin, we believe it was very important for us to be able to explain the reasons for our current stance on the groyne project to the wider BHUG membership and community. Our overall stance remains as stated “Bembridge Harbour Authority remains supportive of this community project being led by Bembridge Harbour Users Group (BHUG)”.

11 / 6.7.20 BHT Patrons

In an attempt to start a dialogue with the BHT Patrons, we wrote to them directly on 02/05/2020 (subsequently copied to BHAG but unfortunately not circulated to BHUG members), with a detailed proposal that we believed could hopefully bring an end to the current acrimony. Disappointingly, their limited response concluded that they have no involvement in the management of the trust.

12 / 6.7.20 Houseboats

Rijnstroom IV left the Harbour for maintenance on 7th June (LNTM no 8/2020).

Two new houseboats, Islay and Eleuthera, arrived under tow on 9th and 10th June respectively and are now berthed in plots 3 and 4 (LNTM no 9/2020).

Sewage treatment plants for Seahorse and Heyvon are expected to be delivered during the 3rd week of July and installed the following week.

13 / 6.7.20 A commentary on the immediate future

This is a very difficult call as there are many different pressures facing trading prospects. Through our promotional talks with yacht clubs, we hear of a very strong pent up demand for boat owners to use their craft, and we are sure that given some decent weather during the summer [and hopefully autumn] months, the Harbour should be busy.

We read that second-hand boat prices based on a strong demand are holding well, with new boats only slightly down unless you relate to the top end of the market that has practically closed down.

It is difficult to see that foreign holidays will be popular for at least this year and we expect that this will have a positive effect on Solent boating generally.

Boating can be considered as one of the safest self-isolating activities; however our main concern is the perceived difficulty should the associated social shoreside aspects of a destination be restricted. Whilst we look forward to visitors' overnight stays, the quandary will be how the visitors are "entertained" once here, and for that we rely on the sailing clubs, restaurants, pubs and local facilities. We do hope that the local community can support our efforts to bring visitors to the east Wight.

To summarise: we have upgraded our facilities to their best within the current circumstances to meet the anticipated pent-up demand – we have dredged our residents' marina – we will be installing our new finger pontoons at the Duver, and we welcome back from furlough our entire brilliant berthing team led by Gordon who are standing by, ably supported in our boat storage business led by Peter and his wonderful team, who have the capacity for more boat maintenance work ... by these measures, we will support the entire community.

Malcolm Thorpe
6th July 2020