

The canal is only
10 yards wide.



▲
In summer, only a very
small flow of water.



The locks would need
to be converted. ▶

Is there a future for the North Walsham and Dilham Canal?

By JAMES BUXTON

IT was in 1962 that The East Anglian Waterways Association resolved that every effort should be made to save the North Walsham and Dilham Canal. The canal, which originally ran from Antingham to Wayford Bridge, was then, and still is, in a condition of dereliction. The waterway is shallow, reedy and overhung by trees; in some places it is totally extinct; the locks are dilapidated and dangerous; and many of the bridges are in poor condition.

In July 1965 the Nature Conservancy mentioned in their Report on Broadland that, among other waterways, the North Walsham and Dilham Canal should be re-opened and repaired at an estimated cost of £60,000. This referred to the section of the canal between Honing Lock and Swafield Bridge, a stretch of four and a half miles including four locks.

The Broads would be extended to North Walsham, which is a little over a mile from Swafield Bridge, and another $4\frac{1}{2}$ miles of waterway, including four locks, added to Broadland. But remember that the canal is only 10 yards wide and the locks are only 5 yards wide. Cruisers on the Broads are in no sense canal craft, many of them have a beam of 10 feet and most helmsmen are novices. A voyage up the canal would be one nervous moment after another, spiced by the terror of handling large and unwieldy boats at locks. The locks themselves are only 60 feet in length and thus, should there be any large amount of traffic, there would be long waits at each lock.

However, clearly something must be done about the canal, not only because it is at the moment an unsightly mess, but also because it fulfills its function of draining the Ant Basin so inadequately. Each winter the land above Bacton Wood Lock is flooded. The canal replaced the existing simple drainage system by a system of dykes running alongside the embankments of the canal; these dykes, called backsoks, flowed into the canal below each lock. This system has now collapsed; if the canal was reinstated, the backsoks would again help to drain land. As it has been shown impracticable to restore the canal, the other alternative—that of de-canalisation—must be taken.

The Nature Conservancy Report made no mention of the Upper Bure. Between Horstead Mill and Aylsham the river is broad, clean, attractive and navigable only by small boats. This is because the river, canalised in the late 18th century, has since been de-canalised, and the locks converted into weirs under the control of the mills. The river is broad and the countryside rather more attractive than that of the Upper Ant Valley.

Such a state would be the solution for the North Walsham and Dilham Canal. It would mean the removal of the embankments and the restoration of the canal to its natural course. It would also require the conversion of the locks to weirs. At the same time as the de-canalisation, the waterway would be generally cleaned, the banks mown and the present

The canal was built for wherries to carry merchandise to and from the various mills and staithes. There were not many more than a dozen wherries operating on the canal—there were, after all, only about 300 on the Broads altogether. Now there are approximately 2,500 motor cruisers and another 2,000 motor boats. Although few of these would actually use the canal, there would be more, much more, powerful traffic on the canal and, apart from the damage to banks, there would be hardly enough water to allow them all to use the canal. There is, in summer, only a very small flow of water into the canal at Swafield, whereas each time a boat passes through a lock a possible 10,000 gallons pass on downstream. At this rate there is reason to suppose that the canal would simply not have enough water to bear the burden forced upon it.

Relief of congestion on the Broads would only be achieved at great cost and by cramming many unsuitable boats into a congested waterway.

state of confusion swept away. The actual removal of embankments and the change in course of the waterway would in fact be fairly slight and, although not cheap, it would bring beauty to the countryside where now there is decay, and it would efficiently drain the valley. It would anyway be far cheaper than restoration of the canal. In many ways a waterway is more attractive when free of large boats, as any visitor to the Upper Bure will know.

The waterway would also be a nature reserve, for fish would be able to breed far better than they do now and far better than they would were the canal restored.

The attraction of a clean waterway, free of all but the smallest boats, must appeal most strongly to anyone who has any feeling for the Norfolk countryside. Restoration of beauty must occasionally be allowed to triumph over development of dereliction—and where better than where development is impracticable?