Unravelling the Council's Planning Data

Ian Shacklock, Friend of Regent's Canal, has embarked on a seemingly gargantuan task of making Council planning data accessible to all. Here he describes the project.

If you have ever spent more than five minutes trying to find your way around a council's planning website - and wondered whether there were easier ways of capturing the information - then you might be interested in a project started by the Friends of Regent's Canal.

The Friends of Regent's Canal are forever publicising and analysing planning applications. Typically our focus is on major ones, following an alert from a stakeholder, but occasionally we step back and ask ourselves how, why and when all the other changes were allowed to happen. Behind every lost boatyard, every converted wharf or hideous skyscraper there are planning applications registered on the council's website. At the moment there is still plenty of information freely available, to help us to learn from history, but it can be a time-consuming battle to retrieve it.
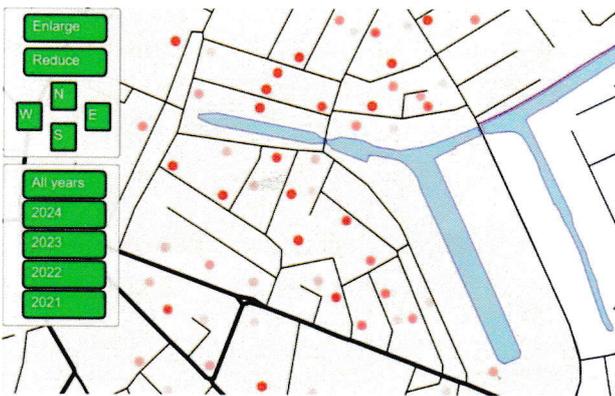

Figure 1 shows the streets around City Road Basin. The red circles represent postcodes. The darker the circle, the higher the number of applications at that location. The upper buttons allow the user to navigate around the map. The lower buttons allow filtering of the data by year.

.Last year we started a project to draw maps of all known planning applications along the banks of the canal but this was abandoned because there were no easy ways to identify them. Sometimes campaigners searched for keywords such as "canal" but this returned results only when that word was included in the first-level description of an application. It proved to be a lot of work for something that interested only a handful of stakeholders. In November we resumed the project with a different approach and started to capture data for the whole borough instead of picking out arbitrary sections of it. The advantage of covering the whole borough is that the workload is roughly the same yet the target audience is much wider. Whether you are a member of CAMRA researching lost pubs or an architecture critic monitoring mansard rooves, this historic planning information could be helpful to you.
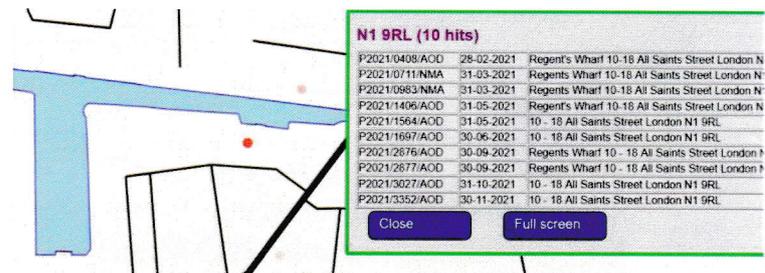

Figure 2 shows a pop-up window that appears when the user clicks on the Regent's Wharf postcode. If the user selects the right hand button, the pop-up will fill the screen with further details of each application

Each council website presents the search results in a different way. Islington and Camden show only ten items per page while Westminster and Tower Hamlets allow up to a hundred per page and the new Hackney website has no pagination at all. Extracting the search results can be a tedious process but we have automated a process to convert it all into a consistent CSV format. We then enrich the data with missing postcodes before deriving their easting and northing coordinates.

Our website now supports a utility to view lists of all the planning applications via interactive maps. By zooming into individual postcodes you can see summaries of all the applications associated with that location. Throughout 2024 the interactive maps are at friendsofregentscanal.org/projects/planapp-demos; if you have any questions or comments then please send them to friendsregentscanal@gmail.com as this is a work in progress. An update may follow later in the year.