

# Waterfront

The Canal & River Trust Magazine

## A brewing storm

How you're powering our teams working to protect canals before the winter storms roll in

## Tackling drought

The work we've done to manage canals through a long, hot summer

## Inspiring the next generation

Meet the young explorers learning to love and care for canal wildlife





# Welcome

The changing season brings you the latest edition of Waterfront, as we reflect on the ongoing challenges of caring for our canals.

Thanks to your support, we're working every day to protect the canals you treasure. With your help, we're making our reservoirs and water supplies more resilient; preparing for a winter of essential maintenance works and planning for the replacement of hundreds of lock gates this winter. We're also excited to be **protecting thousands of historic canal structures through our new volunteer-led heritage asset surveys**.

Yet our challenges are clear. With more extreme weather from summer droughts to winter storms damaging our canals, your support is needed more than ever. **That's why our Winter Appeal urgently seeks your support to prepare for winter – and power our teams working through wet days and cold nights to protect canals, along with all the people and wildlife that rely on them.**

All this change is taking place amid rising costs and falling government funding. We are embarking on a new chapter for our canals and rivers, with our new Chief Executive and a strategic plan to keep all 2,000 miles of waterway open and alive over the next decade. We look forward to sharing details of this exciting plan in the next edition.

Thank you once again for your support so we can continue to protect our much-loved network into the future.



## A hello and welcome

This month, our new Chief Executive, Campbell Robb, joins the Canal & River Trust after previously leading the social justice charity Nacro, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, and Shelter, among many others.

Our chair, David Orr, welcomed him by saying: "Campbell brings a wealth of experience from across the charity sector, including 15 years in similar roles where he has successfully strengthened organisations to respond to challenges and opportunities. I look forward to working with him to secure the long-term future of our canals."

Campbell himself commented: "This is one of the most exciting roles in the public and voluntary sectors, and I am delighted to take it on. To act as a steward for the history, and protect the future of, these amazing living monuments will be a challenge, but also an opportunity. Canals and rivers are vital for those who live, work, and volunteer on them, as well as the wildlife they foster and support. To help our canals continue to thrive will be a privilege."

In future issues, we hope to give you the chance to hear from Campbell directly, as he rises to the challenge of keeping our canals and rivers open and alive.

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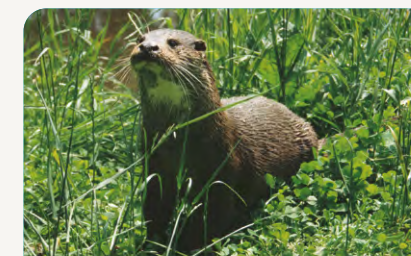
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# “Our heritage craftsmanship is unrivalled”

Simon Turner, National Workshops Manager

**In preparation for this year’s winter works, our lock gate workshops at Bradley near Wolverhampton and Stanley Ferry near Wakefield are already producing an incredible 144 lock leaves to replace worn-out gates across our network. As Simon Turner, our national workshops manager explains, it’s an unrivalled feat of heritage craftsmanship, precision engineering, and bespoke manufacturing.**

“Every year we make more lock gates than anyone else in the world,” he says proudly. “No-one’s making them in such a variety of styles, sizes, and specifications.”

That’s because 250 years ago, in the midst of ‘canal mania’, different engineers built locks in unique ways. Today, that still means no two gates on our 1,581 locks are identical, so it’s a manufacturing challenge that even Henry Ford would struggle with. But Simon relishes the challenge: “It’s not about working harder, but smarter. That’s why we’re starting to digitise using Computer Aided Design (CAD).

The CAD design element is crucial to get it right from the start, but establishing the actual dimensions isn’t always easy to define: “We have documents going right back to Thomas Telford’s original designs, drawn on linen. Sometimes there’s no documentation at all, and we go out and measure gates underwater using everything from traditional plumb lines to hooks and staffs.”

When it comes to assembly, two-thirds of the job is still about



Cutting green oak timbers to size



The team at our Stanley Ferry Lock Gate Workshop



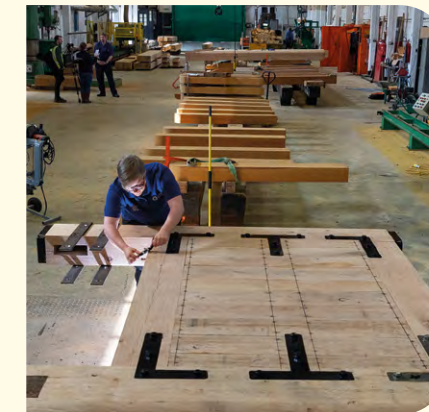
**No two gates on our 1,581 locks are identical**

**It’s like painting the Forth Road Bridge, we simply never stop.**

**“People like senior lock gate technician Andrew Bayliss have been working at Stanley Ferry for 27 years and are like an encyclopedia of lock gate manufacture. He’s probably forgotten more about gates than anyone else will ever know.”**

Simon Turner, National Workshops Manager

assembling those components by hand using carpenters, joiners and traditional skills honed over generations. Once assembled, the lock gates are installed across the network from around November each year. It can be a nervous time, watching the gates leave the workshop to their new home.



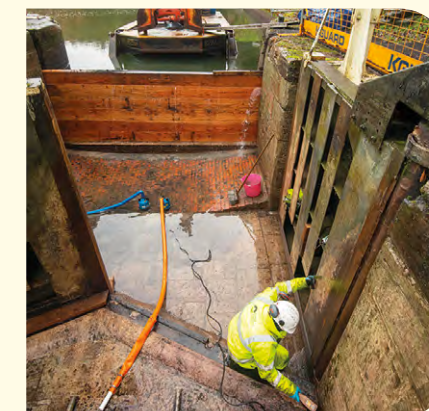
Every lock gate is still built by hand

“Our aim is to make the installation as easy as possible, so gates drop straight into a lock without the need for adjustments. We never forget that our installation teams work through the winter. I remember being up to my knees in freezing water, in sleet and snow, unable to feel my feet or hands, as I tried to fit a lock gate. So, when we get our design and assembly job right first time, it makes our installers’ jobs so much easier.”

Looking further ahead, we are also exploring alternative materials like sustainably sourced tropical hardwoods, with a 60–70-year lifespan. But the green oak we’ve always used are still very much part of the process.

For this year’s gates, funds raised by players of People’s Postcode Lottery will support the replacement of 20 leaves. Manufacturing began about a year ago, and as they leave the workshop in the

coming weeks, the whole process will begin again. As Simon concludes: “We don’t have a quiet period. It’s like painting the Forth Road Bridge, we simply never stop.”



Fitting lock gates is an art in itself

With generation after generation of lock gates having been produced for canals over centuries, we’re proud to be continuing the tradition, protecting the heritage skills that keep our locks working today, exactly as they always have.



# Until the well runs dry...

Like turning on a tap, it's easy to assume there will always be water in our canals. But after an exceptionally dry spring, heatwaves, hosepipe bans and drought being declared across many parts of England this summer, we've faced a crisis that might normally happen only once in 80 years on our canals. Waterfront spoke to national hydrology manager, Dr Adam Comerford, to discover how canals cope in a hotter, drier climate.

It's been an extremely challenging time for canals after drought conditions this spring led to a considerable number of canals being restricted or closed to navigation through the summer. These steps have helped conserve the dwindling water supplies left in the rivers and reservoirs that feed the canal network. But, as Adam points out, sometimes these radical steps are essential.

**"We hate closing canals, so when we do it's vital to explain why. Often we're simply trying to keep enough water in a canal to keep moored boats afloat, keep fish and other wildlife alive, and protect the canal from drying out and suffering damage."**

Of the 53 water resource zones within our network, around 20% have been impacted this summer with closures or restrictions to navigation. This typically involves padlocking the lock gates and paddle to reduce loss of water.

Without any sustained, persistent rainfall during the summer, the situation was incredibly challenging for the Trust staff and our many volunteers to manage, and more importantly for all the boaters and businesses relying on the canal for recreation and income.

As Adam explains there are other historic, geological and social factors to consider when it comes to managing our precious water resources. "Although we're constantly working to manage leaks and seepage on our 250-year-old canals, we don't always have the financial resources to do as much as we'd like to. Some canals have inherent

water supply issues as engineers in the late 1700s didn't always incorporate water resilience into their design, so levels have always struggled on canals like the Rochdale."

"Generally, it does tend to rain more in the North, but geology means much of that water isn't absorbed and runs quickly into rivers. Conversely, in the south, rocks are more porous, so there's a larger store of groundwater to draw from or sustain flows in rivers and streams into the summer months even if it is not raining. And then there's demand. Canals are more popular than ever, so we use all of the tools at our disposal very carefully."

As well as all the work we do to manage water throughout the year, we're always looking ahead and considering our longer term water strategy. That's why Adam and senior colleagues are on the front foot, talking to the whole water industry and planning for the future. On top of our own investments in our reservoirs there are ambitious industry-wide plans to build more and deliver other strategic water schemes. For instance, Adam believes canals can play a vital role to help transfer water across the country in exchange for investment to reduce leaks and losses and upgrade our infrastructure.

Although there are no easy answers, especially in a changing climate where extreme weather events are more commonplace, Adam and his team's future-focussed approach will ensure we carefully manage this increasingly precious resource in the years ahead.

There are four big problems that Adam and his team have to contend with:



## 1. Dry weather

Adam explains: "2025 is likely to be the worst drought situation in living memory on canals – far worse than the last time we saw a drought in 2022. In fact, we've had the driest six months to July in England since the drought of 1976; the typical benchmark for an extreme drought."



## 2. Low reservoir levels

Right now and in years to come we need to heavily invest to bring all our 71 large upland reservoirs up to ever-tightening safety standards and prepare for the effects of climate change. As we have to drain each reservoir before work can start, lower water levels can lead to less supply for canals like the Leeds & Liverpool or the Peak Forest."



## 3. Water limits

In the past we could use water from neighbouring rivers and streams to feed our 2,000 mile network with no restrictions on how much water we used. But now we have to apply for over 150 licences to use this water. They can have very stringent conditions, limiting the amount of water we can use, especially when rivers are running low, as was the case on the Monmouthshire & Brecon Canal earlier this year. But by working with governments and colleagues in the water industry, we're aiming to keep securing access to the water our canals so urgently need.



## 4. Keeping boats afloat

All through this summer our hydrology and operational teams have been working round the clock to keep water in our canals, so that our boaters can still moor safely. Sometimes that means closing locks and navigation, but these measures are essential to keep boats afloat, stop lock gates shrinking, prevent canal banks drying out and save water wildlife from suffering. All our efforts are designed to protect boats, canals and nature from damage, until water levels rise again.



# Charting the history of our canals

In a new survey of the heritage we care for, volunteers are helping us record some of the engineering feats of the industrial age, documenting the centuries-old bridges, locks and aqueducts that make up the rich fabric of our canals.

The ambitious project, beginning with the 127-mile-long Leeds & Liverpool Canal, will chart our changing waterways, and will be the first of its kind since the early 1990s. Working in pairs and using a dedicated app on their mobile phones, volunteers have been walking along the canal recording any historical assets they encounter, taking notes and capturing photographs.

“The volunteers have been amazing,” says heritage adviser, Bill Froggatt, who’s been spearheading the pilot scheme alongside his colleague, Simon Hinchliffe. “They’ve learned so much about the canal and have come to look at it in a completely different way – as a piece of living history, dotted with bridges, locks and boundary stones.”

Volunteers have already logged nearly 1,000 heritage assets, but once the survey is launched across the country, Bill and Simon expect the final tally to be anywhere between 10,000 to 12,000.

Fortified building Bridge 32 Crabtree Lane near Burscough, a former pub stable has had gun loopholes inserted to create a strong point in case of invasion.

Office Lock Bridge Sign Early 20th Century Leeds & Liverpool Canal Company Notice – advising on max weight limits from Motor Car Acts 1896.

Lock 84 Wigan, engineered by Joseph and James Fletcher, is one of 23 locks over a distance of 2½ miles that lifts the canal 200 feet from Wigan Pier to the ‘Lancaster Pound’.

Polish War Memorial to the crew of a Wellington Bomber which crashed near Hambleton Swing Bridge (Bradley) on the Leeds & Liverpool Canal in 1943.

Priestholme Aqueduct 1790s Grade II Listed three-arched aqueduct engineered by Robert Whitworth west of Gargrave.

Basuto, a Clyde Puffer built 1902 by William Jacks & Co of Port Dundas is part of the National Historic Fleet, a select group of 200 boats with national or regional significance to UK maritime history.

Bingley 3 & 5 Rise Locks, one of the most recognisable and visited heritage assets on the Leeds & Liverpool Canal.

“It’s been incredibly rewarding,” says Bill, “It adds colour to our canals, conjures images of what life was like on our waterways all those years ago, and provides a lasting legacy of all the people who lived, built and worked on them.”

Made possible thanks to funds raised by players of People’s Postcode Lottery, the completed survey will eventually be made available to the public, bringing our canals to life in an online catalogue of photos, stories, and even 3D models.

Bridge 41 Hand Lane, a standard stone arch Bridge standing between Parbold and Apperley Bridge was built by the canal’s first engineer John Longbotham.

East Marton Double Arched Bridge 1790s Grade II Listed architectural & engineering gem, widened in the 20th Century to carry the A59 over the canal at East Marton.

Parsons Bridge Kildwick Grade II Listed footbridge that takes its name from the Parson who would lead mourners across the canal for burial services.

This cast-iron milepost, along with 126 other mileposts, were installed along the canals to protect the canal company’s income.

Granary Wharf Crane a rare surviving cast iron wharf crane with wooden jib standing next to the former Leeds & Liverpool Canal Company Warehouse.

Like to volunteer for our heritage survey?  
Search at [volunteer.canalrivertrust.org.uk](http://volunteer.canalrivertrust.org.uk)



# Inspiring the next generation



Every year, our Explorers programme inspires over 100,000 young people to learn more about the canals and nature on their doorstep. Earlier this year, youngsters from Bobby Moore Primary School in East London enjoyed a wildlife walk along the River Lea, in the company of famous naturalist and wildlife cameraman, Hamza Yassin.

At a time when many young people feel disconnected from nature and tend to spend more time in front of screens, we are making great efforts to encourage primary school-aged children to connect with nature. Each week, across the country, we welcome schools, guides, scouts, and families as they explore canals and nature in our 'outdoor classrooms.'

Not only does everyone have a great day by spending time outdoors by water, but our Explorers programme offers a host of learning opportunities aligned with the national curriculum. It gives young people the chance to learn about canal history, the wildlife that canals protect, engineering principles behind our cuttings, locks, and bridges, and how to stay safe by water.

Supported by funds raised by players of People's Postcode Lottery, one key aim of the Canal & River Trust's Explorers programme is to inspire the next generation to love canal wildlife and contribute to our efforts in supporting nature's recovery.

Hamza shares this ambition, as he explained when we caught up with him to discuss nature, wellbeing, and the importance of our canals. Growing up in Northamptonshire, just a stone's throw from where the River Avon begins, Hamza has always had an affinity with water:

"I spent most of my summer holidays on the riverbank, looking for crayfish, otters, and herons.

Our canals and rivers are so important for our ecosystem; they provide vital habitats for a plethora of animals. Today, we've seen mute swans, Canada geese, and even a young fox. It's so wonderful to see kids enjoying nature right on their doorstep."

Hamza also believes our waterways play a key role in our personal well-being and help children and families reconnect with nature. "If you've had a tough day and want to decompress, one of the best things you can do is spend a little time outside. For me, being next to a river or canal surrounded by nature is like a form of meditation.

One of the things I really love to see are damselflies, a beautiful iridescent insect, rather like a dragonfly. Otters too, of course, although they're a little more elusive. I remember as a kid I would search for otter droppings around our local waterways, looking on banks and under bridges for clues that the animals were nearby.

I want to inspire today's kids—our future prime ministers, lawmakers, and influencers—to fall in love with canals and nature so they will care about their future and want to become custodians of our planet."

'Hamza's Wild World' by Hamza Yassin is available now.

"It's fantastic that someone as knowledgeable and respected as Hamza wants to support our work to bring the next generation closer to nature."

Annette Simpson, Learning and Skills Manager



Find out more about inspiring the next generation with our Explorers programme  
[canalrivertrust.org.uk/explorers](https://canalrivertrust.org.uk/explorers)



# Rooted in nature

Connections with nature and wellbeing



Walk along the Leeds & Liverpool Canal in Bradford, and you might encounter our Community Roots team helping local people connect with the nature around them. It's a journey of discovery for many, as they uncover ways to improve mental health through a canal corridor teeming with wildlife.

"Community Roots is at the heart of what our charity does – making life better by water," explains engagement coordinator, Sharron Bright. "It's about reaching out to those living near our canals, understanding their needs, and using the accessible resource of canals to support them."

Supported by players of People's Postcode Lottery, it aims to assist communities most in need of the mental health benefits canals can offer. As a proud Bradfordian, Sharron has worked for years to make her canal an integral part of the local community, maintaining strong connections with groups like the Bradford Community Mental Health Team:

"It's been a truly productive two-way relationship. They signpost individuals facing various issues to us, from loneliness and isolation to grief and depression, and our canals can help provide the wellbeing therapy they need.

Nature connectedness and growing an individual's relationship, awareness and appreciation of the nature around them is central to everything we do all year round. We take people out across winter, spring, summer, and autumn to show them the wildlife close to where they live. We walk purposefully and mindfully, emphasising slowing down and becoming more aware of our surroundings. It's more than just spending time outdoors, we actively encourage people to see, touch, listen, smell, and even taste the nature around them.

For example, we might give someone a colour strip from a paint shop and ask them to find something in nature that matches. To get people to see the bigger picture, we encourage them to look up and spot different cloud formations. Or we ask them to look down and notice delicate,

beautiful things like butterflies. Every member of the group keeps a journal to reflect on what they've seen and learned. They absolutely love it, and it's really quite powerful."

One morning, Sharron recalls the group spending a magical hour watching an otter: "We saw it diving into the water, following bubbles until it resurfaced. We watched as it caught a fish, rolled in the water, and threw it around. It was a little miracle to spend time with an otter like that. I know people who've worked on canals for years and have never seen one."

From kingfishers to caterpillars, trees and fungi, the group have experienced it all. But these close-up, sensory experiences and connections to nature serve a clear purpose – to help those who are struggling in life to fall in love with the world around them once again.

"We have one chap who comes along who is bereaved and these sessions have really helped him cope with his grief for his wife. There's another lady who hadn't been outside for a number of months, after suffering a mental health crisis. Now, she's canoeing on canals as part of her long-term recovery plan."

Sharron admits she has learned about the healing powers of canal nature herself and feels encouraged that others are seeing and feeling the benefits of water, including a range of health workers.

**Nature connectedness and growing an individual's relationship, awareness and appreciation of the nature around them is central to everything we do all year round.**





# Canal photographer, editor, and champion

**The late, great, Harry Arnold MBE 1937-2018, chronicled, promoted and helped rescue our canals and rivers for over 60 years, recording changing places, craft and people.**

Perhaps best known for founding and editing *Waterways World* magazine, he was also a Vice-President of the Inland Waterways Association, a founder of the National Waterways Museum at Ellesmere Port and instigated the restoration of Anderton Boat Lift as well as numerous canals. All while raising a family, and living, at various points, afloat. His energy was as impressive as his eye. Here's just a small selection of his work to celebrate a canal life well-lived.



1. Skipper Jimmy Moores reverses through Wolverhampton 21 flight, 1965. Thos Clayton would finish carrying by canal less than four months later.
2. In 1969 over 200 enthusiasts converged on Welshpool to clear the Montgomery Canal. Harry was involved from the outset, later helping found the Montgomery Waterway Restoration Trust.
3. You might recognise the Black Country Living Museum from *Peaky Blinders*, and this Traditional Boat Gathering from 2017 helps picture the way things were.
4. Boat horses Jim and Billy Bud with boatman Tom Clarke at Norbury Junction, Shropshire Union Canal, 21 June 1965.
5. Steam powered narrow boat, *President*, with butty, *Kildare*, transits the Liverpool Canal Link, 6 May 2016.
6. "Chocolate Charlie" Atkins is famed for carrying Chocolate Crumb to Cadbury's at Bourneville. Here he is on the Trent & Mersey Canal, 1976.

All images © Harry Arnold/waterwayimages.com

**"Harry's photographs show canals from disuse and dereliction to reopening and regeneration.**

**His energy and enthusiasm were only matched by his knowledge.**

**We are so grateful for the photographs he and his daughter Julie generously shared with us."**

Michelle Kozomara,  
Internal Communications Manager



# Return of the Macc

Liam McGonigal and his drysuit, helped save 26 miles of water



**When site supervisor, Liam McGonigal, took a call about a breach on the Macclesfield Canal last March, he knew he had to act fast. A sinkhole was draining the canal so quickly, there was a real risk of losing 26 miles of water. Yet, thanks to his cool head and swift action, just a mile was lost and soon swift repairs began.**

As you'll have seen in our appeal this month, it's unsung heroes like Liam who truly tell the story of how we save canals, whenever disaster strikes. But to him, with over 13 years' experience in the job, it's all in a day's work.

"There's always a team ready, day and night, for an emergency. That day it was down to me," Liam explains. "I could see all the moored-up boats when I arrived, so I made sure ropes were slackened off. If you're not careful, tied-up boats in low water can get damaged, or rip out mooring rings.

Then I went to assess this massive hole, with water rushing and swirling down it. I knew we had to plug it fast. Fortunately, at every bridge, we have a set of stop planks that we can use to hold the water back. A team at the nearest bridge had tried to put one or two stop planks in – but those first planks had become wedged. With the sheer weight of water pressing against them, they were stuck fast.

That's when I made the call to move up to the next bridge, number 53. It was getting dark, and with time against us, I put on my drysuit and jumped into the canal. I needed to be in the middle of the water to make sure these planks went in cleanly."

Thanks to his swift actions, Liam massively limited the loss of water. Over the following days, the site was secured, fish were rescued, and more permanent tarpaulin dams were installed around the leak. Once a local farmer gave us access to this remote rural site, our contractors began the repairs. By July, the canal was open for boaters and walkers again, with the culvert restored, the embankment rebuilt, and the canal banks relined with waterproof clay.

Liam explains that this dramatic breach was simply unlucky. A storm drain, or culvert under the canal, had failed. But as he points out, works that hit the headlines never tell the whole story.

"We knew we had a similar problem further up at Bollington, so while these works were ongoing, we took the opportunity to fix that too. But those are the kind of hidden repairs that no one ever hears about.

I live five minutes from the canal, and I'd love to fix everything around me, but we just haven't got the funds to do everything we'd like to. What can you do about the weather? We're going to keep getting these hot summers and wet winters. We just have to prepare, adapt, and look for the support to care for the canals we love."

**"Because I'm experienced, I know what needs to happen. And I just knew we couldn't afford to wait two or three hours, or else we'd lose the canal altogether."**

Liam McGonigal



The failed culvert that caused the breach is now repaired and as good as new





# Shaping the next chapter of our canals

Our Gifts in Wills Discovery Events series has been taking place across the country this summer from Pontcysyllte Aqueduct to Caen Hill Locks and London St Pancras. Over 300 Friends have joined us for this year's events and they have been a wonderful way to say thank you for their kind and generous support, and highlight how gifts in Wills are playing a vital role in protecting all 2,000 miles of our canals in the years ahead.

There's really no better way to understand the work we do to protect canals and rivers - or to learn about some of the challenges we face - than going 'behind the scenes' and hearing directly from our expert engineers, heritage specialists, and ecologists who work every day to safeguard our canals.



At Pontcysyllte, we heard how destination supervisor, Lynda Slater, has increased visitor numbers from 50,000 to half a million a year. She also shared her

exciting plans to redevelop Trevor Basin at the far end of the aqueduct in the future. Heritage adviser, Mark Somerfield, also explained some of the challenges involved in caring for Thomas Telford's masterpiece and described some of the surprising discoveries he made when the aqueduct was dewatered, investigated, and repaired last winter.

Earlier in the year, our guests at Caen Hill Locks learned more about its remarkable history from heritage adviser, Morgan Cowles. Its name is believed to be derived from the Caen region of France when prisoners from the Napoleonic war who came from the region, contributed to the construction of the remarkable 29-lock flight.

Meanwhile, in London, guests learned about the explosive history of the Regent's Canal as a vital trade route between the Grand Union Canal and the docks of the Thames. Ecologist, Ben Macmillan, also shared how he and his team are helping to bring wildlife into the heart of the city.



**"It's been an absolutely brilliant day, thoroughly enjoyable – the passion of all the people who gave the tour of the aqueduct was absolutely obvious. It's a great environment to be in; we've learnt a lot."**

Rosie, Pontcysyllte Aqueduct Gift in Wills event

Common to all our events, one of the most heart-warming aspects of the day is the way our Friends get to meet one another, share their experiences of canals and their personal reasons for supporting our charity.



As our Gifts in Wills team outline, that support is very much needed. At a time when repair and maintenance costs and the impact of climate change are ever greater, government support is also falling away. Over the next 10 years, we expect to lose a startling £50m in government funding. That means we have to rise to the challenge in order to keep our heritage alive and continue to maintain 2,000 miles of our canals and rivers to make them more resilient in the future, otherwise some canals may face the risk of needing to close permanently.



If you'd like to discover how a gift in your Will could help protect, restore, and revive the history, nature, and peaceful pleasures of your local canal, please get in touch with our Gifts in Wills team.

We'd be delighted to share the impact legacy gifts are already making on our canals, and we're already planning our events for 2026 if you would like to join us.



**"We're both from very different backgrounds and levels of knowledge, but we've both come away with far more knowledge than we came here with, and we'll remember the joy of this shared experience"**

Jennie, Pontcysyllte Aqueduct Gift in Wills event

**Like to learn more?**  
Contact Kelly Alcock:  
[kelly.alcock@canalrivertrust.org.uk](mailto:kelly.alcock@canalrivertrust.org.uk)  
07392 108921





Flower is a gypsy cob, bred to be strong and stocky

# Flower Power

A family in Staffordshire is bringing history to life with the help of a ten-year-old mare named Flower. The family, led by lifelong canal enthusiast, David Ray, operate the country's only traditional horse-drawn narrowboat, giving regular demonstrations along the canals.

David runs a boatyard at Norbury Junction on the Shropshire Union Canal. Flower, a beautiful brown-and-white mare, which the family rescued several years ago, is stabled nearby.

"I've been involved in canals virtually all my life," says David, "and while I enjoy working on modern boats, my real passion is the history and heritage of our waterways. So when Saturn Fly-Boat got in touch to see if I'd be interested in horse boating with Flower, I was delighted."

Saturn Fly-Boat is a voluntary partnership, set up to restore and operate *Saturn*, the last remaining Shropshire Union fly-boat. Built in 1906, she worked as a horse-drawn cargo boat until the mid-1950s.

Lovingly restored in 2005, *Saturn* now serves as a heritage attraction, touring the region's canals. After Cracker, her erstwhile boat-horse was retired, the team contacted David.

Flower took to her new role immediately. It was like she'd been doing it all her life," says David, "within a few strides the boat was travelling at

around four miles an hour and we were cruising slowly along the canal."

Flower's relatively short stature and powerful hind legs make her an ideal boat-horse, strong enough to haul heavy loads, yet small enough to navigate narrow towpaths and low bridges. Her temperament too is perfect for the job, as David explains:

"She's got a lovely nature and she's very good around people; no horse is completely bomb-proof, but she's used to lots of different noises, and she's not easily spooked."

Since taking those first tentative steps along the towpath, Flower has been giving demonstrations on canals across the region, hauling *Saturn* and *Gifford* (a historic boat based at the National Waterways Museum) using a traditional harness and towline.

Seeing Flower in action is a rare and wonderful glimpse of a bygone age, a fitting testament to the thousands of horses that came before her, unsung heroes that toiled on our canals, powering the Industrial Revolution.



**"A lot of people don't realise why the towpaths are there," says David, "when in fact, most of the infrastructure of the canals, the towpaths, bridges and lock gates, were designed specifically to support horse boating."**





# Talking on the towpath

The picturesque village of Stoke Bruerne on the Grand Union Canal is home to our country's very first canal museum, founded on the collections of former canal engineer, Charles Hadlow, and lock keeper, Jack James.



## Jules Fuels

Jules and Richard are well-known suppliers of coal, diesel, gas, and logs to live-aboard boaters. Today, Jules is pulling her Woolwich butty, Bideford, up the lock towards Braunston Marina to get its bottom blacked. Bideford is just one of nine working boats they've rescued, restored and franchised out. Business is good but it won't make them rich Jules laughingly tells us: "It's more a labour of love that keeps the dog in biscuits!"



## Sheila, Steve and Teddy

Sitting outside their holiday cottage beside the lock and enjoying a coffee with their young pup, Teddy, this friendly couple say: "We just love sitting here, watching the world go by. We've had canal holidays, boats on the Norfolk Broads and in France before, but now we're older it's nice to let others do the hard work! With the museum, an Indian restaurant next door, and a pub on the other side, we're spoilt for choice."



## Rosie

Volunteer lockkeeper, Rosie, loves her regular Thursday spent outdoors: "45 years ago, my husband booked a very cheap narrowboat holiday for our honeymoon, and remarkably, we're still boating and together today. When you've got experience, it's good to share a bit of knowledge and chat to people; you often get a life story within a lock! People come here from all over the world, particularly Scandinavia, so I'm practising my Norwegian."



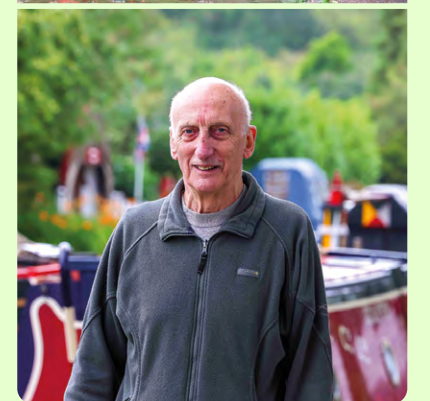
## Jo and Hobo

As continuous cruiser, Jo, passes down the flight, her friend Holly turns deck-grown blueberries into a cake in the galley to the sound of pumping drum and bass. She says: "I love the boat life, escaping the rat race to live in a more peaceful, alternative outdoor way. When the waterways were quieter, we used to moor up side by side at night and watch movies!"



## Portia and Melissa

"I want her to be happy," says Melissa's carer, Portia. "And she wants the same for me, so we have adventures together. After an active life, Melissa still loves to explore with regular days out: "I love the water, and going on a boat ride is so romantic." Meanwhile, Portia finds the history fascinating telling us: "It's great to remember that canal boats pulled by horses, drove the industrial revolution 200 years ago, and shaped our modern world."



## Kenneth

As Kenneth signed up to join us as a Friend, we discovered this was a poignant occasion: "Sadly, my wife Jo died last year. She was a big part of the village WI and the over-60s club. She loved them and they loved her, so I've brought them for a boat trip at one of Jo's favourite places. We passed through many times as boaters, although I admit, Jo got a bit claustrophobic, so she preferred to walk over the tunnel, rather than going through it!"



# Wrestling with warm weather weeds

**When warm weather arrives to our canals, it can also bring a choking blanket of invasive weeds. When they grew rapidly across parts of the network this summer, we took to the water to keep our canals clear for boaters and protect water wildlife.**

Our annual summer programme to combat invasive plants is costly and involves volunteers, staff, and contractors working to remove more than 2,500 tonnes of invasive weed each year.

Aquatic weeds like duckweed, floating pennywort, and azolla grow exceptionally quickly. Some of the fastest-growing weeds can double in size within hours. If left unchecked, the weed causes problems for boats, rowers, and anglers. It blocks sunlight from native water plants, depletes the oxygen fish need to breathe, and damages species such as kingfishers and otters.

The proliferation of weeds in summer isn't new, but hotter weather followed by heavy rain are making the problem worse. Weed thrives in high temperatures, and the recent rainstorms will have washed nutrients from the surrounding land into the waterways, enabling weeds to spread even further.

Recently, our regional director for the East Midlands, Linny Beaumont, joined local volunteers from 'Barrow in Bloom' and the Leicester Outdoor Pursuits Centre's 'Wild women' group to remove

around 120 tonnes of floating pennywort from the River Soar. The session involved 19 people using kayaks and paddleboards to transfer the weeds from the water to the bank, where they naturally decompose.

Meanwhile, our team at Stourport Basin in the West Midlands used a specialist weed harvester boat to extract over 80 tonnes of duckweed in five days, at a cost of £12,500. It's thanks to supporters like you that we can undertake a lot of this vital work. Julie Sharman, our chief operating officer, says: "The decision by the government to cut future funding for the nation's canal network is going to make winning our battle against aquatic weed even harder. We run regular volunteer days where people can get involved in all sorts of tasks to care for their local waterway, including removing weed, and we would welcome any help in keeping our canals alive."

