



**Canal &
River Trust**

Making life better by water

Issue 21 Spring/Summer 2025

Waterfront.

The Canal & River Trust Magazine

Better boating

Learn more about our plans for
an even better boating experience

A positive plan

A new, exciting vision for the
future of the West Midlands' canals

Spring bursts into life

Enjoy our guide to wildlife by water

Front cover.

Welcome

In this edition of Waterfront, we welcome spring and all the hope, promise and positivity it brings. Because as you'll see inside, this is a time to look forward to a better future for our canals.

It's heartening to know that we all share the same goal of keeping our canals alive, and that's why we've spent the winter undertaking vital work on our canals, so these special places are open and ready for us all to enjoy this summer.

We pressed ahead with major projects to iconic lock flights such as Hatton and Caen Hill, and welcomed even more volunteers and supporters to our cause whose valuable time and donations are helping to make life better by water for everyone.

Your amazing support for our winter appeal has raised an incredible £84,000 so far, and every penny helped us deal with emergency repairs to our canals following storms Bert, Darragh and Éowyn. Thanks to you, our teams were able to respond quickly to control rapidly rising water levels after Bert hit in November. In the aftermath of Darragh in December, our West Midlands team alone removed over 400 fallen trees blocking canals and towpaths. And work has already begun on major repairs to Locks 11, 12 and 13 on the Huddersfield Narrow Canal after New Year floods washed away towpaths and embankments.

With longer, brighter days ahead, we hope you can get out onto our canals and towpaths in the coming weeks. You'll find them bursting with life, and our feature on spring plants, birds and wildlife of all kinds will help you to spot more of the amazing nature around you.

Along the way, this issue might also inspire you to discover new canals with friends and family, such as the beautiful Brecon Canal, in the heart of the Beacon Mountains in South Wales. Or perhaps you'll follow our footsteps into the heart of richly historic Oxford where our canals connect to the Thames.

One of the joys of time by water is meeting new people and discovering their stories along the way. As always, this edition of Waterfront celebrates our rich and varied canal community, all of whom, in their own small ways, are coming together with us to ensure a future for our canals.

It serves as a reminder that our canals are only as strong as the people who care for them. The best hope for our waterways are all those who rally to our cause. Thank you once again for all your kind and generous support, we hope you get to experience the magic of our canals this spring and see the impact we continue to make together.



A farewell and thank you

Richard Parry, our Chief Executive will be standing down this summer after 12 years leading our charity through its formative years to become a well-supported national cause.

He comments: "It's been an honour to lead the Trust through such a key period, working to build a sustainable future for our historic canal network, increasing the number of people benefiting from it and widening appreciation of its value to the nation.

I have loved working with such committed colleagues and a rising number of amazing volunteers. I've made so many friends among the people who share our passion for canals. After 12 years it is the right time for me to hand over the Trust for the next stage of its journey."

Thank you, Richard and best wishes from all our Friends.

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Stairway to heaven

Last month 40 enthusiastic Friends, legacy pledgers and supporters joined us for a VIP tour of the bottom of Lock 40 on the famously steep 21-lock Hatton Flight. Standing below the waterline, we witnessed first-hand the skilled craftsmanship and engineering expertise needed to replace the huge, heavy English oak lock gates as part of this winter's vital maintenance works.

"If you look behind you, you'll see what we call a cofferdam," explains Andy Morris, regional construction manager and our guide for the day. "So right now..." he teases gently, "...you are all below water, and behind those planks are thousands of tonnes of water pressure eager to break through. Thankfully, I have complete faith in our engineers' calculations, keeping us safe."

It's a real privilege to be here, at the bottom of the lock, watching the skilled craftsmen applying mortar to the brickwork around us. As Andy explains, these locks are some of the youngest and strongest constructed on the network. The original narrow locks built in 1800 were replaced as recently as the 1930s with double-width locks, wide enough to carry two boats side by side and accommodate even more canal traffic between London and Birmingham.

Always an arduous 45-metre climb over just 2 miles, the flight earned its nickname as the Stairway to Heaven, in Victorian times, as working boatmen would only collect their wages for their run once they reached the carrying company office at the very top lock.

The flight remains a significant challenge for boaters today, and the 25-year cycle of replacing lock gates is just as demanding. Andy shows us how each pair of gates is carefully lowered into position using remote-controlled



Andy Morris gives us a tour of Lock 40

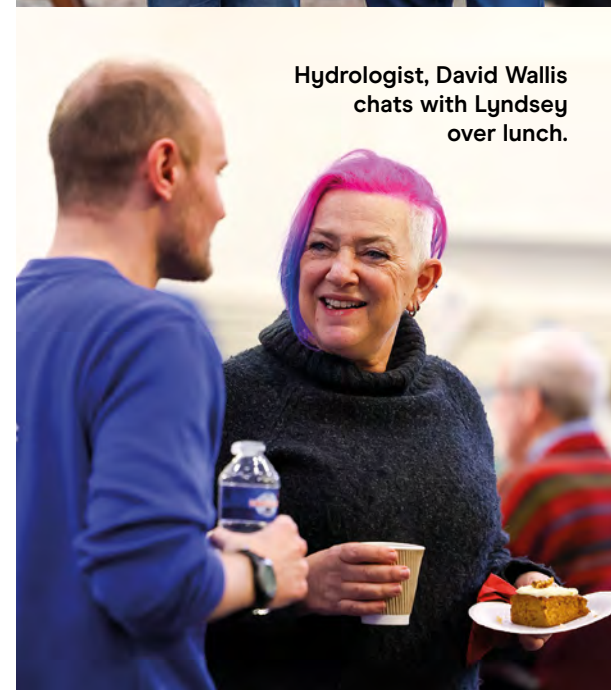
cranes. With each pair costing £64,000 in sustainably grown timber and metalwork alone, this job is handled with the utmost care over the course of two days. However, it can take another two weeks to refine a perfect watertight seal between each mitred door.

It's fair to say that every one of us felt incredibly fortunate to witness such remarkable feats of engineering up close, but they were by no means the only insights of the day. We also heard from hydrologist David Wallis about how his team ensures 10 million litres of water a day feed the Hatton Flight from Edgbaston Reservoir in central Birmingham. Meanwhile, expert speakers from our heritage, ecology, and education teams also shared their knowledge with our guests. There was even time for Chief Executive, Richard Parry, to drop by and thank everyone who attended for all their support over the years.

Today's event certainly seemed to resonate with nearly everyone who attended, with many guests commenting on how much they learned about our work to care for canals. And it's just the first of many events our gifts in Wills team are planning for the rest of 2025. You may have received an invite for a forthcoming event near you inside this edition of Waterfront, and we look forward to seeing you by (or below) the water very soon.



Janette and Paul, two of the forty friends who enjoyed their day with us.



Hydrologist, David Wallis chats with Lyndsey over lunch.



Considering a gift in your Will, want to know more, or attend an event?
giftsinwills@canalrivertrust.org.uk

Behind the scenes with Narrow Escapes

With a second series of Narrow Escapes returning to our screens this Spring, Waterfront stepped behind the scenes of Channel 4's popular canal reality show.



Jay Saunders, and his assistance dog, Hawk.



Andy Flint and Emma Culshaw-Bell.

"We're delighted it did so well," explains executive producer Heidi Gomes. "To everyone's surprise, we were in the top 5 Channel 4 shows every week. Clearly, it's a very aspirational and uniquely British lifestyle, and it's just very soothing to watch."

The production team found no shortage of stories to feature, as she got to know many members of what she calls 'the longest village in the world'. She tells us: "We began by joining every Facebook boating group going. Then people put us onto other people. We've learned a lot about filming on canals – for instance, there's so little room on a narrowboat that the cameraman often ends up having to stand in the loo!"

The canal is just a very positive place to be. It's great to see people walking or riding bikes on the towpath, or a dad teaching his daughter how to fish. Last year, we filmed one lady whose health had dramatically improved since she began living afloat. Life on the water really is good for you."

This brings us to the main story of our filming day at Sawley Marina, just outside Nottingham. We are meeting Andy Flint, the founder of Forces Veterans Afloat. In 2021, he proposed restoring old or abandoned boats for homeless ex-service personnel. Andy's idea struck a chord with the boating and veterans' communities, which now help him offer four temporary homes afloat. The Royal British Legion helps match these boats to ex-service people in need, like Jay Saunders, who today will be taking ownership of NV Stingray, a rare 41-foot Sea Otter narrowboat with a midship cockpit.

"I was in the Navy and Army for 24 years," explains Jay as he proudly shows us around, "so I'm used to living in cramped quarters! This boat is a safe place for me and my assistance dog, Hawk. Somewhere to hunker down, meditate and recover myself. It all went wrong for me when I was posted to Sierra Leone to help manage the Ebola outbreak. We were losing 80 to 120 people to the virus every day. It was horrific. I became so ill with post-traumatic stress disorder that I was discharged, without anywhere to go."

Now, however, Jay plans to cruise continuously for the next 18 months until he earns enough money from his stand-up comedy gigs to buy a boat of his own. "Forces Veterans Afloat is a family," says Jay. "We keep each other safe. It's stunning and beautiful. I can't believe how lucky I am."

Happily, the wider boating community is coming together to help people like Jay too. That's why Emma Culshaw-Bell, artist and liveaboard boat fixer-upper, is also here today. Emma and her fellow female boaters have just produced a cheeky (but tasteful!) 'Boat Girls' calendar. Andy is nervously waiting to see the first printer's proofs. "I'm a bit anxious," he says, "and not sure how to react, but Emma's been so generous, it would be rude not to take a look!"

At this point, Waterfront retreats as the Narrow Escapes crew films Emma and Andy's raised eyebrows. But if you want to see more, watch out for the next series.

Celebrating 225 years of the Brecon Canal

On a frosty Christmas Eve in 1800, when most people were gathered around the fire with their nearest and dearest, navvies in mid-Wales were hard at work, as the Brecon Canal finally reached Brecon Basin. Two hundred and twenty-five years later, we're celebrating this landmark moment with a host of events and activities leading up to the official anniversary on Christmas Eve 2025.

The Monmouthshire & Brecon Canal, known affectionately as the Mon & Brec, is one of the prettiest, most peaceful canals in the country. Following the line of the Usk Valley, as it winds lazily through the Brecon Beacons, this tranquil waterway is a true hidden gem, with stunning views and a wonderful array of wildlife.

"Boating on the Mon & Brec is a unique experience," says development manager Wales, David Morgan. "It's a contour canal and built into the mountainside, so you're cruising, you're enjoying the view, you're halfway up a mountain and you've got the breathtaking beauty of the Brecon Beacons National Park all around you."

Yet the Monmouthshire & Brecon Canal actually began life as two separate canals – the Monmouthshire Canal and the Brecknock & Abergavenny Canal (Brecon Canal). Although the two were joined in 1812 at Pontymoile, our 2025 celebrations commemorate the completion of the more northern Brecon Canal 12 years earlier.

In its heyday, this picturesque canal was a vibrant trade link, bustling with narrowboats laden with coal, lime and hay brought down from the hillsides on horse-drawn trams. As the Industrial Revolution gathered pace, it became a vital cog in South Wales' burgeoning iron trade. It helped shape the modern world, carrying thousands of tonnes of pig iron from the mighty blast furnaces at Blaenavon, supplying cannon balls for the Napoleonic wars and iron rails for railroads in the US and Russia.

"The canal was a hub of activity," says David. "Industrial goods were flowing out of the region to the docks at Newport and across the world, and fruits, vegetables and fabrics were flooding back in to feed these growing industries. The canal connected mid-Wales to the world and the world back into mid-Wales and to Brecon."

Today, the Mon & Brec is a haven for wildlife and a popular spot for boaters, cyclists, walkers and nature lovers. To celebrate 225 years since the canal reached its most northerly point at Brecon on that cold Christmas Eve, we'll be hosting a variety of exciting events and activities throughout spring and summer.

Dubbed Brecon Canal 225, the packed schedule of celebrations is planned to feature walking tours, photography competitions, boat trips, picnics, and a travelling exhibition. There'll even be opportunities for heritage learning, as volunteers are invited to help out with bridge repairs.

"It's an exciting time," says David, "the canal is such an integral part of the community, evoking a real sense of pride and ownership, and we've really tapped into that for Brecon Canal 225, partnering with local historical societies, theatre companies and community groups, to put on some really special events."

So, if you haven't done so already, 2025 is the perfect time to discover the Monmouthshire & Brecon Canal, a true hidden gem meandering through the Welsh countryside.

Camlas Aberhonddu
Brecon Canal

Dathlu | Celebrating

225

o Flynyddoedd | Years
1800-2025



Spring bursts into life on our canals

Spring is a truly magical time. As the days grow longer and the frost fades away, our canals burst into life, with blooming flowers, scurrying water voles among the reed banks, spawning fish underwater and an orchestra of bird song in the hedgerows. Whether you're walking, cycling or boating, it's the perfect time to stop, take a breath, and enjoy the first signs of spring.



Blackbirds and chaffinches

As one of the first songbirds to set up home on our canals, blackbirds build their nests from mid-February alongside long-tailed tits, chaffinches, blue tits, dunnocks and robins to name just a few. If you wander too close to a blackbird nest, an adult bird might surprise you, bursting out of the undergrowth, shrieking their 'chink, chink, chink' alarm call.



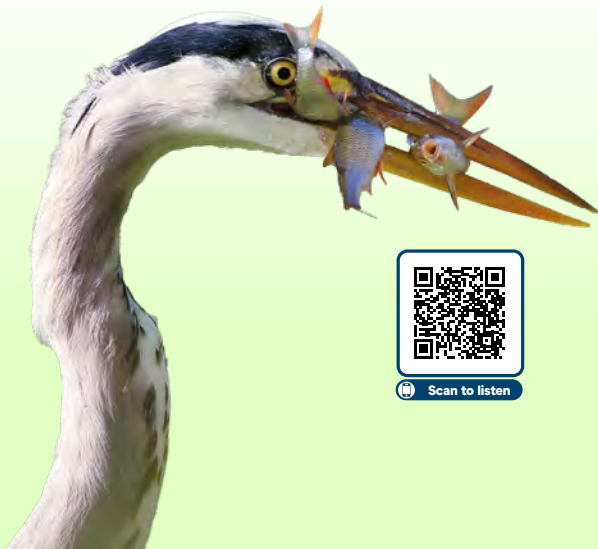
Scan to listen



Scan to listen

Hérons

Another early nester, grey herons often rebuild nests they've used for generations before. So, check back to where you've seen herons previously to observe house repairs. Other water birds like coots, mallards, swans and moorhens will be busy too. Moorhens are early birds happy to nest in some quite unusual places, from banks to the back of a boat. Make sure you check your hatches carefully.



Scan to listen

Reed Warblers

Reed warblers arrive from African wintering grounds in April, settling among tall, thin canal reeds. These little brown birds weave intricate ball-shaped baskets where they'll lay their eggs and raise chicks. Listen out for their rhythmical 'chirr, chirr, chirr' call as you may often hear them before you see them.



Scan to listen



Kingfishers

Kingfishers are wonderful to behold in springtime, with their bright blue feathers flashing in the sunlight. They build their nests in burrows along the bank, excavating the soft, sandy soil with their beaks. They like to hunt from a perch so keep your eyes peeled for well-placed branches.



Scan to listen



Fish

Spring is the spawning season for many canal fish such as perch, pike, bream or roach, so although you can still fish on canals, it is the traditional close angling season, to help the next generation come through. You can still take the kids dipping for minnows in canals or tadpoles in bankside ponds.



Water Voles

Spring is also an ideal time to spot water voles. As vegetation grows back in the spring, water voles become more active as they get ready to start breeding. Water voles are fairly elusive and one of the most threatened mammals in the UK. Canals provide a rare haven for them – look out for tell-tale signs that they are nearby, such as their brownish-green tic-tac-shaped droppings, or listen for the soft 'plop' as they slip, unseen, into the water.



Primroses and yellow hazel

Alongside the bustling wildlife, you'll also see an array of budding trees and flowers, bursting into life along our banks. Don't miss the bright pollen-filled catkins of the yellow hazel and purple alder trees, or beautiful spring flowers such as bluebells and primroses, which spread like a blue or yellow carpet along woodland-fringed waterways.



Find out more about canal wildlife
canalrivertrust.org.uk/a-guide-to-wildlife

A positive plan

Almost a year on since her appointment, our new West Midlands director, Henriette Breukelaar, has a can-do attitude, a positive plan of action, and clear priorities for the region's canals at a time when she says settling for the status quo is simply not an option.

"The passion, commitment, and team spirit have blown me away. My team really couldn't work harder," reflects Henriette as she recalls her first impressions of our charity. "Canals are a big and much-loved part of our regional identity. But at the same time, it's clear that our canals need resources far beyond what we have. We need to work smarter, and that leads us to some clear priorities; working with outside partners, raising money, exploring new ways of working and involving more young people."

It's a clear-sighted analysis that Henriette is happy to expand upon: "With so much on our plate, it's natural to turn inwards, but after working with many local civic partners, I believe the opportunity lies in also bringing in help from the outside world. Let's explore people's ideas and proposals for using our waterways with an open mind."

Already, Henriette's team is working with the world-famous City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra, and earlier this winter, together with Birmingham Roundhouse, they put on an event called Bringing the Light to celebrate music, light and heritage alongside the region's canals.

But Henriette has even bigger ambitions in the future, telling us: "I'm building a good relationship with the new mayor, Richard Parker, and offering canals as part of the solution to some of the problems he wants to tackle, such as social housing, active travel and youth employment."

On housing, for instance, we want to encourage more developments like Port Loop in central Birmingham that face the canal and encourage residents to use the water and towpaths as a route to work and wellbeing."

As a towpath cyclist, Henriette is also keen to encourage more active travel along canals. "What can we do to help cyclists safely and respectfully co-exist with pedestrians on the towpath?" she asks rhetorically. "Let's think how we can make it work. When it comes to youth employment, we know that work experience or volunteering with us can be a real life-changer, especially for young people struggling with self-esteem. So, let's get more young people involved. If you start young, you will carry a love for canals with you for life."

Henriette is full of enthusiasm about community payback explaining: "We know the Department of Justice wants to keep more people out of prison, so why not make maintaining canals part of their rehabilitation? It's a complete win-win: helping us get on top of the work that needs doing and opening opportunities for people who might need a job or to volunteer in the future."

By passionately promoting canals as a solution, Henriette's vision is that canals become a partner of choice in the region. With such a clear and positive plan, there's every reason to believe she'll achieve it.



There is no shortage of partners in the West Midlands who want to work with us. So, let's do it and create something exciting."

Henriette Breukelaar
Regional Director, West Midlands.



Henriette and colleagues with the West Midlands mayor, Richard Parker, at a litterpick last year.

Better Boating

This summer our recently launched Plan for Better Boating will be taking its maiden voyage. Waterfront caught up with Matthew Symonds, our head of boating, to learn how we aim to deliver an even better boating experience in the years to come.

"We've taken the opportunity to reset and refocus," explains Matthew, as he details where the Plan for Better Boating has come from. "It's fair to say that boater satisfaction is not where we want it to be, so that's where we're now going to put our emphasis for the coming years".

"People may well say, 'Why haven't you done this already?' and our only answer is to hold our hands up and explain that we've had a lot of things to tackle as well," he continues.

"We've had no choice but to invest millions into fixing our ageing reservoirs to ensure they are safe for everyone to use. We've also been dealing with costly and time-consuming extreme weather emergencies. And in the bigger picture, making the case to keep canals alive during negotiations over the government grant settlement. All those things mean there wasn't enough focus on what our boaters need from us."

So, how does this new plan address those concerns? "First and foremost, it comes right from the top," says Matthew. "Our chair, David Orr, will be driving this through and making sure that keeping canals open for navigation will be central to our ten-year strategy. And there will be a protected budget to deliver the three key things boaters say they need from us."

Matthew is proud of the plan, driven by feedback from boaters themselves: "From boater surveys and analysing feedback, we knew what the common problems and priorities were. But the best ideas for improvement were pinpointed in workshops with the boating community."

Our three priorities

1. "It's about getting the basics right – making sure locks and swing bridges are working and easy to use."
2. "Then it's about improving boater facilities, like bins, and water points."
3. "And finally, it's about better customer service, making it easier to report faults and learn what we're doing to resolve them."

Matthew Symonds, Head of Boating and Customer Service Support

These sessions led to our 'Paddle Pledge' to fix all broken paddles by this time next year and he explains: "To give you a sense of scale, we've got about 140 long-term paddle fixes outstanding. Paddles are fundamental because they dictate how easy a lock is to fill, empty and use. Boater feedback also led to our commitment to improving boater facilities, delivering more recycling opportunities and contributed to a new app which should be ready by the end of

this year, that will make it easier to report faults, hear about fixes, and make waterway bookings.

The app will mean boaters can add a photo, log their location and quickly and easily make a report. It gives more transparency of our planned works, and shows which paddles we've fixed, which facilities we've cleaned up, what is still to do, and when works will take place, so boaters know where they stand."

So far, Matthew has been heartened by how well the Plan for Better Boating has been received, with many saying 'thanks for listening.' We look forward to reporting back on developments and continuing the conversation with all our boaters. If you want to find out more about our plan or have your say, please do join our boater meetings and events in 2025.

Find out more:

canalrivertrust.org.uk/boating/better-boating

canalrivertrust.org.uk/meetings



Walking with your doctor

At a time when we're all looking for better health, and yet the NHS is so stretched, our Walking with Doctors scheme is putting its best foot forward and rolling out across the canals of the West Midlands. To see how we're helping patients find a path to better health, join Waterfront on a walk by the canal in Birmingham.

"It was a no-brainer for us," says Dr Manir Aslam, discussing his Ladywood surgery's initial response to the idea of walking consultations with patients along the canals. "The benefits of exercise for physical and mental health are well established and our canals are much nicer places to be now than they were 10 years ago."

"When the Canal & River Trust proposed it to us, we were coming out of Covid, and with so many people in our area at risk from issues around mental health, social isolation, obesity, diabetes, hypertension, and cardiovascular health, any opportunity to get people moving with entry-level, free-of-charge exercise was welcomed. For instance, we know that Type 2 diabetes can be reversed through regular exercise and losing weight. Prevention is often better than cure."

But the programme would never have got off the ground were it not for Tahir Parvaz, our charity's urban engagement manager. Tahir describes how it came about: "Before taking on this job, I'd been there and bought the T-shirt. I was overweight and pre-diabetic and working in pharmaceuticals. But I changed my lifestyle, got active, lost weight, and my diabetes disappeared. I became passionate about the benefits of exercise and open spaces and came up with the idea of these Walking with Doctors sessions soon after I joined the Canal & River Trust."

"That initial pull of being able to spend time with a doctor outside the surgery, without the 'white coat syndrome,' was an instant success," says Tahir. "The sessions are now run by health workers and people have benefited massively. They create friendships, avoid social isolation, and enjoy a positive start to their week. Many people have discovered healthier ways to

"We soon realised these walks were a two-way street. Patients weren't just learning more about how to improve their health, we were learning what our patients needed from us."

Dr Manir Aslam

get about town, often going on to run, cycle, or paddle with us or visit the gym so that it becomes self-sustaining."

Bryan Philpot, a former volunteer lock keeper for our charity, is just one of the people who found these sessions a lifesaver. "I had to stop doing the lock keeping because I had angina, so I joined the walking group, but soon even that became too much. I ended up having triple bypass heart surgery earlier this year. It is amazing what they can do these days. I was only in the hospital for around a week. Initially I could only walk up and down the road, but eventually, I was walking three miles a day. By September, I was ready to come back to the canals. Everyone's been so supportive. It's good to talk to health professionals who understand what I've been through."

That's why, as Tahir explains, after the initial success of the pilot in Ladywood, the Walking with Doctors model started to take off and be adopted across the region. "The walks may be run with a wider range of healthcare professionals to ensure people get care appropriate to their needs. Current activities are in Ladywood and Bilston with interest from Sandwell, Walsall, Wolverhampton, Dudley, Warwick and Stratford Upon Avon, where they have lovely stretches to walk. Word of mouth is getting around. But with limited resources, we need others to take this up from our charity and roll it out."

"It makes perfect sense," says Dr Aslam. "90% of NHS interactions take place in GP surgeries, in primary care," he says. "But 90% of NHS money goes into hospitals, in secondary care. So, I'd say if you're serious about preventative medicine, if you're serious about getting people off sick notes and back into work, and improving the nation's health, put more money into activities like these."



Dr. Aslam walking on the towpath with patients

Capturing the magic of fishing

After seven years driving our amazing Let's Fish! programme, nothing gives Peter Henery greater pleasure than hooking young people into the sport he loves. To share the joy of fishing with the next generation, he plans to leave a gift in his Will to our charity.

Peter is rightly proud of his free introductory canal fishing sessions, which are open to everyone of all ages, backgrounds and abilities. From just 38 events in 2017, the programme has grown to a high of 530 events in 2022, during which 9,879 people enjoyed the sport. He's also been part of a push to establish key national fishing events, attracting young anglers from England, Wales, and around the world, as well as revitalising junior membership in local clubs, nurturing talent like Jodie Deacon who, at 18, is on the verge of an England call-up.

In fact, Peter has helped to give a once-dying sport real hope of a sustainable future and is passionate about how a gift in his Will could give more young people the chance to enjoy angling.

"I was about eight when I caught my first fish in the local park," says Peter, who fished constantly in a varied career covering everything from competitive match fishing to coaching, teaching, and youth work.

"By the time I got involved with Let's Fish! I had the design and model all mapped out and knew how to make it work. Here we are, seven years later, and Let's Fish! is a huge success."

One of the many reasons Peter wants to leave a gift in his Will to Let's Fish! is the way it passes on traditional fishing skills that are in danger of being lost. "The programme prepares young anglers in the right way. It doesn't exclude anybody, it just offers opportunities. And anyone can take an opportunity," he says.

"Fishing is a brilliant educational tool, especially for those who are hard to reach or people living with autism or ADHD. It teaches calmness and

"It's that face of glee when you catch your first fish. I just want to pass on more happy, smiling faces."

Peter Henery

relaxation but also responsibility, accountability, and boundaries. We teach kids to fish in an environment that's safe, follows etiquette and passes on essential watercraft.

To catch them you need to understand where the fish are. It depends on the depth of the water, the weather, and the type of fish you're after. These basics make up 80% of your success or failure. They are easy to learn, but you need experienced coaches like ours to share them with you."

Yet for all his care and passion, Peter has decided that 2025 will be his last season. "I haven't been fishing myself for years, and I really, really miss it. The magic is still flooding through my veins. I want my legacy to protect the Let's Fish! programme so other people can experience that. Then maybe, when I'm pushing up daisies, somebody will still be walking over them to go fishing."

See how you can share the joy of canals
canalrivertrust.org.uk/giftsinwills





Interesting fact!

If you ever want to learn about the plants along your local towpath, there's only one person to follow on social media. 'Dave The Plant Man' from Wigan, Lancashire, has become an unlikely social star, by sharing his unrivalled plant knowledge, jaunty thumbs up, and 'Interesting Fact!' catchphrase with a worldwide audience.

Dave got involved in horticulture, garden centres, and the wholesale plant trade at just 17, so it's no surprise he's acquired so much knowledge along the way. But it's his down-to-earth, cheerful, and endlessly enthusiastic style that makes him so endearing. "People enjoy my videos because I keep them quick and simple, and I don't try to baffle anyone with science or Latin names," says Dave.

"I was already known as 'The Plant Man' in my local village, so I decided to make and post a video to give everyone advice at once. Amazingly, it got around 75,000 views, and everything took off from

there." Dave has now built a huge following and often features canal plants on his local towpath. But his superpower isn't just knowing plant names; he also knows the stories and legends that make each one special, amazing and unique.

Waterfront joined Dave close to home at Johnson's Hillock Locks on the Leeds & Liverpool Canal as he filmed with the Chorley towpath task force to promote volunteering for our charity. Today's winter task is planting a new hawthorn, blackthorn, and hazel hedge. But there's no need to ask why these and other canal plants are special species; just tee Dave up, and he's off!



Hawthorn, blackthorn and hazel

"This is a great mix of native hedge species. Hazel grows quickly, can be coppiced for charcoal and produces hazelnuts for birds. Hawthorn is dense and hardy, ideal for nesting birds in spring, and in winter provides lots of red berries for wildlife to feed on. Blackthorn, in contrast, is more of a wild plum and produces the sloe berries that flavour your gin."



Ivy and lichen

"Look at this mature ivy. It has a more rounded shape than the arrow-shaped juvenile ivy you might know. See the lichen on the tree? It only grows where the air is clean. In the 1950s and 60s, lichen was found only in places like the Lake District, not near mill chimneys. Now, lichens are back, but on the flip side, roses that loved the sulphur in smoke no longer thrive."



Clover and plantains

"Look out for the little and common plants too. Clover is amazing because it locks nitrogen from the air into the soil, so it's great for enriching and improving even poor ground. When it flowers, rabbits eat clover, bees feed on the nectar, and we can eat it too. Narrowleaf plantain is a weed/herb and has followed us around, the European settlers took it to North America, where it's known as the 'White man's footprint'."



Yellow flag iris, and fireweed

"This is fireweed, which in spring produces strong stalks with purple flowers. It's the first plant to germinate after a fire, so it was common on railway banking after the grass was burned off with the sparks from the steam engine, also industrial canals and after the blitz. The yellow flag iris in the water gets its name from its drooping petals, which inspired the 'fleur-de-lis' symbol in French heraldry."



Giant hogweed and hemlock

"Not all canal plants are safe, mind. When I discovered a giant hogweed on the canal, which burns and blisters the skin, Canal & River Trust quickly sent someone to remove it. Another danger is hemlock water dropwort, which coined the phrase 'sardonic smile'. In Sardinia, they used hemlock for executions. The poison caused muscle spasms, leaving a smile on the victims' faces."

For many more interesting flora facts, search 'Dave The Plant Man' on YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, TikTok and LinkedIn.

Talking on the towpath

The Oxford Canal is our gateway to dreaming spires, a punt along the Cherwell, or cruising up the Thames. Yet as we learn from local volunteer leader Alex Higginbottom, it was also once the original mainline canal between London and the North, playing a vital role in the leisure revolution of the 20th Century. Join us as we meet the people who live on, care for and enjoy the canal today.

“Long before the Grand Union was built, the Oxford Canal was the main north-south route, carrying coal down from the Midlands and goods up from the Thames and London.”

Alex Higginbottom



Alex Higginbottom

As our guide for the day Alex shares a little-known story of the canal. “In 1937, the canal company was struggling, so they sold Oxford coal basin to the University for £9m to build Nuffield College; an incredible sum worth £100m today. They reinvested that money carrying out the essential works the canal needed. It was so well maintained the leisure boating revolution centred around it. You could say this is where the restoration movement that saved canals began!”



Nicola and Susanna

A vision in red, Nicola and her Canadian friend, Susanna, bustle along the towpath towards the railway station for a day out in London. “I often walk this way into town, especially in the summer, as it puts everything I need within reach” says Nicola. “Living across the water, it’s lovely to sit and watch the world go by and I know that a lot of older people like me living nearby value having this beautiful space on our doorstep.”



Roger's walking group

Heading the other way, we meet Roger, leading a well-being walking group. “The group enjoy the canal because it gives them a different viewpoint on the city,” he explains. Another member agrees: “You get a totally different perspective on the Georgian, Regency and Victorian architecture of Oxford from the water’s edge. Even though you know the city, it’s like discovering it all over again.”



Bill

Beside his home in Jericho, we bump into Bill, a stalwart of our volunteer Towpath Taskforce who recently repainted the Isis Lock and bridge. “By planting thorny Pyracantha hedges in front of walls, we’ve deterred the graffiti artists and transformed the gateway into Oxford,” says Bill. “We also run a biennial canal festival here and are using the funds to help restore ‘Kilby’, a 108-year-old Fellows, Morton and Clayton narrowboat, as a community theatre space.”



Peter

Cycling on his electric bike and trailer, Peter is collecting firewood for his narrowboat from the fallen trees our charity cleared from the canal after the Storm Darragh. “Apart from the stove, our boat ‘Picnic’ runs on solar power and a lithium battery,” says Peter. “When they’re ready it would be great to use the new eco-moorings here at Aristotle Lane to power up. We’re on our seventh year of cruising now, and electric is the future.”



Sam and Rose

This boating couple met when mooring next to each other in London. Now married, they cruise together along the Thames and Grand Union canals in summer, before sheltering on the Oxford Canal in the winter. “We both bought the boats as an affordable way to live in the capital,” says Rose. “Now Sam works in Oxford, and I’m a musician so happy to travel all over. At this time of year, we just spend time on whoever’s boat is the warmest!”



Rightmove onto canals

We're thrilled that our community of supporters is growing, as more and more people come together to care for our canals. Our new partnership with Rightmove, the UK's number one property website, shows how businesses can also help keep canals alive.

Rightmove pledged £50,000 to support the Canal & River Trust's Environmental Fund, which aims to create cleaner waterways for people and wildlife. Rightmove's employees will also get actively involved in volunteering work to protect canals in their own communities.

This partnership reflects our shared ambitions to protect our environment. Maggie Gardner, our fundraising director, says: "We're excited to partner with Rightmove as their sustainability initiative, Go Greener, embodies our vision of living waterways that transform places and enrich lives.

As nine million people live within a 15-minute walk of a canal, together we can make a real impact for nature in local communities where people live."

Jennifer Barker, Rightmove's chief people officer, is equally proud, saying: "We're committed to protecting the environment and helping everyone work toward a more sustainable future. Our employees are eager to get involved, supporting the charity's incredible work." We hope Rightmove will be the first of many household names supporting our ambition to give our canals a sustainable future.

