



**Canal &  
River Trust**

Making life better by water

Issue 17 Spring/Summer 2023

# Waterfront

The Canal & River Trust Magazine

## Robbie Cumming

The star of TV's Canal Boat Diaries shares his passion for our canals

## The lost canal yard

See how you're helping restore Ellesmere Yard on the Shropshire Union Canal

## The community channel

Welsh valley communities come together along the Monmouthshire & Brecon Canal

# Welcome

We're delighted to share our first Waterfront magazine of 2023, exploring the true value of our waterways.

As we know, canals are a huge asset to our nation. They preserve our unique industrial heritage, support nature and wildlife, enable navigation, provide spaces on our doorsteps to boost our health and wellbeing, and generate employment and income. When you add it all up our canals are worth billions to our country every year. But what does that really mean for those of us who spend time by our local canal?

In this issue we explore the value of the Monmouthshire & Brecon Canal to local people living in the Welsh valleys nearby, discovering how our community roots programme is helping to improve lives right along this amazing waterway. We also drop into Southall in West London and Leeds city centre, where your gifts are helping more people to benefit from being by water.

TV's Robbie Cumming is one person who certainly knows the value of our waterways, and for those of you who share his keen interest in canal history, this issue looks at how and why the much-loved Pontcysyllte Aqueduct was built. We also uncover the lesser-known Ellesmere Yard, a canal yard that is itself a treasure trove of precious canal artefacts. Restoring this amazing place to its former glory will be a big challenge for our charity in the coming years.

Canals also have a vital role to play in protecting our nation's nature and climate. Read how we're improving biodiversity in the West Midlands and how water transfers along our canals are fighting drought and protecting wildlife in the Home Counties.

Thank you as always, for helping make life better by water in 2023. We hope to add to your enjoyment of life in the sunny days ahead, wherever our canals and rivers take you.

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## In this issue:

### 4-5 The community channel

Learn how our community roots team in rural Wales are using the Monmouthshire & Brecon Canal to draw valley communities closer together.



### 6-7 The star of slow TV

Robbie Cumming shares the day-to-day realities of 4mph boating on our canals and rivers and talks about his unexpected road to fame.



### 8-9 Improving special sites for nature

Across the West Midlands last winter, your support helped to protect rare species and special places for nature. Find out how our efforts could help life bloom this spring.

### 10-11 Ready, steady, flow

As our climate changes, canals are already helping to balance the nation's water supply. Thanks to your support, canals provide a ready-made way to transfer water.

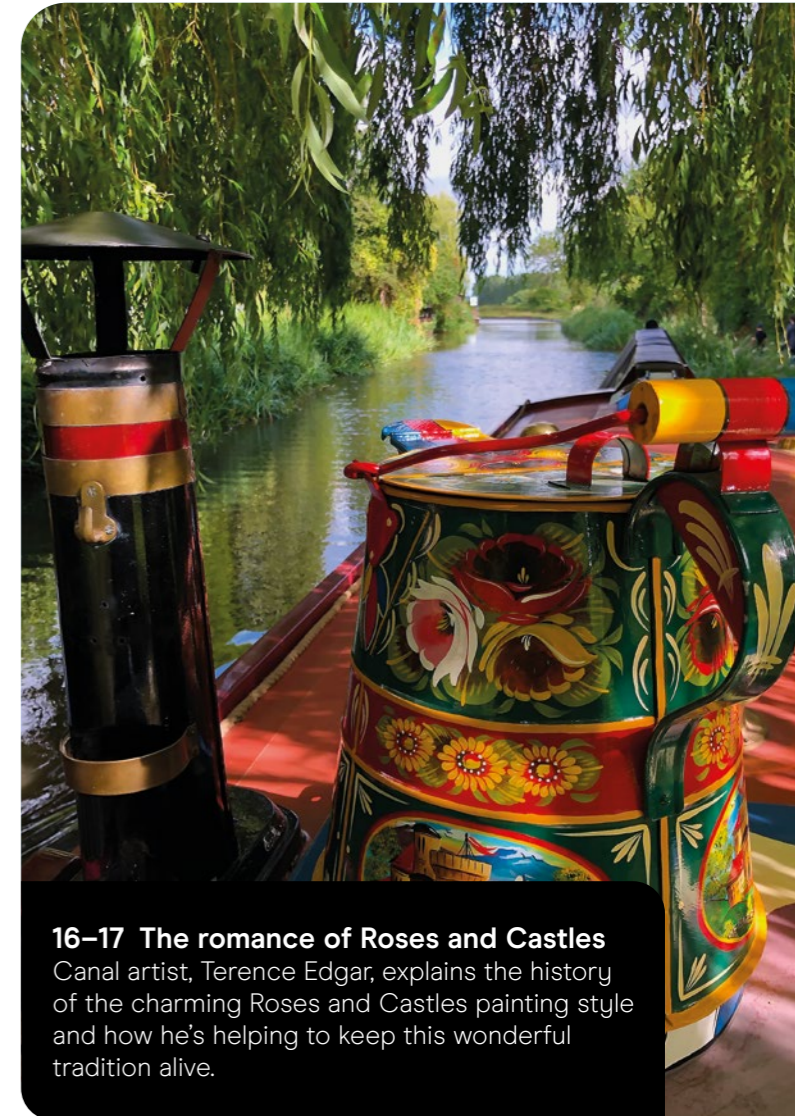


### 12-13 The majestic history of the Pontcysyllte

Discover how the incredible vision of canal engineering great, Thomas Telford, left us one of the seven wonders of the waterways.

### 14-15 Celebrating lives made better by water

Fellow Friend Bryan explains his story of a life well-lived by water and why he's left a gift in his Will to our charity in memory of his dear, late mother.



### 16-17 The romance of Roses and Castles

Canal artist, Terence Edgar, explains the history of the charming Roses and Castles painting style and how he's helping to keep this wonderful tradition alive.

### 18-19 The lost canal yard

Ellesmere Yard on the Llangollen Canal is a little-known, hidden gem on our waterways that, with your help, we hope to restore to its former glory.

### 20-21 Talking on the towpath

Join us in Leeds as we discover a waterfront that's being transformed by new offices, apartments and a thriving city community of dog walkers, cyclists and volunteers.

### 22-23 Southall finds a way to wellbeing

Starting this spring, our work along this blue and green corridor will boost the wellbeing of the community, visitors and wildlife alike.

### 24 Spending summer afloat?

Find out how you can try the joys of boating for the first time this summer, with a special free offer from Drifters.



## Where's your Waterfront?

We'd love to know! Just send us a selfie of you reading your Waterfront Magazine in one of your favourite canal places. We took this image at stunning Saltaire on the Leeds & Liverpool Canal, but yours can be from anywhere along our 2,000 miles of waterways. Simply send us your picture and say why you love that stretch so much to: [supportercare@canalrivertrust.org.uk](mailto:supportercare@canalrivertrust.org.uk)

# The community channel

Many of us feel life is better by water, but do our canals and rivers really add to our nation's wellbeing? Looking at the numbers, the evidence is clear. Our recently published Valuing our Waterways report adds up the total social value of canals and rivers to a dizzying £4.6 billion a year. But just how do waterways add to our economy, support our health or protect our natural and cultural heritage? Waterfront visited the Monmouthshire & Brecon Canal to find one example.

## The value of our waterways in numbers

**£1.1 billion**  
in annual NHS cost savings

**£1.5 billion**  
annual economic value

**£4.6 billion**  
annual social value

Meandering through the Welsh countryside, cut off from the rest of our network, this is one of our most beautiful and peaceful waterways. Hannah Cubie, our charity's community roots engagement co-ordinator, explains how there's a special connection between the 35-mile long canal and local people: "The sense of community is like no-where else I have found. You can't walk down the towpath without someone saying hello, telling you a bit of local canal history, or showing you where they just saw a kingfisher. It's the people who make it."

Hannah uses the canal to put on activities to help support people's health and wellbeing, encourage people to socialise and gain life skills through volunteering, and enjoy the amazing waterway wildlife and industrial heritage. This is possible thanks to funds raised by players of People's Postcode Lottery, awarded by Postcode Earth Trust.

She tells us how the canal has always been of huge economic value to local people: "This is one of the valleys that changed the world. The canal carried lime mortar down to Newport when it was one of the most valuable commodities of the day. People have depended on this living, breathing waterway for generations."

Now the canal welcomes tourists who spend over 40,000 nights a year on canal hire boats. Every summer they support the local economy, with many traders making a living selling, food, drink, ice-creams and Welsh cakes, and who are, in turn supplied by small farming communities.

As Hannah says, the way the canal is used may have changed, but the community's passion for it hasn't and it now provides a fantastic location where local people can go to get fitter and healthier: "Many people enjoy walking and cycling on the flat towpath, in an area where much of the land is steep. Every

year there's a canalathon where people canoe, cycle or run the whole canal length, sometimes in fancy dress.

The feedback we've had from our walking, canoeing or paddleboarding sessions has been fantastic. They are all completely free of charge and people are just grateful to have these opportunities. Especially in an area where, with the cost of living crisis, you might not have much money spare.

For mindfulness and mental health, we also put on activities like canal yoga", continues Hannah. "People love to sit and meditate with Kate, the yoga teacher, after a day's work. She is great at helping people feel the rain falling on their face and embracing the nature around them."

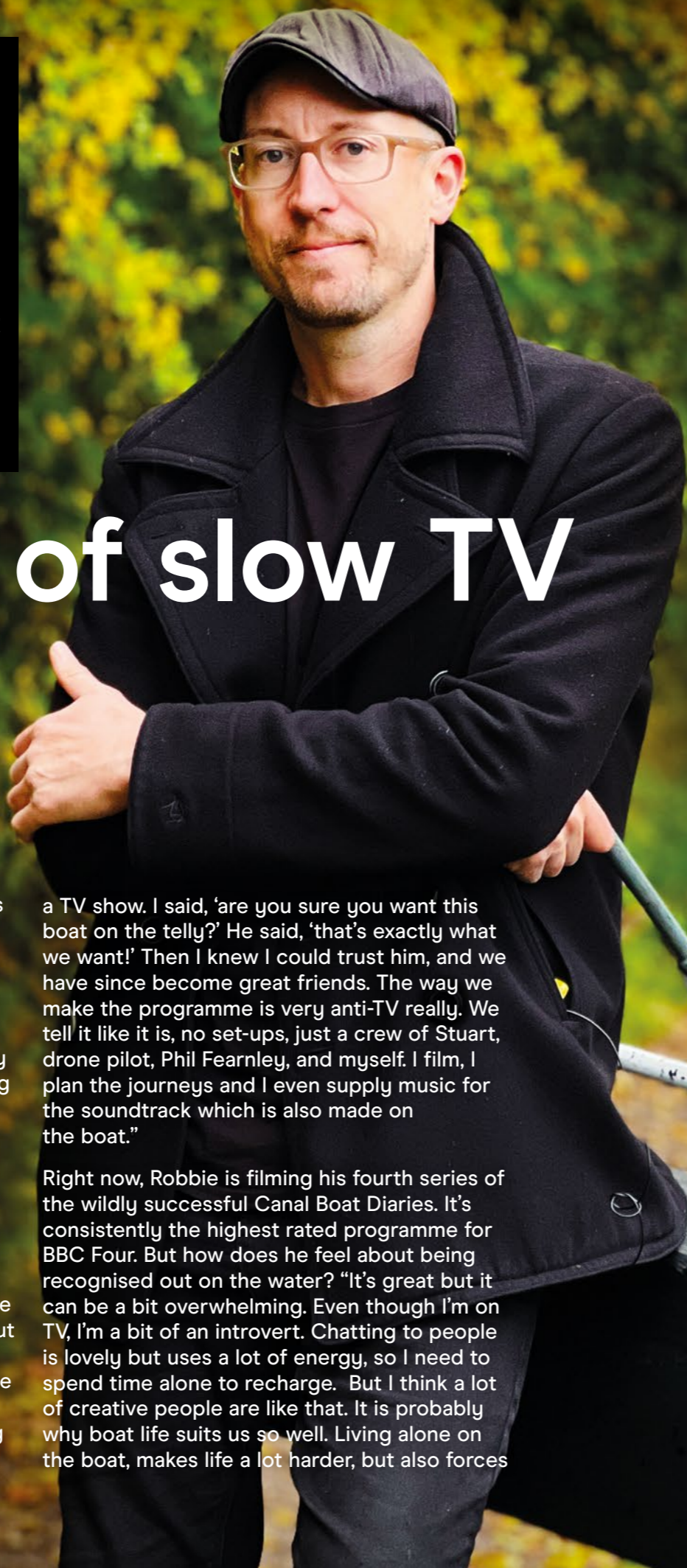
As well as providing a whole range of activities that provide social and wellbeing benefits, Hannah and her team also work with local wildlife organisations who put on Forest Schools beside the canal to help children connect with nature through bushcraft activities like food foraging and bivouac building.

Many activities take place at Pontymoile Basin, and Hannah says having a canal base like this is a great advantage: "It's a social space, where people can come down, get active and then enjoy a coffee together in the café. That's nice to see because social isolation was a big issue locally coming out of lockdown. Last Christmas, one of our volunteers sent a lovely group text saying, 'Thank you for making this Christmas a little bit less lonely than those in past'. For me, that was really touching. If I can help people connect with each other, then I know I'm doing my job."

Hannah's work in Wales is just one example of how canals are helping millions of people to find prosperity, wellbeing and a healthier life by water. What could be more valuable than that?



Enjoy the steady chug of the BBC's Canal Boat Diaries? Then you'll know Robbie Cumming as the friendly, engaging host, who shares the day-to-day realities of 4mph boating on our canals and rivers. Robbie invited Waterfront aboard to chat about his love for boating, filming, and an unexpected road to fame.



# The star of slow TV

It's a crisp late November morning in Newark-on-Trent when we knock on the window of his firmly battened down boat, *Naughty Lass*. When there's no answer we start to worry, but it's not long before Robbie appears having been out filming in the centre of the sleepy market town.

He puts the kettle on the gas hob and shovels more coal in his stove. "Keeping the fire going is rule number one for winter boating," says Robbie. "I spend a lot of time onboard, recording music, editing my vlogs, cooking. I love it but at six foot one, there's a lot of ducking to avoid bumping my head. It's partly why I wear my cap all the time. I love spending time inside my boat at this time of year, but I'd rather be out on the water, going through locks, exploring the network. Even without the camera, I'm always looking at the world through a lens."

As we chat, Robbie reveals getting his first break on TV could not have come at a better time. "I remember it being a real low point. The boat was a mess. Everything needed fixing. But then, totally out of the blue, I got a call from BBC producer Stuart Woodman. He told me he wanted to make a completely different canal show. He had seen what I had been producing for YouTube and asked if I would like to make

a TV show. I said, 'are you sure you want this boat on the telly?' He said, 'that's exactly what we want!' Then I knew I could trust him, and we have since become great friends. The way we make the programme is very anti-TV really. We tell it like it is, no set-ups, just a crew of Stuart, drone pilot, Phil Fearnley, and myself. I film, I plan the journeys and I even supply music for the soundtrack which is also made on the boat."

Right now, Robbie is filming his fourth series of the wildly successful *Canal Boat Diaries*. It's consistently the highest rated programme for BBC Four. But how does he feel about being recognised out on the water? "It's great but it can be a bit overwhelming. Even though I'm on TV, I'm a bit of an introvert. Chatting to people is lovely but uses a lot of energy, so I need to spend time alone to recharge. But I think a lot of creative people are like that. It is probably why boat life suits us so well. Living alone on the boat, makes life a lot harder, but also forces

you to be independent," Robbie explains. "You learn how to fix the engine, what to do when the propeller gets clogged up with weed, how to change a water pump. It's physically demanding navigating a lock solo, but you learn to take it slow. For me, that's the whole point of life on the waterways. You can't be in a rush to get anywhere. And it's a great leveller. Even if you were a multi-millionaire, you'd still be stuck waiting in front of the same lock, buying supplies from the same chandlery, waiting the same amount of time for a mechanic to fix your engine."

A shared sense of adventure lies at the heart of Robbie's intimate films, making it feel as if you're onboard with him. He says he doesn't have a favourite canal, although he does have a soft spot for the north: "The canals are just a bit quieter, a bit more unknown, and sit in an incredibly varied landscape. Until we were commissioned, no-one was showing how great it is to moor-up in the middle of Stoke-on-Trent.

I want people to share the sight of a boat coming down Anderton Boat Lift or see the diagonal brickwork on a skew arch bridge. It's mind-blowing how the canal builders did that. Here in the UK, we are so lucky to have this completely unique network of narrow canals, aqueducts, staircase locks, and boat lifts. Nowhere else in the world has industrial heritage like this, that's still being used today."

Time for one last question. Quite simply, what's next? "I'm not sure. I know this won't last forever. Even with the TV work, I'm still scraping by. But I am wealthy in terms of time. I do what I want to do, like a snail, moving along slowly, carrying my home with me. The secret to happiness? Maybe it's just being content with what you've got. Do that, and you're almost invincible."

**"I've always wanted to go with the flow; see where it takes me. I can't resist following the next bend around the canal. I'm happiest when I feel I've discovered something no-one else has."**

Robbie Cumming



Find all episodes of 'Canal Boat Diaries' on BBC iplayer or visit Robbie's YouTube channel

# Improving special sites for nature

**Our canals and rivers are amazing places for wildlife like ducks, swans and many varieties of fish. But did you know that our charity is also responsible for some of our nation's most important nature sites? Waterfront spoke to senior ecologist Paul Wilkinson, to discover how he's helping to improve Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs) in the West Midlands.**

As Paul explains, SSSIs are areas with best examples of natural habitat and home to some of our rarest wildlife. To improve biodiversity and nature, our charity actively manages and works to improve all our SSSIs to ensure they're in the best possible condition for both people and wildlife.

That's why, thanks to your support, and a grant from the Green Recovery Challenge Fund, we've been working on vital enhancements to seven SSSIs in the West Midlands.

Some sites are particularly good for protected or rare species; like our Fens Pools reservoirs near Dudley that provide a refuge for amphibians like smooth newts, great crested newts, or common toads, which despite their name, have declined by 68% over the last thirty years. Paul and his team have been hard at work this winter creating more ponds and a flood plain on site to encourage more water wildlife in.

Meanwhile, at Bittell Reservoirs in Worcestershire, invasive Elodea waterweed is proving a problem. Our ecologist has created several new ponds on site to help give native species such as the rare mud snail and slender spike rush a safe home. The earth excavated to create these ponds has been turned into wildflower banks. Resident Daubenton's and brown long-eared bats are also enjoying newly installed bat boxes.

Further north, over 250 species of waterfowl and other birds fly into Belvide Reservoir SSSI near Stafford, which feeds the Shropshire Union Canal. However, with a drop in shoveler duck numbers triggering concern, Paul's team are now enhancing the reservoir edges with

shallow pools and scrapes which help them forage for food.

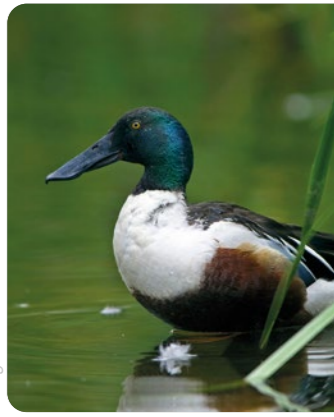
Also in Staffordshire, the Cannock Extension Canal SSSI boasts 34 species of aquatic plants, including the legally protected floating water-plantain, and at least nine species of dragonfly. But the water quality on this site can be poor due to coal dust and silt from former Staffordshire coalfields leaking into the canal. That's why the ecology team have come up with a natural filtration system of bankside vegetation, rock rolls and hazel bundles, to slow the silt.

Other West Midlands SSSI sites are more notable for the rare habitat they provide. Just below Cannock Chase an unusual corridor of acid grassland and sandy heathland runs along the Anglesey branch of the Wyrley & Essington Canal. Here Paul and his team have been clearing back scrub to encourage heathland plants like bell heather, bilberry and cowberry out of the shade. Brewin's & Shrewley Canal Cuttings are also both geological SSSIs, where layers of ancient rock formations and fossils can be seen. Our ecologists and volunteers have cleared shrubs and trees from rock faces here, as well as installing signage to ensure these historic features can still be appreciated by visitors.

We're excited for you to see the fruits of our labour at our SSSIs, but as Paul explains, these sites don't stand alone – they are all part of the West Midlands Nature Recovery Network, a £1.7m landmark scheme to revitalise wildlife habitats across the region. Together, these initiatives mean that our wildlife, and visitors, have a lot to look forward to this spring.

“SSSIs are where you'll find the rarest flora, fauna, habitats and geological features in the country.

Our charity cares for over 70 SSSIs and by law, we must improve these special places for nature.”



Alamy

Jack Perks

Alamy

Alamy

Jack Perks

# Ready, steady, flow

How canals are balancing the nation's water supply as our climate changes.

With 2022 confirmed as the UK's warmest year on record, there's little doubt our climate is changing. With more water expected to reach our rivers and canals in the north, and the south planning for droughts, transferring water across the country has never been more important. However, thanks to the way our charity maintains and protects our historic canals, the nation already has a ready-made, sustainable water network ready to flow.

Moving water by canal might seem like carrying coals to Newcastle, but we've been working with water companies to transfer supplies to their customers for many years. In fact, our canals transfer over 300 million litres of water each day to supply millions of homes and businesses in Bristol, London and Cheshire.

Most recently, a new project with Affinity Water will see the Grand Union Canal transfer water from the Midlands to the home counties. Darren Leftley, our charity's head of commercial water development, tells us why: "Unlike constructing new pipelines or reservoirs, our 2,000 mile long, 250-year-old network already exists, linking water company zones in a much more efficient way. Because canals span river catchments,

they are ready-made to move water between water companies as the nation faces up to longer, drier summers."

The Grand Union Canal, linking Birmingham to London, is the longest in our network and the good news for our boaters, paddlers and anglers is that the new transfer will help to keep the canal full of water, making navigation and fishing easier than ever. It will also protect water wildlife along the route, while generating more money to reinvest in maintaining our charity's locks, bridges and towpaths.

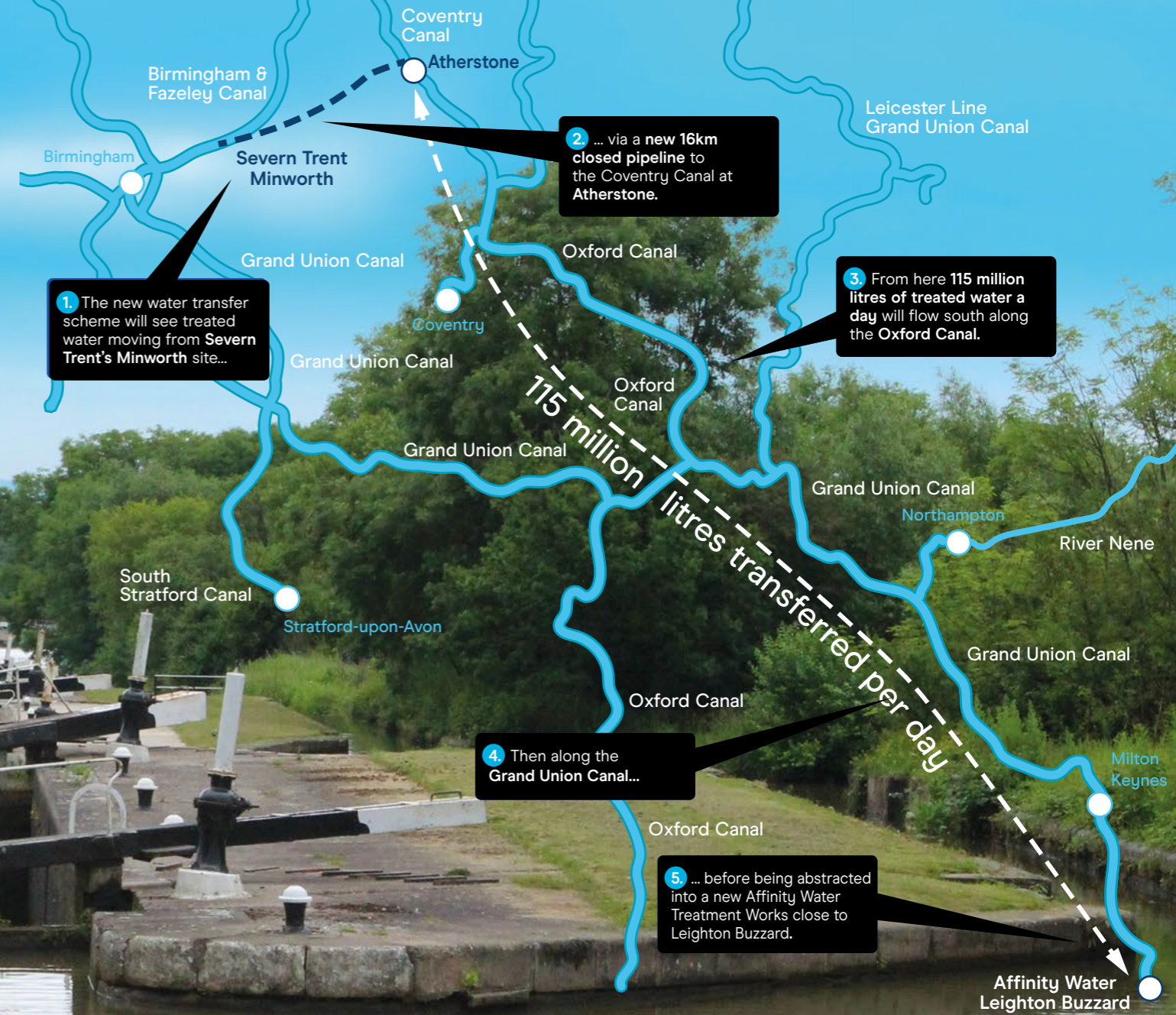
The scheme will transfer up to 115 million litres a day for Affinity Water customers to draw on, providing a low-cost sustainable way to combat future water shortfalls. "The actual

infrastructure we need on the canal is quite limited," explains Dr Doug Hunt, their head of water resources management planning. "As well as keeping carbon emissions and energy low, the great thing about a canal is that it's a big open channel. It's a great way of getting large volumes of water moved great distances without much pumping."

Using the canal will also help Affinity Water relieve the pressure on ecologically sensitive chalk streams found across Bedfordshire, Buckinghamshire, Hertfordshire and beyond. Kingfishers and salmon thrive on the pure water that flows from the underground chalk aquifers and springs. Yet ten per cent of all the chalk streams in the world are found in these Affinity Water catchment areas, so the company

is constantly looking for ways to reduce the amount of water they abstract from these rare water habitats.

Many more water companies are looking at using canals to transfer water for domestic supply, with further plans in the pipeline, including using the Oxford Canal and Regent's Canal in London. It's clear that our 250-year-old canals have a vital role to play in the 21st century, not only ensuring the UK's water resilience, but helping to protect the future of our canals, long into the future.



# The majestic history of the Pontcysyllte

**Pontcysyllte Aqueduct is considered one of the seven wonders of the waterways. The incredible vision of the prolific canal engineer, Thomas Telford, it was first conceived as part of an elaborate plan to create a waterborne trade route between Liverpool and Shrewsbury. This year marks the 230th anniversary of Telford's appointment to oversee this ambitious project. It was a decision that would lead him to design and build one of our nation's most iconic structures.**

Rising majestically above the beautiful River Dee valley in North Wales, there are few sights on our network to match the awe-inspiring Pontcysyllte Aqueduct. Already a Scheduled Ancient Monument and a Grade I Listed structure, in 2009 it became an UNESCO World Heritage Site, putting it on a par with the Great Barrier Reef and the Statue of Liberty.

At over 120 feet high, the so-called 'stream in the sky' carries the Llangollen Canal over the valley, with some truly breathtaking views of

the surrounding countryside. Unsurprisingly, it's one of the most popular destinations on our network, a must-see for boat enthusiasts and landlubbers alike.

Built at the height of the Industrial Revolution, Pontcysyllte Aqueduct is part of a canal system that knits together the lowlands in England and the rugged Welsh hills. A collaboration between Thomas Telford and fellow luminary of early canal building, William Jessop, the aqueduct was a world first.

Originally, a traditional lock system was proposed to span the River Dee, but this idea was quickly scrapped due to the unusual terrain and the sheer amount of water required. Telford's solution, to build an aqueduct and carry the canal in a cast iron trough high above the valley, was truly ground-breaking. His design called for four cast iron arches to support 18 tapered hollow pillars, to reduce the burden on the foundations. An incredible feat of engineering and unprecedented at the time.

Pontcysyllte Aqueduct was Telford's first great engineering masterpiece, cementing his reputation as one of the foremost canal builders of his day and launching him on the world stage. Taking ten years to design and build, when it finally opened in 1805, it was hailed as a modern marvel.

Today, the imposing structure remains a remarkable feat and is still the longest navigable aqueduct in Britain and the highest in the entire world. A testament to the ambition, ingenuity and determination of these two visionary engineers.

Each year, thousands of people flock to the River Dee valley to see Telford and Jessop's awesome creation. If you've got a head for heights, you can hop on a boat or stroll along the towpath and enjoy some of the most stunning views on our network.

But it's not just the spectacular sights that keep people coming back. With walks, cycle routes, paddle sports and fishing, there's plenty to do in the heart of this UNESCO World Heritage Site.



**Plan your visit**  
at [www.canalrivertrust.org.uk/pontcysyllte](http://www.canalrivertrust.org.uk/pontcysyllte)

# Celebrating lives made better by water

Some very special Friends recently came together for a celebration at the Roundhouse in Birmingham. The event was a small token of our immense appreciation for some of our Friends who have been with us since the beginning, and for those who have shown us great generosity by including a gift in their Will. We can't say thank you enough.

The day began with local heritage adviser, Lizzey Thomson, inspiring us with the amazing story of the beautiful Roundhouse building. Afterwards, engagement manager Taz Parvaz led our group out to the canal for a special boat trip around Icknield Port Loop aboard *Euphrates Packet*. As Friends shared their canal histories with each other and forged new friendships over mulled wine and a buffet lunch, Waterfront took the opportunity to listen in. Here, we share just one of our favourite canal stories.



## A mother's love for canals by Bryan Husband

My mother, Margaret Husband, was quite extraordinary, with a real twinkle in her eye. Born in 1921, she lived a full life, driving ambulances through the Second World War.

In 1969, our family moved to Somerset, where my four brothers and I were largely brought up, close to where the River Parrett meets the Bridgwater & Taunton Canal. I think that's where our family's love of canals began.

I believe they helped keep my mother grounded; she was quite religious and the canal was somewhere quiet where she could feel a connection with the water, the air, the sky and the earth. But if there happened to be a café with cake nearby, then all the better. Later, when she lived by the Oxford Canal near Banbury, she loved to meet friends at a canalside café.

My father died in 1989, but my mother did remarry at the age of 95, to a childhood sweetheart. Eventually, after he also died, my mother moved back to Bridgwater in 2020. It was about around that time that I saw that it was possible to adopt a stretch of canal, through the Canal & River Trust.

When I told my mother I'd done this for her she was very chuffed. But that was during lockdown and she was no longer very mobile, so sadly, she never actually saw it. On her 100th birthday in

November 2021, we lost her too. Almost a year later during 'Remember a Charity' week I saw that the Canal & River Trust were suggesting leaving a gift in your Will and I decided to make a legacy of my own. It seemed fitting to do this in memory of my mother's love of canals; a passion that I've inherited too.

I now live close to the canal and river in Worcester. Taking up running by the water in lockdown turned out to be a real lifesaver. I'm a musician, but obviously I couldn't perform or teach music at that time, so getting outside was vital for my physical and mental health. I noticed the canal was a lot busier than normal then, and like me, people were almost using it as a lung to help them breathe and stay calm through those hard times.

I guess my legacy is about our whole family's love of canals. My mother's, my own, and my grandchildren's who now come out on walks with me to spot kingfishers and other wildlife. We'd love to see an otter one day.

I'd like my gift to be used to make sure canals are there for future generations or revive and repair as much of the network as possible. But when I look back on my mother's favourite way



Bryan Husband (above) has left a gift in his Will in tribute to his beloved late mother, Margaret Husband (below)



to spend her time by the canal, maybe it would just be a good idea to just have more floating cafés selling coffee, ice cream and cake.

## Thanking you for your support

In 2023 we'll be running an expanded programme of exclusive events to continue to say thank you to our Friends and share how a gift in your Will can help make life better by water. We also look forward to hearing more wonderful stories about how the canals have made a difference in people's lives from our growing Friends community in future issues of Waterfront and our regular monthly emails. If you would like to come to an event near you, we would love to see you there. Please do get in touch.

## If you'd like to find out more about gifts in Wills

Contact [Emily.ding@canalrivertrust.org.uk](mailto:Emily.ding@canalrivertrust.org.uk)  
Visit [www.canalrivertrust.org.uk/giftsinwills](http://www.canalrivertrust.org.uk/giftsinwills)



“I’m a traditionalist. I know things have to evolve as time goes by, but I’m passionate about keeping this special part of our history alive.”

## The romance of Roses and Castles

Swags of roses, towering castles and harlequin diamonds are just some of the colourful folk art motifs adorning traditional narrowboats. Waterfront spoke to canal art painter, Terence Edgar, to uncover the history of the charming Roses and Castles style and find out how he’s helping to keep this wonderful tradition alive.

@ Terence Edgar

Bold, mysterious and romantic, there are many theories as to where the Roses and Castles art form originated. It is often linked to folk art from Germany, Holland or Asia, as well as to Romani communities, whose highly decorated caravans are similar in style.

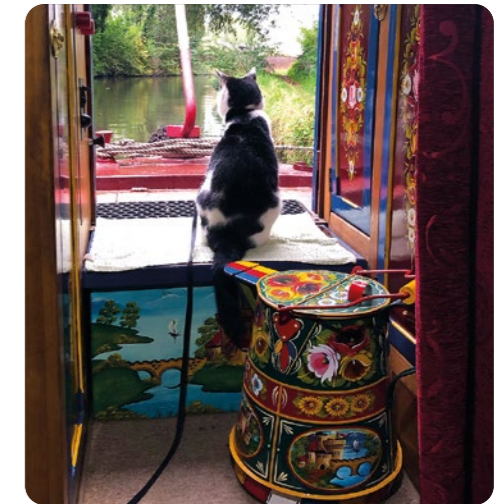
Some suggest that pieceworkers from the Potteries brought their landscape-painting skills with them as they migrated to work on the waterways. Or perhaps that farmhands, whose skills working with horses were in demand on the canals, applied the roses they used to decorate wagons to their new narrowboat homes.

What we do know is that the ‘Roses and Castles’ genre began in the mid 19th century. The art form evolved into a set of symbolic images, fonts and patterns in bold colours, designed to stand out on the canalside. Over time, traditions of master painter and apprentice developed with families, such as the Nursers of Braunston and the Atkins of Polesworth, who passed on their own interpretation of the style through the generations.

For the bargees living and working on narrowboats, the brightly coloured motifs were a way of cheering up cramped living spaces, with the decoration also spilling over onto accessories such as hand bowls, horse nose tins and Buckby cans – water vessels, which were made at Long Buckby on the Grand Union Canal.

It was these embellished Buckby cans that inspired artist Terence Edgar to create his first Roses and Castles piece over 20 years ago: “I fell in love with the Buckby cans. I was introduced to a lovely Roses and Castles artist called Dave Moore who gave me a couple of pointers, and it just took off from there.”

Each piece Terence paints is first sanded, primed, then a layer of gloss paint applied. He sketches his design with chalk pencil



@ Terence Edgar

and uses enamel paint to build up the image in layers. “A Buckby can would take me about four to five hours to complete,” says Terence.

He explains the decoration on a boat could also hold hidden meanings for the bargees, many of whom couldn’t read. “The back cabin doors would have a geometric symbol on the top plaque,” Terence reveals. “So, at the weighbridge, they’d see the symbol and know which company the cargo came from.”

Thanks to his wife, Christina’s, photography, Terence’s Instagram feed is a riot of colour, showcasing the canal art he has skilfully applied to their beautiful narrowboat and the painted accessories he sells. You may also spot Master Tiddles Plumpkin, the rescue cat who accompanies them on boat trips and even has his own Twitter feed!

For Terence, who teaches his skills to others via workshops and videos, it’s important that the Roses and Castles style is passed on to future generations: “I’m a traditionalist,” he says. “I know things have to evolve as time goes by, but I’m passionate about keeping this special part of our history alive.”

### Learn to paint roses with Terence.

Join Terence at the Canal & River Trust Stand at Crick Boat Show between 27 and 29 May where he’ll show you how to paint a rose in this traditional style. Follow Terence on Instagram: [@canalartbyterence](#) Tiddles on Twitter: [@tiddlesplumpkin](#)

# The lost canal yard

In times past, every canal had its own yard where lock gates were built, boats repaired and maintenance teams were based. Today, Ellesmere Yard on the Llangollen Canal is still a working yard. But our charity urgently needs to protect its past and give it a sustainable future. Waterfront spoke to enterprise manager, Nicola Lewis-Smith to discover how, with your help, we hope to restore this hidden gem to its former glory.

Nicola speaks with palpable excitement about a place she's clearly fallen in love with: "I always describe it as having a soul," she says. "You need to touch, smell, feel and sense it. As the courtyard faces the canal, it's hidden behind closed doors, unless you're on the water."

The yard began to take shape between 1806-7, soon after what was then known as Ellesmere Canal had opened. William Jessop and Thomas Telford built both Chirk and Pontcysyllte Aqueducts along its length. Due to its central location, a canal office was established in the imposing Georgian residence, Beech House, by the canal at Ellesmere. As a result, Ellesmere Yard soon developed along a small canal branch behind the house.

Over time, a unique collection of buildings formed around the courtyard including a dry

dock for boat repairs, a carpentry shop where lock gates were built and a blacksmith's forge, paint shops, sawmills and cranes. This was a hard-working yard through the great canal age, right up to nationalisation in 1948. The yard survived under the stewardship of British Waterways and today it's still the base for our operations teams who care for the Llangollen, Shropshire Union and Montgomery Canals nearby.

Nicola explains that many parts of the site are almost frozen in time: "The lock gate workshop is just as it was before closure in the 1960s. There's a foreman's desk where you pull out a drawer, and all the original drawings, job sheets and pencil notes are still there, as if someone just stood up and walked away. There's also a treasure trove of wooden patterns that were

used to cast metal parts for the canal. When we were restoring Pontcysyllte Aqueduct, we recast the original handrails from one of the patterns stored here."

Architectural heritage treasures abound around the site, but renovations to the buildings are long overdue. Leaking roofs, cracked walls and rotting woodwork urgently need attention right across the site, especially on listed structures. That's why, right now, your support is helping our charity to prepare a multi-million pound bid for funding from the National Lottery Heritage Fund for a complete restoration. Our vision means Nicola is as excited about the yard's future, as its past.

She explains: "We've taken an approach known as 'slow architecture' where we test out ideas that could make the yard sustainable. The yard is already a hub for craftspeople. A blacksmith still uses the forge, a furniture maker is in the joinery shop. We've also had expressions of interest from upholsterers and we are looking into turning the dry dock into a training site for heritage boat repairs. If we can conserve the buildings, the tenants will come."

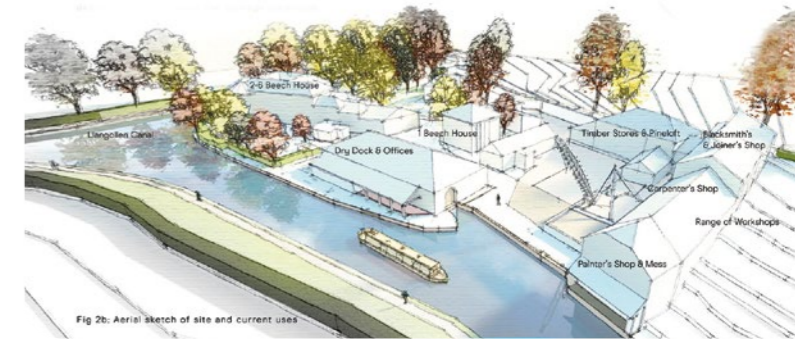


Fig 2b: Aerial sketch of site and current uses

An artist's impression of Ellesmere Yard

The Ellesmere locals are also embracing the yard as a wonderful venue for community events. Visiting heritage boats, paddleboarding, live theatre shows, heritage tours and ecology days have all drawn a crowd, along with canal art exhibitions, and a summer 'Yarden party' with live music. With your support, the yard's future as a working space, historical treasure and a centre of canal and community life looks brighter now than ever before.

© Chris Seddon



# Talking on the towpath

The waterfront in Leeds has been transformed in recent years as new offices and apartments line the towpaths where the River Aire meets the Leeds & Liverpool Canal. On our visit we stopped to chat to people and discovered a thriving city community of residents, dog walkers, cyclists and volunteers, all enjoying a richer life by water.

## Mandy

Every morning, Mandy hops off the bus one stop early to feed her swan friends before work at Leeds Building Society (LBS): "They get to know you and raise their wings to say hello," says Mandy. "I've met good friends on the towpath who help to care for the swans. At times, myself and some of my friends have had challenging issues, we find that spending time in nature helps to put our minds at rest. It's beautiful here in the spring with butterflies, dragonflies, ducklings and cygnets all coming out to hatch."



## Nikki

As part of a volunteering partnership with our charity, Nikki and her LBS colleagues join in work parties once a month, along an adopted canal stretch near their new waterside office: "We paint locks, plant wildflowers, build bug hotels and pick up litter. People see rubbish floating past their office windows every day, so want to help clear that up. The water is a great escape from the stress of work. And with better facilities at our new head office, we're encouraging colleagues to walk, run or cycle to work."



## Louise

Volunteering for our charity by water also gives Louise and her LBS colleagues the chance to escape a busy office and enjoy some fresh air helping improve the local canal. She tells us: "Going from an office environment to being outside is wonderful, as is simply spending your lunch by the water away from the hustle and bustle. With climate change and so on, it's good to help make just a small difference and bring together two organisations that want to help the local community."



## Alec and Rose

Walking up to Leeds Dock and the Royal Armouries, we also met locals Alec and Rose: "We've always lived by the water, so we deliberately chose our flat to do the same in Leeds. There's a lovely brewery taproom called the Piglove by the River along this way, activities like paddleboarding in the dock and lots of places to run and spot wildlife. It's not all perfect though. We'd like to get involved in clean ups, because we still see a lot of plastic and rubbish."



## Thomas

We met Thomas striding into town to do some Christmas shopping: "My friend and I moved into the nearby climate innovation district three months ago. It's passively heated, heavily insulated housing, that's very cheap and efficient. We liked the area because there's a strong community feel with lots of groups, get-togethers, waterside pubs and floating bookshops. I travel by train a lot and the water taxi is a lovely way to get straight to the station and see wildlife along the way."



## Michael

We met Michael enjoying a tea break after riding his bike into town: "I was diagnosed with diabetes last year and advised to exercise. I bought this bike and have lost one and a half stone already. I only went for a mile or two to start with, but my longest canal ride since is a 28 mile round trip past Bingley Five Rise and up to Riddlesden."



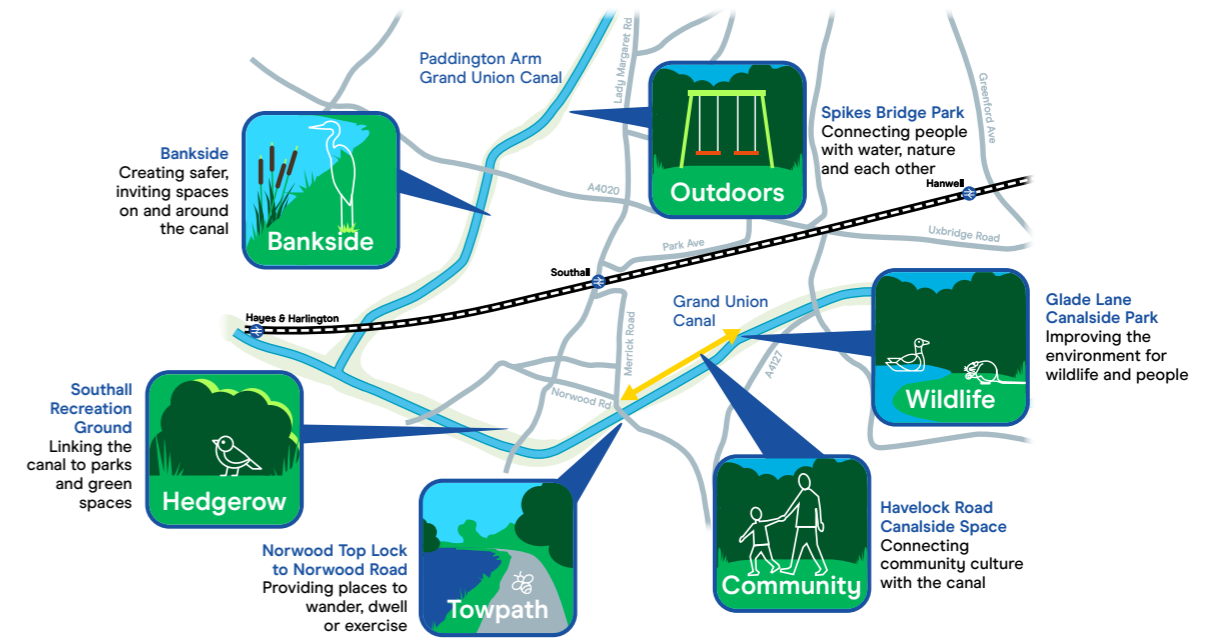
## Minnie the Maltese

"I love coming out on the canal for a walk each day. I live in the Candle House, the iconic apartments you see as you draw into Leeds station. There are lots of 'apartment dogs' like me nearby and our humans help each other out on a WhatsApp group. There are French bulldogs, dachshunds, cockapoos and pugs around, but as you can see from my elegant outfit, there's only one true diva in our pack."



# Southall finds a way to wellbeing

## Southall Grand Union Canal Wellbeing Way



On the Grand Union Canal in West London, our Southall Wellbeing Way project is making great strides. As work begins in spring, Waterfront shares how this blue and green corridor will boost the wellbeing of the community, visitors and wildlife alike.

Supported by the London Mayor's Green and Resilient Spaces Fund, the project aims to promote the benefits of more active lifestyles to Southall's community and visitors; and also to bring back more wildlife to the area. What makes the project unique is the way it is being designed in co-operation with the local community. Working with local partners on the ground such as Ealing Council, Let's Go Southall and housing association Catalyst, we've reached out to the local community, who are actively shaping the Southall Wellbeing Way via workshops and surveys.

"We've had amazing feedback," says Diana Fitzwilliam, our engagement manager for

London and South East. "It changed many of our plans. For example we thought it would be nice to have benches at Bankside, but local people said that might only encourage the anti-social behaviour they sometimes experience, so we're planting wildflowers instead. It's great that people put forward their ideas and local knowledge."

Bankside is one of five key areas forming the new Southall Wellbeing Way. Between now and 2024, the project will bring a series of waterside enrichments along an L-shaped section of the Grand Union and the Paddington Arm. Improvements will include better access to the canal, inviting spaces for exercise, relaxation

and play. We're also exploring creating fitness, wildlife, art and heritage trails, community gardens and habitats for wildlife, helping people and nature to thrive.

Work begins this spring, as our charity upgrades a kilometre of towpath between Norwood Road and Norwood Top Lock. This key stretch, which links important spaces at Havelock Road and Glade Lane, currently has a mud and gravel path that can be difficult to use. "Improving the towpath will give people ready access for walking, cycling or running, which will be fantastic," says Nicola Wheeler of Catalyst Housing Association.

Providing places to exercise is important, as sadly, the local community has high rates of preventable health conditions such as Type 2

Diabetes. "We've got what I call the 'sleeping giant' of a huge canal network in Southall," says Rajinder Singh of Let's Go Southall, who hopes the project will be a catalyst for healthy lifestyle changes. "People want to exercise, so we're creating the conditions for them to do that."

It's not just people who will benefit from the project. At Glade Lane Canalside Park, a new wetland habitat will be created with the help of Thames Water by recycling surface water drain-off. This will provide the ideal environment for wildlife such as ducks, swans, frogs, newts and damselflies, and enable wetland plants to flourish, while also providing an area that can absorb more surface water in times of heavy rain.

## Help nurture the Southall Wellbeing Way

To volunteer, email [enquiries.londonsoutheast@canalrivertrust.org.uk](mailto:enquiries.londonsoutheast@canalrivertrust.org.uk)

Last July, local residents joined us by the canal for the launch of the Southall Wellbeing Way, with a multi-faith blessing, gentle exercise sessions, samosas and cupcakes.



# Helping our Friends spend this summer afloat



Although we know some of our Friends are seasoned boaters, if it's something you'd like to try for the first time we have a very special free offer for you from [drifters.co.uk](http://drifters.co.uk) to help you get onboard this summer.

On Sunday 23 April, the UK's largest consortium of canal boat operators, Drifters, is offering Friends the chance to try canal boating for free at 16 locations across England and Wales.

Take inspiration from this issue of Waterfront and you could explore just some of the places we've visited in this issue, from the Monmouthshire & Brecon Canal in South Wales to the Pontcysyllte Aqueduct on the Llangollen Canal. Or you could explore our beautiful Midlands canals from Huddlesford Junction on the Trent & Mersey.

The taster sessions are open from 11am to 4pm and include free short trips on skippered

narrowboats, plus the opportunity to look round holiday-hire boats at many of the locations. Remember, if you like what you see, as a Friend you can enjoy a 5% discount on any boating holiday you book through Drifters.

Haley Hadley from Drifters told us: "What could be more relaxing than travelling at just 4mph through peaceful countryside, past welcoming pubs, sleepy villages and vibrant waterside towns and cities? Canal boat holidays are often described as 'the fastest way to slow down' and our free canal boat taster sessions are a great way for people to find out what makes canal boat holidays so special."

So, if you've always wanted to try boating, here's a free chance to see what a boating holiday might be like and make the most of being a Friend of our waterways. Don't forget to download your voucher and events will be run on a first come, first served basis.

- Find an Open Day event near you
- Download your free Open Day voucher before the event
- Claim 5% discount on any Drifters boating holiday

Visit [www.drifters.co.uk/openday](http://www.drifters.co.uk/openday) to download your free voucher

or call 0344 984 0322 to claim your Friends discount when booking a boating holiday

