



PRESS RELEASE

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BEHIND THE SCENES OF THE MONTGOMERY CANAL RESTORATION

Around 30 people joined the Canal & River Trust charity to take a rare behind-the-scenes look at a £4 million project to restore a section of the Montgomery Canal on the Shropshire Welsh border, near Oswestry, this week.

They enjoyed special guided walks to the new Aston Locks Nature Reserve, which is being created next to the canal to provide a protected home for birds, wildlife such as damselflies, dragonflies, otters and water voles, and rare aquatic plants like Floating Water Plantain *Luronium natans*.

Trust project manager David Hennessey and ecologists Stuart Moodie and Sara Hill explained the complex works and showed how the plants and animals were being transferred into the new nature reserve from the main line of the canal. The whole project is being funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) and Shropshire Wildlife Trust's Freshwater First ERDF Programme, supported by the Montgomery Canal Partnership, and delivered by the Canal & River Trust, which cares for the Montgomery Canal and 2,000 miles of waterways in England and Wales.

Known for its outstanding natural beauty, wildlife and heritage, the Montgomery Canal runs for 35 miles between England and Wales. The canal is designated as a Site of Special Scientific Interest on both sides of the border. The whole length in Wales is also recognised as a Special Area of Conservation, confirmation that it is one of the most important wildlife sites in Europe.

Funding for the restoration programme was announced a year ago and since then good progress has been made towards upgrading nearly five miles of towpath, restoring 1¼ miles of the canal to navigation from Maesbury to Crickheath and creating a dedicated turning point for narrowboats, known as a ‘winding hole’. This will enable boats to return to the area for the first time since 1936 when the canal was closed.

Only around half of the canal is currently navigable but, with the help of Shropshire Union Canal Society volunteers, this latest major phase should be completed by 2020.

Canal & River Trust project manager David Hennessey explained: “The Montgomery is a special canal and its restoration has required a special solution. The absence of boat movements over the last 80 years has allowed the man-made channel to become colonised by a wide range of rare flora and fauna. By creating a new three hectare wildlife habitat, we will be able to protect and conserve these species for generations to come, while enabling boats to return by excavating the main channel into a navigation again.”

The reserve features two new giant ponds which are being constructed next to the canal main line. Specialist environmental coir matting has been laid along the pond banks, protecting the banks from erosion and enabling vegetation to establish more easily. Each pond is being connected to the canal with an inlet and

outlet channel, allowing fish and aquatic mammals to travel between the two water spaces. Due to the natural topography of the land and the high water table, the ponds have not been lined but rest on a natural bed of peat.

Trust ecologist Stuart Moodie explained: “One pond is now constructed and the second pond should be finished in the next few months. They will inevitably take a few years to become established but ultimately we expect them to become self-sustaining, biodiverse eco-communities - a wonderful resource for the local community.

“We are working closely with Natural England monitoring the success of the reserves and hopefully in the next three to five years, they will allow us to double boat movements along this section of the Montgomery Canal from 2,500 to 5,000 per year.”

Sara Hill, the Trust’s local ecologist, said that rare floating water plantain and grass wrack pondweed plants, which had been propagated specially for the project at Chester Zoo, had recently been trans-planted into the reserve.

“We are impressed how quickly the coir matting has enabled the plants to become established, despite the heatwave. We have spotted many fish and the area is already buzzing with dragonflies and damselflies. As soon as the main construction phase is completed, we will be adding a network of footpaths around the reserve so the public can enjoy the wonderful wildlife too. We are expecting to be able to open the reserve to the public from next summer,” she added.

The Canal & River Trust works with 15 partner organisations which make up the Montgomery Canal Partnership. The Partnership aims to restore the canal fully within the next decade as a haven for people and nature.

For more information about the Montgomery Canal restoration, visiting your local canal or becoming a Friend of the Canal & River Trust, please go to www.canalrivertrust.org.uk or call 0303 040 4040
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Notes to Editors

The Canal & River Trust cares for and brings to life 2,000 miles of canals and rivers across England & Wales. We believe waterways have the power to make a real difference to people’s lives and that spending time by water can make us all healthier and happier. By bringing communities together to transform their local waterway, we are creating places and spaces that can be used and enjoyed by everyone, every day.
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The Montgomery Canal Partnership members include; Canal and River Trust, Montgomery Waterway Restoration Trust, Powys County Council, Shropshire Council, Natural Resources Wales, Natural England, Historic England, Cadw, Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historic Monuments of Wales, Environment Agency England, Shropshire Union Canal Society, Inland Waterways Association, Montgomeryshire Wildlife Trust, Shropshire Wildlife Trust and Severn Rivers Trust. The Partnership is working to restore the canal under the terms of the 2005 Conservation Management Strategy.

The Montgomery Canal has already been restored in England from Lower Frankton to Gronwen Bridge, near Maesbury (7 miles). In Wales, about 12 miles have been restored in the Welshpool area. So 19 of the canal’s 35 miles are already fully usable. The areas to be restored are the 7.5 miles from Gronwen to

Arddleean (the northern end of the navigable Welshpool section) and the 8.5 miles from Refail (the southern end of the Welshpool section) to Newtown, Powys. Unlike many other canal restoration projects, with the Montgomery canal, it is all in single ownership; water supply is secure; and all the locks have already been restored (in all cases, except for the two miles at the Newtown end). A restoration fund has been established and is currently focussed on raising £300k to rebuild Schoolhouse Bridge, the last lowered bridge in England. Donations can be made by visiting www.restorethemontgomerycanal.uk.

Works covered by the £4m scheme include creating extensive new nature reserves in recognition of the SSSI status of part of the canal in England; relining the canal bed to Crickheath. In Wales, the work will include restoring 12 historic structures; four areas of dredging to improve the flow of the water; towpath works and community involvement.