



**Canal &  
River Trust**

Making life better by water

# A Review of the Year in the West Midlands

2021/22



[canalrivertrust.org.uk](https://canalrivertrust.org.uk)

# Introduction from Regional Director & Regional Advisory Board Chair

This report demonstrates the impressive progress made during 2021/22 despite the fact that it was still another difficult year for our colleagues, volunteers, and partners with Covid still very much a part of our lives and impacting our activities across the West Midlands.

As restrictions eased from July, we have had some fantastic achievements and taken part in numerous celebrations and events along our canals. It has been wonderful to see so many community events take place.

The West Midlands has around two million people living within a mile of their local canal within a region which is a mixture of dense urban and expansive rural populations. Our canals have continued to play an important role in helping to improve the mental and physical health of the thousands of people who use these green spaces every day.

Although we have had further restrictions and lockdowns this year, we've had a record year for volunteering with over 167,000 hours of volunteer time recorded. We want to thank each volunteer for their time and effort they have so generously given us to help care for our canals. The support they provide ensure our canals are always great places to visit throughout the year.

The Coventry UK City of Culture 2021 has been a huge success with a wide range of cultural and arts events, plus multiple Let's activities taking place along the Coventry Canal from the Basin to Hawkesbury Junction. Although the City of Culture celebrations will end in May 2022, we will still

play an active role celebrating our canals, as the city will be a key venue in the upcoming Birmingham 2022 Commonwealth Games.

We've been awarded two new Keep Britain Tidy Green Flag Awards for the Coventry Canal and the Trent & Mersey Canal in Stoke-on-Trent. We've successfully retained our Green Flag status for the Revolution Walk and for the Montgomery Canal. We have submitted a further six Green Flag applications and hope to hear their outcome later this year. We also secured £1.7million in Government funding from the Green Recovery Challenge Fund to improve nature and engage people along our waterways.

Looking ahead to this year we have much to look forward to. One of the biggest sporting events, the Birmingham 2022 Commonwealth Games, is coming to the West Midlands. Our teams and volunteers have been busy helping us get our canals #GamesReady for the four million people that are expected to attend the Games and the festival celebrations. We will be showcasing our beautiful and historic waterways across the world, highlighting how the region that was once the place of trade, is now a place for wellbeing and leisure.

We want to create a legacy of the Games on our canals and

encourage more people to use our towpaths and canals as part of their daily lives. Working with the Games legacy teams at United By Birmingham 2022, Gen22 and also in partnership with funding from Sport England we are working with local people to show them the benefits of being on and next to water. We hope you join us in the celebrations or even volunteer for us during the Games.

Want to get involved? You can find out more on our website [canalrivertrust.org.uk/commonwealth-games-2022](https://canalrivertrust.org.uk/commonwealth-games-2022)



**Adnan Saif**  
Regional Director



**John Hudson OBE**  
Chair – Regional  
Advisory Board



**SCAN ME**

# A year in numbers

**£27.9m total spend**

to manage, maintain, protect and develop the West Midlands canal network in 2021/22

**£13m** programme of external funding secured for delivery over the next three years

Over **167,000** volunteer hours

**7,396** boats use West Midlands canals each year

**559miles** of canals and **683 miles** of towpath

**23** reservoirs

**900+** access points to our canals

**4,731** young people engaged in participatory activities and events

**18,445** children engaged through the Explorers education programme and 11,084 children received water safety education

Over **90** volunteers carrying out otter surveys

**2** new Green Flag Awards for Coventry Canal and the Trent & Mersey Canal in Stoke-on-Trent plus two retained

**11,089** attendees at trust led events and activities

**50,000** spring bulbs planted by volunteers

**£563k** on offside vegetation clearance

**117** individual packages of work completed in the Region with **£5.3million** priority works programme delivered

Identified and delivered **103** packages of repairs and improvements, including 40 locks, Earlswood Reservoir and Ivy House Embankment

**289** waterways businesses

**13** lock gate replacements and 11 lock gates relined

**£1.7m** secured for Green Recovery Challenge Fund funded projects

And if that wasn't enough we also celebrated **250** years of the Staffordshire & Worcestershire Canal

# Regional highlights

-  lock
-  lock flight
-  tunnel
-  Canal & River Trust office
-  places to visit
-  railway station
-  cared for by Canal & River Trust
-  unnavigable / under restoration
-  other water bodies



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## Birmingham & Solihull

The restored Roundhouse Birmingham, which was a joint venture delivered by Canal & River Trust and the National Trust, is now fully open to the public

We opened the doors to our yard at Icknield Port as part of National Heritage Week

Additional moorings rings have been installed along the canal in Birmingham and Selly Oak

We took part in Birmingham Pride 2021

The Cuckoo Wharf customer service facility has been refurbished

A packed programme developed to celebrate the Birmingham 2022 Commonwealth Games in partnership with the Commonwealth Games Organising Committee, United By Birmingham 2022, GEN 22 and Birmingham 2022 Festival

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## Black Country

New towpath lights have been installed along the Wyrley & Essington Canal in Wolverhampton

A virtual Open Day was filmed at Ryders Green in Walsall

Sadly £60,000 was spent on clearing litter and fly tipping from the canal and towpath in Walsall

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## Coventry & Warwickshire

A local waterways strategy was developed and adopted with Warwickshire County Council

We won a Green Flag Award for the Coventry Canal from Coventry Basin to Hawkesbury Junction

A £1.6million reservoir improvement project was delivered at Earlswood Lakes

Successful Coventry UK City of Culture 2021 celebrations have taken place along the Coventry Canal

The Coventry Canal towpath improvement project with Coventry City Council has been completed

A new visitor and boater welcome station is now open at the Coventry Canal Basin

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## Shropshire

The development of Ellesmere Yard is ongoing with the local community helping us plant fruit trees and repair hedgerows

109 people took part in a tour at our Open Day at Grindley Brook along the Llangollen Canal

Towpath repairs were completed along the canal at Market Drayton

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## Stoke-on-Trent and Staffordshire

A Green Flag Award was achieved for the Trent & Mersey Canal in Stoke-on-Trent

Repairs started to Ivy House Embankment on the Caldon Canal

The one mile stretch of the Cannock Extension Canal has been dredged

The annual 'Scarecastle' event was held at Harecastle Tunnel

We held our second Halloween trail event at Fradley Junction

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## Worcestershire

A community orchard has been created and planted with 300 fruit trees along the Worcester & Birmingham Canal at Tibberton

The Worcester & Birmingham Canal towpath in Worcester near Junction 6 of the M5 has been improved

We attended the IWA Festival of Water in the summer, held near the Worcester & Birmingham Canal

# Our strategic projects



## #GamesOn for Birmingham 2022

With the **Birmingham 2022 Commonwealth Games** just round the corner, we've been busy getting our canals ready for the millions of people expected to attend the Games. Together with our colleagues, volunteers, partners and local businesses, we've been working hard to make sure our towpaths are clean, green, and welcoming.

We're pleased to be part of £4million funding award given to local authorities and organisations from Sport England's Active Communities Fund to tackling inactivity in local communities and engage underrepresented groups. The funding is aimed at people on lower incomes and disabled people as part of Sport England's ten-year strategy, **Uniting the Movement**.

Through **United by Birmingham 2022** we're actively recruiting around 1,000 new volunteers from the local community as games

operatives, rangers, enablers, educators and champions.

**United By Birmingham 2022** is the community brand of the Commonwealth Games, recognising projects delivered by grass-roots organisations that are having a positive impact on the communities that they serve across a diverse range of subjects.

We're also part of the **Gen22 programme** which aims to provide career and employability boosting opportunities for young people aged 16 to 24 across the region who might otherwise struggle to be given a chance. Young people are nominated via Gen22 to take part in a 30-hour volunteering opportunity, with projects co-designed by young people to ensure they best meet the needs of the participants and are something they will enjoy and benefit from.

From now until September, we'll be promoting our canals during the **Birmingham 2022 Festival**, which celebrates the culture and history of Birmingham's diverse communities. There are exciting

plans for interactive art trails along our towpaths, mass-dance events beside the water and pop-up museums to name but a few. Our participation is via three strands:

### **Past:Present — celebrating history, people and stories**

Using the stories of those who worked and lived on the canals over 200 years ago, our industrial and Commonwealth links, right through to how people of the West Midlands use the canals today, we will reimagine how a place of trade became a place of wellbeing, and the benefits this brings to all.

### **Artismo — art and our waterways**

From traditional canal art created on boats, to immersive experiences and beautiful street art, we will work with local artists to bring the West Midlands canals to life, reflecting their unique heritage and environment, and the simple life-affirming enjoyment of being by water.



**Sustain — caring for our environment**

Working with young people, we will highlight the challenge of plastic pollution and show what everyone can do to bring about change for the better. We show how we're making our blue waterways greener, taking care of rare species and protecting our environment.

**Coventry UK City of Culture 2021**

There's been a huge amount of activity on the Coventry Canal as part of **Coventry UK City of Culture 2021**.

With activities ranging from creative arts and culture, through to fishing, cycling, kayaking and much more, local people have had a chance to experience their local canal in a whole new way.

The five-and-a-half-mile route from Coventry Canal Basin in the city to Hawkesbury Junction can now celebrate a **Green Flag Award** from **Keep Britain Tidy**. The award, now into its third decade, is given to spaces that boast the highest possible environmental standards, are beautifully maintained and have excellent visitor facilities.

This accolade was only made possible thanks to the commitment and dedication from our volunteers and colleagues, along with local groups including The Big Clean – Coventry, Coventry Mercia Lions Club, The Good Gym, Crisis (Coventry) and many more who have worked so hard to make this an exceptional space.

Thousands of people have had the opportunity to see the value in our beautiful canal network during the year. We partnered with Coventry UK City of Culture 2021 in a series of events and activities, and some of the highlights include:

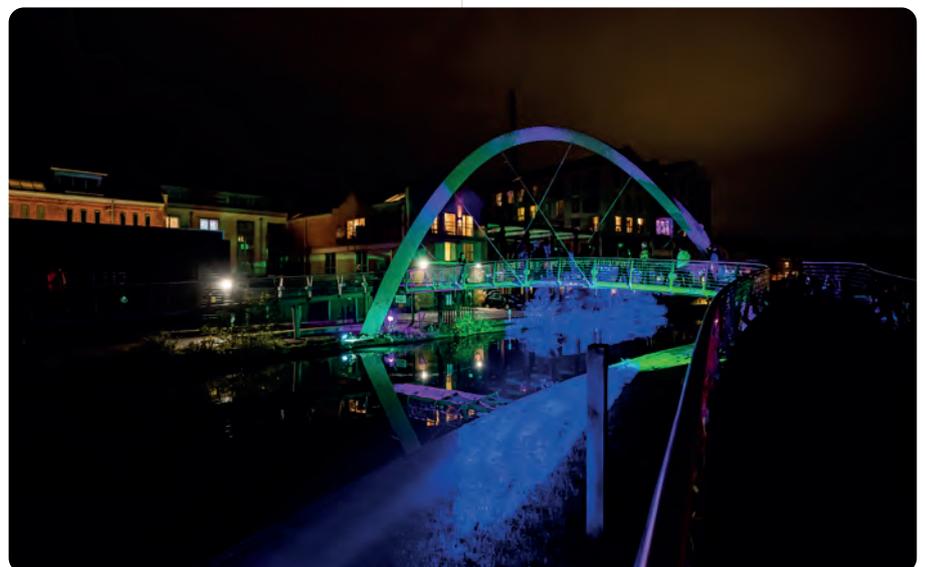


- Narrowboat trading
- Heritage Week — an opportunity for local people to learn about life and history on local canals
- Live music, arts and culture as part of the European School of Participation
- 'Roam and Dwell' with Ludic Rooms featuring artists and opportunities to experience the canal through the arts
- 'Castaway', which highlighted the issues around plastics pollution

In November, the Coventry Canal and basin was lit up as part of the

Random String festival of arts and technology from local non-profit organisation Ludic Rooms. An event filled with light, sound and projections, its theme was folklore, exploring the urban canal, gods and goddesses of the waterways, future creatures and new folk tales. It also asked what it means to be by the water in a land-locked city.

Looking ahead to the summer, Coventry will be a big part of the Birmingham 2022 Commonwealth Games, when the Coventry Building Society Arena plays host to rugby sevens, wrestling and judo.



# Awards, events and celebrations



**Two more stretches of the West Midlands network have received prestigious Green Flag awards this year**

## More Green Flag Award success

Two more stretches of the West Midlands network have received prestigious Green Flag awards this year. Presented by environmental charity Keep Britain Tidy, the awards recognise well managed green spaces, setting a benchmark for environmental management across the country.

The new awards are for the five and a half-mile stretch of the Coventry Canal from the basin to Hawkesbury Junction, and an eight-mile section of the Trent & Mersey Canal from Etruria to Harecastle Tunnel in Stoke-on-Trent.

The Revolution Walk, a four and a half-mile green route linking heritage sites between

Brindleyplace in central Birmingham to Chance Glassworks in Smethwick, has had its Green Flag renewed, and we're awaiting a decision on six further applications to be awarded in October.

## Open days go global

Two open days in the past year have shown how we can showcase our work to in-person visitors and to many more online.

In February, visitors to a public open day at Grindley Lock on the Llangollen Canal in Shropshire enjoyed the unique experience of going into a specially drained lock to see the solid oak lock gates and 200-year-old masonry work that's normally hidden below water. A great opportunity to understand how our historic canal

infrastructure is preserved and protected!

A virtual open day at the Ryders Green Lock Flight on the Walsall Canal was promoted online to more than one million supporters worldwide and showed the replacement of a worn-out lock gate with a brand new one made from solid oak, amongst other highlights.

Our colleagues and volunteers are skilled in maintaining and caring for all the locks, bridges, tunnels and aqueducts, along with the wildlife living along the canal. The combination of in-person and virtual open days means even more people can learn about our work and enjoy the canals, wherever they live.



## Blooming lovely award for busy Hillmorton locks

The busiest set of locks in the country is also officially one of the most attractive. Volunteers at the Hillmorton locks on the Oxford Canal won a Gold award from Rugby in Bloom for their efforts in sprucing up the lockside area, including planting bulbs, creating raised planters and growing herbs.

This is the third year in a row that the team has won the gold award in the Community category, helping improve the area for boaters and visitors as well as creating a haven for wildlife.

Hillmorton also takes the crown as 'top of the locks', with a record 8127 lockages during 2021.

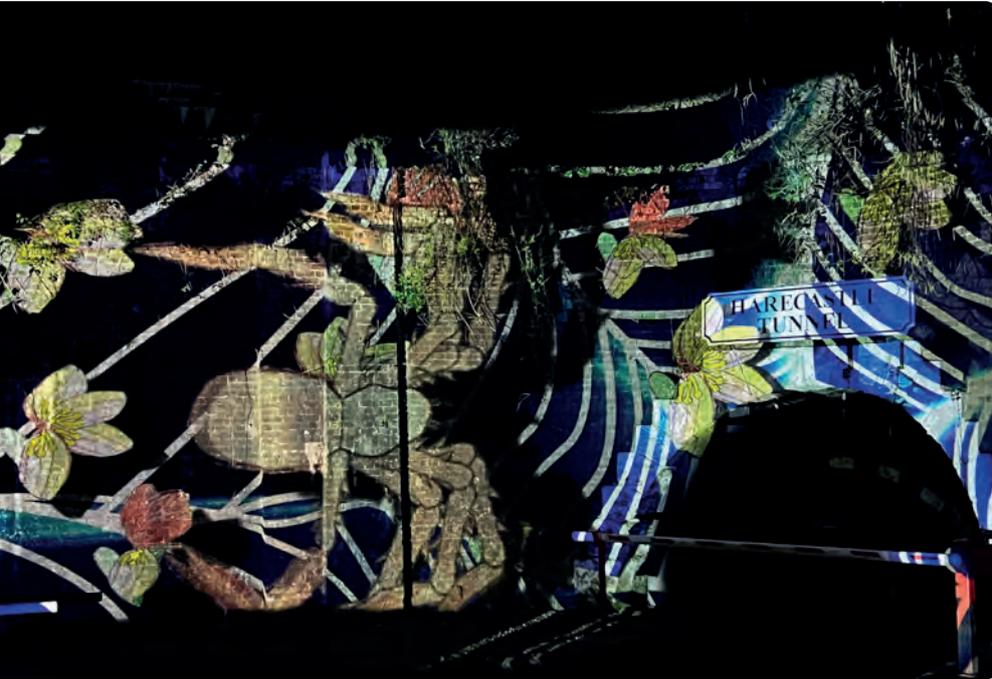
**The busiest set of locks in the country is also officially one of the most attractive**

## Spooky goings-on along the waterways

Halloween is a great excuse for dressing up and having fun. Harecastle Tunnel and Fradley Junction made the most of the spooky celebrations this year with fun family events.

Harecastle became 'Scarecastle' for the day, raising over £1700 in donations and over £800 in sales from more than 600 customers. Fradley Junction built on the success of last year's Halloween events with a week-long 'spooktacular' event, including a kids' scavenger hunt adventure trail around nearby Fradley Pool Nature Reserve.





## An enlightening look down the rabbit hole

Harecastle Tunnel on the Trent & Mersey Canal has long sparked the imagination of those peering into its dark entrance. Boaters often find travelling its 2676-metre length a spooky and unsettling experience. So where better for video projection artists and storytellers **Illuminos** to create a stunning light artwork imagining just what is down there?

**'Down the Rabbit Hole'** was a one-night-only experience in March which saw the **Illuminos** team, along with media students from The King's Church of England Academy, draw on the mystery and magic of the place to create a remarkable lightshow projected onto the north entrance to the tunnel at Kidsgrove.

The event was delivered as part of a year long project working with local schools and communities, and in partnership with local art organisation, **Appetite**. The Kings' Academy students developed their own mythical creatures to feature

in the work and the route along the canal to the event was lit with lanterns inspired by fantastical beasts and magical creatures.

## Women of the canal

Women have always played a huge part in the life of the canals. As part of Walsall Town Council's Christmas 'We Are Walsall' celebrations, we organised a performance which showcased the history of women who lived by the canal. In less-than-ideal weather, around 40 spectators enjoyed the show and provided positive feedback.

## Nowka Bais racing on the reservoir

Nowka Bais is a traditional form of dragon boat-style racing, held in Bangladeshi villages after the monsoon rains. A Nowka Bais event has been held in Birmingham since 2015 and is one of the most important Bangladeshi cultural events in the UK, with a host of activities on and off the water.

This year's race across Edgbaston Reservoir attracted many teams of up to 12 paddlers plus a drummer and included one from Canal & River Trust West Midlands. We also supported the event with branded goodies.

## Women on the water

We supported Birmingham's first women's regatta in March, which took place on the canal running alongside the Star City complex.

Organised by local women, the bell boat race tournament was held to mark Women's History Month, to inspire and empower women who don't usually get the opportunity to enjoy a traditionally male dominated sport and to encourage residents to make use of outdoor spaces in the city. It raised funds for The Gift of Vision, a charity which works to help people with sight disabilities in Bangladesh.

The 17 teams of eight paddlers included first-time rowers as well as seasoned professionals. Many of the teams were led by women, with mixed-gender teams for young children. Participants included an all-female Peaky Blinders boat along with teams from Saathi House, Legacy WM in Lozells, West Midlands Police, Swift Cruisers, New Hope Global, Baby Bengal Tigers, Ninja Warriors, the 'Unsinkables' and Squid Squad.

We also held events at the Roundhouse Birmingham with free boat trips along the canal, an art exhibition, Roses and Castles painting workshops a performance from the Alarum theater and historical talk on Idle Women.

## National Festival of Water

Free **Let's Fish** and **Explorer** sessions along with a guest



appearance from our Well-B mascot were some of the highlights of the Trust's attendance at the National Festival of Water, organised by the Inland Waterways Association and held last summer in Worcester.

More than 100 boats from around the country lined the banks of the Worcester & Birmingham Canal and around 15,000 people enjoyed the weekend's fun in the sun, making the most of the good food, drink and music along with a host of stalls and fairground rides.

### Pride in our region

Birmingham Pride in September was the only Pride event in the country that avoided cancellation because of COVID-19. Colleagues, friends and family were honoured to celebrate the diversity of our organisation and our local communities, and represent the Trust in the lively, colourful procession through Birmingham City Centre.

### Dancing under Spaghetti Junction

We held a series of four free movement workshops and performances led by **ME Dance**, bringing to life the stories of those who lived and worked along the canal. Using the space under Spaghetti Junction next to the Birmingham & Fazeley Canal we created a unique experience for local people and boaters.

### Heritage boats around the region

Our heritage boats had a busy summer attending various events and festivals across the region as well as supporting activities at Roundhouse Birmingham.



# Canalside developments



## Port Loop continues to grow

Port Loop is a new neighbourhood community close to Edgbaston Reservoir and 15 minute walk from the city centre, circled by a kilometre loop of canal off the Birmingham Old Main Line Canal. It's currently home to 100 residents and is a great example of placemaking, innovative design and build and community regeneration, opening up a previously unloved part of the canal network for commuting, exercise and wellbeing.

Created In partnership with Birmingham City Council, Urban Splash, Places for People and

House by Urban Splash, Port Loop is also a multi-award-winning development. It topped the 'Healthy Homes' category at the Housing Design Awards 2021, achieved 'Best regeneration initiative' at the Housebuilder awards 2020, and 'Placemaking Project of the Year' at Midlands Business Insider Residential Awards in 2020.

Now into phase three, the Port Loop scheme will eventually deliver 1,100 new homes, as well as moorings, more green spaces, retail and leisure spaces. The Floating Front Room, an outdoor coffee shop, is already open on the canal at Port Loop, along with YARD, Birmingham's first art house.

## Roundhouse Birmingham building opens

The Roundhouse building was, formerly a stables and stores on Sheepcote Street near the Birmingham Main Line Canal, opened to the public in summer 2021 after extensive renovation. Visitors to the historic canalside venue were offered the chance to #SeeTheCityDifferently through a range of volunteer-powered guided city and canal tours.

The large circular Grade 2-listed building dates back to 1874 when it was the result of an architectural competition run by the Corporation of Birmingham.



The project to revive it began in 2013, with renovation works starting in 2019.

Roundhouse Birmingham, an independent charity and a collaboration between the Canal & River Trust and the National Trust, is the custodian of the building. Further funding came from the National Lottery Heritage Fund, Historic England and other organisations.

The renovation work included structural support, new windows, new services throughout, roof replacement and insulation and relaying sections of the courtyard for drainage and accessibility. The building has been segmented into a series of spaces which serve as offices for Canal & River Trust, National Trust, Roundhouse Birmingham and Sustrans, the walking and cycling charity. There's also a visitor centre and café.

The Roundhouse is a launchpad to explore Birmingham's brilliant stories and places, and visitors can enjoy activities including canal-based kayaking, city walking tours and boat trips.

Council's former British Steel site and land off Qualcast Road, all of which were brought together under a collaboration agreement to ensure comprehensive development that puts sustainability and place-making at its heart. In addition to new homes, there is potential for a mix of complementary retail, leisure and commercial development.

A preferred developer is currently being appointed, and we will work with them and with the City of Wolverhampton to ensure a quality scheme that improves the canalside for existing and new residents, the wider community and all users of the canal, including boaters.

### Wolverhampton Canalside South

Canalside South, a development of around 1000 homes being built at the junction of the Wyrley & Essington Canal and the Birmingham Canal Navigations Main Line, has been described as one of the largest city centre residential development opportunities in the Midlands.

A 17-acre waterfront development, it comprises the former Crane Foundry site owned by Canal & River Trust, City of Wolverhampton

### Campus connection

Getting around will be easier for students and staff at the University of Birmingham thanks to a new footbridge across the Worcester & Birmingham Canal. The bridge links the campus with University railway station on Birmingham's Cross City line, which serves both the University and the Queen Elizabeth Hospital. The station is undergoing a £56 million redevelopment and the bridge, which opens in the summer, will be crossed by thousands of people every day.



# Investing in our waterways



## Greening up our workboats

We are working towards zero emissions on the waterways and, from the end of 2021 to March 2022, we trialled the use of HVO — hydrotreated vegetable oil — in our workboats, initially in the urban litter boat Berkswell, operating out of Icknield Port in Birmingham. The trial has provided valuable information on the practicality and performance of HVO, which is over 90% carbon neutral, has 30% lower nitrogen oxide outputs than fossil fuel diesel and can reduce particulate emissions by almost 90%.

A switch to HVO is seen as a short-to-medium term solution on the road to more fundamental change, and we're gathering feedback from fuel suppliers and boaters who are using HVO. There will be a gradual roll-out of

HVO across the fleet coinciding with the withdrawal from sale of commercial red diesel, which has disproportionately affected boaters who live aboard.

A switch to a zero-carbon future on the waterways needs to be a collaborative effort between boaters, businesses, local authorities and government, and we're keen to find the right solutions to help boaters decarbonise without affecting their enjoyment of life on the water.

## £1.7 million boost for nature in the region

We're thrilled to have been awarded a £1.7 million grant from the second round of the Government's Green Recovery Challenge Fund to develop a nature recovery network across the West Midlands.

## Investing by numbers

**117** individual packages of work have been completed in the region.

**35** stoppages were completed, including 13 lock gate replacements and 11 lock gate relines.

Dredging work to the value of

**£1.8m** was undertaken this year in several locations, covering 21 miles.

We've spent

**£563k** this year on offside vegetation clearance undertaken along the Shropshire Union Canal, Llangollen Canal, Montgomery Canal, Trent & Mersey Canal, Coventry Canal and Oxford Canal at Newbold.

A **£13m** programme of external funding has been secured for delivery over the next three years.



This is one of 90 nature projects across England to have been awarded grants to create and retain 1000 green jobs. The impact of the grant will allow us to:

- Improve 31 miles of waterway habitat, creating a nature recovery network linking seven nature reserves
- Develop seven SSSIs (sites of special scientific interest) including the Cannock Extension Canal, Fens Pools, Belvide Reservoir, Bittell Reservoirs, Shrewley Cutting, Brewins Cutting and the Anglesey Branch Canal
- Enhance seven urban Green Flag canals over 18 miles, in Birmingham, Perry Barr, Smethwick, Walsall, Coventry and Leamington
- Create 500 metres of new marginal habitat for water voles, reducing soil erosion and improving water quality

- Engage 50 schools in practical environmental conservation activities, support a further 250 to embed learning through nature and work with 500 Council for Learning Outside the Classroom member schools
- Train 100 community champions to support links between schools and families, and introduce 100 volunteers to citizen science projects
- Support 23 existing jobs, create eight new environmental roles and four new apprenticeships

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### Kickstarting a worthwhile career

A group of young people joined us on the Walsall Canal in early 2021 as part of the Government-funded Kickstart scheme. As part of their six-month placement the Kickstarters worked with

colleagues and volunteers on a variety of heritage repairs and construction tasks, including stone masonry, bricklaying, carpentry, canal bank protection and towpath resurfacing, as well as getting the canal ready for the thousands of visitors who will visit the region for the Birmingham 2022 Commonwealth Games.

The Kickstart initiative is aimed at 16–24-year-olds who are claiming Universal Credit and are at risk of long-term unemployment and supports them to build up their experience and help them move into sustained employment after they have completed their Kickstart-funded role.

We're delighted that seven of our original Kickstarters have chosen to stay on as apprentices with the Trust — the start of what will hopefully be a worthwhile career protecting and preserving the region's 200-year-old canals.



In September we were joined by a new cohort, who are helping to care for the canal in Wolverhampton.

## Getting #GamesReady

The Birmingham 2022 Commonwealth Games is just a few months away, and our operations teams and volunteers have been busy getting our canals #GamesReady for the past year, improving and creating new accesses to the canal, cutting back overgrown vegetation, and carrying out repairs to our towpaths. Some examples of the key improvements we've made include:

- Installing 180 metres of new mooring rings along the New Main Line Canal in Birmingham near St Vincent Street and a further 25 metres at Selly Oak on the Worcester & Birmingham Canal
- Vegetation works along the canal at Birmingham City centre, Sandwell, Perry Barr, Coventry, and Leamington Spa to spruce up the canals for the Games
- A new roof for the historic Toll House along the Main Line Canal in Smethwick after it was vandalised and destroyed by fire
- Improved access from Hordern Road in Wolverhampton with a new towpath surface and fencing
- Newly planted wildflowers, herbs and plants along the Walsall Canal courtesy of our volunteer and Kickstarter teams, bringing some much-needed colour and smells when walking along the flight
- Towpath repairs along the Coventry Canal at various locations



## A powerful health & safety boost

Regional operations manager Rebecca Whitehouse, area operations manager Keith Grubb and GIS specialist Barry Keight have been awarded a Canal & River Trust Safety Award for implementing the use of battery powered tools in the West Midlands region. They're quieter in use and don't vibrate as much as mains-powered tools, helping to reduce the risk of injuries.

The team also developed an app-based system, linked to a dashboard that allows us to see how many tools are being used, where they are and when they need maintenance or service. Each tool and battery pack has a unique number and QR code that is scanned via the app whenever they

are taken from or returned to the depot. Users can also comment via the app on the condition of the item and report any faults.

## Enhancing Earlswood Lakes

A £1.6 million programme of necessary improvements to the three reservoirs at Earlswood has been completed, including strengthening the core of the main dam along Valley Road to improve its resilience during flood events.

In addition, the footpaths alongside the left bank of Engine Pool and right bank of Windmill have been widened and resurfaced to make them accessible all year round. New angling platforms and wildlife habitat enhancements have been provided, including coir roll soft

bank protection planted with native plant species along the Canal Feeder Channel, securing waste wood in Windmill Pool for invertebrates and fish and providing a step up over the metal piles for wildlife.

The reservoirs were built in the early 19th century to supply water to the Stratford Canal. Together they occupy 70 acres and are popular walking, fishing and sailing spots.

## Lighting the way at Wolverhampton

1000 new solar-powered lights have been installed along six miles of canal in Wolverhampton, making them easier and safer for walkers and cyclists.



There's a solar light every 10 metres along the Birmingham Main Line Canal from Coseley to the bottom of the Wolverhampton Lock Flight, and along Wyrley & Essington Canal from Wolverhampton Train Station to the Bentley Retail Park.

The lights will illuminate from dusk until sunrise and have been fitted with special 'bat hats' to ensure bats are not distracted as they hunt for food and navigate along the canal.

The project is in partnership with the City of Wolverhampton Council and was part-funded by Priority 4 of the European Regional Development Fund, which supports the shift towards low carbon economies.

### Cannock extension dredging

Dredging work completed on the Cannock Extension Canal will benefit boaters and wildlife alike.

The Cannock Extension is a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) and Special Area of Conservation (SAC) for its population of floating water-plantain *Luronium natans*, which has thrived in the clear water. Additional funding has allowed us to carry out new biodiversity and access works, including the installation of coir rolls to improve the bankside habitat, extensive tree works to reduce shading, towpath enhancements to minimise puddling and the installation of interpretation boards to tell the story of this unusual waterway.

The Cannock Extension Canal, a quiet but important part of the Birmingham Canal Navigations, is just over a mile long and an arm of the Wyrley & Essington Canal on the Staffordshire/Walsall boundary.

### Titford Pools

The latest phase of a £3million, two-year project to improve the water quality at Titford Pools in Oldbury has seen us working with Sandwell Council, Highways England and the European Regional Development Fund to manage overgrown vegetation. The removal of dense bushes and scrub has opened up the area, allowing more light onto the woodland floor and encouraging more plants and wildlife to the area.

This will have the benefit of improving the paths through the site, helping to make the pools more accessible for local people. 250 native trees and a new community orchard of around 100 different fruit trees will also be planted.

Titford Pools were originally constructed in the 1770s as a small reservoir to feed the Titford Canal. Today they still provide water to both the canal and Edgbaston Reservoir in Birmingham, but over the years the pools had become silted up, affecting the water quality and deterring boaters.

The initial phase of the project removed 30,000 tonnes of silt from the pools, with special 'Vortex Separators' being installed to filter the silt from the water entering the pools and the River Tame. Bank protection was installed along the edge of the wildlife friendly island in the middle of the pool to protect it from erosion.

### Towpath updates

- A much-needed makeover by Highways England has provided a new towpath alongside the picturesque Worcester & Birmingham Canal near Junction 6 of the M5, a well-used route for runners and dog walkers



- A £212,000 European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD) project to improve a 1,200-metre stretch of towpath on the Shropshire Union Canal from Victoria Wharf at Bridge 65 to the Market Drayton Aqueduct has provided a pothole- and mud-free rural green route at a popular access point for boaters and local shoppers
- Also undertaken with EAFRD funding was an eight-week project to resurface and widen the towpath from Lions Quay to the village of St Martins along the Llangollen Canal. The new towpath links up with previous towpath improvements, creating 12 miles of new pathway and improved year-round access through the Pontcysyllte Aqueduct and Canal World Heritage Site



## We're working with Warwickshire County Council to develop a Warwickshire Waterways Strategy — a five-year framework to 2026 to promote the county's rivers and canals

- The final surface dressing was applied last summer to the new Coventry Canal Towpath from Coventry Basin up to Hawkesbury Junction, including new branding, signage and wayfinding information

### Ellesmere Yard

Plans are underway to sustainably develop the historic Ellesmere Yard maintenance site alongside the Llangollen Canal on the Welsh borders.

Ellesmere Yard has a unique heritage status as one of the

UK's best-preserved canal yards. Dating from the early 1800s, it was originally the office and workshops of the former Ellesmere Canal Company, established by canal pioneer Thomas Telford.

Described as a 'vanishingly rare example of a canal maintenance yard', the site remains a working yard and operational base for the Trust colleagues and volunteers, with a variety of buildings, many of which are listed. They include small workshops, dry dock, offices, and the iconic Beech House, and a forge which is home to a heritage blacksmith.

The Yard is now falling in disrepair and work can no longer keep pace with the rate of deterioration. We're looking for ideas from the local community and canal users to inform the sustainable development of the Ellesmere Yard into a new waterside destination that makes the most of the area's heritage and potential.

## Warwickshire Waterways Strategy

Warwickshire has a rich canal heritage with four canals covering 104 miles with over 100 miles of towpath. Its 121 locks include the 'Stairway to Heaven' at Hatton, where 21 broad locks raise the canal by 146 feet.

Working with Warwickshire County Council we've launched a Warwickshire Waterways Strategy — a five-year framework to 2026 to promote the county's rivers and canals as valuable community assets, based on three main themes: health and wellbeing, a sense of place and economic vibrancy. We'll be talking with community groups and stakeholders, including the Environment Agency and Shakespeare's England, to develop a detailed action plan.

Key elements include:

- A survey of the county's towpaths to identify and prioritise improvements to improve accessibility and connectivity
- Attracting investment and funding to carry this out
- A film to promote the county's waterways
- Educational packs and marketing campaigns

# Community engagement



in Wolverhampton as a way of connecting people from the community who are struggling, feel isolated or simply want a space to socialise

## Let's do it!

Outdoor enjoyment is essential to our wellbeing — it's why we're known as the waterways and wellbeing charity. Encouraging people to enjoy the opportunities for exercise, sport, fun and games along our canals is one of the most important reasons we're here. As we gradually emerged from COVID-19, we put this into practice with our **Let's** community engagement and activities programme.

Key highlights include:

- In Birmingham we set up a new Let's Walk activity with Broadway Health Centre. Every week one of the practice doctors joins us as we walk along the canal in Ladywood. Not only is it great exercise, but people also have the chance to speak with a local GP
- Let's Paddle sessions have taken place on the canal at Perry Barr, Icknield Port, Aston and Camp Hill as part of the #GettingGamesReady

programme for the Birmingham 2022 Commonwealth Games. At the time of writing, 331 people have attended 10 sessions

- We ran four Let's Fish events in Walsall and one at Titford Pools in Oldbury, with 56 participants altogether. We are also forming a local angling group in Birchills
- We held our first LGBT+ Let's Walk and Sparkle along the canal

## Community roots

Our Community Roots programme, supported by the players of People's Postcode Lottery, is now in its third year and operates in the Coventry, Walsall, and Sandwell areas. The idea is to get local people involved with their local canal.

As part of the programme, we organised a bell boating session for ladies from the local community who often feel isolated and are not used to participating in outdoor activities. Working in partnership with the Sewa Echo group we organised a canal clean and vegetation clear-up along the Walsall Canal, making it ready for



some summer flowers  
seed planting.

We organised a canal clean using a bell boat on the Tame Valley Canal, and a litter pick with the Prince's Trust along the Walsall Canal which collected eight bags of rubbish.

Community Roots volunteer activity has also included:

- Towpath Task Forces in Coventry and Hawkesbury Junction, where the iron bridge has had all its bricks repaired or re-laid by Towpath Task Force volunteers and the wooden footbridge over the stop lock has also been repaired
- Painting the weighbridge office and the white hoardings in the Coventry Canal Basin. Volunteers have also carried out towpath repairs and helped install new signage
- New interpretation boards have been installed around the region by volunteers assisting operational colleagues
- The International Asian Christian Federation has begun cleaning up at Leicester Causeway
- Good Gym continued their regular runs and the Big Clean assisted a local action group in a 24-hour litter pick which included sections of the Coventry Canal to raise money for Samaritans
- Members of the Lions Club and Coventry Big Clean supported the floating market festival in the basin, acting as Covid marshals and greeters on both days

### More volunteer heroes

It's no stretch of the imagination to say that our volunteers are crucial to the work of Canal & River Trust. Over the past year they have given a remarkable over 167,000 hours of



their time to help keep our canals and rivers safe, attractive and accessible for all. For example:

- Our volunteer lock keepers in Wolverhampton have been helping with grass cutting and strimming and supporting boats through the busy lock flight
- Line painting has been completed at the disabled car park at the Trevor Basin visitor centre in North Wales. This should help disabled visitors park more safely and encourage other visitors to park in the larger car park
- Volunteers at Fradley Junction have been busy repairing and repainting fences
- In Stoke our volunteers have worked with Barlaston Parish Council to carry out towpath repairs along the Trent & Mersey Canal

2022 presents a unique opportunity for volunteers — helping make our canals #GamesReady in advance of the Birmingham 2022 Commonwealth Games.

With over 1.5 million people expected to visit the West Midlands region for the Games, we've asked local people to volunteer with us and help us to build a legacy for the future by getting involved, whether as

games volunteers, working with our **Let's** community engagement and activity programme or helping keep the canals clean by supporting our #PlasticsChallenge.

### Learning on the water

With school visits finally back on, our new floating classroom Tucana is now fully kitted out for teaching and learning. Based at Coventry Basin, it's proving a great help to our Explorers team, who work with 5–11-year-olds, as they deliver education sessions on the water.

For the first floating classroom session in September, we worked with local partners supporting the City of Culture programme to lead a STEM workshop with our Explorer volunteers. Artist group **Imageer** led an art workshop, and the **Big Clean Up Campaign** guided the class on a litter pick. It was a great success and a fabulous example of partnership working.

'Towpath Tuesdays' see the Tucana being used for two themed visits: Schools Plastic Challenge and Junk Monsters, and STEM - Building Canals. We also run virtual workshops in Water Safety, Introduction to Canals and Rivers, and Build a Canal, which are great preparation for a real-life visit to the floating classroom.

## Stoke City National Citizenship Service

15 young people from National Citizenship Service spent an entire week working on social action projects around Stoke. The team painted over a graffiti-covered wall, cleaned the footbridge across the canal at Etruria and went on a mammoth litter pick from the BET 365 stadium to Westport Lake — and back again!

## Stories of Birmingham coming to life

**Birmingham Heritage Week** tells the stories of the city in a myriad of different ways. In 2021 we joined in with two very special events: **The Forgotten City Canal Walk** — a walking tour of the Farmer's Lock Flight taking you right under the city centre and **Discover Birmingham's Oldest Canal Maintenance Yard** — a look round Icknield Port yard, along with a heritage boat trip.

## Business support

Early in 2022 we entered into a new partnership with financial services group PwC UK as part of a national agreement with the business. To mark the partnership, PwC UK helped us plant fruit trees at Galton Valley Pump House in Smethwick, one of our Green Flag areas. Volunteers from PwC UK cleared the land and planted 12 heritage apple trees, as well as clearing overgrown vegetation and picking litter.

Other new corporate partners include GL Events — which is supplying stadium infrastructure for the Commonwealth Games, Pets At Home, SCC and Clarion Housing.

## Paying it back

A new national partnership between the Trust and the Probation Service was launched by Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice and Deputy Prime Minister, The Rt Hon Dominic Raab MP on a visit to Perry Barr, where he saw offenders working on a stretch of towpath along a popular route to Alexander Stadium.

On this stretch alone, offenders completed more than 15,000 hours of unpaid work along the towpath during 2021. So far, the scheme has been responsible for improving access and towpaths in the region at Northbrook Street, Ocker Hill and Icknield Port Loop.

## A warm welcome to the canals

Welcome Stations are based at key locations around the canal network, manned by volunteers who are there to answer questions about the area, host events, sell vital gear and attractive gifts, and provide information about supporting and volunteering with the Trust. After an understandably short season in 2020, our venues all opened in



April 2021, and have been available for customers through to October, including helping at some key seasonal events.

A new Welcome Station was established in the Weighbridge Office at Coventry Basin in the time for the start of the Coventry UK City of Culture and has been well used as a hub for the many events and activities based there this year. We've also taken the opportunity to run informal 'pop-up' Welcome Stations at busy locations such as Delph Stables, Wolverhampton Flight and at Diglis Basin at different times through the year.



Volunteers at the Welcome Station in Stourport have been helping modernise the station, designing and painting the room for the 2022 season, as well as setting up a retail area as requested by customers. We've also seen a refurbishment at Hawkesbury Junction, so we can welcome visitors back inside this year. Meanwhile Hatton has joined Stourport, Fradley, Harecastle and Birmingham in being able to provide retail for our customers, including boating keys and cards, chandlery and gifts.

We're looking forward to developing new Welcome Stations in places such as Stratford-upon-Avon in 2022, reopening our refurbished regional front of house at Cambrian Wharf in Birmingham, and particularly to creating a main hub for our Games activity at Perry Barr yard this summer.

### #StayKindSlowDown

The canal towpaths have been busier than ever during the last couple of years, with double the pre-pandemic level of visitors last summer. More crowded towpaths combined with speeding cyclists could be a recipe for disaster, so we tested a portable speed detection device to remind cyclist to #StayKindSlowDown and to be considerate and take it easy when travelling along the canals.



The device was trialled at popular locations including the Worcester & Birmingham Canal at Selly Oak, central Birmingham at Cambrian Wharf, along the Birmingham Main Line Canal at the Wolverhampton Lock Flight, at Coventry Basin, and along the Trent & Mersey Canal in Stone, Staffordshire.

The trials were successful, and the devices are being rolled out at hotspot areas across the region.

### Orchard inspired mural at Snow Hill Bridge

A new mural Brink Art inspired by our record-breaking canal orchard project has been completed under Snow Hill Bridge at the end of Farmers Lock Flight in Birmingham City Centre. Senior Ecologist Paul Wilkinson was involved in the planning along with our Heritage & Environment Manager Audrey O'Connor.

### Colourful displays in Wolverhampton and Birmingham

Students from the University of Wolverhampton have helped turn a stretch of the Old Main Line Canal in the City into a corridor of colour, planting a variety of spring bulbs

along the Wolverhampton Lock Flight near the Science Park. The bulbs will flower into a variety of colours, brighten up the towpath and attract a range of animals and insects to the canal.

20 students helped with the project and the Students' Union hopes their efforts will blossom into a more long-term volunteering partnership with the Trust over the coming years.

Volunteers have also been braving the winter weather to plant bulbs in Birmingham's city centre as part of the **Wild in Birmingham** project, as well as planting trees and native plants to green up the urban canal in and provide a haven for wildlife.

### Supporting our boating customers

Our boating customers are some of the most important users of our canals, but lockdown and the reduced activity of the past couple of years has given rise to more concerns than usual about maintenance and the state of the canals. We've seen a rise in complaints about leaks, canalside trees, overrunning works, and the condition of our customer service facilities, particularly in areas where boaters were locked down over the winter.

We're working to improve the situation and held boating customer surgeries online, at the Bratch, Hawkesbury Junction, Market Drayton, Diglis and at Fradley Junction to better understand their concerns. Whilst these and attendance at popular events such as the IWA's Festival of Water have helped open up conversations, a lot of the work continues to take place behind the scenes, with our teams helping boaters in need on a daily basis, working with a wide range of agencies.

# Raising our profile

It's been a busy year for public engagement in the West Midlands. Our brand awareness figure has remained steady at 65%, and we've had some great media coverage and interviews and very positive conversations with MPs and political leaders from across the region.

## In the news

- **Our #PlasticsChallenge**, the issues of fly tipping plastics and the threat from microplastic pollution were all covered by BBC Midlands Today and the Birmingham Mail in separate interviews with our environmental scientist Charles Hughes and area operations manager Aaron Atwal, filmed along the Walsall Canal. They also spoke with ITV News on the issues
- **Steph's packaging lunch:** Steph McGovern covered the story of litter on the Walsall Canal on her Channel 4 show, Steph's Packed Lunch
- **A potential radio audience of 1.69 million listeners** heard our senior ecologist Paul Wilkinson kick off our national #ActNowforCanals campaign with interviews on several stations
- **Living on the canals:** volunteers Ralph Gaskin and Paul Roache spoke with BBC Radio CWR and the Stratford Herald about life as a volunteer lock keeper on the canals in Warwickshire
- **On Black Country Day, July 14th**, our partnerships and external relationship manager Richard Preston spoke with



**Black Country Radio** about canals in the Black Country, why they are so important to the history of the region and the role they play today

- **Birmingham Live and BBC Radio WM** spoke with heritage advisor Elizabeth Thomson about the restoration and opening of Birmingham Roundhouse
- **Our partnership launch with the Police Cadets** was discussed by community engagement manager Gavin Passmore with **ITV Central** on the canal in Wolverhampton
- **Staying Afloat** tells the story

of people who are moving onto boats because they cannot afford to buy on land. It featured our license support office Glyn Bumford who talked about the importance of communication when people run into trouble

## Political visits

- **West Midlands Mayor Andy Street** paid a visit for the launch of the Community Green Grants programme, an event also joined by local group, the Community Connect Foundation. In a separate visit, the Mayor led a litter pick along

the Worcester & Birmingham Canal from the National Indoor Arena to University Station as part of a campaign to get the region looking its best in advance of the Birmingham 2022 Commonwealth Games and events to mark the Queen's Platinum Jubilee

- **Councillor Lezley Picton**, the Leader of Shropshire Council and the portfolio holder for Communities, Place, Tourism & Transport, visited the Montgomery Canal in Shropshire to see the ongoing restoration and meet the Shropshire Union Canal Society volunteers who are actively restoring the channel at Crickheath.
- **Bridget Jones, deputy leader of Birmingham City Council** and City Director Rob James came to visit and discuss developing a joint strategy for the canals in Birmingham
- **Jo Gideon, MP for Stoke-on-Trent** joined businesses and organisations in a discussion about the reopening of the Stoke to Leek railway line which closely follows the Caldon Canal and provides a number of opportunities for the tourism and visitor economy
- **Mike Wood, MP for Dudley South** invited us to attend a jobs fair at Merry Hill Shopping Centre in Dudley to help encourage local people to consider a career with the Trust. Mr Wood also joined volunteers on a boat to clear litter on the Stourbridge Canal
- **Nicola Richards, MP for West Bromwich East** and **Eddie Hughes, MP for Walsall North** visited Kickstart trainees in their constituencies
- **Transport Minister and MP for Aldridge-Brownhills, Wendy**



**Morton**, visited Pelsall Junction, to find out more about the Green Recovery Challenge Fund

- **Health Secretary and Bromsgrove MP, Savid Javid** met with Trust Chief Executive, Richard Parry on the Worcester & Birmingham Canal
- **Mark Pawsey, MP for Rugby** met with regional director Adnan Saif to discuss opportunities in his constituency and Jane Stevenson, MP for Wolverhampton North East met with us and Severn Trent to try and resolve a long standing drainage issue on the Shropshire Union Canal
- **Robin Walker, MP for Worcester** visited the Unlocking the Severn project and returned in January to find out about the Safer Streets partnership in the City
- **Theo Clarke, MP for Stafford** visited Great Haywood and Shaun Bailey MP for West Bromwich West dropped in at the Tipton community fun day
- **Michael Fabricant, MP for Lichfield and Chair of All Party Parliamentary Group for Waterways** also met with Richard Parry at Fradley Junction to discuss a range of subjects including HS2

## Social Media



# 6,800+

Our regional Twitter Account @CRTWestMidlands has grown to over 6,800 followers.

## Face to face with our customers

It's been great to see people in real life again after so much virtual engagement. We've enjoyed meeting canal users in person at our customer surgeries, reopening our regional front of house at Cambrian House in Birmingham, and our Welcome Stations around the region. We've also attended events such as the Etruria Boat Gathering in Stoke and Nowka Bais in Birmingham.

# Issues



## Ivy House embankment repairs

The Caldon Canal in Stoke-on-Trent has suffered from leakage in the Ivy House embankment section for several years. Repairs finally started last November, with a section of canal drained by our engineers so they could investigate the source of the leak, before relining repairs were started. However, several problems arose — mainly due to the amount of silt in the canal, which required a redesign of the works and led to delays to the anticipated reopening. However, the work should be complete this summer.

## Hazelhurst Bridge is reborn

After discussions with Historic England and the Staffordshire Moorlands District Council

Conservation Officer we've now agreed a plan on how to rebuild Hazelhurst Bridge on the Caldon Canal. The design options for the rebuild were discussed in close consultations and it has been decided that the bridge would be rebuilt in traditional style using as many of the existing bricks and stones as could be salvaged.

Subject to all the necessary planning permissions, the work is expected to start this summer with the bridge reopening in early 2023.

## Trees felled in storm damage

Following storms Dudley, Eunice and Franklin, we had to clear 151 trees across 48 locations in the West Midlands, at a cost of around £65,000. This has also had an impact on the winter vegetation works, as teams had to move from planned works to reactive works.

## Pollution, damage and repairs

- Factory Locks number 2 on the Birmingham level had a lock beam burned out by vandals but, thanks to the efforts of the local team, it was back up and running within 48 hours
- Lock 17 on the North Stratford Canal had a badly leaking cill which was causing water control problems. The team held a morning stoppage and managed to refit the old cill and minimise disruption to boaters
- We have fitted a new fender to the bottom end of Filance Lock on the Staffordshire & Worcestershire Canal, as the old fender had rotted off and left the fixings poking out the wall
- Due to the warmer weather aquatic weed continues to grow at a rapid rate and volumes have gone up by over 50% on some canals in comparison to the amount normally cleared every month. This is having a significant effect on the overall cost for maintaining the Bradley Arm
- The team removed a burnt-out car on the Wyrley & Essington Canal in Walsall, which was picked up and removed safely within 24 hours
- In November our environmental and operations colleagues led an investigation into a significant pollution incident on the Anglesey Branch of the Wyrley & Essington Canal in Brownhills



**Aquatic weed continues to grow at a rapid rate and volumes have gone up by over 50% on some canals in comparison to the amount normally cleared every month**

- Over 1000 litres of oil was tipped down a drain at Brierley Hill, Dudley, and ended up in the canal, taking four days to clean up
- Lock 10 on the Trent & Mersey Canal needed an emergency repair after the lock gate came dislodged from its cup
- A broken lock beam at Lock 2 on the Titford Canal had an emergency repair after it had almost snapped in half. The lock beam has had a brace fitted and will be replaced in 2022/23 winter programme of repairs



# Wildlife habitat improvements

## Record-breaking community orchard for West Midlands canals

Together with local communities, we're creating the longest community orchard in the world, lining the canals from Wolverhampton to Worcester with a wide variety of fruit trees including rare and historic varieties.

The 50-mile orchard will provide a valuable habitat for wildlife as well as fruit for the community. It will follow the route of the Staffordshire & Worcestershire, Old Main Line, and Worcestershire & Birmingham canals, passing through Birmingham.

The ten-year project will see the planting of around 3000 trees, including cherry, plum, apple, and pear. It will also feature rare

historic varieties such as the Tettenhall Dick Pear, originating from the Black Country but almost completely lost, along with exotic species such as peach, apricots, figs, persimmon, loquats and pomegranates to take account of the warming climate.

The city locations have already been planted with species from around the world, and we have been gifted eight Kazakhstan apple trees – known as the mother of all modern-day apples — from Alys Fowler, the well-known Birmingham-based gardener and writer.

The trees will be planted at the back of the Trust's towpaths, filling gaps in established hedgerows, as well as creating 'pocket orchards' of between 10 and 300 trees on adjoining land. One such orchard has been planted this year along

the Worcester & Birmingham Canal at Tibberton.

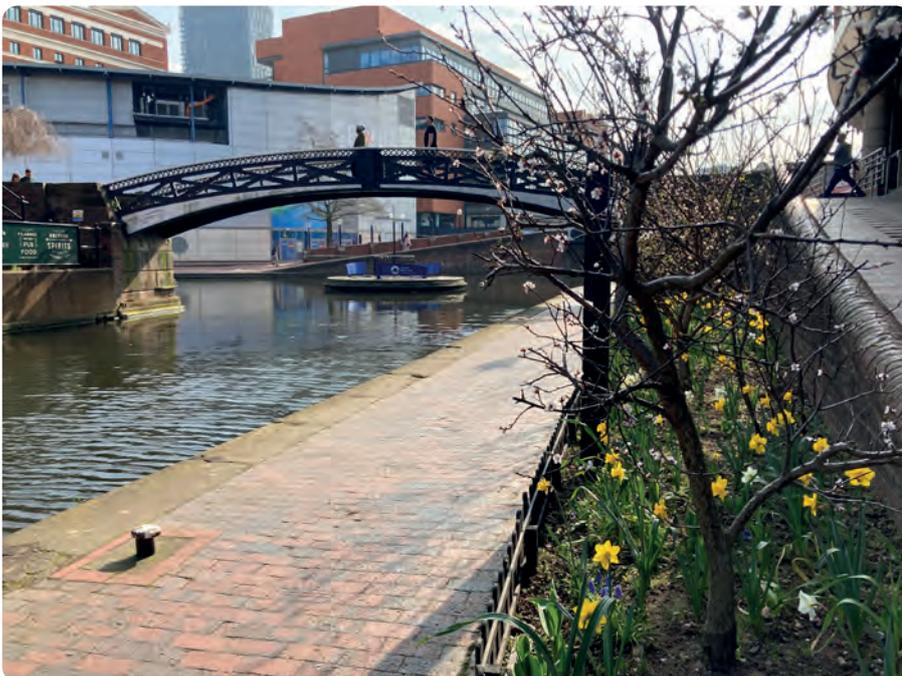
The project has been partly paid for through a grant from the Green Recovery Challenge Fund. We will be relying on the support of volunteers to help propagate and grow the trees, plant them along the canals and help care for them as they grow through the early years. Eventually, boaters and local people will be encouraged to have an urban fruit celebration day at the end of summer, harvesting the fruit and taking home what they pick.

## Tackling invasive species

As part of invasive species week last summer, we launched a four-year project in partnership with Severn Trent's Great Big Nature Boost scheme to eradicate invasive species along 180 miles of canals across the West Midlands.

The £600,000 project is the largest of its kind in England and Wales and will focus on getting rid of the Giant Hogweed, Japanese Knotweed, Floating Pennywort and Water Fern (Azolla), which can all damage historic structures and prevent navigation. They can also reduce the quality of the water and availability of habitats, severely impacting the canals and their native wildlife.

Invasive species are second only to habitat loss as a threat to native plants and wildlife. Many of them have been inadvertently introduced by members of the public and boaters who have unknowingly transported small



plants and seeds along the canals. We spend £700,000 every year dealing with the problem.

We are using traditional chemical treatments to address the issue, as well as trying new techniques including biological treatment for water fern as well as specialised mechanical boats to tackle floating pennywort. We're also trialling innovative, environmentally friendly technology such as Root Wave's Electricide, a technique that uses electricity to heat the plants until they boil and die, and Weedingtons hot foam spray, which smothers the plants to stop them growing and spreading.



### Working with nature to preserve the network

Many of our canals pass through important geological and nature sites and carrying out work here takes a little extra planning. This was the case last year when we worked on managing the vegetation at two cuttings on the Grand Union Canal in Warwickshire.

**Shrewley Cutting** is a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) and we had to gain permission

from Natural England to carry out work there. The sandstone rocks extracted during the original excavations for the cutting revealed several nationally significant fossils, including those of shark fin spines and footprints from reptiles from the Triassic Period. The nearby tunnel is also an important roost for several bat species that can often be seen at dusk during the summer months.

Over time, brambles, ivy and self-set elder trees have gradually covered up the impressive Arden Sandstone strata of the cutting. To maintain its SSSI status, vegetation needs to be removed to expose it. Volunteers from Warwickshire Geological Conservation Group (WGCG) are working with us to clear some of the more accessible areas adjacent to the towpath.

**Rowington Cutting** was also cut through Arden Sandstone and is located alongside a County Wildlife Site. Over the years, this area has also yielded several significant fossil finds, many of them discovered by the Reverend Peter Bellinger Brodie, the vicar of Rowington Church between 1853 and 1897, who is depicted in an impressive stained-glass window in the church.

A number of wildlife species are found alongside this section of the Grand Union Canal including badgers and birds. To avoid the bird nesting season, WGCG volunteers spent a day early in the year clearing ivy growth, dead leaves and soil from selected areas of the rock strata to expose the more interesting sections of the sandstone formations. The

presence of a badger sett meant that the work had to be restricted to areas that would not disturb its residents.

At both sites, the WGCG is also producing information to contribute to displays about the sites at Shrewley and Rowington Village Halls which will explain and expand on the rock formations that can be seen in the cuttings.

### Water vole decline

Maps produced by our specialist GIS team have shown a 80% decline in the number of water voles living on the West Midlands canals over the past 30 years. This is partly due to the degradation and fragmentation of habitats and demonstrates the urgent need for habitat restoration and the connection of existing sites to address the problem. To address the decline, we're working on a project to deliver environmental enhancements along our canals. We hope that by creating and improving wildlife corridors we can link up water vole colonies, encourage them to breed and boost their numbers.



Credit: Jack Perks

# Working in partnership with:



# With support from:







# Canal & River Trust

Making life better by water

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## Thanks to all our partners & supporters

It is impossible to list all the statutory and voluntary organisations, community and partner groups, corporate supporters, funders and individuals who work with us to deliver projects and activities and to maintain and care for our waterways. But our thanks go to all of you that have supported us over the past two years, and we look forward to working with you in the future.

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