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1. Campaign for properly funded waterways
2. Provide a voice for you
3. Help improve your local waterways
4. Defend the waterways from unwelcome development
5. Give practical financial and political support for waterways restoration
6. Provide expert advice for waterway managers and restoration groups
7. Organise restoration holidays for young people
8. Provide over 5,000 days of volunteer labour each year
9. Arrange affordable insurance for waterway organisations
10. Enable greater appreciation of the waterways through education and experience
AGENDA
The Column of the National Chairman

Since our very early days IWA has worked hard and very effectively to persuade politicians of the importance of our inland waterways to the country. With a general election in May we have a good opportunity to influence politicians and have produced a Waterways Manifesto for branches and members to get their prospective MPs to sign up to. Politicians love a photo opportunity and if that results in local or national press coverage for the waterways, so much the better. Please encourage your candidates to sign up so that we can record their support on our website.

Navigation Committee has been looking at how the Environment Agency navigations have been fairing since Canal & River Trust was set up in July 2012. EA’s navigation function did not get the funding protection CRT has and is subject to the significant and ongoing budget cuts suffered by Defra and the Agency as a whole. There is less money being spent on navigation maintenance on EA waters. We are aware of a number of locks under EA’s control that, despite the best efforts of the local staff, are not or have not been available for navigation. This is simply unacceptable and we are putting pressure on the EA to address the situation. The problems are mostly in EA’s Anglian Region whilst the much higher profile River Thames has yet to suffer any long-term closure problems.

All our inland waterways are important and we must not allow closures to go unchallenged. The long term implications are frightening and it is most disconcerting there are still politicians who would happily close waterways.

IWA continues to believe that with appropriate funding the EA navigations should be transferred to CRT at the earliest opportunity. The All Party Parliamentary Waterways Group supports our view but its membership will change after the General Election so the importance of getting our message across to prospective MPs is very high. Our waterways have always benefited from strong cross party political support, so let’s make sure we keep it that way by getting as many candidates as possible to support our Waterways Manifesto.

Waterway Recovery Group is an essential part of what IWA does to benefit our inland waterways and I was absolutely delighted that George Rogers, one of WRG’s most active volunteers, received the Prime Minister’s Points of Light Award (see News pages). This award recognises outstanding volunteers who are making a change in their community and inspiring others. Well done George, and also all our other volunteers who make such a difference to the wellbeing and future of our inland waterways. IWA aims to work in a constructive and pragmatic way, and to receive such high level recognition is excellent news.

Funding WRG is a major part of the Association’s expenditure that we can only do with the support that you give us through your membership fees and donations. So thank you for making all this possible.

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Aurora
62ft Semi trad, rear galley, 6 berth, July 2014
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8% Share, £8,995

Dawn Treader
61ft Semi-trad, rear galley, 4 berths. March 2014
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**IWA Grant to Chesterfield Trust**

IWA has awarded a grant of £15,000 to Chesterfield Canal Trust, to help fund the restoration of narrowboat *Python*. The grant has come from the Keith Ayling Bequest. Keith Ayling was a former long-standing chairman of Chesterfield Canal Trust and the purchase of *Python* was his last project for the Trust.

Major works are needed to preserve the integrity of the historic narrowboat, owned by Chesterfield Canal Trust, which cannot operate in its current condition. *Python* is used by the Trust as a publicity vehicle to promote the work of the Trust (the volunteer crew engages with members of the public and boat owners at canalside events), and to help maintain the Chesterfield Canal. Further volunteer activities were planned but have been postponed until the necessary works can be carried out.

To fund these works Chesterfield Canal Trust applied for a grant from the Heritage Lottery Fund in 2014; the Trust also planned to use any money awarded to equip the boat with interpretation materials about its history. Despite support from many, including IWA and Canal & River Trust, the application was unsuccessful and the project stalled, with *Python* remaining out of service.

However, although IWA does not normally make grants for the restoration of individual vessels, it considers the Trust’s project to be of significance in engaging the public with the waterways, so has agreed to make a grant from the Keith Ayling Bequest to help fund the work. A total of £15,000 will be given to Chesterfield Canal Trust to fund the essential work on *Python*.

Gordon Harrower, IWA National Treasurer, said “IWA is pleased to be able to support the restoration of *Python*, and the Finance Committee believes that this is a fitting use of the Ayling Bequest. Keith was passionate about the Chesterfield Canal, and *Python* was the last project in which he was involved. This project will help to continue the great work of the Trust and *Python*, which engages the wider public with and enables everyone to enjoy our waterways.”

Robin Stonebridge, Chair of Chesterfield Canal Trust, said “Keith Ayling would be thrilled that *Python* is being given a new lease of life to promote the waterways he loved, and attract more people to the pleasure of using our waterways. Hundreds of people have taken *Python* to their hearts over the last few years, and she has been sorely missed at events over the last year. The support from IWA is a tremendous boost to getting her up and running again, and we intend to keep her busy for many years to come. The crew who have spent so much time restoring *Python* are eager to ensure she is up and running in 2015.”

**David Edwards-May to Run London Marathon for IWA**

David Edwards-May has been selected to represent The Inland Waterways Association in the 2015 London Marathon.

David was chosen from a selection of strong applications that were received after IWA invited volunteers interested in taking on the challenge of running the marathon. IWA’s place in the 2015 London Marathon was won in a charity ballot held earlier this year.

Having successfully completed the Canalathon, a 33-mile endurance challenge along the Monmouthshire, Brecon & Abergavenny Canals, David wishes to test himself further and is eager to run his first full-length marathon. He has loved running from an early age and has always wanted the opportunity to compete in the London Marathon, as it is one of the largest and most prestigious running events in the UK.

David aims to raise £5,000 for IWA through sponsorship and is already hard at work training for the event, having undertaken several 11-mile runs over the past few weeks.

If you would like to support David in his efforts to raise funds for IWA’s campaign and restoration work, you can sponsor him:

- **Online** - visit David Edwards-May’s Virgin Money Giving fundraising page, a link to the page being available on www.waterways.org.uk/marathon
- **By Phone** – Call 01494 783453 extension 611
- **By Post** – Send a cheque payable to ‘The Inland Waterways Association’ to London Marathon, The Inland Waterways Association, Island House, Moor Road, Chesham, HP5 1WA.

If you would like more information about David, how to support him or if you wish to follow his progress see www.waterways.org.uk/marathon or contact Toby Gomm on 01494 783453 extension 611.
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Heritage Lottery Fund Award for Grantham Canal

The Canal & River Trust has announced that a volunteer-led project to restore a series of locks on the Grantham Canal has received a £830,500 grant from the Heritage Lottery Fund.

The five-year project will be managed by CRT and Grantham Canal Society. The restoration work is to be carried out by volunteers from GCS with support from IWA’s Waterway Recovery Group and Grantham College.

The project’s aim is to bring locks 14 and 15, near Woolsthorpe, back into working order for the first time in around 80 years and to lay the groundwork for the restoration of a further two locks (numbered 12 and 13). As part of this, a tailored training programme will be available, offering volunteers the chance to gain important heritage skills and restoration knowledge, which they can use on other sections of the canal.

In addition to the physical works, the project will also aim to raise awareness of the canal’s built and natural heritage and encourage more people to explore it through festivals, walking trails, archaeological activities, on-site information and online resources.

The two locks were designed by renowned engineer William Jessop and many components and design features are largely intact from their original construction over 200 years ago. Sadly, since the canal was closed to boats in 1929, the locks have become overgrown and have collapsed in some places. Now volunteers will be helping to reverse the decline by rebuilding collapsed lock walls, clearing out earth and debris from the lock chambers, installing new wooden gates and refilling with water.
With the Northampton Festival of Water taking place on the Nene over August Bank Holiday weekend (see Events & Festivals, pages 14-15), the Environment Agency is generously offering two for one licences for boats attending the event, and Canal & River Trust plans to make a similarly attractive offer for boaters too.

To mark the launch of Northampton Festival of Water, Festival President, David Blagrove MBE presented the Tiller Pin Trophy to the Leader of Northampton Borough Council, Councillor David Mackintosh, at a special ceremony at the Nene Whitewater Centre on Friday 21st November 2014. The trophy remains with Northampton until handed over to the next town hosting a major IWA festival.

Councillor David Mackintosh, Leader of Northampton Borough Council, said: “For generations the Nene was a source of wealth as our town’s industries imported materials and exported products along the canal network. Today our riverside is a wonderful place to relax and the Northampton Festival of Water is set to be a wonderful celebration of our town’s connection with the Nene. It is a real honour to receive the Tiller Pin on behalf of Northampton and start the build up to what is set to be a fantastic event with something for all ages, and well worth a visit to Northampton.”

IWA is carrying out a joint survey with the Historic Narrow Boat Club to gather information about winding holes on the inland waterways.

Winding holes, otherwise known as ‘swinging areas’ on rivers and commercial navigations, are purpose built widenings in a waterway to allow boats to turn in order to change direction of travel along the waterway. In the original canal era, winding holes evolved at places where working boats needed to turn (other than at canal junctions and arm entrances), usually in the vicinity of factories or wharves. Now, in the ‘leisure’ canal era, traffic flows – in both pattern and total volume – bear little or no resemblance to the more predictable flows for which the original winding holes were created and located.

The project has asked boaters to report, via a survey, on winding holes in the areas they know, or have boated recently, in order to identify where winding holes have been lost (or the size of boat that can use them has been reduced) as a result of siltation, overhanging vegetation, prohibiting notices or chains, or permanently moored boats. It has also asked for suggestions for new winding hole locations.

The information gathered through the results of this survey will allow a greater understanding of the geographical spread of any problems relating to winding holes, and will enable both organisations to lobby navigation authorities about these issues.

The Port of London Authority, which regulates boating on the tidal Thames, has forbidden hire boats on the Tideway, following an incident in which a narrowboat was swept onto Dove Pier near Brentford.

PLA is unhappy that some companies permit hirers to do the London Ring, or even navigate from Brentford to Teddington without prior experience of tidal waterways. Hire firms have been asked to cease these operations until further notice.

Extra regulations for all narrowboats were introduced over the last ten years, including requirements for marine VHF radio for craft over 45ft and an understanding of navigational requirements. An exception is made for transits between Brentford and Teddington, provided the Vessel Traffic Service is alerted by phone at the start and end of the passage.

IWA has asked PLA to justify its actions, and discussions on the topic are continuing.
Keeping Our Waterways Alive

IWA is looking for nominations for its annual National Awards. Nominations are invited from members, branches and regions and should be emailed to awards@waterways.org.uk by 31st March. Nominations should state which award is appropriate and how the nominee’s contribution relates to the award criteria. The names and contact details of the nominator and nominee should also be provided.

The award categories are as follows:

Cyril Styring Trophy – for an IWA member who, in the opinion of trustees, has made an outstanding contribution to further the Association’s campaign. This is the Association’s premier award.

John Heap Salver – for an IWA member who, in the opinion of the trustees, has made an outstanding contribution to raising funds for the Association.

Richard Bird Medal – for members of the Association whose efforts and support are considered to have brought significant benefit to the Association over a sustained period.

Christopher Power Prize – for a person, society or trust who has made the most significant contribution to the restoration of an inland waterway.

Vivian Bulkeley-Johnson Salt – for the person or organisation who, in the opinion of trustees, upon a recommendation from IWA’s Inland Waterways Freight Group, has made an outstanding contribution to the furtherance of commercial waterways transport in the United Kingdom.

Award nominations will be considered by an Awards Panel nominated by trustees, and recommendations made to trustees for final approval.

IWA National Award Nominations

Points of Light Award for George Rogers

Last November it was announced that George Rogers, a volunteer from IWA’s Waterway Recovery Group, is the latest recipient of a Points of Light Award. The award recognises outstanding volunteers who are making a change in their community and inspiring others.

Over the past five years, George has volunteered on over 40 week-long WRG Canal Camps, as a volunteer, assistant, cook and leader, restoring the waterways of England and Wales. He has also helped plan major canal restoration work on several projects from the Cromford Canal in Derbyshire to the Swansea Canal in South Wales.

Prime Minister, David Cameron said “Through his work, George is helping to safeguard the heritage and culture of Britain’s canals for future generations, which is of great importance. He truly deserves this Point of Light award.”

George said “Restoring the canals has long been my passion, and it is somewhat humbling to be recognised for something that I enjoy so much. The short and long term benefits to the other volunteers and the wider community make it a truly rewarding experience. This award also represents my firm belief that all volunteering is equally important - whether it be restoring the canals, building a school in Africa or mowing an elderly neighbour’s lawn; volunteering is the bedrock of society and I only wish I could do more.”

Walking for WRG in Warwickshire

Come and take part in IWA’s eight-mile sponsored walk on Sunday 22nd February, supported by IWA Warwickshire Branch. The walk aims to raise vital funds to purchase minibuses for IWA’s Waterway Recovery Group while promising to be a great day out in wonderful surroundings.

You will travel from Lapworth Village Hall into the Warwickshire countryside along the towpaths of the Stratford-on-Avon and Grand Union canals and across tranquil fields and country lanes. The route will lead eight miles in a circular route, taking you back to the village hall for rest and refreshments. The walk will begin at 11am, but you can arrive and sign-in from 10am. There will be marshals along the route to point the way and a couple of country pubs to stop at for lunch or a mid-walk snack.

The minibuses are essential to the work that WRG carries out, transporting equipment and people to the various restoration sites across the country. After providing years of service the existing minibuses need replacing, each costing more than £25,000. By booking onto the walk and helping to raise money, you will be supporting IWA’s vital work restoring derelict waterways and bringing them back to life.

Places are £5 per person and under 16s go free. Young people under 18 must be accompanied by an adult. To book your place you can register online: www.waterways.org.uk/iwalk or phone 01494 783453 extension 611. You will then have the challenge of raising as much sponsorship as possible to support WRG.

Once your place is confirmed you will be sent an information pack giving further information about the walk, directions, a map of the route, a kit list, sponsorship guide and a sponsorship form template.

To find out more about the walk visit www.waterways.org.uk/iwalk or contact walk organiser Toby Gomm at toby.gomm@waterways.org.uk or by telephone as above.

IWA is looking for nominations for its annual National Awards. Nominations are invited from members, branches and regions and should be emailed to awards@waterways.org.uk by 31st March. Nominations should state which award is appropriate and how the nominee’s contribution relates to the award criteria. The names and contact details of the nominator and nominee should also be provided.

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Award nominations will be considered by an Awards Panel nominated by trustees, and recommendations made to trustees for final approval.
Badly affected by the economic depression domestic waterways freight in 2013 declined once again but the statistics for that year, published in December 2014, showed that while coastal and one-port traffic was down the internal barge traffic showed a welcome increase accounted for by two regions.

According to the PLA, traffic between Thames wharves was 5.3 million tonnes, a dramatic two million tonnes increase on the previous year mainly accounted for by 1.8 million tonnes of Crossrail tunnel spoil, 65,000 tonnes of scrap from Erith to Tilbury and increased movement of aggregates to waterside concrete batching plants and construction sites. This increased traffic almost certainly continued in 2014 and the barges of Thames Shipping, S Walsh & Sons, GPS Marine and Bennett & Sons are reported to be very active. Known to many as the Geminus from her MSC grain days and now as Thames Shipping’s Polla Rose, in a two-week period in November she completed nine aggregates trips from Clubb’s Wharf, Gravesend, to Battersea.

On the Manchester Ship Canal the container traffic triggered by Tesco in 2007 with the 160 TEU Daisy Dorado grew from 3,000 units in 2009 to 20,000 in 2014, when in July a 360 TEU ship was introduced with the suggestion that further tonnage may be needed. With Peel Ports now controlling the ports of Liverpool and Manchester and the linking MSC, further integrated growth is likely. Ships bringing grain in to Ceresar often load scrap outwards, Port Cheshire at Ellesmere Port is being developed as a multimodal logistics hub and Salford will be a tri-modal inland facility. All this must be good for traffic on the MSC. Ports are no longer called ports but it is important to make sure that waterways are not ignored in the logistics revolution.

In the North East there has been an overall decline in the traditional barge traffic with Lafarge’s withdrawal from Besthorpe-Whitwood movement of aggregates but Brett Aggregates is interested in barge movements from Shellford on the Trent. A very positive commitment to barge transport by Exol Lubricants means it receives two or three tanker barges a week from Hull at their Rotherham blending plant – a total of 75 million litres a year, each barge the equivalent of 18 road tankers; this is a wonderful example of the numerous advantages which waterborne freight can offer.

Leeds is the hub for the varied Yorkshire industrial area and the City Corporation is taking a positive approach to wharf safeguarding and assured sites for handling cargo would encourage greater use of the city’s waterway links and provide an alternative to congested road transport. There has already been a trial handling of steel and sea-dredged aggregates, and containers are also possible cargoes each with the need for fit-for-purpose craft such as being introduced by our European neighbours. The Commercial Boat Owners Association (CBOA) is very active in that area and in April held a meeting at Leeds with a working barge trip to view some of the wharf sites being considered. There must be potential here that we cannot afford to neglect.
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25th
Marsden Cuckoo Day Festival
Huddersfield Narrow Canal.
(www.marsden.org.uk/events)

MAY
2nd
Horning Boat Show
Norfolk Broads. Broadland Village.
(www.horningboatshow.co.uk)

2nd-4th
IWA Canalway Cavalcade
Regent’s Canal. Little Venice, London. Canalway Cavalcade is a unique waterways and community festival arranged by IWA at Little Venice in London since 1983. There will be a boaters’ gathering, a pageant of boats, trade shows and stalls, bands, competitions and a wide variety of refreshments on sale. Admission is free. Opening times: 10am-6pm Saturday and Sunday, 10am-5pm Monday.
(07979 676461, www.waterways.org.uk)

2nd-4th
St Richard’s Boat & Car Festival
Droitwich Canals. Vines Park, Droitwich Spa. (www.strichardsfestival.co.uk)

2nd-4th
Norbury Junction Canal Festival
Shropshire Union Canal.
(www.canalrivertrust.org.uk)

8th-15th
BCN Explorer Cruise A
(www.bcnsoociety.co.uk)

9th
Montgomery Triathlon
(www.montgomerycanal.me.uk/triath2015)

9th-10th
Coombeswood Canal Trust Open Weekend
Dudley No2 Canal, BCN. Hawne Basin.
(www.hawnebasin.org.uk)

15th-17th
BCN Summer Rally
BCN. Engine Street, Oldbury
(www.bcnsoociety.co.uk)

16th-17th
Rickmansworth Canal Festival
Grand Union Canal.
(www.rwt.org.uk/festival)

Moira Canal Festival
Ashby Canal. (www.moiracanalfestival.co.uk)

23rd-25th
Crick Boat Show & Waterways Festival
Leicester Section, Grand Union Canal. The major trade show of the year. Ticket hotline 01283 742970.
(www.crickboatshow.com)

23rd-24th
BCN 24-hour Challenge
BCN. (www.bcnsoociety.co.uk)

30th-31st
Etruria Canals Festival
Trent & Mersey Canal. Etruria Industrial Museum, Stoke-on-Trent.
(www.etruriacanalfestival.org.uk)

30th-31st
IWA Trailboat Festival
Lancaster Canal. Westmorland Show Ground, Crooklands, Cumbria. Organised in conjunction with the Lancaster Canal Trust, the Festival will be part of the ‘County Fest’ show, an annual canalside event. There will be activities for the whole family with a boaters’ day on the Monday including a visit to Hincaster Tunnel, and perhaps an opening of the restored stretch of the Lancaster Canal.
(www.waterways.org.uk)

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(email: info@overwatermarina.co.uk)
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5th-7th
Beale Park Boat & Outdoor Show
River Thames. (www.bealeparkboatandoutdoorshow.co.uk)

6th
Leicester Riverside Festival
Grand Union Canal, Leicester Section. Bede Park.
(www.leicester.gov.uk/riversidefestival)

13th
Reading Water Fest
(www.reading.gov.uk/whatson)

14th-15th
Longwood Boat Gathering
Daw End Branch, BCN. (www.bcnsociety.co.uk)

18th-28th
Lymm Festival
Bridgewater Canal. (www.lympn.org.uk)

20th-21st
Foxton Locks Festival
Leicester Section, Grand Union Canal.
(www.foxtonlocksfestival.co.uk)

27th-28th
Braunston Historic Narrowboat Rally
Rally of surviving Braunston and Grand Union boats with twice daily parade, trade exhibitors, canal societies, music and a wide range of Saturday evening entertainment. A more comprehensive preview of this event will be published in the next issue of Waterways.
(www.braunstonmarina.co.uk)

JULY
3rd-5th
IWA Ware Boat Festival
River Lee.
A full range of events including boat parade, boat handling, boat jumble, lots of stalls and a fine atmosphere guaranteed along Ware’s attractive riverside.
(www.waterways.org.uk)

4th-5th
Stratford River Festival
River Avon.
(www.stratfordriverfestival.co.uk)

4th-5th
Welsh Waterways Festival
Montgomery Canal. Organised by the Montgomery Restoration Trust in conjunction with IWA’s Shrewsbury District & North Wales Branch and the Friends of the Montgomery Canal, this event is centred on Welshpool but will also feature a wide variety of activities and attractions along the entire length of the canal.
(www.makingwaves2015.co.uk)

11th-12th
Evesham River Festival
River Avon. Workman Gardens.
(www.eveshamriverfestival.co.uk)

16th-19th
Russell Newbery Register Rally
BCN. Titford Pumphouse.
(www.rnregister.org.uk/rally)

18th-19th
Thames Traditional Boat Rally
River Thames. Fawley Meadows, Henley-On-Thames
(www.tradboatrally.com)

AUGUST
8th-9th
Blisworth Canal Festival
Grand Union Canal.
(www.blisworthcanalfestival.co.uk)

16th
LUCS Canal Fun Day
Union Canal. Manse Road Basin, Linlithgow.
(www.lucs.org.uk)

29th-31st
IWA Northampton Festival of Water
River Nene. Waterfront, Beckets Park. IWA is holding a major waterways event on the River Nene over the August Bank Holiday weekend. It is being organised jointly by the IWA Events team and Northampton Branch with the main aim of celebrating the 200th anniversary of the opening of the Northampton Arm in 1815. The Festival of Water will also promote Northampton’s riverside and seek to encourage more people to use the river for recreation. Up to 200 boats are expected in the marina and along the riverfront, and there will be a wide range of entertainment and attractions both afloat and ashore.
(www.waterways.org.uk)

SEPTEMBER
5th-6th
Shackerstone Family Festival
Ashby Canal. (www.shackerstonefestival.co.uk)

6th
Angel Canal Festival
Regent’s Canal. Islington, London.
(www.angelcanalfestival.org)

11th-18th
BCN Explorer Cruise B
(www.bcnsociety.co.uk)

11th-13th
Black Country Boating Festival
Dudley No2 Canal. Windmill End, Netherton. (www.bcbf.com)

12th-13th
Village at War
(www.friendsofcanalmuseum.org.uk)

12th-20th
Saltaire Festival
Leeds & Liverpool Canal. Roberts Park.
(www.saltairefestival.co.uk/event/saltaire-festival-2015)

19th-20th
Tipton Canal & Community Festival
Birmingham Old Main Line. Neptune Health Park and Coronation Gardens.
(www.tiptoncommunityassociation.com)

19th-20th
Huddersford Heritage Gathering
Coventry Canal. Lichfield Cruising Club, Huddersford Junction. (www.lhcrt.org.uk)

OCTOBER
4th
Banbury Canal Day
Oxford Canal. (www.banbury.gov.uk/Banbury-Town-Council)
How did you first get interested in inland waterways – was it as a hire boater?
My family lived close to the Rushall Canal. As a child my grandfather would take me in my pushchair to Lock 3 to watch the horse boats come through the lock.

When I was about 10 years old one of my father’s friends invited our family for an afternoon trip on his small cruiser. My younger brother and I were dressed in our Sunday best and told to sit still and behave. We were bored at not being allowed to do anything and so vetoed the whole idea of a family holiday on the canals. I eventually had my first canal holiday in 1979 on a hire boat. There were four of us – one of whom had had a previous canal holiday when he was a student.

Where did you go on your first trip?
We hired a boat for a week from Countrywide Cruisers in Brewood and went all the way to Llangollen and back. We started at first light and continued until dusk. At Grindley Brook I got into conversation with two American couples who had hired a boat for the whole summer to see the country. I remarked that it must be very expensive to do that. “On the contrary” they said, “no hire car fees, no hotel bills, no packing and unpacking, stay in the middle of towns and cities like Oxford, London, Warwick, Stratford-on-Avon, Worcester and York whilst you visit the sights and theatres and you also meet some lovely people on the way.” It set me thinking.

My next holiday was with Anglo-Welsh from Aynho. This time we took my parents to try to make up for depriving them of 20 years of canal holidays. My father died the following year.

Tell us about some of your other early experiences.
Just before my first canal holiday, we spent a weekend at a hotel (near Bromsgrove) learning about canals. The first evening, there was a slide show. I was amazed when people recognised places such as Fradley Junction, Hawkesbury or Braunston from the slides. We walked a stretch of the Droitwich Canal and came across a Waterway Recovery Group work party and I was once again surprised to find how many people knew each other and how friendly everyone was.

What were your first impressions of the canals?
On my first holiday, it took three days for my brain to slow down sufficiently to enjoy the slower pace of travel. Once I understood that it was the travelling rather than the arriving that mattered, I loved it.

Did you go on to become a boat owner?
Yes, my husband was initially against the idea of wasting money on a boat. However, we went on another course ‘Understanding canals’, 28 lectures and four field visits run by Lewis Braithwaite from the University of Aston Extra Mural Studies. In this series of lectures, he explained the history, how the canals were built, importance of water supply and
thousands of other useful bits of information which would have taken so long to acquire if left to our
own devices. He also brought crates of books to the lectures which he loaned out. At the first lecture, he
gave a quick résumé of all the books. The first one I
borrowed from him was L. T. C. Rolt’s Narrow Boat.
Lewis said that it was this book that gave a flavour
of the pre-war canals and had started the whole
movement which saved the canals. This was the
first time I remember hearing any mention of IWA.
As a result of learning about Birmingham Canal
Navigations at these lectures, four of us decided to
hire a boat for a long weekend from Brummagen
Boats (based on the Oozel Street Loop) in the
centre of Birmingham to explore the BCN. This
was November 1981. When we went to look at the
hire boats, our eye was caught by a neat little boat
(38ft) which was for sale. It had scarcely been used
and was a price we could afford. To my immense
surprise, my husband suggested that we bought this
boat. I agreed immediately.

When did you first join IWA?
In the summer of 1982. We went to a boat festival
in Birmingham and someone I vaguely knew
threw me was running the IWA recruiting
stand for Birmingham Branch of IWA. She said that
we really ought to join if we were passionate about
the canals – so we did.

What prompted you to join the Association?
Seeing Carol working on the IWA stand and not
wanting to be seen not to do something that I was
told I ought to do! I have never regretted the decision.
I converted to a Life Member before I retired.

What activities have you been involved in over
the years?
When I first joined IWA, there was no Lichfield
Branch and we had to travel 25 miles across
Birmingham to Quinton for meetings. When it was
announced that there was to be a Lichfield Branch,
we went to the first interest meeting. Volunteers were
asked to come forward if they would be willing to
serve on the committee. I was amongst the volunteers
who made up the first Lichfield Branch Committee.
I became the Meetings/Social secretary. This was a
perfect chance to invite people who I thought had
written interesting articles to speak at our meetings.

When did you first become Lichfield Branch
Secretary?
I have never been Lichfield branch secretary. I first
became the branch chairman in August 1990 and
stayed in post until March 1997. When I became
chairman, I had to learn a lot of things very fast
but soon built up a strong committee who did most
of the work. Until I got the hang of the role and
learned what I should be doing, someone else ghost
wrote all my official letters!

As an example, the second Public Inquiry for the
M6 Toll Road was held in 1994/95. Most of the hard
work was done by Phil Sharpe who led the IWA/
Lichfield & Hatherton team. We were successful in
protecting the line of the Lichfield & Hatherton canals.
In March 1997 I became the West Midlands
region secretary (until 2004).

I rejoined Lichfield branch committee in 2010
and became chairman for a second time in 2013. I
inherited an experienced committee and I have to
say that they do most of the work.

Is local membership at a healthy level?
Yes, but I am conscious that we must continue
to work hard to ensure that newcomers to the
waterways understand the importance of being in
IWA. Even if one does not always agree 100% with
what IWA says or does, it is the only organisation
which stands any chance of getting the ear of the
Government to get “wrongs righted”. If we work
together, to the best of our ability, we can achieve
more than all of us working separately.

What was your role in the recent Fradley/HS2
negotiations that came to such a successful
conclusion for the waterway movement?
I have to say that my role was very small compared
to the huge contributions made by people such as
Phil Sharpe and Gren Messham.

My role, as branch chairman, was to hear and
understand exactly what Phil Sharpe, our branch
planning officer, had been saying since 2011 about
the effect that HS2 would have on the canals in our
branch area but in particular the Fradley/Woodend
area. The fact that Phil had identified an alternative
route that would avoid this particular area seemed
worth drawing to the attention of IWA trustees to
get them to fully appreciate the damage to both
the canal and IWA’s reputation, should the original
plan for the railway go ahead.
Through my membership of the IWA Promotions & Communications committee, I still see the repercussions following the loss of the Ridgeacre Branch (in the 1990s) and the difficulties it still causes on our ability to recruit new IWA members. It seemed to me that it was important to strive our hardest for the HS2 route to be diverted away from the canal at Woodend.

Regret is not an emotion I want to live with. I would rather have tried my best and failed than not tried at all. Our success with the M6 Toll Road made me optimistic that we could succeed.

I am especially grateful to our national chairman, Les Etheridge, for hearing and understanding what we in Lichfield were saying. And Phil has committed many hours attending meetings with HS2, Staffordshire County Council, Lichfield District Council and the local parish councils. IWA national officers have been able to work closely with the Canal & River Trust to present a united front to HS2 and the Select Committee.

There has been criticism that IWA has not fought to stop HS2 completely. In my view, this is outside the remit of the charitable status of IWA and not anything that we could justify spending our time and money on. If our members wished to join the Stop HS2 campaign, we have certainly not discouraged them.

You must have been very satisfied at the outcome – although concerned perhaps at possible negative implications for the Lichfield & Hatherton Canals restoration project?

Yes, we are very relieved with the outcome. Once we had seen the engineering study which IWA & CRT commissioned, common sense dictated that HS2 should follow that route especially as it would save them money.

I am concerned on the effect that the decision for HS2 to burrow beneath the A38 will affect the Lichfield & Hatherton Canals restoration project. (It is important to note that the proposal from Staffordshire County Council to lower the whole route of HS2 around Lichfield is not as a result of our route suggestion which started north of the A38 and which would not have had negative implications on the L&H had not the Staffs CC scheme been adopted in addition.)

I understand that HS2 Ltd are now working closely with L&H to overcome this problem.

HS2 aside, what other activities has the branch been involved in recently?

We have held a number of work parties to put in new moorings and vastly improve the towpath and access to the canal by the aqueduct in Rugeley, assisted by Lichfield Lions and some of the local residents.

We also organise regular guided walks. Forty people came to the one on New Year’s day along the Ashby Canal (held in conjunction with Ashby Canal Association).

We have meetings once a month with speakers between September and April; interested parties can visit www.waterways.org.uk/lichfield for full details of our activities.

With your IWA activities keeping you busy, do you still get time to go out boating or walking the canals from time to time?

You have barely touched upon my IWA activities yet! I am a member of one of IWA’s national committees, the Promotions & Communications Committee. I am responsible for managing several of the national IWA recruitment and sales stands at events such as Canalway Cavalcade. I also help set up and run IWA training workshops such as the ‘Energising Member Experience’ workshop to be held on 28th March in Peterborough. This is for anyone interested in helping to both recruit and retain IWA members by finding ways of ensuring that the member experience is positive and fulfilling; visit: www.waterways.org.uk/iwa/calendar/event/view?id=1633.

I also manage the purchase and distribution of IWA clothing.

And yes, I do get quite a lot of boating but not as much as I would like!

Where do you like to go?

I go wherever I’m needed for IWA purposes. It would be nice to go somewhere different for a change!

Do you have a favourite waterway – or a favourite holiday – that stands out from all the others?

I spent five months boating the canals in France in the summer of 1989. It seems like a lifetime ago and I should love to have the opportunity to do more.

Finally, what is the best thing about being a member of IWA?

Firstly it is probably the people that I meet and get to know when I am working on the IWA stands.

Secondly, it is knowing that I have the opportunity to help protect the waterways. I feel that I have had so much enjoyment from the waterways that being an active member of IWA is a way of giving something back and trying to ensure that future generations have the opportunity to get as much enjoyment from the waterways as I have done.

“
I feel that I have had so much enjoyment from the waterways that being an active member of IWA is a way of giving something back."

ABOVE LEFT: Helen with campaigners for the re-routing of HS2 at Fradley.
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Sometime in 1943 three young ladies, who had earlier learnt acting together at the London Theatre Studio under Michael St Denis, were living in a flat in Beauchamp Place in London’s fashionable Knightsbridge. They had enjoyed a brief theatrical career before war intervened and, being over eighteen and not mothers, they had been compelled to sign up for war work in some way, the choice was theirs – and joining the estimated seven million British females who did.

Together they got a job at the Hoover factory, in west London, which was now making components for the aircraft industry – principally the Avro-Lancaster bomber which had come into service in 1942. The work was arduous and tedious, but it allowed the girls to live in central London, and not go into uniform, or work on remote farms.

One day one of the flatmates spotted an advertisement in The Times calling for female volunteers to work narrowboats on the Grand Union Canal. This was due to a combination of the much-increased wartime carrying on the canals and the crew shortages caused by some of the younger boatmen being called-up to work on landing craft and the like. In response to their letter of enquiry, the girls would have received the standard reply, which included the following: ‘When considered proficient and able to operate boats without supervision, trainees will be appointed to boats of their own, a crew consisting of three women, there being no objection to friends going together.’ It seemed an ideal escape for the three of them and the girls decided to go for it. But the advertisement cautioned, ‘Only women of robust constitution and good health should enter this employment.’

Sonia later recalled, ‘We were all quite physically fit and thought we could manage it. We didn’t know anything at all before we went to be trained. I don’t think any of us had even seen a canal.’ At her interview with Rita Currie at the Ministry of Transport in Berkley Square, Sonia was shown her broken fingernails and told of the tough work required, working very long hours for three weeks without a day off. (Rita Currie had worked less than two months on the canals before she managed to get this desk-job, which caused much resentment amongst the other volunteers. After the war, she married the Duke of Grafton as his third and final wife.)

Sonia & Co now went for their initial training run with the great Kitty Gayford. She had co-founded the female canal volunteers in 1942, who in 1944 were given a special badge to wear with the initials IW – for Inland Waterways – but gave rise to the nickname Idle Women. The girls joined Kitty on her pair of boats at Bulls Bridge near Uxbridge. The foursome went to load in the London docks before heading north to Birmingham. Then it was a loop back to Coventry to load coal and so back down to London, a round trip of about three weeks, after which they were on their own.
As they had passed this brief training period, in which they had learnt only a fraction of what the boatmen had taken a lifetime to learn, they were put in charge of a pair of Grand Union Canal Carrying Company (GUCCC) boats, the _Moon_ and the _Phobos_ – which were to become at once their home and workplace for the next two years. Sonia commented, ‘I found the work exhausting but liberating. Perhaps because I was an orphan with a nomadic upbringing, I thought the boatmen had something I hungered after. I soon made friends with the boaters and the people along the bank.’

By 1943 German bombing raids were few and far between, mainly concentrated on coastal ports, so there were none of the dangers of going into the London docks or Birmingham and Coventry that the working boatmen had faced in 1940-41. It was only from mid-1944 onwards with the arrival of the V-1 and later V-2 flying bombs that things became somewhat dangerous again. Sonia took it all in her stride. She recalled that when once in Limehouse Basin she watched the flying bombs going off and the resulting fires and her thinking it was ‘a great light show’. Casualties amongst the boatmen in WWII were very light and only two boatmen are known to have died – none of them female volunteers – only one of whom came close to being killed, when a flying bomb exploded beside City Basin, Islington and badly damaged her boat with her in it.

The greatest danger was falling in the canal, especially when working through the locks at night in winter, when they and the boats were covered in frost. Sonia fell in the locks at Hillmorton, near Rugby in just this way. ‘I was wearing Dutch wooden shoes of quite a large size and certainly wider than the gunwale. I have never forgotten it.’

Only a handful of women volunteers survived the initial training and lasted more than a couple of trips. In all something like 120 women volunteered, but only 30 or so made it through. It is therefore a great credit to Sonia & Co. that they were part of the small band that did survive. At best it is estimated that only 11 pairs of boats were operating at any one time, compared with the hundreds being run by the working boatmen, so the scale of the Idle Women’s contribution was quite small. Former working boatwoman Laura Carter recalled she hardly noticed them, and felt they had been given far greater credit than the endeavours of the working boatmen who never had a day off – whereas the Idle Women were able to take off one week in four.

However the Idle Women did leave a lasting legacy in that four of them published books on their experiences and other diaries are coming to light. The boatmen were an illiterate community apart, with a life that had changed little in 200 years, but was to fast disappear after the war. These accounts together give a unique insight into the boatmen’s way of life.

One of the reasons Sonia & Co did survive was the great help and kindness they received from the working boatmen, and in particular George Smith.
SONIA SOUTH
Sonia Mary Fleming South, to use her full maiden name, was born in New York in 1919. She appears later in 1919 on a passenger list travelling to England with her parents and two brothers. After her arrival in England, her father then rather disappeared from her life, and what became of him is now unknown.

Her mother was Kathleen Louise Matheson South, née Boxhill, who was born in Barbados to a well-to-do colonial family. Kathleen led the life after WWI of the English equivalent of the Great Gatsby set, travelling a great deal, and appearing on numerous shipping passenger lists. Her later life was lived in much reduced circumstances in England, where she was cut off from her family, and worked as a matron in a boarding school. Towards her end, one of her two sons was accidentally killed on his motorcycle whilst serving with the army in France in the early months of the war. She finally died in 1942. Tom Rolt wrote in Landscape with Figures: ‘Sonia was an orphan. She had never known her father, while her mother died just before the war in tragic circumstances, which affected her outlook on life profoundly.’ (Rolt is incorrect about the date of Kathleen’s death.)

Because of her parental position, Sonia was rather taken under the wing of her kindly maternal Catholic grandfather, who was a doctor in Barbados. He decided that the best thing for her was to send her off to England aged 10, to attend the very fashionable newly opened Farnborough Hill Convent, where she would get a good education and meet the right sort of ‘gals’. The good nuns of the French Order of Religious Christian Education had recently acquired the house where the Empress Eugenie, widow of Napoleon III had lived from 1880 until her death in 1920. A passenger list of 1929 records Sonia and her mother travelling from Barbados to England, but research has failed to find Sonia on any other. That trans-Atlantic crossing seems to have been a one-way ticket.

Sonia enjoyed her time with the nuns, and unsurprisingly learnt excellent French, as well as gaining a very good general education. Rolt described Sonia as ‘highly intelligent and much better read than I was’. That awareness of her knowledge and intelligence was felt by anyone who met her since. Her range of intellectual activities even in her nineties was quite astonishing. As an antidote to the good nuns, Sonia then went to the London Theatre Studio to be trained for the stage by Michael St Denis.

‘George and Sonia tied up alongside and came round to see us. All of us piled into the butty cabin. Much talking – Sonia has great plans for the amelioration of the boatpeople’s conditions.’

SONIA ROLT

- whom Sonia went on to marry in September 1945
- and his brothers. In her hand-written message read for her at his funeral, Sonia wrote, ‘He always welcomed the new and gained enjoyment and amusement from it. The trainee boat women of the time could vouch for his kindness and helpfulness.’

Just where George met Sonia, he could not exactly recall. But he does remember pulling the girls off the mud at some notorious bend, helping them here and there with engine problems, and meeting up in some of the canalside pubs and having drinks or dinner with them. Sonia would never talk in any detail about their courtship, which must have been very brief and intermittent, as both were working pairs of boats for the Grand Union Canal Carrying Company with little time for meet-ups. Sonia & Co continued canal carrying until the very end of the war, being paid off after completing their last delivery post VJ Day which was on 16th August 1945.

Then on 1st September, after a brief stay with friends, Sonia met up with and married George in the Northampton Registry Office, George having just unloaded in Northampton. George recalled that they were on their own and had to ask someone they met on the street to act as the witness. Once married they were immediately away on their boats.

No one amongst the remaining female volunteers seemed to know anything about it. Fellow volunteer Margaret Cornish wrote in her diary, in early September, ‘Daphne has told us the gossip, that Sonia is to marry George... We half envied her the superior status of mate to a real boatman.’ By then they were already married.

The marriage at first was a happy one, and Sonia saw herself not only as a proper working boatwoman but also someone to campaign on their behalf for better working conditions – something she had already started on in the Khaki General Election of July 1945, when she had covered her boat with slogans like VOTE LABOUR and A FAIR DEAL FOR BOATERS. Margaret Cornish, who continued working the waterways for some months after the war, noted in her diary of 6th December, ‘George and Sonia tied up alongside and came round to see us. All of us piled into the butty cabin. Much talking – Sonia has great plans for the amelioration of the boatpeople’s conditions. Everyone has left already.’ It was this radicalism that was to doom their marriage.
Meeting Tom Rolt

When and where Sonia met the author Tom Rolt and her future second husband is debatable, but it surrounds the making in the summer of 1944, of the classic Ealing Studios canal film *Painted Boats*. The outside scenes were filmed on location between Braunston and Stoke Bruerne in Northamptonshire, and the indoor scenes and close-ups at Ealing Studios. One of those indoor scenes was a recreation of the interior of the Boat Inn at Stoke Bruerne. For the extras, boatmen awaiting orders at Bulls Bridge, Uxbridge, were invited and then selected to participate, being paid about the same wages as when carrying. George, with his youthful good looks, was amongst the chosen, who were then bussed down the following day to Ealing Studios, having been told to dress as they did when working. At the studio they spent a whole day sitting around on the set, once they had been allocated a slot – George’s being by the bar. Then at a prompt they had to pretend to be jolly boatmen, drinking fizzy brown water, but being forbidden to smoke. George was pleased when he returned to Bulls Bridge to find he had orders for the next day. Thus ended his brief life in the limelight. It is questionable if he appeared in the final version. It is not possible to identify him with certainty.

George recalled that there were some 200 boatmen awaiting orders that day, including Sonia and her team, at which time she and George were apparently just good friends, though there was some attraction. In that funeral address, she says, ‘He was an amazing man, handsome, strong and well set up.’

The technical adviser to the film was one Tom Rolt, whose book *Narrow Boat* had recently been published, and because of it, he was invited to help as technical adviser to the filming. Tom had been married since 1939 to Angela Orred, which marriage had had its dramas – her wealthy father strongly objected to her going to live with a penniless author on a narrowboat, and cut her off financially and from her family. Angela that day was probably on their boat *Cressy* moored at Tardebigge, near Birmingham.

George remained convinced that all three protagonists – of what, for the next five years, would become a tragic love triangle between himself, Sonia and Tom – had met that fatal day at Bulls Bridge. Tom claims that he met Sonia and George a year later at the Birmingham premier of *Painted Boats* by which time George and Sonia were together, and probably married. Regardless of which day it was, it marked the beginning of George’s fatal encounter with Tom that was to destroy his short happiness with Sonia and his canal world as a working boatman. As Tom was later to write, ‘What caused Sonia and myself so much distress was the future of her husband, that simple, blameless man who could neither read or write.’

In about May 1946, George and Sonia left the employment of the GUCCC, which was already in steep decline and heading for nationalisation – the latter the very thing Sonia had campaigned for. They moved to canal carriers Samuel Barlows who were based at Braunston in Northamptonshire, and were principally coal carriers from the Warwickshire coalfields down to London and Oxford. The company escaped nationalisation and remained active long after the new British Waterways Board had closed all
its carrying operations. Sonia girlishly explained the move by saying that Samuel Barlows boats had the prettier livery.

George and Sonia were at first given a pair of boats, the motor Cairo, and ironically the butty Sunny Valley, which had been used in the film Painted Boats. George disliked the Sunny Valley for its poor handling, and it was changed for the Warwick, which pair George and Sonia worked for the four or so remaining years of their canal carrying. The boats were to make them famous in the canal world.

**Formation of IWA**

In that same year the Inland Waterways Association was formed with the principal objective of saving the canals, its co-founders being Robert Aickman and Tom. The headquarters was Aickman’s house-come-office in Gower Street, London. Tom invited Sonia to join the committee, which met during the winter months to represent the working boatmen. Aickman offered sleeping accommodation to those who had travelled far, which provided the ideal breeding ground for the problems that were to come.

In addition to their canal carrying, George and Sonia helped the IWA cause by bringing their spruced up pair of boats down to London in 1947 for the Festival of Britain, during which they ran boat trips on the Regent’s Canal. They were to repeat this at the first IWA National Rally at Market Harborough in August 1950, by which time both Tom and Sonia’s marriages were in trouble, and Tom had fallen out with the energetic but domineering Aickman.

In 1951 Tom’s wife Angela walked out on him leaving him on his narrowboat Cressy at Banbury, and going off to join Billy Smart’s circus. His canal world was falling apart. He canal cruised on his own, but the wooden Cressy was showing its age, and he finally abandoned the boat near Stone in Staffordshire and ‘moved on the bank’ as the old boatmen would say.

Things were also going downhill for George and Sonia’s marriages. He became more and more concerned by the constant flow of letters between his wife and Tom. In about April 1951, after unloading somewhere in London, George and Sonia had an enormous row at Bulls Bridge, and it was agreed they would take the empty boats back to Braunston where Sonia would leave. The journey was hasty and in almost total silence. They stopped half way up the Buckby Flight, where Sonia left most of her possessions in the cottage of a retired boating couple they knew. In helping her to unload, George was astonished by just how many books she had stored around the boats.

Then they went on down the locks to Braunston, where, at what is today the A45 bridge – then the Rose & Castle Bridge – Sonia stepped ashore in the bridgehole and walked up into Braunston where she had arranged to stay with a friend. George took the boats in tow on his own towards Sutton Stop, Coventry. He glanced back as he departed and saw Sonia walking up the hill into the village in the evening light. He would not see her again for another 44 years. George tried boating on his own, or with a mate, for another few months and finally gave it up. He disappeared into Crouch End, north London where it is believed he joined a former working boatman and found work as a building labourer.
Sonia’s New Life

After Sonia had left George, she soon met up with Tom and they quickly began their new life together, but away from the canal. Their first major project was saving the Talyllyn Railway, and there were many other extraordinary achievements, including saving the Cheltenham Literature Festival in the mid-1960s. Though Tom had almost left the English canals, and there is only one record of a later visit which was to the Pontcysyllte Aqueduct, he did continue to write extensively about them, including his Landscape with Canals, published in 1977, which covered his canal years up to 1951, but in which Sonia did not receive a single mention.

Tom died in 1974, after he and Sonia had only been together for 23 years, and she was only 53. She dedicated her remaining 40 years of life working for the causes they had been involved in together and many more. Canals dominated them, and she was, amongst others, a Vice President of IWA, President of the Commercial Boat Owners Association, and Patron of the Mikron Theatre Company. Away from the canal she was actively involved with the Society for the Preservation of Ancient Buildings, chairing their Education Committee for nearly 15 years. She was a member of the Newcomen Society, and an honorary member of the Vintage Sports Car Club. She was also involved with the Landmark Trust and the National Trust.

A change was to happen to Sonia’s life in 1993, when David Stevenson, who was Chairman of IWA from 1989 to 1994, persuaded the Council of IWA to reinstate as honorary members a number of former members who had been thrown out by the at times Putinesque co-founder Robert Aickman. One was Sonia, and she responded with conciliatory glee, and she was soon made a Vice President, and was very much in demand.

Sonia was to reward his foresight and friendship when in the spring of 2011, she invited him to join her and her two sons when she went to Windsor Castle to receive her OBE from the Queen – ‘for services to industrial archaeology and heritage’. Sonia was by then too frail to walk any distance, and attended the investiture in a wheelchair. She afterwards quipped about her condition: ‘I blame it on my seven years on the boats. I was never brought up to do that.’

In December 2012, she also asked David Stevenson to represent her at George’s funeral, and read a neatly hand-written message from her: ‘I am sad to think George Smith has gone. He was an amazing man, handsome, strong and well set up. The trainee boat women of the time could vouch for his kindness and helpfulness. I am sure these traits sustained him and persisted throughout his very long life. It will make him long remembered and spoken of. God Bless him!’

Sonia Rolt – known to many on the canals simply and affectionately as ‘Sonia’ – died peacefully in hospital on 22nd October, after a short illness at the age of 95. Her death has meant the passing of the last of the Idle Women who was still actively involved with the canals – the other two who are known to survive, and were once active, are now no longer so. Sonia by contrast, in her 96th year, attended the Hay Literary Festival in May last year, where the 70th anniversary of her late husband Tom Rolt’s great work, Narrow Boat, was celebrated in style. For those who knew her, her energy and passion for life never ceased to amaze, and remained with her almost to her end.

Amongst her tributes was one from her good friend Tom Grasso, President of the Canal Society of New York State: ‘She was the First Lady of the English canals.’

Sonia made many friends on the canals, not only in Europe, but also North America and Australia. Amongst her tributes was one from her good friend Tom Grasso, President of the Canal Society of New York State: ‘She was the First Lady of the English canals.’

Sonia is survived by her two sons. Her first husband George died in 2012. Her second husband Tom died in 1974.
The 88-year-old Sonia Rolt, with celebrity protestors, attending one of the March 2007 IWA demonstrations against Government spending cuts affecting the canal network.

ABOVE: Sonia on Nutfield in the opening parade of boats at the 2006 Braunston Historic Narrowboat Rally. At the helm is former working boat woman Laura Carter, who opened that year’s rally. Sonia attended three Braunston Historic Narrowboat Rallies in all.

ABOVE: Sonia in 2008 speaking after unveiling the plaque to the Idle Women outside the Stoke Bruerne Canal Museum.

BELLOW: Steaming up to open the 2007 Rally – Sonia Rolt on President.

LEFT: Sonia at the 2010 Cheltenham Literary with L/R Tim Coghlan, author of this article, and her sons Richard and Tim. At Sonia’s invitation Tim Coghlan and actor/canal enthusiast Timothy West gave a presentation on ‘Tom Rolt, Narrow Boat Man’ in centennial year of his birth. Tom and Sonia saved the Cheltenham Literary Festival in the mid 1960s.
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Whether or not Birmingham has more miles of canal than Venice, the city’s waterways certainly offer mile upon mile of characterful cruising and rewarding towpath walking.

In the first of a two-part article, we look at the canals of the city centre together with the BCN’s New and Old Main Lines...

ASTON AND FARMER’S BRIDGE LOCKS

The Birmingham & Fazeley Canal – historically owned by the BCN (The Company of the Proprietors of the Birmingham Canal Navigations) – provides an ideal introduction to the real character of the Birmingham Canal Navigations, especially its Aston and Farmer’s Bridge lock flights.

Boaters following the B&F will have noticed Birmingham approaching for a while, but it is at the four-canal Salford Junction – with the infinitely more complicated road interchange known as Spaghetti Junction thundering overhead – that the city really takes hold. Heading south-west here along the B&F gives an industrial, but well-maintained approach to the city. In 1919, curiously, this stretch of canal was used for a 100-seater waterbus service for Dunlop workers.

There are some overnight moorings at the residential community at Cuckoo Wharf if you’ve arrived too late to make it to the city centre by dusk.

The climb to the Birmingham plateau begins in earnest here with the 11 Aston Locks. On the left are the first sightings of old industrial canal arms under the distinctive BCN hump-backed towpath bridges. The sight of gas-holders and an attractive turn-over bridge at Ashton Top Lock, as the Digbeth Branch joins from the left, announces the start of the densely-packed Farmer’s Bridge flight. As the busiest locks on the BCN, they were operated 24 hours a day with gas lighting; the Tame Valley Canal was eventually built to relieve congestion here.

For some observers, Farmer’s Bridge may perhaps have lost some of its character through latter-day
redevelopment, but there is still much charm in its surroundings: a slightly chaotic amalgam of 2005 flats, 1970s office blocks, a mighty 19th century railway arch with soft modern lighting, a few remnants of industrial architecture, and chic modern restaurants – and as the National Indoor Arena hoves into view above a tangle of old canal buildings and modern offices, you have without doubt arrived in Birmingham the best way possible.

**OTHER APPROACHES**

Another popular way to approach Birmingham is from the south, via the long summit of the Worcester & Birmingham Canal (which in turn is joined by the Stratford).

Two lesser-cruised routes also deserve consideration. The Grand Union Canal’s suburban entrance to Birmingham, via Solihull, is often neglected in favour of the prettier Stratford Canal; but the route becomes more interesting once you reach the narrow Camp Hill Locks (surprisingly, a descent towards the River Rea) and Warwick Bar, with its old stop lock, Fellows, Morton & Clayton buildings and Banana Warehouse. The Birmingham & Fazeley’s evocative Digbeth Branch, comprising low tunnels and short ponds, completes the route to Farmer’s Bridge.

One last, now very little-used route is provided by Garrison (or Saltley) Locks, a Grand Union-owned link from the foot of Camp Hill to Salford Junction. Criss-crossed by railway bridges, it is worth considering in conjunction with the Digbeth Branch as an alternative route out to the B&F.

**City Centre Sophistication**

And so, having climbed to the 453ft level of Birmingham’s sophisticated city centre canals, you will reach Britain’s only canal roundabout. This is Old Turn Junction, outside the Barclaycard Arena and Sea-Life Centre. Turning south here (no one really minds which way round the roundabout you go) will take you right to the heart of things – to the pubs and bars of Brindleyplace, to the famous Gas Street Basin, and to the Worcester Bar, where the Worcester & Birmingham Canal eventually succeeded in making a direct link with the Birmingham Canal Navigations – for another 14 or so miles of lock-free cruising on the ‘453’.

The Worcester Bar is not one of the many smart new pubs that have appeared along the line of the canal through central Birmingham, but is the name long associated in boating circles with that short parcel of land, just 7ft wide, which the Birmingham Canal Company insisted must separate their canal from the new one proposed by the fledgling Worcester & Birmingham Canal Company in 1791. It was another 14 years before, in May 1815, agreement was finally reached for the Bar Lock to be created, long after most of the canal had been completed, and just a few
months before the first boats would be able to arrive from Worcester, following the opening of the canal throughout its entire length.

The paired lock gates at either end of the Bar were removed at the time of nationalisation of the waterways, enabling uninterrupted passage for the narrowboater today. In fact, the lock-free 453ft contour extends for another 14 plus miles to Tardebigge Top Lock, together with just over 11 miles to the locks at Lapworth from Kings Norton Junction along the Stratford Canal – a total of some 45 miles cruising in all without the need to raise a paddle!

The bar is now the centrepiece of Gas Street Basin, greatly gentrified in recent times, though still not quite “yet another city basin” thanks to the clutter of workboats and party boats. It was the Birmingham Gas Light & Coke Company, once located on the wharf here, that led to the name Gas Street Wharf – but little trace of this remains now.

Entertainment and retail therapy are the industries today. Brindleyplace has the better class of chain bar (Broad Street, above the short canal tunnel, is a little “livelier”), while luxury shops

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**LOOPING THE LOOP**

Back on the canal, those travelling towards Wolverhampton can prepare for a rather earlier example of redevelopment. When Thomas Telford built a new, direct line to supplant James Brindley’s original, winding Birmingham canal, the old meanders were left as loops – and some of them are still navigable today.

Oozell’s Street Loop, which leaves from Old Turn Junction, is now lined with tall ranks of gleaming new apartments. Here too is Sherborne Wharf which offers moorings and boater facilities before the Loop emerges back on the Main Line beneath one of the BCN’s stylish new footbridges.

The next left leads to Icknield Port Loop with an interesting mix of wharf buildings and, usually, an array of wildlife including ducks, swans and Canada geese. Cross the Main Line at the Rotton Park Junction crossroads for the Soho Loop, another of those secret BCN corners: in this case Hockley Port, with boater facilities and a residential boaters’ community.
BIRMINGHAM CANAL NAVIGATIONS

“The shopping malls and restaurants of Birmingham’s vibrant city centre lie within comfortable walking distance.”

ABOVE: Cruising past Brindleyplace.
LEFT: Worcester Bar and Gas Street Basin.
FAR LEFT: Icknield Port Loop.
BELOW: Colourful footbridge at Brindleyplace.

and restaurants – and the BBC – are to be found at the Mailbox, situated on land that was formerly occupied by the Midland Railway goods depot and later the Post Office.

Boaters can choose between a number of locations for 48-hour mooring here, and above Sheepcote Street Bridge on the Main Line, there is 14-day mooring for those who wish to stay longer. Cambrian Wharf, at the top of Farmer’s Bridge, also has a Canal & River Trust information centre.

The shopping malls and restaurants of Birmingham’s vibrant city centre lie within comfortable walking distance. The Bullring, once an eyesore, is for many the premier retail destination and there are other attractions too, including the new Central Library and famous Town Hall.
THE MAIN LINES
Between Soho and Tipton, the Birmingham Canal splits in two – commonly called the Old Main Line and the New Main Line.

The Old Main Line, or ‘Wolverhampton Level’, is Brindley’s early route following the 473ft contour. (In fact, Brindley’s 1769 route also had a very short 491ft summit at Smethwick, but this was – sensibly – eliminated by John Smeaton 20 years later.) The much straighter New Main Line, engineered by Telford, stays at the ‘Birmingham Level’ of 453ft until they finally meet at Factory Locks, Tipton.

The Old Main Line
The two main lines diverge at the three Smethwick Locks, which raise the Old Main Line to the Wolverhampton Level. Once reaching the top, boaters take the right-angled turn beneath the tight little roving bridge above the locks, along the short, dog-legged Engine Arm over the handsome aqueduct – one of three crossings of the 453 by the 473. The ‘high road’ – as it is often referred to – is at its best along this, the summit level past Smethwick through a predominantly green corridor, passing the wonderfully named Brasshouse Lane Bridge from where it is possible to view – and photograph – the juxtaposition of the Brindley and Telford levels, the scene completed by the architecturally satisfying Smethwick New Pumping Station.

The landscape gives way to the dramatic ‘undercroft’ of the M5 motorway, which dominates the canal for a mile. To the right are the three locks at Spon Lane. Now a short, rarely used route back to the New Main Line, they were built as part of the Wednesbury Old Canal and are thought to be the oldest navigable locks on the BCN – and perhaps the whole system?

The 473, meanwhile, veers left to cross the 453 on the Stewart Aqueduct, followed shortly by another turn to the Telford Canal.

Next stop along the Wolverhampton Level is at Brades Hall Junction where the Gower Branch provides a link to the New Main Line via the three Brades Locks, a single and staircase double – unique on the BCN. Carrying on along the Old Main Line, Tividale Aqueduct offers the final opportunity to visualise the height difference between the 473 and 453 contours. This is the point at which the Old Line passes directly over the Netherton Branch from the New Main Line towards Netherton Tunnel.

“Passing the wonderfully named Brasshouse Lane Bridge it is possible to view the juxtaposition of the Brindley and Telford levels, the scene completed by the architecturally satisfying Smethwick New Pumping Station.”
Like two friends reunited, the New and Old Main Lines continue their journey as a single entity above Factory Locks. Passing Deepfields and Horseley Fields junctions, the canal comes to the major industrial city of Wolverhampton. Reasonably secure (daytime) moorings are available close to the railway station and city centre, enabling boaters to explore the retail and tourist attractions close by.

Now just the Wolverhampton 21 flight of locks – densely urban at the top, more rural lower down – stand between the boater and the BCN Main Line’s meeting with the Staffordshire & Worcestershire Canal at Aldersley Junction.

**New Main Line**

Returning to Factory Junction, we head back to the city centre via the New Main Line; we first drop down the 20ft of the three Factory Locks.

This takes boaters from the Wolverhampton Level to the Birmingham Level, and the start of what is also known as the Island Line. Thomas Telford was the man chosen to engineer the bypassing of the old Summit Level, and the Birmingham New Main Line exhibits his engineering confidence as the wide channel, with a towpath along each side, strides straight ahead in a deep cutting, providing one of relatively few opportunities for the boater to sustain 4mph, and shortening Brindley’s original line by some seven miles.

As is so often the case, however, there is still much for the slow boater to enjoy – beginning immediately at Factory Locks themselves. Here, adjacent on the offside, is the historically important Tipton Gauging Station. Careful inspection reveals two arches through which boats would gain direct access from the canal for ‘indexing’ and ‘gauging’, means by which the tonnage carried by a boat could be measured through displacement.

Barely half a mile on, to the left, is one of those handsome BCN cast-iron roving bridges – this one made virtually on the doorstep, at the nearby Horseley Iron Works foundry. It spans Watery Lane, where the Toll End Branch once linked the Main Line east to the Walsall Canal near Ocker Hill. Here was the yard of Caggy Stevens, one of the last horse-boaters on the system.

The sparse surroundings make it easy to pick out canal heritage details along the New Main Line. As well as the cast-iron bridges, look for locked entrances to lost canal arms on either side: for example, the path of the Dixon Branch, heading north under the parallel railway, is obvious. Impossible to miss except at night! – are the low-level toll islands in the centre of the channel, their buildings sadly demolished.

After just a mile, Dudley Port Junction is reached, with the branch to Netherton Tunnel. Heading straight on towards Gas Street once again, boaters pass the Gower Branch on the right, and on to Pudding Green Junction for the Wednesbury Old and Walsall Canals through to the BCN’s Northern Reaches. For the short way to Bromford Junction and Spon Lane Locks, the New Main Line assumes the course of the Wednesbury Old Canal.

Passing beneath Stewart Aqueduct this time, next come the abandoned remains of the famous Chance’s Glass Works and the deep Smethwick cutting. Here is the ‘canal wonder’ that is the Telford-designed, fantastic Galton Bridge, completed in 1829, built at Horseley with a span of 151ft and reputedly then the largest canal bridge in the world. Next you see Smethwick New Pumping Station and the classic Engine Arm Aqueduct from below, before arriving at Smethwick Junction where the Old Main Line joins from the left via the three Smethwick Locks.

**Next issue**

In the next issue of *Waterways* we shall continue our exploration of the BCN by travelling north to the comparatively little used Tame Valley, Rushall and Walsall canals, as well as south to Tividford, Netherton Tunnel and Dudley.

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**BCN CRUISES**

The Birmingham Canal Navigations Society is holding two of its popular **BCN Explorer Cruises** in 2015, on 8th-15th May and 11th-18th September. The aim of the cruises is to encourage boaters to explore the waters of the BCN, with the additional security of cruising in the company of other boaters. Many enjoy the social side of informal gatherings and organised activities at the various designated mooring locations. For further details and application forms email bcnsexplorercruise@gmail.com or telephone 07709 165073 or 07510 167288.

**BCNS’s popular annual BCN 24-Hour Challenge** will this year take place on 23rd-24th May, starting at 8am on the Saturday and finishing at 2pm on the Sunday. The event is open to everyone with a boat licensed for use on Canal & River Trust canals. Historic working boats and pairs are welcome. Boats may start at any point on the BCN but should finish at the Bradley Canal workshop on the Bradley Arm. Participants may navigate for as long as they like during the 30-hour period up to a maximum of 24 hours. The winner will be the boat crew who amass the greatest number of points during the challenge, with additional points awarded for navigating lesser used waterways and correctly answering questions at certain places.

For additional information and application forms contact Mr R. Kenn, 14 Hollemeadow Avenue, Walsall, West Midlands W5 1JQ (01922 428644, bcnchallenge@gmail.com).

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**BCN Clean up Weekend**

Like most urban canals, the waterways of the BCN receive plenty of unwanted rubbish dumped by as yet unenlightened local residents. IWA stages regular clean-ups all around the BCN system in which volunteers are cordially invited to participate. The next such event takes place on the BCN Old Main Line at Smethwick Junction on the weekend of 18th-19th April – for full details see the WRG IN 2015 article on pages 36-37 of this issue.
WRG in 2015

Whether or not you have volunteered for IWA’s Waterway Recovery Group before, why not make canal restoration your New Year’s resolution for 2015. Get fit, make new friends, learn valuable new skills and get that much needed fresh air whilst volunteering to save Britain’s heritage.

In 2014 WRG travelled across England and Wales and spent 40,000 volunteer hours working towards the restoration of derelict waterways and we want to do even more in 2015. That’s where you get involved...

What do we do

WRG organises week-long working holidays designed at offering you valuable experiences of volunteering whilst giving something back. The working holidays, known as Canal Camps, run from Saturday to Saturday and cost as little as £56 which includes accommodation and food throughout the week. WRG’s volunteers are all aged 18+ and come from all walks of life – from students, doctors, to civil engineers and school teachers; no experience is necessary, just the drive to make the most out of your week.

Susan, aged 71, from Scotland

“A keen interest in water and boats led me to WRG Canal Camps all offering many different challenges. Last summer I spent a week in thigh-deep mud at Bowbridge Lock on the Cotswold Canals, as well two weeks on the Lancaster Canal driving dumpers and using a brush-cutter. Previously it was tree extraction on the Cromford Canal, and bank restoration and fence mending on the Basingstoke Canal – and of course the bonfires; there are always jobs for us at every level of interest. I use my existing skills, learn new ones, and enjoy working with people with a wide range of ages and backgrounds. It is a real change from my usual week!”

Angela, aged 49, from Italy

“Canal Camp life was the most interesting part of my experience because everybody was friendly and nice to me! From the beginning I didn’t feel different because I didn’t understand everything, to the contrary everybody always asked me if I understood what the leader said and they were always ready to help me. I loved the camp because I had the opportunity to get to know more about the UK people, their habits, hear different accents and discover the wonderful British countryside!”
WRG IN 2015

VOLUNTEER NOW!
WRG are busy planning their Canal Camps schedule for the summer months but we already have three Canal Camps and a clean-up arranged in the first half of 2015:

February on the Chelmer & Blackwater Navigation
Dates: 14th-21st February

To help maintain this beautiful waterway, which runs through rural Essex, WRG volunteers will be working alongside the Essex Waterways team, helping to clear overgrown vegetation from the towpath, improving access for all waterway users. As with every February Canal Camp there will be lots of scrub bashing, bonfires and other activities to keep you warm. Accommodation for the camp is on a barge moored in the tidal estuary, converted for residential use. Volunteer and help us to improve this active and vibrant waterway.

Easter on the Cotswolds
Location: Bowbridge Lock
Dates: 28th March-4th April and 4th-11th April

The Thames & Severn Canal and the Stroudwater Navigation (collectively known as the Cotswold Canals) once linked the Thames, through the Cotswold Hills, to the Severn. Although the canal closed over 50 years ago, the waterways are still part of the landscape with many sections still visible today in Gloucestershire and Wiltshire. The main focus of 2015 is to help the Cotswold Canals Trust restore Bowbridge Lock. Volunteers will undertake a wide variety of activities, including removal of damaged brickwork from the lock chamber walls and starting the rebuilding process. These will be busy, fun-filled camps which will give volunteers the chance to learn a wide range of skills.

BCN Clean-up
Location: BCN Old Main Line at Smethwick Jct
Dates: 18th-19th April

The Birmingham Canal Navigations Clean-up weekend is a great opportunity to have fun and meet new people whilst clearing shopping trolleys, tyres, bicycles and even more exciting treasures from the canal! This year WRG volunteers will be working on a new site on the BCN Old Main Line at Smethwick Junction and surrounding locks. In 2014 volunteers cleared over 40 tonnes of rubbish from the canal at Ashted Locks, Typhoo Wharf and Camp Hill Locks and it is hoped that this annual effort on the BCN & Black Country network will keep it from getting choked up with rubbish and becoming impassable for boats.

For more details, to book or to request a Canal Camps 2015 brochure, please visit WRG’s website www.wrg.org.uk, or you can call the WRG Head Office Team on 01494 783453 extension 604.

Will, aged 19, from Devon
“I volunteered for a week at Bowbridge Lock on the Cotswold Canals in August, to complete the residential part of my Gold Duke of Edinburgh Award. There was a mix of people volunteering; several like myself were DoEers, with a few ‘old hands’, some of whom had been working on the canals since before I was born! Unlikely though it may seem, one of my favourite parts of the week was the frequent involvement with copious quantities of mud and the things lurking in it! Besides that, there was a surprising but wonderful sense of camaraderie and friendship, which transformed what was essentially a week of moderate labour into a thoroughly enjoyable (although still fairly gruelling!) experience. I will definitely be returning for another camp when next I can and would recommend that anyone else considering it should go for it wholeheartedly.”

Make new friends
Learn new skills
Get fit
We publish on these pages a round up of just some of the recent activities carried out by IWA branches around the country. If your event isn’t included here, do let the Branch Campaign Team at Head Office know, ideally in advance so that they can assist with publicity and planning where that would be helpful. Alison Smedley (alison.smedley@waterways.org.uk) covers branches in the four regions in the north of the country, and Stefanie Preston (stefanie.preston@waterways.org.uk) is the contact for branches in the south.

**LEICESTERSHIRE BRANCH**

On Saturday 4th October 2014, volunteers with IWA Leicestershire Branch braved the wet and windy weather and headed to the Soar Navigation in Leicester for the branch work party.

The group was tasked with cleaning up the navigation, collecting rubbish from both the towpath and the water. Armed with litter pickers and grappling hooks the volunteers had collected 17 bags of rubbish and assorted larger items from the canal by lunchtime. By the end of the day this had increased to a full trailer load of rubbish including a bicycle and an office chair.

Leicester City Council and Canal & River Trust were there to help with equipment and support. The council provided three workboats, which were used to collect floating rubbish and access rubbish on the offside.

The team also had a chance to publicise what they were up to when Julie Mayer from BBC Radio Leicester also braved the wet weather to interview four of the volunteers live on the Tony and Julie Saturday morning radio show. This publicity, a sunnier afternoon and the satisfaction of a job well done represented a successful project.

**SOUTH YORKSHIRE & DUKERIES BRANCH**

On Sunday 26th October, South Yorkshire & Dukeries Branch’s biannual clean-up on the Sheffield & Tinsley Canal took place. Some 36 volunteers from IWA, Abbeydale Rotary Club, Tinsley Boat Club and Adsets Canal Project took part, all supervised by CRT’s Dave Walker. There is to be a major stoppage on the canal in January/February time, so the group targeted the area where much of the work is to take place, collecting 66 bags of rubbish. This was to give a clear path for the work team to determine where to locate a roadway that will have to be constructed to enable machinery to access the site. The canal is to be completely de-watered between locks 3 and 8 during the works.
Is your branch doing something that demonstrates the great work that our members do? If so let us know - send your story and pictures to stefanie.preston@waterways.org.uk.

NORTH STAFFORDSHIRE & SOUTH CHESHIRE BRANCH

Work party at Flint Mill Lock, Consall, as volunteers uncover the old lock.

INSET: The lock before work began.

As ever, North Staffordshire & South Cheshire Branch had a busy autumn and start to winter. Volunteers worked hard and contributed not only to a much improved canal environment on various waterways but also to Congleton securing a Britain in Bloom gold medal. The branch’s contribution at Congleton was its regular work parties held on the Macclesfield Canal, where volunteers have cut back vegetation and regularly litter picked, tasks that have greatly improved the local environment.

The branch continued to work alongside Caldon & Uttoxeter Canals Trust and on Thursday 13th November, moved the Caldon Canal work party to the new location of the Leek Tunnel on the Leek Arm. The volunteers spent the day clearing overhanging vegetation from the route that takes the towpath over the tunnel, as well as clearing grass and weeds from a section of cobbled towpath by the west portal of the tunnel and litter picking the area.

The following month the two groups of volunteers took on an exciting project to unearth Consall Old Lock at their last Caldon Canal work party of the year. The volunteers met at what is commonly known as Flint Mill Lock. This lock is also shown on old maps as “Consall New Lock” because it is beside the abandoned and buried “Consall Old Lock”. The task for the day was to remove vegetation around the overgrown site and locate the buried lock. The lock was barely visible at the start of the day, but by the end it had been revealed in all its glory. There is a proposal for an interpretation board to be installed to tell passers by about the history of the lock and the immediate area. The lock was replaced prior to 1900 as the original lock chamber was suffering from subsidence due to its proximity to nearby hillside, reducing the width of the chamber for the passing working boat traffic.

Also taking part on this work party were Glyn Parkes and his trainees from the Churnet Valley social action and personal development programme led by vInspired and delivered by the Waterways Action Squad, CRT’s youth engagement programme. The participants work towards a level 2 qualification in Work Based Environmental Conservation that is accredited by City & Guilds. The young people all enjoyed getting stuck in with the task in hand, and were particularly enthusiastic when it came to removing some of the many tree stumps in the lock chamber.

The branch also holds monthly work parties at the Cheshire Locks with the Trent & Mersey Canal Society. Saturday 15th November, saw eight volunteers meet at Lock 62 at Malkins Bank, Sandbach to prepare and paint a number of railings. In addition, long covered and somewhat slippery cobbled setts were cleared of vegetation and restored to something like their former glory.

As is evident, the branch and volunteers are busy with work parties and all of this requires a fair amount of equipment. This in turn has to be stored so North Staffordshire & South Cheshire Branch and Caldon & Uttoxeter Canals Trust committees agreed to construct a joint shed in a corner of a member’s field.

The project started on 8th May, when volunteers created a level area for concreting in June. June also saw the shed assembled and installed before a wooden floor was fitted in July. On 9th October, four volunteers undertook the final job of digging and filling a trench with almost one tonne of pea gravel, which was put in place to stop water running down the field from entering the shed. The shed was finally declared finished the following day.
IWA MANCHESTER CLEAN-UP

In October, Manchester Branch began its work parties once again after a summer break and joined Manchester Bolton & Bury Canal Society (MB&BCS) for a weekend of tree felling. After this good start to the autumn work parties, IWA Manchester Branch volunteers enjoyed a work party on the Rochdale Canal in Newton Heath in November.

The MB&BCS tree felling was a technical operation undertaken with great care. Volunteers had a fine view whilst waiting for the felling to finish before moving in to stack logs or lay bonfire piles.

At the November work party, eight volunteers came together and successfully filled 68 bags of rubbish. The weather was very kind and the words of appreciation from the passing public were the talking point of the day. One other striking point was the amenable attitude of the CRT van driver who was unabashed to be asked to stuff his van full of rubbish bags. Even more so, when the branch realised he had only called to check Lock 74 sluices! Three of the volunteers were new to the group and had a pleasant initiation to the many possibilities of volunteering, marking the event as a very successful one.

IWA’s annual big clean-up in Manchester took place on the weekend of 4th-5th October. Following on from a successful event in 2013, volunteers returned to the canals of Manchester armed with grappling hooks to remove hidden items from the depths of Manchester’s waterways.

Over the weekend, 52 volunteers, including 12 Officer Cadets from Manchester & Salford Universities Royal Naval Unit, came out to help. Work focused on the Ashton and Rochdale canals, from which volunteers filled two skips with rubbish pulled from the water. On top of this 19 solid fence panels, two heras fence panels, over 13 pieces of scrap metal, a stop plank, a lamp post, a ladder, a big red child’s car, a double mattress and numerous shopping trollies and bicycles were pulled from the canals.

It was not just canal rubbish that was tackled with volunteers litter picking up to Lock 3 on the Ashton Canal and Lock 81 on the Rochdale Canal. Vegetation was also tackled and cut back at Lock 82 on the Rochdale Canal and around the first two bridges from Ducie Street Junction on the Ashton Canal.

LONDON REGION

On 22nd November, volunteers from London Region took the chance to participate in a canal clean-up that took them down to the bed of the Regent’s Canal. CRT had recently drained a mile of the canal, close to Limehouse Basin, to carry out major works and IWA was able to collaborate with CRT to organise a work party to make the most of the improved access to the canal bed.

Around 30 volunteers from the London area, some from as far afield as Chelmsford, came together and navigated sticky mud and uneven ground at two sites close to Commercial Road Lock. During the work party volunteers removed various items, including a safe, a motorbike, numerous tyres and a suitcase.

Throughout the day, the volunteers were visited by various members of CRT staff including chief executive Richard Parry and the media team. Members of the public also stopped for a chat and to praise the excellent work that the volunteers were doing.

Those involved enjoyed the experience and their hard work made a real difference to the waterway environment. It is hoped that more waterway events will take place in London in the near future.
Milton Keynes Branch held its annual autumn canal clean-up on 17th-18th October. The turn out was impressive with over 50 volunteers helping out across the two days, including 15 Scouts and Cubs on the Saturday.

Over the two days, volunteers travelled over nine miles of the Grand Union Canal from Fenny Stratford to Grove Lock by boat and foot, using grappling hooks to remove submerged rubbish from the canal bed, as well as tackling floating litter. The rubbish collected weighed in at over 5½ tons. The Scouts and Cubs pulled out five bicycles and two shopping trolleys whilst other volunteers found another 12 bikes and eight shopping trolleys as well as four motorbike frames, two tractor tyres, a camera and a double mattress amongst other assorted items. The haul was only achieved thanks to the nearly 400 hours spent by volunteers, Scouts and Cubs, CRT and Wyvern Shipping grappling, litter picking and navigating boats.

BIRMINGHAM, BLACK COUNTRY & WORCESTERSHIRE BRANCH

In November Birmingham, Black Country & Worcestershire Branch not only held its regular monthly work party on the Staffordshire & Worcestershire Canal, at which volunteers collected five full bags of rubbish, but also held a big clean-up at Bournville.

The big clean-up was held over the weekend of 22nd-23rd November on the Worcester & Birmingham Canal. The branch was joined by members of Worcester, Birmingham and Droitwich Canal Society as well as some new to volunteering with over 20 people helping on the Saturday and 10 on the Sunday.

On Saturday, the group cleared the canal of rubbish and various objects, in both directions. The volunteers working south reached just past Bournville station on the first day and Sunday’s volunteers carried on from here, removing mainly industrial rubbish as well as some clothes and plastic guttering. Across the weekend, tyres of a wide range of sizes were removed, and the grappling hooks found a couple of machines, bikes, shopping trolleys, and various pieces of ‘road furniture’ including barriers, concrete blocks and drain covers.

It was a successful clean-up and a chance to welcome several newcomers to canal work parties, all of whom enjoyed their day.
WEST COUNTRY BRANCH

West Country Branch has had great success in engaging with the local community through its regular work parties on the Bridgwater & Taunton Canal. On 25th October, the branch held a work party at Bridgwater Docks where volunteers met outside the new IWA base for the first time. The group was joined by Councillor Brian Smedley, who chatted with the volunteers involved in the branch’s painting project. The group is painting the numerous metal structures around the docks, many of which were originally installed for the large seagoing vessels that visited Bridgwater and are now an important part of its history.

The following month the branch held two work parties. The first was on Wednesday 19th November at Bridgwater Docks where the volunteers were joined by staff from the local branch of Lloyds Bank. With such good support, it was possible to split up and carry out work at four different locations along the Bridgwater & Taunton Canal. Tasks included vegetation cutting, litter picking, painting and planting flower bulbs on a site adjacent to the canal towpath. The bulbs were planted on behalf of Bridgwater Town Council and the location chosen by local residents, through a poll of potential sites. The volunteers also managed to clear accumulated rubbish from the canal including two shopping trolleys, which belonged to the nearby supermarket, traffic cones and a pushchair.

The second work party was on 29th November, when CRT staff started the session with some training and instruction in the use of power tools. The volunteers then proceeded to carry out a deep cut of the excess vegetation along the towpath from Newtown Lock towards the Victoria Road Bridge. This team was followed by a group with secateurs who trimmed the hawthorn trees. It was thought best to do this by hand to avoid loss of the red berries that birds and other wildlife feed on during the winter.

LICHFIELD BRANCH

Local Volunteers helped Lichfield Branch to lay a complete new towpath in Rugeley during the week of 10th to 14th November, using equipment and materials provided by CRT. The new towpath runs between Brindley Bank Aqueduct on the Trent & Mersey Canal as far as the Rugeley Bypass Bridge, a distance of some 200 metres. This is part of a popular circular walk for Rugeley residents, but it previously became very muddy during the winter months.

Some 27 volunteers put in 340 hours labour, sometimes in very wet weather. Some came for the week, some for a day or two, some fitted in hours between work or babysitting, but everyone worked extremely hard to get the task finished.

The new towpath has now been lined, and one layer of aggregate has been laid and compacted. The final layer will be installed in early spring, when the weather will hopefully be better.

Volunteers from Lloyds Bank.
Is your branch doing something that demonstrates the great work that our members do? If so let us know - send your story and pictures to stefanie.preston@waterways.org.uk.

CHESTER & MERSEY SIDE BRANCH
On Saturday 1st November, volunteers from IWA Chester & Merseyside Branch were at Tower Wharf on the Shropshire Union Canal for the branch’s regular work party. The group cleared weeds and vegetation from the Turnover Bridge and around the Graving Lock, as well as taking time to plant spring bulbs at Northgate Locks. Work parties have proved a huge success for the branch and it again managed to squeeze an extra work party into November, showing just how popular they are. This was held on Saturday 8th November, when volunteers completed a much needed litter pick at Cow Lane Bridge.

NORTHAMPTON BRANCH
On Sunday 9th November, Northampton Branch’s work party at Gayton Junction Yard on the Northampton Arm of the Grand Union Canal was greeted with weather that was ideal for the planned task – painting Lock 9. Under the guidance of volunteer Mick Butler, the group achieved this and also painted the top gate of Lock 10. The branch has now painted about three quarters of the 17 locks on the Northampton Arm.

The second branch work party of the month on Tuesday 25th, was based at Lock 17, where volunteers litter picked the area up to the B&Q Bridge 16 and extracted 11 bags of rubbish, a large cushion, a tyre and a shopping trolley. The volunteers also opened up a view through the trees from the bottom gates of Lock 17 to the Environment Agency strong stream notice on the opposite side of the riverbank. This was in response to concerns that first time boaters would otherwise only see this important sign once they had left the lock and were already on the river.

WARWICKSHIRE BRANCH
Despite the damp conditions on 2nd November, over 80 volunteers, including IWA members, Warwick university students, army cadets from Stourport and local residents, turned out to clean the stretch of the Grand Union Canal between Emscote Road and Wedgenock Lane, Warwick.

Organised by Warwickshire Branch, with the active support of CRT, the event saw many tons of abandoned ironmongery dragged from the canal using grappling hooks. The predominant items retrieved from the canal were bicycles and shopping trolleys, but also retrieved were three motorcycles, lengths of carpet, electronic equipment and a safe.

For those wanting a less strenuous task, litter pickers and black bags were supplied. The recent strimming of the vegetation adjoining the towpath had exposed numerous plastic bottles and cans. These were gathered up and loaded onto the hopper boat driven by Steve Lambert, CRT Volunteer Leader.

The next IWA organised canal clean-up will be in Leamington Old Town on 1st March 2015. If you would like to help or would like details of other similar events please email info.warwickshire@waterways.org.uk.

Details of all IWA branch events can be found on the IWA website events calendar. If you would like to get involved or have any suggestions for future work parties, please contact the IWA Branch Campaign Team: Alison Smedley, Branch Campaign Officer 07779 096915; alison.smedley@waterways.org.uk
Stefanie Preston, Branch Campaign Assistant 01494 783453; stefanie.preston@waterways.org.uk

Rubbish collected from the Grand Union Canal on the Warwickshire Branch clean-up.
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I am writing to support Ralph Knowles’ letter in the Winter edition of Waterways. My boat is shown in the magazine as I reversed into Horseways Lock with Jonathan Chambers on 5th April last year. I was one of the last boaters to use Horseways Channel and Welches Dam Lock before the route was severed in 2006 when the Environment Agency deliberately piled the entrance to the lock. That was nearly nine years ago.

The present Peterborough Branch Committee and their predecessors have tried and tried to get some restoration work started but the Environment Agency seems to have blocked all attempts to make any progress.

You might say this doesn’t matter when an alternative route along Well Creek is possible. The Well Creek Trust (all volunteers) and the Middle Level Commissioners (who receive no income at all from boat licences) have done a really good job but Well Creek is shallow in parts with some very low bridges. What if the Mullicourt Aqueduct or a section of embankment failed?

Many canal and waterways routes have been restored to full navigation after falling into disuse. The list is impressive and we probably all have our favourites. Examples include the Southern Stratford, the Upper and Lower Avon Navigations, the Kennet & Avon Canal, the Ashton Canal, Huddersfield Narrow Canal, the Rochdale Canal and the Droitwich Canals. The Falkirk Wheel has been built, the Anderton Lift has been restored, Standedge and Leek tunnels have been reopened, the Ribble Link established and a new route into Liverpool created. Many other restoration schemes have been completed or are well under way.

I think that the main problem in restoring Welches Dam Lock and Horseways Channel is not finance (or lack of it) but of will. The technical difficulties involved in restoring the short stretch of leaking Horseways Channel appear to be similar to the leaking canal bed at Limpley Stoke that was fixed as just a small part of the complete restoration of the Kennet & Avon Canal. Rebuilding Welches Dam Lock is not rocket science; staff at the Canal & River Trust (formerly British Waterways) and IWA’s Waterway Recovery Group do this all the time.

I cannot believe that this state of affairs long had it occurred on the main canal system or had it involved the Canal & River Trust/ British Waterways. Would not IWA (nationally) have sorted this out by now?

John Revell,
Via email

Les Etheridge IWA national chairman responds:
I was at Horseways Lock, along with members of IWA Peterborough and Great Ouse branches last year, when John reversed his boat into the lock; I was keen to support the initiative taken by Peterborough Branch. Resolving the issue requires action both locally and nationally, and I was recently updated on progress being made by Peterborough Branch. Nationally, we are putting pressure on the EA to address all its navigation assets that are currently out of action, and that will remain the case.
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