

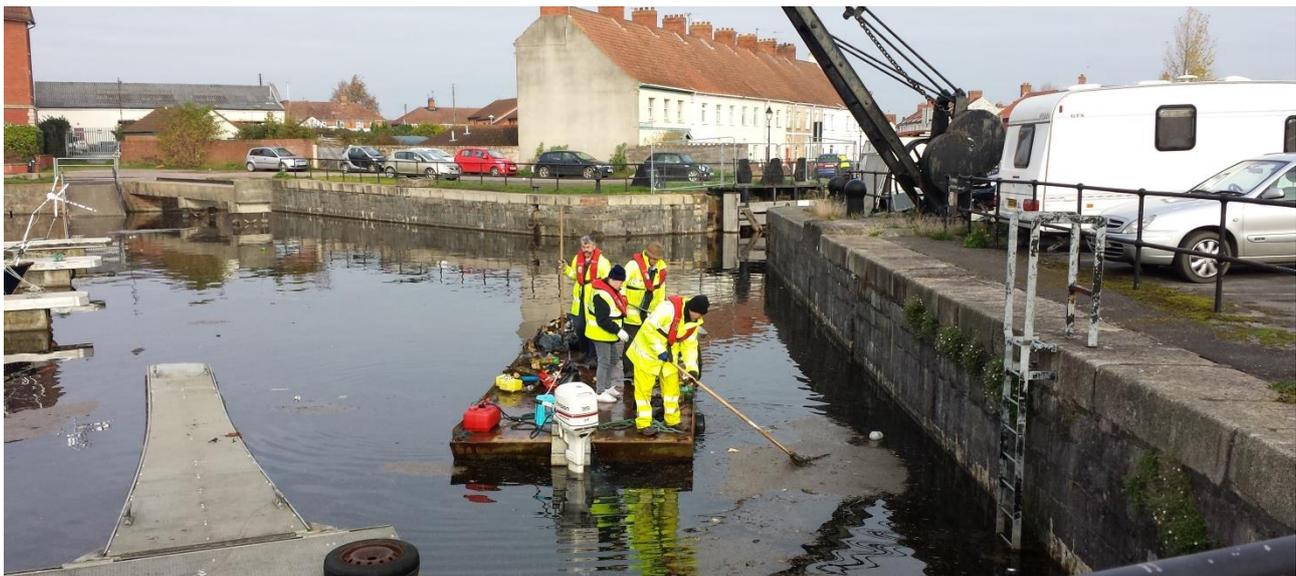
IWA Briefing Note

Volunteers on the Waterways

This briefing note sets out The Inland Waterways Association's (IWA) views on volunteering on inland waterways.

In recent years, there has been an increase in the number of volunteers engaged in practical tasks on the navigable inland waterways. This development has led some, who perceive such volunteering as a threat to jobs, to question the ethics of this practice. This increase in volunteer numbers follows the transfer of the waterways previously managed by British Waterways (BW) to Canal & River Trust (CRT). As a charity, CRT aims to engage with volunteers so as to support paid staff in their work. This is similar to many other charities looking after Britain's heritage and environment, including the National Trust.

IWA has always been a charity that has a large volunteer presence on the inland waterways and this has not changed with the transfer of waterways from BW to CRT. IWA still encourages people to volunteer on the inland waterways through IWA branches, national IWA committees and its Waterway Recovery Group (WRG). IWA continues to work closely with navigation authorities, including CRT and the Environment Agency (EA), to ensure that waterway volunteers' time and skills are used effectively. Furthermore, WRG has long worked with the owners of other waterways and restoration groups, so WRG is well positioned to offer its experience and skills to further restoration works that otherwise would not happen.



The Role of Volunteers

One of IWA's main aims is to ensure that all waterways are well maintained for current and future generations to enjoy. On navigable routes and towpaths, IWA volunteers currently carry out tasks varying from litter picks to painting lock gates. The ambitions and scope of local IWA branches continuously grow as they become more confident in their abilities and more involved in and supported by local communities. This has already been the case with a number of IWA branches, which have become an important part of the community and contribute accordingly. An example of a wider scope and increased ambition is one branch's participation in the creation of a Town Guide that is available for boaters visiting the area. Whether the task is a litter pick or leaflet production, IWA volunteers aim to physically improve the waterways and associated environments, increase the support of inland waterways from various areas of society and to encourage the community to view the local waterway as a valuable asset.

On the derelict parts of the system, volunteers carry out restoration tasks, such as rebuilding lock chambers and relining the canal. Canal restoration is not a task that commercial organisations are often willing to support financially, although such projects are starting to receive more support from CRT. However, with the current financial strains on the larger navigation authorities their support alone is not enough and inland waterways will not be restored without volunteers.

Benefits

Both waterways and people benefit from the work of volunteers. Navigable waterways benefit as volunteers carry out a variety of tasks that directly improve the environment and users' experiences on the waterways. Tasks completed by volunteers that improve waterway environments and experiences include:

- Planting hedgerows and controlling invasive species so that waterway corridors are diverse habitats that benefit wildlife and people.
- Towpath litter picks so that people and wildlife alike can benefit from a clean and tidy area to live in, travel through and enjoy recreationally.
- Grappling rubbish from the canal to improve water quality and environments as well as improving the waterway so boaters can navigate without the risk of collision with submerged items.
- The installation of new mooring rings to encourage boaters to moor up in suitable locations.

Volunteers aid in the improvement and on-going maintenance of our waterways, which increases the longevity and quality of waterway infrastructure and its features and attracts new users.

In addition to improvement works on navigable waterways, volunteers are the lead force in the restoration of canals. Derelict canals are often left to disappear by landowners who lack the time, money or inclination to bring them back in to use. WRG works with waterways restoration promoters, as well as landowners, to reinstate navigation on derelict canals. WRG has successfully contributed to the restoration of most re-opened canals; examples include WRG's involvement in the restoration of the Montgomery Canal, where WRG volunteers rebuilt the four Frankton and three Aston Locks, and WRG's involvement in the restoration of the Droitwich Barge Lock. WRG's work helps open more of the network for various inland waterway users, develops new habitats and preserves important industrial heritage for the benefit of all.

Volunteers are not just active carrying out practical tasks on inland waterways. Through committees, both locally and nationally, IWA volunteers campaign for the interests of inland waterways and their users. Campaigns led by volunteers range from challenges to unsympathetic and damaging development to the call for improved mooring availability across the country. Committee volunteers are also integral to raising funds for inland waterway projects. Many volunteers run fundraising initiatives or support grant applications through contribution to the written application or demonstration of community support.

The work of volunteers clearly benefits inland waterway environments. The benefits that the volunteers themselves gain, however, should not be overlooked. The range of these benefits is wide and reflects the range of volunteer opportunities on offer. Practical roles on navigable and derelict waterways provide opportunities for volunteers to develop various skills from bricklaying to hedge-laying. These opportunities can also promote a healthy lifestyle as they encourage people to get outside and active. Volunteers on committees develop different skills depending on their role. These skills could include improved computer literacy, report writing and presentation delivery. Skills that can be developed in all roles include written and verbal communication and the ability to work well in a team. Development of these skills can increase an individual's confidence, help a volunteer secure a job and help individuals develop a sense of pride in themselves and their contributions to a wider community. There is also no doubt that volunteers on inland waterways have opportunities to socialise and make new friends, become active in their community and enjoy the enrichment that this brings.

Perceived Threat to Jobs

There is little or no threat to employees from volunteers working on derelict canals as historically few people are employed to restore canals commercially. Additionally, as volunteers continue to

facilitate the re-opening of derelict canals more jobs will be created as these navigations will require management and services for boaters and other visitors.

There is a perception by some that the use of volunteers on inland waterways is a threat to navigation authority jobs. The reality is that navigation authorities have faced and will continue to face budget cuts. With financial restraints there is a limit to the amount of work that paid staff can carry out. Volunteers do not take work away from employees of navigation authorities but carry out tasks that complement their work. Navigation authority employees cannot meet the demand for maintenance alone, without volunteers many jobs would never be started, let alone completed. The maintenance backlog is large and constantly grows; volunteers help undertake more of this maintenance. Furthermore, as recognised, accepted and supported by the trade unions, engagement with volunteers generates additional employment opportunities as it creates volunteer management roles and contributes to an increase the income of organisations such as CRT.

IWA is dedicated to encouraging public participation in activities on inland waterways. By working with a wide variety of users and volunteers ranging from those who have a lifetime of boating experience, to Scout & Guide groups as well as walkers, cyclists and young adults completing their Duke of Edinburgh's Awards, IWA engages people with the waterway system. Many volunteers are familiar with the waterways but there are also many who would have little experience of canals and navigable rivers had they not been given the opportunity to volunteer with a charity such as IWA. This helps to keep an interest in the waterways alive and ensures the demand for well-kept inland waterways is recognised and fulfilled. This demand cannot be met by staff alone so volunteers are likely to continue to offer their support to provide a well maintained and growing waterway network for the benefit of waterway users and the environment. There is always more work to be done and improvements to be made on inland waterways and IWA supports staff and volunteers in their continuous efforts to make these changes for the better.

More information on volunteering with IWA can be found at www.waterways.org.uk/volunteer.