Wilts & Berks Canal Trust

Patron: Her Majesty The Queen.

Restoring 70 miles of canal and towpath for the benefit of local communities, wildlife and leisure



Credit: Howard Wilson

Melksham, Calne & Chippenham and Foxham & Lyneham Branch Members Report for March 2026

Chair's Report

After the wet winter the weather is at last showing signs of drying up which is great news for our Dirty Boots volunteers who, as you can read below, continue with their sterling work.

Mike Gibben (CEO), Ron Crook (deputy CEO) and myself gave a presentation to Chippenham Town Council on the Trust's 5-year business plan and 25-year vision, concentrating particularly on plans for the Pewsham Waterside park area. We received a very positive response.

Senior Leadership Team (SLT)

Melksham Town Council have agreed to sign a Memorandum of Understanding with the Trust.

Melksham Without Parish Council have, somewhat surprisingly, decided not to enter into a MoU with us.

Rachel Gear has been appointed as head of the Trust's Comms team, led previously by Chloe Ford. Rachel is a new volunteer and member with an extensive career in digital media, publications and partnership development. Rachel currently works as Head of Careers & Work at Swindon college, in itself an important connection. Please find Rachel's profile at:

https://www.linkedin.com/in/rachel-gear-68a5954

Chloe Ford has been appointed to the executive board as Advocacy director. This is a strategic role overseeing more widely with me, the development of our outward facing strategy - partnerships, campaigns, marketing and comms in general. Chloe will continue in her role as Swindon branch chair.

Howard Wilson,
Chairman - MCC and F&L Branch
howard.wilson@wbct.org.uk

Health & Safety

Nothing to report.

Malcolm Hitchinson, H&S Advisor

Work Parties

Work Party Management Group
Nothing to report.

Ray Canter, WPMG Chair

Pewsham Site - General
Work has continued on removing silt / spoil from the Top Pound. The remains / foundations of the north-east entrance wall to Middle Lock has also been unearthed.

	
Top Pound	Middle Lock Entrance Wall foundations

Other sites
Nothing to report this month for:

- **Greenlane Farm & Pudding Brook**
- **Studley Lane**
- **Dauntsey Lock**
- **7 Locks**

Dave Maloney, WPO

Projects

Peterborough Arms

Local engineers recommended by our structural engineer have been instructed to create the bracket needed to support the beam in the bar area.

Volunteers have been working in the cellar building insulated stud walls to reduce the area that needs cooling. This included a small block pillar which volunteers created on Bank Holiday Monday so the mortar could set ready for the final area of stud wall to be fitted at the next work party.
A survey of the external paint work was carried out and jobs prioritised ready for when we get a run of decent painting weather.

Unfortunately, due to our small group of volunteers when someone becomes unavailable, we often must cancel a work party as volunteers are not allowed to work on their own.

If you are a competent DIYer or retired trade person that could help us with our maintenance/project work please do get in touch. We are a friendly team and the work is varied and satisfying- Oh and there is often cake.

Dave Maloney, Project Lead

Top Lock Bridge

The concrete coping between the bridge and the Lock gates has been completed with landscaping carried out. The last of the scaffolding has been taken down and stored for future use. Work on building the exit to the bywash pipe that will eventually allow excess water to flow from above Top Lock into the Top Pound continues.

	
Completed coping	Landscaped area

	
View of bridge with scaffolding removed	By-wash pipe

Howard Wilson.

Carpenters' Workshop

The annex area is progressing really well.

In the kitchen the worktops and sink are in place and the wall's tiles fitted.

All electric cables are routed and can be terminated soon. Down lighters have been installed.



In the toilet areas the down lighters and extractor fans have been installed, walls painted, and floor prepared for tiling.

Cutting the solid insulation to facilitate installation of 16 down lighters was a horrible job and one we are glad is over!

Due to the possibility of mice in the loft space above the annex all the cable is run in trunking/conduit in a bid to stop them gnawing at the cables. Once we have power, we will install a few of those sound emitters, that apparently mice don't like, as an added precaution.

The solar power cables have been routed in relevant trunking and we hope to have Greg our electrician onsite soon to connect to the consumer unit to give us at least one power outlet to run the tile cutter which we will need for the floor tiles.

Insulation was installed in the kitchen/store wall.

We are still having challenges re a suitable brick for the main workshop area but believe now we have found a supplier of a hard modern brick that looks Victorian. Samples are on the way.
My thanks to David P & Basil R for continued hard graft/support and advice.

Dave Maloney, Project Lead

Dry Dock
No work to sponsored tiles will be carried out until the spring of 2026.

Dave Maloney, Project Lead

Bottom Lock
Work is still ongoing on trying to get design drawings that will allow us to start work on the rebuild.

Ray Canter / Howard Wilson

Melksham Link

We are seeking legal advice regarding our 'impasse' with the Environment Agency.

We had a meeting with Councillor Peter Wragg who offered to meet with the EA together with Councillor Andrew Griffiths to try to resolve matters.

There is no further progress on the masterplan to fund construction of Melksham Link.

Paul Lenaerts, Project Manager

Environmental

(Photos by Howard Yardy or wildlife photographers)

Bird Box Sponsorship

Over 60 bird boxes have been sponsored in the last month which has raised nearly £700 for our environmental work. A big thank you to those people who have supported us. There are still over 30 boxes left to sponsor.

Many of the boxes have already been occupied by nesting birds.





We've had two corporate parties from Siemens Group Chippenham.
They were tasked with planting over 350 wildflowers and the last group worked on the Miyawaki forest.





Wildlife

The canal and its environs continue to attract a wide range of wildlife.

A water shrew is creature I never seen before. It was photographed by one of several photographers who are finding the canal a great place for wildlife.



The kingfisher is a regular visitor and the photo of one eating a fish on the guard rail around the horseshoe weir is special.





Howard Yardy, Wildlife Officer

Boats

Boswell has been put to use trimming back over hanging vegetation with help from the green team. Unfortunately, the warmer weather has brought out our local bored people who have caused some problems with Boswell, so we have moored the boats on the off-side bank.

Bob Howlett, Boats Officer

Events

A busy March in preparation for April events. Our thanks to Bob & Linda H for preparing the Popup Cafe for our first Pewsham Open Day on the 11th April.
The Quiz group have been preparing and verifying questions for our Spring Quiz at the Neeld in Chippenham on Friday 17th April.

Bob H has been working on repairing a few leaks in the events container and Malcolm H, Keith V started to install racking in the main container area to enable us to store our events kit.
New posters to show the wonderful work on the Top Lock Bridge have been added to our collection of display posters.
Please do consider volunteering at an event, none of them are particularly arduous and you can make a difference either to the branch/Trust finances or the public in general. We generally come away satisfied after an event in the knowledge we have either showcased the work of the WBCT or raised funds towards this work.
Please contact me for more information on event volunteering.

Dave Maloney
dave.maloney@wbct.org.uk
Chair Events Committee

Media Relations

My profile of branch wildlife officer Howard Yardy was featured in the April issue of national magazine Canal Boat, as part of its new series on 'Unsung Heroes of the Cut'.
The full-page article included my photographs of Howard in front of Double Bridge, working on the hedges and driving the tractor.
To amplify the coverage, I also promoted the magazine feature in the Melksham Independent News. The newspaper used a photograph of Howard with fellow volunteers Graham S, Andrew and Raine V, with the magazine photographs included in the online version of the story.



Howard said: “I’ve always been fascinated by the history of canals and love working outside and keeping fit, so I was keen to get involved with the local restoration campaign.
“Making a difference to the environment is part of who I am. The charity understands the importance of the canal for the wildlife along its course, and they’ve given me great support.
“I’m also very lucky to be supported by so many other fantastic volunteers - it’s truly a team effort.”
He added: “I’ve made lots of new friends who share my passion for nature, and even when I’m not volunteering, I still enjoy taking my dog for a walk along the towpath to see what’s happening and plan my next task. I’m slightly obsessed, but I love being there!
“Sometimes there are special moments like an encounter with an otter or an unusual bird, or capturing a beaver on my wildlife camera, and it proves we’re doing the right thing.”

Justin Guy, Media Relations Officer

Branch Webpages & Digital Comms

We were able to report on extensive work being carried out in Top Pound as volunteers took advantage of the fair weather and started to remove the spoil, and then silt, from this area.
Photographs and details of the final stage of Top Lock Bridge were also shared.

There have been a number of corporate groups helping our Green Team in the last month and it was great to be able to share photographs of them and the work that had been carried out by them.

Local newspapers picked up some of our Facebook posts and reported on the extensive work at Pewsham Locks and the MCC Branch receiving the charity’s annual Tony Davy Award, named after a former chairman, for contributing 12,173 hours of volunteer work, up more than 20 per cent on the previous year.

Dave Maloney, Howard Wilson, Howard Yardy
(Digital Comms contributors)

Finances

Main event in March was Howard Yardy's bird box sponsorship campaign, raising money for the Bee Route fund. In the month this yielded £480 in the branch bank account, £102 on the card reader and £60 in HQ accounts for a total of £642.
Other income:

- £215 donations from railway enthusiasts
- £25 member donation
- £43 collecting box at Hilperton Marina
- £19 at the branch meeting.

Branch spending was £199 diesel, £50 deposit for the Folk Festival pitch, £30 plant repair parts and £24 petrol for small equipment. A further £127 of restricted fund spending (Bee Route, Carpenter's etc) went through the bank account.

£450 was transferred to HQ (representing most of the Bee Route money) to keep our local balance down. Balance at the end of the month was £3,108.

Steve Roberts, Treasurer

Membership (Info from SLT meeting)

Nothing to report