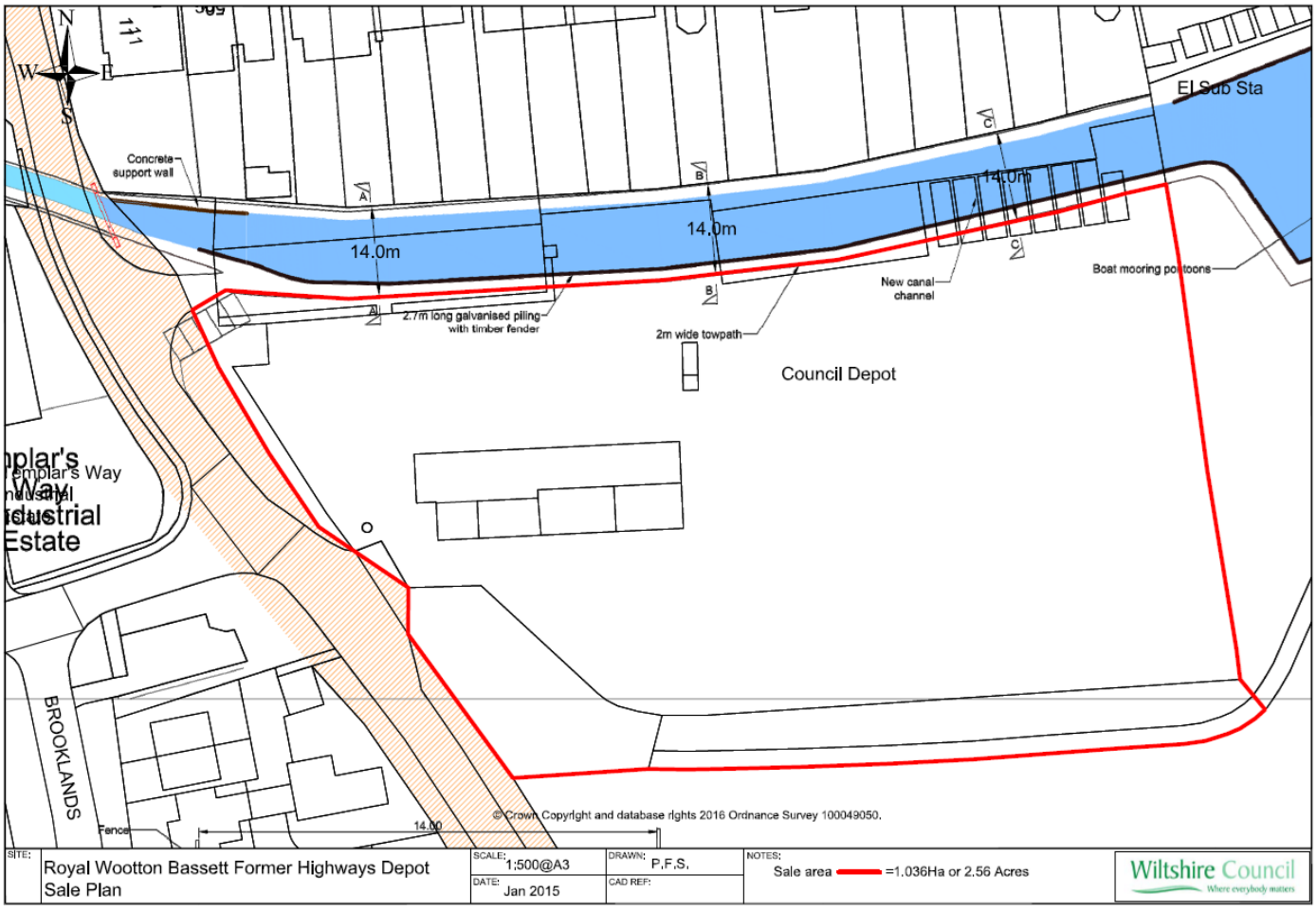
Wilts & Berks Canal Trust

RWB Branch Newsletter, April 2026

The Gateway vision for the former Council Depot at Templar's Firs

On **Thursday afternoon, 2nd April at 1:30pm**, representatives of several organisations will be meeting **our MP Sarah Gibson at the Town Council Offices** to discuss what we'd like to see at the **former Wiltshire Council Highways Depot**, which has stood semi-derelict for several years. Plans to sell the site for development stalled in 2017, but WBCT had already carried out as much as it could on the **Templar's Firs Extension** without affecting utilities or the Depot site itself. The farm track was diverted ready for the canal to branch south-west to run along the north edge of the Depot site, but the project relied on material excavated from the Depot site to build an embankment – and we're still waiting.

More recently, the open space at **Brynard's Hill** had finally been handed over by **Wainhomes** in 2025 to create the **Coronation Country Park** – much reduced in size than the acreage that had originally been promised. The initial housing development included car parking for visitors, but this has long since been covered by further housing. In order for a **'Country Park'** to live up to its name, it needs at least a **car park** and **vistor facilities**. That's what the former Council Depot could provide if it became something of a Community Hub – including the key ingredient of a waterway passing through to the west of Marlborough Road. See this plan, drawn up by Wiltshire Council as long ago as December 2015:



The plans for the canal's extension can be downloaded from the Wiltshire Council's planning portal using the planning reference **13/03892/FUL.**

A key document dated **14th December 2016** had got lost within the Wiltshire Council's filing system, probably because it was addressed from one part of Wiltshire Council to another - **Wiltshire Council's Canal Officer** who'd acted as agent for WBCT's planning application – and now it's escaped at last!



It's intriguing to note that a line of **old sheds within the Depot were demolished in March**, leaving piles of metal and concrete to clear.

Trust 2026 AGM

It's our branch's turn to host the Trust's AGM, which will be held at the **RWB Academy's Sixth-Form block** on **Saturday 17th October**. Now that the date has been fixed, we can make further plans for site visits, exhibitions, etc. Further details will follow when available.

RWB Branch AGM

The Royal Wootton Bassett branch AGM will be held on **Monday 18th May**, at the Angel Hotel in the High Street at 7:30pm. **The Trust's Wildlife Officer Howard Yardy** will give a brief talk about the work of the **'Green Team'** at Pewsham, where the **MCC Branch** has many more volunteers than we do – after all, it's three times the size, encompassing the towns of **Melksham, Chippenham and Calne**. When our branch finally starts construction work – the **Templar's Firs Extension**? - we hope that we can attract and train those who are adept at such projects. This happened before between 2005 and 2013 when Chaddington Lock, Chaddington Spill Weir and the pound below the lock were built by volunteers led by John Bower.

John Bower is still active, maintaining equipment alongside our Work-Party Organiser Neil Lazenby. John has been a stalwart Branch Secretary, and he is prepared to stand for election again in May along with The Chair, Vice-Chair, Treasurer and others. With luck we'll have younger – and fitter - people who can take on these roles.

Can YOU help manage the branch? If so, we'd love to see you at the Branch AGM.

RWB Carnival 16th May

In years past, the branch has entered floats in the **RWB Carnival**, to be held this year on **Saturday 16th May**. We have been asked by the carnival organisers if we can take part in 2026. It may be short notice, but what we could do is to tow **The Mary Archard** on its trailer in the procession, advertising the boat trips along our canal. If you would like to help, please let us know.

The Mary Archard may actually make canal trips on **Saturday 2nd May** when the Coronation Country Park will have a May Day celebration. If this goes ahead, we'll advertise it in advance.

Work Party Update

0nly one March work-party was held at **Studley Grange**. On the 4th, the last of the Norfolk Reeds were cleared from the towpath side, allowing the Work Pontoon to return to the Chaddington end, where it was dismantled and taken back to be stored in a garage at Templar's Firs. For its last trip, it took the sawn logs from the fallen tree to the west end, where they are available for anyone with a wood-burner (after the wood has been well-seasoned, of course).



Simon Meredith steering the pontoon loaded with logs.



Unloading the logs onto the north side.

The work pontoon was split into three sections, then given a wash down and taken in two trips to Templar's Firs.





The first job on 11th May was to give the pontoon sections a thorough clean: we don't want any Norfolk Reeds to take root at Templar's Firs!

It was re-assembled alongside the slipway before entering the water.

Wednesday 18th May was when **Alan Ward** brought Nonsuch's engine back in style, on a trailer towed by his classic Riley. We had hired an excavator for the day, driven by Head of Boats **Martin Palmer**, to lift the engine into the engine bay. This wasn't as easy as it seemed, because Nonsuch had to be dragged along towards the slipway because the canal was so silted-up at the west end.

We also welcomed **Allan Lees-Smith**, who has now retired, on his first week back as a volunteer. He had previously joined us during Lockdown when he had been unable to work indoors.

During the day, Martin used the excavator to remove silt and weed from the towpath side, clearing a channel which made moving Nonsuch, with engine, much easier to haul.

Allan was a great help with Nonsuch, because he has owned a 60-ft narrowboat for many years. It is moored at Braunston Marina, which can claim to be the epicentre of the connected canal network. Along with skipper **Robin Dare**, the team got the engine back into place even if they were unable to get it started on the day. Boat trainer **Bob Howlett** was also on hand to assist. Many thanks to all.



Alan Ward in his Riley, bring the engine back.



Martin lowers the engine into Nonsuch at the slipway.



Removing silt and weed onto the towpath side.



The last of the matted weed, leaving a clear channel.

The final work-party in March on the 25th was spent mostly on extending the all-weather surface on the north side, now that the ground is drying out. The ride-on mower could take four tubs of aggregate at a time up and down the slopes at Noremarsh.



Unloading tubs north-east of Noremarsh Bridge.



Neil and Gareth, after the team had laid more material.



Here's a view of the north side on 30th March, showing the new sections of all-weather track.

Most of the northern footpath is drying out, but there are some sections that are still too muddy for the ride-on mower or the all-terrain mower to reach. The worst of these sections will be resurfaced at the work-party on 1st April, using the work pontoon to transport around a dozen tubs a time along the canal.

Also on 1st April, Alan Ward and members of the Boat Team will continue work on Nonsuch's engine. It is thought that the problem is to do with electrical connections.

Our **Work-Party Organiser, Neil Lazenby,** is happy to welcome new volunteers. If you want to join the team, please e-mail neil.lazenby@wbct.org.uk .

How's the towpath at Studley Grange? It's almost dry enough to use walking shoes rather than boots. It's not normal to see a brood of ducklings before the end of March, but on the 31st there were five ducklings with their Mum.

Trustee visits

On Tuesday 10th March, the Trustees paid a visit to **Pewsham**.



They saw progress on the now-complete tail-bridge on the top lock, the interior of the **Carpenters' Workshop**, and the **Dry Dock** which has now been roofed, as seen here.

The brickwork on the adjacent bottom lock had been water-logged at the beginning of the year despite being pumped out, preventing further work until it was drier. MCC Branch Chair Howard Wilson was the guide for the day. We then took our cars to the A4 to see the cleared woodland at Greenlane Farm and Pudding Brook to the east of the road.

Next time, the trustees are going to visit a RWB branch work-party either in April or in May, most likely at Chaddington and Studley Grange.

RWB – Swindon Connection

The team continues to meet monthly. As things stand, there is already a complete footpath link between Templar's Firs and the branch boundary, and indeed as far as Mannington and central Swindon. The contractors are making steady progress extending the canal line south-east and south-west of the restored section at Wichelstowe.

50th Anniversary preparations

Also meeting monthly is the Trust-wide team planning the 50th Anniversary celebrations for 2027. Talks are continuing locally with the RWB Museum for an exhibition in the Old Town Hall.

It should be practical to update the artwork for the eight interpretation boards for Studley Grange. The existing boards have about a year's life left in them.

Events

The next **RWB Branch meeting** is on **Monday 20th April** at the **Angel Hotel, starting at 7:30pm, either in the committee room or downstairs in the Restaurant area**. As mentioned earlier, **the branch AGM is on 18th May** at the Angel.

Don't forget that **Swindon Branch has a Charity Quiz Night on Thursday 23rd April** at the **Manor in Cheney Manor Road** including a buffet meal, for £12 per person. Teams of up to 4 people can compete.

Steve Bacon Chair, Royal Wootton Bassett branch
m: 07749 215741
e: steve.bacon@wbct.org.uk
w: https://www.wbct.org.uk

Restoring all 70 miles of the Wilts & Berks canal in Oxfordshire and Wiltshire to create a public and wildlife waterside park for walking, cycling, fishing and boating.

The Wilts & Berks Canal Trust. Registered Charity No 299595, Limited Company No 2267719
Dauntsey Lock Canal Centre, Dauntsey Lock, Chippenham SN15 4HD