Wilts & Berks Canal Trust

RWB Branch Newsletter, May 2026

Green transport meets green boat



We ended April with a welcome sight – the boat **Nonsuch** on a test run before the **Mayday celebration at Coronation Country Park on Saturday 2nd May**, when we start our Saturday trips for the season.

It now runs smoke-free to and from the turning point at Hancock's Water. In this photo, it was passing the work pontoon loaded with tools, which was being bow-hauled back from near Buxstone Bridge.

With the sunny (if rather windy) weather encouraging the difficult-to-remove invasive yellow water-lilies to spread across the canal, Nonsuch's test trips simply tore them up by their roots as it scraped along the silted-up canal, saving many hours of manual work.

Clearing the accumulated reeds and bulrushes (Reed-Mace) took a lot more work, involving volunteers literally lying-down on the job, pulling them up and removing plenty of silt from the roots as they did. The channel beyond Hancock's Water junction is now clear, ready to take storm water to Woodshaw Spill-Weir.



Before: The pontoon **near Buxstone Bridge** on 8th April.



After: **Simon Meredith** with the cleared channel.



The grassy space **east of Buxstone Bridge**, a picnic area.



15th: Another picnic area, below **Chaddington Lock**

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



As planned, our local MP Sarah Gibson met with many representatives of local organistions at the Town Council offices on **2nd April**, to discuss what we'd like to see at the **former Highways Depot**.

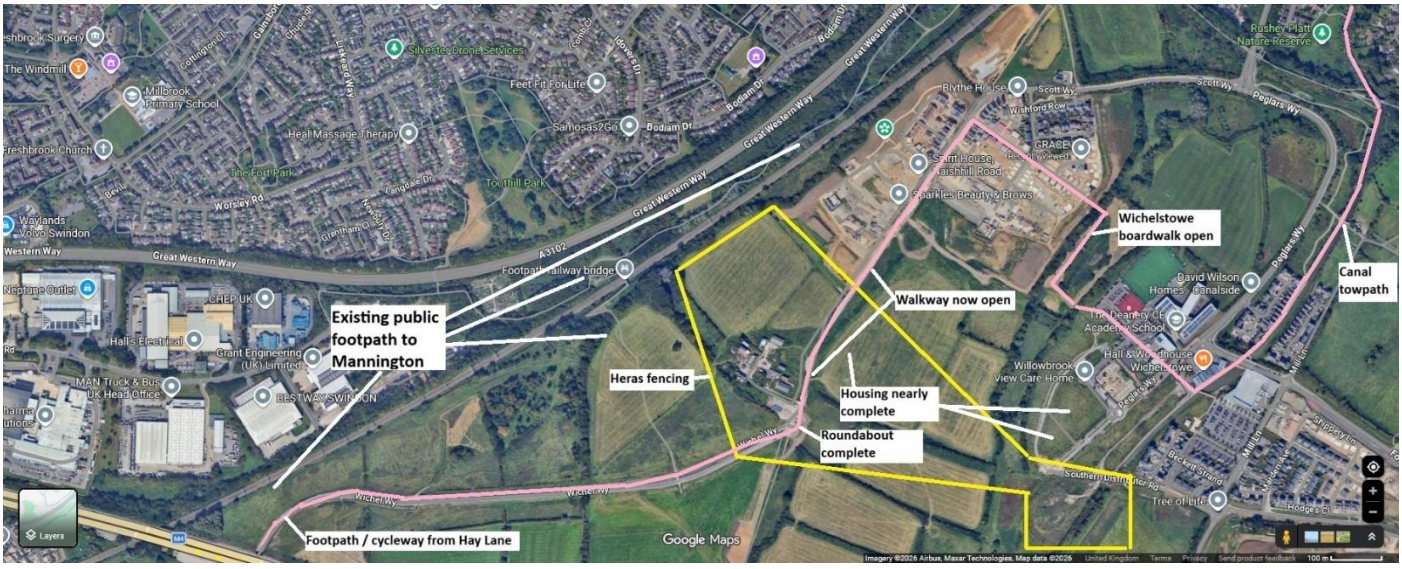
Wiltshire Council members and officers took note of the many suggestions made, and we hope for a follow-up meeting soon.

A key subject was **Active Travel**, which is being promted by the **Sustain** initiative funded by **Crapper & Son**. The long-planned but still un-funded **£3.5 million Cycleway from Woodshaw to West Swindon** using an existing tarm-track bridge across the M4 was constrasted with the already-available safe walking and cycling route to Swondon via the canal towpath. **Crappers have now pledged to make landfill-tax money available** over several years to enable this route to become an all-weather Active Travel route!

Safe Walking Route to Swindon re-opened

Since mid-2025, it has been impractical to walk from the **Templar's Firs slipway** to the southern end of the restored canal at **Wichelstowe** because of building work, with all possible direct routes blocked by high fencing. However, in April the blockages were finally removed (for walkers at least), and by the end of the month it is now easy to walk to Wichelstowe and on to **Canal Walk in Swindon** on public footpaths & towpaths. It looks physically possible to cycle.

The **western part of the route to Hay Lane** has been open for over three years, and the new **Southern Connector Road** – now renamed **Wichel Way** – provides a smooth surface to new housing at **Orchards View** and on to the **Wichelstowe Boardwalk**. Here's the eastern route, both by Wichel Way (marked in pink) and by the public footpath to Mannington alongside the railway, which I find preferable: you get closer to wildlife including Hares and Roe Deer.



A fit person can complete the walk in under 2½ hours, but on 28th April I took 3, including a detour to see **Badger's Bridge**. Starting at 8:45 am, I reached the **99 bus-stop in Fleming Way** in time to catch the 12:50 back to **New Road**:



1 hr: Cowslips beside east end of Studley Grange



1¾ hr: Rebuilt, bigger, roundabout on Wichel Way



1 hr 50 min: The un-built road to Wichelstowe



1 hr 55 min: Newly-surfaced footpath to Orchards View



2 hr 5 min: Conference Road to Wichelstowe Boardwalk



2 hr 10 min: Newly-opened play park on Boardwalk



2¾ hr: Badger's Bridge, with canal/towpath dividing wall



2½ hr: Temporary scaffolding bridge, near Skew Bridge

If you need a stop, there's the café at the Studley Grange Garden Centre after 1¼ hour, then the H & W pub or Waitrose café at Wichelstowe. Finally, on Canal Walk in the Brunel Centre, 'The Crossing' provides snacks, meals and loos, accessed via an escalator.

Work Party Update

April had 5 Wednesdays, one of them at Chaddington Lock mowing the lock sides & access track on the 15th,

and one at Studley Grange on the 22nd dealing with the by-now bone-dry towpath and Chaddington Spill-Weir. The other three were at Templar's Firs where the northern path was not quite dry on the 1st; we used the work pontoon to transport the tubs of scalpings, with loads of garden bricks to line the edges (We don't throw away anything that might come in useful!).



The slightly muddy northern footpath, lined with bricks.



Alan and Phil with the finished result on April 1st.

The final section to be surfaced was on the notorious winter quagmire, which has been so bad that the temporary bypass was very well-used earlier this year.

It was a long way for those bow-hauling the pontoon to walk (on the towpath side) and then to be ferried across to the north side to help lay the surface. Meanwhile, Head of Boats Martin Palmer and engineer Alan Ward had succeeded in getting Nonsuch's engine to start and to take it to Hancock's Water and back for its first successful smoke-free run, as seen from the pontoon. On the 8th, the work-party finished laying the path at this point, plus a small patch further east.



1st: Martin & Alan on Nonsuch passing the pontoon.



Neil stamping the surface flat on the 8th.

We weren't alone working along the Templar's Firs stretch. Contractors for Network Rail were in action to cut down and saw the remains of a tree that threatened the overhead power lines on the railway, seen here on 6th April.

The train heading west looked to me as if it had been attacked by graffiti artists, but it's an official vinyl wrap to advertise the new Paddington Bear show.



If evidence were needed that walkers make good use of the towpath, the fitness walk the 'Striders' was seen from Nonsuch on Monday 27th before it made another test trip along the canal. The Striders had come from the Old

Town Hall down Station Road, then along the towpath to Buxstone Bridge, returning on the north side on the dry path and back up Station Road to the town centre.

They didn't disturb the moorhen on her now-untidy nest, just visible inside the tyre beside Nelson's cabin. Her bright-red marking betrays her presence.

Nonsuch was again in action on the 29th while the work-pontoon was taken eastwards beyond the Hancock's Water junction, to remove the reeds and bulrushes blocking the water flow, as seen earlier.





The ride-on mower close-cut the paths and picnic areas ready for inspection on the Mayday weekend. Cars for the event on the 2nd will be able to park on the wedge of grass next to the security compound. Our new volunteer Paul Day dealt with a Crack Willow that had blown down a couple of weeks ago, making the garage area particularly tidy.



The Crack Willow in the garage area, seen on the 20th.



The remains of the crack willow, neatly stacked.

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

Trustee visits

Trustees are going to visit a RWB branch work-party **on Wednesday 13th May**, at **Chaddington and Studley Grange**.

Monthly meetings affecting the RWB Branch area

Continuing monthly is the Trust-wide team planning the 50th Anniversary celebrations for 2027.

Also monthly, the **Advocacy team** now has a new director – **Chloe Ford**. She has worked very hard both as Swindon Branch Chair and Head of Comms, but has now handed over the recently we have been joined by **Rachel Gear**, who is employed by **New College** in Swindon as **Head of Careers and Work Experience**. Well, WBCT can offer plenty of Work Experience to her students as well as providing professional leadership to WBCT in PR and Cooms.

Mike Gibbin and Paul Mumford meet the RWB and Swindon branch representatives and engineers to plan the **RWB-Swindon Connect programme**. This will become highly important as we plan how to make use of the Landfill-Tax funding for the route.

Events

A reminder that 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**.

Up for election are the Chair, Vice-Chair, Secretary, Treasurer, Work Party Organisers, Membership and Event officers. **Can YOU help manage the branch?** If so, we'd love to see you at the Branch AGM.

WBCT has been asked if it can enter a Float for the **RWB Carnival on Saturday 16th May**. To this end, Martin Palmer will be bringing **The Mary Archard** on its trailer on 2nd May, so that we can plan how to decorate it ready for the Carnival.

After this, the next **RWB Branch meeting** is on **Monday 15th June** 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.

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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.

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