Wilts & Berks Canal Trust

RWB Branch Newsletter, July 2026

Canal Trust Anniversaries

The Wilts & Berks Canal Trust is preparing for our 50th Anniversary preparations in 2027, but this year it's the 75th anniversary of our near neighbour, the **Kennet & Avon Canal Trust**, marking this in June with a celebration cruise along the canal from **Bedwyn to Bristol and back via Reading**, using the **Bruce Boats wide-boat Hannah**, which is equipped with for wheelchair access using a built-in lift.

The journey has been crewed by the many trained crews taking it in turn. By the weekend of 13-14 June, it was moored at **Bradford-on-Avon**, and on the 15th, I was one of the WBCT representatives invited to cruise from there to the original junction with the Wilts & Berks Canal at **Semington**.



View of 'Hannah' from the stern, showing banner.



Steve with a K & A volunteer crew member.



Sections of the K & A Canal have been invaded by Norfolk Reeds, severely restricting the channel width.



Display boards in the cabin, with **Rosie & Jim** puppets. Unfortunately, we didn't have WBCT leaflets with us.

When the boat reached Semington, just before the lock, 'Hannah' was moored opposite the painted entrance to the Wilts & Berks, where **WBCT Chair Martin Holliss** presented the **K & A Chair Graham Puddephatt** with a 75th celebration cake in the shape of the canal junction complete with canal bridges and a model narrowboat, which was cut and shared out. There was plenty of cake left over, and our own Work Party team shared in the celebration with cake on Wednesday 17th.





Marrtin and Graham with cake at Semington.



'Hannah' posing alongside the old junction.

The boat continued eastward in stages, reaching **Crofton pumping station**, in steam for the weekend of 20-21 June, and finally arrived at Reading to moor-up at the **Reading WaterFest** on Saturday 27th June.

There was a WBCT gazebo at the 2025 WaterFest, and Martin Holliss asked for volunteers to man a gazebo for 2026. It was decided that it would only be on the Saturday – when Reading turned out to be within the **Red Alert for heat**.



Martin Palmer and Philip Ball, staying in the shade.



Mid-afternoon – one of the pair of flower-clad walkers.



The grand arrival of Hannah with VIP guests.
I was finally able to provide the boat with WBCT leaflets



Steve & Jim Dunning, retired Council long-term planner, who had helped to revitalise Reading's waterside.

Note the red 'boat' in the photo above.

Actually, it was a modular pontoon similar to our work pontoon, but longer and enclosed with what looked like re-purposed parts of large dog crates.

This craft was used to transport musicians from the north side (where 'Hannah' was being moored) to and from a larger pontoon on the south side being used as a stage for performances.



For me during the afternoon, I was delighted to meet **Jim Dunning**, who had been a Long-Term planner when I had been a **Wokingham District** councillor. Jim told me that before he was at Wokingham, he'd worked for **Reading Borough Council**., which in the 1980s really made a feature of the Rivers Thames, Kennet and the restored canal. On Saturday, Jim asked me if I'd met one of his colleagues at Wokingham (I hadn't), who had already left Wokingham to work for **Stroud District Council**, which has done so much to regenerate that town and attract canal-side businesses. Jim mentioned the minibus tour that I had arranged for June 2016, which covered the circular route of the K & A and Wilts & Berks Canals, where we made a stop at the then-newly-redecorated **Peterborough Arms**.

Another Trust which is celebrating an anniversary is the **Basingstoke Canal Society**, which has recently completed a video of **60 years of restoration**. It's well worth seeing: **How to save a Canal - the story of the Basingstoke Canal .**

Work Party Update

There should have been four June work-parties, but the final one on 24th June was called off beforehand. Normally, the work-party would finish early on hot days, but as it turned out, the temperature had already climbed into the 'Red' zone before 8:30am. By contrast, mid-June was cool and wet.

The first week was at **Chaddington Lock** where the grass had grown really tall within just a month. It was brought back under control, as was the towpath towards the spill-weir. While mowing the greenery beside the towpath (keeping clear of the edge of water's edge to protect the wildflowers), the mower disturbed a nest of bumble bees who came out to take a look, but they weren't aggressive. This area was avoided for the rest of the day, and a '**SHOC**' was recorded to report the **'Safety Hazard Observation'**.

The much-delayed visit by the Trustees happened on the 3rd, when new Trustee **Andy Rhoades** was shown the work-sites and the canal at Studley Grange, spending some time afterwards reviewing Safety policies and procedures with Neil Lazenby. Andy is a Health & Safety professional, hence the emphasis on documentation.

Later in the day, many more floating reeds had parted company with the main mats on the north side. The work-party gathered them on the towpath side to be removed and disposed, once any wildlife had been given a chance to get back to the water. What seemed like lots of spiders turned out to be miniature frogs – dozens of them.



Erecting the safety barrier before mowing at the lock.



Chaddington Lock, partially mown.



Alan & Simon removing mats of reeds onto the bank.



H & S Trustee Andy Rhoades with WPO Neil Lazenby.

Also on the 3rd, a couple of volunteers walked to the east end of the Templars Firs section to remove a tree that had blown down across the towpath a couple of days earlier. Branches were sawn off and the remaining trunk pushed off the path. It was a shorted distance from Chaddington than it was from the garages at Templar's Firs!



Yet another tree blown down, late on 1st June.



The tree, partially sawn, after the 3rd June work-party.

On the second Wednesday (the 10th), the team concentrated on **Chaddington spill-weir** and the western part of the towpath at **Studley Grange**, where the target was the **Norfolk Reeds** (see Page 1 where these invasive reeds are also on the K & A, restricting navigation on what should be a wide canal).

In the last couple of years, there had been no need to use the lightweight aluminium work-boat because Nonsuch boat trips suppressed their growth, but in recent weeks the yellow water lilies have taken over again. The Angling Club has done what it could to clear small areas for fishing, but by the 17th, the lilies at the west end needed to be eliminated to allow the fish to breathe (and be caught by the anglers!).

For many members of the work-party, this was the first time that the work-boat and battery-powered weed-cutter was used in this way. However, for the first few runs through the thick vegetation, the work-boat could make no headway at all using the weed-cutter. Instead, a solution was to point the boat into the middle of the channel and let the propeller chew its way through, stopping every boat-length to remove the built-up mass of leaves. Once a clear channel had been formed, the boat could the widen the channel in stages using the weed-cutter, stopping repeatedly to un-clog the blades. The piles of vegetation were pushed towards the towpath to be carted off.

The work-boat and weed-cutter had been the preserve of veteran volunteer **Frank Keohane**, who by chance turned up to see the action. Frank has suffered a stroke but is gradually improving, though not enough to take the helm.

Our youngest volunteer, **Brendan Bennett**, is still at college in Cirencester, but has been granted volunteer time off on Wednesdays to work on the canal. When under 18, he couldn't be included in photos for safeguarding reasons, but he's been so keen to work that he's almost always been in view! At last, we now take photos of our young hero. Unfortunately for the rest of us, almost all are over 65 and need a different sort of safeguarding – against the heat.



The canal at the west end on 17th June. Before work started, there was a wall-to-wall bank of yellow lilies. In the far distance are members of the Angling Club.



The remaining vegetation was gathered up by this metal contraption known as 'Son of Sid [Vicious]', which replaced the wooden version a few years ago.

	
Scoopng-up the chopped vegetation onto the towpath. Brendan is in the background.	Neil Lazenby chatting to Frank Keohane by the slipway.

The **Maintenance Team** works on and repairs the mechanical equipment used by the team. On the 22nd, **John Bower** and **Neil Lazenby** checked a donated petrol strimmer kindly donated. Although it's several years old, it is of high quality and is now available to be used by members of the team. On the 29th, Neil was joined by **Gareth Penn** to carry out strimming around the storage containers at **Spittleborough Farm**.

	
The WBCT containers at Spittleborough Farm seen from the car park, after the grass had been strimmed.	The 'wild side' of the containers seen from the motorway side. (These photos: Gareth Penn).

For the third month in a row, we have had people asking if they can volunteer. They first need to have an induction led by our **Branch WPO Neil Lazenby.** If you want to join our ***'free outdoor gym'***, please e-mail neil.lazenby@wbct.org.uk.

Take the 'No Peaks' Challenge

We may have the Wiltshire Downs to climb if we wish to take a strenuous walk, but we're a bit far from taking on the **Three Peaks Challenge** just completed in one day by the **Princess of Wales**.

Our **'No Peak' Challenge** is suitable for anyone who can manage about 6 miles on the flat, with only a couple of very slight inclines: one at the site of **Woodshaw Lock** and the other beside the restored **Chaddington Lock**.

Starting from the Marlborough Road car-park, the **first hour** of the walk to **Swindon** passes the **Templar's Firs stretch**, then on a public footpath through the un-restored **Harris Croft Farm**, then on the towpath within **Morningside Farm** both below and above **Chaddington Lock**, and finally onwards past the landfill sites at **Studley Grange** and thence by public footpath to **Hay Lane** where you can get a cup of coffee at the Garden Centre café.

The **second hour** is on foot and cycle ways which are wide and smooth beside **Wharf Road** and **Wichel Way** to **Orchards View estate,** then across to the **Wichelstowe Boardwalk** to reach the elegant footbridge **between the H & W pub and Waitrose** where you have a choice of which to take refreshment**.**

The **third hour** (or less) starts with a detour down to the nearly-complete **Badger's Bridge** where you can make out the footings of the new swing bridge further south. From here, the canal will split into two to go east under **Mill Lane** to **East Wichel** or westward towards the **proposed M4 canal tunnel**. After this tunnel has been built, you will then be able to walk, away from roads, all the way from **RWB to Wichelstowe**. The final stretch takes you over the rebuilt **River Ray Aqueduct** (see below), through **Kingshill** to **Canal Walk** in the **centre of Swindon** within easy reach of either the **hourly 99 bus to New Road** (Monday-Saturday only) or the **more frequent 55 bus to RWB High Street**.

Fleming Way, now the **Bus Boulevard**, is built on the line of the old **Wilts & Berks Canal and North Wilts Canal junction**, and you can even see where the old bridges crossed over the former canal, inscribed into the pavement.



A slight detour from the Wichelstowe Footbridge to see progress at Badger's Bridge & swing bridge, 29th June.



The River Ray Aqueduct is now rebuilt by contractors. Seen on 29th June, the scaffolding will soon go.

Events

A reminder that the **Royal Wootton Bassett branch meetings** are held on the third Monday of the month, at the **Angel Hotel in the High Street at 7:30pm**. The next meetings will be on **20th July, 17th August** and **21st September.** If you cannot use the stairs, let us know in advance, and we shall ensure that we meet on the ground floor.

Branch Quiz

Peggy-Sue Ford, our new Events organiser, has arranged for the RWB Branch Quiz to be held up in the Ballroom, on the third Wednesday in August – the **19th**.

If successful, it will be repeated in the town on a suitable day.

Now's **your** chance to make it successful!



Angling Club

The **RWB Angling Club** pays for a licence to fish the canal on the Wiltshire Council-owned stretch at Templar's Firs, and our work-parties do their best to keep the channel clear, despite the invasive yellow water-lilies.

The Angling Club was due to run a tournament last Wednesday, 24th June, but of course the weather was far too hot. It finally took place on Sunday 28th, with at least 15 competitors along the towpath, spread out both east and west of Noremarsh Bridge.



Near the white water-lilies east of Noremarsh Bridge.



Anglers at the west end, seen from the footbridge.



East of Buxstone Bridge, there may be plenty of fish. They can't be seen under the yellow water-lilies and reeds.

A reminder that **FISHING IS NOT ALLOWED** on the **RWB Town-Council-owned stretch** from **Hancock's Water** to the east end, as seen above on the 28th.

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