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

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



Credit: WBCT

Chair's Report

Despite the hot and dry month, we still managed to achieve a lot on our various projects. The weather, as you can read below, is having its impacts not least the lack of rain which meant that we couldn't run The Mary Archard on our monthly Open days, nor use Boswell, or the butty to help in our reed clearing. Whilst we now seem to be getting some rain, it is likely to take several weeks before water levels rise enough to be able to use the boats.

18 KESCRG volunteers spent a week working at the Pewsham site at the beginning of August. They completed the last of the pointing on brickwork under the new bridge and repaired a short section of wall above the main waiting wall between middle and top locks. They also carried out a lot of work on Bottom Lock and also on digging out the area for the water and sewerage tanks for the Carpenters' Workshop. Organising the week caused a lot of stress and angst for the WPOs; lessons have been learnt as to what work we offer them for any future visits.

Whilst we have drawings / designs for the building of the south-east entrance wall of Bottom Lock, Clive Dorling and I are trying to be pro-active in getting the drawings/designs for the whole of Bottom Lock in place so they are ready when we want them, and not cause a delay in procedures as happened with the SE entrance wall, however trying to initiate this process is proving frustratingly difficult.

We also require a design drawing for the access road over Top Lock Bridge to The Carpenters' Workshop.

We have received information from Wiltshire Council (WC) of a proposal from the British Horse Society for an upgrade of some footpaths around the Pewsham Locks area to Bridleway status. This would include a section of towpath on the route from Pewsham Locks to the A4. WC have brought this to the fore, I suspect, due to the proposed Gleeson Development as the proposal was first submitted in 2022. The Trust is yet to give its official response.

To finish on some good news, we have had a number of new 'dirty boot' volunteers start in the last few months. Great to see; we'll just try not to work them too hard!

Proposed Pewsham Development:
An outline planning application has been submitted by Gleesons. Work is underway to prepare a response. We are awaiting the application from Gallaghers.

Agreement has been reached on the principal objectives the Trust wishes to see arising from the two developments.

These are:

- The restoration of the canal from from Pewsham Top Lock to the A4
- The construction of a bridge to carry the A4 over the Canal.
- The provision of a Visitor Centre, Trust Offices and Parking
- The provision of a path or other reserved strip marking the line of the Chippenham branch line.

Howard Wilson,
Chairman - MCC and F&L Branch
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Health & Safety

Nothing to report this month.

Malcolm Hitchinson, H&S Advisor

Work Parties

Work Party Management Group

Nothing to report this month.

Martin Palmer WPMG Chair

Pewsham Site

The annual reed / weed clearance has started with the WRG excavator being used from the towpath to remove weed and some reeds that it can reach. Water levels are too low to be able to use the butty so we are currently just clearing the reeds on the towpath side of the canal after which hopefully rising water levels will allow us to use the butty to reach the offside area.

Dauntsey Lock

KESCRG (WRG team) will be on site 12th and 13th of September to start clearing the 80m of Canal bed just north of Dauntsey Lock. There are plenty of Willow trees and various saplings to get out of the bed and dispose of in dedges. The KESCRG team will be joined by the MCC Green team members and other MCC/ WBCT members during that weekend.

Dave Maloney, WPO

Projects

Peterborough Arms

Paul and Theo who looked after the pub for G4 for a while have now moved on so we have a new landlord Alex & his partner Sarah reopened the pub on 4th September. Alex has been in the trade for decades and is a Chef, part of the Gravy Man Team. Sarah will be dealing with front of house. Why not pop over and say hello?

From a volunteers' perspective we have had an extremely busy month. We removed dead plants and broken plant containers from the font of the pub so it looked less derelict!

We continue to deal external woodwork repairs and painting.

We have a couple of window sills to repair/replace and are grateful to Graham S from Melksham Shed for his assistance.

The repair to a beam in the main bar was delayed due to a lintel production error. The lintel returned to site recently, so all components are now at the pub. Volunteers cleared out all the relevant areas in preparation for the third-party workforce to come on site on the 7/8 September and install the lintel and hanging bracket.

Replacement tile catches have been put in place at the front of the building, and the four chimneys of the building have been repointed. This work was carried out by a third-party contractor.

The log store is now complete, and we are moving timber from the outside store into the log store. This will give the landlord more storage space as it's quite busy inside the pub.

Early September will see tower scaffolds at the front of the pub as volunteers deal with sealing issues and replacement of windowsills.

Dave Maloney, Project Lead

Carpenters' Workshop

Work progresses steadily inside the CWS with David P facing challenges of door liners as the doorways to the annex areas are not a standard height, but of course he's rising to the challenge as always. In the toilet area the internal wall cladding is all but finished, waiting on a component before last panel is fitted.

Greg our friendly electrician has been on site checking over my work and, after relevant testing, we now have power to all main socket outlets in the annex area. There is an important historical video of the first kettle to be boiled within the kitchen. We are currently installing the PIRs in the toilet areas so that lights will only be used when needed.

After the Waterway Recovery Group volunteers dug the relevant holes for the tanks, MCC volunteers got the tanks into place with the help of Chippenham Farm Sales' telehandler and experienced driver. MCC volunteers have finished the concrete around the water treatment tank.

	
Final adjustments are made: Dave Maloney	Tanks in place. Water treatment has its concrete surround: Dave Maloney

Dave Maloney, Project Lead

Bottom Lock

KESCRG dug out the last of spoil for the foundations of the south-east entrance wall. Two thirds of blinding laid. MCC Volunteers completed this. First concrete pour (11.25 cubic metres) took place last week of August. First row of concrete blocks now being laid.

KESCRG cast 12 coping stones cast on east lock wall – another 3 or 4 left to complete

	
Casting Coping stones	Excavating and laying blinding

	
Preparing to lay concrete foundations	First of many dumper loads of concrete
	
Progress!	Using excavator to help spread concrete
	
Foundations completed.	Setting of first concrete blocks

Howard Wilson

Melksham Link

This month we are able to welcome a new Project Manager to the team.
Paulina Heijman was already a member of the trust and has visited Pewsham Locks on a number of occasions. She is a professional and qualified PM who offered her services for a few hours a week and joined the team in August.

A plan for achieving Planning Permission for ML has been created and circulated to the Directors and Senior Leadership Team.

A Freedom of Information Request was raised to establish the ownership, maintenance schedule and future plans for the Melksham Gate. The response was:

- The Environment agency do not own the Melksham Gate and Weir
- While they have maintained it for many years, they have no formal agreement or obligation to do so.
- As the Melksham Development Company (MDC) owns the river bank they are considered to be the riparian owners of the Melksham Gate and Weir.
- Under English law, as the MDC's property and land directly adjoins the River Avon at Melksham Gate, they are presumed to be the riparian owner of the land and structures up to the centre line of the watercourse, carrying the responsibility for keeping the channel clear and managing local flood or drainage issues.
- In this instance due to the length of the Weir, MDC's responsibility may extend bank to bank.

A draft letter outlining the current situation with the Ecology (wildlife) Study has been prepared. This is currently under discussion before being finalised and sent to Wiltshire County Council (WCC). A meeting to discuss this and gain agreement to the content of the final report is scheduled with WCC for Sept 29th

A Terms of Reference (TOR) for the proposed ML Steering Committee has been prepared and attached to this report. We are asking the branch for nominations for the positions detailed in the TORs.

Denis Hellewell, Director of the Melksham Link Project

Environmental (Photos by Howard Yardy or donated by wildlife photographers)

The hot and dry weather continued causing the water level to drop further in the canal. I would have expected to see algae forming and lots of dead fish on the surface, but I think it has been held back by the crows foot keeping the remaining water well oxygenated. Not good for boating I know, but the water does look healthy. It also helps that the farm above the canal is organic and there is no artificial fertiliser run off. There is no doubt this helps keep the water in a good state and therefore attractive to wildlife. Hannah's brook is now running and hopefully it will fill up quickly.

The low water didn't seem to put off some fishermen who have left line and float in two places opposite Gordon's meadow.




We have begun mowing the meadows and towpath edges. We're seeing an increase in numbers of different species of wildflowers and this year has been a great year for butterflies. We have recorded 22 different species along the canal with 3 this year I haven't seen before, brown Argus, small heath and clouded yellow. The extension to Gordon's meadow has been sown. We were lucky to borrow a rotovator for the tractor which has made the job a lot easier and established an excellent surface for a grass and wildflower mix. The meadow extension will have a hedge, and we have laid cardboard and mulch to the line, with grass from the meadow cutting.

One of the aims of the Bee Route is to have close relationships with other environmental groups in the area. Nature is in a crisis and working with other charities is important to address this. 'Rooted' is a community based environmental group in Chippenham who have a large community orchard in the town which they planted last year. The area has a large grass area which has proved hard to manage. Andrew Shewring and I took the Bee Route tractor and an All-terrain mower and did a 'hay cut' in the orchard. You can read about it on the Rooted website.
A meadow in the making: Restoring wildlife at Lords Mead Community Orchard — Rooted Chippenham

Howard Yardy, Wildlife Officer

Boats

Low water levels still so no boat trips.
The bow section of Boswell has been reboarded using old scaffold boards.

Bob Howlett, Boats Officer

Events

MCC Volunteers erected and struck the MCC Marquee that was used to host the Peterborough Ba, and a display by RWB Branch, at the Dauntsey Festival of Transport Saturday 28 & Sunday 29 August.

Melksham Food and River Festival will have been held by the time you read this. We are grateful to those who volunteered to help at the event. No volunteers equals no event, and therefore no funds from boat trips or awareness of the public to our work.

So, if you are able, please do consider volunteering to help at an event. You really can make a difference.

MCC Quiz Neeld Hall Friday 23rd October. People are already asking for/booking tables so if you want your team to be a part of this quiz night get in touch without delay.

Date for your diary.

MCC Christmas Dinner in the Barn at the Bell Inn Lacock, Wednesday 16th December. More details in November's report.

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

Media Relations

My focus in August was the promotion of the Bottom Lock restoration, featuring project lead Roger Noyce as the spokesperson.



He was photographed in front of the lock, with the restored dry dock clearly visible in the background. It was another of the images provided by professional freelance photographer Stephen Lewis when he attended the celebration of Top Lock bridge.

Roger said: “Once the lock is restored and we’ve cleared the pound above so that it can hold water again, we’ll be able to move tripboats and workboats from the restored canal into the dry dock whenever they need repairs.

“Teams have been excavating the southern entrance so that we can rebuild the wing walls, and carefully removing loose bricks and roots from the lock chamber itself. Hopefully we can clean and reuse many of the bricks at a later stage.

“Teams have also been casting new coping stones along the top of the lock.

“It’s time-consuming work but we’ve received fantastic support from partners including the Waterways Recovery Group and the Kent and East Sussex Canal Restoration Group, who kindly provided their own volunteers to support us.

“However, it’s a major project so we’d welcome any additional help, particularly with fundraising.

“The more support we receive, the sooner we can bring this wonderful waterway back to life.”

The press release was featured by the North Wiltshire Gazette & Herald, Swindon Advertiser, Calne News, One Chippenham and WiltsHive, with branch chairman Howard Wilson interviewed on BBC Radio Wiltshire’s breakfast show.

In addition, Trust head of comms Rachel Gear kindly shared an amended version of our press release on Facebook, supported by Howard Wilson’s photographs of recent workparties.

It was one of the most popular posts of the month, with almost 160 engagements. Comments included "Thank you for the amazing work that you all do" and Every time I see what the Trust is doing, I'm impressed and hopeful that the canal will be flowing again".

I also managed to secure a brief mention of our participation in the Melksham Food & River Festival in the Melksham News, highlighting the boat trips, while Stephen's photograph of the team celebrating the completion of Top Lock bridge was used to illustrate Gazette & Herald and Swindon Advertiser updates on the proposed housing development at Pewsham.

Next month's press releases will focus on Howard Yardy's attendance at BBC Radio Wiltshire's Make A Difference Awards on September 5, where I nominated him in the Environmental category, and the Heritage Open Day at Pewsham Locks on September 12.

Justin Guy, Media Relations Officer

Branch Webpages & Digital Comms

Two articles published re our environmental work

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

Finances

Income in August included:

- £400 from the sale of two fire pumps (thanks to Peter Williams),
- £220 cash and £145 cards at the Open Day, and
- £250 for assistance to Relish Running.

The Bee Route received two donations: a £150 cheque and £1,000 online.

Expenses were:

- £425 petrol and diesel
- £267 engine oil
- £150 accommodation for future work camp
- £63 SumUp card payment terminal
- £53 rake and broom
- £31 sundries for repairs to Boswell
- £10 supplies for cafe

Also paid via the branch bank account were £382 Bee Route (bulbs and seeds), £68 Carpenter's Workshop (electrical) and £102 for Peterborough Arms repairs.

Bank balance at the end of the month was £2,773.

Steve Roberts, Branch Treasurer

Membership (Info from SLT meeting)

Not provided this month.