



Monmouthshire, Brecon &
Abergavenny Canals Trust

Canal Connections

SPRING 2020



**THE NEWSLETTER OF THE
MONMOUTHSHIRE, BRECON & ABERGAVENNY
CANALS TRUST**



Monmouthshire, Brecon & Abergavenny Canals Trust

EDITORIAL

Apologies for the delay in issuing this edition of our quarterly newsletter. Spring is normally a wonderful time on the canal, a time for new beginnings with a freshness in the air and newly born wildlife all around us. We at MBACT were particularly looking forward to this year as it promised to be an exciting one for the Trust. Our original plan was to have this newsletter ready for distribution by the end of March – two weeks before Easter. In it, we had laid out our plans for the forthcoming school holidays, with events scheduled at Fourteen Locks for the Easter break, while at Goytre Wharf, our volunteers had worked tirelessly over the winter months to prepare our Community Boat – the *Lord Raglan* – for the season ahead.

But, as we now know only too well, global events were to overtake these plans with devastating effect. Our canal is normally a blissful escape from the big, bad world around us, and it remains a haven in the difficult times in which we currently live.

It is important, however, to keep things in perspective - the cancellation of a few events and the delay in the provision of boat trips on the canal are only minor issues in the overall scheme of things. Nevertheless, the coronavirus outbreak and the subsequent restrictions to the way we live our lives will undoubtedly have a major impact on our leisure time, both in the short and long-term. At the time of writing, with talk of the lockdown being eased gradually, there is still a lot of uncertainty as to when we, as a Trust, can get back to what we consider to be “normal” working.

I walk my dog along the canal every day, something that I have continued to do within the lockdown restrictions imposed at the end of March. The towpaths have generally been quite empty, but it has been good to see families out together appreciating the canal and its therapeutic, escapist qualities. The social distancing rules, not always easy to adhere to on a narrow towpath, have generally been observed with good nature and goodwill, although the coming together of walkers, joggers and cyclists has, on the odd occasion, presented some issues.

With this in mind, we would like to remind you of the Canal and River Trust’s advice for the safe use of the towpaths during the lockdown – please follow the attached link <https://canalrivertrust.org.uk/enjoy-the-waterways/safety-on-our-waterways/coronavirus>. There is also some useful information for boat owners.

In this issue, we have endeavoured to keep you updated with how we as a Trust are dealing with the lockdown, and also try to give a broad outline as to how we plan to operate once the restrictions begin to be lifted. Obviously, this is a constantly changing situation, but we are hopeful that our Summer newsletter will be able to provide some more positive information, and that we can, at least, start to plan our road back to normality. Please take care and stay safe.



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A MESSAGE FROM STEVE THOMAS CBE

The following article by Steve Thomas – the chair of Bwrdd Glandwr Cymru – followed on from his attendance at the MBACT Committee meeting in February. It was written just before the main impact of COVID-19 became apparent, and was intended for inclusion in the original edition of the newsletter in March.

I was delighted to be appointed in 2019 to be the new chair of Bwrdd Glandwr Cymru - the advisory body to the Canals and River Trust in Wales. I feel privileged to take up this role, not least since my background has generally entailed walking the canal towpaths rather than navigating them. Anyone approaching the world of canals and boating cannot help but be impressed by the passion of the people involved. The time people freely volunteer to canal restoration projects, in often difficult conditions, is a source of inspiration. Being invited recently to speak to the MBACT committee meeting confirmed this feeling and it was also a learning experience.

The CRT stresses the role of canals as a major source of wellbeing. Welsh Government's active travel legislation could be written with canals as its source. The use of the Mon and Brec towpaths by boaters, cyclists, walkers and many more makes it one of the most popular tourist destinations in the Brecon Beacons. In doing so CRT recognizes that some of our towpaths can be blighted by shopping trolley syndrome, litter, and rubbish. The community roots project focused on the Pontymoile basin within Torfaen is a place-based intervention. This aims to materially change patterns of use and perception of non-users living within 1km. This will include link paths improvements, upgrading ramp steps and greening the canal. On the latter theme, 2020 will hopefully see the canal achieve a Green Flag Award® status. CRT and a range of stakeholders have worked on this. The award recognizes and rewards well-managed parks and green spaces as a benchmark standard. This would also confirm the canal's central role in protecting and fostering an environment that is ecologically opulent with plants and wildlife.

Like everyone involved with MBACT, we at CRT share the ambition to get the canal fully navigable and restored. It is our view that a new strategy for the canal that consolidates the mass of existing documentation is needed. This should be produced quickly and pitched across local authorities for consideration at the Cardiff capital city deal. Equally more intense lobbying of Welsh Government Ministers will occur over the next year to test possibilities.

We had a fantastic presentation at our last board from Wyn Mitchell, Richard Dommett and Yvonne Forsey of MBACT on the history of the canal and its potential development. It is clear that, while a solution remains possible, the pace of factors like yet more retail development could prevent this. Isn't it time for the same scale of imagination in South Wales that we saw in Scotland? There the Scottish Government funded the Kelpies, the 30-metre-high horse-head sculptures, which stand proudly next to a new extension to the Forth and Clyde Canal. Such vision is possible on the Mon and Brec, not least to achieve the restoration does not require any CPOs on the route.

In recent months, the scale of flooding has shown the impact of climate change. The shock of the COVID-19 pandemic also sees foreign travel in decline. To see the Mon and Brec stretch again from "the towpaths to the tides" chimes with all key provisions of the Future Generations Act. Surely now is the time to look to the beauty on our doorstep and promote sustainable tourism with our canals at the forefront?



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FOURTEEN LOCKS CANAL CENTRE

We took the decision to close the Centre and Café on **Friday 20th March** in keeping with government advice, and the Centre has been closed since then. Our Centre Manager, **Kate Wickens**, has still been busy, however, as she has taken the opportunity to catch up with all the small jobs that normally get left behind during the hurly burly of daily life at Fourteen Locks. The Centre has also been deep cleaned from top to bottom, with the paintwork touched up where deemed necessary.

Rock the Lock 2020 has been cancelled, and it is unlikely that **Brass on the Basin**, scheduled to take place in August, will go ahead either, although a firm decision on this has yet to be taken. At the present time there are no plans to reschedule these events this year.

The popular monthly walks also have had to be put on hold, and although restrictions on outside exercise were amongst the first to be lifted, the logistics of arranging an organised walk within the social distancing limitations make it unlikely that these will restart soon.

In the post-coronavirus world, the Centre will need to be reorganised and set out differently, and Kate is currently looking at alternative ways to ensure that staff and customers alike are protected. In addition, many of our events require volunteers, some of them in the more senior age bracket, who may not be able to give of their time as freely as before.



As well as planning ahead and dealing with daily administrative tasks, Kate regularly updates our Facebook Page, and she has been busy uploading photographs of interest, as this is a busy time of year for wildlife. The picture above is a good example - a pair of moorhens nesting in the bronze dragonfly sculpture located in the water pound at the Centre.

Please keep updated on all MBACT events by following us @fourteenlocks on



www.mbact.org.uk

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Tel: 01633 892167

Registered Charity No. 515879

Registered Office: Fourteen Locks Canal Centre, Cwm Lane, Rogerstone, Newport, NP10 9GN



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COMMUNITY BOATS

The final work on the refit of the *Lord Raglan* has had to be put on hold for the time being. We were just getting ready for what we hoped would be a busy Easter period when the lockdown was imposed. Although we have yet to obtain the MCA licence to enable us to take up to 30 passengers, we are still able to run cruises with a smaller amount of people on board. Indeed, during February and March, when it eventually decided to stop raining and the wind dropped, we were able to run a few trips which were well received.

This year we have already made a lot of progress getting the *Lord Raglan* ready for its final inspection, with adjustments and finishing touches being made to the electrical and hydraulic systems, and upholstery being fitted to the seats for more comfort (see photo). It is now nine years since we first acquired the vessel from a scrapyard on the Neath Canal, and it is frustrating to be held up so close to completion. But, as has been mentioned earlier in this newsletter, there are much more serious situations occurring all around



us that are far more important, and we all need to stay patient at this time. We are already making plans to restart boat trips just as soon as we can after the lockdown restrictions are lifted, and we are looking at a way of being able to run the vessel with limited numbers within existing social distancing guidelines.

Just a quick mention of our smaller trip boat – the *Edith-Elizabeth* – which is also moored at Goytre Wharf. Along with the *Lord Raglan*, our team of volunteers are constantly monitoring the condition of both vessels during the lockdown as we need to ensure that the batteries are retaining their charge. The *E-E*, being open-sided, has the distinct advantage of not having an enclosed cabin, and therefore maybe in a position to resume some trips before the *Lord Raglan*.





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OTHER NEWS ITEMS

DUCK RACE 2020

We have decided that it would not be practicable to have a Duck Race this year. Although it is still possible that some outdoor events may be able to take place by the end of August, we felt that the current economic situation would make it very difficult both to sell tickets and also to attract support from the various organisations who normally very generously donate the prizes.

MEMBERSHIP RENEWALS

As we mentioned in our recent email to members, you may have experienced some delays when renewing your membership. This is due, in part, to the closure of Fourteen Locks Canal Centre, but also because **Paul Stacey**, our Membership Secretary, has not been available due to personal family health issues related to coronavirus. Thankfully, this situation has now improved, and he has resumed his duties. We now hope that all queries have been answered and resolved. We thank you for patience in this matter.

ROGER HOUSE

We have been saddened to learn of the recent death of **Roger House**, who was British Waterways Area Engineer Gloucester, responsible for the South West Region. Roger was very much involved in the early days of the restoration of the Monmouthshire & Brecon Canal, and was a real gentleman and highly respected during his days at BW, where he was affectionately known as **Mr House**. Our Chairman, **Richard Dommett**, warmly recalls Roger "as a forgotten champion supporting community involvement in canal restoration and volunteering. He was a real friend and mentor in support of my career at BW."

FINALLY, A MESSAGE FROM OUR CHAIRMAN

We thank you for being a member of the Trust. Your support makes all the work put in by our volunteers possible, and during these difficult times this is more crucial than ever. Thank you again.

Richard.

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