

Canal Connections

Winter 2021/2022



A HAPPY NEW YEAR TO ALL OF OUR MEMBERS AND VOLUNTEERS

**THE NEWSLETTER OF THE
MONMOUTHSHIRE, BRECON & ABERGAVENNY
CANALS TRUST (MBACT)**

A WELCOME FROM OUR NEW CHAIRMAN REVD. JOHN COLLIER



I would like to introduce myself and reflect briefly on events since our last Newsletter in Spring 2020.

I was born in Griffithstown, so the canal was a huge part of my growing up, not least my daily walk to school was along the canal towpath.

In 2014 I was at the Fourteen Locks Canal Centre and expressed an interest in supporting the work of MBACT. They were looking for a chaplain so I got a new “job”. Subsequently I joined the committee, and became a Director and Vice Chair, assuming the role of Chairman in April this year when Richard Dommett MBE stepped down. My appointment as Chairman was ratified in our AGM on 30th October 2021.

I am grateful for all the work Richard has done as Chairman over the years; so much of which has been behind the scenes, and thankfully he will continue to avail us of his expertise in the regeneration work which the Trust is doing.

The events of the last 2 years have had an impact on our Trust and we also miss the dedicated Andrew Parks as Secretary, who succumbed to illness in September 2020. A number of other key people have left the Trust over the past 18 months. I would like to thank them for their time and commitment to the Trust. However, I feel that we have a reinvigorated vibrancy with new people joining and a new focus looking forward especially around re-establishing old partnerships and forging new.

It’s not always immediately obvious, but I can assure you that MBACT is working furiously in the background for the benefit of securing a future for the canal. We are in regular contact with officers at CRT (the Canal and River Trust), and Torfaen, Newport and Caerphilly Councils, to raise issues of concern, prepare funding applications as well as more practical day to day work.

I am also grateful for all other groups and individual volunteers who give their time and effort in support of the Mon and Brec, in so many different ways. Without a truly collaborative approach we will never see the opening up of the canal through Cwmbran or restoration work on the rest of the canal.

A happy and safe New Year to you all. Revd. John Collier



THE VARIED WORK OF OUR VOLUNTEERS

In our Trust we are lucky to have the support of so many volunteers from those who help in our Fourteen Locks Canal Centre, through to towpath volunteers, community boat volunteers, our trustees and directors, as well as others working on admin functions, and on our website and social media.

We also work in partnership with other organisations such as Newport City Council (NCC) and have affiliations with others such as the Torfaen Canal Volunteer Group.

We have a special Partnership with Newport City Council in the Canal and Countryside Volunteer Group who work every Thursday on the Fourteen Locks flight and at the nearby Alt yr Yn Nature Reserve. Their recent work has made a great difference on the pounds between the locks.



Volunteers at Alt yr yn

Our Fourteen Locks Canal Centre is back to being open 7 days a week. This is down to the hard work of new Centre Manager Laura and her Assistant Managers, and especially the team of great volunteers who turn up on a regular basis to welcome visitors and to tell them about the canal and the work that we do.



Volunteers at Ty Coch

We also have a small team of towpath volunteers on the Ty Coch flight in Cwmbran. The canal-side there needs constant maintenance and undergrowth clearing. Our volunteers there have been working hard this year to cut the undergrowth back, even down to clearing the towpath of fallen trees to allow cyclists, horses and their riders through!

We really need some extra help here so if you wish to join this team on a Saturday morning then please contact us.



Monmouthshire, Brecon & Abergavenny Canals Trust

This year we have had an expanding team of volunteers maintaining and running our 2 community boats at Goytre Wharf. The boats are used to promote the canals heritage and importance, not least by bringing people to the canal. The boats have also provided the Trust with a useful income this year whilst keeping the ticket price as low as possible. Our passengers and volunteers have all enjoyed being on the canal this year.



Some of our boat volunteers

We had a small evening buffet in Penelope's Café in Goytre Wharf in October to celebrate the incredibly important work of our volunteers. A huge thank you to all our volunteers.

AGM - 30th OCTOBER 2021

MBACT held the Annual General Meeting in October 2021, on Zoom due to the continuing COVID risks which had prevented a meeting being held in 2020. Our Chairman reported how COVID had affected the activities of the Trust, and although our activity in Fourteen Locks and the trip boats had been curtailed, volunteers had spent the time profitably and carried on with essential works and activities when permitted.

The enforced break had also allowed some changes in the organisational structure to be made. Paul Thomas and Wyn Mitchell had been carrying out a significant upgrade to the website which had been well received, and Paul had taken over as Director responsible for Fourteen Locks. Richard Dommett having stepped down as Chair sees a new role as Regeneration Manager, which means we will be able to continue to benefit from his extensive knowledge and experience of all things canal. Ian Lewis is now Director, Vice Chairman and Community Boat Project Manager.

John thanked the Directors and volunteers for the support they continue to give to MBACT. Without the volunteer directors, and all who participate in the many roles within the Trust we could not be as successful as we have been.

The treasurer reported that, despite not holding fundraising events, the financial position was good mainly due to the grants and support secured to help businesses and charities recover from the effects of COVID. The annual report and accounts were accepted. Committee Members were re-appointed, and Paul Thomas and Jayne Collier confirmed as Directors.

THE FOURTEEN LOCKS CANAL CENTRE

The Fourteen Locks Canal Centre remains the admin centre of our Trust and an income source for our work. The Centre also provides the base of other activities such as our small museum and archive. The Centre was significantly affected by the Covid 19 restrictions and was closed for a period of time, and then was only open for 5 days a week, although the café was open for 7 days a week. In November 2021 we have again gone back to the whole Centre being open 7 days a week, 10am – 4pm.



Laura Thomas, our new Centre Manager

dedication to the Centre. Cllr. Yvonne Forsey also stepped down as Fourteen Locks Director in August 2020. Again we wish to thank Yvonne for all her hard work especially around the financial work that she put in. We'd also like to thank David Burden who also stepped down as an MBACT Director in September 2020. David helped in many ways, including editing this newsletter. Thanks also goes out to Paul Stacey who was our Membership Officer for a number of years. Paul stepped down in December 2020.

Kate Wickens resigned as Centre Manager in July 2021. Kate has been the face of the Fourteen Locks Canal Centre for several years and we thank Kate for all of her hard work and dedication. Pauline Beckett, one of our regular volunteers joined as Assistant Manager in January 2021 and left us in October 2021. Pauline took over as temporary Centre Manager whilst we formally recruited a replacement for Kate.

We were pleased to announce that Laura Thomas joined us on 1st September 2021 as the new Centre Manager. In August 2021 we also welcomed Paul Thomas (no relation!) as volunteer Director responsible for the Fourteen Locks Centre. In November 2021, we welcomed both Jodie Morgan back as an Assistant Manager and regular volunteer Huong Ha also as an Assistant Manager.

Staffing Changes - The last 18 months has seen some significant changes in our Centre and MBACT staffing.

Colin Westacott and Jodie Morgan left the Canal Centre in March 2020. We would like to thank them for all their hard work and

Review of objectives and priorities – we have decided that now would be a good time to review the objectives and the priorities of the Centre. The Centre has many aspects to it from being a Community Centre, an Information Hub, Museum, through to providing office and meeting space for our Trust. The shop and café also provide an income to support the operating costs of the Trust. We will be undertaking a review to ensure that the Centre’s objectives align with the overall objectives of the Trust. Members and volunteers will have an opportunity to input into this review.

Children’s Trails – the children’s trails have been a popular feature of the Centre for a number of years and provide an enjoyable experience for young people to experience the area around the Fourteen Locks whilst providing parents with an activity in their local area.

This year’s Halloween Trail was a great success with over a thousand children completing the trails in Autumn half term week. The low entry cost also provides a small income for the Centre. Although the entry cost is low, we are looking at ways that all children can access the trails where entry cost may be a constraint.



Trail explorers

Free coffee for anyone with a Social Carer Workers Card – in partnership with the café, we have introduced a scheme where Social Care Workers can have a free coffee when they visit with the person supported. This is available on specific days of the week. Please contact Laura, our Centre Manager at fourteenlocks@mbact.org.uk for more information, or call in and have a chat.

Arts and crafts at the Centre – we have always had a focus at the Centre of supporting local artists and crafters. We have many local crafters that sell their goods in our shop where both they and the Centre benefit from the sales. We also have local artists who sell specifically in our shop, and also other art exhibits on a monthly basis on our two display boards. Going forward we are changing the display boards to a more flexible arrangement where the display may change more frequently, and will feature more prominently the local artists who sell in the shop. This will allow more display space in the shop itself. We are hoping that this will benefit both the artists and the shop.

REGENERATION AND CANAL ISSUES

Water Shortages – this year the canal has had periods of very low water levels with parts of the Crumlin Arm and parts of the Main Line north of Newport drying out completely. We are grateful for members of the public who have contacted us and who have also contacted the canal owners to report the issues. We published a news item on our website in May 2021 explaining why the canal is so susceptible when rainfall is low. Given the structural issues that parts of the canal have, then water shortage is always going to be a problem. We continue to work with the canal owners on this issue.



Dry canal just north of the Fourteen Locks Canal Centre

Bridge 46 canal blockage – the blockage of the navigable canal at Bridge 46 due to a housing development has been a major issue on the canal.

We are extremely grateful to the Bridge 46 to Five Locks Facebook group for leading the way in getting this issue resolved. In total the canal was blocked for 3 years and was opened again in October 2021.

It is clear that any future developments like this around the canal need to be more pro-actively managed by the canal owners to ensure that navigation is maintained.



Bridge 46 - September 2021

Mon and Brecon Canal loses out in Levelling Up funding – in November 2021 we issued an open letter to the leaders of Newport City Council, Torfaen County Borough Council, and Caerphilly County Borough Council concerning the fact that they had not applied for Levelling Up funding for our canal. The letter received a lot of attention in the press and also triggered conversations with the Councils. It is still early days but all three Councils and CRT have expressed a willingness to re-establish the

Monmouthshire and Brecon Canals Regeneration Partnership Group in 2022. The Open Letter / Press Release can be found on our website.

Future Projects – before Covid19 struck we were working on an expression of interest with the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) for a new project at Ty Coch to continue the work that was done during 2012 – 2017. That application was put on hold by the HLF. We are currently working on re-submitting an outline to the HLF for funding work at Ty Coch.

Torfaen Council has just appointed a new Canal Officer, and we are already in contact with her to discuss Torfaen’s future plans, and how we can work together to progress restoration projects in the Torfaen Council area. We hope to have more active engagement with the Canal Officer and other Council officers early in the New Year, in addition to the Canals Regeneration Partnership Group.

Five Locks – with the opening of the canal at Bridge 46 in October, boats were able to reach the Five Locks basin. Having worked with Torfaen Council in the past to establish pump out and electrical charging facilities at Five Locks, it was reported by boat users and the public that these facilities were not working. A number of our volunteers met Torfaen Council officers at the basin and explained the setup to them, and what needed to be done to ensure that these facilities are always available to boat users.

Our view is that the more boats that reach Five Locks and use the facilities there, then the case for extending the canal onwards grows stronger. We will continue to work with our partners and other groups to press for the extension of the navigable canal though we do recognise the huge technical and funding hurdles that stand in the way of this objective.

Junction House, Pontymoile – in April 2021 CRT put Junction House in Pontymoile up for sale. There was a large public outcry about this, and we also contacted CRT to express dismay at their plans. A large number of our members also contacted CRT and we are grateful for all of the comments sent to CRT. As a result CRT removed the building from the open market. We are still in contact with CRT discussing how they can safeguard the future of this historic Grade II Listed building. We would wish to see this important building back in use and open to the public in some way that safeguards its future.



Junction House at Pontymoile



OUR COMMUNITY BOATS

Our Community Boats continue to be an important part of our Trust. Over the last year or so the boats have become a way for our volunteers to work together out of doors whilst maintaining a safe environment that adheres to Welsh and UK Government Covid guidelines. Our boat volunteer pool has expanded significantly over the past year bringing together volunteers of all ages from the local area and also from as far away as Swansea and Somerset. Our boats continue to be based at Goytre Wharf, but we are looking at expanding our trips to other areas of the canal in 2022 where it is safe and practical to do so.

Why do we run our Boats? We are often asked why as a restoration and volunteer Trust do we run boats on the Mon and Brec canal?

Along with virtually every other canal society in the UK, we run trip boats because.....



Our Edith-Elizabeth boat

- It's a means of engaging with our community about the canal. It gives us an opportunity to show how beautiful it is, and to explain its important history and ecology. Our aim is to leave passengers with a positive view of our local waterway and our aims.
- The boats function as floating classrooms enabling school classes to experience an enjoyable time on the waterway whilst learning about its history and environment. The courses are often linked to the national curriculum. Our aim is to leave pupils with a long-lasting positive view of the canal and its environment.
- The boats provide an opportunity for local people to volunteer to help run and maintain them. It gives them the opportunity to engage with others and make new friends, undertake a worthwhile function and obtain boat handling qualifications. This contributes to the health and well-being of our community.
- We run our boats on a non-profit-making basis, with any monies over-and-above running costs being used to further our charitable objectives, so it's a way of earning money to invest in the canal and its restoration.
- We can provide a means for the disabled passengers in our community to enjoy the waterway, as our larger boat, Lord Raglan, has two dedicated wheelchair spaces, a wheelchair lift and disabled accessible toilet.

- We can offer trips to disadvantaged groups in our community, who wouldn't otherwise get a chance to experience a canal boat trip on our beautiful canal.

The Edith-Elizabeth – our smaller electric boat has been the stalwart of our boat trips this year primarily as its open structure has meant that we could operate it whilst meeting Welsh Government Covid19 guidelines. It has operated on many weekends this year and through the summer holiday period.



Passengers on the Edith-Elizabeth

The Lord Raglan – our larger electric boat has been constrained by a number of issues. The fact that it's an enclosed boat meant that for long periods this year we have been unable to operate the boat due to Welsh Government Covid19 guidelines. The boat has also been undergoing MCA Certification which is required to operate with more than 12 passengers. This was completed successfully in August 2021.



The Lord Raglan south of Pontymoile

We were pleased to take the Lord Raglan down to the Open Hearth pub on the 28th August to support the boat flotilla to present a new Boater's Signing Book to the landlord. The event was organised by the Bridge 46 to Five Locks Facebook group.

We had planned to run Christmas Illuminated Cruises on the Lord Raglan in December 2021 but unfortunately our plans had to be abandoned due to low water levels in the canal due to essential

maintenance at Govilon.

Helmsman Training – a number of our volunteers successfully completed the RYA Inland waterway Helmsman Course at the Somerset Boat Centre on the Bridgwater and Taunton Canal. Congratulations to everyone.

We are looking forward to being able to operate both of our boats more extensively in 2022.



Some of our successful Helmsman



NEW DEVELOPMENTS

Our New Website – we launched our new website in March 2021. The website was totally re-written and brought up to date. Many thanks to volunteers Wyn Mitchell and Paul Thomas who spent over 3 months constructing it. We are also grateful to Kate Wickens for her input and photographs. The website can be found at <https://mbact.org.uk/>

Social Media – we have also expanded our presence on social media and we have MBACTrust and FourteenLocks accounts on Facebook, Instagram and Twitter.

Fourteen Locks Drone Video – we have recently commissioned a 10 minute video of the Fourteen Locks flight and of the Canal Centre from a new local drone video business “Birds Eye View Photography”. The video will be used to promote the Fourteen Locks Canal Centre, and to highlight the scale of the work that still needs to be completed at the Fourteen Locks. We are very grateful to Grant from Birds Eye View for the work that he has done on this video and for his support. We are happy to recommend Grant (grant@birdseyeviewphotography.co.uk) for Drone Video projects.



Birds Eye View Photography

New Telephone System – we have recently installed a new telephone system in the Fourteen Locks Canal Centre which is still in the process of being configured. It will provide a single telephone number for the Canal Centre, the MBACT Office, a future Boats booking line, and the Fourteen Locks Café. We are extremely grateful to RPS Telecom based in Cwmbran who have provided this system for us, and we are happy to recommend this company (<https://www.rpstelecom.co.uk/>) for your business telephone needs.



MEMBERSHIP

Membership – we are always grateful for membership support but we always welcome new members to help support our objectives. You can maintain your existing membership online, or new members can sign up on our membership portal at <https://membermojo.co.uk/mbact/>



VOLUNTEERS

Volunteers – we are always extremely grateful to all the work that our volunteers do. Without them our Trust wouldn't exist. If you wish to volunteer with us then more information about the opportunities available can be found on our website at <https://mbact.org.uk/volunteering-opportunities/>

We are also specifically looking for suitably qualified, or experienced volunteers for the role of Secretary and Treasurer. If you are interested in these roles please contact us at fourteenlocks@mbact.org.uk or by telephone at 01633 892167.

SPONSORS

We are always extremely grateful to all supporters of our Trust and also those who provide financial or service support.

As mentioned earlier in this newsletter we are grateful to RPS Telecom and to Birds Eye View Photography for their support.

The Lord Raglan Community Boat project also benefitted greatly with a considerable amount of support from local and international companies via donations of equipment and services. We are extremely grateful to all those companies and people who helped on this long project. You can see all of the companies and people who supported this community boat project on our website page for the boat at:

<https://mbact.org.uk/our-community-boat-project-the-lord-raglan/>

Monmouthshire, Brecon & Abergavenny Canals Trust (MBACT) Registered Charity No. 515879

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