

## The Green and the Blue - and Things to Come?

On Sunday March 17, with the everlasting rain beginning to dry and the sun creeping out, (a bit like the delegates really) the hardy 'biannuals' assembled for the first of the Northern Canal Association (NCA)'s 2024 meetings, this time in Lichfield, Staffordshire, watched over by the 'Ladies of the Vale' and home of the Lichfield & Hatherton Canal Restoration Trust (L&HCRT).

48 delegates representing 25 different canal related organisations, gathered at the Boley Park Community Hall, Lichfield, for their coffees and natter from 9:30 a.m.



At 10:30 the joint chairs of Ivan Cane, (NCA) and Carole Mills (L&HCRT), brought order to the proceedings and the day commenced.

The inevitable formalities over, Carole Mills outlined the current thinking on the 'blue,' the water in the channel, and the 'green,' the corridor around it. Strategies and operational plans abounded but can be summarised thus: the emphasis now is trying to get boats into Lichfield through the 'Darnford Moors Ecology Park' (check it out) from the Huddlesford Junction with the Coventry Canal whilst the Hatherton end will, inevitably and sadly, have to come lower down the list - they don't have the time or money at the moment. Buzz words flew around: outcomes, enablers, funding, followers, liaison, modernisation. Wise advice flowed: good quality site leadership essential; need to encourage younger people; don't annoy your neighbours; plan ahead; be ruthless in deployment and activity; don't be afraid of modernisation – go smaller, refresh your brand, be more focussed. All in all, a rousing start to a new year and none the worse for that.

Sir Michael Fabricant, MP for Lichfield, chair of the All-party Parliamentary Group for the Waterways and Patron of the L&HCRT, then gave a stirring talk outlining the place of Parliament in and on our waterways, covering a wide range of topics from the funding of the navigation authorities and the effects of HS2 to the sterling work being undertaken by the restoration groups across the country and the reliance that charities, such as C&RT, will be placing on them in future. Controversial views and high feelings were much in evidence. Somehow, having reared its head during this item, HS2 became a recurrent theme, not to be denied thereafter.



Further detail on the Darnford Moors Ecology Park followed, engineering wise from Derek Lord, Planning & Technology, L&HCRT, and fundraising/finance from Bob Williams, L&HCRT, both contributors highly knowledgeable, lively and engaging. You would do worse than to heed them. Engineering focussed on piling, joints and Bentonite matting whilst finance centred on 'Awards,' 'Funds' and a timely legacy allowing 'Funds' to be 'juggled' – a highly renowned financial activity, I'm sure.

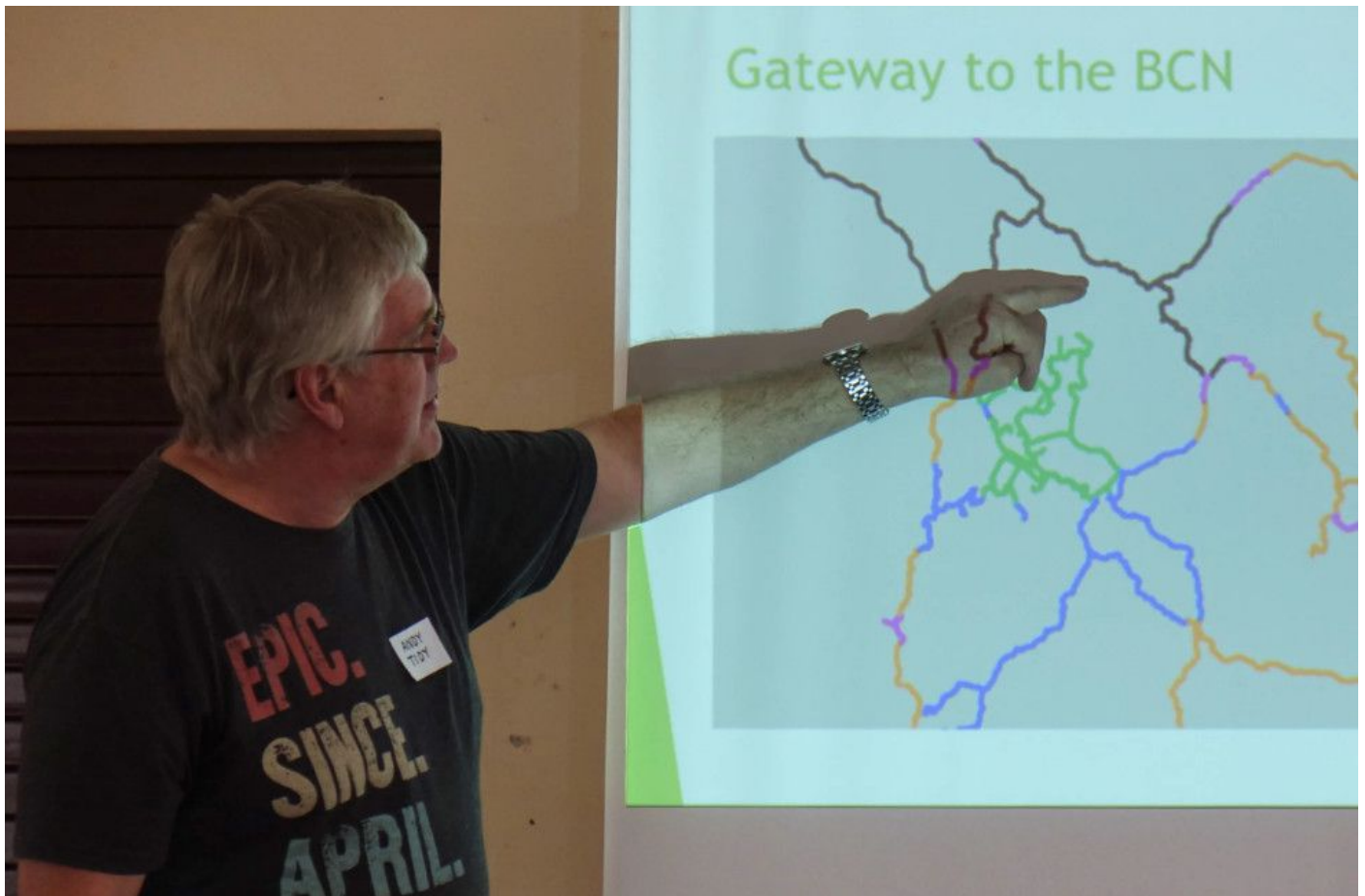
There then followed our 'most important contributor of the day,' Charlie Plant, a truly impressive 20 something (if that?) Having signed up to complete his Duke of Edinburgh Award (Bronze) by volunteering with the L&HCRT whilst still at school he just, kind of, carried on, eventually completing his Silver and Gold. Now at Rodbaston College studying animal care and management, he spoke with confidence and enthusiasm, outlining how he'd 'learned a lot' and was now confident in both his knowledge and skills, describing his progress from 'brick cleaning' with 'hammer and chisel' to 'hedge trimmer' as an 'adventure' and acknowledging how he'd made friends and kept them. And all



through volunteering on a canal restoration scheme. There's plenty of scope in many of his wise words for us greybeards, tha' knaws. The future clearly should be Plant shaped...

Ivor Caplan, former National Chair of the IWA, gave a much lauded update on the progress of the 'Funding Britain's Waterways Campaign,' the time limited group campaigning for the proper funding of, err, Britain's Waterways, to avert their decline and promote the awareness of their benefits in terms of economic and social wellbeing. Last year's campaigns were highlighted with this year's activities outlined, most notably a further Westminster Protest Cruise on 8 May. Most welcome was the assurance that waterways authorities only deserve more funding if they spend existing funds wisely.

A tumultuous morning session was brought to a close by Andy Tidy, Canal Hunter Extraordinaire, discussing how the Lichfield canal is a vital gateway to the wider Birmingham Canal Navigations (BCN) and how, in spite of their industrial origins, the BCN today is an incredibly rural, attractive yet underused network.



A much needed lunch break



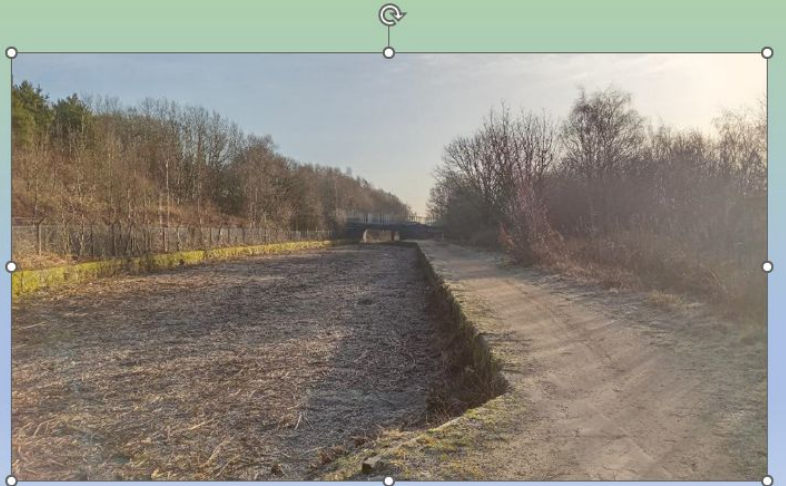
was brought to its end by Geoff Pursglove's (Ashby Canal Trust) treatise on Slipways – everything you didn't know you needed to know about slipways, their design and deployment. It's all in the title. We didn't know – but we sure do now. And very hilarious it was! You are left wondering just how supposedly intelligent human beings can make such crashing (literally) mistakes over slipways, their construction, launching from and all ports in between. We are, nevertheless, bidden to the National Trail boat Festival at Moira Furnace, Swadlincote, S Derbys 18/19 May 2024.  
*(For copies of the plans and details of slipways – as illustrated by Geoffrey – please contact Ivan at NCA).*

The time honoured Restoration Roundup followed; 5 minute updates on many and varied restoration schemes from around the country, complete with Ivan's dubious maps and arrows followed:



- The Buckingham Canal Society – opened half a mile of canal last year, now they're a canal *operating* society. It's not all about boats!
- Manchester, Bolton & Bury Canal Society – Places for Everyone and Heritage Washing. Yes, you'll need to look up the latest buzz words and phrases.

## Repairing the 1936 Breach- Creams Mill



- Derby & Sandiacre Canal Trust – flooding following Storm Babette and beware the insurance – it will only reinstate not fund flood prevention. You're on your own there!

## However

- Our building didn't
- 3 cottages flooded, but Café escaped – just.
- Insurance will only reinstate – Efforts underway by volunteers to restore AND protect them
- ALSO local villages suffered the worst flood to date



- Stafford Riverway Link – or how Things Turn Up, especially bricks, cement, sand and gravel, if you learn to play one provider off against another.

# Stafford Riverway Link - *Boats into Stafford*



**Donated  
6,000 bags**

Finally, before we were all dismissed, like infants into a playground, John Dodwell of the Montgomery Canal Restoration Trust and David Carter, Chair, Shropshire Union Canal Society, gave updates on the Schoolhouse Bridge Saga and Things to Come **at the next meeting of the NCA, October 6, 2024, on the Montgomery Canal in Shropshire.**

The infants were eventually allowed out to play – along the Darnford Moors Ecology Park, under the watchful and informative eye of Peter Buck, Construction & Operations, L&HCRT.



Boots and coats donned, 'crocodiles' walked and transport organised, we romped (figuratively speaking) in the early spring sunshine along the new towpaths at Darnford Moors, viewing the new channel and its associated wetland areas and hedgerow corridors, appreciating the native planting and supporting water control features. A brand new vision of a new canal corridor. Impressive, especially when seen within the time frame in which it has been completed. L&HCRT, its volunteers, contractors and supportive groups profoundly deserve every congratulation.



A

note of sadness sounded when we viewed the 'remains' of the old Lock 29, Ogley Locks, now preserved in an offside heritage area – which rapidly turned to hilarity on viewing the frail wooden supports under the massive brick pillar at the tail end of the lock, put in because the volunteers thought 'it ought to have something holding it up.' Engineering wise it wasn't necessary but, there you go!





On reflection, it was the usual roller coaster of a day we've now come to expect from the NCA. Strong views, strongly held and strongly expressed in parts but endlessly amiable and helpful withal, especially to those in need. The buzz starts as soon as folks begin to arrive in the morning, increases during coffee and reaches a crescendo over lunch - the sound of folks, networking. It cannot be bettered. What's not to like?



So hopefully we'll see you at the next meeting on Sunday October 6, on the Montgomery Canal.

Sue Ball

*Photos by Paul Marshall & Ivan Cane*

*See also*

<https://lhcr.org.uk/2024/03/20/lichfield-hosts-the-northern-canals-association-meeting/>

3<sup>rd</sup> April 2024



