

King Charles Meets *Electra* Volunteers During Visit to Milton Keynes

The Trust's 'Team *Electra*' was delighted to be invited to meet HRH King Charles on Thursday 16th February, when he came to Milton Keynes to present the Letters Patent to the newly promoted city. Whilst there, he met volunteers from a range of charity and community groups, including representatives from the *Electra* team.

Jane said, "It was a huge honour for *Electra* to be recognised as one of the things that make MK a special



(above) The King addresses those present. (Below left) John Best (B&MK Trustee), Jane Wolfson (*Electra* chair), Denise Taylor (training lead) and Vicky Wade (cabin host), in front of the *Electra* display stand and (below right) *Electra*'s display stand, ready for the Royal visit .



place to live, work and play. We were one of only 17 organisations present at the Royal visit."

Vicky agreed, "I was delighted to be invited to represent *Electra*'s cabin hosts and especially pleased that he stopped to speak to us."

Denise commented, "The King seemed genuinely interested to learn that *Electra* was all-electric and asked where she was. We explained that she was having her winter holiday, which raised a smile."

The stunning new display banner and panels were put together at short notice by the 'backroom team'. Led by David Wolfson, with support from Jane Wolfson and Steve Ashley, and using inputs from volunteer graphic designers and photographers, the team spent around 40 volunteer hours to get these created.

John Best concluded: "The *Electra* team has put the Trust and our activities well and truly on the City of Milton Keynes map, an important step in encouraging local politicians to put their energies behind our plans for new and existing waterway parks for the city."

After the event, we received a letter of thanks from Councillor Amanda Marlow: "I wanted to take the opportunity to thank you for the wonderful and informative display that was arranged for the visit of His Royal Highness to Milton Keynes on 16th February 2023. It was a wonderful opportunity for us to showcase just why we were given the honour of City Status". ●

View from the Chair

I always feel that this time of the year is a very positive one. As the days get longer and green shoots start to appear it's a reminder to start planning ahead for the forthcoming year. It's the time to look forward to holidays and to getting out and about in the warmer weather. For the B&MK Waterway Trust it is a very busy period as we get ready for the new cruising season, make sure we have updated our business plans for the year and have some clear targets to aim for.

We obviously want to maintain the momentum of last year's successes and continue with volunteers at the heart of everything we do. *Electra* and the *John Bunyan* are drawing up their own business plans for the year and scheduling all the necessary activities which keep us safe, happy and successful. The Trust is drawing up a new 3 year Business Plan and aiming to concentrate our resources on three main areas of activity. Firstly, delivering small scale projects along the waterway route, including the connections with the Grand Union Canal and the River Great Ouse. Secondly, working with and supporting local communities along the route who can help us achieve our ambition to see the Waterway Park developed. And thirdly, continuing to work with the BMKW Consortium and strategic partners on wider initiatives which support the project's business case.

At the local level, last year saw the successful completion of a landing stage at Kempston Mill. This year we are currently focussing on securing a home base for the *Electra* team to operate from at Campbell Wharf and we have other projects in the pipeline.

At the community level we are working with the Milton Keynes Canalside Forum, a range of organisations with an interest in waterways. In Bedford we are hoping to work with local artists with the aim of developing an arts based initiative to promote the River Great Ouse and its links to the waterway. We hope both initiatives will help raise the profile of the Waterway Park.

At the strategic level, under the Chairmanship of Cllr Ian Dalgarno from Central Bedfordshire Council, there is renewed enthusiasm and determination from the Consortium to work towards setting up a Special Purpose Vehicle as a delivery agency for the project as a whole. This will not be straightforward for such a complex project and it will require support and resource. Cllr Dalgarno has recently stepped into the role and will be

staying in the Chair until Spring 2024 to give the Consortium some much needed stability and direction. This is very welcome news indeed.

Also at the strategic level, Water Resources East (WRE) and the Environment Agency (EA) have completed a significant technical study into how the Waterway might help with managing flood risk and moving water around in times of drought. I have listened to presentations from the consultants several times to try to get to grips with it but the technical detail remains above my comprehension! However, what I do understand is that the outcomes are broadly positive such that WRE have now included BMK Waterway Park as a project in their draft Regional Water Resources Plan. This plan will eventually feed into the first national water resources plan in 2024. More work will be needed in the longer term because, to play a role at the strategic level, the BMK Waterway will need to link up with and be dependent on other regional and national water resource initiatives. However, this is a very positive step towards the project being included in significant infrastructure planning at the regional level.

We will be publishing the WRE/EA study on our website shortly. It is the first major piece of work which has been wholly funded by external partners. This initiative, together with the renewed support of Consortium partners is great news and will lift a lot of pressure off the Trust so we can concentrate on more local activities as outlined above.

So, much positive news for the start of the year. This leads me on to one final update. My ambition in taking on the Chair of the Trust in 2015 was to drive the project forward at a strategic level and win the support of those organisations who are capable of making the Waterway a reality. After much hard work and investment of our own money, generated by our community boats, we have started to build a business case that others now recognise and support. This feels like a turning point toward delivery of the Waterway and an ideal opportunity for me to step down from the Chair of the Trust and leave the next steps and new initiatives to others.

I will miss everyone enormously. The job has been a bit of a roller coaster with many frustrations and stamping of feet but also some real successes. My patient and supportive colleagues on the Trust Board, our wonderful volunteers and our wider membership have all made it an extremely rewarding experience. However, I hope

(Continued on page 3)

April will see the start to our cruising season, with the familiar sight of the blue and white *John Bunyan* community boat gracing the River Great Ouse in and around Bedford, fresh from her repaint over the winter season. This year will be 10 years since her launch in 2013, and we are planning an exciting year with a mix of new and existing cruises from upstream toward Kempston and downstream to Great Barford, manned entirely by volunteers. It is hard to improve on a peaceful and tranquil meander through the countryside around Bedford or enjoy views of the town and Embankment from a new vantage point, whilst taking refreshments from the galley.

This year will see a number of new cruises while retaining our popular cruises from previous years such as our very popular curry night in conjunction with Thali & Tandoor and Irish nights with Inis Eire, Motown & Soul Disco cruise, Fish & Chip Supper cruise and our very popular family EyeSpy cruise during school half-term & summer holiday. As part of the community the *John Bunyan's* aim is to provide something for everyone whilst involving local businesses, charities and local community.

Fish & Chip Lunch Cruise

During April, May & October we will be running a Fish & Chip Lunch cruise on Thursday lunchtime, with superb fish & chips from The Golden Chicken Fish & Chip shop in Bromham Road instead of our Thursday Sovereigns Quay to Cardington Cruise.

Afternoon Tea at the Kingfisher

This year will see the return of our Wednesday afternoon tea cruise to the Kingfisher pub (formerly The Barns Hotel) which re-opened last year. Embarking at Priory Marina, making our way to the upper river and cruise along The Embank-

(Continued from page 2)

very shortly, to move south to the coast and water of a different nature. The Waterway Park is not a project which can be led or managed at a distance so I now have a few weeks to hand over to new safe pairs of hands. It will leave a huge hole in my life. I shall stay in touch and keep up with all the news, but in the meantime, a great big thank you to everyone who I have worked with over the past 8 years. You have made a challenging job an honour and a very enjoyable experience.

I will send you postcards from the seaside!

Jane Hamilton

ment before going through Town Lock and making our way to The Kingfisher Pub where we will disembark for Afternoon Tea.

Special Afternoon Tea Cruise

To celebrate Father's Day the *John Bunyan* has commissioned a special Afternoon Tea from Crème Brew Lait with table cloths for a proper old fashioned afternoon tea served on china. For those who would like to celebrate in style, there is an option to order a glass of prosecco served chilled to your table by our purser for the cruise.

Halloween Ghost Story Cruise

On the Friday before Halloween, the river will be full of lost souls wandering the river and along the riverbank, as you listen to horrifying tales of ghosts, spectres, murders and spirits spanning the centuries. With stories provided by Kempston Ghost walk and covering ghostly happenings on stretches of the River Great Ouse, there's no scarier way to spend Halloween. ●

Sir Samuel Charles Whitbread, 22 February 1937 – 17 January 2023

It is with great sadness that we must report the death of our Patron, Sir Samuel Whitbread KCVO JP DL who passed away on 17th January 2023.

Just over 210 years ago Samuel Whitbread, Member of Parliament for Bedford, was the driving force behind the plan to create a waterway linking the Grand Junction Canal (now the Grand Union) at Milton Keynes with the River Great Ouse at Bedford. It was most fitting that in 2012 his descendant and great-great-great grandson agreed to be become the first Patron of the Bedford & Milton Keynes Waterway Trust.

Sir Sam was much loved and very active in many roles in Bedfordshire including periods as High Sheriff and Lord Lieutenant of the county.

Our thoughts are very much with Sir Sam's family at this sad time. It has been a great honour for the Trust to have Sir Sam as our Patron and we shall miss his support greatly. ●

Eastern Projects Group (EPG) Update

The John Bunyan reaches the new landing stage

On the morning of Monday 30th January 2023, the *John Bunyan* team assessed the river conditions and decided to try to reach the landing stage at Kempston (Julian Armitage writes). Whilst there they would look into what would be required in the way of dredging and modification to the width of the river to enable the boat to turn round at the landing stage site.

The day was bright and sunny with the river level 280 mm higher than mean summer levels, ensuring adequate depth under the boat.



1

However, the current was very strong and the river fast flowing at the approach to the landing stage, making the helmsman's job difficult.

Still, with great skill the JB was finally brought in to moor at the landing stage as the photographs affirm.



2

In relation to the issue of turning, the Eastern Projects Group (EPG) team have had a number of discussions with the Environment Agency to establish acceptable disposal areas for any dredged material that will be generated when we finish off the river and turning areas for the JB at the site.

Meeting with the Inland Waterways Association (IWA)

On 23rd November a few of the EPG members met with representatives of the IWA at Box End. Tom Tagg gave a presentation to explain the history of B&MKWT with specific emphasis on how the EPG fitted in with the overall aims of the Trust.

We were then briefed on their take on volunteer recruitment by Jenny Hodson, who also undertook to attend a further meeting with our Volunteering sub-group on 15th December. This generated a number of ideas which were new to us.

Mikk Bradley currently heads up the Waterway Recovery Group (WRG) and



3

(1) "Full steam ahead" (2) & (3) "Coming in to land" (4) "Arrival"

explained how we might enlist their help with specific projects once we had identified these. Typically, 12 to 18 volunteers will spend a week on site to deliver waterway construction and enhancement projects using mechanical plant where necessary. The volunteers will generally stay at a village hall or similar accommodation for the whole week. We are hoping that projects at Fields Road might be appropriate.

The third person present was Jess Muraji, who runs his own small engineering consultancy. He is one of three IWA Honorary Engineers. He may be able to do small designs for us and advise on other suitable firms who could deliver larger projects. He has already given some input to how we might tackle the issues at Green Lane.

Fields Road, Green Lane and Gibraltar Corner

The EPG, as well as assisting with the future requirements at Kempston to turn the JB, is considering what projects it might assist with to show that we are serious about constructing parts of the waterway along the route.



4

Now that the development at Fields Road is substantially complete, it affords an opportunity to engage with the developers and the Council to construct a section of the waterway by joining up the lakes with the waterway passing under the already partially constructed bridge. This will require a significant amount of work and will require design, planning permission etc. Although this is an isolated section of the waterway, it would create a useful facility for local people where a viable stretch of useable waterway could be used by the Wootton residents as a boating lake for canoeists and paddle boarders etc.

We are also looking into the issues at Green Lane. Here a significant sum, in excess of £4 million, has been allocated to the Council to construct a culvert under the road in which cables have been laid serving Covanta's waste to energy facility. This is technically challenging and the funds appear insufficient to implement a

solution. We are trying to assist Bedford Borough Council with suggestions as to how this could be done.

The Borough Council are also planning to develop more housing at Gibraltar Corner opposite the new Lidl store. We are seeking to understand the proposals and to ensure that the waterway is not compromised in any way.

Volunteers

Only a few regulars are contributing to our efforts, so if there is anyone out there who can help and wishes to get involved, you would be very welcome. We particularly need those with backgrounds and skills in the following disciplines: Civil Engineering, Design Management, Project Management, Document Control, Quantity Surveying, Estimating and Planning. Please contact Julian Armitage if you think you may be able to help.
(julian.armitage@b-mkwaterway.co.uk)



Electra Shore Unit

John Best, on behalf of the B&MK Waterway Trust, signed the lease for *Electra* to occupy one of the commercial units at Campbell Wharf on Monday 20th February (James Clifton writes). Crest had offered *Electra* tenancy of the unit at a peppercorn rent. Located down at canal level, close to its pontoon, this will provide:

Reception space for greeting guests, with seating, an accessible toilet and wheelchair store. Administrative space for marketing, ticket sales, meetings, training, liaising with, and rostering volunteers. Food preparation and refrigeration facilities. Storage for dry goods and drinks, furniture, publicity, signage and maintenance. The layout (below right) was also included (larger) in the last edition of BMK News, which is available on the website.

Draft risk assessment and health and safety documents have been prepared, with kind assistance from the Inland Waterways Association.

John Best has secured funding for fit out from various bodies amounting to £32K (£14.7K in grants/donations and £18.5K available from extension of existing Trust member loans for *Electra*). A bid for further s106 funding is being prepared with the support of Central Milton Keynes Town Council, for an additional £20k, which may mean that the fit out can be fully funded without loans.

A team of experienced volunteers is on stand-by ready to start construction as soon as all paperwork is completed. With a fair wind we hope the shore unit will be fully ready for use when *Electra* starts

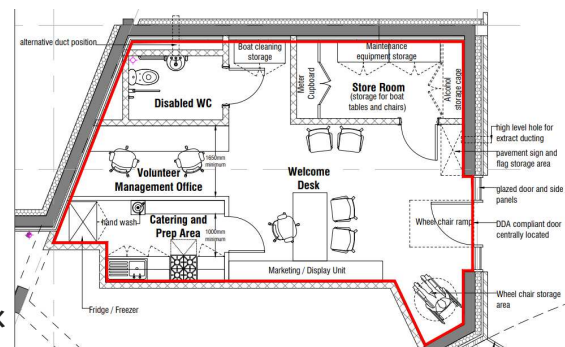
cruising again in the summer.

Brand new sales website

Watch out for the Trust website's *Electra* page for the launch of our brand-new sales site on 6th March. Over 100 customers are already waiting to be told it is live, as they are keen to make bookings. The new site will be easier and quicker for guests to make and change bookings, and much, much easier in the background for volunteers and our bookings manager to add and change items. About 300 volunteer hours over 6 months were needed to get this up and running – one of the many 'unseen' shore activities that make our community boat a success.

What do we do when we're not on the water

Our volunteer co-ordinator, Gill Kirkup, and her team have been busy keeping our volunteers involved and engaged during the winter off-season. Volunteers met for a pub lunch in January and a bowling night in February. A quiz is being organised for March and other ideas include a flotilla trip of volunteers' boats in May, assisting with the MK branch of the IWA in their canal clean-up, an exchange trip with the *John Bunyan*, and a possible guided walk with lunch. ●



Proposed layout of shore unit

The Essential Nature of Our Volunteers

Volunteers are our very lifeblood and without them we would not be able to achieve as much as we do (Jane Hamilton writes).

Both of our community boats, *Electra* and the *John Bunyan*, have had a hugely successful season and well exceeded the forecast number of cruises and consequently the level of income raised for the Trust during this year. Whilst we always need to reinvest in the boats to keep them in good repair and able to cruise safely, excess profit is transferred to the Trust at the end of the financial year, enabling us to continue to build a business case for the Waterway Park and invest in projects on the ground.

Over the past 4 years, the Trust has invested around £80,000 of the income earned by the boats in feasibility work to support the business case for the Waterway Park and persuade others to invest in it and build it. Our initial investment has made a strong case for the project which, in turn, has recently successfully drawn in a further £250,000 of investment from other partner organisations. Bedford Borough Council and the Environment Agency have contributed to the Kempston landing stage. The Environment Agency and Water Resources East have invested in a soon-to-be published water management study which helps build the case for longer term capital investment, and National Highways have just started work on looking at how the Waterway Park might help increase biodiversity. More investment is likely in developing the role of the Waterway Park as part of a wider cycling and walking network. All of this together is making the case for the Waterway Park as strategic environmental infrastructure much stronger so investing our own money to kick start the work has been very worthwhile.

On the ground the landing stage at Kempston is complete and in use. Whilst we commissioned contractors to do the main construction work, we must thank a dedicated team of volunteers lead by Julian Armitage who have worked extremely hard to oversee the project. During the course of this summer, they have tidied up and re seeded the area to ensure it is a welcoming destination. Added to this Kempston Town Council have also been active in ensuring the area continues to be well maintained for everyone to enjoy. It's another clear demonstration of where our investment then brings in

funding from others.

We are investing in new information boards in Milton Keynes and Bedford to ensure visitors to the area can read up to date information about the Waterway Park. Once again volunteers have had an active role in this and also in continuing to maintain the wood sculptures along the route of the Waterway in Marston Vale.

As well as the “hands on” activities, we always need volunteers to take on the management roles ensuring that the Trust and our enterprises are effectively governed and our finances properly managed. From Board level all the way through to the Enterprise Board, the operational management teams on the boats, our project teams and everyone who helps run *Electra* and *John Bunyan* cruises – we are all volunteers.

At our last Board meeting we agreed to ensure that we work more proactively to promote and recognise the importance of volunteering. Janet Goodland who both volunteers on the *John Bunyan* and sits on the Trust Board will be leading a new Volunteering sub group which will report to the Board. We must ensure every one of us knows they are valued and where they fit in to the bigger picture. We want to ensure workloads are evenly distributed and that we all operate efficiently. Most of all, we want to ensure all our volunteers enjoy what they do. We constantly need to grow and build our volunteer resource and will be consciously putting this at the top of our agenda for the new year. Surviving covid and keeping the business running has been a challenge but we have emerged successful as demonstrated by this year's activities. The job now is to keep us in tip top condition as a happy and valued bunch of hard-working volunteers!

A very big “thank you” all round!



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Atterbury finger post (see opposite)

Events Calendar 2023



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|---------------|--|
| 6th June | AGM - Box End Park. Details with this mailing for members. |
| Early October | Annual Partnership Conference. To be confirmed. |
| Other live | events are being planned. Watch this space. |

Marking the Route

We continue to identify opportunities to mark the proposed route of the waterway. Recent progress in this regard has been made at both ends of the route (Beryl Bennett writes).

Firstly, at Milton Keynes – a new interpretation board has been installed



Above: Making the first cut at Campbell Wharf Marina
 Above right: First viewing! Left: Fitting the first finger post.
 Opposite: Post No. 4 at Atterbury - job complete!

at Campbell Wharf marina indicating the entrance to the waterway. Also, four finger posts have been placed alongside the footpath leading from the marina through to Willen Lake. This could not have been achieved without the support of The Parks Trust and the help and enthusiasm of Steve Waring and Simon Brodie (volunteer members).

Secondly, at Bedford – the three boards placed next to the River Great Ouse along the stretch of Bedford Embankment at

The Swan Hotel, Bedford Lock and under the bridge at Aspects Leisure Centre, have been refreshed. We hope these will help to bring renewed interest in the project. ●

Electra to re-start cruising by July

Electra has been worked very hard since she started cruising in summer 2021. Tests by national battery experts NIBS in early February confirmed that the existing batteries are exhausted and in need of replacement. *Electra* will be delivered back to Colecraft, her original builders, in late April. The new batteries will be fitted, together with some additional maintenance to smarten her up for her third season. This will be done as quickly as possible, so that she could be ready to receive paying guests from late June.

Through the winter, the *Electra* maintenance and management teams have done

extensive research into current and future best options, including necessary new monitoring systems and tools. It is clear that the number and type of cruises that *Electra* offers is 'leading edge' nationally, and that electric canalboats are still in their infancy, compared to automotive solutions.

The team was pleased to see *Electra* described as the Trust's first electric boat on the Trust's new signboard at the start of the B&MK at Campbell Wharf. It is a ground-breaking project, with all the ups and downs that this entails. ●



Removing the existing batteries for testing onshore

Is This the Future of BMK News?

There is a theory that if a headline asks a question, the answer is always “no”. That seems to be the case here.

You will probably have read about artificial intelligence (AI) and specifically about ChatGPT which can now write to a standard which is causing examiners concern that candidates may use this to write their answers.

Your editor decided to find out whether future editions of the newsletter could be produced by machine, asking ChatGPT the question “tell me about the Bedford & Milton Keynes Waterway Park in 500 words”.

The answer it gave was quite good, although it included too many inaccuracies and out-of-date pieces of information (especially about the expected cost) to be useful. Also, it is only 369 words, so this program can’t even count. It said:

“The Bedford & Milton Keynes Waterway Park is a proposed project that aims to create a new waterway connecting the River Great Ouse in Bedford to the Grand Union Canal in Milton Keynes. The proposed waterway would be approximately 45km long and would include a variety of features such as locks, bridges, and marinas. The project is being led by the Bedford & Milton Keynes Waterway Trust, a charity organization that was established in 2016 to promote the development of the waterway.

“The main goal of the project is to create a new recreational and leisure destination for residents and visitors to the area, and to support economic development through the creation of new jobs and businesses. The waterway is expected to attract a variety of users, including boaters, anglers, walkers, and cyclists. It is also expected to provide new opportunities for wildlife and biodiversity, and to improve flood management in the region.

“The project is still in the planning and feasibility stage, with the Trust conducting a number of studies and consultations to assess the feasibility of the proposal and to gather input from local residents and stakeholders. The Trust has also been working closely with local authorities, including Bedford Borough Council and Milton Keynes Council, to secure the necessary permissions and funding for the project.

“The Trust estimates that the project would require an investment of around £120 million, and that it would take around 10 years to complete. The funding for the project would come from a variety of sources, including government grants, private sector investment, and community fundraising.

“The Trust has also proposed a number of additional developments along the waterway, including new housing and commercial developments, as well as new parks and green spaces. These developments would be designed to complement the waterway and to provide additional benefits for the local community.

“The Bedford & Milton Keynes Waterway Park is an ambitious project that has the potential to bring significant benefits to the region. If the project is able to secure the necessary funding and support, it could become a major new recreational and leisure destination for the area, and help to support economic development and improve the quality of life for local residents.”

Not bad, but certainly not good enough. So, it seems that your editor and his valued contributors will have to keep writing their own content for a while yet. *Please* don’t assume anything in this piece is reliable. ●

Contact Us.

For more information, to support or join the Trust, or to volunteer with one of our boats, please see:

www.bmkwaterway.org

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