

The 2023 Annual General Meeting was held at Box End Park, Bedford, on 6th June.

There was a disappointing turnout of 17 people, although some (like your editor) were probably on holiday. 20 proxy votes had been received for most of the business, 39 for the increase in the number of directors, the difference being because the proxy forms were sent out separately.

The minutes of the previous AGM and the annual report and accounts were accepted, as was the increase in the maximum number of directors allowed.

The longest serving directors: Drew Marchant, Chris Hilliard and Paul Smith were re-appointed. Janet Goodland who had been co-opted since the previous AGM was appointed as a director.

Jane Hamilton, in her last appearance as Chair, reviewed the year. (see page 4) She then introduced the new chair, Simon Clewlow.

Simon paid tribute to Jane's work and hoped that he would be able to do nearly as well in future. He then called for a round of applause to thank Jane for her efforts.

After a few questions, John Best gave a presentation about the community boats over the past year. See page 5.

The guest speaker was Terry Cavender from the Buckingham Canal Society. See page 6. ●

Reflections in the water... moving on

It's almost 10 years since I joined Bedford & Milton Keynes Waterway Trust (Jane Hamilton writes). Looking back over that time I now recognise that the minute I joined, my life took a completely different route. The previous year my husband of over 35 years died very suddenly. I was gradually rebuilding my life but joining the Trust as a Trustee suddenly changed my direction of travel. By the time Graham Mabbutt asked me to join him as joint Chair the following year, I was volunteering with two other local organisations. Very quickly B&MK Waterway Trust took over. Another year on and Graham stepped down to focus on the *John Bunyan* boat leaving me as the sole Chair. I was suddenly caught in a whirlwind of people, meetings, minutes and all things waterways. Until that point canals and waterways were something I walked and cycled along.....not something to get built! Very quickly I had to pick up and learn an entirely new language.

From my professional background I knew that for any piece of infrastructure to be taken seriously it needed a credible business plan which spelt out why it was needed, what the costs were and who was going to build it. So, from 2016 onwards, with the help of existing and newly recruited Trustees, that's what we did:- developed a business plan. Thank goodness, we soon had an income stream from the incredibly successful *John Bunyan* boat which we used to fund some essential technical work.

I know a lot of members felt that we should be getting on and digging ourselves but the Trust are not new waterway builders – our job has been and remains to be advocates for the waterway. The Business Plan was intended to persuade others to take the lead, establish a legal entity which can attract major funding and has the experience and expertise to deliver the project.

View from the Chair



So after seven years the View from the Chair is coming from a different perspective, but undoubtedly one that has been shaped and moulded by the unstinting and excellent work by my predecessor. Jane's leadership of the Trust has seen changes a plenty, many of which she refers to in her final column for this newsletter so I won't go through their significant number myself. Suffice to say she has left a legacy of organisation and achievement for which she deserves a very big Thank You! I am sure you all share with me in wishing her well for her new life closer to family in Sussex.

While the baton she has passed on is indeed weighty, I am supported by fellow Trustees who bring vast experience of public service and a broad base of knowledge to the Trust. The Board also draws on the views of those representing the management of our two community boats and diverse array of volunteers who bring so much pleasure to the thousands of people who get the opportunity to cruise the waterways of Bedford and Milton Keynes every year. One can speculate whether or not another organisation would have spotted the potential for passenger-carrying craft to ply the river or canal but it is through the vision and efforts of the Trust, you the Members and especially its volunteers on the boats and elsewhere that this demand is now being met so successfully.

The ability to bring this enjoyment to people of waterways, whether cruising along them or walking, cycling or wheeling alongside them, is of course the core purpose of the Trust. But this is not just on and around the River Great Ouse and Grand Union Canal; it is also, eventually, in all places along the route of the Waterway Park. We all know that the linking of navigable waterways around the east of England will offer innumerable leisure opportunities but, furthermore, it is the linking of the wet west of this country to the increasingly dry east that is clearly something which can be and, with increasing urgency, needs to be achieved. So although there are engineering, environmental, financial and political issues to be resolved (to name just a few!), the concept of the Waterway Park can be part of the solution to this challenge and, as has previously been reported in this column, is recognised as such.

Bringing the vision of linking the Grand Union Canal to the River Great Ouse to a reality can, however, sometimes appear to be overwhelming and it is easy to think that it could never happen. At such times

I find it is important to return to fundamentals; how great the gain to society can be if we achieve our aims and, put simply, does it make common sense.

At such times I look back in the early 80's when, at university, I was inspired by working for a year on a project that was investigating the viability of erecting wind turbines in the sea to generate electricity. At the time fossil fuels accounted for over 80% of electricity generated and the coal industry employed hundreds of thousands. Nevertheless we could see that finding a way to harness a renewable resource so providing a cleaner and safer way of producing electricity made sense whatever the hurdles. A target of 5% for wind-generation then seemed ambitious yet nowadays there are times when over half of our electricity comes from wind power.

To my mind, the concept of moving water from the west to the east has echoes of knowing 40 years ago that the wind was then an untapped resource - an opportunity just waiting for and needing a solution. To this end we are fortunate as a country that Victorian engineering already brings the water supply for Birmingham from the Welsh hills via an innovative system of reservoirs and pipelines. This legacy ensures that water still flows today and, once used, enters a huge wastewater treatment works at Minworth, east of Birmingham. Currently, once cleaned, this water eventually discharges out to sea but a study has now been commissioned for the design of a water transfer scheme to enable the transportation of up to 115M litres per day of cleaned wastewater from the Midlands to the Southeast by upgrading the Grand Union Canal.

The Trust awaits with great interest the outcome of this proposal since, with just a fraction of this redirected discharge, the Waterway Park would be able to make a difference to farmers and residents in the east - surely that makes common sense.

Simon Clewlow

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Reflections in the water... moving on (cont)

(Continued from page 1)

It has taken over seven years of very hard work to reach a point where that looks a lot more hopeful. Over the course of those seven years the Trust has:

- Significantly raised the strategic profile of the Waterway
- Established broad strategic policy support from a range of partners
- Brought in new Consortium members and persuaded the Consortium to lead on delivery
- Persuaded external agencies (the Environment Agency and Water Resources East) to invest (£120k) in building the business case around water resilience
- Ensured the project's integration into new development
- Established an economic case
- Created a digital map to use in bids and for lobbying

At the local level we have

- Launched another Community Boat – the wonderful *Electra*
- Built a landing stage at Kempston
- Secured a shore base for *Electra*
- Marked the route with some eye-catching sculptures in Marston Vale and new interpretation boards in Bedford and Milton Keynes

Looking forward there are some new positives which will really help the Waterway. It has recently been included in Water Resources East's Regional Water Resource Management Plan which says

"Work will continue with the Bedford and Milton Keynes Waterway Park Partnership to help build the business case for investment in this new strategic link. Specifically, WRE has been leading a project with the Environment Agency to assess the water resources and flood risk management benefits that the link could unlock."

This is a big step with important external agencies getting involved and taking the lead in establishing a means to attract and plan for long term investment.

Whilst I am very sad to step away from the Trust, I do feel that there is a positive future ahead. Make no mistake, there will always be challenges ahead, however the new Chair, Simon Clewlow, is taking those challenges on. I always feel change is good for an organisation and I know that Simon will bring a fresh perspective, new thinking and renewed determination.

Recent local elections have brought significant changes for the Bedford and Milton Keynes Waterway Consortium. I know that Simon and the Trustees will be working to build relationships with new Consortium representatives and maintain the strong strategic profile we have established.

So, I am off to the South Coast where the only digging I do will be the bucket and spade sort. Simon has already taken over as Chair and I step down as a Trustee at the end of July. I will, of course, remain a member of the Trust and receive my regular newsletter like everyone else!

The Bedford and Milton Keynes Waterway Park is an amazing project. It is very difficult to step away from something which has been a huge part of my life in recent years. I will miss greatly all my colleagues on the Trust and all the volunteers. Everyone has worked so very, very hard over the years and made my job as Chair very rewarding. I will take with me happy memories of a group of wonderful, dedicated and endlessly cheerful people.

Thank you everyone for all the support you have given me and the Trust. ●



Above and top: Jane on her "Thank You" cruise

Review of the Year: The Trust

Jane Hamilton gave her annual report at the AGM. She began by quickly reviewing the Trust's Vision for the Waterway, this being familiar to most members.

The new waterway is important to the region because it will provide:

- A brand new navigation
- Improved water resilience for East Anglia
- Potential to reduce local flooding
- Potential to help water transfer between regions
- Encourage healthy lifestyles
- New and direct routes for cycling and walking between Bedford and Milton Keynes
- Improved links between existing rivers, canals, lakes, good for wildlife
- A sense of place, and help us get to know where we are and who we are

Jane listed the current members of the Consortium, and mentioned that it had become more active over the last year. It has started a stronger lead in promoting the Waterway. A new chair is in place and the Consortium partners are meeting more regularly and working towards setting up a Special Purpose Vehicle (SPV) which would be the legal entity responsible for delivering the Waterway.

Our role is to advocate for the Waterway - delivery will be the responsibility of the Consortium and other major agencies.

As Jane would be standing down as Chair at the end of the meeting, she thought it appropriate to review achievements over the last 10 years, rather than just one. We have:

- Significantly raised the strategic profile of the Waterway
- Established broad strategic policy support from a range of partners
- Brought in new Consortium members and persuaded the Consortium to lead on delivery
- Persuaded EA and WRE to invest in building the business case around water resilience. This is important as the first time external organisations have paid for this sort of work. Until now we have had to fund it all ourselves.
- Ensured the project's integration into new development
- Established an economic case
- Created a digital map to use in bids and for lobbying

More locally we have:

- Launched two Community Boats
- Built a landing stage (with £30k and £10k from EA and Beds Borough)
- Secured a shore base for *Electra*
- Installed new interpretation boards and an art trail to mark the route of the Waterway Park

A lot of time is spent meeting with and lobbying a range of organisations at national and local levels, from DEFRA to parish councils, and specialist organisations including East/West Rail, Environment Agency, arts groups, and many more.

Regionally, water resource management plans are being developed around the country, to go into a national plan expected next year - the first for many years. We have been working with Water Resources East (WRE) and are mentioned in their plan, which is a really big step forward.

Being in the WRE plan should help to bring in investment to the project and encourage the members of the Consortium on board more strongly as they can see other external agencies taking the project seriously.

What hasn't gone so well? Politics are always there, with many ups and downs over the years. The Oxford Cambridge Arc looked likely to help us, but has now gone away to be replaced by a Pan Regional Partnership. This means much less funding in infrastructure in the region. Levelling up has moved funds away - this region doesn't seem to need any help.

SEMLEP has helped us over the years, but Government policy means that it will cease to operate in April 2024.

The local elections may have a big impact. Over the past year Central Bedfordshire has been a major player on the Consortium - the elections have made a big change there, with independents now the largest group. We will have to see how this plays out as they form the new administration. Also the mayor of Bedford has changed, so we will need to get to know the new mayor.

For the future we need to:

- Maintain the strong strategic profile we have established
- Build relationships with new Consortium representatives
- Work closely with the Environment Agency and Water Resources East
- Continue to build the business case
- Protect the route
- Support the community boats

Review of the Year: The Boats

John Best presented a report on BMKWEL and the community boats.

John began by explaining that BMKWEL Enterprise Limited was set up to manage any commercial operations the Trust might have, specifically the *JB* and later *Electra*.

More recently the boat operations felt that they were too busy running the boats, and know best about the boats, so they felt that BMKWEL added little value. It remains as a legal entity for tax and contract purposes but does little else. The boats now do their own thing at each end of the route.

John, therefore, felt his task was to summarise the outputs and impact of having a boat at each end of the route.

In the 25 years that the project has been going under the Trust, we have found new benefits every few years to add to the roster of good reasons to build the Waterway Park.

John went on to say "I think where these are starting to impact upon social conditions, quality of life, wellbeing and that whole range of community benefits. I think the current circumstances of general stress, cost of living problems and general mental health challenges around the country. I think the social impact to what we and the boats doing becomes more significant in the judgment of whether the Waterway Park has now arrived at the moment where it needs to be built."

What we as the Trust have been doing for the last 25 years is scoping, defining and promoting the project. But it's only going to happen as we found out, particularly with the politics that we've been touching on around the consortium, if we have not only national and regional support but also local support - particularly from the three local authorities. We need them if we are to get the waterway built.



The boats are both delivering a substantial amount of local support. They have raised a significant amount of the money for the Trust - especially the *JB* which can carry more passengers and has been operating for longer.

Electra has built partnerships with parish councils along the Grand Union, and *JB*

	<i>JB</i>	<i>Electra</i>
Passengers	6,770	2,586
Cruises	250	264
Wheelchairs carried	50	36
Ticket revenue	£100k+	£45k
Surplus	£30k	£10k
Donations	£4.8k	£750
No of volunteers	63	45
Summary of 2022 results		

(although structured differently) is also building partnerships with community organisations.



Both boats also provide volunteering opportunities and training for local people, generate funding for projects in each town, deliver improvements to the waterways either end and raise the quality of life for a diverse range of people.

The boats are well known and highly regarded. They are important in raising awareness of the project and, in the area in which they each operate, the boats are known much more than the Trust. John then showed a slide listing some of the communities we have worked with - far too many to list here.

The Royal recognition is extremely gratifying. As reported in previous editions of BMK News, *JB* was awarded the Queen's Award for Voluntary Service, and *Electra* was selected as one of a handful of MK charities to present to HRH Charles III on the award of City Status to MK.

John ended by saying that: Some day we'll have a third boat, plying the bit in the middle, stopping at places along the route, working with local communities (some very old; some very new) showing that all the wait, all the energy expended and all the volunteering had produced monumental community benefits, at regional as well as local level.

And they'll wonder how they ever did without it . . . ●



Terry Cavender was the guest speaker at the AGM. He gave a review of the progress of the Buckingham Canal Society in restoring that stretch, and their future plans.

He began with a brief history, including that the last boat on the canal (2.5 miles short of Buckingham) was in 1937.

The BCS was formed in 1992. In the early years they were predominantly preserving the line and acting as a history society, collecting artefacts and information.

The first restored section (11 miles from Cosgrove) was at the far end, at Buckingham. This was opened in 2015, and your editor was there.

This has become a successful nature reserve.

They are also working at Hyde Lane, through the nature reserve there.

They have restored a bridge, and rebuilt a collapsed one, using volunteers and a crane boat donated to the BCS.

Over the last 5 years they have restored the first 500m at Cosgrove, and piled the narrows there allow-

ing it to re-open this year.

They are encouraging biodiversity and protection of endangered species, both as a good thing in its own right, but this work can also provide another income stream. The Buckingham Canal, the Waterway and the 3 miles of Grand Union in between would give a 30 mile long wildlife corridor.

An apparent problem is that when the A5 dual carriageway was built through Milton Keynes, it blocked the route of the canal. However, the Act of Parliament which created the canal is still in force, and there is a flood bridge nearby which could be used. After continual pressure on National Highways over a long period, there are



signs that it may be possible to use this route. It is hoped that this will be in place over the next 2-5 years.

There are plans for the work to be carried out over the next 5 years, and from 5 to 10 years - by which time the canal may be open - or at least the end will be in view.

When people ask "when will it be finished?" the answer is "as soon as possible - do you want to help?"



Bourton Meadow section in 2015...



...and more recently



Benches at Hyde Lane made from old lock gates

The future depends on involving younger people and communities, as well as staying on good terms with partners.

Terry ended with a quote from Muhammad Ali, which sums up Terry's approach:

"Impossible is just a big word thrown around by people who find it easier to live in the world they've been given than to explore the power they have to change it. Impossible is not a fact. It's an opinion. Impossible is not a declaration. It's a dare. Impossible is potential. Impossible is temporary. Impossible is nothing."

The BCS is overcoming "impossible" obstacles one by one. First the collapsed bridge, then getting permission to water the first 500 metres, next is the A5. Keep the faith, and you never know what may be achieved. ●



The way under the A5?

November	Annual Partnership Conference. To be confirmed.
Other live	events are being planned. Watch this space.

John Bunyan Community Boat 10 years of cruising

This July, the *John Bunyan* Community Boat celebrates its 10th year of operation. The *John Bunyan* was launched at a boat-naming ceremony at Priory Marina on the River Great Ouse in July 2013. Over the past 10 years the *John Bunyan* has become one of Bedford's top tourist attractions carrying over 60,000 passengers on over 1,200 cruises.

It offers a range of cruises from leisurely Sunday cruises to Kempston, music cruises featuring jazz, Motown and Inis Eire Irish Band, a wide range of dining with fish & chip suppers to 'Thali and Tandoor' curry cruises, and afternoon tea cruises at Mercure Hotel and Kingfisher Pub (formerly the Barns Hotel).



Naming the *John Bunyan*

The *John Bunyan* has come a long way since its initial public cruises offering in 2014 of:- Thursday morning cruises Sovereigns Quay to Kempston return and in the afternoon Sovereigns Quay to Cardington lock return and Sunday afternoon cruises from Priory Marina to Kempston via Sovereigns Quay which we still run today. Providing special cruises: the Town & Anchor Great Barford lunch cruise and 'Swan Teatime' & 'Swan Sunset' cruises. In the evenings providing jazz and folk music cruises and the highly successful 'Saturday Fish and Chip' cruises. Also running a cruise with a difference 'Bat Watching' discovering the bats along the river Great Ouse and a 'Spooky Halloween Cruise'.

In 2016 we introduced the highly successful Barns Hotel afternoon tea cruises with



afternoon tea served at the Barns Hotel. In following year, the *John Bunyan* went disco crazy introducing the 'Motown and Northern Soul' Cruise from the Barns Hotel (now Kingfisher Pub).

In 2021 we introduced 45 minute family EyeSpy public cruises during the school holidays playing the game of

EyeSpy helped by the cabin crew to spot local landmarks & wildlife.

Last year the *John Bunyan* Volunteers received the Queen's Award for Voluntary Service, the equivalent of an MBE for a voluntary organisation, in recognition of services to the community which was presented by the Lord Lieutenant of Bedfordshire. This was a great recognition for the volunteers who provide their time on the *John Bunyan* Community Boat.

Following on from that, 2 volunteers were nominated to attend a Garden Party at Buckingham Palace on the 3rd May this year. Teresa Clarke and Colin Christie were chosen and attended the once-in-a-lifetime event in glorious sunshine. It is estimated that over 7,000 people packed the 34-acre gardens so the chances of spotting a royal were slim! Colin and Theresa had headed for the tea tent for much needed refreshments while others had lined the royal processional route for a better glimpse of King Charles III.

At the recent Bedford Independent Everyday Heroes Awards for 2022, in partnership with the Harpur Trust, The *John Bunyan* Community Boat's Operations Team won the 'Raising the Profile of

(Continued on page 8)




Teresa Clarke and Stephen Goosey (R) at the award presentation

(Continued from page 7)
the Town (Team)' award, sponsored by Bedford Radio. Stephen Goosey, *John Bunyan* boat Chair, said, "This is a great achievement to win the award, this shows the hard work our volunteers on the Operations Team puts in. However, without the wider volunteer team in all roles this would not have been possible and shows the great commitment of all volunteers on the *John Bunyan* Community boat."


Last year the *John Bunyan* made available over 100 free tickets to family EyeSpy cruises and a dedicated 'Tea & Cake'



Participants on the BRASS cruise.
Photo: Jan Long (Rotary Club)



John Bunyan Boat River Cruise



Relax on a John Bunyan river cruise while attending the Kite & Motoring Festival
Find us near Bedford Town Lock
Mill Meadows
No booking needed for a
30mins return cruise,
Adult £5, Children 5-16 years £3
Licensed Galley Bar from 12pm

Web:- www.johnbunyanboat.org

13

JB Featuring in the Kite Festival Programme

cruises for the Ukrainian Refugees and this year on a very hot Sunday afternoon we held a joint sponsored cruise with Bedford Rotary for the local BRASS (Bedford Refugee Asylum Seekers Support). We hosted families from Syria, Afghanistan and Vietnam on the cruise enjoying sunshine as we cruised the view along the Embankment and lower river, including experiencing going through a lock.

Special thanks to all volunteers crewing

on the BRASS Sponsored cruise on 11th June and BRASS organisation for organising the families that came on the cruise.

BRASS support many different clients from a wide range of countries including Syria, Afghanistan, Vietnam, many of the African countries.

The *John Bunyan* attended the Bedford Kite and Motoring festival held in Russell Park and Mill Meadow on the 24th & 25th June, providing short taster 30min cruises on both the Saturday and Sunday at the event, with a total of just over 300 passengers taking a trip on the *John Bunyan* from the Town Lock landing stage. ●

Contact Us.

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

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