

R N Newsletter R

Issue 127
Autumn 2025

The journal of the Russell Newbery Engine Owners & Enthusiasts Club

Snowdonia Rail Tour Two
Autumn Gathering
Paul Le Blique Obituary
Ouch! Mind the Gap!
K&A Cruise
Odd Lock Artist



www.rnregister.org.uk

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Front cover: Stafford Boat Club with visiting Register boats moored on the offside of the canal during our Autumn Gathering. [Andrew Laycock]

Back cover: Stunning scenic views from The Cob and of Porthmadog Harbour taken during our North Wales Railways tour. [Steve Whetnall]

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Spring tour proposal

I am in the early stages of planning a Spring tour. The suggested location is North Norfolk to include a visit to the Muckleburgh Military Collection at Weybourne. Also a ride on the North Norfolk Railway ('The Poppy Line') from the smart Victorian seaside resort of Sheringham to the Georgian town of Holt.

The planned dates are Friday 17th & Saturday 18th April 2026, the week after Easter. Muckleburgh is the UK's largest privately owned military museum. The core of the collection an extensive range of artillery and military vehicles, including armoured cars, trucks and tanks.

More information to follow in the next edition of the *Newsletter*, as at present neither venue is giving firm dates that they will be open in April. If you are interested in joining this tour, please register an expression of interest with me by email, now, neilamason@btinternet.com, so that I can gauge numbers, for a group visits.

Neil Mason

Next edition

All contributions for the Winter edition will be gratefully received. Copy deadline 15th January 2026. Do not worry about format — in true RN fashion the editorial team can cope with [almost] anything! Please supply photographs as separate JPEG or GIF files.

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Editor's Ramblings

Even non-railway enthusiasts will not have failed to notice the plethora of events and TV programmes this autumn as part of the "Railway 200" celebrations. The actual 200th anniversary is of the opening of the Stockton & Darlington Railway in September 1825. Whilst that was not the first railway in the UK, nor the first to use steam locomotives, nor the first to carry passengers - it was the first that combined most aspects of what we now consider to be a modern railway.

Similarly, 32 years ago in 1993, "Canal 200" was almost an equally contrived anniversary. That year was chosen as 1793 was the very height of canal mania, with several canals opening and many more receiving parliamentary approval. That 200th celebration programme was certainly much lower key - no mass gathering of boats, re-creations of first runs, and very few TV programmes. Even the IWA National Rally that year took place on a river (the Nene at Peterborough) rather than an canal. Maybe "Canal 250" in 2043 will be a larger series of events.

As both canals and railways are now very much part of everyday life, understanding the impact of those developments 200 years ago is not easy. These days we are so used to change, and an ever increasing rate of change, so we expect

Membership Matters

Its been a quiet time for new members, with just one new addition to the Register, so a very warm RN welcome to: Chris Smith, nb *Cyenus*.

We continue to have numerous members (45 at the last count!) who are paying their membership (£12 or £15) by standing order or means other than the Go Cardless processed direct debits. If you are one of these, please do get in touch with me and we'll swap you over in a painless manner. A key to checking your payment set-up is whether you are receiving an electronic newsletter without requesting to do so – as this saves the postage but is not the correct solution.

to witness many major developments over our lifetime. When I was born, colour TV, space travel, heart transplants, mobile phones, digital cameras, and artificial intelligence were the realms of science fiction.

However, the ability to wind back the clock is still fantasy. With each passing year, we do have to acknowledge that for most of us our physical capabilities are diminishing. I doubt whether I will achieve another day navigating 54 or more locks! Julie Ferne makes a very good point in her article that it is best to cruise some of our more challenging waterways whilst we are still in good health. Whilst Dave Martin's piece reminds us that whatever our capabilities, we need to be ever vigilant of the dangers of boats, machinery and waterways.

Let's hope that we all have plenty more years of of boating ahead. My canal 'bucket list' still has plenty of items on it. Whilst top of the wish list now is a wet winter and early spring, those reservoirs need filling!

As this is the last edition of the year, I wish you compliments of the season and a Happy Boating 2026.

Andrew

editor@rnregister.org.uk

The WhatsApp group ('RN Chatter') continues to be proving popular. Any members not on the RN Chatter who wish to be added, please just let me know and we'll get you sorted out.

If there is anyone wishing to take a more active role in the RN Register, we are receptive to a volunteer willing to become a director. If you want to know more or step forward, get in touch with me or any of the other current directors.

Rayne

administrator@rnregister.org.uk

Chairman's Chatter

Hello, me again. Well, we are almost at the end of a pretty miserable year, for one reason or another I've done precious little boating and even missed the Autumn Gathering. I know this is a little, no, a lot like the kettle calling the pot black but it appears that the people who attend events and away days always seem to be the same crowd. These events are good fun, the company convivial, well organised and not overly expensive, in fact good value for money. I wholeheartedly encourage all members, old and new, to support the events and away days. The Autumn Gathering and the North Wales trip were great but no new faces on either. As I say, this particular year it is a little bit of pot and kettle but come next year, I'll be there at every available opportunity.

With the departure of Meg Bartlett as a Director (who will be and is, sorely missed) we have at least one vacancy for a volunteer to join the board and help shape the Register for the future. The duties are not onerous and board meetings few. If you feel you have something to offer, and most of you have, please get in touch, enthusiasm is about the only qualification.

Great to see that Cotswold Canal Trust have succeeded in their current bid for funding from the National lottery, £6.4m to restore "the missing mile". Just to put that in perspective, the recently completed Wilmcote Top lock on the South Stratford cost in the order of £900k for an almost complete rebuild. Boats that couldn't get to Stratford upon Avon before should now have no difficulty. At last I am able to get back to my home mooring on the Avon from either direction – last year I could use neither.

I've been told by the Editor to make this a little shorter this quarter, an instruction with which I'm happy to comply.

See you next year.

Bob

chairman@rnregister.org.uk

The Kennet and Avon at last

Yes - we have always wanted to do it, but it has taken more than 23 years of boating to actually get there. We had heard all about it of course from other boaters - "there's lots of difficult locks", "there's nowhere to moor", "it's a leap of faith to get to the bank" and also of course, we took no notice at all. We wanted to reach Bristol and spend a little time there, so heading from our mooring at Alvecote we travelled via the Coventry and Oxford Canals to the Thames, heading for Reading. We actually missed the turning - the shanty town of tatty live-aboard vessels along this part of the Thames had totally obscured the sign. This should maybe have been a warning to us - certainly a portent of things to come, as the ever-evolving canal system has become home to many itinerant boaters.



First impressions were not great - the first official lock on the K&A is literally held together by ratchet straps and sticking plaster, and the first pub we encountered (despite having excellent

moorings right outside) had "No Mooring" signs aplenty. Travelling through The Oracle shopping centre was fun - but again no stopping, no mooring, Do Not Pass Go. The traffic light system before the Town Lock is also unique and quite jolly in the spirit of things at the beginning of the journey.

After Reading it became a real slog. The locks are really hard work and not very well maintained. There are lots of swing bridges which are equally hard to manoeuvre. The countryside is not very interesting and the mile upon mile of permanently moored boats is depressing. This really is a tick-over canal. At the beginning of our journey we nearly turned back several times.

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On the positive side, we found some lovely pubs. Mooring was a constant problem, but the pubs were really good. Fine food, lovely people - definitely an enjoyable end to the cruising day. The Cuning Man just outside Reading, The Lock Stock and Barrel at Newbury and The Barge at Seend saved our sanity just when we needed encouragement.

Still of a mind to turn back, we finally arrived at Newbury and the countryside began to blossom. Both Newbury and Hungerford are charming, access to shops is easy from the town moorings, and there are lots of places to eat, drink and restore our faith in the beauty of the canal system.

Meadow mooring is a complete nightmare. All the prior warnings were sadly coming true one by one. There are sections of this



canal where there is no alternative to meadow mooring. We are a deep draught vessel and we struggled to moor alongside. We had noticed that most boats had huge gangplanks and it became obvious why - our paltry little five footer was sadly inadequate, and leaping into bushes to secure our ropes resulted in many bruises, scrapes and cuts to remind us of that.

One highlight around Little Bedwyn lock was a herd of bullocks rampaging towards me on the bridge - lots of them. They careered down the lane, flattening me against the wall. There did not seem to be anyone in charge and I am still not sure where they ended up.

Honey Street had been recommended as a favourite stop - but, as ever, the continuous moorers had nabbed all the available moorings so we really cannot comment.

Heading for the famous Caen Hill flight we finally had a stroke of luck on the mooring front. You can actually book a mooring at the Black Horse pub which is three locks away from the flight. Such a welcome relief to know we had a secure place to stay.

Caen Hill was truly magnificent. The views from the top are breathtaking and the locks themselves are actually a dream to work. There are masses of volunteers and the whole experience - on both the outbound and return journeys - was just sublime. Thank you for restoring my faith.

Now the countryside is truly gorgeous: Bradford on Avon is divine (and yes, Tesco does deliver to The George Inn pub postcode) and the journey to Bath is beautiful. But approximately eight miles of solid moored boats dampened our spirits somewhat. Bath itself is so incredibly beautiful - blighted yet again by the favelas of tatty boats at every available mooring space. The smell of weed is overpowering as you cruise (tick-over, obviously) past boats moored three deep.

Our final stop before Bristol was at Hanham where there were actual visitor moorings! The Lock and Weir pub is a haven. Lovely people - the landlord actually offered to get stuff for us from the Cash and Carry! We spent a night there before our descent into



Bristol itself. We had booked moorings, £138.00 for 2 nights - but worth every penny. Moored at the Arnolfini Museum which is a secure, gated pontoon mooring with water and electricity. The latter is accessed by a pre-purchased card but to our delight there were several electric points with money still on them so that was all our laundry sorted.

Are we glad we did it? Yes. Should we have done this 15 years ago when there were fewer itinerant boaters? Definitely Yes. Should be have done it when we were younger, fitter and stronger? Yes and Yes. Should we have listened to wiser boaters about the downside of the K&A? Totally. Would we ever do it again? Absolutely not.

Julie Ferne
(All photographs by Julie)

Bristol is a glorious city - and you moor right in the centre close to College Green. All delights are here and we really enjoyed our time sightseeing, eating, drinking and reminding us of why we attempted the Kennet and Avon canal in the first place.



Paul Le Blique (1946-2025)

When the RN Register started in 1994 it was a technical forum for those of us keen to have support for our precious engines. I didn't expect it to develop into an organisation where many of us would make enduring friendships.

I feel very fortunate to have met and known Paul through the Register. With both of us having engineering backgrounds and enquiring minds, we had much in common, so I guess our friendship was inevitable. Fortunately, his wife Jenny and my partner Beryl got on well too. Like other boating friendships, there were gaps in time when we might not meet but we stayed in touch and when we did get together, we were always able to enthusiastically pick up from where we left off.

I think it started with a comment from Alister Denyer who, around the time of the millennium, let slip we had a very interesting new member who had found a D2 industrial Russell Newbery engine in a scrap yard and was rebuilding it. Soon after, the RN Register newsletter published the first part of the story and this is the opening paragraph in Paul's own words:

"It may be construed as a character weakness but I am an avid explorer of scrapyards, not the piles of tyres variety, rather those wonderful establishments often run by generations of the same family and concealing anything from locomotives to computer bits. Such a place existed at New Bradwell in Buckinghamshire that had provided me with endless relief as a boy during visits to my elderly grandmother. When in 1980 we moved to the area chasing that curse of the common man called work, to my surprise it was still there, without a guard dog or corrugated iron fence in sight. A quick look round started the events which culminated in this epistle. A tarpaulin had been thrown over a pile of machinery, including a couple of old generating sets, one of which had a twin cylinder engine painted dove grey. Yes, it was a Russell Newbery, and I had to have it....."

To me, that's what I'd look for in a best-selling novel! At this time Rob Davies and I were busy organising the 2001 RN Rally at
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Three Mills in London and I think it was in August of that year in East London where we first met. I found that he and Jenny were active members of Taverner's Boat Club near Cosgrove where they kept their boat *Ebley*. They actively embraced the social aspect of the rallies and became regular attendees. Paul's engineering knowledge extended beyond mechanical to electrical, and this led to something that later became the stuff of RN folklore. The 2007 rally was held at Atherstone and this is from my account in issue 54 of the *Newsletter*:

".....The next morning (Sunday) it was up to Paul Le Blique to talk on the subject of boat electrics. Rising to the challenge he delivered the goods and, to put his all-female audience at ease, he very sportingly wore his best frock and pinny....".

Quite what happened, Beryl never revealed but I did find myself with a long list of electrical jobs on her boat. There are some grainy photos on page 8 of that *Newsletter* but the rest is only as good as the memories of those ladies present!

There's so much more I could say about his waterways involvement with the Association of Waterways Cruising Clubs (he was National Chairman for some years) but I hope this gives a snapshot of just part of Paul's life that many of us will fondly remember.

Paul's illness and death in April of this year was sudden and came as a surprise to all of us. Along with some other Register members, I was fortunate to attend his funeral and hear about so many other interesting aspects of his life.

If you'd like to read the rest of Paul's two-part article about the discovery and build of *Ebley's* engine, go to the website: rnregister.org.uk, click on the "Newsletter" tab and scroll down to issues 29 and 30.

Steve Burt



Mind the Gap! (or “A Lesson Too Late For the Learning” as the song goes)

Here's a recent boating saga that might offer some useful lessons to us all.

It all started innocuously at the end of May when we set off on our summer cruise from our mooring at Audlem, heading for somewhere south of Banbury. Then leaving *Jaipur* for a week at Dunchurch Pools (for free, using the marinas' Cruise Moor scheme), then head back to Cheshire.

The weather at the end of May was poor, so we delayed the start for two days whilst the rain and wind abated. It continued in this vein, and it was four days out before the shorts were donned. Nothing much improved, so shorter cruising days meant the original objective of getting beyond Banbury disappeared. We rescheduled for a trip up the Coventry Arm and possibly the Ashby.

Lesson 1: don't believe all you read about the Coventry Arm. It was excellent cruising with little rubbish and a decent depth. Totally different from our last trip: now no factories nor pipe bridges, but the excellent towpath was evidently a drug users and dealers highway! The basin moorings are good and feel safe. There is even an operational pump-out machine, though the rubbish disposal is closed. The Transport Museum was excellent, likewise The Golden Cross pub next to the cathedral, but the city centre, whilst convenient, leaves a lot to be desired. But it does have a Sainsbury's.

We decided to save the Ashby for another trip, and eventually pulled in at the Fradley water point. Which is where it all went wrong. We'd tied up, got the rubbish and hose-reel off, and I was kneeling on the bow shutting the locker. The next thing I knew was that I was very wet and blowing bubbles.

Lesson 2: shut your mouth when you fall in (as instructed by our illustrious chairman after his Avon immersion). All very well if you can see it coming, but in 60 years of boating it's never happened to me before. I just wish I knew what happened: I can only assume the front rope wasn't tight and the bow swung out.

Lesson 3: always look where you are going

to put your feet. Never assume. Having come up for air, the next question was how to get out? Using my body as a dip-stick, the water was four feet deep, and the bank around 18 inches high.

Lesson 4: always have some means of escape from the cut on the boat. Some form of ladder is probably more convenient than a winch! Fortunately, two hefty passers-by came to the rescue and pulled me out. Nessa certainly couldn't have done it on her own. Scary!

A quick review of the situation showed a nasty cut just below the knee (probably caused by bouncing off the piling) and missing spectacles, although hearing aids stayed put.

Lesson 5: take a spare pair of glasses when boating. Having washed down, dumped the wet clothes in the shower and cleaned and covered the cut, we decided to push on to Rugeley to get more wound dressings. Nessa nobly steered through pouring rain whilst I elevated the leg to try to stop it bleeding: it wouldn't!

Lesson 6: make sure you have a well stocked first aid kit on the boat for both cuts and sprains. Having reached Rugeley (3+ hours) it was clear the wound would not stop bleeding, so having taken advice from the local GP practice, we decided a trip to Lichfield hospital was in order. A taxi pick-up at Tesco was arranged.

Lesson 6: install the UBER app on your phone if you don't know the area. We were picked up within five minutes, and by wrapping the leg in a towel and kitchen roll managed to avoid bloodying the taxi.

Staff at the hospital reception were very understanding of my dripping blood over the waiting room floor! We were seen within an hour. First question was “are you up-to-date with tetanus jabs?”

Lesson 7: know your tetanus jab status. Having cleaned the wound, the nurses decided it couldn't be stitched as it had swollen too much, so some form of sticky tape (steri-strip) was applied to try to seal it. We were given dressings and instructed to get it seen again within three days, and



warned it would take a long time to heal.

We continued our merry way along the Staffs & Worcs, even managing a trip into Penkridge Market, Jaspers, and the Horse and Jockey. By now the lower half of the leg was completely purple. The wound was still bleeding, but not as badly, and therefore manageable.

Lesson 8: never miss an opportunity to get a Jaspers cake or visit the Horse & Jockey for a beer and a bap. On reaching Atherley Junction it was time for another UBER trip to A&E at Wolverhampton Hospital. The wound was cleaned and re-dressed, and I was again told to have it checked again in three days. Only two hours for the round trip!

Lesson 9: visit A&E at Sunday lunchtime. By this time Pete Batten on *Pershore* had appeared, so we went in convoy up the Shroppie. Pete went ahead after Norbury as he'd agreed to meet Brian Jarrett in Nantwich in a day or so's time.

At this point sod's law prevailed, and Nessa took a hefty tumble on the lockside at Adderley Locks: caught her foot in a grass covered hole. Nothing broken but much bruising. A quick phone call meant the Audlem boating mafia plus Pete appeared next morning and we were taken down Adderley and Audlem locks, and back to the marina: thanks folks!

Next wound dressing was at Audlem Medical Practice, with much oo-ing and aah-ing at both the wound and the purple leg. A course of antibiotics was prescribed as they were concerned that it was still bleeding 10 days after the accident.

In all this time the wound itself was not hugely painful, but one of the worst bits was removing the adhesive dressing from my hairy knees. As one nurse pointed out, some ladies pay good money for that treatment!

Two days later the leg was starting to swell and feel warm, and the wound beginning to smell: I thought it was my feet initially! It being a Sunday lunchtime, another trip to the hospital was in order. Busy this time, but very efficient once they decided which clinic I needed to be at: was it orthopaedic (bone) or cosmetic (skin)? Skin won out, my arm was filled with antibiotics, and x-rays taken to check no pieces of piling were lurking in the cut. The words sepsis and cellulitis were bandied about!

Lesson 10: do not delay going to A&E just because there might be a long wait (Nessa claims this is a man-thing, as they hate waiting in queues!) An urgent surgical investigation was decided upon, so there was no going home for me. Regular injections of blood thinners were made overnight, alongside an antibiotic drip. Surgery came and went, with the anaesthetist telling me "this is the best gin & tonic you'll ever get" as she knocked me out. At last the never-ending-bleeding mystery was solved: an infected blood clot deep in the wound. The surgeon had to enlarge the cut to get it out, so I've ended up with an even bigger hole in the leg! After another three days incarceration I was finally released with strict orders to rest the leg, but not too much as "we don't want a clot to form". Now there's a conundrum.

Regular trips to wound clinic have ensued, with Nurse Nessa being allowed to change dressings in between visits. Normal cuts/ wounds heal from the top downwards, but because I have a hole, it has to form skin and heal from the inside upwards.

It's taken three months to heal, so boating's been off for most of the summer.

And finally: *Lesson 11: be careful, and remember the leading cause of injury to old men, is them still thinking they're young men.*

Dave Martin

Autumn Gathering Report

Unsurprisingly, with the exceptional dry weather continuing into the autumn, many canals remained closed or restricted due to lack of water. This had a big impact on boat attendance at our Autumn Gathering at Stafford. Only seven visiting boats arrived, an eighth member's boat resides at the Stafford Boat Club. However, many more members came by other means. Some for just a day, and some for the weekend. The Stafford Boat

Club made everyone extremely welcome. They opened their bar each lunchtime and evening, consequently we consumed all of the extra beers they laid on from the Titanic brewery. One of the beers was Stafford Link, for which the brewery donate some of the profits to the Stafford River Link project.

John Potter gave a presentation of the River Link project on Friday evening,



The visiting RNR boats moored on the club house side of the S&W canal. One of the few not affected by water restrictions - thanks to Wolverhampton sewage works!



Meg and Janet preparing the cake display,.....



with plenty of advice from others!



Cakes galore!



Two Register members absconded on Sunday to visit the Stafford Model Railway exhibition. They were impressed by this model featuring a very accurate BCN tug and day boat.

focusing on the progress made since our last Gathering at Stafford. On the Saturday afternoon many attendees visited the site of the junction, basin and lock to see the progress for themselves.

A culinary highlight on Saturday morning was a MacMillan Coffee morning. The large spread of cakes contained many home-made items, including some baked on board the visiting boats. The coffee morning raised £181 for the MacMillan

Cancer Support charity.

As usual at our events, Meg ran a successful raffle. The proceeds of this was split between two charities which the Boat Club support: Katherine House Hospice and Midlands Air Ambulance receiving £60 each, whilst the Stafford Riverway Link project received £65.

Andrew

(All photographs by Andrew)



John explains the proposed layout of the basin using this splendid model. The lock is in the top right of the basin.



Almost all of the basin floor is now concreted. The bund will remain until the bridge is complete.



The foundations of the lock house.

The junction sign, maybe a few years until boats can reach Stafford.



Chris, Caroline, Andrew and Diane enjoying the journey along the Cambrian Coast. [SW]



Prince heads our special train to Boston Lodge Works. [SW]



A very rare McLaren MDB4 diesel engine was of great interest. When restored this will power Kerr Stuart locomotive 4415, of 1928 vintage. [SW]

Ail Daith Rheilffyrdd Eryri / Section

Photographs by Steve Whetnall [SW]

'Repeated by popular demand' certainly applied to our Snowdonia Railways tour. With 14 participants who were unable to attend last year, and three returning for a second time (plus the two organisers), 19 Register members enjoyed four packed days based in Porthmadog in mid-October.

Whilst the itinerary was similar to last year, there were a few changes. Firstly, all the participants were able to book accommodation at the Premier Inn. Located opposite the Harbour Station, this was exceptionally handy for the departure point for most of the visits, and



The RNR party assemble at Boston Lodge Halt, kitt to denote visitors, apart from Jim in the tour guide p



The stunning Summit of Snowdon

Cond Snowdonia Railways Tour

[V] and Andrew Laycock [AL]

the venue for our evening meals in the station bar/restaurant, Spooner's. Another welcome change from last year was the weather. Very unusually for North Wales, we enjoyed four days without any rain! And whilst most of the rest of the UK was under cloudy dull anti-cyclonic gloom, the Snowdonia coast enjoyed a fair amount of afternoon sunshine.

Many participants travelled by train, gathering at Shrewsbury for the afternoon Cambrian coast train to Porthmadog. As the train progressed west, the weather became sunnier and warmer.



ed out in blue hi-vis
purple. [SW]

view from The Cob embankment across Traeth Mawr:
owdon (Yr Wyddfa) visible, middle left. [SW]



Lunch at Caernarfon. [SW]



WHR 130 at Caernarfon. [SW]



Alongside the River Glaslyn. [SW]



Evening meal in Spooner's. [SW]



First item on Tuesday morning was a visit to the main Ffestiniog workshops at Boston Lodge. These are the oldest working railway workshops in the world. However, the oldest buildings on the site pre-date the railway, built in 1807 when the site was a quarry. After returning to Porthmadog, we travelled by coach to Caernarfon. Whereas last year the coach was a vintage Bedford OB, this time we rode in a brand new Yutong vehicle from China. After a 'picnic' lunch in the upstairs function room of the Caffi De Winton at Caernarfon Station, we boarded the Welsh Highland train for the 25 mile ride back to Porthmadog. This is simply a very spectacular journey, especially the tortuous curved section near Beddgelert and the dramatic riverside route through the Aberglaslyn Pass.

Our WHR train was hauled by a Manchester built Beyer Garratt locomotive which spent most of its working life in South Africa. Class NG/G16s No 130 demonstrates why such powerful locomotives are required on the tight curves near Beddgelert.
[SW upper, AL lower]





Motive power for our trip to Blaenau was James Spooner, the latest (built in 2023) of the iconic Double Farlie locomotives. Note the well polished brass work. [SW]

Our Wednesday schedule commenced with a return ride on the Ffestiniog Railway to Blaenau Ffestiniog. Another spectacular ride, enhanced by the autumn colours. The good weather enabled us to enjoy the views over the Dwyryd estuary south toward Harlech. Further on the bulk of the old nuclear power station at Trawsfyndd stood out. As unusual feature for a UK railway is at Ddaullt, where the line spirals around to cross itself. This was part of the mainly volunteer built 'Deviation', required to lift the railway 35 feet above its original course to avoid the Llyn Ystradu reservoir of the Tanygrisiau pump storage hydro-electric power station.



Up and over the spiral at Ddaullt. [AL]

We had fifty minutes in Blaenau, which was just enough to get the feel of the former slate capital of the world. Now it is one of the six distinct areas of the Slate Landscape of Northwest Wales, a UNESCO World Heritage Site.



Recently installed monumental slate art work at Blaenau. [AL]



Many shades of grey. The Blaenau Ffestiniog terminus surrounded by mountains of slate. [AL]



The WHHR diesel loco at Pen-y-Mount Junction. [SW]

On return to Porthmadog, most participants strolled across the town to the station of the Welsh Highland Heritage Railway. The history and politics behind this separate heritage railway are complex and devious, far too long to repeat here! We joined the short diesel hauled train for the mile ride Pen-y-Mount Junction, where there is a physical connection to the current Welsh Highland Railway. On the return journey we stopped at Gelerts Farm, to visit the workshops and excellent museum. Plus a ride on another train on the 12inch gauge miniature railway.



Enjoying the high standard of woodwork of the WHHR carriage. [SW]



On the WHHR miniature railway. [SW]



One route to walk between the two stations at Porthamadog is to follow The Cut (Y Cyt), or Madocks Canal. This was once navigable to Tremadog. William Madocks, the main entrepreneur behind the development of Porthamadog, had a drainage ditch enlarged for small boats to carry copper ore from a mine to the River Glaslyn and the harbour. This was navigable from about 1815 until replaced by a tramway 35 years later. The boats must have been very small, but some records state they carried 120 tons!

[AL]



Jim ensures Judy, Rob, Kath and Ian know the schedule for the day. [SW]



Smiles from Roger, Steve and Jane as they settle into a vintage first class compartment. [SW]



Vintage first, second and third class compartments awaiting passengers. [SW]



Many participants took another trip on the Ffestiniog on Thursday morning, this time on the vintage train. This consisted of some of the original low slung four wheeled carriages, commonly known as 'bug boxes', two of the vintage bogie carriages from the 1870s, and a replica of an 1873 bogie van, familiarly known as the curly roofed van. The early arrivals bagged the first class compartments in a Gloucester built bogie carriage, others had to make do with second or third class. The vintage train runs as far as Tan-y-Bwlch, a delightful station nestled in the woods. There was just enough time for some of our more active participants to take a woodland stroll towards the lake (Llyn Mair) below the station – but the majority contented themselves with the view from the cafe. On the return journey, a few intrepid travellers sampled one of the bug boxes: the ride was lively to say the least.



Rush hour at Tan-y-Bwlch, two Porthmadog bound trains. Linda on the Quarryman train left, Prince on the vintage train, right. [SW]



Val makes sure all the party are on the train, before the guard locks the doors. [SW]



Steve and Jim in the third class bug box. Ironing board seats on trains are not a recent invention! [SW]

All participants agreed this was a very interesting and enjoyable tour, excellently arranged by Jim and Val Comerford. Many thanks (diolch yn fawr) to them both.

Andrew



Llyn Mair. [AL]



Prince takes on water at Tan-y-Bwlch.

[SW]



Some of the tour participants were lucky enough to stay in rooms at the back of the Premier Inn. These have spectacular views over the Traeth Mawr. Lots of birdlife to spot, including swans, herons, oyster catchers, curlews, and redshank. The train enthusiasts preferred the rooms at the front, looking onto Harbour Station. The least appreciated rooms were at the side with a view of the car park!

[AL]



As a thank you to Jim and Val for organising this, and last year's tour, the participants presented them with some gifts from the Purple Moose brewery shop. The sweatshirts will make a change from RNR or Ffestiniog attire, whilst we suspect the case of beers will not see in 2026!

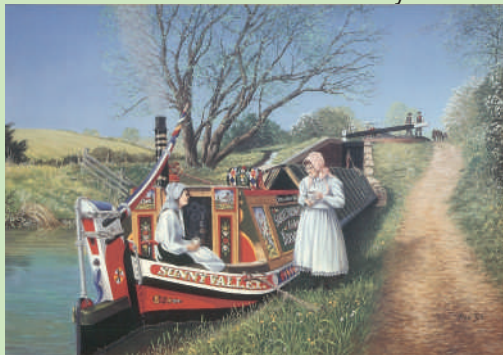
[SW]

Alan Firth — The Odd Lock Artist (Part 1)

Tim Coghlan recalls the life and works, and his own personal memories, of canal artist Alan Firth 1933-2012 – once described by the IWA as ‘probably Britain’s best known waterways artist.’

There is one signature-painting by Alan Firth which really has most of the elements of his canal artist style, technique and artistic licence. It is his well-known painting of Bearley Lock on the South Stratford Canal. The high-rising lock, lying alone and isolated in the middle of the countryside a half mile north of the Edstone Aqueduct, is the only one on that canal which is not linked to a lock flight, and with it a barrel-shaped lock-keeper’s cottage. Regardless of its correct name, it was just known to the working boatmen as ‘Odd Lock’. Alan Firth was also a loner, and the ‘Odd Lock’ name had its appeal. As Terry Stroud, the main distributor of his works, commented to me following his death, ‘I probably sold more of his works than anyone else, and met up with him on a number of occasions, but I really knew very little about him as a person’.

The painting is simply called Sunny Valley – Stratford on Avon Canal, as its main subject is the famous Samuel Barlow’s buttie Sunny Valley. The buttie was used in the wartime propaganda film Painted Boats, and is seen here below the lock, in all its glorious traditional livery. It is still the seemingly happy carefree days of the working boatmen – another world from today. Two



Sunny Valley – Stratford on Avon Canal A signature painting of ‘Odd Lock’ that really has most of the elements of Alan’s style, technique and artist’s licence.

[Alan Firth Estate]



Alan Firth canal-side in 1993. A photograph taken for the Wedgwood brochure Waterways By Winter Moonlight. Although there is a narrowboat behind him, it is not his. Alan never owned a boat and did not even go hire-boating with his family – but painting the canals as they once might have been, became his life’s work. [Wedgwood]

boatwomen in traditional dress are chatting whilst enjoying a cup of tea. Beyond up on the lock, their husbands are conversing whilst waiting for it to empty. There is a buttie in the lock just visible and coming down, and in the distance the two horses are grazing peacefully. It is the passing of these boats, held up for a few minutes by the emptying lock, that makes for this social occasion. It is a bright spring day, the towpath is alive with early yellow flowers and its hedge ablaze with white blossoms. God’s in his heaven, and all’s right with the canal world!

Alan has used his artistic licence to the full. The Samuel Barlow boat had a previous name, and only adopted Sunny Valley for that film made in 1944, by which time the boatmen had long discarded traditional dress. And under whatever name, the boat probably never went near the South Stratford Canal. Finally there is Alan’s hatred and fear of painting people. Eyes were his worst nightmare, and to get round this he would put people into heavily rimmed glasses of the type a boatman would not have been seen dead in. But here the boatwoman is contentedly wearing large Nana Mouskiri type glasses beneath her traditional pink bonnet.

Terry Stroud commented that despite all of this - which could have left Alan open to ridicule - the painting was a great favourite with the canal enthusiast and has been reproduced many times as prints of varying

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sizes, table mats, and greeting cards - some of which found themselves into frames to be displayed in boats. 'Alan was first and foremost a fantastic artist, whose distinctive style, which he developed, could warm to many. Few artists achieve that.'

Terry had a point. In the Easter run-up in about 1992 Alan called at our marina shop to deliver a mixture of his stock that we had ordered. I commented to him that I had been to see Sunny Valley the day before for the first time to give a valuation, as the then owner, who had spent a fortune restoring it was now thinking of selling it. Alan went back to his car and brought in a framed greeting card version of the picture, which he then gave me. I so liked it that it has been on the wall above my desk ever since. In the depths of winter, it has a special appeal. Some years ago the Inland Waterways Association described Alan as 'probably Britain's best known waterways artist'. It was a sentiment I could endorse.

Alan was born in Blackpool in 1933. As a boy during the war, he became well-acquainted with the Leeds and Liverpool Canal at nearby Wigan. He told me once that he would often help those boatmen who due to call-ups, had been reduced to working single-handed to travel the lock flight. 'If we could brew them a mug of tea, we were very welcome and we often stayed for quite a journey. I consider myself fortunate to have seen the final years of the working boats. Now I am painting my memories, and I rarely paint present-day canals.'

Alan completed his artistic training near Manchester, at what is today the Salford School of Art and Design. Here a formative incident occurred. He was invited to visit Lowry's small, terraced house in Salford with a group of students. He once told me, 'Lowry was a very introverted and difficult man. I remember as we arrived, watching him through his window as he went round his canvasses putting price labels on them - in case one of us impoverished students wanted to buy one! The largest were £60 - a bargain you might say, they go for hundreds of thousands of pounds now - but that £60 was half a year's student grant. Sadly, I knew one day they would be worth a

fortune, and I regret it to this day. But what I learned from Lowry was invaluable. He set out to be an artist in the fashion of the day and failed miserably at it. So he decided to do his own thing and stick to it. It worked for him - and it's worked for me. People still question whether he was an artist - as they do about me. I just call myself a painter, and a canal one at that.'

To pay for his life as an artist, Alan had also trained as an art teacher. In 1960 he moved to Coventry to become art teacher at the Tile Hill Wood School, where he continued to teach until ill health made him take early retirement in 1983. This was due to his continuous exposure to a minute undetected leak in the art department's gas heater, which caused him lung damage and left him permanently short of breath. During this time, his first marriage to Joy failed, and ended in an acrimonious divorce. They had had two children, a son John and a daughter Sarah, who is an artist. In 1975 Alan remarried to Anne, a maths lecturer at Hereward College in Coventry. Because they were both now in their forties, they decided to adopt a pair of half-sisters, Sally and Teresa aged five and two and a half respectively, who had been taken into care. Alan used to refer to them as 'the twins' as they arrived on the same day. The new arrangements proved to be an immensely happy one, and in their respective declining old ages, a rewarding one to their adopted parents.



***Hoar Frost – Grand Union** A typical canal winter scene of which there are many by Alan. Here a pair of loaded Samuel Barlow boats are heading south down the Grand Union.*

[Alan Firth Estate]

Alan used his time in Coventry to continue his exploration of the canals to the north of the city, and to paint them, in which he began to build up something of a reputation. In an interview in 1981 he said, 'I met the late Joe and Rose Skinner on their boat Friendship at Sutton Stop. One of my great pleasures was spending an evening drawing on their boat and talking about their life on the cut.' But strangely, although Alan probably joined others going boating here and there – how else could he have acquired his extensive knowledge of the waterways? – he never owned a boat, nor even went on a hire boat holiday, which the young 'twins' were always begging him to do.

Once retired, Alan now threw himself into his art – and to make it pay, he began publishing prints and greetings cards of his popular paintings, doing his own framing in his bungalow loft which he had converted into a workshop, and doing the rounds of canal shops and attending waterway rallies. He had long before turned the far end of his sitting room at the back of their house into his studio. He had bought the house because it had a large modern window giving good views to the north, into fine open countryside. There was a valley immediately below and rising ground on the far side, which included two fine chestnut trees on the rising slope, which he included in his paintings whenever he could – as a sort of signature. Lowry once commented, 'If people call me a Sunday painter, I'm a Sunday painter who paints every day of the week!' That was now Alan's life.

Alan's chosen technique was to paint in gouache, a thick water-based paint, which dried quickly. A favourite tool, which he mastered to perfection was using an airbrush, which allowed him to create his misty effects. His problem was that he struggled to finish and let go of a work – he was always dissatisfied – and in consequence he never had any of his works on display in his house.

Terry Stroud recalled that he had once attended a rally at Moira Furnace on the Ashby Canal, where he had a stand. When walking around he spotted a canal society stand that was selling off one of Alan's



Once I start painting, I'm away! Alan contentedly at work in his studio.
[Alan Firth Estate]

moon was no problem, and quickly sorted, the watermark to the bridge was painted over with ivy, and then Alan airbrushed and redid the water – just like that. Then when he had finished, Alan commented, 'I never liked the way I did the water in that picture. I'm glad you brought it back.'

I acquired Braunston Marina in receivership and in a rather sorry state in 1988. In the spring of 1989 we formally reopened the marina, including making the old rope shop into a shop selling chandlery and a mixture of canal items. My then general manager, who had been with the company before I acquired it, knew Alan of old – as I did not. He was a great enthusiast for Alan's canalware range and wanted to make something of a splash with it for the formal opening of the shop. It was to be done by former working boatmen Jim and Doris Collins – now working for me. This we did and in so doing I first met Alan, and over the years perhaps got to know him as well as anyone else involved with the canals. I always enjoyed chatting to him when he came in to deliver his stock, and finding out what paintings he was working on.

In 1991, I started the Braunston Boat Show with Simon Ainley, the dynamic manager of British Waterways' Braunston office, with whom in many ways we were able to achieve so much. The event proved a runaway success that grew rapidly. Each year we built on the previous year, adding new attractions. Amongst the staff of British

Waterways Braunston office, was Helen Harding who was the local publicity officer. She was also a trained artist, and a member of the Guild of Canal Artists. This was an organisation founded in the 1980s by a group of artists who were also waterways enthusiasts, with Alan Firth a founder member. British Waterways made 1993 nationally into the big year for the canals – the bicentenary of 1793, the year of Canal Mania, when most of the Acts for new canals were passed through Parliament. As part of these celebrations, Helen suggested that the Braunston Boat Show should sponsor a marquee for the Guild of Canal Artists in its office car park, which we did with very encouraging results. I cannot recall one of the well-known artists of the time who was not there. It was a veritable feast of canal art.

Alan of course, was there very much to the fore, smiling and in good form, as besides his usual canal-ware, he had recently landed himself with a jammy prestigious contract with Wedgwood. This was to make eight canal paintings, collectively to be called *Waterways By Winter Moonlight*, which would be reproduced on eight-inch round wall plates. These would then be sold as collectors' pieces. Wedgwood did a lot of that sort of thing at that time, their collector leaflets being a standard insert in Sunday newspaper colour supplements. People could subscribe for the set, to be issued one at a time over a period of time, so they could be paid for in instalments. The first one was now out, entitled *Between The Locks*, with the blurb proclaiming it 'An evocative new collector's plate inspired by a living part of our heritage that harks back to an age greater than our own.'

On Alan's stand was an example of that plate and with it, and very much bigger – about eighteen inches in diameter – was his round painting for that plate. It was my first encounter with Alan together with an original of his works, and we had a long and enjoyable talk about it. Alan told me he had used a photograph of former working boatmen Jim and Doris Collins, whom I now employed, approaching Lock 2 on the Braunston Flight.



An extract from the Wedgwood brochure for its Waterways By Moonlight with the Between the Locks plate. It was one of a set of eight collector's plates that would use Alan's circular paintings. The commission was probably the high-water mark of Alan's artistic career. [Wedgwood]

The photograph, taken in 1961, came from Mike Webb's great booklet collection of photographs called Braunston's Boats. Alan had used his artistic licence to set the scene by moonlight, in thick snow. The boats are breasted up, and Doris is snug below in the cabin, one assumes making the evening meal, while Jim steers on into the night. Who was going ahead to open the lock is not made clear. Ugly Sixties add-ons to Braunston have been removed. Instead there are substituted Alan's beloved trees seen from his studio window. Alan told me he retained the selling right to the eight paintings, once the whole plate selling saga was over, and offered the painting to me for £750 on this basis. At the time I and the marina were up to our necks in debt, and I turned down the offer. It was one I have always regretted – like Alan with that Lowry.

[To be continued in our next issue]

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