

# So what is it?

## Waterway Recovery Group...

- **provides work for hundreds of volunteers** helping to restore derelict canals all over Britain.
- **runs over 20 weeks of Canal Camps** every summer and has six regional volunteer groups running weekend working parties all year.
- **provides a pool of labour, expertise and equipment** that has already helped rescue hundreds of miles of our historic waterways from dereliction, and is working towards opening up hundreds more for everyone to enjoy.
- **publishes the only magazine dedicated to waterway restoration** throughout the country, keeping everyone involved in voluntary work informed, entertained and amused.
- **might be just what you're looking for if you want to spend your spare time doing something useful and constructive and having a lot of fun at the same time...**







## The reason why...

**The canals that Waterway Recovery Group (WRG) volunteers are busy rescuing as havens of rural tranquillity were once the transport arteries of the world's first Industrial Revolution.**

For sixty years, from the late 18th century onwards, Britain's inland waterway system expanded to link the country's rivers, ports, cities and industrial heartlands. Boats supplied the new factories with raw materials and carried away their finished products.

Then, with the beginning of the Railway Age, the days of roaring prosperity for the waterways were quickly replaced by a continuous decline of fortunes. Finance was diverted to build railways, some railway companies even bought up canals with the intent of neglecting them and strangling the competition.

Those canals that survived the onslaught did so by cutting their tolls to the minimum; this meant there was little money available to enlarge or improve the waterways, and they slipped further behind the railways.

By the Twentieth Century the decline was accelerating, some waterways were abandoned and disappeared, and can now only to be traced by ancient maps. Others, ignored or sometimes deliberately sabotaged by various authorities that had been entrusted with their care, lingered on in a sort of twilight existence, mouldering gently, carrying only a small percentage of the traffic they carried in their heyday.

Largely unimproved since the 1830s, the waterways seemed to have little hope of serving the nation's transport needs.

But in the 1940s and 50s, just as the canals looked set to become a part of history, a few visionaries realised that they had a future - for pleasure boating and as a fascinating piece of industrial archaeology that had survived unmodernised for over a century.

By the late 1960s, the inland waterways were starting to be recognised as a recreational asset, and holidays on narrow boats became popular.

### what is the...

In more recent years, ownership of narrow boats and similar craft on the inland waterways has grown, and the revival of many canals has preceded the regeneration of inner cities through which they run, and has helped sustain rural economies. Most canals are busier now than they have ever been, and more people are enjoying than ever before.

**But there is more to canal restoration than simply providing additional water space for boaters:** many other users such as anglers and towpath walkers will benefit. Much of Britain's industrial heritage that would probably have vanished forever has been brought back to life and is being used for its original purpose. Former industrial areas that suffered years of decline can benefit from the regeneration that a restored canal and its users will bring.

The concept of voluntary work on the inland waterways was born in the early 1960s and has steadily grown. From the early days when a very few volunteers worked on projects such as the Peak Forest and Ashton canals near Manchester, the River Avon in Worcestershire and the Stratford-upon-Avon Canal in Warwickshire, the position has changed out of all recognition.



Hundreds of miles of canals and river navigations have been saved from dereliction and are enjoyed by thousands of people. And hundreds more miles are gradually being brought back to life, thanks to over 50 voluntary groups spread all over the country, with a combined workforce of thousands.

From the Lancaster Canal in the North to the Chichester Canal in the South, the Bude Canal in Cornwall to the Ipswich & Stowmarket Navigation in Suffolk, voluntary working parties are run by local waterway societies, branches of The Inland Waterways Association and regional WRG Groups. Some work regularly on a project in their area, while some work as a mobile task force, travelling long distances to boost local efforts where their help is most needed.

**One thing is sure.** Only by utilising this pool of 'free' labour will these lost routes ever be restored. Time after time it has been shown that by using volunteers, restoration costs can be cut to a fraction of those incurred by 'conventional' methods.

Today's waterway restoration projects often involve construction work that is beyond the scope of the volunteer - replacing a demolished main road or railway bridge for example - and waterway societies call upon local authorities or National Lottery funds to pay for it to be done professionally.

But in every single case where this has happened, it has been the volunteer work elsewhere on the same canal that has shown the people with the big money that the waterway was worth restoring.

Since the late 1960s, local waterway groups recognised that to be really effective, the volunteers would benefit from having some kind of national co-ordinating organisation.

**This is where Waterway Recovery Group comes in...**



# The group



**In 1970, volunteers who had been active in restoration work since the mid 1960s formed the Waterway Recovery Group.**

Their aim was to be a co-ordinating force, not centred upon any individual project but backing up and assisting local groups on any worthwhile project. They could help to overcome problems of organisation and communication, supply and loan vehicles and items of machinery, and advise on methods and technique.

Since then, considerable knowledge and experienced of restoration methods has been built up and key items of plant and equipment have been acquired and made available to groups that need them. At present, the group has a fleet of vans, and a range of plant, including excavators, dumpers, pumps, mixers, winches and other sundry equipment.

All of this is freely available on an 'expenses paid' basis and drivers and operators can be found too. WRG can also help with the supply of labour and training in the use of machinery.

WRG has co-ordinated groups of volunteers to visit sites when major restoration works were needed over a short period, ranging from the Ashton and Peak Forest Canals in the 1970s, and more recently covering the Droitwich, Basingstoke, Montgomery, Herefordshire and Gloucestershire, Derby, Lichfield & Hatherton, Grantham and many other canals - resulting in a constant flow of labour and ensuring smooth operations.

Perhaps WRG's most spectacular early episodes were the Big Digs. Undertaken as demonstrations of the staggering effectiveness of well co-ordinated voluntary labour, dramatic improvements were made to long derelict stretches of canal. Twice in the Manchester area and again in Dudley, Woking, Welshpool and Droitwich, WRG organised mass working parties with work forces of hundreds.

In October 1991, the Big Dig was revived - over 1000 people reclaimed two miles of the Wilts & Berks Canal at Wantage in the biggest single weekend working party held so far. And since then, they have become a regular annual event, with 'Bonfire Bash' weekends every autumn helping to boost a different project every year.

## what is the...

One of WRG's largest projects has been the complete rebuilding of the four Frankton locks and the three Aston locks on the Montgomery Canal, which branches off the popular Llangollen canal to pass through over 30 miles of spectacular Welsh Border scenery.

In addition to the work on the locks, during 1993 and 1994, a four-acre wetlands nature reserve was constructed beside Aston locks. Built entirely by volunteers at a cost of just over £100,000, there was a saving on contract prices of over £200,000! WRG undertook these works as a way of providing an alternative habitat for the wildlife that had flourished in the derelict canal, but that might suffer when the boats returned.

More recently one of WRG's biggest ever projects was the complete re-creation of Over basin which formed the River Severn terminus of the Herefordshire and Gloucestershire Canal, in just under a year and a half. The site had languished for many years beneath Over hospital, but a deal with Swan Hill Homes meant that when the site was redeveloped into housing, the basin could be restored as well – provided the work could be completed inside the deadline. The Herefordshire & Gloucestershire Canal Trust turned to WRG to supply most of the manpower and skills needed to complete the work on time, and a long series of Canal Camps and weekend digs saw the basin excavated, concrete walls poured, a slipway installed and the basin refilled – just in time for the official opening.



The most recent large-scale project carried out by WRG was the completion of the restoration work on Hanbury Locks, a flight of three locks on the Droitwich Junction Canal. These locks were built at the very end of the canal period and are considered to be 'state-of-the-art' with deep, well built brick chambers and side ponds to save on the amount of water used. This work was funded by a £100,000 bequest left to IWA by the late Neil Pitts, which enabled a series of Canal Camps to be run over an eighteen month period that completed the lock wing walls, patched the chambers, repaired the side ponds and refitted the coping stones.

This work led to the flight being opened in 2002 and the Droitwich Canals are well on the way to completion with the help of a National Lottery grant that would never have been received without the hard work of a large number of volunteers, including WRG.

**Most voluntary work has to be done at weekends**, and between them WRG's regional groups ensure that almost every weekend there will be volunteers hard at work somewhere. **However the exceptions to this rule are the Canal Camps**. First organised in the early 1970s for a few weeks in mid-summer, they have now expanded into a flourishing annual programme.

Currently, we organise 20 or so weeks of Canal Camps each year, mostly in summer but taking in holidays the whole year round. The Camps offer the opportunity to achieve a vast amount of work in a short time; it is not unusual for a Camp to achieve in a week or two what might take the best of local societies many months of weekend work parties.

Camps are held the length and breadth of the country from long established restorations such as the Droitwich canals, the Wey & Arun Canal and the 'Cotswold Canals' (the Thames & Severn and Stroudwater canals) to such new projects as the Ipswich & Stowmarket Navigation, the Lichfield Canal and the Herefordshire & Gloucestershire Canal. Some Camps also help out at IWA's annual National Festival and other festivals, providing much of the back-up and site organisation for events that attract tens of thousands of visitors to the waterways in one weekend.



### **...Waterway Recovery Group**

**Canal Camps attract a wide range of people,** from young volunteers taking part in the Duke of Edinburgh's Award Scheme to waterway enthusiasts who wish to make a contribution to restoring and preserving the system that gives them so much enjoyment.

Volunteers attending a Canal Camp must be aged between 18 and 70 for insurance reasons, but apart from that, age doesn't matter, nor does previous experience. Although everyone is treated the same, no one is asked to work beyond their capabilities and any necessary skills will be taught.

A Canal Camp is a worthwhile week in the open air with 20 or so like-minded people, with lots of hard work, fun and an enjoyable social life.

The work of the modern canal restoration volunteers is just as varied as the volunteers are. It may be 'traditional' work - bricklaying and stonework for example - or it may involve more modern construction techniques such as steel piling, concreting or building a pumping system to supply water to a flight of locks.

And it may involve the use of machinery - excavators, dumpers, cranes and so on - or it may involve nothing more sophisticated than a shovel or a trowel.

Although it must be appreciated that there are limitations to what these unpaid workers can do, most waterway restoration work is well suited to this pool of free labour. Today, it is often the volunteer, raising his own funds or paying her own expenses that lead where others will later follow.

Government training schemes, partnerships with local authorities, European regeneration funds and the proceeds of the National Lottery, coupled with the greater awareness of the importance of the environment, have brought much-needed money and support into waterway restoration. It is fair to say, however, that none of these schemes would have begun without pressure from volunteers, and volunteers still contribute expertise and labour to most of them. Today, legislation on safety, construction, VAT etc. - coupled with the increasing complexity of the jobs tackled as work has progressed from the 'easy' restoration projects to the ones that were written-off as 'impossible' in the early days - have combined to change beyond recognition or recall the world into which WRG was born.

**But Waterway Recovery Group has evolved throughout its existence and will continue to provide powerful leadership at the forefront of waterways restoration.**





# Before and after

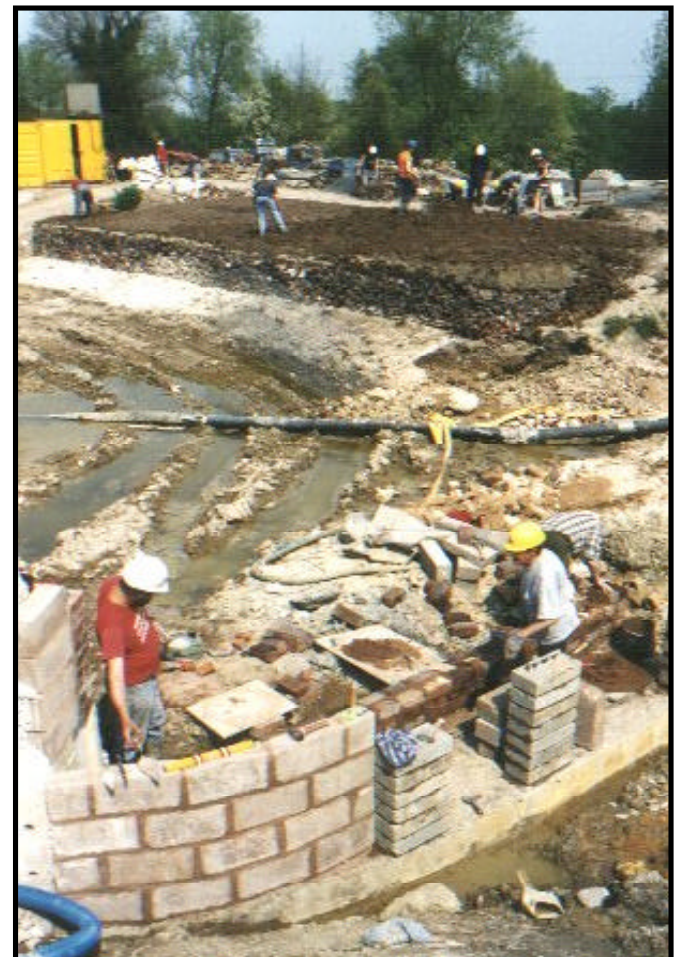


The pictures on this page show two of the bigger projects out of the many that WRG have supported in recent years - and demonstrate how canal restoration volunteers can really make a difference.

In the top picture we see one of the three Hanbury Locks on the Droitwich Canal, in the late stages of a rebuilding programme, mainly carried out by WRG volunteers supporting the Droitwich Canals Trust. The top middle picture shows the same lock completed, with the canal full of water and the lock gates fitted, awaiting the arrival of the boats.



Meanwhile on the Herefordshire & Gloucestershire Canal, the lower middle and bottom right photos shows the sea of mud that was Over Basin. And the bottom left picture shows what eighteen months of intensive work by volunteers can achieve: from looking like a bomb-site, the canal has been transformed. And the newly built slipway would soon see its first boats for the official opening.





# ‘Navvies’

By 1966, the need for co-ordination and greater co-operation was already apparent. *Navvies Notebook* magazine - which takes its name from the original ‘navigators’ who laboured to build the waterways - was the first attempt to fill this need.

By listing dates and details of volunteer work parties throughout the country, the ‘new navvies’ of the waterway restoration movement could keep in touch with each other and with what was happening on the canals.

Since those early days, the journal has changed little: the title has been abbreviated, format and layout improved, but the aim has remained firm - to be a unifying influence, to inform, advise, guide, entertain, amuse and provoke. In short, to campaign and lead the restoration movement - on occasions into conflict with the ‘powers that be’ when they tried to move against the system’s best interests!

WRG has always kept the minimum subscription to *Navvies* unrealistically low. Currently, it is £1.50 - which hardly covers the cost of postage.

This is a deliberate policy to keep the magazine within reach of all, particularly those on restricted incomes, but clearly this is only made possible by the generosity of other subscribers who can afford to give extra with their subscription. Costs are kept to a minimum; all editing, production, printing, collation and despatch being done by volunteers, the only expenses being materials and postage. It is also available on WRG’s Web site.

Published six times a year, each issue gives details of forthcoming work-parties and progress reports from all over the country, plus views and news on waterways topics. A subscription form is provided overleaf and we hope that you will want to complete it and send it off - with a cheque! Or you can subscribe on-line at:

[www.wrg.org.uk/navvies.htm](http://www.wrg.org.uk/navvies.htm)

**There is plenty of work to be done; please come and help us restore some of our neglected waterways.**





# For your information...

To find out more about Waterway Recovery Group, contact:

**Web:** [www.wrg.org.uk](http://www.wrg.org.uk)

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**e-mail:** [enquiries@wrg.org.uk](mailto:enquiries@wrg.org.uk)

...or fill in the form below to subscribe to our magazine 'Navvies'.

**Please supply 'Navvies' magazine for the next 12 months (6 issues).**

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I enclose cheque/ PO (no cash please) to the value of £\_\_\_\_\_ payable to the 'Waterway Recovery Group'. The minimum subscription is £1.50; please add a donation if possible.\*

**\*Gift Aid for Charities can add 28p from the Government for every £1 you give to help the work of Waterway Recovery Group (part of The Inland Waterways Association – registered charity No. 212342).**

## **Gift Aid Declaration**

I want The Inland Waterways Association to treat all donations I have made for the six years prior to this year, (but no earlier than 06/04/2000) **AND** all donations I make from the date of this declaration, until I notify you otherwise, as Gift Aid donations. I pay an amount in Income Tax or Capital Gains Tax which is at least equal to the amount of tax IWA will reclaim on my donations.

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# Where it's happening

