

COATES' CUTTINGS

The Chelmer Canal Trust's Newsletter

Registered Charity No 1086112.



Works underway on Stonhams Lock
A rare look at the anatomy of a lock wall laid bare

Chelmer Canal Trust

Issue 41

June 2009

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**Welcome to a new member:**

**Steven Miles  
from Billericay**

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We welcome members' photos, articles and other contributions to Coates' Cuttings. Please e-mail them to nl@chelmercanaltrust.co.uk or post them to Windmill Pasture, Little Waltham Road, Chelmsford, Essex, CM1 7TG.



Editor's column

The theme of this issue of Coates' Cuttings could be said to be "pivotal times", and we have a mix of articles covering the past, present and future.

Chelmsford and Maldon councils are both working on their reviews of the Chelmer and Blackwater Navigation Conservation area. This makes our own decision to host a seminar on 'The Natural and Built Environment of the Chelmer and Blackwater Navigation' particularly timely. It is one of the paradoxical joys of the Navigation that, with changing seasons, it is never quite the same any two times you visit, whilst a reassuring timeless heritage is somehow preserved. The preservation of this delicate balance is a core principle of the Trust, and in changing times it is vital that we recognise those things that make our local waterway so uniquely dear to our hearts, and then find ways of protecting them. We hope our seminar will bring together all of the various bodies involved, to build a vision for the future which preserves those experiences of the Chelmer which we treasure.

It is a while since we reported on the activities of our "weedbusters" in these pages. After six years of regular work parties, the impact of the American Floating Pennywort has been reduced from being a widespread disaster to a lurking threat. While we will not let our guard down, our volunteers have enjoyed being able to broaden their activities.

It is very exciting news that evidence has been found of otters returning to the Chelmer. We are delighted to report on the training opportunities being offered by Essex Wildlife Trust. Early indications are that the places will go quickly, so book early to avoid disappointment!

“Twenty Years On”

The Chelmer&Blackwater Navigation Conservation Area

Dudley Courtman

The Chelmer&Blackwater Navigation Conservation Area (CBNCA) is now 20 years old and it is time to reflect on how influential its designation has been.

The 1990 Government Conservation Areas Planning Act required local planning authorities to identify areas of special architectural, landscape or historic interest that it was thought desirable to preserve and enhance for the benefit of the local community. Chelmsford, Braintree and Maldon councils considered that the historic Chelmer & Blackwater Navigation with its river valley, water meadows, water-powered mills, heritage locks, bridges and listed buildings was worthy of protection and duly awarded it conservation area status. At the time possible enhancements that could be made to the area were thought to be low key leisure facilities, better public access, footpaths leading to the surrounding countryside, the re-creation of the traditional river valley landscapes with hay meadows, permanent pastures, their associated drainage systems, and habitat restoration. Decisions on the final choice and type of enhancement were to be taken in consultation with the local community and landowners.

It is twenty years since the Conservation Area was established and we can now examine what has been achieved.

The Chelmer & Blackwater Navigation Company, which had maintained the waterway for the last 200 years, stopped carrying commercial cargoes in 1972 and in many ways this action pre-empted the CBNCA scheme. At that time the Company’s directors recognised the importance of safeguarding the navigation for everyone to enjoy. With this in mind they raised funds by charging for moorings, fishing rights, and licences and by growing willow for cricket bats, as well as seeking the co-operation and assistance of councils, voluntary bodies and government agencies. This process continued right up until 2003 when they were forced into administration. Prior to that the grant aid that they had received had

been freely given and it was this process that the CBNCA designation sought to regularise.

The first enhancement scheme under the CBNCA designation was carried out by the Inland Waterways Association in 1993, in association with Chelmsford Borough Council, Essex County Council, the Navigation Company and the Environment Agency, when they restored the derelict lock gates, lock chamber and lock cut at the head of the navigation at Springfield. This restoration ensured that the navigation was once more navigable along its whole 14 mile length and could be used for public recreation. Chelmsford Borough Council followed up this initiative by developing public amenities at the restored Springfield Basin: apartments, shops, restaurants, and a marina.



The restored Springfield Basin

In 1999 a scheme specifically devoted to the enhancement of the CBNCA was carried out by a consortium of the local councils, the Chelmer & Blackwater Navigation Company and English Heritage,

who combined resources to fund the restoration of the Navigation's historic infra-structure: the lock gates and chambers, and Beeleigh Bridge. The sum of £300,000 was provided for this and for some landscaping enhancements, mainly tree and hedge planting to screen the A12, the sewage works at Sandford, and Langford Waterworks. This consortium was called the Conservation Area Partnership Scheme (CAPS) and lasted from 1999 to 2001. This scheme was a major enhancement project which encapsulated the essence of the CBNCA's objectives. It was a major step forward, not only for providing welcome enhancements, but for establishing a professional management team who were able to decide on what needed to be done and how best to carry it out. The drawback was that the CAPS initiative came and went leaving a vacuum which, to date, has not been adequately filled.

Part of CAPS legacy are the two excellent surveys that it carried out: "*The Chelmer and Blackwater Navigation Conservation Area Landscape Character Assessment*", and "*The Chelmer and Blackwater Navigation and Conservation Area: Comparative of Survey Modern/Industrial Sites and Monuments*" No 11, Vols 1 & 2, 2001. The first made environmental recommendations: to encourage wildlife by providing natural habitats, to develop recreation, and to promote landscape conservation. The second surveyed the condition of historic buildings, archaeological remains, heritage features like locks, bridges, boundary posts, mills, farms and Second World War defences, and made recommendations for their future management, and conservation. Both of these surveys were very valuable outcomes of the CAPS programme.

In 2003 the Chelmer & Blackwater Navigation Company went into administration and the ongoing management of the Navigation was passed to the Inland Waterways Association. Their trading arm, Essex Waterways Ltd, has since taken over the Navigation's maintenance programme, replacing locks and providing new facilities for boaters. EWL has an executive board which includes the main agencies which, as was the case with the former Navigation Company, have an interest in the upkeep of the waterway. EWL holds consultative meetings for the benefit of the recreational users in active support of the aims of the Conservation Area.

Other organisations have supported the development of the Conservation Area in the public interest.

The Chelmer Canal Trust was founded in 1996, initially to lobby for grant aid to assist the Navigation Company's maintenance programme, but conflict of interests led to it adopting more of a public watchdog role. The Trust has actively promoted the recreational, environmental and educational aspects of the Conservation Area; specifically along the waterway it has successfully removed invasive foreign weed, installed landing stages and steps, provided picnic facilities and information boards. That the Trust has no vested interest other than acting in the public interest gives it important status.

Essex, Chelmsford and Maldon councils have published a series of illustrated walks linking the Navigation with the countryside. A car park and fields for quiet leisure facilities have been established at Heybridge and Heybridge Basin by Maldon District Council.

Tearooms, car park and river trips have been provided by a private company at Paper Mill, Little Baddow.

All of the above enhancement and improvements are positive outcomes to the Conservation Area which have enabled more people to use and enjoy the river and its unique landscape. However there are threats which have still to be addressed.



Mineral extraction on the former water meadow at Little Baddow



Top soil erosion after the recent floods

Many ancient water meadows have been ploughed up with the result that they have suffered serious soil erosion with fertile top soil being deposited in ditches, in the navigation and on the mudflats at Maldon. Mineral extraction has continued to blight riverside landscape creating large lakes, ugly extraction sites and road congestion on narrow lanes. Housing developments has been permitted on the flood plain diminishing landscape value and causing local flooding which has entailed costly reparations. Rare flora and fauna has been unwittingly destroyed by landowners because no attempt has been made to carry out and disseminate an ecological audit of the conservation area. A looming threat is the mounting pressure of uncontrolled recreational usage: the ever increasing number of walkers, fishermen, boaters and day visitors could degrade the very thing that they all come to enjoy. In time the riverscape could be spoilt by the visual distraction of lines of moored craft and attempts to turn adjacent banks into suburban gardens (prettification).



Moored boats at Little Baddow

Are there lessons to be learned from this review of twenty years of the Chelmer and Blackwater Conservation Area?

It is very apparent that it is easier to apply the conservation concept to fixed and built structures than it is to a living dynamic landscape. The enhancements to the Navigation's infrastructure and the provision of new recreational facilities have been a success story. The traditional river valley landscape however has not escaped unwelcome development, and unforeseen threats are emerging which need to be addressed. Any conservation area policy for a living landscape has to be flexible, and responsive as circumstances and perceptions change. New threats have to be identified and confronted as they emerge.

Maldon and Chelmsford councils are in the process of updating their Conservation Area policy statements, the drafts of which can be viewed on their websites. Details of arrangements for public consultations will be published towards the end of the year.

Seminar

Part of the Chelmer Canal Trust's role is to 'preserve, maintain and enhance' the Chelmer and Blackwater Navigation and the areas of land around it. The Trust is organising a half-day seminar on the subject of 'The Natural and Built Environment of the Chelmer and Blackwater Navigation'. We want to give all interested parties the opportunity to come together to discuss the various issues that pertain to the way the natural and built environment of the Chelmer and Blackwater Navigation is managed and to look at how the historic character and natural environs of the Navigation can be enhanced and conserved.

The Seminar, comprising keynote speakers and workshops, will take place at The Essex Record Office on Friday, 20th November from 9.00 to 12.30. The detailed plans are currently being put together. If you know of individuals or organisations which might like to input in some way – by providing a speaker, running a workshop, having a stand or just attending, then please let us know.

Further details will appear in the next Newsletter, including an application form enabling you to book a place on this important event.

Chelmer Canal Trust Work Parties

One of the most visible aspects of the Trust's existence is that of our Work Parties which meet, typically, once per month throughout the year.

For those who are interested it is possible to scroll back through the pages on the Working Parties section of our website (www.chelmercanaltrust.co.uk/cct_workparty.htm) to see pictures of work parties taken back as far as September 2003!

In those early days we were learning by experience how best to deal with the invasive floating American Pennywort weed. The priority

was, in reality, to remove enough weed to enable the Navigation to be navigable. In places large rafts of weed blocked the river from bank to bank. Those boats which tried to get through the weed sometimes managed, but often with the associated aggravation of a blocked cooling water inlet and an overheating engine. Having cleared their water inlet they were able to carry on, potentially unaware of the fact that by breaking through the weed, and cutting some of the it into smaller ‘weedlets’, they had put in place the start of more infestations further downstream.

The same dilemma faced our weed-clearers. It was necessary to remove the rafts to make the river navigable (and to prevent boats from ‘cultivating’ future infestations), but in doing so it was difficult not to do break the weed up ourselves.

Over the years our techniques have changed and we have tried to adopt a ‘zero tolerance’ approach to American Pennywort weed. Our volunteers have been both loyal and tenacious, and this has paid off. Each year we have less weed to deal with and, although we haven’t eradicated the weed, we seem to be at a stage where we can keep it under control.



The challenges still exist, but they are different. The weed we were dealing with in 2003 was obvious – so obvious that both dogs and people had occasionally assumed that it was ‘land’ and tried walking across it! But now it is playing a ‘hide and seek’ game with us. It hides in the winter, doesn’t do an awful lot in early summer, and then tries to catch us out, when we might be getting complacent, by growing furiously in September and October! It ‘hides’ in feeder

streams and ditches, often between brambles and weeds, doing no harm, but a potential disaster if floodwater washes it into the main Navigation. It lurks between the reeds beside the bank, with long stalks weaving their way, almost imperceptibly, within the reeds.

As the amount of weed to be dealt with has been changed so has the work we do in our work parties. In the winter months we are more likely to be dealing with bank-side vegetation – and especially the brambles, willows and blackthorn which grow over, and into, the water. These make fine anchors for passing pennywort and their removal allows the pennywort to drift on by, rather than get lodged and start to grow in situ.

Moving along the river and along the banks as we do gives us a fine opportunity to remove the surprisingly large amount of litter which finds its way



downstream. Our volunteers regularly turn up at the Chelmsford River Clean up sessions which take place twice per year, and recently, following the floods, we have spent a considerable amount of time removing litter from in the water, from on the bank, and from high above the bank.

A factor that contributes to the success of our work is that our volunteers are generally a flexible band of people. Some are prepared to skipper the workboats; some like to work from a boat (be it a workboat, kayak, canoe, inflatable or coracle); some like to work from the bank, pulling out weed; some like to work on the bank collecting litter; some deal; with the refreshments. As we try to convey in the emails we send out giving details of the work parties, there is likely to be a job for everyone (if you are not on the email

distribution list please contact neil – neil@chelmercanaltrust.co.uk - and he will add you to the list).

We try to provide our volunteers with the tools needed, and with the training needed. Each of our workboat skippers has undertaken training to demonstrate they are proficient in the safe handling of each of the workboats. If you would like to undertake training to skipper a workboat (and having done so can regularly turn up to support work parties) then please consider undertaking the training; the next training session is on Saturday, 25th July and Neil (email address above) would be pleased to hear from you if you would be interested in taking part.

If you are a regular volunteer please continue to come along to work parties – you will know that our efforts are paying off. If you haven't attended a work party, or haven't done so for a while, please consider attending. All are welcome (including children aged 13 and above, as long as they are under the direct supervision of a parent or carer). You can find details of the dates of future work parties on our website - www.chelmercanaltrust.co.uk/cct_workparty.htm.

Hoe Mill Hoe Down - 18 July

A date for your diary, the ever popular summer bash at Hoe Mill lock. Entry is free to this all day event, just take yourselves along and enjoy. Barbecue facilities are provided so take your food along and take your own drink also as unfortunately there is no refreshment tent this year. For those of you who enjoy a flutter it is hoped that there will be a Duck Derby in the lock and for a small entry fee you might be the lucky 'owner' who enjoys a meal out at the 'Sportsman's Arms' in Nounsley. A great variety of music will be provided for your entertainment - Del and Shoot the Drummmer, Velvet featuring Terry Towpath and Bob Memphis for a spot of jazz and Mark Smith a folk and rock singer/guitarist. Don't forget, get along there with your gazebo, seats and refreshments for a very enjoyable day and evening in the fresh air.

The Sea Scouts at Barnes Mill

John Woods recalls some boyhood adventures with the Sea Scouts at Barnes Mill

The Twelfth Chelmsford Sea Scouts began in 1938 when a few Maldon Rover Scouts formed a new troop at Barnes Mill.

The first headquarters was an old bus and a timber boat house was also constructed. My own experience was as a cub when I joined in 1943 or 1944. During the winter we met at Trinity Road School but in the summer we met down on the river.

Just after the Second World War it was a very flourishing Group, with Cubs, Scouts, Senior Scouts, and Rovers, some seventy strong. One of my early memories is of a large fete held on the Baddow Meads, run and organised by Mr Bill Munday, head of Marconi's wartime fire brigade. This must have been about 1946 and the firemen dressed up as pirates. All the hire boats from the café on the meadow below Barnes Mill were used plus the scouts own boats and after dark they were lit with candles in coloured jars.

As part of the entertainment a demonstration of "Breaches Buoy" was carried out. This involved firing a rocket with a thin cord attached across the mill pool. A rope was then attached to the cord and hauled across; this was tied to a tree and a trestle was set up on the near side and scouts were hauled across on a wooden seat. There was no shortage of volunteers and this was an exercise which was carried out on subsequent occasions.

Another memory was my first experience of flooding when a large working party was desperately building a flood bank one Sunday morning in 1947 along the mill stream to protect the bus.

Soon after that the bus was replaced by a Nissen hut which offered much better accommodation. We had five boats in all, one large handmade canoe called "Swift", a smaller tippy canoe, and two small rowing boats called "Curlew" and "Shrimp. The Troup became Admiralty Recognised and was given a ship's whaler. This was not used very often as the oars almost reached both banks of the river.



**Sea Scouts outside their Nissen Hut headquarters at Barnes Mill
c1947**

We always had a week's summer camp, usually in Essex or Suffolk and also did camping at Easter and Whitsun and at other times, often at Little Baddow Scout Park. On one occasion, probably in 1948, it was decided to camp down river between the sixth and seventh locks. We took "Swift" and "Curlew" and even with an enthusiastic band of scouts it was extremely hard work lifting and carrying them around the locks.

As we got older and became Senior Scouts we were allowed more freedom to do things on our own. We spent a lot of time on the river with the boats and even rigged a lug sail on "Shrimp". Of course sailing was restricted to whichever way the wind was blowing up or down the river with no room for tacking.

We all passed our master swimmers badge and this was done on the river (none of this sissy stuff swimming lengths of the baths). We had to dive in from a height and this was done from the top of Barnes weir into the weir pool. We then had to swim 100yds fully clothed, also done in the weir pool. Next we had to do a long distance swim

of, I think 1000yds or a mile. Anyway this was accomplished by swimming from 2nd lock to 3rd lock. There was no time limit but there were certain hazards such as the stems of water lilies clinging around the legs and the swans that were unfriendly. For this reason we were accompanied by a boat.

At some stage the Troop acquired an old fishing boat called "Argo" which was berthed, if that was the right word, on the mud flats at Maldon. Despite cycle trips to carry out repairs it never made it to open water but it was good fun.

We even spent Christmas in our Nissen Hut H.Q. which was furnished with a tortoise stove, a table tennis table, a quarter size billiard table and a wind-up gramophone with records "liberated" from a rummage sale. Friendships were made then which have lasted a lifetime.

Then in the 1950's, for our generation, National Service intervened. For a few years the Sea Scouts carried on with our own crowd helping out but gradually most of us got married and departed for different parts of the country. We are eternally grateful to the Scout Masters and Cub Mistresses who looked after us and allowed us to have such an exciting boyhood.

In the 1960's and 70's times were changing rapidly with many things for young people to do. The boat house, the Nissen Hut, the boats, were all in need of repair, and then the mill itself was sold. So the 12th Chelmsford Sea Scouts was wound up.

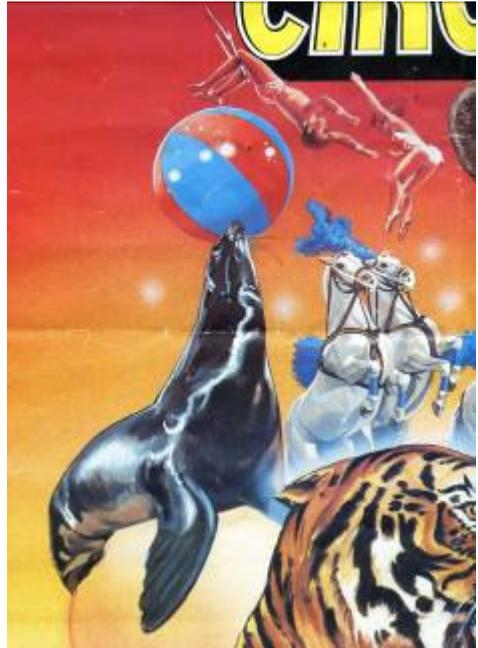
Now when you boat along the canal past Barnes Mill all is quiet despite the huge estate of Chelmer Village nearby. The days when the Baddow Meads was a place of leisure and activity for children and adults have long gone but remain in the memory of those that enjoyed them.



Modern day sea cadets help a shipwrecked raft racer in Chelmsford town centre.

HAS SYLVIA RETURNED?

After the Second World War in 1946 Chipperfield's Circus came to the Kings Head Meadow in Chelmsford every year, usually in October. One of the star acts was "Sammy the Sea Lion", who could balance balls on his nose, clap his flippers in time to music, and catch hoops thrown into the air by his trainer. In 1974 the circus brought a young sea lion, Sylvia, with them with the idea of training her up as part



of Sammy's act, and also to give him some company. The plan was working well until one night, the beginner, Sylvia, decided to stage an impromptu act of her own "off stage", so to speak. Unfortunately the stage which Sylvia chose was not the circus ring but the waters of the Chelmer and Blackwater Navigation.

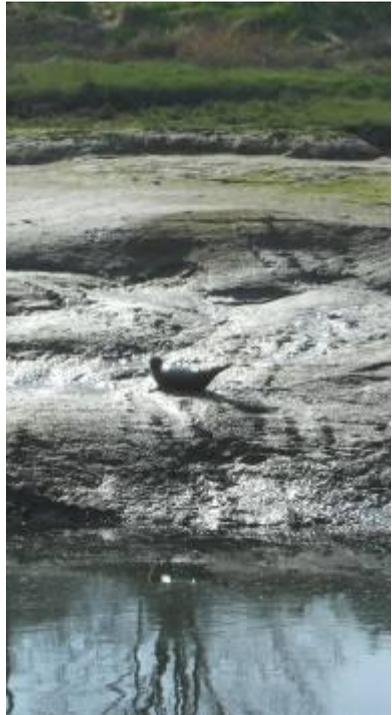
It was a dark and stormy night, pelting rain, and high winds. Claire Steibner, Sylvia's trainer, was settling her down for the night. As soon as Claire opened the cage door Sylvia shot past her like lightning; it was almost as if she had worked out an escape plan and was waiting in readiness. The grass outside was slippery and the river was only a few yards away - Claire had complained on their arrival that the lorry had been parked too close to the water. She was powerless to stop her: Sylvia made straight for the river bank, slipped effortlessly into the water, and disappeared. The river was in flood and the night was pitch black: Claire could do nothing but raise the alarm. She was dismayed because she knew that she would get the blame for allowing the valuable young Californian sea lion, which had been with the circus only three weeks, to escape.

During the following days there were numerous sightings of Sylvia: Eddie Webb, the canal foreman, spotted her in Stonham's lock; the Environment Agency tried to catch her at Beeleigh Falls; and Dick Townsend, the Coastguard, spotted her on the beach at Bradwell. The last sighting was reported in the East Anglian Daily Times on the 1st November 1974:

Mr Barry Parker, 29, of Grey Gables, Swan Lane. Westerfield, Ipswich, was fishing from the shore at Felixstowe yesterday and says he saw a sea lion in the sea only ten yards away. "I presume it was the same one that escaped form Chipperfield's circus at Chelmsford," he said. "I know the difference between a seal and a sea lion - and this was definitely a sea lion. It was jumping in and out of the sea and looked quite healthy". Mr Parker said he watched the sea lion for about ten minutes before it swam off.

When Sylvia escaped it was thought she would survive for some time but would be in danger when the cold weather came. Did she survive? Did she make it back to California? Sylvia's bravura performance on the Chelmer and Blackwater Navigation certainly suggested that she was up to it.

Now after all this time there has been another possible sighting. This time on the mud flats at Maldon. Surely it couldn't be Sylvia returning to pay a nostalgic visit to the scene of her great escape?



Is this Sylvia basking in the sun on the banks of the Chelmer?

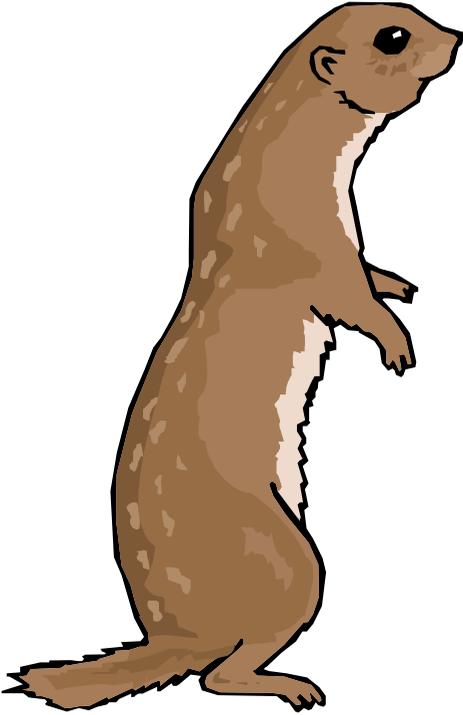
To chunk or not to chunk?

Back when the navigation was first built, some parts of it were raised on embankments above the level of the surrounding land. In the places where streams were crossed, the canal builders of the day knew that they had to make arrangements for the water to pass under the canal to avoid flooding the land. Their solution, a submerged culvert, which functions in a similar way to the u-bend under a sink, was known as a chunker. The construction material of choice for this task was elm, a wood noted for its reliability under water.

Impressively, these wooden chunkers lasted over two hundred years, but one of them – at Elms Farm has collapsed blocking the flow of water and putting the low lying land at risk of flooding. The temporary solution has been to install a pumping station to raise the water from the stream into the canal, from where it can find its way out to sea over the weirs. But pumping stations require regular care and maintenance, so it has been proposed that the chunker be replaced with a 1.2 metre pipe. This work will require coffer dams, more pumping, and more expense than was originally anticipated. The canal will of course be closed at this point while the work takes place, but before that, the various authorities must gather the necessary funding, approvals, reports and permissions which we seem to require in these modern days before such major works can take place.

In the meantime walkers and boaters on this part of the waterway can see the temporary pumping station in a huge steel cage beside the navigation.

Otter Survey Training



If, like many of our members, you are interested in the natural history of the Navigation, you might be interested to learn more about otters on the rivers Chelmer.

Darren Tansley from Essex Wildlife Trust has offered to deliver 'Otter Survey Training' on Friday 21st August and Saturday 22nd August. The location of the training will be confirmed nearer to the time, but it will be on the River Chelmer somewhere in the Chelmsford area.

Darren believes that the population of otters is growing on the River Chelmer and this training will provide you with a fun means of exploring the river and also gathering highly valuable data that will help with the conservation of otters locally.

There are 15 training places available on each day. To book a place please contact Greg Hall, email - greg.hall@keepbritaintidy.org; snailmail – Greg Hall, RiverCare Project Officer, Keep Britain Tidy, PO Box 73, Beccles, NR34 4AB. Children are able to attend the Otter Survey Training but they must be at least 10 years old and accompanied by a parent or guardian.

Nature Watch



New arrivals at Ulting

This year there seems to have been a considerable increase in the number of baby moorhens, swans, ducks and coots along the Navigation. A decrease in the mink population could well account for this welcome trend.



Marsh marigolds amongst luxurious new summer growth at Boreham



Towpath of Outstanding Natural Beauty



Nature and boat in harmony – almost...

John Garner writes:

“At Paper Mill we currently have a swan nesting on the bank in front of my boat which does its best to deter anyone from passing. To make matters worse we now have a moorhen with nine eggs nesting in my transom between the spare fuel cans. I think I could claim some tax relief if I can prove my boat is a nature reserve.”

Interesting/Unusual Sightings
Abandoned - Every Picture Tells a Story



If you have any comments or contributions to Interesting/Unusual Sightings, please send them to dudleycourtman@googlemail.com or 16 Roots Lane, Wickham Bishops CM8 3LS

Events Diary

Saturday 18 th July	Hoe Mill Hoe Down
Wednesday, 22 nd July	Work Party. See our website for details
Wednesday, 19 th August	Work Party. See our website for details
Friday 21 st August Saturday 22 nd August	Otter Survey Training days See article on page 19 for details
Saturday, 5 th September	Work Party. See our website for details
Wednesday 30 th September	Chelmer Canal Trust AGM Followed by a talk and tour of the Museum of Power. Details to be circulated
Friday 20 th November	The Natural and Built Environment of the Chelmer and Blackwater Navigation – A seminar, Further details in the next issue

Some useful phone numbers:

Chelmer Canal Trust — 07791 615634

Chelmer and Blackwater Navigation (IWA/Essex Waterways Ltd);- 01494 783453

Colin Edmond, General Manager - 01245 226245

Hugh Turner, Moorings Manager - 01245 222025

Martin Maudsley, Heybridge Basin - 07712 079764

Ron and Judith, Blackwater Boat Trips — 01206-853282

Heybridge Boat Trips — 07835 657462

Paper Mill Lock, Tea Room and Boat Trips — 01245 225520

Environment Agency — General Enquiries: 08708 506 506 (Mon-Fri 8-6)
Incident hotline: 0800 807060 (Freephone* 24 Hour)

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