



Chelmer Canal Trust Newsletter

January 2023

Issue No 64



With it seeming that it was only last month that we sent round our last Newsletter (it was actually July!) it's time for our Winter edition!

As we start a new year it's a great time for the Chelmer Canal Trust to reflect on the last year and consider the future.

Firstly, looking back on the last year, huge thanks to our loyal members who, without a single complaint, and in fact with several messages of understanding, willingly paid the increased subs. The current income enables us to be in a strong financial position going forward. Given the cost of living rises we are all suffering we are feeling pleased that the Trust doesn't have gas or electricity bills to pay, that volunteers pay their own travelling costs and that refreshments at Work Parties are donated!

Also reflecting on the last year:

During 2020 we've held three talks, including one at our AGM, and had a very enjoyable Barbecue.

It has been a busy 'Work Party' year including pennywort and 'boom' work on the Navigation and work at St Osyth on the lighter, Susan.

Trustees have met regularly throughout the year to discuss and conduct the business that ensures that the organisation remains active and relevant. We are a volunteer-led and volunteer-run charity and one of the many things your committee is responsible for is ensuring that we are delivering on our charitable 'Objects'. These are basically three aims that can be expressed in brief as 1) preserving, maintaining and enhancing the waterway and natural environs of the Chelmer Valley. 2) encouraging knowledge of the history, industrial archaeology and natural features of the area 3) promoting the Navigation and its surroundings for recreation.

The Chelmer Canal Trust's areas of interest are wider than simply the actual Navigation itself, but we nevertheless rely on a good relationship with the company that manages the Navigation – Essex Waterways Ltd. It is with some regret that we've learned that General Manager Ant Comber has resigned. We've developed increasing cooperation and support from EWL over the years and Ant certainly moved that cooperation and support forwards substantially. As well as valuable strategic support his practical commitment is possibly typified by him getting up at silly-o'clock on a Saturday morning, having partied till late the previous night, to single-handedly move a work boat from Paper Mill to Hoe Mill for us to use at a work party!

We will miss Ant. However, the very good news is that David Smart, who was General Manager a few years ago, is returning from Essex Wildlife Trust to be General Manager of Essex Waterways Ltd again. David was another valued supporter of the Chelmer Canal Trust and we look forward to working cooperatively with him again.

So, with no further intros, on with the show! We hope you enjoy reading this Newsletter. Feedback is always appreciated.

Neil
CCT Chair and CCT Trustee

Your Chelmer Canal Trust Board of Management.

We remain at just four Trustees! We had two lovely people join us for a few meetings, helpfully participating, but sadly they had other responsibilities and commitments that meant that they both felt that they couldn't additionally commit to being a Trustee. So, back to the drawing board and we are still on the lookout for willing people to attend four or five Board meetings per year and possibly undertake extra responsibility for aspects of CCT's operation. We don't ask for any initial commitment. We give prospective new members 6 months to see if they like what they see, and most importantly that they know it can fit into the rest of their lives, before they make up their minds if they like it or not.

As a Trustee Board we are keen to know your views about how we are doing and where you think we should be going! After all, the Chelmer Canal Trust is YOUR organisation!

We are hoping to hear from you! Please email: neil@chelmercanaltrust.co.uk

Trustee and Work Party member Steve ponders over replacing his broken coracle.

When I'm out and about in my coracle a question I often get asked is "What is it?" and when I've explained what it is that's sometimes followed by "Where can I get one?" Which is a really relevant question right now because it's one I'm asking myself – "Where can I get one?"

Why am I asking that question? Because after the annual Bures Coracle Regatta I managed to 'compromise the structural integrity' (insert your own terminology here!) of my larger coracle. It's the big square-fronted one, the Cleddau, named after the Welsh river. I managed to break seven laths in the front of the frame. Damn!



So, what are my options now?

1. Build myself a totally new one.

As well as the laths I've broken, the lower laths are possibly also all rotted by now. The cost - a sheet of 7/32" thick ply (5.5mm in foreign) and about five days work and some fabric. Not full days mind, as I'm including soaking laths and waiting for paint to dry.

2. Do some further repairs

The most obvious course of action. When I remove the cover I can then assess the full damage, rot or otherwise, and what I need for repairs. That could be just a few new laths and a new cover. The old one is more patches than cover, which is deliberate on my part; apart from being quicker to repair it gives a rustic charm.

3. Buy myself a new one.

A company called Arrow Craft make fibreglass coracles and canoes. I have tried their 'Ironbridge' coracle which feels and behaves just the same as mine although it was a bit noisy on the water, which was a surprise. They make one called a 'Teifi'. It looks the part as it is moulded on the ones found on the River Teifi around Cenarth in Wales. Buying one is so tempting but the down side is the cost - £470, which is a fair price for such a specialist craft. But not an option for me. And perhaps the reason why people buy alternatives – a local chandler has 'sit on top' kayaks on sale for £360. With cheaper options available that possibly goes a long way to explaining why coracles are a rare and unusual craft.

One option I suggest for others wanting to get a coracle is to do a coracle-making course. This is usually a two to three-day holiday course, learning new practical skills and in doing so building your own coracle. The course, including a newly-built coracle at the end of it, costs about £390.

And me and my coracle? I'm still pondering...!

Steve

CCT Work Party member and CCT Trustee

(note from Editor – we're going to keep an ongoing interest in this and hope to report Steve's progress in a future Newsletter)

Pennywort – the battle continues!

Charities are required to contribute to the public benefit. Well, there's potentially no better example of that than the work our amazing work party volunteers do to manage Floating American Pennywort on the Navigation – and surrounding ditches and feeder streams - regularly turning up to work, often under some very testing conditions.



Our pennywort story goes back about 20 years when we became aware that an invasive weed was starting to block the Navigation. It was so good at it, it grew so quickly, that in many places large sections of the Navigation were completely blocked. Boats couldn't get through. Our work parties started.

Little did we know that those early work parties, promoted and organised by Dudley Courtman, would still be going today. We've learned lots about pennywort over the years. Early learning was that doing a cosmetic job of breaking up large rafts and pulling them out, heavy tiring work, had a short-term positive impact - boats could get through, but with a longer-term negative impact - the fragments that inevitably broke away each had the potential of becoming another raft. But learning quickly paid off for us and we soon developed techniques that others around the country, when they eventually started seeing pennywort in their waterways getting out of control, decided to use.

Without doubt we rescued the Navigation from just becoming a drainage route for the rivers flowing into Chelmsford. And our ongoing work, thanks to our volunteers, has meant that we've kept Pennywort under control. In fact, we've perfected our techniques to such an extent that our teams of volunteers turn up and get on with the work with almost innate skills.



Occasional practical support from Essex Waterways Ltd is welcome.



At the current time there's good news and bad news! The bad news first. We are noticing the same as others are across the country – Pennywort is mutating. Adapting from its favoured home environment in South America it is learning how to live in the UK. Its main growth spurt is now later in the year, September rather than August (global warming?); whereas it used to die off in the winter, it can now survive through mild winters and grow all year round; maybe worst of all, originally a weed that only floated on water, it is now starting to successfully root into damp bankside soil in some places.

But there is good news. We've been tracking a scientific project for about ten years. CABI have been studying a weevil that chomps away at the stems of Floating American Pennywort in its countries of origin

in South America. The weevil's efficacy has been extensively tested in the UK. Naturally there are a number of requirements including the fact that it must like eating the strains of pennywort that we have in the UK, that it can survive the British climate (we've said that it's getting there!) and most importantly that it won't eat any of our native UK plants. So far it's passed all of the tests and has been released into the wild in a number of test sites. We missed out on one of our locations being used as a test site, but we were asked to submit samples of our Chelmer Valley pennywort, it's been tested, and seems to be just what the weevil enjoys. We say 'Bring it on'!

To see more details about our CCT work parties take a look at our website [click here](#).

Neil

CCT Chair, Work Party Organiser and CCT Trustee

Our Chelmer Canal Trust talks.

Three or four times each year we put on a talk which is aimed at being relevant to the Chelmer Canal Trust and of interest to our members. Necessarily during Covid our talks went online. But this year, thanks to some useful equipment I have access to, we've offered the talks either In Person at Moulsham Mill or online. The best of both worlds!

In February the then General Manager of Essex Waterways presented a talk entitled 'Essex Waterways; building a future together.' Ant talked about current work and techniques before handing over to Louise McConnell who talked about volunteering.

At our AGM in September we were treated to a talk by the Environment Agency about their work and their responsibilities. Very interesting!

Then in November, the Chelmer Canal Trust having been given access to a set of glass slides, some of which featured the Navigation, I put them together, along with other slides in our archives, to produce what others have reported as being a very interesting and engaging talk.



Attendance at all of our talks, either online or In Person, is free to members and non-members. Check out a wide range of videos relevant to CCT in the Media section of our website. [Click here](#).

William

CCT Work Party member and CCT Trustee

The Susan. Work is progressing. In fits and starts!

We reported in our summer Newsletter that work on the lighter Susan, in dry dock at St Osyth, was progressing well. In part due to the work done by several CCT work parties. Then summer came along, the boatbuilder disappeared to do other work and all progress stopped. Necessarily so too did our CCT trips to St Osyth. Chelmer Canal Trust takes an interest and is keen on involvement in the restoration of Susan as she is a key part of the history of the Chelmer and Blackwater Navigation.

We'd hoped to resume our input into the work on Susan after the summer but problems of communication with the boat builder scuppered that. However, we learn that some progress is now being made. Since we last saw Susan her rudders have been refurbished and fitted and half of the underside of the hull has been painted. The work that is now needed on Susan before she can be brought back to the Navigation, apart from completion of the painting, involves accurate drilling through a very large thickness of wood to instal the stern tube and propellor, installation of sea cocks, exhaust outlet and so on. Then she needs a number of sessions submerged in water in order that her very dry planks swell and make her watertight.

Even if we can't get to do any more work on Susan while she's in dry dock at St Osyth we're ready for her when she gets back to the Navigation and our volunteers can hopefully play their part in doing the internal painting and fitting of floorboards.

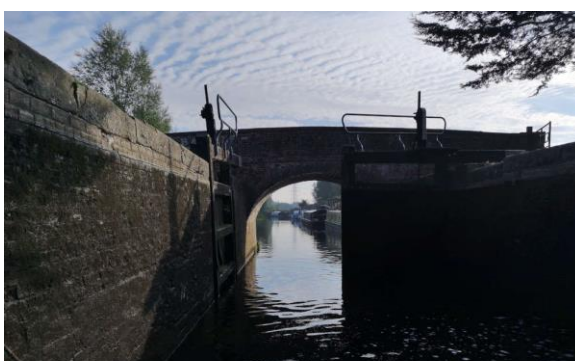
Duncan

CCT's rep on The Susan Trust and CCT Trustee

Reading this Newsletter but not a member of the Chelmer Canal Trust?

If this Newsletter has helped you to learn more about the Trust, and about some of the things in which we are involved, and you are not yet a member, we'd love to welcome you. You can join online or by post.

[Click here to get started.](#)



Want to contact us or keep in touch with us?

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