



Chelmer Canal Trust Newsletter

August 2026

Issue No 71



Here we are with our Chelmer Canal Trust Summer Newsletter!

As always we hope that you'll find something in this Newsletter (well, lots of things actually) that is interesting, or informative, or amusing or maybe something that brings back happy memories of the Navigation and the Chelmer Valley.

Our contributors work hard to write articles for the Newsletter – thanks to them. We don't get much feedback about our Newsletters. So, a few weeks after we've sent this one out, we are going to send you a Survey in the hope that you will give us the feedback we need to ensure that our six-monthly Newsletter hits the right spot for you.

OK! What's in this edition? Well, to start off with William describes a 90th Birthday celebration in which he took part (and it wasn't his own!). Ron Abbott has been a stalwart of the Navigation over many years. Read about his increasing involvement in the Navigation over the years.

Coracleman Steve seems to have exchanged his love of traditional coracles to that of modern electric outboards! Traitor! Then, a snippet about the Yellow Legged Hornet. This nasty character continues to cause trouble.

Our Newsletters wouldn't be complete without a few interesting pics. In this issue we've got several - taking us across the seasons and across the years.

If you've visited Heybridge Bason recently, you'll possibly have seen the lifeboat the Sir William Arnold moored there. Want to know a bit more about her? Read on!

Have you heard of the Sandford Boating Club? Well if not you can find out all about it in an article submitted by their Secretary, David Zelly.

Apparently our Agony Aunt, Aunt Bea Leigh, is growing on some people! In this edition she helps readers with Invasive Species issues. Check them out. It might save you money on a therapist (don't get your hopes up!) Cuckoos are back again! (well actually they aren't! they left about a month ago). Read all about Arthur's journey from Suffolk to Mali.

Finally we've got a little teaser about Bentalls, the foundry at Heybridge. We're intending to have an article about Bentalls in our next edition (any offers?)

What don't we have in this edition? Anything about the lighter Susan. It's such a shame that after so much effort that our volunteers put in at St Osyth and at Heybridge she is now looking ever more unloved.

Nor have we mentioned our monthly CCT Work parties. That's a serious omission! Our valiant volunteers have continued to do amazing work. Check them out in the Work Parties section of our website.

But before you do that, settle down in a cool room and take in all there is on offer in this Chelmer Canal Trust Summer Newsletter

Neil

CCT Chair and CCT Trustee

William reports on a special '90th Birthday' celebration

For some of us, any excuse to be out on the water will do! When I inevitably accepted the invitation to join a boat trip on the river Thames in early May, I hadn't realised quite what a unique treat awaited. A 90th anniversary is always a celebration of heritage and the achievement of longevity. It usually centres around an individual, who through luck and good fortune has achieved that ripe age. Now imagine that it is a joint celebration, and a big homecoming, with no less than three couples still together and all of them still working full time with no intention of retiring any time soon. Clearly these nonagenarians are a rare phenomenon, and what a rare treat to see them all together. Now before you imagine that some secret society has discovered some elixir of eternal youth, I should explain that the celebrants were historic vessels. Specifically historic narrowboats built in the 1930s for the Grand Union Canal Carrying Company, by Harland and Wolf in North Woolwich. The "couples" were working pairs of motor and butty, once a common sight on the Grand Union Canal.



Historic narrowboats gather on the Thames prior to entering the Royal Docks

To mark the 90 years of carrying goods on the canals, Andrew and Cathy Haysom of the Historic Narrow Boat Club had arranged this trip from Limehouse, through the Thames barrier to the King George V dock adjacent to the old Harland & Wolf works in the London Borough of Newham.



Here I should briefly mention the links with the Chelmer and Blackwater. Our own former chair, the late Dudley Courtman worked for this Borough providing outdoor learning experiences for Newham's children and young people, frequently paddling canoes on The Navigation. Activities which continue to this day.



The vast ship lock at King George V dock making the 23 boats look tiny by comparison. The chained off mechanism to the right of frame is the paddle gear! The flats to the far right occupy the former Harland and Wolf site.

It may be true that Harland and Wolf have had their share of difficulties. Their North Woolwich yards closed in 1972, with the only remaining evidence of them on the ground being their original wrought iron gates, now preserved in Lyle Park.

The build quality of their narrowboats

however lives on and is evident from the fact that some of them are still working to this day, making fuel deliveries along our inland waterways. Not only that, but their present owners consider them seaworthy enough to return along the tidal River Thames to the place of their origin. In common with so many former key industrial heritage sites, the site of the old yard is now covered by quite desirable modern flats, but the vast area of water of the Royal Docks and the huge ship lock giving access, still remain. Nowadays departures from here to international destinations are mostly by air from the London City Airport, built on the old wharves in the middle of the docks, rather than by ship, and there are various efforts to use the water for recreational use, which must surely be preferable to infilling the waterways for additional land development as has happened to many of the Capital's historic docks.

Seeing a good number of these traditional boats together in one place, with their crews who still make a living delivering the goods on the waterways gave a fleeting glimpse of what



Two types of historic vessel: A motor-buttery pair on their way home, pass the Cutty Sark at Greenwich.

the waterways must have been like when commerce was the dominant

imperative. Their modern mixed cargo

shows how times have changed. Although these are still very much working boats, their customers are the countless pleasure and live-aboard boats which line the waterways, and for whom delivery of heavy items like fuels and bottled gas are much more practical by water than any other means. The owner-operators of these boats nonetheless take an obvious and deep pride in their historic vessels and way of life, and it was a massive privilege to be able to briefly mingle with them.



The trip inevitably brought back memories of Susan's return to the Navigation from St Osyth. She after all is our own most historic vessel. We should not forget also Julie, still very much a working

boat on the Chelmer. Once freight carrying on the Chelmer had ceased, Julie's sister craft found work in London, quite possibly assisting in the construction of the Thames Barrier. I believe I have a dim memory

of gazing out of a works canteen window on Canary Wharf when the businesses still occupied converted warehouses. I noticed an unusually large outboard motor on one of the barges moving around the docks. Could this have been an ex-Chelmer and Blackwater boat? I like to think so, but I will probably never know for sure. But we still have our historic boats on the Chelmer, and it is up to us, and those who come after to make sure they continue to have a role, and will be cherished like the venerable examples of the work of Harland and Wolf.

Further reading and viewing:

Andrew Christy's Blog post "Historic Narrowboats return to Harland & Wolff site in North Woolwich to commemorate the 90th anniversary of their build": [click here.](#)

Myk Askin's Youtube post "Harland and Wolff narrowboats return home - 90 years later": <https://youtu.be/OhpekukS6yk?si=YaxnVhyCi9rN4FOo>

Ron Abbot describes how his involvement in the Navigation developed over time

It was with interest that I read Neil's article in the last newsletter and his definition of a canal, which true enough, is an artificial method of transportation. However, it can also have other connotations when it's used in different situations. But for this article I will not dwell on those but talk about the canal or canalised river which I first became familiar with - the Chelmer & Blackwater Navigation (C&BN) - in the 1990's.

My personal connection with the C&BN goes back many years. Some 35 years actually when I was invited to share a canoe, starting from Paper Mill Lock, with a friend and fellow member of the River Stour Trust. (RST). Little did I know then that I would become much more involved with the C&BN when my wife and I took over a business called Blackwater Boats just over 30 years ago in 1994. That business had been started 3 years earlier by someone that I knew and was also a member of the RST. Little did I know that that association was to become an integral part of my future involvement with the Chelmer & Blackwater Navigation.

Prior to a business involvement my first knowledge of the River Chelmer was when the second Chelmsford bypass was opened in the 1980's. I often drove over it on my way to visit relatives in London or going on holiday. I had also spotted it from a train when going over the railway viaduct in Chelmsford that crosses the upper reaches of the Chelmer.

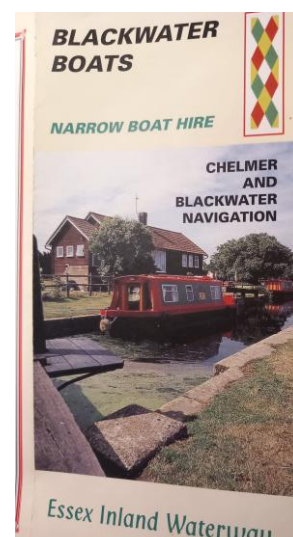
So how did I get involved with Blackwater Boats? Well, from the time of my first introduction to the C&BN in that canoe, to when I became involved with Blackwater Boats, I was the Estates Manager at Severalls Hospital, Colchester. That Hospital was part of the North East Essex Mental Health Services, and became one of the first NHS Trusts to be formed in 1991. However, due to reorganisation within that NHS Trust in 1994 I was given the opportunity to take early voluntary retirement. Being unhappy about how that reorganisation would work for my department, that at the time had over 60 employees covering all building and engineering trades, I decided to take up the retirement offer and departed a month later. Whether that was a wise move at the time was debatable but I had made the decision and so there was no going back. Initially I did undertake some consultancy work that included spending a few months carrying out engineering and building surveys and producing an Emergency Plan for the Royal Opera House in Covent

Garden in London. Then a couple of months later, and by chance, my wife spotted in the Waterways World magazine an advert for the sale of Blackwater Boats, with a box number contact. So, we decided to make further enquiries. I was sure that advert had been placed by the member I knew in the River Stour Trust so got in touch directly with him.



That's how taking on Blackwater Boats all started and, after negotiating the sale price and then putting a business plan together, we took over four 27 foot four-berth narrowboats and other assets in October 1994. But did we know how to run a boat business? Well no, but having hired boats in the past and owning one we thought "how difficult could it be?"

Fortunately, the previous owner had taken a few forward bookings for that and the following year so we had time to get ourselves organised, have new brochures printed and start learning how to manage and operate our narrowboat business. The previous owner also had a contract with Blakes Holidays, a Norfolk boating holiday company with offices in Wroxham. This was very helpful and although we had to pay them a percentage from any booking they got for us it did give us a nation-wide advert in their brochure. Including bookings from overseas which of course was at a time when using the internet was not as popular, or as widely used, as it is today. From then on it was a matter of my wife and I getting everything onto a sound operational and financial footing investing our savings and taking out a bank loan to acquire the business and to be ready for our first full year of bookings in 1995.



It was not long after we took over Blackwater Boats when I was approached by Dudley Courtman who informed me that he and other people with an interest in the Chelmer & Blackwater Navigation were intending to form a "Friends" group to become a "watching eye" and where possible to conserve and enhance the unique aspects of the Navigation. And to also raise money to improve the river's amenities for all users. So, with that intention an exploratory meeting was set up on 26th September 1995 at Paper Mill where a constitution was discussed and drafted. Following some amendments the final version of the constitution was formally adopted at a public "Friends" meeting held at Moulsham Mill on the 7th June 1996. Following that meeting there were further meetings of the committee and during one of them it was proposed that a newsletter would be a way of keeping all our members informed. So as a member of the Friends committee, I was persuaded to become the Editor. After accepting that task the first newsletter, consisting of two pages, was printed and distributed on the 1st September 1996. From that beginning the C&BN Friends, as we had officially become, was affiliated to the Inland Waterways Association and so having a common interest in waterways conservation we began to work together to meet our common aims. In

January 1998 the 5th issue of the newsletter was ready to go out but that edition had a title change and it became Coates Cuttings. (See Chelmer Canal Trust Website for all the Newsletters).

I am of course now a member of Chelmer Canal Trust which superseded the Friends Of The Chelmer & Blackwater Navigation when it became a Registered Charity. So, I still help with work parties if I can. But sadly the days of Blackwater Boats have long gone and mostly due to many challenges during those 20 years such as the outbreak of the Foot And Mouth Disease in 2001 and finally not helped by The Proprietors Of The Chelmer And Blackwater Navigation company going into receivership in 2003 which could, had it not been for the intervention of the IWA, have ultimately brought an end to the Navigation as we know it today..... But that is another story yet to be told.

Coracleman Steve has become an electrically-powered dinghy enthusiast

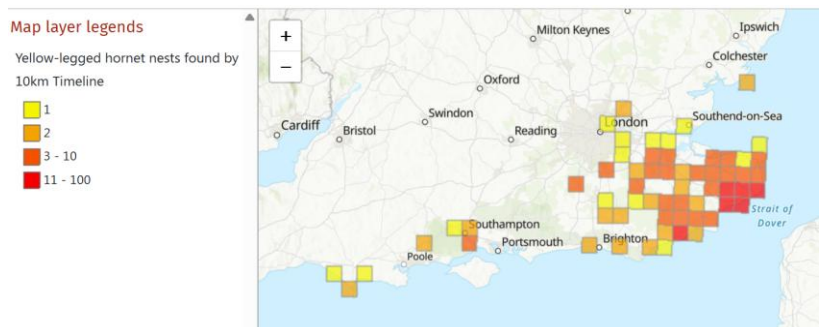
Some years ago now I had a need for a small dinghy, for pottering around and as a Safety Boat for the Bures Regatta. My wife found a Sea Hopper folding dinghy for sale in Chelmsford. So, cash in hand off I went. "It comes with a Torqeedo electric outboard motor." "Oh. Does it work?" So with the bonnet of the Landy (= Landrover) raised I attach it to the battery. Ready! Here goes! Click...nothing, hum? Click.. click. Ok, price renegotiated. I'm now the proud owner of a folding dinghy and a dead electric outboard, which I didn't really particularly want or need. So obviously I had to strip it down and repair it. Turns out it had dirty switch contacts; happy days. The outboard is the old-style trolling motor which requires a 12V leisure battery to run. To keep the water line level, I needed to place the battery as close to the front as I could, to feel happier on the water.

Test drive. Wow, isn't this pleasant!? Tootling along in almost silence. Obviously I know now, but I didn't expect speed and silence. Such an experience, much quieter than the 'kerplonk' swish of rowing. Much less effort and you're facing the right way too.



I highly recommend giving electric propulsion a consideration as a replacement for petrol, as for me the peace and tranquility of the river is undisturbed by a noisy motor. The range on the new model is now 100km! Which is probably further than my old seagull would manage before some "character" would show through.

The Yellow Legged Hornet



This cunning non-native invasive, which threatens our very important Bee population, is still advancing into the UK. As of 6 August, the National Bee Unit has received further credible reports of YLH. To date there have been 99 sightings in 2026 resulting in the identification of 24 nests.

It's picture time!!!

There's probably only one person who can identify the location of this pic. It's of a road near to the Navigation!



It's Sandford Mill Road looking towards Prentices Farm and Baddow Meads in Winter 1962/3. CCT Volunteer Keith's sister and grandmother are on the left-hand side. (Credit Keith Meadowcroft)

Here's one taken at the other end of the Navigation. Probably obvious where it is if you can read the pub sign 'Jolly Sailor'. But what about the date?



Pic supplied by Chas who between Chas and his brother reckon it was taken in about 1960.

The Sir William Arnold Lifeboat

If you've taken a stroll around the Basin at Heybridge during the summer, chances are your eyes were drawn to a striking black and high-visibility orange vessel resting in the water. That isn't just any boat—it's the Sir William Arnold, a legendary Arun-class lifeboat with a dramatic history of maritime rescue.

When the RNLI built the prototype Arun in 1971, trials revealed a major design snag: her high sides (freeboard) made pulling shivering survivors out of the water exceptionally difficult.

Engineers went back to the drawing board at Osborne's Boatyard in Littlehampton. The result? The second Arun-class vessel featured a lower aft deck for easier water recoveries, a redesigned wheelhouse, and space to carry a smaller inflatable Y-Class lifeboat.

Funded by a campaign led by the Bailiff of Guernsey, the vessel was named in his honour following his death in 1973 and officially launched by the Duchess of Kent in 1974.



Stationed at Saint Peter Port in Guernsey from 1974 to 1997, the vessel became a formidable force in Atlantic rescues:

- 500+ rescue missions launched
- 224 lives saved
- 15 RNLI bravery medals awarded to her coxswains and crew
- 1999 featured on a official 25p Guernsey Post stamp marking the RNLI's 175th anniversary

Her most legendary exploit came on December 13, 1981. Battling full-blown hurricane conditions, her crew braved monstrous seas to rescue all 29 people—including crew members and their families—from the doomed MV Bonita.

After retiring in 1997, the boat went through a few name changes (Our Lady, Theocrat, and Samuel J) while serving as a private vessel in Ireland.

In 2019, maritime enthusiast Colin Trowles rescued her from Blyth. Following an extensive restoration in Maldon, Essex, she was transformed into a floating educational museum—spending time at London's St Katharine Docks before making regular summer appearances at Heybridge Basin starting in 2023.

Today, when she isn't visiting Essex waters, the Sir William Arnold is moored at Gunwharf Quays in Portsmouth, where the public can tour her decks and step inside a true piece of living history

Keeping all our ducks (and swans) in a row!



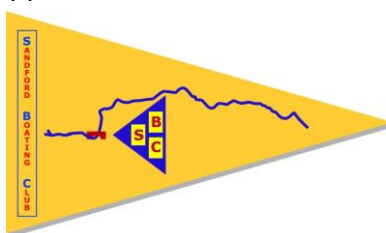
Credit: Piers Harrington

We asked David Zelly, Secretary of the Sandford Boating Club, to give us some info about the Club. Here's what he sent us:

Welcome to Sandford Boating Club.

Regardless of where you have your boat moored, I expect you will agree that there are always a number of boats around you that never seem to leave the safety of their mooring, being tied to the bank and not looked after.! Ask yourself 'what is the point of owning a boat' in that case. Maybe it is the fact that these boat owners have not had the encouragement or lack the enthusiasm to actually use their boats.

Well this is where we come in... Some of you may not have heard of the 'Sandford Boating Club', surprisingly based at Sandford Lock on the Chelmer and Blackwater Navigation.! The club was set up in 2008 by most of the boat owners based at Sandford at that time with the aim to have one voice for which to put over points of view and concerns to the navigation authority and more importantly to promote the use of the upper reaches of the CBN.



With more boats arriving at Sandford the club started to encourage boaters to use their boats more frequently, and now regularly organise cruises either up into Springfield Basin or down to Heybridge. Nearly every bank holiday will see some of the SBC boats out and about on the navigation, always spotted by the bright yellow pennants flying from their tiller arms or masts.

Our club objectives have always been to promote the CBN and its environs, community boating, social events, helping in maintaining areas of the navigation and enabling good communication between boaters and authorities. By becoming a member (which costs nothing) your email and contact details are then used to send out details of events, cruises out, notices of stoppages, works programmes, closures, problems at Sandford and at other moorings etc etc. This not only keeps everyone in touch, but allows the free passage of information around club members.

Sometimes our cruises end up at Heybridge, usually spending the night in one of the local hostelries for an evening meal, followed by the return trip the following day. Our other popular events are the end of season Fish and Chip supper cruise to Springfield Basin in October. We travel up on the Saturday, fish and chips in the evening, staying overnight and cruising back to moorings on the Sunday. The boaters BBQ, open to any boater and friends on the navigation also takes place in August and has a strong following.

Finally our other big event is the Summer Fete at Sandford usually at the beginning of August where we try and run a traditional fete with coconut shys, plastic duck racing, face painting, football, tombola's etc. All proceeds go to the upkeep of the moorings and donations to EWL. Whilst out and about no cruise would be complete without its minor hiccups, breakdowns, or problems with locks. If you are cruising with a few other boats then these troubles are more easily overcome. However, if you are out on your own and get into difficulties then there is usually someone around at Sandford who can come out and help. All are welcome to join the club, 54 members at present, and it is not necessarily confined to boaters who have their boats moored at Sandford. There are no fees or membership matters, just a very easy-going group who like to get things organised and encourage the use of the Chelmer and Blackwater Navigation and this wonderful hobby of ours called 'boating'.

Whatever you do please enjoy your boat, use it, and why not visit us at Sandford.

secretarysandfordboatingclub@gmail.com



She's back! By popular demand our own Agony Aunt Bea Leigh has returned. She's called this edition her Invasive Species Special.

Dear Aunty Bea. Our relationship is going through a rocky phase and we keep arguing about the most trivial things. The latest is about the Himalayan Balsam we see as we walk along the banks of the Navigation. She says that despite it being classified as an Invasive Species it's an attractive plant that provides a rich, abundant source of nectar that attracts bees, butterflies, and other pollinators well into late summer and autumn when other native nectar sources may begin to wane. I say it outcompetes native plants and creates dense stands that block light and space from smaller native species. It has shallow roots that fail to adequately bind soil along riverbanks and streams, leaving bare earth exposed to severe erosion when the plant dies back in winter or during floods. Who's right? Her or me? Stan from Springfield.

Oh you poor poppet. What a nasty situation to be in. It sounds like you need couples' counselling. Arguing over something like Himalayan Balsam is probably indicative of something much more deep-seated. But in this case you are both right! So maybe congratulate rather than criticise each other? Hold hands as you walk beside the Navigation. Enjoy the outdoors together. There are Pros and Cons. What I wouldn't advise you to do is to go out pulling up Balsam when it's at the flowering stage. Some plants will potentially already have seed pods and disturbing the plant can cause the seed pods to explode, projecting thousands of seeds a long way away. Some will be distributed by the water further down the Navigation. They'll grow next year.

Dear Aunty Bea. I have a problem that is really starting to take root. About three years ago, I noticed a rather attractive little plant growing at the bottom of my garden. I thought nothing of it. It had lovely leaves, seemed quite vigorous and, if I'm honest, I rather admired its enthusiasm for life. How wrong I was. It turned out to be Japanese knotweed. At first, I tried ignoring it. I thought that if I didn't give it any attention, it would eventually get the message and go away. It didn't. I then tried cutting it down. This seemed to upset it considerably, because the following year it returned with what can only be described as a personal vendetta. I have since discovered that Japanese knotweed is an invasive non-native species, which frankly explains a lot. It has spread along my garden, through the hedge and is now behaving as though it owns the place. My neighbours are beginning to look at me suspiciously. I have considered digging it up, poisoning it, covering it, negotiating with it and even pretending that the garden belongs to someone else. Nothing seems to work. What should I do? Yours desperately. Ursula from Ulting

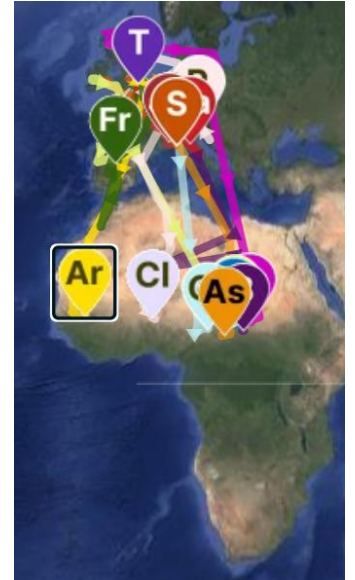
Oh dear Ursula. You have made the classic mistake of allowing an attractive stranger into your garden without first checking its background. Japanese knotweed is notorious for being difficult to control, remarkably persistent and capable of spreading from tiny fragments of its rhizome. Your first mistake was cutting it down. Your second was assuming that would make a difference. Your third was probably saying, "It can't get any worse." Never say that about Japanese knotweed. My advice is simple: do not try to solve this relationship yourself by randomly cutting, digging or moving the plant around. You may simply help it spread. Instead, seek advice from someone who knows what they are doing and establish the extent of the infestation. Depending on the circumstances, professional treatment may be required and can take several years. And whatever you do, don't put bits of it in your garden waste bin and hope nobody notices. Japanese knotweed has survived being ignored, attacked and apparently abandoned by civilisation. It will probably survive your council's waste collection as well. As for your neighbours, I suggest honesty. Tell them: "It's not you. It's me. And unfortunately, it's also the Japanese knotweed." Good luck — and remember: if it looks harmless, grows aggressively and has absolutely no intention of leaving, it's probably time to call a professional.

Disclaimer! The Chelmer Canal Trust wishes to make it clear that Aunty Bea has no skill or training for the advice she gives.

Cuckoos again

In our Winter Edition we talked about cuckoos, their journeys between the UK and Africa and their decline, though not necessarily in the Chelmer Valley where many have been heard again this year. Not so long ago this year's tracked cuckoos left to return to Africa. One that is being tracked, and was fairly close to us this year is Arthur.

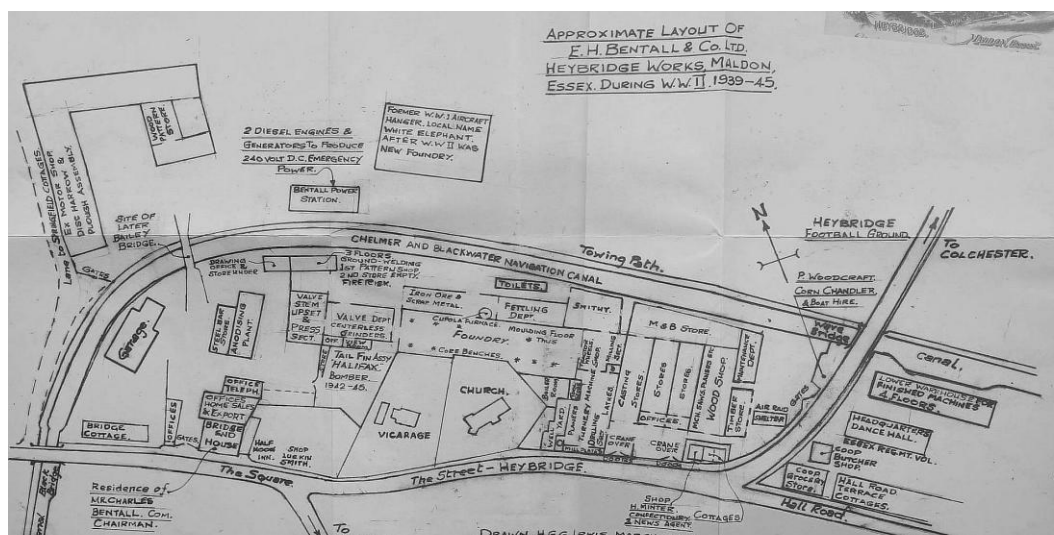
Arthur was the last remaining tagged Cuckoo to still be in the UK. On July 7th he was around Worlingham Marshes, Suffolk, where he was first tagged in May 2025. But he didn't linger any longer and by 10th July he'd made quite a move, leaving Suffolk and flying determinedly south through France, and down to the Spanish border to the west of the Pyrenees. Soon after crossing the border into Spain from France, Arthur swiftly pushed on and cleared the entire Iberian Peninsula in a couple of days, arriving in northern Morocco by 13th July. In the early hours of the morning, he was just north of the city of Khouribga. Despite his earlier reluctance to leave the UK, Arthur has made considerable headway in a short time and is now the third tagged Cuckoo to reach Africa this summer, and the first to do so using a western route. On 20th July Arthur's tag showed he'd continued to move south through Morocco into Western Sahara. He then flew through southern Mauritania and western Mali, before arriving in eastern Senegal just before the weekend.



Arthur took a rest in the west, presumably feeding up, and then headed east into western Mali, close to the confluence of the Senegal and Bafing Rivers near the town of Bafoulabé. The latest we have before going to print is that by 4th August Arthur had moved east of the Senegal River and into Mali, 90 km (56 miles) east of the city of Kayes. This area is currently experiencing a fair bit of rain, which will no doubt ensure that there is plenty of food for him to refuel before he continues east. Well done Arthur!

Bentalls Foundry, Heybridge

E. H. Bentall & Co. was a major 19th-century iron foundry and agricultural equipment maker in Heybridge, founded by William Bentall around 1805 on the Chelmer and Blackwater Navigation. The factory produced famous gold-medal ploughed machinery, employed hundreds, and even manufactured the Bentall 9hp car between 1908 and 1912. Here's a diagram of the foundry during World War 2. Drawn in 2010.



Are you 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.](#)

Are you reading this Newsletter in hard copy rather than electronically?

Please let us know if you could receive our Newsletters via email rather than snailmail. We are happy to keep printing and posting your copy, but it is considerably more expensive to do so than emailing it to you (especially as the Editor includes so many pictures!)

Would you like more information about helping by becoming a Chelmer Canal Trust Committee Member?

We are always on the lookout for more people to help on the committee. If you think that might be something you could be involved in please email the Chair here: neil@chelmercanaltrust.co.uk

Are you interested in joining one of our Work Parties?

Contact Work Party organiser Neil: neil@chelmercanaltrust.co.uk

Would you be willing to write something for the next Newsletter?

We want to make our Newsletters as interesting and relevant as possible. If you have an idea for an article please get in touch. Contact the Editor: nl@chelmercanaltrust.co.uk

Do you want to contact us or keep in touch with us?

Visit our website: <https://chelmercanaltrust.co.uk>. Follow us on Facebook: @ChelmerCanalTrust

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