

Chairman's Report for the past year (2015)

Welcome back to The Moorfield for this year's Annual General Meeting. We have, sometimes unwillingly, moved around a bit for our Open Meetings over the years, but suitable locations in the area are few and far between and this seems to be generally acceptable. My report this year will ring a note of similarity to last year's for those who attend regularly, but there are only so many different tunes that can be played along a canal towpath!

This year we continued the pattern of having just the two general meetings, the one in the spring, the other being our AGM in November; we've carried out three litter picks along the Bridgewater Way and we planned, as usual, to put on Canal cruises in June during Sale Festival.

At our open meeting in May which had to be re-located at very short notice to the slightly smaller meeting room at The Volunteer, we had a record attendance which it was felt was largely due to our guest speaker Eamonn O'Neill, Managing Director of Trinity Group Newspapers who, as will be seen later, gave an enlightening talk on the making of the ITV series Locks & Quays. In addition, we had a supporting talk from Jacqui Bates about the movement afoot at the western end of the Bridgewater Canal in Runcorn to re-open the set of locks closed more than sixty years ago leading down to the level of the Manchester Ship Canal. They are convinced that it would be of considerable economic benefit to the area bringing the narrow boat fraternity into the town instead of almost universally taking to the Trent and Mersey Canal at Preston Brook. They certainly seem to have a lot of high profile support.

In the spring we again had just the one litter pick on a Saturday morning early in March which we have found adequate to keep on top of things, to which I will come back later. As in previous years we had another litter pick on the last Wednesday in May – just a week or so before the start of Sale Festival – which repeated the popular scheduling of starting at 7 o'clock and concluding with an opportunity to socialize in the bar at The Bridge Inn. The weather that evening was not kind to us which it was felt was the main reason for a rather modest attendance. A good many bags of litter were, however, removed from the towpath on both occasions. The final litter pick was just a month ago, again on a Saturday morning, and on this occasion we were more fortunate with the weather but we go ahead with our plans almost whatever the weather because our experience shows how much this aspect of our activities is still needed if we are to keep the canal bank attractive for all to enjoy. The Bridgewater Canal Co kindly supports us at all these events and go out of their way to dispose of the litter we collect and to store the necessary equipment between one such event and the next. Whilst most dog walkers *are* conscientious, there is much evidence, regrettably, that there are those who are not. Things are improving, slowly.

Each event has been organised by our Environmental Co-ordinator, Helen Bayliss, who, has organised her holiday this year to be sure that she can be here today; she departs for a transatlantic holiday next week. She, along with others, is the driving force behind Sale Wombles, the group which does such a fantastic job trying to improve the many eyesores around Sale. All our official litterpicks focus on the west side of the canal bank as far south as Timperley Bridge and last year we were eagerly awaiting the completion of the upgrade of the southern stretch to Bridgewater Way standards. Not only does the upgrade of this stretch now seem to be a while ago but the recent completion through to and beyond The Bay Malton means that pleasant walking without muddy distractions is possible almost as far as Dunham Town.

Metrolink kindly support our environmental efforts and let our team travel free from Sale to Dane Road or Timperley in connection with our litterpicks. Our efforts last year were supported by a grant from Sale Community Panel to cover the cost of purchasing a proper litterbin located adjacent to Walton Park sports centre to replace the old tree stump which used to masquerade as a litter bin just south of Marsland Bridge and was for ever full to overflowing. The Bridgewater Canal Company, who had to remove the old tree stump, covered the cost of its installation as part of the upgrade. We have accepted the responsibility of servicing this litter bin which has already well justified the outlay and has, as previously mentioned, helped to reduce, though unfortunately not eliminate, the incidence of discarded and windswept litter. At this point I must pay tribute to our team that undertakes to service not only this litter bin but also the other one located at Dane Road Wharf. This entails monitoring the bins and emptying the one at Raglan Road up to three times a week in the summer months; the one at Dane Road Wharf maybe once or twice week – a slightly lower frequency in the winter months.

They are Helen Bayliss, Jim Smart and Marion Ball who each carry out the duty with great willing on a monthly rota and dispose of the full bags.

As has been our practice for several years now, two Canal cruises were organized in June coinciding with Sale Festival. Last year, for technical reasons, we had the benefit of a wide beamed barge rather than MV Castlefield, the Bridgewater Heritage Boat Company's narrowboat that we'd always had in the past. It proved popular not only with us but also to Mark, the company's owner, so much so that last winter he sold the Castlefield and replaced it with a wide beamed barge, The Francis Egerton. His enthusiasm overtook him and we were all on the quayside awaiting his arrival (he's always very punctual) when, to our great dismay, we learned, that he was destined for another booking. He'd committed the cardinal sin of double booking, and we were going to be the ones to loose out. That we had a lot of very disappointed passengers assembled on the quayside is an understatement. We did receive compensation but that did not really make up for the damage done to our reputation for running attractive summer cruises from Sale. Despite this experience, we have decided to continue our summer cruises with Mark, confident that this serious error of judgement will never arise again.

The general reaction by walkers and cyclists alike to the upgraded stretches of towpath is very encouraging and the figures for enhanced usage levels continue to rise, especially cycling. As previously mentioned, The Bridgewater Way runs in a south-westerly direction all the way to the countryside in the Dunham area and very recently the extension towards the City Centre has been completed, though it is temporarily closed for a short stretch in the Cornbrook area due an unsafe building. The popularity of this ribbon of made-up surface alongside the canal, only 1.8 metres wide, has given rise to incidences of conflict between different user groups; this very difficult challenge is being addressed by a group specifically set up for the purpose. The latest meeting was only ten days ago and a plan of action is being drawn up but it is difficult to be sure how best to address it.

For the last two years or so we have taken under our wing the small piece of land opposite The Bridge Inn known as Dane Road Wharf. Nestling up against Dr White's Bridge at Dane Road is our first gardening project which is now maturing nicely; we continue to maintain it with regular weeding. For this good work I would again like to make mention of those responsible – Jim Smart, Jo Morley and Myrtle Chadderton. Unfortunately Jo is standing down from the committee for health reasons and Myrtle feels that she will not be able to actively support us after she's moved from the Sale area.

Our second project, a small raised bed of some 12-15 sq m about 200m along the canal bank, was cleared of well established weeds a couple of years ago and planted with an attractive selection of hardy shrubs. These have also matured nicely and the aforementioned gardeners are successfully keeping the weeds (primarily the pernicious mare's tail) under control. This will take on extra meaning later on. Very close by is a small triangular bed, only a square metre in area, which was planted up last year and again the shrubs are winning the battle against the weeds thanks to being regularly tended.

About the time of last year's AGM, Jim and I planted about 100 daffodil bulbs along the back of the Dane Road Wharf site and this spring they gave a nice splash of additional colour to this tranquil spot much favoured by fishermen. The bench, installed at Dane Road Wharf along with the litterbin, was donated by The Bridgewater Canal Company a couple of years or so ago but one of the timbers is in a poor state and has been temporarily removed to allow the problem to be addressed.

Our latest proposal is to improve the appearance of a short stretch of land between the Bridgewater Way and the northern part of Sale Cemetary by planting half a dozen trees to extend the tree line from its present end towards Marsland Bridge. This will have been made possible by outside funding for which we applied; planting will not be till early next year.

Thanks to Barry Brotherton, our Secretary, who maintains our website, we've extended our profile by opening a twitter account and have established our own Facebook page so that our followers can keep up with our activities by those means if they choose. Barry himself will be reporting further on this under item 6 on the agenda. Sincere thanks are nonetheless due to Walter Mann who, over the past six years, has given and continues to give, website guidance and assistance whenever we need it.

I cannot begin the conclusion of this report without a sincere word of thanks to our very own 21st Century Duke of Bridgewater (our Deputy Chairman, Tom Everett) who continues to do excellent work amongst

the community with visits and talks ranging from primary school children to groups of ladies such as the local Women's Institute.

We always ensure that a member of the Committee (usually myself) represents us whenever the Bridgewater Canal Users' Group meets twice a year to make sure our opinions and concerns are fully heard. Though the meetings are kept reasonably short they are always interesting and, of course, cover the whole length of the canal. That there are now, at certain times, almost too many people wanting to use the stretch of the Canal from Broadheath through Sale, to Stretford and beyond is now, as previously mentioned, being handled by a separate group. Peter Parkinson, the Manager of The Bridgewater Canal, who, unfortunately, is unable to be with us tonight due to scheduled annual leave, has on two occasions this year afforded myself the opportunity to walk with him the length of the Canal with which we concern ourselves. The first such occasion was on a decidedly unattractive, drizzly Friday afternoon in the spring; the second, when Chris Wareing, the Senior Maintenance Engineer, again accompanied us, gave us the opportunity for a very pleasant walk on a Wednesday morning less than three weeks ago. These gave me the opportunity to point out on the spot various aspects of the Bridgewater Way that were less than satisfactory; many of these related to safety aspects and we hope that most will be addressed before the end of the year.

Last year I took this opportunity to bid farewell to Mike Webb who, in many respects, had been our guide and mentor in getting this group off the ground back in 2008. He had in fact retired a few weeks earlier. There was a month or so before his successor was appointed and I made the acquaintance of Peter Parkinson. Peter has proved to be a worthy successor to Mike and I must thank him for swiftly picking up the reins and continuing with the BCC's support for us. He along with Chris, to whom I referred earlier, are, and I'm sure will continue to be, very supportive of the work we do and look upon us as their having an extra pair of eyes and ears to bring any potential problems to their attention.

So much for the year behind us – our plans for the year ahead will be covered under item 10 on the agenda.

Chairman's look forward to the coming year (2015 AGM)

Over the next twelve months we are planning that there will again be just two general meetings, the one in May and, of course, the annual general meeting in November. Precise details of these will be covered under item 13 of the agenda.

Unfortunately, litter picks will always be necessary however much we may wish that the day may come when they were not. The general reduction of observed litter is, however, encouraging and at this stage just the one litter pick is planned for the spring with the summer one again in May and an autumn one in October.

Whilst it would be very nice for there to be a litter bin every few hundred yards, this is not realistic and the two that we have had sited is as far as we can go. We will continue to be responsible for their servicing.

At this stage just two cruises are planned coinciding with Sale Festival during the second weekend of June and will follow the same pattern as this year. The cruises are our main source of income and without them we would become wholly dependent on such funds as we could obtain from grants.

I'm confident that The Duke of Bridgewater will want to continue his excellent work with both local schools and other groups informing them of the importance of The Bridgewater Canal both in the history of the industrial revolution and in today's environment.

Although I expressed the same hope last year, I am still hopeful that, in the foreseeable future, we may be able to assist in the establishment a sister group adjoining our own. Getting a group going is always the challenge, keeping it going is not so difficult, and that takes up time. Two groups running from Dunham to the Sale/Stretford border would be fantastic for South Trafford.

We will build on our efforts to improve the horticultural appeal of specific stretches of the towpath, both on the east bank as well as along the verges of the Bridgewater Way itself. Seeing one's autumn planting coming to fruition in the spring can be very rewarding.

The ongoing maintenance of our website and our social media pages to give up-to-date information to our members will continue to be given the attention that it undoubtedly warrants. A visit to the site will generally give an update of forthcoming events.

We will continue to actively partake in the meetings of the Bridgewater Canal Users' Group and to represent the Group in any event that the Canal Company may hold.

Above all we'll continue, as best we can, to promote The Bridgewater Canal as an amenity for the community.

Thank you, ladies and gentlemen, for hearing me out.