

Working Party News

No. 359

For WACT Volunteers

January 2024

Editorial

A Happy New Year to all our readers!

You might not have noticed but it's been a bit wet and windy over the past few weeks. Nevertheless our teams have been getting on with the many tasks needed to keep the canal in good order.

The new year brought the great news that Bill Nicholson, a stalwart of WACT and the Newbury Working Group had been awarded the MBE.

Peter Winter

Midweek Working Party

MWWP has had a quiet month. We only had three weeks of work due to where Christmas fell and our middle week was a very sedate working day.

At the beginning of the month we completed all we could at Bonfire Hanger. We took down a number of trees and cleared the ditch. The towpath although drier is still very boggy. We have one more week there clearing two large trees and moving the 3m logs to the compound for a contractor to pick up for chipping, and WACT to receive some recompense.

The middle week was at Run Common Road where we do an annual clearance. We always make it a



The Midweek Working Party make merry

Christmas social, so mulled wine, sausages and mince pies were had by all. The land owner very kindly gave us a donation and some homemade mince pies. Whilst there three of the team tidied up Whitley Bridge which we own. It makes the rest of the Downs Link rather untidy.

Our last outings for 2023 were to Haybarn and Hunt Park. The winter has taken its toll at Haybarn and we had to clear three trees; one was humungous. A small group tidied Hunt Park but unfortunately the Downs Link looks a mess due to contractors taking down ash trees and not clearing up, which does not help our cause.

Margaret Darvill

Hedgelaying

December's nasty weather (apparently always on a Tuesday) caused a few problems, especially cancelling our last work party before Christmas along with a post-work drink at the Onslow Arms - the latter is something to look forward to in 2024. However, the team managed to lay two short lengths of hedge in Slinfold, fronting the road next to the hazel coppice which had produced well over 360 stakes and a similar number of binders. As mentioned previously, our thanks to Chris Tavener (owner of the hazel coppice and renowned WACT Puddle organiser) for giving us access to this great material.

Our huge thanks also to Adam Rayner, who along with a volunteer, Stephen, moved all 300+ remaining stakes and 300+ binders to Drungewick on the Thursday just before Christmas - on Adam's last working day in 2023, so much appreciated.

We are now ready to start in January laying the hedge at Drungewick alongside the towpath - once the temporary bridge is put back by Dave Evans - again huge thanks to him for the offer of help. The bridge will help enormously, by allowing us to take heavy bundles of stakes and binders across the canal more easily.

No photos from our work this month, but an image of another regional style in Derbyshire, which I came across in December - very different from what we do - square sawn stakes, spaced farther apart and no binding. Great to see regional differences!



Derbyshire style hedgelaying

As always, please come and see us working on a Tuesday if you are walking along the Canal, or even better, email me if you wish to find out what hedgelaying is all about and get some hands-on experience.

Nick Baxter

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Boat Group PEST

The onset of the holiday season and the resulting departure of volunteers meant that we managed just one working day this month. Nonetheless the team was able carry out a remarkable amount of work.

We assisted the visiting Waterway Recovery Group forestry team in making preparatory initial clearances through the thick hedges and vegetation along the offside of the canal just north of Baldwin's Knob Lock. We also cleared up other parts of the canal in this general area collecting three full loads on the workboat *May Upton* and dropping them off at the Brewhurst Lock. Another satisfying day's work.

Recently we have lost several team members due to ill-health or moving away from the area. We would like another one or two volunteers to join us on a regular basis. If you are interested in working on the water for a couple of days each month then please contact Peter Hyem on 01403 752393 or at peter@barscorner1.plus.com.

Chris Jones

Monday Group

As anticipated in the last issue of WPN, the Group spent the last two meetings in November hedge cut-



Tidying up the Loxwood car park

ting, strimming the towpath and disposing of the results between the Canal Centre and Brewhurst Bridge. This was subsequently extended in December to include the winding hole below Brewhurst Lock. There is more to do here so our meeting on 8th January will continue at this location.

We completed the year's work on the 18th by 'blitzing' Loxwood car park, clearing the ditches, cutting the hedge and generally tidying up. Then, of course, we had our Christmas lunch in the Onslow, much enjoyed by all including a welcome to our Vice-Chairman, Margaret Darvill.



Everything stops for elevenses

Our thanks are due to Tom Close, our leader, for organising a very successful and enjoyable year of canal maintenance.

The Group wishes all our colleagues a Happy New Year for 2024.

Nick Wood

Eric Walker Group

While the new lift bridges at Birtley have been formally opened, their operation remains a bit of an effort. To improve matters, the team is casting an extra concrete balance weight for each of the bridges. The

Working Party Diary

Every Monday	Monday Group	Contact Tom Close
Every Tuesday (late October to March)	Hedgelaying	Contact Nick Baxter
Every Tuesday and Thursday	Boat Maintenance	Contact John Reynolds
Every Wednesday	Midweek Working Party	Details from Margaret Darvill
Every Thursday	Tickner's Depot	Contact Mark Feeney
Every Wednesday and Thursday	Eric Walker Group	Contact Dennis Gillen
Every Monday, Tuesday, and Third Saturday	Northern Working Party	Contact Gordon Powell
Every Thursday	Thursday Group	Contact Ian Lower or Brian King
First & Third Friday of the month	PEST Boat Group	Contact Peter Hyem
Third Saturday of the month	Summit Level	Contact Dave Evans

first was cast in December and the second will be made in the New Year. In addition we have gone back to the suppliers of the hydraulic mechanisms for improvements.



Starting on the track to Northlands farmhouse

Meanwhile, work at Northlands is gathering pace. The basic track from the entrance off the B2133 across the field towards the canal has been completed as far as the woods. Trees and scrub have been cleared from the slope down to the canal, but significant earthworks are required before we can tackle the track. So the next step is to focus on the track through the edge of the woods to Northlands farmhouse. A start has been made on this.

Dennis Gillen

Thursday Group

A variety of tasks were completed on our first outing of the month, when we split into two teams. One team travelled down to Harsfold Bridge where we patch repaired a small section of the towpath. The second team returned to Devil's Hole Lock to finish the replacement of the rotten gate posts on the bridge, and then repaired a loose gate post at Loxwood Lock.

The next week, the Group again split into two. One team went out on *May Upton* to grease the mechanisms of the locks between Brewhurst and Gennets Bridge. The other team remained at Tickner's Depot to start work on constructing a weatherproof roof on the WACT Archive and Records store, as described by Mark in last month's Working Party News.

During our last working week before Christmas, the last of our Thursday Group requiring practical training to use *May Upton* was completed. This means that all the team except one are now author-

ised to skipper the boat as and when needs arise.

When returning *May Upton* to its mooring point we got a frantic call to inform us that the Chairman was stuck in the Visitor Centre at Loxwood. We did



Photo by Gordon Powell

our good deed for Christmas and released her and others following the open door being caught by a large gust of wind and jamming tight. Amazing what a large screwdriver and muscle will do.

Brian King & Ian Lower

Tickner's Depot

I have good news about the Bowser Power Washer – it lives! A new battery was fitted as starting the diesel engine with a pull-cord would be hard enough for a musclebound 20 year old, so we wouldn't stand a chance!

The water tank was filled and detergent and anti-freeze added. Sadly, I wasn't there for the first test, but Dave and Ian jet-washed all of the diggers, dumpers and vehicles in the yard and left them gleaming.

I also have good news about the Records and Archive store roof. We had enough dry weather in the

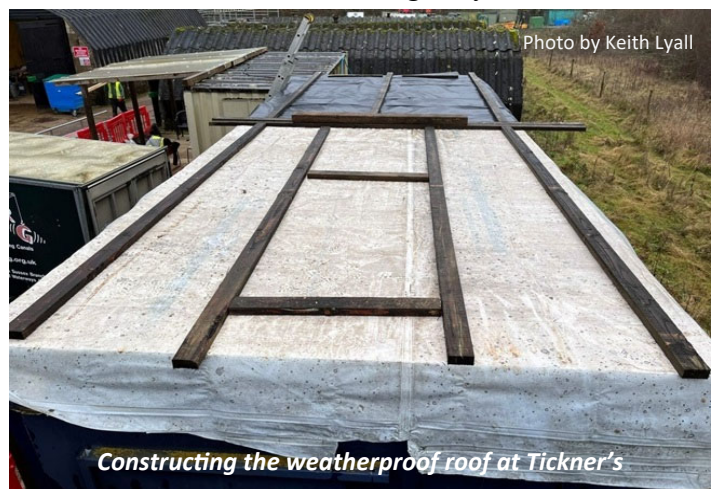


Photo by Keith Lyall

middle of the month for Keith and Harry to get the timber frame and OSB sheathing fixed in place with some temporary plastic sheeting over the top to keep the worst of the rain off.

Unfortunately, the wind had managed to lift some of the plastic off, so Ian and I got up and screwed the battens down over the plastic sheets. Only time will tell if it was good enough to cope with Storm Gerrit. Hopefully, we'll have some dry conditions in January and get the proper membrane stuck on.

It would seem that Father Christmas came early to WACT. We have just taken delivery of some new Stihl cordless equipment; a normal reach hedge trimmer, a long-reach hedge trimmer and a very long-reach chainsaw pruner. We'll need to check to see if any specific training is needed before these are used, but they will transform the working environment of the users and those around them.

Wishing you all a Happy New Year.

Mark Feeney

Northern Working Party

Just a short report for this month as the teams had only a couple of outings. In order to keep the log piles dry, we continued with the task at Tickner's Depot to erect a temporary shelter over the log bays.



Photo by Keith Lyall

Erecting a shelter over the log bays

We had a trip to The Onslow Arms car park to fill some of the potholes and then returned to Tickner's Depot to erect Heras fencing around the site perimeter near the entrance, in quite waterlogged conditions! *May Upton* was taken out to clear debris from the canal and a boatload of vegetation was cut down and collected from the verges, which would have been difficult to accomplish on foot.



Finally, with true festive spirit, 18 of the Monday and Tuesday teams met at The Onslow Arms for a convivial Christmas lunch, enjoyed by all. Thanks are due to Gordon, our Team Leader, for organising the function. Congratulations go to our team member and former long serving leader, Bill Nicholson, on being awarded an MBE in the New Year Honours List for services to canal restoration. Well done, Bill.

Dave Miller

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