

# GRAND TRUNK



*Rebekah*  
**Near Star Lock in Stone**  
**With former owner**  
**John Tackley**  
**(see pages 4-7)**

**May/June 2023**

[www.trentandmerseycanalsociety.org.uk](http://www.trentandmerseycanalsociety.org.uk)

## Chairman's Bit

The first talk arranged by our new talks organisers (David & Jean Clegg) took place on March 17th when John Potter gave us an insight into the Stafford Riverway Link. This is a scheme to relink Stafford to the Staffordshire and Worcestershire Canal, which involves building a new basin and lock as well as dredging the River Sow. Much progress has already been made and the audience found the talk very interesting. The final talk of the season (on April 21st) will also have taken place by the time this issue has been printed and posted, so I will just remind you that next season starts on October 20th. Please make a note of the date in your diaries, and look out for more details in later issues of Grand Trunk (or, of course, on our website on page [www.tamcs.org.uk/diary](http://www.tamcs.org.uk/diary)).



The repair work at Anderton Lift continued to go well as hoped, and the lift has just reopened for booked passages using a single caisson. Currently (during this testing period) the opening hours are only from 10am till 2:15pm, but CRT hope to extend these from April 24th as well as increase the frequency of bookable passages. See their stoppage notices for more details.

Finally, I would like to remind you that our AGM this year will be held on Saturday 3rd June at Westport Lake Visitor Centre. The AGM itself takes under an hour, but tea/coffee on arrival and lunch afterwards are included (and there is an optional walk around the lake afterwards) so why not come along and make a day of it. Please note that we need to know who is planning to attend by the Saturday before (27th May) so that we can tell the caterers how many meals to prepare. If you haven't booked by then, you are still welcome to attend the AGM of course but, sadly, we won't be able to provide you with any food.

*Roger Evans*

## Editorial

Happy Easter everyone!

You may have noticed that this magazine is a little early (for a change!). This is partly because we wanted to make sure you were all aware of the AGM.

This will be taking place at the beginning of June this year, a little later than usual– and that brings me to my second reason for the promptness of publication. Chairman Roger and I will be in French Canada for almost the whole of May. We will be researching the Rideau Canal for our readers (that's my story and I'm sticking to it!). Our bucket list is also involved.

We finally managed to make our way around the four counties ring (as we do every Spring) just before the Easter boating rush started. It was wet, cold and very muddy. We enjoyed getting very dirty, visiting a few of our favourite pubs and curling up beside the fire at night. We saw some interesting things (see pp. 10/11) and renewed our acquaintance with an old friend at Tyrley (see back page– photo by Roger Evans).

We also had the privilege of helping a single-hander who slipped on the mud at Audlem and appeared to have broken his ankle. Under orders from the boater coming up behind, we hauled the stricken boat back to the mooring beside the mill (with road access) while an ambulance was called. Unfortunately, the ambulance waiting time was 9 hours, but a relative was able to join the boater as a temporary carer. The sight of your tiny editor stern-hauling a 70-foot narrowboat must have been something to see!

Finally, don't forget, annual subs were due on 1st April– and I hate sending reminders out!



News of Canada in the next issue .



## **REBEKAH/ AXE**

It was August 1962, and my first wife (now deceased) and I had just returned from Ibiza and were sorting out our mail.

Suddenly - excitement!! A letter from British Waterways containing a massive disposals list of ex-working boats surplus to requirements. I had written to them months before asking if they had surplus craft available and had been informed they had none, but this was apparently a policy reversal, as it was obvious to the knowledgeable that many 7'-0" beam working narrow boats were idle.

So this was an open invitation to bid for any of the 40 or so craft on the list, which was countrywide, but - because of our intervening holiday - there was only one week left before the tenders had to be submitted!

Panic! We had both already agreed we wanted to obtain a, "real," narrow-boat for our own use, as our cheap wooden clinker built second hand boat had sunk the previous winter as the ice opened the seams, and the summer had been spent repairing the damage! Anyway, we had decided we wanted something larger and more robust.

We lived in Buckinghamshire, and we only had time to view local boats before the bids closed, which meant that our choices could only be made from available boats lying at Brentford, probably round about ten in number, or a solitary craft lying at Marsworth, near Aylesbury, a few miles from our home.

So, we bid for purchase of one boat only, from a choice of four which we had selected, with our bid price for the Marsworth craft - being £5.00 higher than the base prices we had offered for our other alternative selected boats at Brentford, which was further away.

Two weeks later we learned we were the proud owners of, "AXE," lying at Marsworth.

AXE was a a River Class butty, (non powered) boat. she had worked as a butty recently with a motor boat delivering concrete bank piles, which were

made at Marsworth, to various sites throughout the canal system as and when these piles were needed.

The notification of ownership also stipulated that, “Axe” had to be moved from its BW moorings within one week - this we were not expecting - without suggesting any possibilities where it could otherwise be accommodated.

So, a rapid learning curve. The craft was only a few years old, built for British Waterways by E.C. JONES, Tug and Barge builders, of Brentford, incidentally with pin-ups of desirable young ladies pasted to the boatman’s cabin ceiling, but otherwise in very good condition!

Immediately we drove out again to admire our new purchase, and as it was a Saturday, we found a manned motor boat also on the wharf side quay, still involved with carrying piles, and we posed our problem to the skipper. He suggested that ample, cheap moorings were available at Braunston, but - how to get it there?

“That’s no problem,” we were told. “There’s bound to be a single motor skipper passing who will be willing to give it a, “snatch,” to Braunston today or tomorrow for a couple of quid if I ask him.”

It should be explained that the Grand Union Canal was still quite busy with commercial traffic at this time, and much of this traffic was carried in, “single motors,” which could, alternatively, tow a butty and become a “working pair.” It was arranged and we received a call from the Braunston basin a few days later saying AXE had arrived and informing us what their, very reasonable, mooring rates were. It had, at least, a new temporary home with excellent adjacent facilities.

Braunston was also the home base of Union Canal Carriers, who offered kitted out ex-working narrow boats for holiday hire, equipped with rather spartan live-aboard facilities, bunk beds, gas cooker, fridge, wash bowl and an Elsan toilet under a sheeted up hold. These were intended for youth parties, scout groups, boys brigade or school parties. Adult leaders would also have to handle these deep drafted authentic load carrying boats, as they had large diameter propellers under the stern, which had to be fully immersed, and so boat handling skills were desirable. The maximum accommodation permitted was 12 persons.

Union Canal Carriers decided to offer also the less troublesome alternative hire, to them, of a working pair of boats, complete with paid skipper and mate, and doubling the passenger numbers, as this configuration would be less troublesome on call-outs - as there was expert knowledge available from the live aboard crew, who occupied one of the living cabins.

I was approached by UCC to suggest I equip AXE as a camping butty boat, to be operated with a Union Canal Carriers motor boat to help with this alternative choice, and this I was most happy to do. AXE was ideal for this activity as it was fitted with fibre glass hold covers, which were more substantial than the tarpaulin sheets used on the majority of working boats.

The boat cabin was painted in UCC livery and I was paid a rental charge by Union Canal Carriers on every week that AXE was chartered.

This arrangement continued for several years, until I bought a sister craft, "ANT," at a later BW disposal sale, and converted this into a motor vessel, and I then operated the pair independently.

However, over the years I moved to Cheshire, my boating interests changed, and I finally disposed of AXE to a new owner who wished to convert it to a conventional motor cruising narrow boat, so he took it to Fullers Boatyard in Stone, where he had the original residential stern cut off and a different, "motorised," stern welded on.

This meant that the old stern, complete with living cabin, after many years interesting commercial activity, became redundant and it was renamed, "Rebekah," after Roger Fuller's daughter and offered free for display adjacent to the Trent and Mersey Canal by the main road bridge in Stone, to remind everyone of Stone's impressive canal involvement and history, and this it has done for the last 20 years or so.

I now learn that this monument is suffering from neglect, which is most distressing, as it is a symbolic example of the last class of unpowered vessels ordered in quantity and built explicitly for narrow boat carrying, immediately prior to the massive shrinkage in demand of this mode of transport. It was the forerunners of this design of horse drawn (Butty) boat that helped make Britain the leading nation of the world-wide Industrial Revolution 200 years earlier.





*Rebekah Today*

I very much hope that Stone residents will realise that this monument, acknowledges in an unusual way Stone's special status in our transport development and should be preserved. It has a small and unique place in our nation's history.

*John Tackley*

# **Trent and Mersey Canal Society 2023 AGM**

**Saturday 3<sup>rd</sup> June 2023**  
**at Westport Lake Visitor Centre**  
**Westport Lake Road, Stoke-on-Trent**  
**ST6 4RZ**

**10:30 Arrival + Tea or Coffee or Squash  
with Biscuits**

**11:00 AGM in the Conference Room**

**12:00 Lunch**

**+ Sales Stand (TMCS clothing + 2nd-  
hand Canal Books)**

**13:00 (optional) Walk around Westport  
Lake**

**14:00 End**

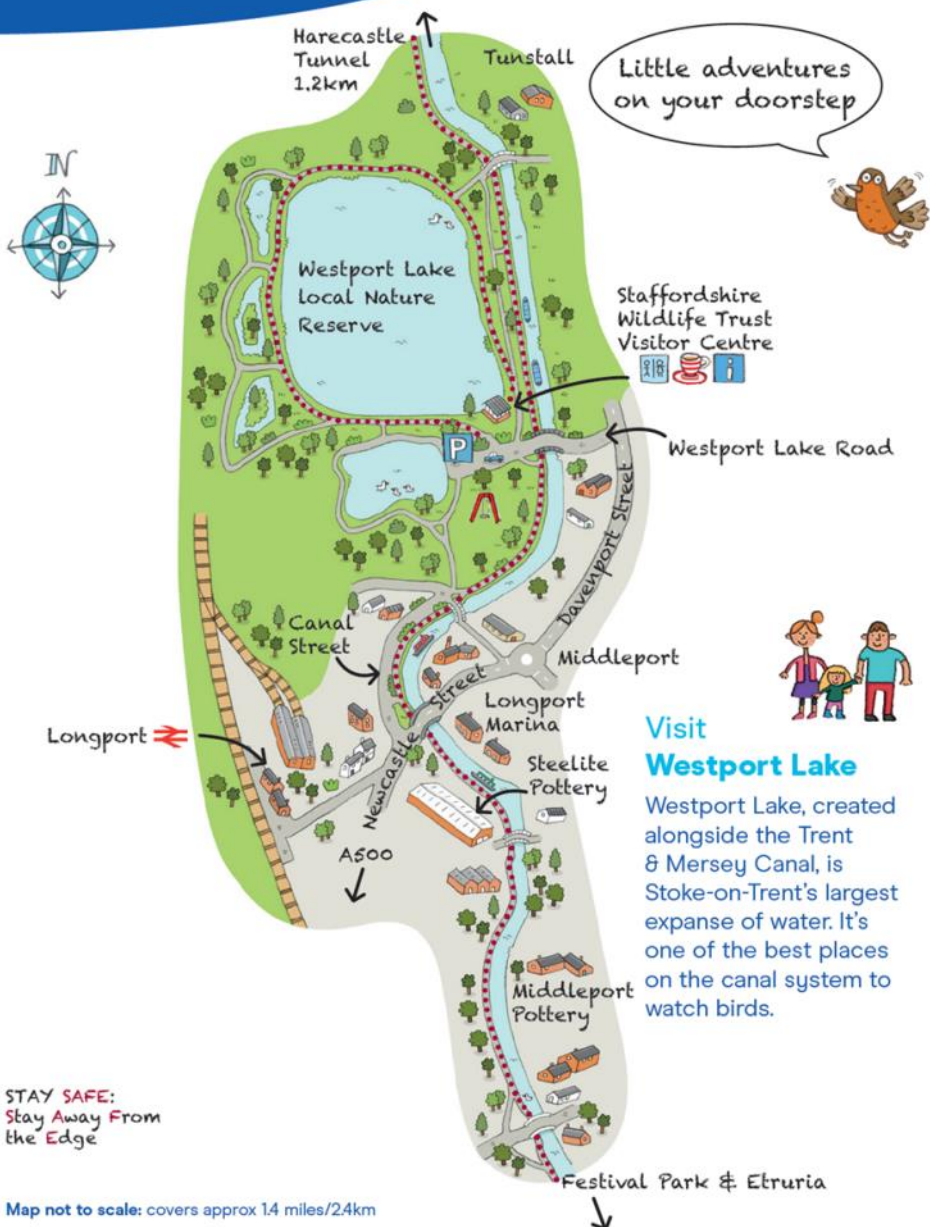
***If you are attending the AGM, please let  
Margaret or Roger know (so we can get  
the catering correct)***





**Canal &  
River Trust**

Making life better by water



Confusion at Lock 49!

**Canal & River Trust**

Canal & River Trust apologise for  
any inconvenience caused by  
the malfunction of this structure.  
We will be carrying out repairs  
as follows:

Fault Reported: 21/07/1986

Estimated Repair Date: 03/05/2031

Details: LOCK OF  
MAINTENANCE

Please contact us if you would  
like any further information:

Tel: 0303 040 4040  
Email: [enquiries.london@canalrivertrust.org.uk](mailto:enquiries.london@canalrivertrust.org.uk)

When travelling up the Cheshire flight on our traditional Spring cruise 'around the ring', we noticed that lock 49 (towpath side) still appeared to be out of order (even though not mentioned on the stoppage lists).

The lock had evidently not been used for some time and bore rather unusual tags attached to the paddle gear.

It would seem that CRT operatives would appear to be unable to spell!

For the second time, chairman Roger pointed this phenomenon out to CRT. To date he has not received a reply.



A close inspection of the lock showed that the problem in question appeared to be a loose bumper plate.

The lock could be used (with care) , but if we have to wait until 2031, it will probably have deteriorated to the stage where it is no longer operable!

*Margaret English*

## **Plan to make Burton a tourist hotspot with its river the 'blue jewel'**

*It wants to attract 1,000s putting the town on the tourist map*

At a project meeting early in March chaired by Mr John Beaty (interim chairperson), ideas were put forward to change the image of the canalside brewing town.

**Capitalising on Burton's green, blue, and sporting pedigree:** Mr Beaty said the River Trent was the "blue jewel" of Burton that can play a leading part in the tourism project. He added the canals and the Washlands also add to this.

On this theme Richard Drakeley, tourism lead for the National Forest Company, said he was keen to use the Washlands to connect the town to the National Forest. He said he wanted to bring 'foresters' markets' to Burton town centre.

Other attractions in and around Burton in the National Forest include the National Memorial Arboretum in Alrewas, Barton Marina in Barton under Needwood, the Trent and Mersey Canal and the National Forest Adventure Farm in Tatenhill, are also tourist attractions.

Further information on the newly introduced story for Burton upon Trent can be found at [www.thinkburtonupon trent.com](http://www.thinkburtonupon trent.com).

*From Staffordshire Live 7<sup>th</sup> March 2023*

Pictures on facing page courtesy of Burton Grammar.co.uk

The lower picture was taken in 1910!





## **New Mural for Stoke on Trent**

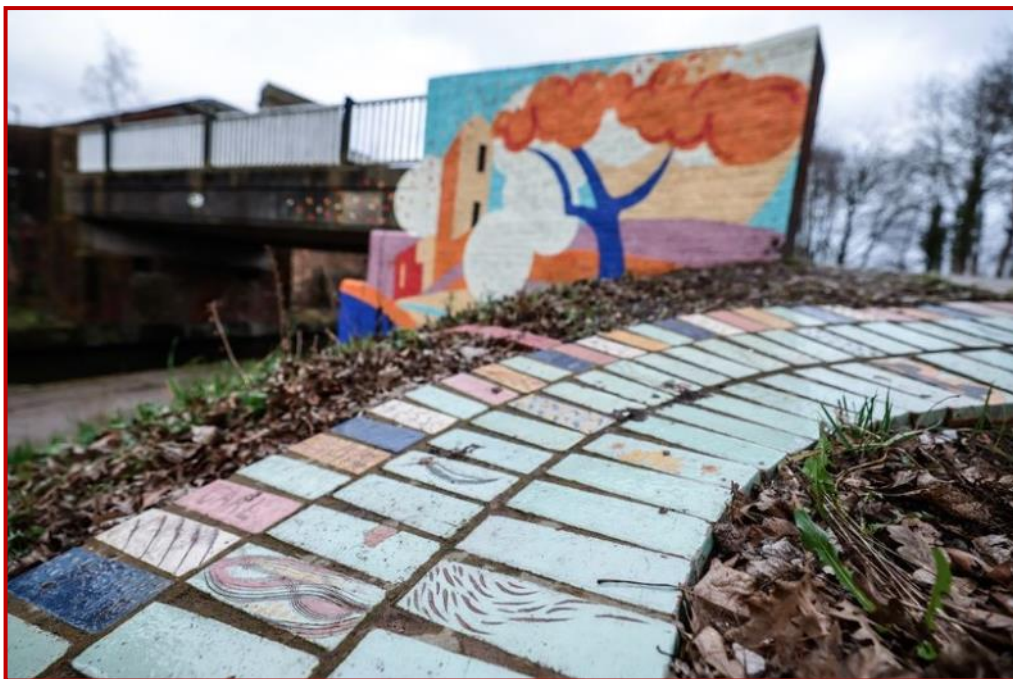
A new mural has been painted on a canal bridge in Stoke-on-Trent to improve the area and deter vandals. The colourful design has been painted on the wingwalls of Mill Bridge at Pidduck Street, close to the Grade II-listed former calcining works.

The artwork has been inspired by ceramic artists Charlotte Rhead, Susie Cooper and Clarice Cliff and was developed and painted by Stoke-on-Trent-based graphic artist Rob Fenton.

The Middleport Links project also includes handmade terracotta tiles and painted bricks along the entrance to the tow path, which were designed and made by members of the Middleport community, working with Sarah Fraser from the British Ceramics Biennial.



Residents also worked with Clay Comrades and the Canal and River Trust to prepare the space for planting and installing the fired tiles. The project has been a partnership between Middleport Matters and Appetite.



Vicki Gwynne, operations manager for Middleport Matters, said: "We have been so pleased with how our partnerships and collaborative work have come together so positively to produce this fabulous piece of community artwork over the last year.

"Working with Appetite and the other groups has been great, as they understand the importance of community involvement, as well as the benefits of quality art. Feedback from people passing by the canal bridge has been overwhelmingly positive throughout the project.."

The planning application for the mural was made last year by the Canal and River Trust. In it they wrote: "The mural would provide a welcoming and colourful feature on the canal, helping to make the area more attractive and inviting.

*Article courtesy of Staffordshire Live  
Pictures by Peter Stonier/Stoke Sentinel*





## **Join Us on a Canal Work Party**

**Cheshire Locks, Trent & Mersey Canal**  
**Monthly work party on the third Thursday each month**  
**Jointly with IWA North Staffs & South Cheshire**

### **LOOK OUT FOR THE HIGH-VIS VOLUNTEERS!**

Why not join us for our monthly work parties, on the Cheshire Locks between Kidsgrove and Wheelock, carrying out vegetation management and other tasks in the fresh air and good company?

Work parties run from 10am to 3pm on the third Thursday each month (except December) and volunteers are welcome to come for a couple of hours or all day. The meeting place varies each month, so please contact us for details.

**Contact: John Lawson**  
**07940 878923   [John.Lawson@waterways.org.uk](mailto:John.Lawson@waterways.org.uk)**

## **Work party 16th March**

This had to be cancelled owing to bad weather (and led to our current leader renaming himself 'Jonah').

## **20th April**

Fingers crossed we can finally complete the work on Lock 59 (if the weather permits).

## **Future Work Parties**

Lock 64 has been identified as being greatly in need of some TLC. It has the advantage of being close to Malkin's Bank golf course. The management have always been very helpful to us in the matter of parking and use of loos!

On the other hand, Thurlwood Locks are very close to the home of our intrepid chief, John Lawson. John has been very poorly, and is hoping to re-join the team just as soon as his health allows.

***Watch this space!***



***Working on Lower Thurlwood in 2012***

*Photo Alison Smedley*

## **‘Di’ Skilbeck, Obituary**

Inspirational waterways volunteer Diana Skilbeck MBE (80) was given a highly appropriate send-off at the National Waterways Museum, Ellesmere Port, when her coffin was transported on a historic working boat, Gifford, which she had once helped to save and restore. Di, sadly, had died on 4th March. Prior to becoming president of the Boat Museum, she was headmistress of Sheffield Girls’ School, and later became headmistress of Queen’s School in Chester. She had been a member of The Trent & Mersey Canal Society for over thirty years.

In recognition of her 50-year contribution, HM King Charles sent a letter of condolence from Buckingham Palace to say he was sorry to hear of the death of Diana Skilbeck MBE and offered his sincere sympathy and very best wishes to the National Waterways Museum in Ellesmere Port. He described her role as an early volunteer at the Boat Museum as “inspirational”.

After a memorial service at her local Holy Cross Church at Woodchurch on the Wirral, the coffin was transported by boat along the Shropshire Union Canal for a short distance before a cremation at Blaenon Crematorium, near Chester.



A special memorial service celebrating her life was held on Saturday 8 April, as part of the Easter Boat Gathering Festival at the National Waterways Museum over the bank holiday weekend.

Diana Skilbeck, known as Di, has been volunteering at the museum site since the 1970s and is one of the hard-working band of enthusiasts who rescued the derelict port and transformed it into a national home for the UK’s historic boat and waterways collection.

Richard Parry, chief executive of the Canal & River Trust, said: “Di Skilbeck MBE has been a passionate waterways supporter for half a century and she has given so much to them in that time; her record of achievements is remarkable. Her passion for local history and the canal network placed her at the centre of the ambitious work to restore the derelict Ellesmere Port and as a founder of the museum society. Since then, she has served tirelessly as a volunteer in a range of leadership roles that have made such a vital impact on the Waterways Museum, its historic boats and the wider collection of artifacts.



“As a retired schoolteacher and head mistress, Di had a natural gift for sharing her knowledge and enthusiasm with adults and children alike. Always a source of generosity and good humour, she will be greatly missed.”

*Pictures and bulk of text courtesy of  
CRT*

Please send contributions for the next issue to me, Margaret English, by e-mail to [margaretetlm@hotmail.com](mailto:margaretetlm@hotmail.com), by post, or by hand. Remember, this is *your* magazine. Contributions from the South especially welcome! Last date for inclusion in the July/August 2023 edition is **18/06/2023**



**Red Bull Public House**  
**Congleton Road South,**  
**Stoke-on-Trent**  
**ST7 3AJ**

Talks for this season have finished for the summer, but a splendid season is promised from October 2023 to April 2024.

***October 20th: TBA***

***November 17th: Changing Places, Patrick Marks***

***December: There will be a Christmas meal!***

***January 19th 2024: Cruising the Mon and Brec, Alan Chetwyn***

***February 16th 2024: Ireland (Part 1), Malcom Bridge***

***March 15th 2024: Ireland (Part 2), Malcolm Bridge***

***April 19th 2024: TBA***

**Put the dates in your diary!**





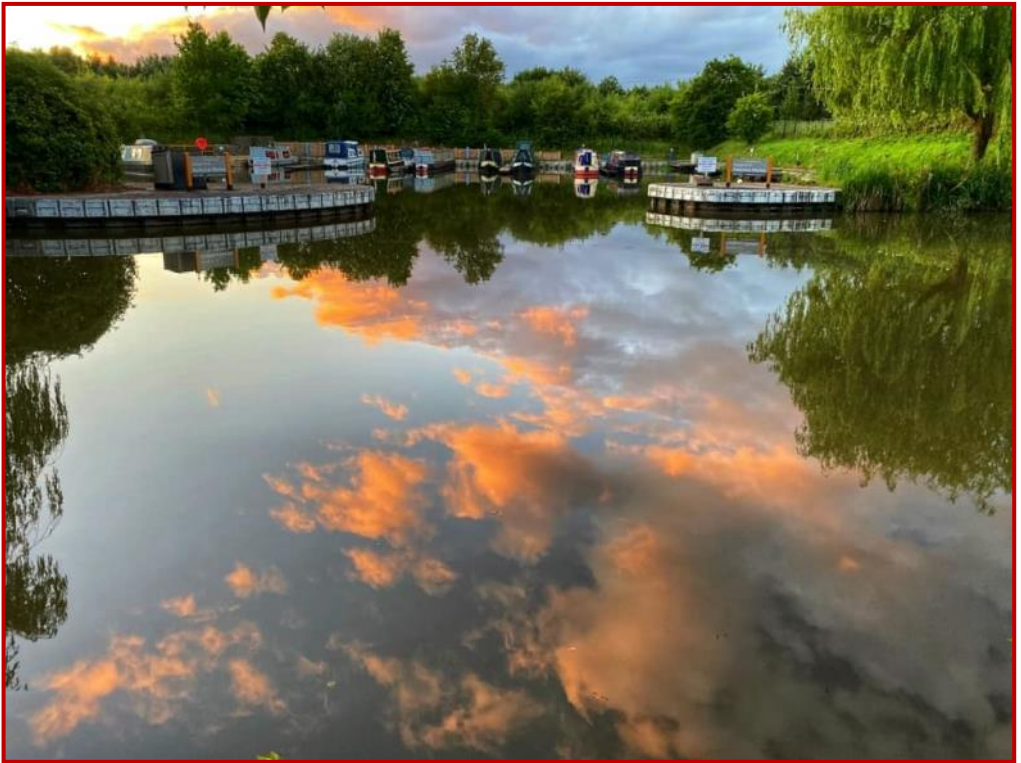
*I found these pictures online and couldn't resist sharing them.....Ed*

### **Waterway Photos**

The Guardian Camera Club has been taking pictures of mid-Cheshire waterways.

There are some stunning shots of marinas, meres and locks.

The Camera Club is a supportive and friendly group of amateur and professional photographers and as well as submitting photos taken recently, members also take part in regular themed challenges like spectacular sunsets and Valentine's Day.



***Anderton Marina by Alison Hamlyn Hughes***

You can join 576 others in our camera club on Facebook at [facebook.com/groups/guardiancameraclub](https://facebook.com/groups/guardiancameraclub),

*Article by Heidi Summerfield,  
Northwich and Winsford Guardian February 2023*

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**TRENT AND MERSEY CANAL SOCIETY**  
*a charity recognised for tax purposes by HMRC*

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Telephone: 01606 834471

[www.trentandmerseycanalsociety.org.uk](http://www.trentandmerseycanalsociety.org.uk) (or) [www.tamcs.org.uk](http://www.tamcs.org.uk)

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***The Trent & Mersey Canal Society is proud to  
continue supporting Burslem Port***

***Bringing Boats Back to Burslem***

