

Avon Boaters' Gateway

Issue 10 - 2024



The Avon Navigation Trust



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A very warm welcome

A year packed with many reasons to smile



Usually a late evening urgent buzz on the work mobile signals an emergency of some kind, but on a Thursday night I knew it would probably mean loads of smiles.

That's ANT Squad night, during the season, and click-happy Kim Bonk, one of the Volunteers in charge, sends me streams of uplifting images of young 'uns learning, working and enjoying the river.

In darker times - when we are battling against the elements, the clock and thus frustrated we're not out there doing as much of our usual *improving* as well as maintaining our beautiful river - those pictures are a perfect pick-me-up.

It's so heartening to know that not only is my long-held dream a living, breathing reality, these youngsters have surpassed our wildest imaginings.

The Squad has already gone from fortnightly to weekly meetings, and now we're looking at launching a second squad.

And whilst their Volunteer leaders, headed by Leanne Greenwood and including Alex Mellor, are brilliant, they'll be the first to say that the super success is driven by the youngsters themselves, who want to learn, do and give more all the time. Brilliant.

Miles of smiles then, in some challenging times, with all hands on deck after Office Manager Adrian Main, now thankfully back in situ, was forced by illness to be out of the picture for months.

Add in the floods, bringing ever bigger tree bits (see front cover) into the mix, and you can see why we needed

some bright spots.

But there were other good times too. It's wonderful to have Adrian back. It's good to have *Corsair* and the dragon pedalos bringing the crowds back to hire boating in Evesham, and Tewkesbury-based RAWC is a huge hit.

We had time to add some more visitor moorings, a constant aim of ours.

We also put up an ANT sky-blue commemorative plaque thanking those who donated memorial trees to the Pershore Lock Island project and Volunteer Chris Knight, whose splendid idea that was. We're going to have a new visitor mooring there too so you'll all be able to enjoy it.

Our featured Lock this time is Fladbury, which is fitting as it's reigned over by Brian and Diana Morgan and he's just stepped down after an astonishing 33 years plus worth of service on Council as Trustee.

They are still our Super Volunteers though, thank goodness.

Our people are another huge plus - the Boaters, the marinas, the businesses that are at the beating heart of river life, and the ANT team and Volunteers.

Those ANT aces always pull out all the stops, but they moved heaven and earth to fill the enormous void left by Adrian, albeit thankfully temporarily.

It turns out there's an awful lot to smile about after all.

Clive Matthews

Editor and ANT Chief Executive

As ANT marks the milestones and highlights in the year, our esteemed River Avon's Poet Laureate Alison Bergqvist's poem looks ahead to the dawning of a new season. The new year will also bring a welcome change for the beaming bard and her partner. Landscape gardening expert Chris retired in 2023, which means more time on the Avon. "We shall both be able to relax better on the river without having to rush home for a 6am Monday start," reports Alison, who is busy adding to her lexicon of poems. In the meantime you can cuddle up with a copy of Alison's beautiful *The Little ANT Book of River Poems* by ordering a copy via office@avonnavigationtrust.org or picking up at book at our River Avon Welcome Centre.

A FRESH START

As winter retreats we warm to the thought,
That perchance, after all, our world will keep turning.

Despite prudent precautions our moorhen's returned,
Determined to scupper our shakedown cruise plans.
But her nest is dishevelled, her eggs icy cold,
She can't have remembered where she laid them so bold.

Tess victualled and fuelled, scrubbed up and made ready,
We cruise keenly upstream to rekindle our dream.
As the river awakens, arouses, bestirs,
Her flora and fauna pursue our esteem.

Birches shake with elation, their tinsel leaves tremble,
Fuzzy topped willow trees pert with potential,
Apple, cherry and may are bursting with blossom
While cuckoo pint and cowslip slip by clothed in green.

Yellow rumped wagtails dart, whistle and bob;
Not bidden, but betraying, where their babes are hidden
Neath sturdy lock sides or midst bubbling weir rocks.
A fresh start to the year our dear river unlocks.

© Alison Bergqvist



Tree marooned duo all smiles at rescue effort

A Tewkesbury couple are singing ANT's praises after the team galloped to their rescue on board *Cammell*.

Impressed Boaters Stuart and Sharon Adair also went on social media to trumpet "Avon Navigation Trust to the Rescue" after their Norfolk Broads 29' cruiser *Broad Smile* was trapped on a toppled tree.

"It was a bit scary, to say the least, but the ANT team was absolutely brilliant," says DX Construction Manager Stuart.

"If it wasn't for them we'd still be there because we were going nowhere!"

Dave Mechen and Nick Huckvale were clearing and shearing not far away when they got the SOS alert from Daisy Wood. Daisy was also an absolute star say Stuart and Sharon, who works at Ashchurch army camp.

The couple, frequent cruisers from their Twynning mooring, had just rounded the corner from Bidford Grange Lock when they spotted a tree blocking their path.

"It must have just fallen as two narrowboats had passed us 15 minutes earlier," says quick-witted Stuart, who slammed into reverse but couldn't stop the boat drifting broadside into the tree.

"It went under the boat so we were sat IN the tree," sigh the couple who quickly checked the boat wasn't leaking.

"Sharon said, who do we call and I said everyone! We started with ANT and Daisy was superb.

"She talked us through the safety code to check all was well, told us to blast our horn to warn any nearing boats and then to make a cuppa and relax because ANT was on the way.

"Not 20 minutes later, the cavalry (*Cammell* and *Eric*) arrived with the most amazing kit.

"They couldn't quite get to where we'd landed so the crane operator used the digger arm to pull close and then swapped that for a grabbing machine to chop bits off the tree to free us. It was extraordinary.

"After saying very many thank yous to the amazing guys we motored onto Bidford, where we spent the next several hours in the pub!"

It's their second boat on the Avon after the couple, who honeymooned on the Broads and holidayed there most years with their four children, had a eureka moment.

"We realised it was daft going all that way when we had the Avon on our doorstep," smiles Stuart. "We hadn't heard of the Trust before we came on, but what an amazing organisation doing a splendid endless job of maintaining a beautiful river... let alone rescuing people like us!"

"It was our pleasure to help," says Chief Executive Clive Matthews, who warns that flood weakened trees are becoming an increasing hazard.

Roaring success



Bringing boating back to Evesham with colourful dragon boats and the hugely popular ANT Squad are a roaring success. Turn to page 12 for more.

Eye eye skipper

Boaters have welcomed new River Watch cameras keeping an eye at Stratford's Bancroft and Pershore and King John's bridges.

Plus there's another mooring at The Valley, just outside Evesham, and more on the way.

Thanks so much

People who helped turn Pershore Lock Island into another splendid Avon wildlife corridor have been thanked with a special plaque. Full story on page 33.

Space invaders

The Works Team has added floating pennywort clearing its to-do list and enlisted the help of Volunteer Inspectors to keep a watchful eye. Find out more in ANT at Work, starting on page 26.

The Main man

The ANT office squad has been bowled over by Boater, business and river community support after Office Manager and Company Secretary Adrian Main fell ill. Turn to page 18.

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Blossoming into new life

ANT's pretty special new fundraising and crowd-pleasing trip boat was fittingly festooned with blossom for her big comeback to the Avon.

Originally Avon Leisure Cruise's *Frederick*, the newly named *Corsair* is back and her first outing was for The Valley Evesham's Blossom Trail River Cruises.

They were launched to mark the Wychavon's Trail's 40th anniversary and took advantage of ANT's new moorings.

The sell-out trips attracted more than 500 people, including VIP guest of honour Japanese Ambassador, His Excellency Hajime Hayashi.

"We were eager to support the Vale Blossom bonanza and to mark a special year in a special way," says The Valley's Retail Director Phil Maclean, the brains behind the idea.

"The views from the Avon added a whole new dimension to the spring spectacular," adds ANT Chief Executive Clive Matthews.

The 38ft canopied 12 berth boat was one of the late Dave Smith's fleet of three.

She was bought from Evesham Marina by business and music maestro Stuart Miller, whose Towpath Productions (www.towpathproductions.co.uk) gives musicians a free floating stage on the Oxford Canal and on land.

Stuart has allowed ANT to purchase *Corsair*, at a cut price, on terms over a period of time to enable the Trust to raise grant funding, because he's a fan of the charity's ANT Squad work.

"The financial return was less significant to me than what she was going to be used for," says Stuart, who launched successful technological logistics company ByBox in Silicon Valley in 2000 and sold it 20 years later.

"Getting young people involved with the river and learning in such a lovely environment plus providing training for Volunteers of all ages is such a great project, which I am delighted to support."



Corsair is moored in Evesham with ANT Squad HQ *Neptune*, which was also refurbished by Evesham Marina.

"We're proud to have been the *Corsair* conduit between Stuart and ANT," says Marina MD Steve Smith.

She is part of the Trust's big AVON project, embracing the Squad of young Volunteers, repurposing of the Evesham Lock House and bringing boating back to the town.

She is also a new string to the Volunteers' bow, raising funds for ANT via trips and chartered events.

"*Corsair*, like all of the AVON projects, takes nothing from the charity's funds but adds a great deal, bannered ANT's work at the same time," says River Activities Manager Alex Mellor.

The boat was refurbished by Volunteers, including MVT leader Jonathan Goode and colleague Mike Thompson, the retired electrical engineer who is also Reachmaster at Chadbury and Avon relief Lock Keeper with wife Kim.

Patron Timothy West is gifting a history and anecdote-filled commentary for next year's trips, fuelled by facts provided by David Snowden of the Vale of Evesham Historical and Simon de Montfort societies.

ANT is also grateful for the loan, from Bancroft Cruisers, of lovely trip boat *Princess Marina*.

Clean SWEEP

Former Stratford-upon-Avon SWEEP river and canal litter pick boat, *Dudley Matthews*, is back in the ANT fold.

The real Dudley would have been delighted that she is being refurbished

by Volunteers over winter as their Luddington-based work boat.

"It will be nice to get her looking really spectacular in honour of Clive's dad," says MVT leader Jonathan Goode.

Two new arrivals are a real gift for Patrol Team

There's no chance Avon loving Tony Hodgkins will ever forget exactly when he built the boat he's now kindly gifted to ANT's Volunteer Patrol Team.

His wife June was pregnant with their first son Christopher when he started crafting on their Kingswinford driveway in 1973.

"All went well until she was getting close to going into labour and then I had to stop because I was ruining too many sheets of marine plywood," smiles the former sales engineer.

The family, later completed by second son Michael, had some splendid times on *Sharasun*, the cruiser he built from a Stourport-on-Severn Heads' moulding and soon shifted to the Avon, where they spent 20 happy years.

"It was 15ft and trailable, so we'd nip to the Broads occasionally, and even to Poole so I could fish off the harbour," adds the keen angler, latterly moored at Wyre Mill.

"I'd spend days alone fishing, but the children persuaded me that was daft after I had a stroke, and then near fatal pneumonia, in 2018.

"They've also confiscated the chainsaw and banned me from ladders!"

Tony, whose still busy days include being a National Trust volunteer piano player at Warwickshire's Coughton Court, was delighted ANT had such a perfect role for his beloved boat.

Pimped up by Volunteer Jonathan Goode

in ANT colours, she's new Patrol Officer Will Fish's ride and he's delighted.

"She's superb, lovely to handle, quiet, quick, and fits in the smallest of places," says Will, who has been very warmly welcomed by Boaters and Patrol Team lead Adrian Main.

"He had a hard act - Adrian Bailey - to follow, but Will has quickly had a big impact, issuing quite a few tickets and helping Boaters and visitors," says Adrian.

"It's great fun and people like to see a physical presence on their river, just like they like to see police on their streets," adds Will, also Tewkesbury Reachmaster and Severn Unit Maritime Volunteer Service stalwart.

"Some of our Boaters flagged up speeding as a sometime issue, but that's stopped. The flashing light going up and down quickly delivers the message."

"I miss the boat, but I am delighted she's being cherished," says Tony, a LANT and ANT supporter. "*Sharasun* and the Avon have given me so much pleasure over the years and I'm so pleased Clive found such a perfect role for her."



We can reveal the origin of *Sharasun*'s unusual name, but keep it to yourselves! Tony confides that it's a mash-up of charabanc and a family member who spent every Sunday checking how many bricks had been added to the house she was having built. "Shara never knew, and never must! She's never been a Boater so we should be safe..."



Above *Sharasun* all bannered to wish Tony, now 76, a happy 40th!

Left: New VPO Will Fish with the smart new patrol boat.

● ANT Squad welcomes Kingfisher: p13



The ever-growing AVON campaign is bannered our beautiful river far and wide, and it's not costing the Trust or its Boaters a penny. Every one of the four-strand Avon-engagement projects are fuelled by grants, donations, self-generated income and Volunteer support. The all-action acronym stands for: ANT Squad (yes they *do* have toy ant mascots!);

Volunteer training and activity centre at the repurposed Evesham Lock House; Outdoor Evesham river activity partnership bringing community boating back to Abbey park; Neptune project, the ANT Squad base and a mobile activity and volunteer training centre. "The AV and N were easy - finding a description for the O was a bit

tougher," smiles Chief Executive Clive Matthews. Grants include £95k from Wychavon District Council Community Legacy funding, backed by Evesham Town Council. River Activities Manager, and grant supremo, Alex Mellor has just secured further funding for the Lock House transformation, which, like all construction work, has faced

rising building costs. Mobile Volunteer Team leader Jonathan Goode will be spearheading the next stage - the internal fit out and decoration, which will be carried out by Volunteers, including eager members of the ANT Squad. "I'm keeping design under wraps but we're all looking forward to helping to turn an iconic building

into a centre for all Volunteers," says Jonathan, who also praised Alex's super effective fundraising. "It's amazing that it's all being made possible by gifted Volunteer hours and grants but I'm not surprised. "ANT Volunteers are always willing and I've heard Alex on the phone to potential grant providers. He is remarkable."

It's our f-ANT-astic Squad

The ANT Squad of young Volunteers was always heralded as a winning way of bringing new blood onto the Avon, but it's turning into an even bigger success than anticipated.

Popular sessions have already doubled to go weekly and there's a waiting list for any vacancy and launch of a second cohort.

In the meantime, the original dazzling dozen is working with school groups and visiting organisations to encourage other young people to love and support their river.

The original core group of 12 is attracting widespread praise as they get out and about at festivals and on the river, wearing T-shirts they designed themselves and funded from donations.

All the adult Volunteers supporting the ANT Squad - Leader Leanne Greenwood, Kim Bonk, Alex Mellor and Jonathan Goode - are buzzing about their young stars.

"It's evolving in an extraordinary way and the young people are just as passionate about it as we are," says Leanne, a Year 1 teacher by profession.

"It's such a wonderful team with the same ethos, values and ambitions."

"The young people are so into it and eager to learn that it's a total joy to be involved," adds Kim, of Avon River Activities.

"Every organisation is desperate for Volunteers and eager to engage with young people, which is notoriously difficult... and here's the flourishing ANT Squad, with a waiting list," says Alex.

"They turn up, week after week, and happily tackle everything we throw at them."

That can range from litter picks to boat refurbs and cleaning, plus they've learnt a lot, including a lot of knots, and added qualifications from boat handling to power boat training and first aid.

All of them can now helm new trip boat *Corsair*, whose trips earn income for the Trust.

Now the Squad, born from Chief Executive Clive Matthew's

long cherished dream, is planning a special event to showcase what they've learnt to ANT's adult Volunteers.

The youngsters have attracted many plaudits, and support, from river users and the community.

Anti Litter Evesham (check out their Facebook page Anti-Litter Evesham) has dubbed them Water Wombles after watching the super scoopers using paddleboards and kayaks to get into even the hardest places.

"Wow Wow Wow. They are truly amazing," posted Madame Cholet, aka Laura van Toller, on social media.

"These young people are a credit to Evesham and the River."

"There have been some truly special moments, including the first time we wore our ANT Squad shirts, which gave us a real presence at Evesham River Festival," adds Leanne.

"Our aim is to do even more together and having the Lock House will be amazing because it will extend the season and mean we can expand still further."

● **Young Volunteers report: p44.**

Here be dragons...

Bringing hire and trips boats back to Evesham has been a huge hit with locals and tourists alike.

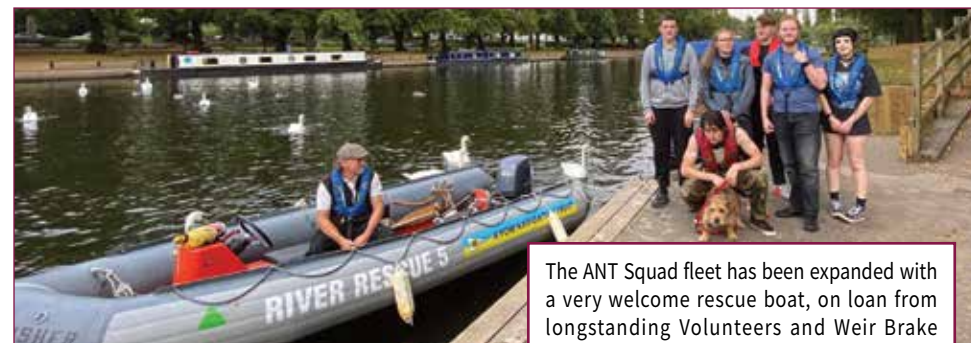
The brightly coloured dragon pedalo boats (pictured opposite) have been particularly popular, reports Avon River Activities' Kim Bonk, who runs their hire, along with kayaks and paddleboards, on behalf of ANT.

"It has been really exciting bringing river fun back to the town," says Kim, who also volunteers to pilot *Corsair* for trips and charters.

"I'm already looking to add more dragons to the fleet."

"The word spread fast last summer," adds ANT Office Manager Adrian Main.

"We got many enquiries and lots of comments about how great it was to see them, and ANT branded *Neptune*, in the park."



The ANT Squad fleet has been expanded with a very welcome rescue boat, on loan from longstanding Volunteers and Weir Brake Reachmasters Kevan and Sally Humphrey.

Former Scout Leader Sally used the 60hp Sea Rider RIB *Kingfisher* for Sea Scout activities and it was a family sea trip favourite for years.

Branded by Volunteers in ANT colours, she joins ANT Squad HQ *Neptune*, the mobile Activity Centre.

"It's also perfect for the level 2 powerboat training course that will be offered at the new Lock House," adds Alex.

"We are so happy to see it being used to inspire young people rather than just sitting in our garage," add Kevan and Sally.

"And she looks so cool displaying the ANT colours on the side."



Top of the litter picks.



The Lock House is re-roofed, repaired and now ready for some Volunteer magic. Picture: Christopher Murfin.



Avon Vessels

The queen of cool

Celebrating comely *Clementina*

The stately Dutch Luxemotor barge *Clementina* made quite a stir when she got to Bidford-on-Avon, but her arrival wasn't quite as dramatic as splashed by a local newspaper.

"It welcomed her 'after crossing the Atlantic', which would have been quite a feat," smiles owner Philip Bidwell, who turned her into a much sought-after hotel boat.

But *Clementina's* journey was indeed testing, after Philip's wife Janet spotted her in Holland and thought she'd be the perfect new business on the Avon.

Tewkesbury Lock Keepers Ted and Vonnice Barton steered her across the North Sea to Brentford, where Philip and his parents met them.

After a quick cruise up the Thames, *Clementina* went up the then unfinished Kennett & Avon Canal, onto a lorry and was relaunched at Bristol.

"It cost £1,500 to put her on the lorry and £95 to have her taken off again," says Philip, who'd paid £16,900 for the 69ft 12in wide grand dame in 1988.

She joined ten hire narrowboats at Bidford Boats, established in 1973 by Sheldford and Anne Bidwell.

It's still operated by Philip's brother David and together they run the family home Riverside as a holiday rental.

Clementina has always been a head-turner. Now a remarkable 100-years-old she's one of the Avon's biggest,



oldest and most eye catching boats.

"She's beautiful. It's like meeting the *Queen Mary*, slipping sedately through the water," praises ANT Chief Executive and *Clementina* fan Clive Matthews.

"They were also built to last. I've hardly had to do a thing to her since," says Philip who expertly converted her into a luxury holiday venue that he and Janet ran for nearly 15 years.

"She still had her original captain's cabin, wheelhouse and engine room... and engine, a single cylinder, 20 horse power.

"I did change that because there was a real knack to starting it, involving a burner and air tank, and I lost it!"

He turned the hold into lush accommodation and they hosted countless tourists making happy memories.

Philip and Janet had met on a hotel boat - he split his working year on them and the river. They'd shared a season in Burgundy before *Clementina*.

Philip worked with David Hutchings MBE on the restoration. "I started, in theory, for a month building some moorings at Lucy's Mill in 1973, and never really got away," says Philip.

He reports that *Clementina* is still a joy to take out.

"She's very nicely shaped and glides cleanly and effortlessly, whereas boats with bigger, heavier engines seem to blunder through the water.

"We always get comments and she does look good for her age," adds Philip, whose family is completed by daughters - consultant paediatrician Clare and lawyer Helen.

Everyone's pleased they inherited *Clementina's* new name as the original, *Nieuwe Zorg*, means new worry. Actually she has always been a joy for the Bidwells.

Are they planning a celebration of her centenary year?

"We ought to, but we're running out of the time. This feature may well be it!"

Happy 100th *Clementina*.



Here she comes... views of *Clementina*, including gliding (on a lorry) beneath Bristol's Clifton suspension bridge, on her way to Bidford (right).



Some rive(r)ting memories

Naturally Philip Bidwell has many memories of helping maintain and improve the river that has always run through his life, and points to how much slower things used to be.

"There were once three water gates - one at Bidford bridge, one at Cropthorne near Fladbury and one at Pershore.

"To use them you had to lower the whole reach up to the next lock," he explains.

"Once the level had dropped, you'd open the gate, take your boat through, close the gate and wait for the reach to rise. In summer when there was a low flow, you could be waiting for a very long time."

Philip was in the work party that in 2009 replaced the gates at Fladbury, which is our featured lock this time.

Back at the start, the Douglas Barwell OBE team had to pull off an engineering feat to beat an underground stream when they were deepening the chamber.

It's still a super success, reports Philip.

"When we drained down Fladbury Lock for the new gates, there was still no leak," adds Philip, who shared a lot of work with contractor Mark Williams and helped Engineers Roger Apperley and Phil Holloway fabricate the new Fladbury gates.

● Fabulous Fladbury: starts page 22



Flying the flag for another Avon first

Avon loving craftsman Nick Birch always has his hands pretty full caring for glorious old boats and building new beauties, but he couldn't resist being also diverted by something completely different.

The former Royal Navy lieutenant has had a life steeped in sailing, constructing and engineering. He also flies the flag for a Stratford-upon-Avon writer who time forgot.

To be fair, there was a boat involved (a gondola) but trying to find it prompted a whole lot more.

Thanks to Nick, best selling novelist Marie Corelli, who moved to town in 1899, has her own website (<http://mariecorelli.org.uk>) and the centenary of her 1924 death will be marked by a special Stratford Society weekend on May 4 and 5, 2024.

It all started when he saw a picture of the writer on her gondola, complete with Venetian gondolier, the talking point of Shakespeare's Avon back in the day in the early 1900s.

Nick was moved to find out what had happened to the splendid boat and was astonished to find just how big the Marie phenomenon was. She outsold Charles Dickens, HG Wells and Wilkie Collins combined. Even Queen Victoria was a fan.

Yet he had to dig hard to discover her story, although you'd think Stratford would understand the draw of a good writer...

"I was intrigued because her books hadn't survived the passage of time and everybody seemed to have completely

forgotten about her," says Nick.

"I felt she needed someone here to try to bring her to people's attention again."

Well that's worked, and it also resulted in learning a new boating technique, crafting two Venetian vessels for customers and a lifelong romance.

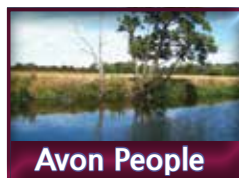
He met his bride-to-be, Italian born Patrizia, over dinner. She was the waitress serving Nick and Edward Rose, whose Avon Boating business launched him onto the Avon and lured him back after a spell in the Royal Navy.

"Edward told her I had a gondola and it went on from there."

Nick's gondola - not Marie's but brought over from Venice where he had learnt how to row like a true gondolier - had made nearly as big a splash as flamboyant Marie's did in her day. It was a rare and beautiful sight on the Avon.

Nick's was eventually replaced by Marie's own *The Dream*, which he tracked down at a company specialising in craft for film and promotional work, and brought back onto the Avon in 2010.

Leamington Spa born Nick first came onto the river in Stratford as a lad who often hired rowing boats from Avon Boating in the late seventies. Later he worked there as a boatman whilst waiting to join the Navy.



You can see Marie Corelli's 1904 Venice-built gondola for yourself at The Stratford Society's 2024 centenary-celebrating May 4 and 5 weekend.

She will be in the garden of Mason Croft, the house Marie shared with longtime companion Bertha Vyver.

The house will be the centrepiece for the grand weekend toasting the author's life, works and legacies, which include saving and restoring the public library in Henley Street.

Events will include an exhibition, academic symposium, garden party, song recital and a dramatic reading of the world's first true blockbuster *The Sorrows of Satan*.

More details are at www.stratfordsociety.co.uk where

you can also find a link to purchase local author

Jann Tracy's book *Marie Corelli: Shakespeare's*

Champion.



He loved the service life, the travel, the learning (starting at Dartmouth Naval College in 1984) and all, but Nick, who grew up watching his dad and grandad working on the family's old Air-sea rescue launch, was yearning to work with his hands again.

He went to the International Boatbuilding Training College, Oulton Broad, worked as a boatbuilder for a year and was enjoying a spell as a shipwright and mate on large yachts, when Edward Rose told him he was expanding and looking for boatbuilder and driver.

"It was perfect timing," says Nick, who took over as MD in 2004.

Nick may have a *passione* for gondolas, but he loves all old wooden boats, and the business has five, all on the national register of historic vessels, and all built by the same Windermere boatyard, Borwick & Sons.

They include *The Merry Widow*, rescued and restored two years ago, and the *Swan of Avon*, recently given a loving makeover and an electric engine, meaning Avon now has a full eco-set of vessels.

She dates back to 1898 and came to the business brand new.

"I have a great affinity with wooden boats because every one is unique and you can build a subtlety of form into them that you don't get in mass produced boats," muses Nick.

"They each present unique challenges, making them enjoyable but also very frustrating at times!"

"But ultimately they are very rewarding and look absolutely fabulous when they come out freshly painted in the spring.

"Most of all it is so rewarding to be keeping a bit of a maritime heritage alive on a beautiful river that has been an inspiration to me and to so many."

Marie Corelli as Lily (Courtesy of the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust). All other images courtesy of Nick Birch.



It was all systems go when ANT lost a key team member through illness and the rapid and robust response has earned praise.

Chief Executive Clive Matthews immediately instigated the Business Continuity Plan (BCP) and his Works Team, backed by Volunteers, took up the baton so he could focus on running the office and Trust. Part-time workers Daisy Wood and Alex Mellor

dropped everything to help fill the gap left by poorly Office Manager Adrian Main.

"It was a remarkable response and everyone concerned should be applauded for their expertise, fortitude and sterling support," says ANT Chairman Jack Hegarty.

"It was a heartening demonstration of loyalty to the Trust," adds Clive, whose usual river winter and

It turns out that dreaded Monday morning feeling is actually one of the best in the world when it's ripped away from you, writes Adrian Main. I left the office one January evening with a cheery goodbye and didn't get back until more than six months later. So, over to dear Daisy...

We did so much together

Suddenly going full pelt three weeks in certainly fast-cured my baby brain!

But I've certainly learn a lot more... and really appreciate how much Adrian does.

It was a challenge because I didn't have him, my fount of all knowledge, but Clive was always on hand and, as ever, a mega mainspring of support.

To be fair January to March is always busy because of licences. It was just a lot busier: flat out five days a week.

Alex and I split the system, ensuring there were no hold

ups. He painstakingly fed the new data base.

It's the first year I've done commercial licences, so that was something nice and new, as was helping Adrian, later, with the marina visits.

Another first was assisting Dutch Lewis gathering advertising for our annual publications. We're lucky because businesses like the Trust and our readers are their perfect audience. We really appreciate their support.

Whilst we managed to switch on Volunteers on time, I had planned to spend the year expanding the data base, the roles and being generally more hands on.

Luckily the new system already keeps us connected, and means I can immediately flag up any live issues with the Works Team.

We did add *Corsair* as a new Volunteer role, plus the Lock House project kicked off, so we did expand. Imagine what we can do next year!

I've now got more depth of knowledge and confidence in making decisions, which Adrian has long been trying to instil. I'd just rather have learnt that with him around.

But big thanks to everyone (including my husband and parents). We did more together than I thought possible.



Daisy Wood
Assistant Office Manager/Volunteer Administrator



Dynamic duo. Alex Mellor and Daisy pool their resources.

spring work plans had to be adjusted accordingly. Accountants Bowker, Stephens & Co flew in to take over payroll and VAT returns and Daisy, just recently back from maternity leave, went full time with River Activities Manager Alex. Together with Clive they ran a very tight ship until Adrian was allowed by doctors to start a phased return in July.

"It turns out that Adrian is an absolute superstar who had such tight systems in place that we could simply carry on where he left off," reports Alex. "It was also a heartwarming experience: suppliers, contractors and everyone he liaises with, even those he hadn't met, were genuinely concerned and sent best wishes.

"We're all delighted to have him back."

Impressed by the top teamwork

I was so impressed (continues Adrian) with the team who pulled together and achieved so much. And all that when we were having the Noah of all flood seasons.

The response has been wholeheartedly positive to the new licensing system, which we had only designed in December, in response to Boater feedback.

We are very pleased to welcome a new Patrol Officer to our excellent crew and another fine boat for our fleet.

Tewkesbury Reachmaster Will Fish now keeps a watch on that stretch on Sharasun, kindly gifted by long-time Trust supporter and Wyre Mill Club member Tony Hodgkins.

Boaters have been telling us how much they like having Will on patrol. They also like the addition of three new River Watch cameras, covering Bancroft plus Pershore and Tewkesbury King John's bridges.

All our Patrol Officers have been excellent as usual and I am very grateful to Mike Thompson, who helped out on my annual marina and boatyard visits.

Thanks to Daisy, I was able to get to Tewkesbury and Shakespeare marinas and Mike kindly covered those in between. We were later than usual, but we got there in the end.

And finally, it has been lovely to be welcomed back so warmly. That started on my first outing, when I walked along the riverbank chatting to Boaters at the Evesham Festival.

It was also my first chance to see Clive and the team, although they had been great keeping me abreast of what was happening.

I loved all those "And where is...?" questions, which actually kept me sane. There is only so much *Homes in the Country/Abroad/Under Hammers* you can watch.

But the best bit was being back in my office doing a job I have now realised I enjoy even more than I thought I did.

Adrian Main,
Office Manager/ Secretary



A warm welcome awaited Adrian at Evesham River Festival

Visitors flocking to RAWC and holiday cottages

Boaters, campers and caravan owners are making a bee line for the Tewkesbury-based River Avon Welcome Centre (RAWC), celebrating its first full year supplying chandlery products as well as the usual.

"There's not as much footfall as Stratford, but we get a lot more Boaters and everyone appreciates the information and advice also on offer," says Joan Murfin, who leads the team on the refurbished William James.

"We also took her to Evesham and Pershore's river festivals, which was really good fun."

The holiday let Avon Lock cottages are also proving to be a great advert for the Trust.

"We've been fully booked apart from the floods," reports Adrian.

Ebb and flow of licence numbers

Annual licence numbers continue to rise, a trend that started post lockdowns.

Short term licences were back to pre pandemic levels in 2022, as were boat movements.

Both are likely to be slightly lower in 2023 because of Easter flooding and poor summer weather.

Call to join fight for the future of vital waterways

ANT is adding its might to the Fund Britain's Waterways (FBW) campaign calling on the government to act now to protect a vital national asset for future generations.

Trustees have attended headline-making rallies protesting at inadequate funding and ANT is urging supporters to sign the petition at www.fundbritainwaterways.org.uk.

"Navigation authorities cannot be FBW members but we're encouraging other organisations to join more than 100 who have already signed up. The more the better," says ANT Company Secretary Adrian Main, who represented the Trust and spoke at the Gloucester Docks Rally.

"We fully support the campaign. Reduction in funding will inevitably lead to cost savings and reduced investment, resulting in potential closures and an impact on ANT income, a large part of which is generated from boats visiting from the national network."

Trustees Roger Clay and Michael Hodges gave supporting speeches at the Birmingham waterborne protest, as did Canal & River Trust (CRT) Chief Executive Richard Parry and former IWA Chair Les Etheridge, who heads FBW.

A third rally was planned on the Thames as we went to press and more will follow in the spring.

"Government needs to recognise that saying it values the inland waterways is not enough to prevent their decline," says Les Etheridge.

"Whilst we understand the financial pressures that everyone faces, the financial cuts are too deep, and adequate public funding needs to be allocated to maintain these national assets."

CRT is the largest of the organisations collectively responsible for Britain's 5,000 miles of navigable inland waterways.

In July 2023, Defra announced future funding for CRT, confirming fears of further funding cuts.

A groundswell of public support is crucial to influence government says FBW. "The nation is able to enjoy the inland waterways today because of the many millions of hours of volunteer time that went into saving them and continues to restore and maintain them," adds Les.

"We can't allow all this work to be lost as a result of the government failing to provide the small amount (in government terms) of funding required.

"David Hutchings MBE and Douglas Barwell OBE, leading lights in the Avon restoration, must be among those turning in their graves."



ANT's Roger Clay (pictured) and Michael Hodges (cameraman) joined the FBW waterborne demonstration at the Mailbox in Birmingham.

■ Encourage organisations to sign up to FBW on the website and let the group know by emailing membership@fundbritainwaterways.org.uk to ensure an invitation to join is sent.

Separately, CRT has been inviting people to email their MP to voice support for maintaining a safe and thriving canal network that provides benefits for many different people, as well as for the environment.

"So far just shy of 12,000 emails have been sent to over 600 MPs. This has been a tremendous show of support that helps put canal funding firmly onto the political agenda," says Chief Executive Richard Parry.

Add your voice to the KeepCanalsAlive campaign via www.canalrivertrust.org.uk.

Pollution watch

ANT, its Boaters and river communities have welcomed projects to monitor pollution along the Avon.

Local groups include Avonvale River Action Group (ARAG), whose members are already testing in Fladbury, Charlton and Cropthorne and feeding data into the Angling Society's Water Quality Monitoring Network national database.

Other groups are testing other stretches in response to nationwide alarm at sewage spills and agricultural pollution.

There were an average 825 sewage spills into England's waterways per day in 2022, according to government data.

ARAG, including ANT Squad Volunteers, is carrying out monthly sampling, and raising awareness. ANT also supported *BBC Midlands Today* filming for a report of their work last summer.

"Naturally we welcome anything that's good for our river and river users and will support in any way we can," says Chief Executive Clive Matthews.

"The more people we have happy to show support for clean rivers, the easier it will be to make a positive change," says Louise Bugg of www.avonvaleriver.org.

"Our river is such a brilliant resource and asset for all of us, and we should do everything we can to protect it."

She says Boaters and ANT supporters can help by joining the group, writing to their local MPs and councillors and spreading the word.



Battling against a floating menace

The Avon community has joined the near nationwide battle against invasive floating pennywort, which can grow 20cm a day in the summer at huge cost to the environment and waterways.

ANT, Volunteers, Boaters and businesses are helping tackle the now illegal ornamental pond weed that first hit UK waterways back in 2018 but only started appearing in the Avon relatively recently.

The Avon blight is thought to have come from a garden pond dumped somewhere near Eckington and the river is currently clear above the bridge. But ANT is keeping a watchful eye.

The country-wide issue is being addressed by local communities, including fishing clubs, in most regions, with input from nationwide groups including British Canoeing and Keep Britain Tidy.

On the Avon marinas and clubs have also been removing clumps and, after consultation with the Environment Agency (EA) on best practice, ANT deployed *Cammell* for four solid weeks to clear the navigation channel.

The Trust has also enlisted the support of Volunteer River Inspectors - Avon River

Activities Kim Bonk and paddleboard buddy Lynne Robinson - to flag up any new patches or growth spurts.

Tewkesbury Reachmaster and Volunteer Patrol Officer Will Fish similarly monitors his stretch. "It's awful stuff," he says.

The pernicious warm weather-loving weed *Hydrocotyle ranunculoides* will die out of water but is a nightmare in it, growing into thick floating islands that can swamp waterways, block water flow, crowd out native plants and sap oxygen.

"Barges and motorboats can push through it, but sailing boats, canoes and paddleboards struggle, and it can get into boat propellers," says ANT's Clive Matthews. "Clearly we will battle to keep the navigation channel clear but eradication of invasive species is not our remit and would cost huge amounts even if it were possible."

Like Japanese knotweed, floating pennywort can also grow from minuscule fragments, warns the EA, which means that even after severe winters and floods it can return.

"The plant has to be removed from the water by machinery, which is expensive and time consuming."

Another welcome blast from the past

The Trust is delighted to welcome back an erstwhile super fan, whose note on a recent ANT membership application caught our eye.

Why was he keen to join? "I owned two hotel narrowboats and was the first to cruise both the Upper and Lower Avon..."

It turns out that Desmond and Katie Fforde had a high old time running a two narrowboat hotel for three years before leaving to live on the land, and in Katie's case becoming a top selling author.

"We arrived in Stratford, on June 1, 1974, in time for the opening of the Upper Avon, and took on our first passengers," recalls the merchant seaman and marine surveyor who also helped set up the National Waterways Museum at Gloucester Docks.

"Our trip down the new navigation was punctuated by running aground on gravel banks, which the passengers enjoyed pushing us off, and we had help from the Bidwell family at Bidford, who ran a small hire fleet, and the Evesham Lock Keeper Jim Brittain, who lived in the new Nordic style cabin."

The couple, with Desmond steering and Katie catering, lived on one boat and carried eight passengers on the other.

"We sold the business after three years because my wife wanted a family and a house to put them in," smiles Desmond, whose water-steeped career began as a 17-year-old cadet, when he worked for the Blue Star shipping line.

They had a smallholding in Wales before moving to their current home in Stroud.

Katie, who's just received the Romantic Novelists' Association's Lifetime Achievement Award, produced her first book, best selling *Living Dangerously*, as a busy mum of three, and every one since has been a winner - including *Life Skills*, based on their Avon experiences.

They've enjoyed boats ever since and have a special fondness for the Avon, which they revisited recently on their Hardy 25 cruiser. "What amazed me, coming back all those years later, is that its beauty hasn't changed much, which is marvellous," says Desmond.

FOCUS



*Above: Brian Morgan today.
Right: as featured in a March 1988 Canal & Riverboat cutting.
Below: Ever-ready to help, here's one of many occasions, when Diana and Brian kept the work boats going through Pershore Lock during the 2017 island crisis.*



Fladbury Lock

Meet the Morgans - ANT's very special classic pair

Fladbury has always been writ large in Avon navigation history, not least because 'twas there that Williams Sandys lived when Charles I granted the Royal Charter that kicked it all off in 1636.

Fladbury was also the star of the remarkable Douglas Barwell OBE's almighty Final 600 Yards drive to complete the reopening of the Lower Avon navigation.

Best of all, it's long been the stomping ground of two of LANT and now ANT's most loyal supporters.

Reachmaster Brian Morgan and wife Diana, who also spearheaded the Sunday Lock Rota for years, took on one of the Avon's most scenic locks back in 1983 and happily added Craycombe Turn to their to-do list.

Brian got hooked when he started helping out at Chadbury, then cared for by Les Hodgkinson and Major Bill Andrews.

"They were very comical chaps who always had a crate of wine there and we got on like wildfire," Brian recalls.

"They asked why didn't we come on to the Trust and must have mentioned it to Dudley Matthews MBE because I got a call from him.... and that was it."

Brian and Diana became Dudley's one of the most popular go-to teams and went on to become just as big a support to his son, ANT Chief Executive Clive Matthews.

"Clive's been a breath of fresh air and is an excellent engineer. His dad would be so proud."

Diana and Brian are hands-on brilliant as well as loyal, kitting out their narrowboat *Kippin 3*, which arrived as a steel shell built by another Trust star, Roger Apperley, for starters.

They turned a nettle-choked Fladbury into a splendid beauty, which so often won LANT's Lock of the Year that they were persuaded to stop entering.

They did up the brick shed and added a concrete floor (and became hosts to some stonking get togethers).

The dynamic duo put up a fence to keep out the cattle and



sheep ("I was worried about them falling into the Lock"), finding an abandoned gate in some riverside undergrowth.

"In those days, asking for something as simple as a gate was like asking for the crown jewels," sighs Brian.

"We cleaned it up and I balanced it across my little pram dinghy and rowed it to the lock. It's still there."

The boundary trees they planted are now a towering 55ft and a couple of hundredweight of plums and damsons are harvested every year from the nearing 20ft high trees planted as saplings by a Bishop Cleeve vicar who brought his flock every Sunday for post service lock duty.

Over the years Brian and Diana have had heaps of fun and made many memories for countless people, as well as their own.

Headteacher daughter Mandy had her wedding celebrations and then her 50th party there and their granddaughter, now an architectural engineer in London, was christened in nearby Fladbury church.

Brian has just retired from the ANT council, after 36 years of making sure things happen. "I'm 86 and not keen on mobiles and computers. Give me a spade or a sledgehammer though..."

"But we're still volunteering. Fladbury has been part of our life for so long that it would be very, very hard to give it up altogether."

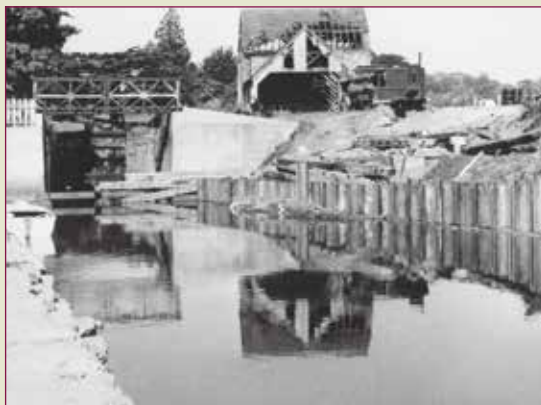
Perish the thought.

Fladbury's William Sandys used his private fortune, estimated at £20k-£40k, to buy the land and build the necessary Tewkesbury to Stratford navigation infrastructure.

George Perrott, who acquired the Lower Avon navigation in the 18th century, lived just upstream at Craycombe House.



1951. A Volunteer working party on upstream clearance before installing the stank



1961. New deflector wall with piles to support bank and landing stage.



1962. Betty Barwell did the ribbon cutting honours when navigation was declared open again between Tewkesbury and Evesham. The June jollities included a thanksgiving service at Pershore, lunch at Pershore Lock and a civic reception at Evesham.

Intrepid crew who were key to unlocking the Lower Avon

Douglas Barwell OBE and his intrepid team actually started work at a choked Fladbury Lock in 1951, but it wasn't until six years later that work began there in earnest.

In 1962 Fladbury was finally finished and the navigation reopened with a flourish, as Betty Barwell on *Avonia* led the festive flotilla and cut the ribbon strung across the river at Jubilee bridge.

Douglas was delighted that the Trust accorded that honour to his wife. "I would need to write a lengthy book should I intend to record all that Betty undertook on the Trust and my behalf," he praised in his diaries.

She had joined the Midlands' industrialist with their very young son Robin aboard *North Star*, on which they attempted to cruise the Avon in the summer of 1949.

"We enjoyed our fortnight's cruise despite the awful thought that a total lock failure might trap us on the river for a longer period."

Douglas was inspired to take up the baton to rescue the beleaguered river, despite the fact many had failed before him.

It would take 12 years of unrelenting effort, ingenuity and some £59k to breast that winning tape.

There had been many previous attempts, including an 1889-launched River Avon Improvement Association, an 1912 Avon Conservancy bid and a 1919 lobby of central government.

The Lower Avon Navigation Company was formed in 1924 and the navigation acquired, but revenue had by then become a trickle.

By 1949 the river, once a thriving hub with five mills recorded in the Domesday Book, was virtually closed to navigation.

And then along came Douglas.

The Trust shares contract was signed in January 1950.

In August, the Trust Vice-Chair, Sir Reg Kerr KBE, surveying Pershore to Evesham with his son, reported, among other things that Wyre Lock to Fladbury was extremely shallow and for a short distance he'd had to wade.

The press, excited by the industrialist's campaign, turned out to watch the October 1951 working party - of 11 men, a wife and several children armed with picks, shovels and homemade contraptions - begin attacking 15 years' worth of debris blocking Fladbury.

Douglas was diverted by arrangements for work starting at Chadbury in 1952 with support promised by the Royal Engineers.

They developed a plan to work upstream from Pershore, where the lock was deepened in 1955 before any further work at Fladbury.

The Barrow family, of Crophorne Mill, were alarmed by the state of the top gates at Fladbury Lock, which could compromise the reach to Chadbury if they failed.

They gave £250 to enable the Trust to undertake preventative work by installing a temporary dam to isolate the gates from the river.

The focus returned to Fladbury on June 21, 1957, when LANT announced the start of the final stage of its task to restore navigation to Evesham.

Civil engineers Thomas Vale and Sons, who had restored Wyre's Lock, offered to deepen Fladbury's.

It was another big job, which would include removing the derelict Crophorne watergate, plus the pier and old ford that pre-dated Jubilee bridge.

Meanwhile Douglas' usual bank of willing Volunteers had refurbished the old barn at Fladbury.

They repaired the roof and infilled the open end to provide daytime accommodation for Volunteer Lock operators.

The stage was set for the grand Lower Avon re-opening ceremony, which the press covered at large.

"It is estimated that some £300k would be needed to restore the Upper Avon to Stratford," reported one...



A thing of beauty. Fladbury Lock today.



Enterprising Douglas Barwell OBE was also a mighty marketer and the press loved the depths to which he would go to power his headline-making project... including all the way to the riverbed.

In 1951, the brave businessman learnt how to become a diver, neatly also avoiding the appeal-draining expense of employing one.

He donned a nose clip plus a shallow water suit with weighted body harness and boots.

A bottle of compressed air was linked to a 40' length of pressure hose, leading to a regulating valve strapped on his back.

The flexible hose from that went to the plate ending in the rubber gag in his mouth. Gulp.

"Betty was very apprehensive and not without good reason for I had no previous experience or even any training in underwater diving," he admitted in his diaries.

His first dive was on August 26 at Nafford Lock, where he also recovered 10 lock keys and a balance weight (above).

Douglas was awarded his OBE in 1970 and was elected Freeman of the Lower Avon, exempting him from any fees, dues or charges.

Our thanks to him, to his family, to his diaries (*The Founding of and Achievements of Lower Avon Navigation Trust 1950-1964*), fellow restorer DH Burlingham's book *To Maintain and Improve: the History of the Avon Navigation Trust*, and to all those who supported, and continue to support, our beautiful Avon.



Top teamwork meant some sheer brilliance

The towering heap of tree bits near to the HQ at Wyre Piddle is a neat image of the scale of the flotsam, jetsam... and often entire trees that choked the Avon in a whirl of worsening weather.

Flash floods, deluges, whatever you want to call them, they abounded, meaning we missed the Easter season launch for the first time in more than five years.

Despite working around the clock, we barely made it for the May 6 Coronation weekend thanks to yet another surge at the beginning of the month, and it was an almighty push to get the Avon looking its best for the Tewkesbury Big Weekend two weeks later.

As it was, although ANT Chairman Jack Hegarty was there

to help do the opening honours and Volunteer Paul Cronin was on usual fine form, Chief Executive Clive Matthews could only manage a dip into the festivities before going back to the work backlog.

It was always going to be tough, with Office Manager Adrian Main taken ill in January meaning Clive had to first major on the office and backroom maelstrom.

He joined the valiant Works Team, backed up by ever intrepid Volunteers, whenever he could and everyone was battling in the face of more headline making weather - starting with nine floods at the beginning of the year and capped by three named storms in October alone and then yet more floods.

"It is unusual to have them in October and what's more one was the biggest in eight years," Clive reports.

Meanwhile the job of tackling all the accumulated debris soaked up manpower pre season, and even after we welcomed our Boaters back, because ANT's usual tree shearing and clearing programme had been delayed. The team was still hard at it in June.

Now those trees...

"Where there used to be branches



ANT keeps a watching brief

ANT is making sure people are going in the right direction... and can see what's coming.

As well as the new commemorative plaque at Pershore (p33), the team has been adding clearer signage for Boaters approaching Strensham and Avon Locks, among others. Meanwhile there are three new River Watch cameras, at Bancroft, Pershore Bridge and King John's Bridge.



ANT AT WORK



ART attack

The ever-ready Avon Recovery Team did a grand job cleaning everything down and getting ready for the Lock teams' big spring spruce up. Often.

Just as they'd finished one round, along came another knockout punch of rain 'n' rising rivers and they had to do it all over again.

This year's top team (some caught on water cam at Tewkesbury Lock) included Brian Morgan, Jonathan Goode, Jack Hegarty, Mike Thompson, Will Fish, Adrian Bailey and Plamen Atanasov.



and an occasional rotten trunk, we're now getting much bigger trunks because successive flooding has undermined root balls," explains Clive.

This season a couple were temporarily trapped by a big fall near Bidford (see p5). A towering trunk created a big underwater hazard near Tewkesbury bridge.

"We were up the other end of the Avon and every time we set out to tackle the problem, the river came up again.

"Luckily we had the MVS and Reachmaster Will Fish to call on."

And that towering heap also represents a shed load of hours it takes to clear all flood debris.

Picture the team filling a whole barge, which hardly makes a dent in the detritus, shifting it to wherever it's going to be put to be dealt with later, unloading, sailing back and repeating, over and over again.

That Wyre Piddle heap represents a lot of trips.

ANT also had an extra load this year - four weeks clearing the navigation channel of floating pennywort (full story p21).

Still, the Team, whilst having to put some wish-list scheduled jobs on the back burner, managed to achieved a staggering amount.

Please read on.



Pulling a whole tree from the river at Tewkesbury.

Moor good news ahead

ANT is always looking to increase visiting moorings to share the joy and encourage people to return.

In fact the Trust has added an extra 25 berths over the last eight years and is always on the lookout for new openings.

Added in 2023 are those for Eagle One, at The Valley Evesham, which also made TV news thanks to the launch of the Blossom Trail Cruises (see p10).

Phase one of replacing Pershore's bottom moorings is complete (pictured, right). Eventually the facility will be extended all the way to the bottom of the Lock Island, which is about to get its very own visitor mooring.

ANT has designated one to give access to enjoy the lush Pershore Lock Island and its memorial trees, which grew from Volunteer Chris Knight's inspirational brainwave (see p33).

The Trust has also confirmed that the visitor berth at

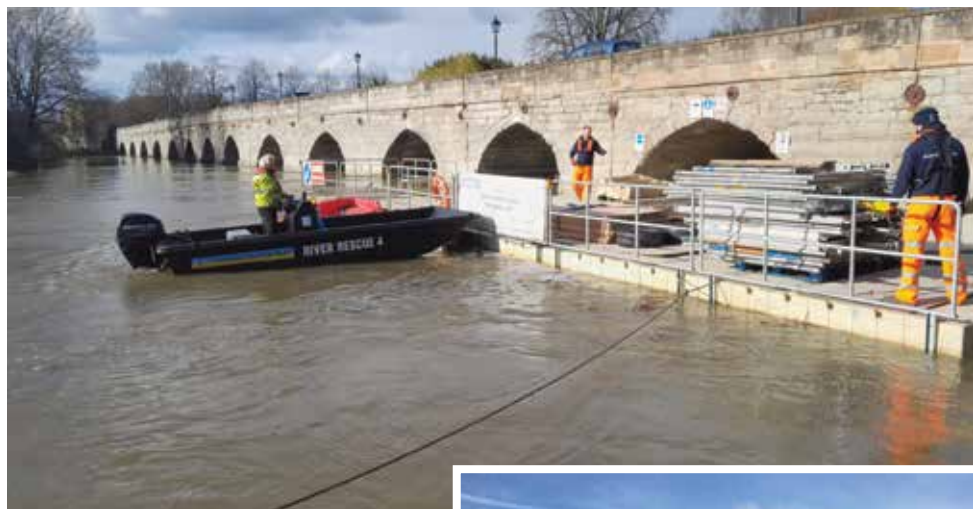


Birlingham Quay, at the Swan's Neck, will stay, following negotiations with the landowner.

"The farmer, who will be removing the old pump house, is planning a tree enclosure which will create a wonderful wildlife and woodland area, further enhancing the mooring," reports Clive.

Meanwhile, ANT has been working on the grounds around its property at Strensham.

"We are in negotiation with the Environment Agency to release some land so we can create a new canoe portage and another overnight mooring."



Ongoing support

The Works Team has been supporting Warwickshire County Council's ongoing projects at its historic bridges. The continuing refurbishment at Clopton involved boat cover supporting the erection and then dismantling of scaffolding, ongoing through winter (above). Binton began in November.

The Team was also in support for repairs at Eckington Bridge (right).



Nafford a top priority

Nafford Lock has been on ANT's major project list for some time, but has shifted to top to-do.

Daisy the drone has already identified that the cills are worn, but there's now a gate pintol failure.

The question is when to launch into such a major project, which is likely to be one of the biggest yet.

Usually the team would fire up a Lock dewater over winter, but recent flood frequency could make that a costly decision.

"Once a Lock is dewatered and the pumps are activated, you're haemorrhaging money, thousands of pounds a week, keeping water out," Clive points out.

"If that's wiped out by a flood, you have to start all over again."

Thought to be one of the weakest structures on the river, Nafford's repairs will embrace the cills, gates, paddles and chamber.

Workers and material can't be driven to it and so everything has to come and go by water.

One option will be to split the project into two halves.

In the meantime ANT spent weeks repairing the swing bridge over the Lock for Worcestershire Council (pictured), and has also refurbished the Lock hut and handrails.

Meanwhile on the winter list are numerous paddle and gate repairs.

ANT AT WORK



Like a duck to water...

After all the flood pictures, how nice to share this gentle one, courtesy of Avon Lock Reachmaster Will Fish, always an avid photographer but unstoppable now he has a drone!

Boaters aren't the only Avon Lock fans, holidaymakers are getting enchanted too.

"This is the first full year the cottages have been hired out and it has been lovely to meet

the tourists who are always saying how lucky we are to live here. It makes me look at it with fresh eyes too," says Will.

As well as his Lock and Volunteer Patrol Officer duties, Will has been doing more of his inimitable three-way depth testing for the Work Team in response to a mooring query.

He also worked with ANT to remove that tricky flood-deposited tree.



Done, dusted and to do

Major works in five years up to the pandemic

Rebuilt Luddington Weir.
Built Twynning Visitor Mooring.
Rebuilt Pershore Bullnose, Mooring and Island.
Rebuilt Marcliff Weir.
Built Pershore Angel Visitor Mooring.
Tewkesbury Lock dewatered and refurbished.
Strensham Lock dewatered and refurbished.
Evesham Lock dewatered and refurbished.
New Avon Lock Control Panel.

Major works in 2022

Luddington dewater and refurbishment
New Visitor Mooring at The Valley, Evesham.
Tewkesbury Lock site above water.

On the major works to-do list

Pershore Lock Bottom Mooring rebuild (part complete 2023).
Nafford Lock dewater and refurbishment.
Harvington Lock dewater and gate refurbishment.
Wyre Lock dewater and refurbishment
Offenham and Marcliff Weir barriers.

AVON VIEW MARINA



Available for Marina Services Narrow Boat Hire & Cottage Holidays

Avon View Marina is situated on the beautiful and scenic River Avon in Pershore, a quiet secluded stretch just over a few days cruise away from Stratford-Upon-Avon.

All Marina services available including boat storage, moorings, brokerage services, boat maintenance, fuelling, and much more.

Boats are pet friendly.

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Boat Trips - Evesham

ANT Trip Boat CORSAIR works hard for the charity, raising funds, visiting events, promotions, charters, and getting people onto the river. In the summer months Corsair is based at Evesham Abbey Park where it offers regular boat trips for the public. Linked to the 'Lock House Project' and run by volunteers, Corsair is helping to bring boating back to Evesham.

Check out the website for details:
www.avonnavigationtrust.org/evesham-boating/

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In 2023 105
Volunteers gifted
a total of 4,804
hours, worth
an invaluable
£80,803

ANT plans a big Volunteer 2024 recruitment drive to swell numbers after last year's plans had to be shelved whilst it was all hands to the deck for the depleted office team. Even so the Trust managed to increase the running total - from 95 in 2022 to 105... luckily, since it was another very busy Volunteering year, as our Support Team reports here.

You are our shining stars

The headline news, other than many Volunteer successes led by the ever growing ANT Squad, is that our supporters have a new person at the helm.

Chairman Jack Hegarty is delighted to head the team that welcomed him so warmly from day one and which he now happily works alongside, on the Avon Recovery Team (ART), lock keeping and lots more.

He moves in after the retirement of Volunteer & Youth Development Director James Jarvis, who's left the area, but steered us well through the first year of the new-style system and training.

Volunteers now have a direct route to Council and Jack was very pleased to be in place at the milestone 400th meeting and the annual dinner.

Losing Adrian for months obviously meant we had to rein

in many plans (*Signal* will be back next year, I promise).

But it's heartening to look back and see how much we did achieve. And that's despite the weather challenges too. Huge thanks to the ART team, who had to go out twice pre season, and to Reachmasters and supporters who were similarly bogged under but unsinkable.

MVT achieved a huge amount (see Jonathan's report), as did the ANT Squad. They will be joining together for the Next Big Thing: the exciting internal fitout of the Evesham Lock House as a Volunteer base.

We have new transport - Mobile Support Vehicles - *Jubilant's* been relaunched and *Dudley Matthews* is back.

We also have new, Volunteer run, fund-raising trip boat *Corsair* and a new festival queen - the River Avon Welcome Centre was a hit at them all, thanks to Volunteers doggedly moving her all over the place.

We have every Lock covered, but there will be some changes next year. Longstanding and very valued Volunteer and Strensham Reachmaster Chris Knight is taking a break, although we really hope he'll be back soon.

The Avon wouldn't be the same without Chris, who has given so much in so many ways - not least a Pershore Lock Island oasis.

Strensham will be taken over by Paul and Margaret Cronin, whizzing them back to where they started on the river.

Also on the move is dear dedicated Brian Morgan, who has resigned as a Trustee but stays, thank goodness, as Fladbury Reachmaster and valiant Volunteer with Diana.

It's the end of an era, as they were recruited by my dad, but the future is always bright when Volunteers are concerned.

CLIVE MATTHEWS, Volunteers Operations.



Popular new Volunteer-run tripboat *Corsair* charts included a fun-filled fancy dress birthday bash on *Talk Like a Pirate Day*. "We've already booked her for more of the same next year," says Fiona Hartley.

Crowds turn out for all festivals

How grand it was to have RAWC available for our festivals.

The weather rained on Pershore's parade, but Tewkesbury and Evesham were brimming brilliant.

Evesham's, the first since 2019, attracted crowds of well wishers and plans are already in place for July 13, 2024.

The sun shone for Tewkesbury's Big Weekend, which again attracted a 30-strong boat parade and so many would-be performers for the riverside stage that they ran out of time slots.

Next year will be even better for sure. "It marks our first decade," reports Paul Cronin who confirms the date as May 18 and 19, with a pirates theme

for Boaters.

Pershore's date for your diary is July 20 and Michael Hodges promises lots of extra events, with plans including bell boatings and choirs a-plenty.

The theme will be *River of Dreams*. "We're hoping that's more auspicious, weather-wise, than 2023's gales-beset *Wind of the Willows!*"



Tewkesbury Town Mayor Cllr Chris Danter did the honours to launch the Big Weekend, watched by Jack Hegarty and Paul Cronin.

Marking a tremendous scheme

ANT has erected a special plaque celebrating a tree planting scheme that helped create a wildlife haven that's also a glorious memorial to loved ones.... and even more will be able to enjoy the view.

The Trust is to designate Pershore Lock Island's mooring as a Visitor mooring, another welcome boost to that tally, which has been increased by some 25 visitor mooring berths over the last eight years.

The island was transformed in the 2018 project sparked off by major repair work and boosted mightily by Volunteer, and RHS-trained gardener, Chris Knight's bright big birthday idea.

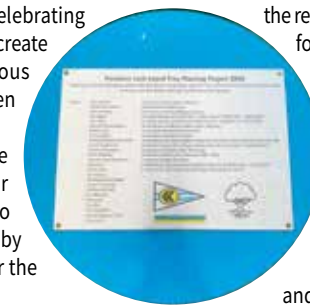
Chris, who helped out at Pershore, asked for tree donations rather than gifts for his 70th and then widened

the reach to anyone who wanted to Name a Tree for a loved one.

More than 30 trees were planted including a Pershore Emblem plum put in by Chris and BBC *Countryfile's* Matt Baker during the TV special on the project. "I'm delighted it had such a rich response," says Chris who added countless spring bulbs and 120 shrubs. The commemorative plaque thanks him and all the tree sponsors.

"It was a brilliant idea that turned a completely barren island into a verdant haven and crucial stop off point for pollinators in the Avon corridor," says Reachmaster and Trustee Michael Hodges.

"What's more, the plums are delicious and increasingly plentiful."





Ensuring always lovely Locks

All hail ART (Avon Recovery Group), Reachmasters and all Volunteers who welcomed Boaters back with the most splendid vistas.

Every one of our Locks looked lovely, tidy and welcoming, transformed from the flood-defaced mud baths they'd just been.

They include Strensham (pictured), which always looks sensational thanks to gardening, and making people smile, expert Chris Knight, who's hanging up his lock hut key for now.

Chris, who first came on the Avon on a family picnic aged eight, is a Volunteer extraordinaire, having been an active MVT, SWEEP supporter and Pershore Lock Island Project Name a Tree mastermind.

He adores Strensham, which he took over from the late Nick Farr and festooned with climbing roses and heaven scent planting, but admits he needs a break.

"I'm 76 and my knees are done for," says Chris, who plans a recuperative spell on the Norfolk Boards but has no intention of leaving Strensham or the Avon for ever.

"I just want a bit of a change for a while, but I'll miss them. "The Lock is the most beautiful spot, with the best views



of Bredon. I still want my ashes scattered there!"

Following, a bit worriedly, in his landscaped footsteps will be Paul and Margaret Cronin, who began Avon life there.

"Chris has got it in such amazing shape and we'll do our best to keep it up to his standards. But he's a hard act to follow," says Paul, who moves on from Nafford and Comberton Quay.

"When we came in 1995, I'd help out with the Sunday car boots at Stensham, run by lovely Ray Chip.

"He was the one who persuaded me to volunteer," adds Paul, whose first foray was strimming at Comberton.

Strensham was Paul and Margaret's first Volunteer Sunday Lock duty.

"It was a boiling hot day in June and we locked 127 boats through. We were absolutely shattered.

"It will be nice to be back where we started."

Our ANT Squad superstars

ANT Squad has a very special event planned for older Volunteer colleagues.

River trips, knot tying displays and all sorts will showcase what they've learnt on a 2024 date to be announced..

The breadth of their knowledge is amazing and there's apparently no stopping them.

They also love meeting visiting groups - like the Worcestershire Parents and Carers Group - and spreading their love of the river and all things Avon.

They have laid the ground for ANT Squad generations to come too. Each member has a special skill, usually many.

Everyone has learnt about Locks, river history and have mastered many more knots than we average Boaters know.

Powerboat training has been core, using the 4.7m Avon Searider *Kingfisher*.

They have been trained as *Corsair* helms and will be able to help with the boat trips in the future.

They have all taken a bit of river life into other aspects

of their lives, which will also help them with their future volunteering.

Tom W and Kia have trained through their watersports coaching qualifications and Tom his FRST rescue course, Paddlesport instructor Level 1 and Paddleboard Coach level 3. Zak has his RYA inland waterways helms certificate and Outdoor emergency First Aid. Josh has achieved level 3 first aid at work certificate and Tom has just qualified as a commercial diver.

Sam F is in his second year motor mechanics and already showing skills and interest in marine engineering. Tia and Maia have been leads on environmental aspects and litter picks. Grace is our knots and tides expert while Harry is the most skilled at driving the Trust boats.

We are all so proud of our young Volunteers. With the Lock House coming on line for 2024, there is so much potential for the future.

ALEX MELLOR

Team effort is just magic

Behind most of the big Avon launches is the Mobile Volunteer Team, led by Jonathan Goode.

New trip boat *Corsair* making her debut on The Valley's Blossom Cruises?

She'd been primed and primed by MVT, with Mike Thompson, Reachmaster at Chadbury with his wife Kim, adding the sound system. "He's a very clever guy," says Jonathan.

"It was pretty straightforward," says modest Mike, who joined the Volunteering team during Covid after retiring as an electrical engineer.

"We really enjoy our Avon time," add the owners of narrowboat *Ruffian*, who also help out at Avon Lock.

Jonathan and Adrian Bailey worked their magic on *Princess Marina*, on loan from Bancroft Cruisers as another ANT trip boat.

New VPO patrol boat *Sharasun* and ANT Squad RIB *Kingfisher* also look stunning, freshly painted with smart Trust branding.

A whole host of people - including, as usual, Brian and Diana Morgan - have spent a great deal of time moving boats... and more.

Tewkesbury-stationed RAWC went to Evesham and Pershore river festivals and then back to her home town.

Corsair shifted to Wyre Piddle for the King's Coronation celebration trips (thanks again, Mike and Kim Thompson) and then to Evesham and Pershore for festival fun.

Even more people got involved for the transporting of floating barriers from Eckington to Binton bridge work, which is just as hard as it sounds. Take a bow Adrian Bailey, Mike and Kim Thompson and new Volunteers Nick Fowler and Trevor Bridges.



"It's a tricky job to keep them in a line and you have to go very slowly indeed," explains Jonathan.

Ongoing have been repairs to Comberton Quay and Pershore moorings, with Adrian Bailey and newby Trevor Bridges.

"It's great to have boats capable of big jobs at both ends of the river," says Jonathan. "It takes an hour to motor the distance, but three days on a boat, which is lovely if you're meandering, but not if you're in a rush to get to work."

Another winter warmer will be starting work on Evesham Lock House, which is being repurposed as the Volunteer training centre.

Jonathan is keeping the designs top secret. "But I think you will be impressed," he tempts.

Who's who

The Volunteers Support Team is:
Led by Jack Hegarty; with Operations shepherded by Clive Matthews.

Alex Mellor leads on Volunteer Training & Portal Support; Daisy Wood provides Volunteer Administration Support and Plamen Atanasov Engineering Support.

Jonathan Goode is Volunteer Team Leader (MVT) and Training Support.

There is a volunteer dedicated 24/7 phone number and email address.

The website has a volunteer portal link that covers recruitment, online training, volunteer job roles and a direct personal messaging system.



The much valued Tewkesbury-based Severn Unit Maritime Volunteer Service (MVS), led by Head of Unit (HoU) Nic Price, supplies stupendous support for ANT and all Avon people. As Sue Price's diary shows, it has been another very busy year.



Festivals flourish

MVS was out in force for Evesham's crowd-pulling Battle Festival weekend in August.

The team took three cruisers plus the Rigiflex through six locks on a seven hour trip to provide safety cover.

Back in May, the Tewkesbury Big Weekend featured the return of MVS' Colvic cruiser *Pirata*, back after several years of careful restorative work by unit members.

She joined *Minerva* and their Rigiflex dinghy *Severn 1* on MVS' many varied roles, including the important tasks of being safety boats for the whole weekend, running the duck race and helping their water display team.

Award-winning rescue



The MVS rushed to the rescue numerous times in repeated floods and one emergency SOS turned into an award winner and a fabulous first.

Cox'n Will Fish, Sue Price and John Huckvale rushed out on a bleak 2022 winter's day to the aid of stricken 54' narrowboat *Endurance* and her even more stricken new owners, marooned just south of Strensham Lock on anchor.

"Due to the flood water pouring over the weirs, it was too dangerous to tow her up to Strensham Lock," reports Sue.

Instead they took her to Tewkesbury Marina with John, on his first rescue, helming the barge and Will skilfully steering

Minerva alongside.

Will's superb work earned him the coveted annual Seamanship Award at Trafalgar Night.

Bad weather call outs continued in the New Year with an ANT request to secure a widebeam in danger of breaking free at Avon Lock.

HoU Nic Price, David Wilson and Reachmaster Will Fish squeezed under King John's Bridge in the Rigiflex workboat to make her fast.

Peter Dallow swapped places with David later that month to add extra mooring ropes to ANT's RAWC in high waters, checking on other boats on their way.

Debris clear-up champs

MVS sprung into spring action when ANT's workboats were busy upriver and King John's Bridge was rammed with flood debris.

"There were tons of logs, trees and other flood debris but, after great difficulty and several hours, Chris Adcock, Guy Brady and Will Fish cleared it all away and laid buoys to mark underwater obstructions caused by a huge tree," praises HoU Nic Price.

"Thank goodness for MVS. Every time we set out to clear, the river flooded again," adds grateful ANT Chief Executive Clive Matthews.



Guy Brady and Chris Adcock clearing debris from the bridge. Picture: Will Fish



Training puts Unit on course for success

MVS' constant training included the much-anticipated cruise down the Severn and Bristol Channel.

The week-long event gives members the chance to practice boat handling and pilotage skills, taking several boats from Sharpness to Portishead and Bristol, plus fetching a two masted motor sail boat from Cardiff.

"We were also pleased to meet up with members of Bristol Unit at Portishead, where our Water Display Team demonstrated to

marina staff how they use the rescue cradle," says Head of Unit Nic Price.

MVS members achieved both their Power Boat 2 and Short Range VHF Radio certificates at the Bristol Maritime Academy.

Meanwhile Deputy Head of Unit Russ Davidson was the course tutor at two special training evenings (above) when he took the Unit through the syllabus for DEFRA Flood Rescue Concept of Operations Module 1 and Water Awareness. Twelve members of Severn Unit MVS have also passed their RYA First Aid Course, delivered by Sue Baker from the Nene Unit.

"It was an excellent course, covering a wide range of subjects ranging from CPR to dealing with sea sickness and hypothermia to bandaging wounds," explains Nic.



Looking ahead

Looking ahead to next season, Nic and Sue's Deck Officer McTavish, the Scottish Terrier, and MVS member, at the heart of just about every adventure.



Trafalgar Day - and a little extra

Floods and bad weather continued to dog the year but at least the MVS team were out of their Trafalgar Day best bib and tucker - just - when they got their next call... to evacuate resident Boaters in Tewkesbury.

"We just knew something would happen but glad it wasn't on the actual night of the dinner," smiles Sue who reports that the couple, and dog, returned to their boat when the river levels dropped.

The sparkling Trafalgar Day event, at Brown's Restaurant at Tewkesbury Garden Centre, was another winner.

"We were delighted to welcome Tewkesbury Town Mayor, Cllr Chris Danter, her husband Rob and RVO Bristol Channel Region Gordon McDonald as our principal guests and thank Simon Brady for proposing the toast," says Nic Price, pictured second left with them, plus MVS Deputy Head of Unit Russ Davidson and Unit Secretary Jane Thomas.

Plaque to celebrate special Pat

PAT JOHNSON 1929-2023

Pat Johnson began her boating days on honeymoon in 1954. Now a memorial plaque will celebrate her and late husband Guy at one of their most favourite spots on the Avon.

Pat had made a generous donation to rebuild the Harvington visitor mooring and added a bench in memory of Guy, lost in 2008.

They'd enjoyed many happy times afloat, becoming involved in the restoration of Stratford-upon-Avon Canal. Their roles had included Chair of the Society, a post Pat held until she died.

They also loved the Avon. In May 1974, with the Upper Avon Royal opening ceremony already scheduled, they visited the final Lock to be built.

David Hutchings MBE shouted: "Come down!" So they happily spent the day spreading concrete on the floor on what was to become Weir Brake Lock.

On the same day Pat bought the picture her favourite



canal artist was working on. John Neill's painting (above) hung in her house all her life.

Up until 2015 Pat was still taking their narrowboat *Guppy* from Stratford to Pershore.

The longtime ANT member also became a marvel at self sufficiency, thanks to solar energy. She'd spend hours on her tapestry work, making beautiful cushions reflecting nature she saw.

Both sons inherited a love for boating. Clive's Chair of the Wendover Canal Trust and Brian is Chair of the Society of Maritime Industries.

Pat asked for funeral donations to be made to ANT. "We hope you all enjoy every moment of cruising on this special waterway," say her sons.

Much-loved Avon man

NIGEL PREECE 1942-2023

The 1993 recession had one good impact - it bought Nigel Preece to Tewkesbury as Avon Lock Keeper.

He and wife June immediately settled in for an extremely enjoyable 13 years.

Hugely popular, Nigel made many friends there after moving from Ross-on-Wye, where he had a furniture, carpet and bedding emporium.

Nigel and June, married 58 years in April, were working in a Cardiff department store when they met.

They went on to have four children - Roxana, Alexis, Luan, and Dorrien - and seven grandchildren.

Avon life was perfect. They loved living by the river and owned a cruiser, so spent their downtime on it too.

Nigel, supremely organised with a brilliant sense of humour, was a perfect Lock Keeper.

"I'm surprised he got away with some of it," says June.

"When Boaters took a while getting into the Lock, he'd say 'I was clean-shaven when you started'"

Severn Unit MVS Head Nic Price, who gave a eulogy at the packed funeral service, also referenced his good friend's humour. "Many have enjoyed his friendly welcome," he says. "He was unique."

ANT Volunteer Paul Cronin salutes his pal too: "He was one of the Avon characters that you couldn't do anything but love."

A keen gardener, Nigel always kept the lock pristine, with beautiful flowers and a bountiful veg patch.

After leaving, their new home overlooked the marina, where Nigel could still keep his eye on the boating traffic.

"He loved his boats and he loved being Lock Keeper. He took to it like a duck to water."



STOP PRESS

We also mourn the passing of Mark Cottrell, Managing Director of Tewkesbury Marina. A full obituary will follow.

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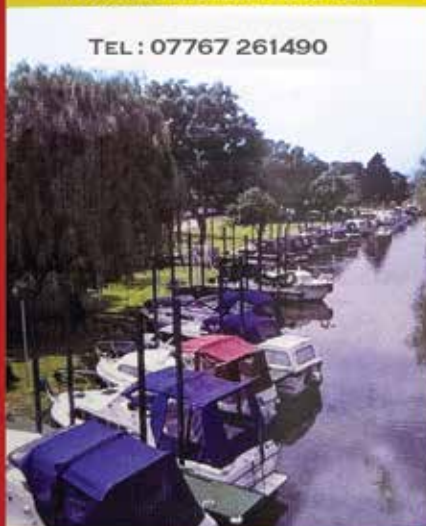
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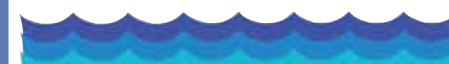
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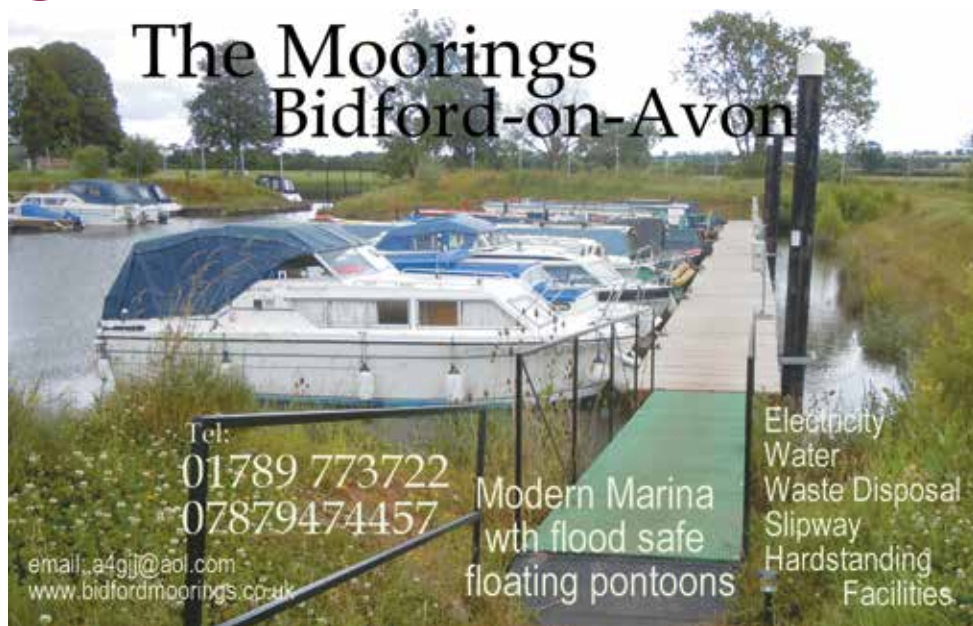
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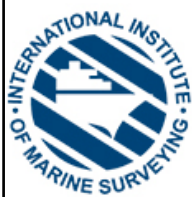
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