

The Wheelyboat Trust

Helping disabled people access canals and rivers throughout the UK

The news item in the November/December issue of The Bulletin that highlighted the difficulties of access on and around Britain's canal network is a reminder that much still needs to be done in order for disabled people to participate in everyday activities that everyone else simply takes for granted.



As a wheelchair user resulting from a spinal injury and a keen angler, I have first-hand experience of the limitations that being disabled creates around our waterways. As Director of The Wheelyboat Trust, however, I am also well aware of the hard work and effort that organisations like ours are putting into creating access and opportunities on lakes, canals, rivers and inshore waters all over the UK.

The Wheelyboat Trust is a small national charity dedicated to providing mobility impaired people of all ages with access to

waterborne activities in specially designed wheelchair accessible Wheelyboats. We have been operating for over 30 years and so far we have supplied 170 Wheelyboats to projects on a wide variety of waters. Since the launch of our latest Wheelyboat model, the Coulam Wheelyboat V20, in 2014, we have never been busier and the future for the Trust and mobility impaired people who benefit from our work is looking very rosy.

Wheelyboats are open powered day-boats. The two most popular models, the Mk III and the new V20, have a bow door that lowers

to form a ramp for roll-on, roll-off access. On board, the floor is level with access to all corners of the boat and, very importantly, the helm; all Wheelyboats can be driven from a wheelchair. The Wheelyboat Trust does not operate Wheelyboats ourselves, instead our role is to design, build, supply and fund the provision of Wheelyboats. We work with groups and organisations to help them acquire a Wheelyboat so they can provide the service to their visitors, members, beneficiaries, etc. Most Wheelyboats are available for the general public to use.



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Wheelyboats were originally designed to help disabled anglers, but for the last ten years or so we have been expanding the range of models and the majority of Wheelyboat projects taking shape now are for multi-purpose use – pleasure boating, nature watching, powerboating, etc. Last year we supplied a Mk III Wheelyboat to the Overwater Wheelyboat Project, a newly formed group on the Shropshire Canal in Cheshire. ‘The Maughan Lass’ was launched in June and is a free service to people with mobility difficulties. The project is closely associated

with trip boat ‘The Audlem Lass’ that carries 4,000 passengers annually but has no disabled access. Her founder, Rodney Cottrell, has long seen the need to operate a Wheelyboat alongside her. This year with our help, Rodney’s plans came to fruition and since her launch The Maughan Lass has taken over 300 disabled people out on scheduled and bespoke trips.

The first V20 Wheelyboat was launched at Bisham Abbey Sailing School on the River Thames near Marlow.

The sailing school works with a local charity called the Rivertime Boat Trust to provide Special Educational Needs schools with adventurous boating activities on the river and the V20 means that children who are less independent don’t miss out on the fun. They have also set up the Accessible Boat Club. The V20 is the first powered boat operating on the Thames in which wheelchair users are trained as powerboat operators enabling them to use it independently. As members of the club they can organise their own trips and take out friends and families on the river.

Another group, the Tees Wheelyboats Club, was set up specifically to operate a Mk III Wheelyboat on the River Tees at Stockton. They identified a significant lack of provision for disabled people to enjoy the river and set about addressing that need. They have been operating their Wheelyboat for public benefit successfully now since 2011.

A Mk III Wheelyboat has been operating at Maunsel Lock Canal Centre on the Bridgwater & Taunton Canal in Somerset since 2012. It was one of four Wheelyboats supplied in a joint-venture with Countryside Mobility. One of the others operates at Wareham Boat Hire on the River Frome. When the Somerset Levels suffered serious flooding two winters ago, Maunsel Lock’s Wheelyboat spent several weeks providing humanitarian relief to the cut-off villagers of Muchelney. Last year Somerset County Council purchased a Mk III on permanent standby should flooding occur again.

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At all other times the Wheelyboat will operate from the canal centre alongside the existing Wheelyboat and will be run and maintained by a group on behalf of the community, where it will benefit local and visiting disabled people.

Wheelyboats are not the only solution for getting disabled people on and around inland waterways. They are day-boats designed for short trips and have no sleeping quarters so you can't stay on them overnight. They are open to the elements, but a bimini cover provides a surprising amount of protection when it's raining or in bright sunshine. They provide access only to the water, not the towpath, tea rooms or other visitor attractions. Where they do operate though they provide a hugely beneficial service and are a popular resource providing people with the severest of disabilities hassle-free access to trips on the water and even the opportunity to drive the boat themselves. While they are designed to accommodate wheelchair users, people who find getting around difficult for whatever reason benefit from their roll-on,

roll-off access and very stable ride. They are a truly multi-purpose craft, especially the new V20 which has great looks and true powerboat performance. An encounter with a wheelchair-using teenage girl at a canal festival one year sticks in the mind. It was a sunny day with a light breeze and we were having a gentle meander down the canal. Asked if she ever went out on the accessible narrow boat that operated there, she replied that she did but compared to the Wheelyboat, which she much preferred, it was like sitting in a bus!

We work with a wide range of groups and organisations, charitable or commercial, that all have in common an enthusiasm to get disabled people involved in waterborne activities alongside and on equal terms with everybody else. As guardians of 2,000 miles of inland waterways in England and Wales, the Canal & River Trust in particular has a responsibility to ensure that disabled people have equality of opportunity throughout the network alongside as well as on the water.

The Wheelyboat Trust is currently in discussion with the Canal & River Trust about working in partnership together to achieve these objectives. In the meantime, we continue to be very busy with projects helping organisations to ensure that boating and watersports provision become truly inclusive on the UK's lakes, canals, rivers and inshore waters.

- If you would like to use a Wheelyboat, visit the website to view and download a list of all the Wheelyboats operating in the UK and Ireland.
- If there is a suitable venue near you that should have a Wheelyboat but doesn't, let the Trust know and we will help them acquire one.
- If you're part of a group that would like to operate a Wheelyboat yourselves, contact us. If the Wheelyboat will benefit a group of disabled people or has a public role, then the Trust will be able to help raise funds towards it and will visit with a Wheelyboat for a demonstration.
- The Wheelyboat Trust is funded entirely by donations - so if you would like to support you can donate via its online giving page on the charity website or telephone the Director who will send you a Gift Aid form.