



**INLAND  
WATERWAYS**  
ASSOCIATION



**SOMERSET & MID  
DEVON WATERWAYS**  
*50 Years of Progress*



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## ABOUT IWA

The Inland Waterways Association is the only independent, national charity dedicated to supporting and regenerating Britain's navigable rivers and canals as places for leisure, living and business. IWA has a network of volunteers and branches who deploy their expertise and knowledge to work constructively with navigation authorities, national and local government and a wide range of voluntary, private and public sector organisations for the benefit of the waterways and their users. The Association provides practical and technical support to restoration projects through its Restoration Hub and Waterway Recovery Group.

### IWA Corporate Members in Somerset & Mid Devon



Somerset Boat Centre

# INTRODUCTION

Welcome to this celebration of the remarkable achievements made in regenerating Somerset and Mid Devon's waterways since the early 1970s. Many thousands of local residents and visitors, along with local businesses, are now benefitting as more and more miles of waterway and adjoining paths have been brought back into use.

The period leading up to the 1970s saw a gradual decline in commercial boating activities on these waterways, culminating in the closure of Bridgwater Docks to shipping in 1971. At that time leisure activities on UK waterways were still in their infancy.

## ACHIEVEMENTS

The past 50 years have seen the reopening of several waterways to navigation; towpaths and riverside paths opened up for walking and cycling; car parks and bridges built; trip boats, hire craft and cafés introduced; also community and environmental initiatives established.

Canoeing, kayaking and rowing on the waterways have increased and more recently paddle boarding and wild swimming have grown in popularity. More people are now using the towpaths and riverside paths for cycling and walking.

This booklet sets out to document the achievements over the past 50 years. It principally covers the River Parrett and its tributaries, the Bridgwater & Taunton Canal

and the Grand Western Canal, all of which today play an important part in the lives of local residents and of visitors to the area.

## SUPPORT

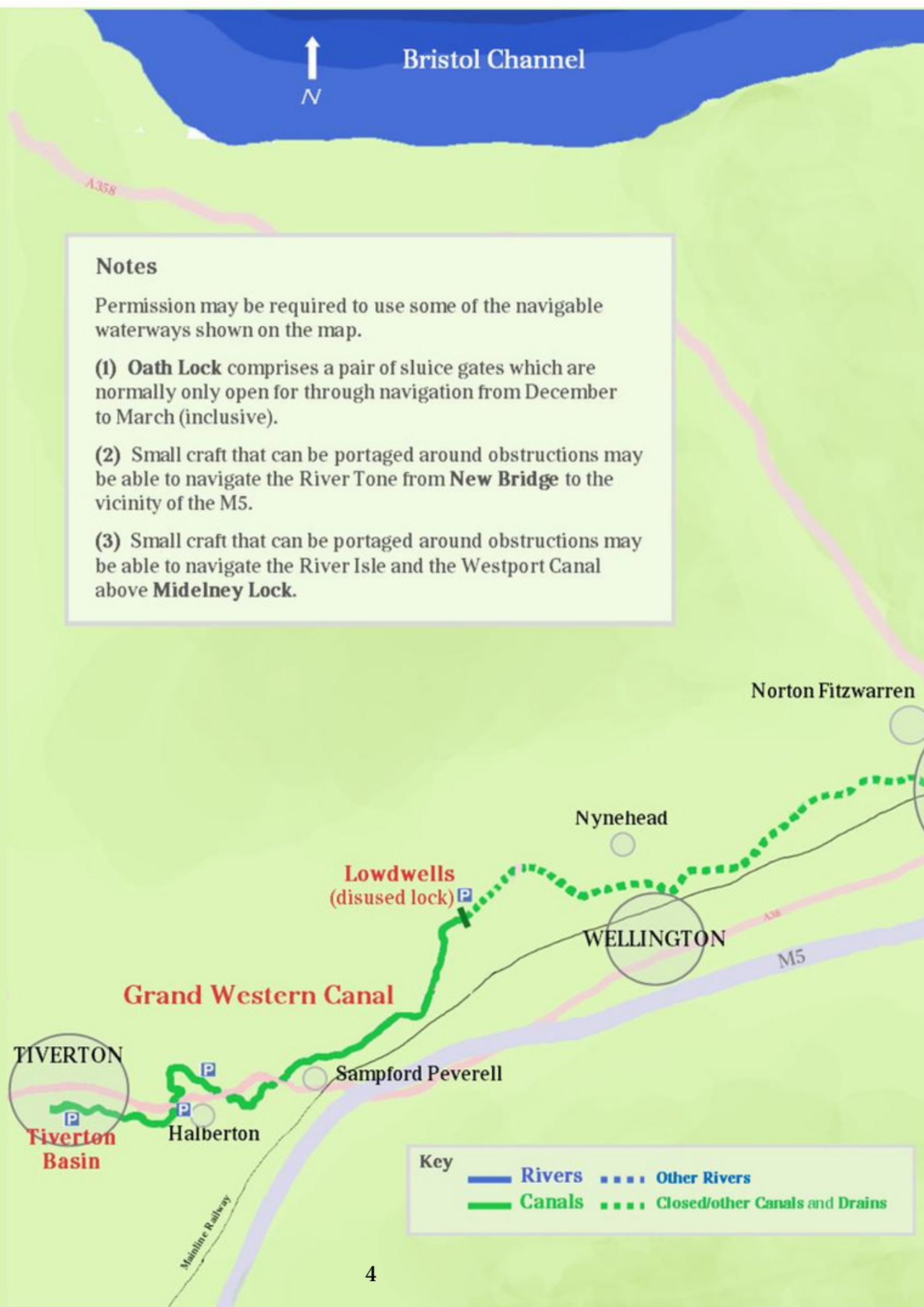
Much of this progress would not have been achieved without the support of the local authorities and British Waterways (now Canal & River Trust), along with Government grants, European funding and contributions from many other organisations, not forgetting the significant and continuing contributions by volunteers and private investors.

The Inland Waterways Association (IWA) is proud to have played its part in the regeneration of the waterways in Somerset and Mid Devon, not only through its West Country Branch and its work party volunteers but also through its specialist advisers and Waterway Recovery Group.

IWA believes that transforming canals and rivers provides important opportunities to revitalise local economies, improve people's lives, benefit the environment and mitigate the impacts of climate change. Our comprehensive report, *Waterways for Today*, examines this in detail and is available on our website: [www.waterways.org.uk](http://www.waterways.org.uk) The Somerset and Mid Devon story is a prime example of just what can be achieved.

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February 2024  
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# SOMERSET & MID DEVON WATERWAYS





# WAYS MAP



# TIMELINE OF EVENTS

## 1971 – GRAND WESTERN CANAL

Ownership of Barge Canal section from Lowdwells to Tiverton Basin (10.8 miles) transferred from British Waterways to Devon County Council, which undertook to restore the canal and create a linear country park, subsequently achieved.

## 1972 – SOWY RIVER

7.5 mile bypass channel opened from Monks Leaze Clyse on the River Parrett (no navigable connection) to King's Sedgemoor Drain.



## 1973 – BRIDGWATER DOCKS

Bridgwater Docks including the Bascule Bridge awarded a Grade II listing.



## 1974 – BRIDGWATER DOCKS

Freehold of Bridgwater Docks transferred from British Railways to Somerset County Council.

## 1974 – INLAND WATERWAYS ASSOCIATION

IWA West Country Branch formed.

[www.waterways.org.uk/waterways/branches/iwa-west-country-branch](http://www.waterways.org.uk/waterways/branches/iwa-west-country-branch)



## 1974 – GRAND WESTERN CANAL

Barge Canal section from Lowdwells to Tiverton Basin reopened to navigation following an extensive restoration programme. Horse-drawn barge “Tivertonian” and small boat hire commenced from Tiverton Basin.

[www.tivertoncanal.co.uk](http://www.tivertoncanal.co.uk)



### **1978 – WESTPORT CANAL**

2-mile canal dredged by Wessex Water, IWA and others. Navigable by small craft that can be portaged around obstructions.

### **1984 – BRIDGWATER DOCKS AND BASCULE BRIDGE**

New lock gates fitted, apart from the outer gates of the Ship Lock. Basculer Bridge restored to full use. All now in need of replacement/restoration.

### **1987 – BRIDGWATER & TAUNTON CANAL**

New car parks and picnic sites opened at Maunsel Lower Lock and Bathpool.

### **1988 – GRAND WESTERN CANAL**

Friends of Grand Western Canal formed. [www.friendsgrandwesterncanal.org.uk](http://www.friendsgrandwesterncanal.org.uk)



### **1988 – GRAND WESTERN CANAL**

Floating barge tearoom “Ducks Ditty”  
opened at Tiverton Basin.  
[www.tivertoncanal.co.uk](http://www.tivertoncanal.co.uk)



### **1989 – GRAND WESTERN CANAL**

0.3 miles of canal at Swan’s Neck relined by  
Devon County Council, to eliminate leakage  
and secure the future of the canal, at a cost of  
approximately £500,000.

### **1989 – BRIDGWATER & TAUNTON CANAL**

New slipway for small craft opened at  
YMCA, Bridgwater.



**1991 – BRIDGWATER &  
TAUNTON CANAL**  
Somerset Navigators  
Boat Club formed.

### **1992 – RIVER TONE NAVIGATION**

IWA Trail Boat Rally held at French Weir Park, Taunton, attracting over 20,000 visitors.

### **1994 – BRIDGWATER & TAUNTON CANAL AND RIVER TONE NAVIGATION**

14 miles of canal and 0.8 miles of  
river reopened to navigation, at  
an estimated cost of £566,000.



### **1995 – BRIDGWATER & TAUNTON CANAL**

Maunsel Lock tea garden opened;  
Maunsel Lock Café subsequently built  
on the opposite bank of the canal.  
[www.maunsellock.co.uk](http://www.maunsellock.co.uk)



### **1998 – RIVER PARRETT**

The 50-mile Parrett Trail from Chedington in Dorset to the Bristol Channel completed, at a cost of £415,000.

### **2002 – GRAND WESTERN CANAL**

New car park and pedestrian bridge across the canal, the Dudley Weatherley Jubilee Bridge, opened at Tiverton Road Bridge.

### **2002 – GRAND WESTERN CANAL**

IWA Waterway Recovery Group dredged 0.2 miles of the former canal near Cothay Manor and restored the towpath, now part of the West Deane Way footpath.



### **2003 – GRAND WESTERN CANAL**

New slipway at Boehill Bridge, Sampford Peverell, opened for trail boats and canoes. Built by IWA Waterway Recovery Group at a week long summer Canal Camp for volunteers.



### **2005 – GRAND WESTERN CANAL**

New road bridge built across railway line at Silk Mills near Taunton with full provision for a restored Grand Western Canal to pass underneath, using the roadway adjacent to the railway line.





#### **2006 – UPPER PARRETT**

Cocklemoor Bridge  
built for pedestrians,  
adjacent to Bow  
Bridge, Langport.

#### **2006 – WATERLINKS PROJECT**

Waterlinks project promoted to manage Somerset's extensive wetlands, its river and canal corridors, future water levels and to encourage green tourism. Awarded £50,000 development finance but did not go on to win the People's Lottery vote for major funding.

#### **2008 – UPPER PARRETT**

Former floodgates at Langport removed, thus enabling navigation on the main river rather than through the former lock channel. Gates now kept at Westonzoyland Pumping Station Museum. [www.wzlet.org](http://www.wzlet.org)



#### **2009 – GRAND WESTERN CANAL**

New Tiverton Basin Visitor Centre opened at  
a cost of £240,000.

[www.devon.gov.uk/grandwesterncanal/visitor  
information-2/visitor-centre](http://www.devon.gov.uk/grandwesterncanal/visitor-information-2/visitor-centre)



#### **2012 – GRAND WESTERN CANAL**

DEFRA Countryside Stewardship Scheme grant  
used at Nynehead to recreate parkland, stabilise  
and conserve the historic lift structure and  
restore the adjacent ornamental aqueduct over  
Nynehead Court's main driveway.



### **2013 – GRAND WESTERN CANAL**

Major breach at Halberton repaired and other flood-related improvements completed by Devon County Council, at a total cost of £3m.



### **2013 – BRIDGWATER & TAUNTON CANAL**

Cut from Firepool Lock to the River Tone dredged by IWA, thus permitting through boating to resume. Dredged again in 2020, by Canal & River Trust.



### **2014 – GRAND WESTERN CANAL**

200th birthday of the canal celebrated, with a public festival, IWA Trail Boat Rally, Illuminated Boat Parade and Navvies Fair.

### **2014 – RIVERS TONE AND PARRETT**

5 miles of Rivers Tone and Parrett dredged, from Athelney Railway Bridge to Burrowbridge (Tone) and Burrowbridge to Northmoor Pumping Station (Parrett), following 2013 and 2014 floods.

### **2016 – BRIDGWATER & TAUNTON CANAL**

Standards Lock refurbished by Canal & River Trust at a cost of £159,000.





**2016 – UPPER PARRETT**  
Cocklemoor at Langport and the former slipway at Huish Bridge acquired by Langport Town Council from the Environment Agency.

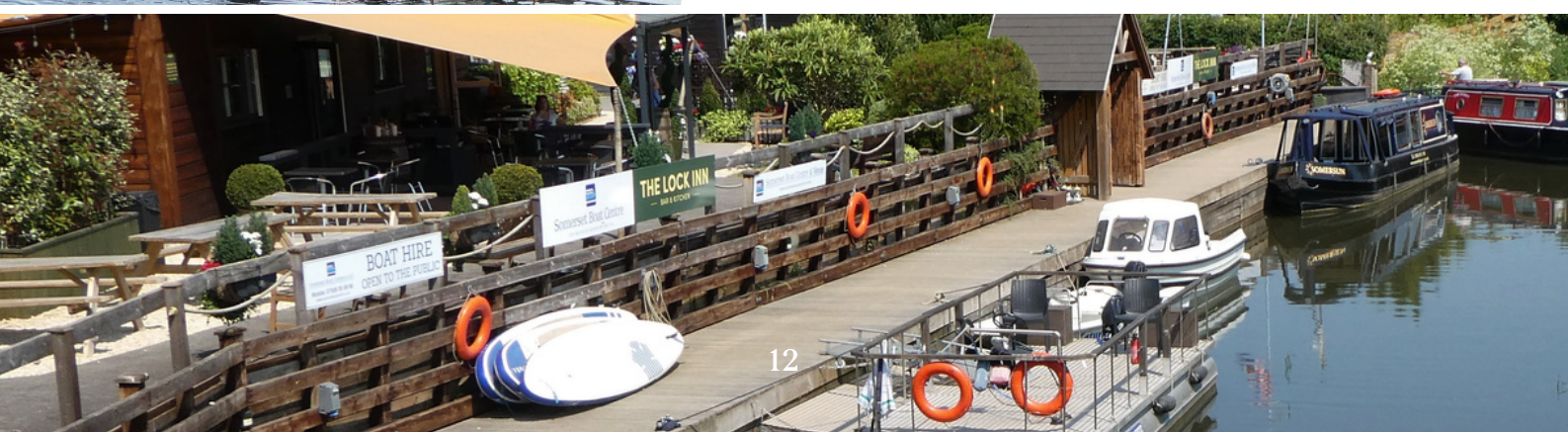


**2017 – BRIDGWATER DOCKS**  
Application by Canal & River Trust to remove Newtown Lock gates, without replacement, withdrawn after protests by local council, IWA and others. Replacement gates still awaited.



**2017 – UPPER PARRETT**  
Trip boat introduced, “Duchess of Cocklemoor”. Historic diesel engine subsequently replaced by solar powered battery motor.  
[www.duchessofcocklemoor.co.uk](http://www.duchessofcocklemoor.co.uk)

**2018 – BRIDGWATER & TAUNTON CANAL**  
Somerset Boat Centre opened at Higher Lock, Maunsel. [www.somersetboatcentre.co.uk](http://www.somersetboatcentre.co.uk)







**2018 – RIVER TONE NAVIGATION**  
 Centre for Outdoor Activity & Community  
 Hub (COACH) opened at French Weir Park.  
[www.coach-taunton.org.uk](http://www.coach-taunton.org.uk)

**2019 – RIVER PARRETT**  
 1.4 miles of River Parrett dredged  
 from Stanmoor to Stathe.

**2019 – BRIDGWATER DOCKS**  
 Principal Inspection of Bascule Bridge, excluding the winding gear, undertaken,  
 pending refurbishment.

**2020 – UPPER PARRETT**

Langport river project completed  
 including repairs to the slipway,  
 opening up 7.6 miles of waterway to  
 trail boats and small craft, plus a new  
 riverside path to Huish Bridge, 4  
 pontoons, fishing platforms for the  
 disabled, canoe steps, lighting and  
 much more. Helped attract over 10  
 new small businesses to the town.  
 Funding provided by European and  
 other grants. [www.langport.  
 life/things-to-do/the-outdoor-life](http://www.langport.life/things-to-do/the-outdoor-life)





### **2020 – BRIDGWATER & TAUNTON CANAL**

Dredging from Firepool Lock to M5 and spot dredging elsewhere completed by Canal & River Trust at an estimated cost of £414,000.

### **2021 – UPPER PARRETT**

Cocklemoor Community Trust formed.



### **2023 – BRIDGWATER & TAUNTON CANAL**

Education and Wellbeing  
Centre constructed at  
Somerset Boat Centre.  
[www.somersetboatcentre.co.uk](http://www.somersetboatcentre.co.uk)

### **2023 – BRIDGWATER DOCKS**

Following a successful application to the Government's Towns Fund, a sum of £4.2m confirmed towards the regeneration of Bridgwater Docks, including the Bascule Bridge. A further amount of £1m also confirmed, from the Active Travel Fund, for walking and cycling improvements at the Docks.

The back cover shows an aerial view of the Inner Basin of the Docks. The photo right shows the Outer (or Tidal) Basin, looking towards the River Parrett.





# THE NEXT 50 YEARS

Somerset and Mid Devon are fortunate to have a wonderful mix of canals and rivers. In the longer term much more can be done to enhance the ways in which they are used, bringing even greater benefits to local communities, the environment and economy.

The £4.2m award by the Government's Towns Fund in 2023 will undoubtedly bring great opportunities to regenerate Bridgwater Docks. It follows CRT's termination of its lease of the Docks in October 2021 which caused the moored boats to move away.

Completion of the new Education and Wellbeing Centre at Somerset Boat Centre on the Bridgwater & Taunton Canal is another welcome development, illustrating what private investment can bring to the waterways.

The proposed development of Taunton's former cattle market site should generate increased community use of the River Tone Navigation, especially by canoeists, paddle boarders, cyclists and pedestrians.

Plans are in hand for flood prevention works on the Bridgwater & Taunton Canal from Firepool Lock, Taunton to the railway bridge at Obridge. This will protect the canal from potential flooding by the River Tone and help secure the canal's future.

## **OPPORTUNITIES**

On the Grand Western Canal, proposals exist for the restoration of more than two miles from French Weir Park to Norton Fitzwarren. These include a replica boat lift and a visitor centre at Silk Mills, and a Park 'n Glide

electric boat shuttle from Silk Mills Car Park into Taunton. In addition there are plans to create a Heritage and Wildlife Corridor along the route of the canal in Somerset and a cycleway along its route from Wellington to Taunton, which will allow cyclists to avoid the busy A38.

IWA believes that the historic routes of the Grand Western and Westport Canals should be fully protected from inappropriate development that might prevent their full potential being realised in years to come.

When opportunities arise to extend the navigable waterway network and to improve waterside facilities these should be taken. This includes the use of certain Drains within Somerset that could be available for leisure boating and related activities.

In order to realise further benefits and to avoid losing the fruits of so much hard work, the local authorities should readily support their waterways, both financially and practically. Ongoing support from the Government, Canal & River Trust and the Environment Agency will also be vital.

Many concerns are being expressed regarding the level of Government support for UK waterways in the future, which looks set to be reduced in real terms. IWA is playing a leading role in the multi-organisation Fund Britain's Waterways campaign and strongly believes in the initiatives being taken to ensure that adequate public funding is allocated to maintain these national assets and secure the benefits they bring.



Front Cover, clockwise from top left: The River Parrett at Langport, the Grand Western Canal at Sampford Peverell and Bathpool Marina on the Bridgwater & Taunton Canal.  
Photographs on front cover and pages 6 to 14 courtesy of Gordon McKerrow except for the penultimate photo on page 8 (Waterways World), the second photograph on page 11 (Robert Hodgson), the Duchess of Cocklemoor on page 12 (Ian Macnab) and the photo at the foot of page 14 (Mike Slade).

Back Cover: Drone shot of Bridgwater Docks © Mark Searle

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