
waterway recovery group (north west)

NATIONAL CO-ORDINATING BODY
FOR VOLUNTARY LABOUR ON THE
INLAND WATERWAYS OF BRITAIN

4th April, 2024

David (Mr. Mac) McCarthy

(26/02/1924 - 17/01/2024)

As everyone will know by now, Mr. Mac died on 17th January, exactly 40 days short of his hundredth birthday. With him went an era for WRG(NW). This is an attempt to provide a pictorial memento for NW Newsgroup members and anyone to whom they might wish to forward it.



Born in Salford, he was brought up in Crumpsall and educated at Stand Grammar School. On leaving, he joined Barclays, staying with them until retirement, except for a period in the Army during the war, when he was conscripted into the Royal Signals, subsequently transferring to the Royal Artillery Corps and serving in North Africa and Italy.



After the war and following marriage to Nancy and the arrival of Ian, he moved to Woodstock, his home (and to become the spiritual one of WRG NW) for the next 60 years, only leaving ten years ago when he followed Ian and daughter Jane to Rossendale.



His interest in canals aroused by a family boating holiday in the early 60s, he joined the Peak Forest Canal Society (PFCS), not only working himself but supplying moral support and refreshments to the younger volunteers. The appearance of him and Nancy, bringing near infinite supplies of hot tea and only slightly more limited ones of broken biscuits, was never more welcome than during the clearance of the 'Rochdale 9' in the bitter early months of 1973.

After the 'Cheshire Ring' re-opened in 1974 he helped the PFCS volunteers' move on to working on other canals, again providing that all-important back-room support until the PFCS working party morphed into WRG North West in 1977.



Typical was his response to inadequate washing facilities at a hall in Droitwich during work on a particularly muddy site. He bought the local hardware shop's entire stock of washing-up bowls, boiled every urn, kettle and pan he could find and produced bowl after bowl of clean, hot water for the returning 'Navvies'. That the bowls had to be arranged on the perimeter wall of the car park in full public view was of minor importance.



As the scale of NW's work grew more funding was needed and in January, 1978, prompted by the experience of one of the volunteers, he started a waste paper collection near Woodstock. This only stopped in 2018, 40 years and 405 collections later, because the merchant to whom the paper was sold could no longer take it. Throughout most of that time, with only limited help, he wrote, duplicated and delivered 1,500 newsletters three times a year, phoned 30+ volunteers each month, booked skips, claimed grants and organised lunch and washed up after it. In the early days most of the paper was stacked in his garden, to be taken in, a load at a time, in the NW van (for which he – naturally - also cared). Collections eventually totalled about 4,000 tonnes, making it a significant environmental project in its own right.

If that was not enough, for much of this period he (and Nancy before her untimely death) also ran the NW publicity/sales stand, helping to recruit a new generation of 'Navvies' while raising yet more money. It's impossible to place an exact figure on the proceeds of his labours though, as the waste paper collection raised over £60,000, the total almost certainly exceeds £80,000 and could well be £100,000.



For 60 years he was at the heart of the canal restoration movement in NW England, remaining involved even when, at about the age of 80, he stopped travelling to digs.



His contribution to the overall waterway movement was recognised in 1986 with the award of the Inland Waterways Association's most prestigious award, the 'Cyril Styring Trophy' to be followed by an MBE for "Services to Canal Restoration and the Environment in the North West".



Naturally, having lived to such a venerable age, he had a lot of birthdays so we'll finish with a selection from his 80th to his 99th.

