

IWA BOATERS' USER EXPERIENCE SURVEY 2023 RESULTS

Background

As part of IWA's work with the Fund Britain's Waterways (FBW) campaign, a comprehensive survey was launched with the aim of gathering crucial insights from boaters regarding their experiences while cruising in 2023. This initiative was a vital component of FBW's ongoing campaign to secure funding for all waterways and navigation authorities across Great Britain.

The aim of the survey was to capture boaters' experiences, focusing on the impact of various aspects of waterway conditions on their enjoyment and the ability to complete planned routes within the allotted time. Boaters were encouraged to share both positive and negative experiences, highlighting instances such as efficiently resolved stoppages. In particular:

- The condition of waterways infrastructure
- The general depth of the waterways channel
- Vegetation management on both towpath and offside
- Mooring
- Service facilities
- What maintenance should be prioritised

The survey ran through March 2024 and boater members of organisations which make up the FBW campaign were invited to take part. It was anonymous; the data collected was not personally identifiable data. There were 726 responses.

The results of this survey have given us a useful snapshot on the recent condition of our waterways but, more importantly, the results have given us a datum to monitor against with further surveys, should future funding reduce. The results have been shared with the navigation authorities.

Survey Results

The full survey data can be seen on line at <https://freeonlinesurveys.com/r/8HitoqCq> but is summarised below:

1. Information about yourself as a boater (tick all that apply)

You are a boat owner (82%); You have a shared ownership boat (9%); You are a boat hirer (9%); You have a home mooring on a canal (42%); You have a home mooring on a river (8%); You are a continuous cruiser (15%); You boat with a trail-boat or portable craft such as a canoe (3%).

2. *How long have you been boating? (tick one)*
Less than 5 years (12%), 5 to 10 years (14%), 11 to 20 years (19%), 20 years+ (56%).

3. *Your cruising patterns (tick one)*
You mainly cruise short trips away from your mooring (21%); You mainly cruise long trips away from your mooring (18%); You cruise a combination of short and long trips (61%).

4. *Your cruising in 2023 (tick one)*
Less than 100 lock/miles* (28%); Between 100 and 499 lock/miles* (52%); Between 500 and 1000 lock/miles* (16%); More than 1,000 lock/miles* (3%).

*Lock/miles is a measure of the total of number of locks operated plus miles cruised.

5. *On average in the pre-pandemic years, you cruised (tick one)*
A lot more lock/miles* (26%); About the same or less lock/miles* (74%).

6. *In 2023 you cruised on waterways managed by: (tick all that apply)*
Canal & River Trust (93%); Environment Agency (25%); Other Navigation Authorities (25%)

7. *Please list the main waterways you cruised on in 2023.*
Top 25 ranked: 1. Trent & Mersey Canal; 2. Grand Union Canal; 3. Shropshire Union Canal; 4. Oxford Canal; 5. Coventry Canal; 6. Leeds & Liverpool Canal; 7. River Thames; 8. Staffordshire & Worcestershire Canal; 9. Kennet & Avon Canal (K&A); 10. Birmingham Canal Navigations (BCN); 11. River Severn; 12. Llangollen Canal; 13. Macclesfield Canal; 14. Bridgewater Canal; 15. North Oxford Canal; 16. Ashby Canal; 17. Peak Forest Canal; 18. Regent's Canal; 19. River Avon; 20. Gloucester & Sharpness Canal; 21. South Oxford Canal; 22. River Soar; 23. River Nene; 24. River Trent; 25. Worcester & Birmingham Canal

8. *Your Boating Experience in 2023. In general, did you find the condition of the waterways: (tick one)*
Better than the experience in previous years (3%); About the same as the experience of previous years (42%); Rather worse than the experience of previous years (56%).

9. *Your experience during all the time that you have been boating. (tick one)*
There has been an improvement in conditions (21%); There has been a deterioration in condition (79%).

10. *Thinking about your Main Cruise in 2023 and the impact that the condition of the waterways' infrastructure had on it (tick one)*

You completed predominantly the planned route in the time allocated (50%); You completed the planned route but problems with waterways conditions necessitated longer cruising days than you would have wished (22%); Unplanned stoppage or major problems with waterways condition resulted in replanning of the route or time allocated (23%); Major unplanned stoppages resulted in abandoning the cruise (4%).

11. *Did the overall the condition of the waterways' infrastructure have an impact on your cruising plans in 2023? (tick one)*

Major impact (18%); No impact (29%); Minor impact (52%)

12. *Explain briefly the issues you encountered on your main cruise.*

Infrastructure Problems: Many locks are in poor condition, with leakage, unbalanced gates, broken mechanisms, and inoperative paddles. Some locks require assistance to operate or are completely closed, causing delays and route changes. Swing bridges, lift bridges, and lock gates frequently malfunction, causing delays and disruptions to travel plans. Difficulty finding suitable winding holes for long hire boats.

Vegetation Overgrowth: Vegetation along towpaths and offside often becomes overgrown, obstructing visibility, reducing canal width, and making mooring difficult or hazardous.

Water Shortages and Depth Issues: Low water levels, silt build-up, and shallows pose challenges, causing boats to ground and impeding navigation.

Lock and Canal Closures: Numerous closures, whether planned or unplanned, force boaters to alter their routes, sometimes requiring long detours. Locks may be closed due to maintenance, breaches, or insufficient water levels. Difficulty obtaining timely information about stoppages and closures.

Facilities Issues: Sanitary stations, waste disposal points, and pump-out facilities are frequently out of order or inaccessible, posing challenges for boaters' basic needs.

Limited Moorings and High Costs: Availability of moorings, especially for visitors, is scarce, particularly closer to London. The cost of visitor licenses is high, which may deter boaters.

13. *Looking at specific waterways' structures and their impact on your cruising in 2023 (tick all that apply)*

Had no problem with operating locks en-route (22%); Managed to operate all locks en-route but with difficulty due to leaking gates or poorly operating paddles (65%);

Experienced locks that could not be operated without the help of navigation authority staff or others (19%) Experienced locks that required an unplanned stoppage resulting in a change of cruising plans (21%); Had no problem with other waterways structures such as tunnels or aqueducts (37%); Had minor problems with other waterways structures as above (10%); Had problems operating lift or swing bridges (18%); Experienced an

unplanned stoppage from other waterways structures resulting in a change of cruising plans (12%);

14. *Explain briefly the impact of specific waterways structures on your cruising in 2023*

Highlighted problems:

- Lengthy closures of locks at Wigan and on the Rochdale Canal.
- Power outages at Thames Locks.
- Toddbrook Reservoir reconstruction and ongoing maintenance closures at Bosley Locks exacerbated water shortages and navigation challenges.
- Could not visit the Eastern end of the Peak Forest due to a bridge problem.
- Llangollen Lift Bridges often very heavy to operate, causing strain to the shoulder.
- Wigan Flight closure and re closure.
- Vale Royal Lock, River Weaver prolonged stoppage.
- No signage to alert Foulridge tunnel users that there's no traffic light system or times to go through the tunnel.
- The volunteers at Foxton flight were brilliant in their assistance.
- Rodley Swing Bridge has a ridiculous mechanism which needs to be replaced (Leeds and Liverpool).
- Couldn't get a lift bridge to raise without help on the South Oxford. Also, couldn't get water levels to balance going through Dukes Cut on to the Thames.
- Bruce tunnel draft insufficient.
- Islington tunnel congestion.
- Difficulty navigating the Droitwich Barge Canal, particularly clearance under the M5.
- Depth of water on the South Oxford Canal from Napton top lock to Fenny Compton due to years of silting and Ashby and Coventry Canals in particular.
- Some locks, particularly on the Stratford Canal, had very difficult paddles and gates didn't open completely.
- The failure of Woodnook lock completely ruined my planned holiday and has shaken my confidence in planning future cruises.
- Had to time my use of bridges on the Gloucester and Sharpness canal due to volunteers not being available.
- Lock 68 at Llangynidr is badly damaged, but CRT won't fix it for 3 more years due to their 25-year life requirements.
- Kennet and Avon: Some locks required additional manpower to open and are generally in a very poor state of repair.
- Closure of the Hanwell Flight.
- Water levels on the Basingstoke Canal.
- Suggestion that CRT should be more proactive instead of reactive which could avoid a lot of the failures.

15. *Considering the general depth of the waterways channel (tick all that apply)*

Had no problems throughout the cruise (20%); Generally had no problems but felt that specific lengths required dredging (58%); Lack of channel depth was a major problem throughout the cruise (13%); Lack of channel depth in some locations made passage impossible and necessitated a change of cruising plans (6%); Lack of depth at the channel edges made mooring difficult or impossible at locations where you might expect to moor up (44%).

16. *Any brief comments about the general depth of the waterways channel?*

Shallow Channels: Many users reported encountering shallow waters, particularly near the edges, causing boats to run aground or have difficulty passing other boats, especially in narrow channels. This problem was widespread across different canals, indicating a systemic issue.

Dredging Deficiencies: Users noted a lack of adequate dredging, leading to silt build-up and reduced navigable depth. This deficiency was particularly evident in areas prone to excessive weed growth, hindering boat movement and increasing the risk of propeller damage.

Mooring Issues: Shallow water near towpaths made mooring difficult, and some designated mooring spots were unusable due to insufficient depth. Additionally, debris and vegetation in the waterway further complicated mooring efforts.

Impact of Weather and Seasons: Issues with water depth and maintenance are more pronounced during the summer months when water levels tend to be lower. Winter flooding can displace buoys and markers, contributing to navigation difficulties.

Lack of Maintenance and Funding: Many boaters express frustration with the lack of maintenance and dredging activities. They criticize the Canal and River Trust (CRT) for prioritizing other projects, such as cycle paths, over essential maintenance of waterways.

Environmental Impact: Shallow waters and silt accumulation not only hindered navigation but also impacted the ecosystem, potentially harming aquatic life and disrupting the natural flow of water.

Specific Problem Areas: Certain canals, such as the Ashby Canal and the Coventry Canal, are repeatedly mentioned as experiencing particularly low water levels and requiring urgent dredging and maintenance.

17. *Considering vegetation management on both towpath and offside (tick all that apply)*

You had no problems with lack of vegetation management (12%); You had only minor problems with vegetation at specific points (38%); You had regular problems with offside vegetation impeding passage (42%); You had regular problems with towpath edge vegetation impeding passage or moorings (39%); Your cruise was delayed or stopped due to major vegetation issues e.g., large fallen trees (13%); Operation of locks was made less safe by vegetation infringing the edges (13%).

18. *Any specific problems with navigation?*

Vegetation Overgrowth: There are widespread complaints about vegetation overgrowing from both sides of the canal, particularly on the offside, which obstructs navigation channels and creates blind spots. It obstructs visibility, narrows the channel, and makes passing other boats difficult. It can also make it challenging to find suitable mooring spots. There is a safety risk when boaters cannot see the ground they are stepping onto. Additionally, mooring bollards are often hidden by vegetation, posing a tripping hazard.

Maintenance Issues: There is a general consensus that maintenance of waterways, towpaths, and bridges is inadequate. Grass and vegetation along towpaths are often left uncut, creating obstacles for pedestrians and cyclists. Locks and lock landing areas may be overgrown, making disembarking dangerous. Fallen trees and debris are sometimes left uncleared, obstructing navigation and causing delays.

Environmental Concerns: While there is recognition of the need to balance boaters' needs with environmental conservation, there is frustration that environmental considerations seem to prioritize cost-cutting over maintaining navigable waterways. Some mention the "veg pledge" to cut to the edge for visibility but note that it's not consistently followed.

Safety Concerns: Overhanging branches, obscured sight lines, and hazardous conditions around locks pose safety risks to boaters. Instances of injuries or near misses are mentioned due to poor maintenance and vegetation overgrowth.

Specific Canal Issues: Several canals are mentioned for their specific challenges, including the Coventry Canal, Staffs and Worcester Canal, Leeds and Liverpool Canal, and Oxford Canal. Issues such as excessive reed growth, lack of maintenance, and narrowing of the navigation channel are highlighted on these waterways.

19. *Considering the places where you wanted to moor en-route (tick all that apply)*

You had none or minor problems mooring as required (30%); You found at some locations that it was difficult to find moorings (56%); You found it often impossible to moor where you wished and needed to move on to less satisfactory locations (22%); Had no problems with overnight moorings at chosen locations (16%); Had some problems with anti-social behaviour at chosen locations (14%).

20. *Regarding mooring, are there any specific situations you would like to note?*

Mooring Availability and Overstaying: There is a significant issue with boats overstaying their welcome on visitor moorings, preventing others from accessing these spaces. Some mooring spots are blocked by permanently moored boats. Many continuous cruisers seem to occupy prime mooring spots for extended periods, reducing overall availability. Additionally, some areas lack sufficient mooring spaces, leading to congestion and frustration among boaters especially in popular areas like Little Venice and Hertford. Limited access to disabled moorings and poorly maintained towpaths create challenges for disabled boaters.

Infrastructure and Maintenance: Problems related to infrastructure and maintenance include shallow depths at mooring locations, poor towpath conditions making it unsafe

to disembark, missing or insufficient mooring rings or pilings, and overgrown vegetation obstructing access to mooring points. Lack of dredging exacerbates shallow water issues, particularly on certain canals and rivers.

Anti-Social Behaviour and Safety Concerns: Boaters report incidents of anti-social behaviour, including vandalism, verbal abuse, and intimidation by individuals on towpaths. There are also safety concerns related to unruly youths, reckless cyclists, and the presence of substance abusers along waterways.

Regulation and Enforcement: There is dissatisfaction with the enforcement of mooring regulations, with many boats overstaying their permitted time limits without consequence. Unlicensed and illegal liveaboards occupy some visitor moorings, contributing to overcrowding and congestion. Enforcement of mooring regulations varies between different waterway authorities and regions. Spaces could be managed more effectively.

Accessibility and Amenities: Lack of accessibility to mooring locations, particularly in urban areas or popular tourist spots, is highlighted as an issue. Limited facilities, such as rubbish disposal points and charging stations, also contribute to boaters' dissatisfaction with certain mooring sites. Boaters face security risks, including theft and vandalism, especially in isolated or poorly lit areas.

Local Community Interactions: Interactions with local residents, especially those living near the waterways, can be contentious, with complaints of verbal abuse, threats, and hostility towards boaters. There are also instances of conflicts arising from competing land uses or perceptions of ownership of waterway spaces.

Planning and Information: Some boaters express frustration at the lack of clear information regarding mooring restrictions or available facilities at specific locations. Planning ahead and pre-booking moorings is recommended to ensure a hassle-free experience.

21. *Considering the service facilities on your cruise (tick all that apply)*

You found the ones visited fully open and functioning (30%); You found some that were not fully functioning (55%); You found some rubbish disposal facilities not adequate (45%); You would have liked more opportunities to recycle (57%).

22. *Some overall thought from your cruising experience in 2023 (tick all that apply)*

The cruising experience did not have any detrimental impact on future plans for cruise routes (59%); On the basis of waterways condition experienced, you would not return to certain canals/ivers or locations (28%); You are less likely to carry out extended cruising away from your home mooring (11%); You are considering selling your boat and possibly hiring boats in future (5%); You are seriously considering giving up boating and taking up a different leisure activity (12%).

23. *Looking ahead if reduced funding necessitates Navigation Authorities prioritising maintenance, what aspects do you think that they should concentrate on? (Tick highest priority boxes)*

Keeping all navigations open even if maintenance has to be reduced (45%); Focus on better used waterways at the expense of others which may become unnavigable (9%); Focus on dredging to maintain all channel depths (46%); Focus on maintenance of locks, gates and paddles to ensure that they can be operated easily (79%); Focus on maintenance of other structures such as tunnels and aqueducts to ensure that navigation is maintained (46%); Focus on vegetation management to facilitate navigation and mooring (42%); Focus on maintenance of reservoirs to ensure that there is sufficient water supply (46%).

24. *Are you a member of the IWA?* 53% Yes; 47% No.

25. *Anything else you would like to add about your Boating experiences in 2023?*

The responses encompass a wide range of feedback and concerns regarding the management and maintenance of the canal and waterway system in the UK, particularly under the care of the Canal and River Trust (CRT).

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IWA

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