



## Fund Britain's Waterways Update, January 2025

New Year greetings to all members and supporters of Fund Britain's Waterways.

### Weather Impacts and Climate Change

2025 opened with a bang on the waterways, with sustained heavy rainfall in the North West causing the collapse of embankments on both the [Bridgewater Canal](#) and the [Huddersfield Narrow Canal](#) on New Year's Day. Both canals will need complex, lengthy and expensive repairs and are now closed for the foreseeable future. Particularly in the case of the Bridgewater Canal this will have a substantial impact on cruising opportunities for both private and hire boaters, and consequently on businesses and local communities.

Ed Helps, Chairman of British Marine Inland Association, said:

"We share the widespread concern about this serious incident which, together with recent flooding in the region, highlights the importance of having adequate investment for the maintenance of Britain's inland waterways to withstand more frequent severe weather episodes.

To cruise along the lock-free Bridgewater Canal, part of the well-loved Cheshire Ring, is a hugely popular choice for families hiring canal boats and who, in turn, help contribute to the region's economy. It is why British Marine has written to the Director of the Bridgewater Canal Company stressing the importance of restoring the Bridgewater Canal as soon as possible. Beyond the current emergency response, we have asked that the company, backed by the Peel Group, provides an assurance that the repairs will be carried out and that reasonable steps will be taken to keep affected businesses informed about the works and anticipated timelines for completion of the repairs."

The embankment collapses were accompanied by widespread flooding on river navigations across the country, again causing damage and impacting use of the waterways. This is not an isolated incident. Extreme weather events are becoming much more frequent and severe as a result of climate change. The Canal & River Trust (CRT) has reported spending an additional £10m in emergency repairs to re-open canals and towpaths in the aftermath of the eight named storms in three months over winter 2023/24. The four named storms at the end of 2024 have already caused significant damage with more than 440 trees falling, and the Shropshire Union Canal is still closed at Woodseaves Cutting after Storm Darragh.

CRT recently published its [Climate Adaptation Report 2024](#) which considers the cost of adapting its network for a future climate. Initial work suggested that additional expenditure of up to £15m per year for the rest of the century might be needed simply to future-proof critical assets. However in the light of subsequent experience CRT now considers that the increase in funding needed to fully

adapt its network will be in line with estimates from the Environment Agency (EA) in its 2021 [report on the Impact of Climate Change on Asset Deterioration](#) that maintenance budgets may need to increase by 30-80% compared with present levels. Tellingly, the EA report highlighted embankments as having a high risk of deterioration due to climate change.

These events and figures are a stark illustration of the “perfect storm” described by CRT’s winter funding campaign. They make the need for Fund Britain’s Waterways clearer than ever.

### **Government Spending Review**

The Chancellor Rachel Reeves launched Phase 2 of the Spending Review on 10 December 2024, inviting feedback on government spending priorities and suggestions of policy ideas. The expectation is that Government departments will have to find savings and efficiencies in their budgets, and every request for budget will be subject to intense scrutiny. FBW will be making a submission based on the [submission to the Autumn Budget](#), arguing that cutting waterways funding is a false economy and more investment is needed in order to protect the many benefits as well as safeguard communities.

### **FBW Q&A session with the Middle Level Commissioners**

On 20 November 2024 FBW held an online Q&A session with the Middle Level Commissioners (MLC) at which MLC Chief Executive Paul Burrows gave in-depth answers to questions submitted by FBW members. The session was notably open and constructive, and was reported in a [press release](#). The questions and meeting notes are available [here](#) and the recording of the meeting will be added shortly. Similar sessions with other navigation authorities are planned for 2025.

### **Floodex / Waterways Management Show**

As in 2023, FBW participated in the Waterways Management Show, held at London ExCeL alongside Floodex and the National Drainage Show on 27 and 28 November 2024. The campaign was promoted through a stand and a presentation. Despite a fairly small number of attendees to the event some very useful discussions were held with both visitors and other exhibitors. Our thanks are due to IWA staff and volunteers for their invaluable help with logistics.

### **Raising Awareness**

Raising awareness among the wider public of the waterways, their value, the threats they are facing and the FBW campaign is really important, especially as the campaign enters its third calendar year. It’s good to report the different ways this is happening.

Our thanks to everyone who has been displaying an FBW banner over winter. You can see the most recent banners on the Chesterfield Canal, the Trant & Mersey Canal in Rugeley and the Grand Union Canal in Hayes Town Centre in our [‘Flying the Flag’ photo collection](#).

FBW was referenced by Paul Miles in his article on his narrowboat journey in the Telegraph on 27 October 2024. By invitation, Hazel Owen from AWCC gave a presentation on FBW at the Commercial Boat Operators Association AGM on 7 November. Please do let us know if you would like to arrange an FBW presentation to your organisation.

At the instigation of Ivor Caplan of IWA, the Stourbridge group of u3a has joined FBW. Ivor has since had a letter about FBW published in the u3amatters journal which is circulated to the 450,000 members. Similarly Sue O’Hare of IWA has had a letter published in the Boundless magazine,

circulated to 160,000 civil servants and public sector employees. Please do consider whether you could do similarly with organisations you belong to.

Steering group members IWA and NABO have joined Bluesky. Please do follow us (@iwa-uk.bsky.social and @nabo-official.bsky.social) and help promote FBW on this increasingly popular social media platform. Meanwhile IWA has dedicated its X account @iwa\_uk to FBW, so please keep supporting us there too.

### **FBW's 2025 Plans**

The major event of 2025 will again be a Campaign Cruise to the Palace of Westminster, but this time it will be different and much bigger. Plans are firming up and the current intention is as follows.

A group of boats will set off from Strawberry Island Boat Club in Doncaster at the end of March (conditions on the River Trent permitting) to make the trip to London, culminating in a reception at St Pancras Cruising Club on 1 May. The plan is to call at several AWCC Clubs during the cruise and hold events to promote and raise the profile of FBW. Any boats that would like to join us enroute will be more than welcome. Boats will post on social media to record their progress so that people can find them as they travel south.

The boats will progress to Little Venice to participate in IWA Canalway Cavalcade over the weekend 3-5 May. Then on 7 May the Campaign Cruise to Westminster will take place, backed up with a reception for MPs and peers so that they can hear about the campaign and see the boats outside on the river. Some of the boats will then cruise to Boston for a crossing of the Wash. The route to Boston will have two main options. Some boats will take the Thames to Oxford and then head North on the Oxford and the second group of boats will head up the Grand Union. Once boats have crossed the Wash the plan is to spend some time cruising in the Middle Level area. As FBW is campaigning for better funding for all Navigation Authorities we are trying to make sure that we cruise along waters managed by as many authorities as possible. If you would like to join either the Westminster Cruise or the Wash crossing please email Andrew Phasey at [theoldmainline@fastmail.fm](mailto:theoldmainline@fastmail.fm) or call Andrew on 07850 753633.

This promises to be a thrilling boating experience as well as a powerful campaigning event. Please check <https://waterways.org.uk/fbw-campaign-cruise> for further details as the plans progress.

### **Changes at FBW**

After more than 18 months as the founding Chair of Fund Britain's Waterways, Les Etheridge stepped down at the end of December 2024. Les has made an absolutely pivotal contribution and without his vision, knowledge, relationships and sheer hard work FBW would not exist in its current form. We are extremely grateful to Les and are delighted that he will continue to support FBW in less intensive ways.

The steering group extends a warm welcome to IWA National Chair Mike Wills, who has agreed to act as Chair on an interim basis. We are sure you will all join us in supporting Mike as FBW develops into its next phase.

Sent on behalf of the Fund Britain's Waterways steering group  
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