



To learn more about the Duke of Edinburgh's Award and how to become a DofE activity provider, go to [dofe.org](https://www.dofe.org).

Volunteering

IN WATERWAY RESTORATION THROUGH THE DofE AWARD

The Inland Waterways Association and its Waterway Recovery Group have been supporting restoration groups who work tirelessly across the country to bring back to life derelict stretches of canal and river navigations since the 1960s.

These ongoing efforts benefit millions of people who enjoy Britain's canals and inland waterways. Many volunteers are young people. In fact the restoration sector acknowledges youth engagement is essential if the next generation is to have a stake in our inland waterways.

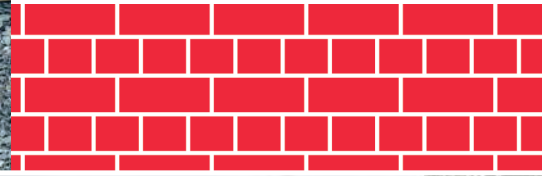
Restoration groups can engage with our youth through the Duke of Edinburgh's Award (DofE), an awards scheme founded in the UK in 1956 by HRH Prince Philip, then Duke of Edinburgh, and open to any person aged 14 to 24.

The Duke of Edinburgh's Award enables participants to build their own programmes, choosing their own self-improvement activities and causes to volunteer for. The programmes take between one and four years to complete, and prove a level of commitment that is highly regarded on a CV.

IWA Waterway Recovery Group has been offering the DofE Gold Residential section as a certified provider for more than a decade. Many DofE participants in WRG Canal Camps (25 in 2024) say it has been a deeply transformative experience which has given them a different perspective of the waterways system and its benefits. This is likely to influence their future choices as waterway users, as well as citizens and voters.

We spoke to two volunteers who joined last year's WRG Canal Camps to get a better understanding of what the experience has meant to them, what they gained and the long-term legacy of this programme.





Kiera

WRG MONTGOMERY CANAL CAMP

The main thing the camp gave me was the confidence to try new things. I came to the camp not really knowing what to expect and not knowing anyone, but the people were really kind and helpful, always willing to show me new things and help me learn. They gave me the opportunity to learn how to drive the excavators, even really big ones, which meant I got my excavator ticket, something I didn't expect and such a cool thing to have.

The camp also showed me how much work goes into restoring canals and how passionate the people involved are. That passion was infectious and really made the whole experience friendly, welcoming and informative. The food was also amazing every day.

I left the camp with many new skills and stories to tell and I'm really thankful for the opportunity to do something different for my DofE residential. I would 100% recommend others to do it if they want to learn something new and do something different.

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HOW DID YOU HEAR ABOUT THE WATERWAY RECOVERY GROUP?

By accident, really. I was searching for a unique experience for over 18s as a lot of the suggested ones listed on the DofE website were for younger people and, due to COVID-19, I left my residential quite late. I found the group through searching Google for residential camps.

WHY DID YOU CHOOSE A WRG CANAL CAMP TO COMPLETE YOUR GOLD RESIDENTIAL?

Mainly because of the price. It was the cheapest I had seen and what was included for that price I thought was really good: three meals a day and accommodation for less than £100. You couldn't get that anywhere else. It also enabled me to learn new skills and meet a range of people I wouldn't otherwise have met. I wanted to gain something from my experience, so this was the best option. I chose the Montgomery Canal trip in particular because it was close to where I live and at the right time of year for me (Easter holidays). It was in a nice place, so I got to travel and see somewhere new.

DID YOU HAVE ANY DOUBTS THAT MAY HAVE PREVENTED YOU FROM JOINING THE CAMP?

Any doubts weren't going to prevent me from joining the camp but I did have a few worries. The main thing was that I didn't know what was going to happen on the camp apart from helping restore a canal. I was probably a little underprepared as I only found out what we were going to be doing for the week once I got there. I did wonder if I was going to enjoy it but I did. I don't think I really had any doubts, more just general anxiety about the week.

WERE THERE ANY FACTORS THAT MARRIED YOUR ENJOYMENT OF YOUR WEEK ON SITE?

Not really, other than being cold which wasn't anyone's fault. Easter week was quite chilly, so I could have done with some more layers.

DO YOU THINK THE EXPERIENCE HAS CHANGED YOUR ATTITUDE TOWARDS OUR WATERWAYS OR HELPED YOU DEVELOP A MORE MINDFUL APPROACH TO OUR CANALS AND RIVERS?

The experience has shown me there is a lot of effort that goes into restoring and maintaining canals and rivers and that it is a long-term project. I'm now definitely more mindful of the upkeep involved in rivers and canals.



Jon

WRG WEYMOOR BRIDGE CANAL CAMP

I had the pleasure of attending a Canal Camp at Weymoor Bridge with the Waterway Recovery Group in August, which I attended to fulfil my Residential section for my DofE Gold Award. The experience was fantastic, with the camp staff and the volunteers all coming together to make it an incredibly enjoyable week. Our task was to build a culvert to divert a stream under what will eventually become the canal, which we just about managed to do despite some drainage issues.



DESCRIBE A TYPICAL DAY ON A WRG CANAL CAMP

Each day started in much the same way, with George (the camp chef) serving up a great breakfast to get us all out of bed and ready to head to the work site. The workdays were long and there was plenty of hard work to go around but, despite most of the group having never done anything like this, we all chipped in and made a lot of progress over the week, learning new skills that we can carry forward into the future. Some drainage issues on site made progress slow at times, and certainly caused some frustration as we watched the pit we had prepared fill with water before our eyes every time the water pumps went down (which they did often, and keeping the pumps running ultimately became a full-time role for at least two volunteers). Despite these setbacks, group morale remained high throughout the week and we had a laugh while dealing with whatever problems the project or site threw at us. We had the opportunity to learn a range of new skills, from mixing concrete, digging a really good hole or operating an excavator.

WHAT ABOUT THE SOCIAL SIDE OF THINGS?

At the end of the workday, after clearing the site, we would all load up into the WRG vans and head back to the hall for showers. Midway through the week, the other DofE volunteers and I decided we would help solve the free-for-all to get to the only shower in the hall by playing cards in the evenings for the next day's shower order ('Chase the Ace' being our go-to choice for this), which made things much more efficient and raised the stakes of our games. The evening entertainments were usually quite simple, often consisting of the whole group sitting around the tables in the hall and talking, playing cards and telling stories of our previous adventures (and misadventures) which was fantastic and exactly what the group wanted. During the week, we also took a walk through the local town and had the opportunity to take a boat ride along the canal which was graciously provided by the Cotswold Canals Trust. Finally, we'd all sit down to another delicious meal made by George and there was always a rush when the call for seconds came.

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WHAT WILL YOU TAKE AWAY FROM THE EXPERIENCE?

My experience has confirmed for me that there is something very rewarding about working hard with your hands towards a goal and seeing the stark difference between when you arrive and when you leave. We live in an increasingly digital world, where many people go their whole lives without experiencing that feeling, and I firmly believe that everyone should take part in a practical project like this at least once. With regards to British canals, despite being something I previously had not thought much about, I now recognise that they form a critical part of this country's history and unique character. The efforts of WRG, the Cotswold Canals Trust and other organisations to preserve and restore this historic infrastructure are valuable endeavours that we should all support. I will definitely consider attending more Canal Camps in the future.