



Fund Britain's Waterways Update, January 2026

Welcome to the first update on the Fund Britain's Waterways (FBW) campaign of 2026.

In this edition we round up 2025 with a report on the post-summer activities including two campaign cruises in East Anglia. We also report on new developments and preview plans for 2026.

NEW CHAIR FOR FBW



FBW has a new Chair, Hazel Owen, who also chairs the Association of Waterways Cruising Clubs. Hazel, a very experienced boater, organised and led the monumental FBW campaign cruise over the spring and summer of 2025 from Doncaster to the Palace of Westminster and across the Wash.

Hazel said: "Britain's inland waterways are a vital part of our national infrastructure, supporting the environment, economy, and local communities. However, these unique assets are facing increasing deterioration due to insufficient funding and maintenance.

We are calling on the Government to urgently review and secure sustainable funding for all inland waterways, ensuring they remain open, safe, and beneficial for future generations. Immediate action is needed to prevent further decline and to preserve the significant environmental, economic, and social value that waterways provide.

FBW is currently planning events for 2026 and plans to work closely with the navigation authorities to support their goals in securing the long-term future of the inland waterways."

SUPPORT FOR FBW FROM THE NEW LADY MAYOR OF THE CITY OF LONDON

The recently-elected Lady Mayor of the City of London, Dame Susan Langley, is also a keen narrowboater, and a champion of the FBW campaign. She explained her thoughts to us:

"The UK's 5,000 miles of canals and rivers create incredible blue-green corridors that millions of people enjoy. They support domestic tourism, help create jobs and bring real economic benefits to local communities. They also play a big role in improving people's health and wellbeing – an experience I've enjoyed time and again on my own travels. For the sake of our economy, our environment and our communities, this is a national asset we simply can't afford to lose."



2025: BOOKENDED BY BREACHES

2025 provided ample reminder – if any were needed – about why FBW is campaigning. The year ended as it began, with a major canal breach impacting people and businesses. Bookended by the Bridgewater and Llangollen Canal breaches were smaller breaches now repaired, for instance on the Macclesfield and Shropshire Union Canals, and other infrastructure failures including the Anderton Lift, Tardebigge Top Lock and two locks on the River Cam.



Bridgewater Canal breach January 2025 (credit Taylors Aboard)



Llangollen Canal breach December 2025 (credit Taylors Aboard)

At the same time the dry spring and hot summer of 2025 caused further fragmentation of the waterway network, with the Canal & River Trust [reporting](#) that at the peak around 400 miles (20%) of its canals were affected by navigation restrictions or closures. As rainfall began to return in autumn, closures because of too little water were swiftly followed in some places by closures because of too much water.

2026 has already begun in similar vein, with an apparent collapsed culvert at Penkrige on the Staffordshire & Worcestershire Canal. Whatever the causes of these events the impact on navigation authority finances is severe.

FBW EAST ANGLIAN CAMPAIGN CRUISES

FBW's last waterborne events in 2025 were two campaign cruises in East Anglia. The first was followed by positive funding news while the second demonstrated the impossibility of reaching its destination. Despite the different outcomes both events succeeded in drawing attention to this lesser-visited part of the waterways.

Funding Hope for River Cam following FBW Campaign Cruise

The FBW campaign cruise to Baits Bite Lock was organised in partnership with local FBW members the Great Ouse Boating Association (GOBA) and the Wilderness Boat Owners' Club together with the Cam Conservators. Baits Bite Lock is one of two locks on the River Cam which [had to be closed](#) because of structural and safety issues. By agreeing to liquidate their investments, the Conservators of the River Cam could just about afford to carry out temporary stabilisation work at Baits Bite, and work is now completed and the lock reopened. However there is no possibility of stabilising Jesus Green Lock without external funding or investment, and the risk of structural failure remains a threat to river users and the environment, economy, and safety of the city of Cambridge, highlighting the urgent need for meaningful investment in Britain's waterways.



Closure notice and FBW banner and event notice at Baits Bite Lock (credit: Sue O'Hare)

On Sunday 3 August a flotilla of boats travelled in convoy up the River Cam from Bottisham Lock and assembled at Baits Bite Lock, to meet Charlotte Cane (Liberal Democrat MP for Ely and East Cambridgeshire) and draw attention to the threats facing Britain's canals and navigable rivers.

Fifteen narrowboats and cruisers, dressed with Fund Britain's Waterways banners, made the journey and were joined en route by a steam launch, a rowing boat and a kayak. They passed moored boats also dressed with banners and were applauded by supporters on the bank. A large group gathered at Baits Bite Lock including Cambridge city and county councillors and representatives of businesses

and other organisations, united in their support for inland waterways and their call for investment to ensure their survival.



FBW campaign flotilla heading for Baits Bite Lock (credit: Kev Maslin, Chasing the Boats)



FBW supporters with Charlotte Cane MP [in orange, behind the word "Fund" on the banner] at Baits Bite Lock (credit: Kev Maslin, Chasing the Boats)

After the cruise there were two positive developments. Firstly the leader of the Liberal Democrats, Ed Davey MP, [gave his support to the campaign for the Cam](#). Secondly Paul Bristow (Mayor of the combined authority Peterborough and Cambridgeshire) championed the provision of [£500,000 to the Cam Commissioners](#), with the hope that this will encourage funding from other sources.

FBW on the River Little Ouse

Brandon Lock on the River Little Ouse has now been closed for two years, following use of the lock in January 2024 for flood management. This resulted in the approach channel and lock becoming completely silted up, making them too shallow for boats to use and preventing the opening of the lock gates. Even though it was the Environment Agency (EA) Flood Management team whose action caused the siltation, it is the Navigation team which is expected to provide the funds to remove it – and which is unable to do so.



Brandon Lock closed notice November 2025 (credit Ivan Cane)

The siltation was highlighted by a Wilderness Boat Owners Club campaign cruise under the FBW banner in September 2024, when the boats were unable to reach their intended venue at Brandon Town. Since then the silting below the sluices has shoaled to the extent that some longer boats are unable to turn. In September 2025 the EA issued a notice recommending against navigation above Hockwold, closing the three-mile upstream journey to Brandon. More recently three trees fell and blocked much of the river. The concern is that this lock will join Welches Dam and Swaffham Bulbeck locks on the list of permanently closed and lost amenities.

In order to draw renewed attention to the ongoing issue, the Wilderness Boat Owners Club (WBOC) planned an FBW campaign cruise to Brandon Lock on Friday 21 November. The WBOC is celebrated for its members' willingness to venture into little-known waters, using their distinctive trailable and shallow-drafted cruisers. Even then a single Wilderness boat skippered by Ivan Cane was unable to reach the lock, but did manage to venture close enough to moor within walking distance of Brandon.



Approaching the third fallen tree (credit Kevin Moore)



Mooring at the highest reachable point (credit Mike Daines)

Ivan reported: “We were welcomed by local canoeists and paddleboarders, as well as IWA representatives and other Ouse club members. We hope that our efforts on behalf of FBW will help a little towards EA navigation assets funding deficits being improved.”

Last year three boats a week on average were visiting Brandon, but now the town is virtually cut off from the network. This is at a time when the Town Council is working hard to attract more users to their waterway and both the Council and local businesses are improving facilities for boaters, canoeists and paddleboarders. The EA public moorings are now inaccessible by boat, whilst the lock itself will soon enter its third year of waiting “for essential maintenance works”.



Campaigners and FBW banner at Brandon Lock (credit Mike Daines)

FBW SPREADING THE WORD

FBW at the British Marine Inland Conference

FBW took its message to the annual British Marine Inland Conference, at the invitation of FBW steering group member British Marine.

The 2025 conference was entitled 'Energising Britain's Waterways!' and was held at the Black Country Living Museum in Dudley on 13 November. It was an opportunity for experts and stakeholders from across the inland boating sector to come together, share knowledge and explore the latest developments. FBW was represented by Hazel Owen and project manager Stephen Busby, who were able to have many good conversations.

FBW response to the Autumn Budget 2025

FBW issued a [press release](#) in the wake of the Autumn Budget, highlighting that once again the Budget failed to mention public investment to safeguard Britain's inland waterways, and repeating FBW's call for a comprehensive national review of future waterway funding plans.

FBW has made repeated representations to the Treasury, setting out the widely acknowledged benefits that Britain's canals and rivers provide and stressing the threat to our waterways from underfunding at a time when the increasing frequency and severity of extreme weather arising from climate change is combining with the ageing infrastructure to create a perfect storm. Yet the Government appears to be turning a blind eye to both the peril of the waterway network and its significance to the economic and social fabric of local communities.

The one possible ray of hope for waterways in the Budget was the devolution of £13bn in flexible funding to seven mayors across England and the promise of more of these integrated settlements in future. The provision of £500,000 by the Peterborough and Cambridgeshire Combined Authority towards the repair of Baits Bite Lock has demonstrated what is possible. But while regional investment is a hugely valuable start, it is not enough.

Hazel Owen, Chair of FBW said "The Chancellor spoke of strong foundations for a secure future. FBW campaigners have this year seen at first hand the effects on the waterways of failing infrastructure and more extreme weather. Strong foundations for a secure future are exactly what our canals and rivers need, now more than ever. Without adequate funding their foundations are compromised and their future is far from secure."

FBW PLANS FOR 2026

Perhaps the only positive effect of the problems in 2025 has been a rapid increase in public awareness of the waterways, helped by ongoing mainstream media coverage of the dramatic Llangollen Canal breach with its obvious human impact. FBW will be turning up the volume of its campaign this year to make sure the effects of insufficient funding for inland waterways are not forgotten or overlooked.

FBW will be pointing the main campaign cruise towards the north west, to highlight the concentration of major issues there. Four routes are being planned to converge on Manchester and Liverpool in June-July. More details will be available shortly.

Three other events are also being planned:

- The first FBW event of 2026 will be a campaign cruise jointly organised with the Birmingham Canal Navigations Society (BCNS) over the weekend of 20/21 March. The Icicle Cruise to the

Walsall Town Arm will celebrate the re-opening of the canal after the August 2024 pollution incident and sample the new CRT arrangements at Walsall Basin. Please email bcnsevents2026@gmail.com for more information.

- This year's [Canalway Cavalcade](#) dispersal cruise from Little Venice after the first May Bank Holiday weekend is planned to be on the Thames tideway to Woolwich, in company with a flotilla of historic narrowboats. The aim will be to celebrate all the boats built by Harland & Wolff, since 2026 is the 90th anniversary of the fleet built in 1936. It will be one of the first occasions this number of boats has returned to the place they were built, and a momentous opportunity to celebrate the longevity and quality of the build work and the dedication of the owners to maintaining and restoring them.
- Building on the enthusiasm generated by the River Cam campaign cruise, the local organiser the Great Ouse Boating Association (GOBA) is making plans for a cruise on the River Great Ouse. The Great Ouse has recently become central to several planned major projects: the Universal Studios theme park near Bedford, the Fens Reservoir and the proposed new town at Tempsford. The aims of the cruise will be to highlight the many benefits provided by the river and draw attention to the lack of funding for the Environment Agency to maintain its infrastructure. The outline plan is to cruise to Bedford and be part of the [Bedford River Festival](#) on 18/19 July, stopping at towns and villages en route to engage with MPs, Mayors and councillors and draw attention to failing assets.

Please email info@fundbritainswaterways.org.uk either for further information about these events, or if you have ideas for additional events.

OTHER WAYS TO SUPPORT FBW

Lobby your MP about the fragmented waterway network

The problems reported in this update provide an excellent opportunity for everyone, particularly those in constituencies where a local waterway is affected, to write to their MP as well as local and regional politicians and mayors, highlighting the benefits of waterways, the threat to them and the FBW campaign. Guidance and template letters are available [here](#).

Follow FBW on social media

Please follow FBW on X (https://x.com/FBW_Campaign) and Facebook (<https://www.facebook.com/groups/946415890265050>) and look out for a new LinkedIn presence coming soon.

Encourage as many people as possible to sign the petition:

<https://www.change.org/p/fundbritainswaterways>

Fly an FBW banner or flag on your boat or elsewhere

You can [download FBW graphics](#) and use one of the internet suppliers. Or [email](#) us for more help.

As always, the heartfelt thanks of all associated with FBW to everyone who supports the campaign in any way.

Hazel Owen, Chair of Fund Britain's Waterways
info@fundbritainswaterways.org.uk