

Volunteer lock keepers, Canal & River Trust

Short description of the project

In 2012 the Canal & River Trust launched a scheme to recruit volunteer lock keepers. In London, the Trust attracted 14 volunteers who worked at four locations. In 2013/14, this had increased to 40 volunteers many of whom were returning volunteers, working at five locations. All five locations are key historic sites: Hanwell, a scheduled monument is particularly popular and the only site that was originally covered throughout the year, Hampstead Road Lock in Camden, Cowley and Old Ford all are within a historic setting. In Brentford and Old Ford Lock, volunteer lock keepers are making use of a listed building: a former toll house and a former stable block which were not otherwise open to the public.



Volunteer lock keepers help the public at Caen Lock Hill Flight © James Davies, English Heritage

What would have happened without this project?

Having volunteer lock keepers helps the Canal & River Trust to look after the historic environment better as volunteers learn how to operate locks and can teach novice boaters which avoids damage by misuse. They can report any damages and wear and tear that need attending. They do a lot of litter collection, especially water born detritus that would otherwise block the culverts and potentially damages the paddles. Anecdotally, it is understood that by having a presence, vandalism such as graffiti tends to be reduced in some locations. The volunteers also provide

information to our visitors and share knowledge, helping to raise awareness and generate pride in the local environment.

What has the project achieved, or difference has it made?

The volunteers have helped raising awareness about the Canal & River Trust and the role the Trust plays in looking after the canal's historic environment. Fundraisers appear to be more successful if working in proximity to where our volunteer lock keepers are and we have had donations in from people that were very grateful for the help they received – especially when tackling a flight of locks at Hanwell or a busy lock by Camden Market. These donations go back into the maintenance of the canal network.

Nationally, 68% of volunteer lock keepers choose to take part to “keep fit and be active” with 67% doing so to “be part of waterways heritage and keep their historic role alive”.

What were the main lessons learnt or challenges overcome?

From first to second year the Trust needed to improve its recruitment drive, induction process and also recognised that a dedicated member needs to provide a lot of support to the volunteer lock keepers. The volunteer teams are now properly equipped with branded outfits and have regular feedback meetings.

Volunteers are more widely brought into the organisations by also helping with open days and other events, welcoming more visitors and helping recruiting more volunteers.

This will hopefully achieve the recruitment of many more volunteers in the future.

Words from people involved

“As a retiree it is wonderful to be part of a cause which is so important to our heritage and to work with a great group of volunteers is a privilege”. – A volunteer lock keeper during the winter works open day at Hampstead Road Lock:

“We just wanted to say a huge thank you to Dave and Pete the volunteers who took us down the Hanwell Flight yesterday afternoon. We have travelled down the Grand Union from Daventry and being in a wide beam, locks are really hard work. We had already done 6 locks on Wednesday and we wanted to get down the flight to ensure we got to Brentford lock on Thursday however the thought of 8 more locks was somewhat daunting. So imagine our delight when Dave and Pete said that they would take us all the way down and reduce our time down the flight too. We would like to know how we can donate some money for them as they wouldn't take any money even for a drink. Hopefully there is some sort of recognition that they can get through your publications too.” – A delighted boater.

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