

NBTA LONDON

NEWSLETTER

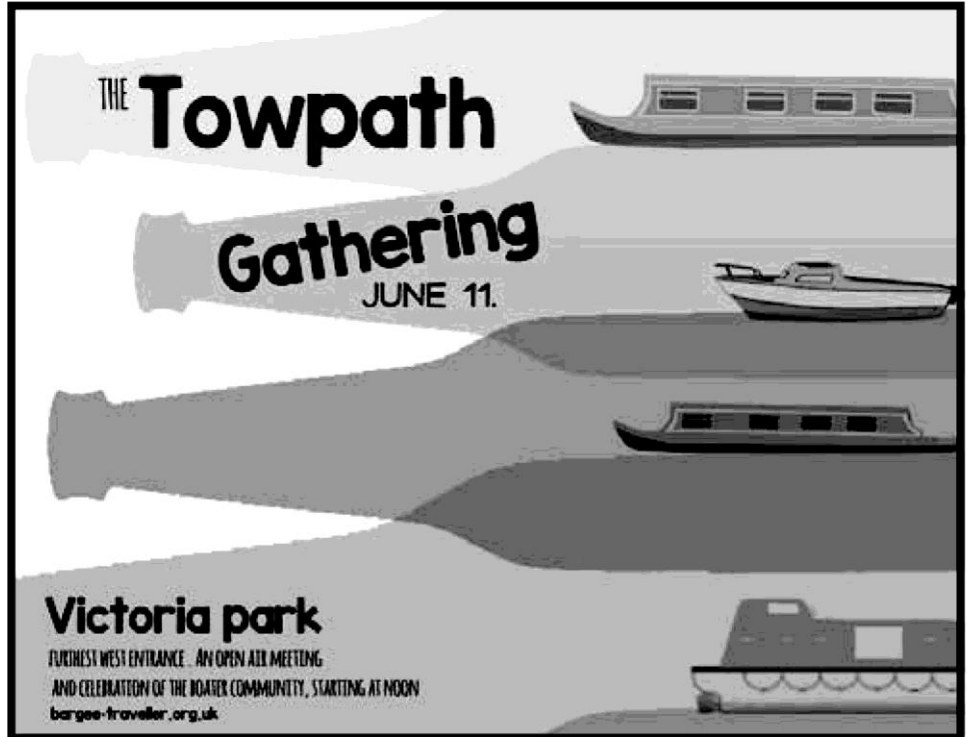
For the community and rights of boat dwellers

The Annual Towpath Gathering Is Back!

The Towpath Gathering is on Saturday 11 June at 12 noon in Victoria Park at the furthest western gate of the park (Canal Gate).

It's been about a year since the Canal and River Trust (CRT) started its policy of threatening to evict or actually evicting people in the travelling boater community for their distance travelled or their pattern of movement. The number of boats without home moorings has declined since the time the policy was brought in.

The policy has put pressure on the community. But many boat dwellers stand defiant against CRT's policy and demand more mooring rings and facilities. Unity within our community is key and as such we are organising a



celebration of the boater community at our annual Towpath Gathering.

There will be music, entertaining acts, spoken word, film, speeches, and arts & crafts. Trade boats

including The Record Store Boat, Jewellery Boat, Cafe Boat, Poetry Boat, Museum Boat and the Village Butty will also be there. Everyone is welcome, let's all show CRT that we are here to stay.

National Demo: Boaters March For Their Homes

On 16 April over 200 boat dwellers marched to Downing Street to hand in a Boats are Homes petition against the Canal and River Trust's (CRT) policy that threatens travelling boat dwellers (boats without a home mooring) with restricted licenses and even eviction. The petition, has been signed by more than 29,000 people. The petition



asks the government to put pressure on CRT to end their policy and stop the unnecessary eviction of boaters.

The threat of homelessness through this policy increases the more it is enforced by CRT and at a time when people, especially in London are facing a desperate housing crisis.

A History of the British Waterways Act 1995

The British Waterways Act 1995 recognised the key right of our community: that we be allowed to have our boats on the canals without having a home mooring. It also set out the condition that we could not remain in any place longer than 14 days without good reason. This is the law which guides us, but it was not always planned this way. In fact, the original approach from British Waterways (BW), the predecessor of CRT, would have effectively destroyed our community while giving BW sweeping new powers.

The 1995 Act was written by BW itself and was submitted to the House of Lords as the British Waterways Bill in 1991. The Bill set out conditions for boats to be licensed, stating that all boats on BW waters would need to have insurance and pass a safety check.

There was also a third condition: all boats must have a home mooring. It is hard to think of a more aggressive attack on our community:

No home mooring, no license; no license, no boat; no boat, no home

Not content with trying to criminalise our way of life, BW also looked to give itself far-reaching enforcement powers. BW employees would be able to order boaters to move if they didn't like where they had moored. Failure to comply would be an offence under law, you could be fined and BW could start proceedings to have your boat removed from the water. BW also wanted to be

able to restrict moorings in any area as they saw fit. All they would have to do is put up a sign and any boater not following the instructions would (you've guessed it) be a criminal, liable for a fine and the removal of their boat. Not only were BW trying to make it easier to seize boats, they also wanted to be able to hold them and their contents hostage until their costs had been paid.

It goes without saying that boaters did not stand for such nonsense.

The Bill was attacked by individual boaters, boating groups and landowners (whose land BW wanted to enter without permission) and was savaged by Parliament.

BW's attempts to give legal authority to their officers and their signs – and to seize our boats if we did not comply – were completely removed. The signs today telling us we can only stay somewhere for less than 14 days are nothing more than guidance. BW wanted them to mean more and Parliament put a big black line through it.

So what about the 14 day rule? The House of Lords rightly took notice of the objections to BW's plan to require home moorings, seeing that the rules could "add to the plight of the homeless in our cities". BW were forced to allow licenses without home moorings and scrap a 'no returns' policy that restricted returning to the same place within a year.

A final twist in the story of the 14 day rule was around 'overstaying' in reasonable circumstances. Originally overstaying was only allowed if BW thought it reasonable. By this Parliament clearly didn't think the BW would be a good judge of what was reasonable and this was changed so that BW's permission did not need to be received to justify staying over 14 days.

What is not written in the law can say as much as what is.

The way the 1995 Act evolved shows a clear line which Parliament did not want BW to cross. Parliament rejected a no returns policy on mooring. It rejected BW being the judge of when it is reasonable or not to overstay. Most importantly, it rejected that policies should be made which could lead to boaters becoming homeless. While BW has given way to CRT, the law – and what was rejected – has not changed. CRT would do well not to forget this. Let's make sure that they don't.

The last word goes to Peter Luff MP speaking in House of Commons in May 1993 (and sadly, these words still hold today):

"British Waterways does not always enjoy a reputation for a sympathetic approach to its users. I suspect that that stems from the fact that it is not just a navigational authority, but a landlord. [...] It probably needs to make much more effort to foster a relationship of trust with those users, in the interests of our inland waterways system."



Pollution on the Regents Canal: How Dirty Are We?

At the end of last year, members of the NBTA(L) went to a CRT organised meeting with a few angry residents and boaters in the Islington and Kings Cross area. In attendance was the Waterways Ombudsman, some Islington residents, predominantly local residents from nearby the canal. This angry minority have a history of anti-boater campaigns including to remove mooring rings in Kings Cross. They had enlisted at the meeting a local councillor who was regularly quoted in the local press about the evils of boats mooring in residential areas.

One of the arguments they try to use against us, is that since the London Olympics in 2012, there has been an increase in congestion of boaters at Kings Cross that has resulted in more cases of asthma in local children. The retired GP who made such a statement, produced statements from parents to back up these 'claims' and also brought forward a parent whose child suffers from asthma. With this apparent tidal wave of "proof" defeat looked inevitable: boat dwellers cause asthma due to the pollution produced by their engines and solid fuel burners.

In the meeting, it was difficult to counter this argument due to the emotional tension in the room and it is generally accepted that nitrogen dioxide and other common pollutants have a detrimental impact on our health. However, in the Kings Cross area around Euston Road and York Way, it is one of the busiest traffic areas in London and hence one of the most polluted (www.howpollutedismyroad.org.uk). So on one hand, you have 23,000+ cars passing daily, producing 3.3 tons per kilometre of the nitrogen dioxide; and on the other hand you have on average 7 or 8 more boat engines or generators since 2012 running for a few hours each night. And it is supposedly, these boats that are the problem but actually these boats only add a negligible amount of the pollution in the area. The How Polluted is My Road website indicates that high pollution follows the roads and not the canal network, therefore it can be assumed that our engines and fuel burners are not the main drivers of pollution in the area.

Interestingly, going back to asthma, the NHS website states "that it is not clear what causes asthma, although it is likely to be a combination of factors." They then produce a long list of triggers that can cause asthma attacks such as

air pollution; modern hygiene standards, dust, cold air, animal fur and damp. In the 1950s, due to pollution, the air quality of London was 10 times worse than it is today; yet the cases of asthma have increased as the quality of air improves, thus leading asthma researchers elsewhere.

If there was an increase of asthma cases during 2012 and thereafter in the Kings Cross area, it has little to do with boat engines, boat generators and solid fuel burners on boats or boats in general. It is more likely to be due to the extensive building work that moved from Kings Cross Station to north of the canal, near the neighbouring York Way and Barnsbury Estate. As you can see from the picture, there was big, heavy machinery working continually, producing large amounts of dust and additional fumes.



Following the meeting, it was reported that both boaters and 'landlubbers' want the same objective; more facilities for the boaters in order to curtail the time that engines would have to run, as well as a reduction of the bunching up of boats around the scant facilities in the London area.

Boat-dwellers without a home mooring have endured, and are enduring, a lot of mud-slinging from all sides, much of it untrue. NBTA are fighting hard to combat misinformation about us. In general, we, boaters seem to create a smaller carbon footprint and cause less pollution than some others in society; we are certainly more aware of water and electricity consumption. Though we must remember, however righteous we may feel, many of us burn wood and coal to keep warm and use diesel to navigate and charge batteries, so we are not pollution-free. But don't get caught up in the claim that we cause ill health to residents, because for that, we are not guilty.

Stonebridge 'Save Our Facilities' Towpath Gathering

A towpath gathering on Sunday 27 March at Stonebridge in Tottenham bore witness to increasing frustration amongst boaters in London. Boaters already affected by a lack of water, rubbish and toilet facilities across the UK protested as more facilities are removed in London.

Through the day almost 70 members of the community and local residents battled the wind and rain to come together to discuss their options, in a situation where the necessities for living a decent life on the water are being taken away, and boaters feel that their plight is ignored.

Boaters pay substantial license fees to the Canal and River Trust (CRT) and rely on them to provide water taps, rubbish points and toilet facilities. Access to facilities however, is now being removed and restricted, and boaters are increasingly forced to endure primitive and unsanitary conditions.

CRT made a surplus of £39.4 million in 2014/15, these figures were taken from the 2014/15 Annual Report, and it is noted that they hold a reserve

fund of £660 million. CRT can easily afford to install more facilities for boaters, but earlier this year, CRT demolished a water tap, toilet facilities and a rubbish point at Waltham Cross.

CRT are now restricting the opening hours of the toilets and showers further down the Lee in Stonebridge, despite attempts by the National Bargee Travellers Association (NBTA) to negotiate with CRT to try to prevent this.

Facilities have been removed on the River Lee before, and with planned redevelopment at Hackney Wick, there are fears that this will only continue to worsen.

With areas being privatised, facilities being removed and a population that has grown, many boaters feel they are being pushed out by CRT.

The event at Stonebridge was also a celebration of the boater community, and included music, crafts, public speakers and homemade food.

Boat Dweller Protest Outside CRT Offices

On Tuesday 10 May between 12pm and 2pm about 90 boat dwellers without permanent moorings took part in demonstrations outside CRT's headquarters in Milton Keynes while 15 protested at the charity's licensing office in Leeds.

They were there to express their opposition to the charity's punitive and unlawful enforcement action against boats without a permanent mooring.

The right to use and live on a boat without a permanent mooring is enshrined in the British Waterways Act 1995. It is not within CRT's legal powers to enforce its draconian new 'rules', which set requirements that go beyond the Act.



A New London Mooring Strategy

After much pressure on CRT from the NBTA and others, CRT are beginning consultations for a London Mooring Strategy, opening up the conversation to provide more mooring rings and facilities in London. The NBTA welcomes this and wants as many boaters to be involved as possible.

However, this is not all that CRT has planned as part of the London Mooring Strategy. CRT

also wants to look at putting in reduced mooring times and spaces on the towpath.

If you want to be involved in getting more moorings and facilities, and opposing plans to reduce mooring times and spaces, please contact us.