



The **R**oile **C**anal  
& Northern Devon  
Waterways Society

SOCIETY NEWS and VIEWS

SUMMER ISSUE 2012

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Cover picture:

*Roy Sutton (Consultant Civil engineer to IWA) examining one of the dry -stone revetments on the Furzebeam section of Lord Rolle's Canal. 14.08.12*

*Photo: A. Wills*

## Comments from the Chair

Despite some very unseasonal weather which has included some extraordinarily heavy rain-falls since the last issue of the **RC&NDWS** newsletter there has been considerable progress made at the Sea Lock restoration site and along the Furzebeam section of the canal.

It is hoped that the work at Furzebeam which is being undertaken by volunteers and ably organised by Tony Barnes as part of the RC&NDWS's commitment to the [Life's Journey Project](#), will enable members of the general public to safely access this section in the very near future.

As more people become aware of what the society is trying to do in terms of restoration and opening up the canal to the general public the number of volunteers has steadily increased. However, there is always room for more! The date of the next **Volunteers Day** is **Wednesday 5<sup>th</sup> September** and as always Tony is the person to contact if you wish to be a part of it.

(Contact details on page 22.)

The guided walks at Braunton Marshes and along the Bude Canal went ahead, were blessed with good weather and thoroughly enjoyed by those who participated. The cream-tea provided by volunteers from the Bude Canal Trust at the end of the walk was especially appreciated. A big thank-you is offered to the Bude Canal Trust, the Bude Canal & Harbour Society as well as Chris Hassall of our own society for making these walks so successful.

The committee of the **RC&NDWS** goes to great lengths and spends a considerable amount of time in planning and preparing its programme of visits and guided walks. We hope they are interesting, educational, enjoyable and at a minimum cost.

They are open to members of the society but to the general public as well. We try to advertise them in plenty of time to allow people to plan them into their diaries and yet we are often disappointed by the take-up. Perhaps there is something we are not getting right and maybe there are ways of making what is on offer more appealing. Feed-back from members would be greatly appreciated.

Unfortunately the Society was unable to participate in the Bude Heritage Day in August this year due to other commitments. However the RC&NDWS did put in an appearance at the Filleigh Fete held on Saturday, 18th August, in the very prestigious Castle Hill Gardens, home of Lady Arran. Despite the day starting off in a damp and rather miserable manner the weather improved and by the middle of the afternoon a substantial number of people were enjoying the event. The RC&NDWS display caught the interest of a lot of people who hopefully returned home wiser and with a better understanding of what Lord Rolle's Canal was all about

Another very important date that must go in your diary is

## **Sunday 9th September**

### **OPEN DAY at SEA LOCK**

The site will be open to the public from 2.00pm onwards and will allow visitors to inspect the level of progress on the restoration. The Tub-boat Building Project will be on view as will some very interesting agricultural artefacts and machinery which is on loan from the **North Devon Museum Trust**. Members of the committee will be on hand to talk about all that the society is doing and hopes to do in the future. All are welcome!

**Adrian Wills**

## Walks around the River Caen Navigation & Lord Rolle's Inclined plane

Four different local groups interested in history and wildlife got together on May 23<sup>rd</sup> for an afternoon guided walk featuring the draining of Braunton Marshes and the navigation on the River Caen.

Members of the North Devon Archaeological Society, Devon Wildlife Trust and the Filleigh History Group joined in the walk led by myself representing the **RC&NDWS**, and starting from Velator Quay where once tall ships used to trade from Braunton and around the world.

This historic quay dates from the eighteenth century and before, but was extensively modernised in around 1855 when the winding river Caen was straightened and embanked to allow merchant ships to trade out of Braunton. A high level quay which they called the Big Quay was built to facilitate loading and unloading the ocean-going schooners and ketches that were now able to sail up the river as far as Velator. Immediately up stream is the low quay where smaller fishing vessels and the estuary sand barges unloaded their cargoes until late in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

It is sad that the Big Quay is now at risk in that it needs repair work which Braunton Parish Council can't afford, so planning consent has been granted for it to be demolished leaving only the low quay and slipway as evidence of Braunton's once noble shipping heritage.

Following the river embankment downstream it was possible to make out the old channel winding through the meadows on the eastern side, forming the Rams Horn Pond described by Henry Williamson and now mostly an expanse of reed beds beloved of water fowl and wading birds. Swans, ducks and moorhens were seen on the Marsh drains and Curlews on the mud flats.

At the north end of Horsey Island the embankment divides, the original 1815 bank, built by Lord Rolle's engineer James Green, leading west to the White House, and the later 1855 bank, built by Nicholas Whitley for the Williams Estate, continuing south to the

confluence of the Caen and Taw and encircling Horsey Island. The 1815 bank contains the Great Sluice that allowed water to drain from Braunton Marshes while preventing the high tides from flooding in. Despite the enclosure of Horsey Island in 1855, the Horsey Island Sluice is ill-maintained and allows sea water to flood in at high tide, so the Great Sluice still provides vital protection for Braunton Marshes from tidal inundation to this day.

The network of drainage dykes within the marshes all connect with the encircling Boundary Drain which takes in fresh water through a penstock from the river Caen above Velator Weir, and lets it out through the Great Sluice, enabling the water levels throughout the marshes to be strictly controlled.

After the combined afternoon walk, the Filleigh History Group stayed on in Braunton for tea and then visited the



Sluice on Braunton Marsh.

Countryside Centre and were taken on a walk across the Burrows by ecologist Mary Breeds to see the fantastic sand dune system and its uniquely diverse displays of spring flowers.

On Sunday June 17th as part of the RC&NDWS commitment to the “Life's Journey” project, funded from Heritage Lottery or interpretation of heritage features along the Tarka Trail a guided walk was led by myself and Hilary Wills.

Gathering at Annery Kiln on the Weare Giffard Road by Halfpenny Bridge and starting off at 2:30pm, the route was quite short and in two parts, each less than a mile; not a taxing distance for most yet within that distance historic features reveal clues to a remarkable achievement of 19th century canal engineering.

The walk focussed on the 1825 Inclined Plane of the Rolle Canal and the modern flood defences of the Annery Kiln settlement.

A new salt-marsh has been created within the flood meadow upstream of the bridge which is already attracting large numbers of water fowl. At the end of the meadow a building standing where the base of the inclined plane once was, has been renovated and is once again weather-proof.



It is thought that this building may once have been used for stabling horses used for towing tub-boats along the canal. It is hoped that Barn Owls and bats will take up residence now that the interior can be kept dry.

**Chris Hassall**

## A VISIT TO THE BLACK COUNTRY MUSEUM

On Tuesday 17th April 2012 Trevor Fordham and myself drove to Brierley Hill near Wolverhampton with a clutch band which required repair. This was from one of the winding drums on the RB 22 crane at Sea Lock. We set off early and the journey was good until we arrived at our destination when it started raining. The repair only took about an hour and a half to rivet on the new linings. We decided to make use of the rest of the day by visiting the Black Country Museum which was not far away.



This museum was established in 1976 and covers a 26 acre site. Various jobs are enacted by people in costume of the period. The height of activity was during the 19th century when the area was covered by smoke, dust and noise from the mines, iron foundries, steam hammers and lime kilns. Under the surface the ground was rich with seams of coal, iron, clay and

limestone. The area was at that time served by the Birmingham canal network and is near the Dudley and Netherton tunnels.

Barge trips will take members of the public into the tunnels but we considered we had insufficient spare time to experience this for ourselves. What we found interesting was not only did the tunnel cut a route through the hillside but there were coal mines inside. This reminds me of the underground mines at Worsley Delph, north of Manchester, served by the Bridgewater canal. The barges were 'legged' through these tunnels, that is, a person(s) lies on his back on the top of the barge and uses his feet to walk the tunnel roof to propel the barge forwards since there is no towpath through the tunnel for a horse to walk.

The museum has had a wide range of interesting buildings moved from other sites in the area and reconstructed. These



features include various shops of the period: a general stores, a vehicle dealers, a chemist's shop and a pub with no beer! At the blacksmith's forge we watched a square nail being made. Inquiring about a possible source of nails for Adrian's replica tub boat was one reason for visiting this region but alas unlike the repaired clutch-band, this proved unfruitful.

Many lace articles are on display which were prominent in the homes at this time, as were black 'Bodley' type cooking stoves. Relying on hand water pumps and maintaining handpainted, tiled, fireplace surrounds made much work for the wives, as did keeping the parlour spotless for those special occasions.

The industrial part included a large bank of lime kilns, two or three iron forges where a lot of chain was made, including mushroom-like anchors for lightships. A lift, transporter-type bridge crossed the canal and was wound up by a hand crank. There is a boat repair shop and in the canal are several canal barges in a variety of conditions. A mine shaft has been built and includes the winding gear and gantry.

In 1712 Thomas Newcomen built the first successful steam engine for pumping water from Lord Dudley's coal mines. There is now a full size replica on site which can be viewed working at certain times.

A tramway winds its way around the site with a number of preserved trams running to a timetable. There was also a coach on display bearing a Devonshire registration number. There are many more attractions to see including a visitor centre depicting the fascinating history of the area.

We returned home in good time and within a few days got the new clutch-lining fixed back in the crane and all is now working smoothly.

This proved to be an interesting day out and well worth the long journey.

**Norman Richards** 15th June 2012

## A Visit to the Bude Canal

Unfortunately only 4 of us from the Rolle Canal Society went on the visit to the Bude Canal on 21st July but we all had a fascinating day out and even the weather obliged by finally turning dry and sunny.

We started from the Lower Wharf at Bude, viewed the Sea Lock and heard how the breakwater was built to offer some shelter on a very dangerous stretch of coast. I have always enjoyed the dramatic scenery of this area but hadn't fully understood how difficult and dangerous it was for sailors trying to get in and out of Bude.

Walking up the canal towards Truscotts Bridge we were shown old photographs of the buildings round the Upper Basin and could then see traces of their original functions as ware



Standing at the head of the very impressive inclined plane at Hobbacott.

houses, laundry, life boat house etc on those that have survived into the present day.

Moving on to Helebridge we saw the fine house originally built for the canal company engineer and the barge workshops that now house an original tub boat and an interesting collection of old machinery.

After a very welcome pub lunch at Red Post we went to Merrifield and crossed several private (and very muddy) fields to view the wheel-pit which once housed a 30 foot diameter underground water wheel which provided the power for one of the canal's 6 inclined planes. I'm afraid I chickened out of climbing down a vertical ladder to stand on a narrow ledge half way down the pit but even just peering down and admiring the photos taken by the more intrepid members of the party was a very



Inside the Merrifield wheel-pitt

impressive experience. It is such a strange and hidden place that it was easy to understand why the resistance in the Second World War had planned to use it in the event of a German occupation.

From Vealand Nature Reserve we walked down another inclined plane past the site of the water treatment works that early in the 20th century used water from the redundant

feeder arm of the Bude Canal to provide Bude and Stratton with running water. A little further on we crossed the River Tamar on the dramatic Burmsdon Aqueduct before retracing our steps for the highlight of the whole day – a wonderful home made cream tea in the garden of one of the members of the Bude Canal Trust. I have walked large sections of the canal over the years but I still found this a fascinating day out and will look at the whole area with new eyes now that I have learned so much more about its history. I would thoroughly recommend this sort of outing to anyone with an interest in the past even if, like me, you are not particularly into the more technical side of canal engineering and don't like climbing down vertical ladders!

**Margaret Shambrook.**



1. Chris Jewell of BC&HT informing the group about the reasons for the canal. 2. A view of the canal basin looking seaward.

*Editor's Note:* Thanks to the members of the **Bude Canal & Harbour Society** and the **Bude Canal Trust** who gave up their time to organise and lead this group to see the various features of the Bude Canal, and for providing the very much appreciated cream tea at the end.

## WEARE GIFFORD SHIPBUILDING - THE SECOND PHASE

*Michael Guegan, chair of the North Devon Maritime Museum continues his fascinating description of the ships built at Annery and Sea Lock.*

After a break of five years another new vessel took to the water at Weare Gifford. This was the *Margaret*, which was, at this date, the largest vessel to have been built alongside the Rolle canal. Her dimensions were 74-6½ x 20-10¼ x 12-9, with a tonnage of 138 88/94. She was rigged as a snow (rig descriptions will be explained in a later article along with measurement and share rules), and her builder was a Thomas Saunders. Now I don't know much about Mr Saunders except that a newspaper article (Bideford Gazette-April 18<sup>th</sup> 1933) gives details of his son, also named Thomas Saunders who died in 1918. It states that he was the son of Thomas Saunders, draughtsman of Sea Lock, who trained him as a draughtsman and whom eventually became chief designer in turn of Coxes, Johnson and Restarick yards. He, Thomas jnr. was credited with designing among others, the *Sarah Neumann* of 1855, a full rigged ship which was and still remains the largest wooden sailing vessel ever built in North Devon and was among the ten largest vessels launched in the United Kingdom in 1855.

The *Margaret*, as well as being a one-off, was the first vessel built at Annery to carry a figurehead and was certainly intended for something more exciting than the limestone trade as she was sheathed and coppered for tropical waters. The nearest Lloyds register that I have to her launch year is 1839 which gives her as voyaging to the West Indies. There is a painting of her in existence which shows her with a row of stern windows, but unfortunately I have never managed to obtain a copy.

The ownership of the *Margaret* also differed from the previous vessels in that some of the owners were local merchants who had no financial interest in the Rolle Canal.

The principle owners were William Tardrew of Monkleigh, with 21 shares and George Braginton of Saint Giles, with 15. The remaining shareholders whom were all well known names in local shipping at this time being Thomas Burnard Chanter and Joshua Williams, both merchants; William Williams, sailmaker and John Howes, mariner, all with 6 shares and Josias Wren, merchant with 4 shares. She was re-registered under the new measurement system in 1841 and by this time due to various transactions the ownership of the vessel had changed, William Tardrew having sold off all his interest in the vessel and George Braginton with 17 (out of 64) holding the greatest number. On August 9<sup>th</sup> 1853 the *Margaret* was again re-registered, this time 'due to a change of owners', as George Braginton had over the previous 12 year's purchased the remainder of the vessel. By this time the *Margaret* had been reduced in rig to a brigantine. There were a few changes in ownership during her remaining years at Bideford, with George Braginton selling 21 shares, in 1855, to a Thomas Handford whom in turn, in 1861, sold 7 each to George Braginton; Frederick Holwill and Herbert Henry Pidgeon who were by now, according to Barry Hughes, partners in the Rolle Canal Company. In May 1865 the *Margaret* was sold out of Bideford to Weymouth owners and was then transferred to that port, thus severing any contact with both the Rolle Canal Company and Bideford. From new until at least 1866, her intended voyages, as recorded in Lloyds Register, was stated as either the West Indies or North America, although her final voyage ended in the Thames estuary.

The new and what turned out to be her final owners were a licensed victualler, Samuel White Board and a general merchant, Samuel Webb, both of Weymouth, with 32 shares each. The *Margaret* met her end off the Nore lightship on the November 5th 1869. It was not dramatic, except perhaps for her crew, all of whom were saved.

A letter in the grandly titled 'Essex Standard and General Advertiser for the Eastern Counties' published on Friday November 26th 1869 gives the details-

### **THE SCHOONER MARGARET OF WEYMOUTH**

#### **To the Editor of the Essex Standard**

Sir----I beg through the medium of your valuable journal to express the heartfelt thanks of myself and crew to Captain Ollet of the schooner John and Jane, of Lynn, for receiving us on board his vessel, at 3am on the 5th inst., after my ship had foundered off the Black Tail. I have also to tender similar thanks to Capt. John Salmon, of the smack Emily, of Colchester, who kindly received us from the John and Jane at 7 a.m. of the same day, and landed us at Sheerness at 10.30 a.m. I wish further to bear testimony to the kind treatment we received from the masters and crews of both of the said vessels whiles we were on board. By inserting this in an early impression you will oblige, Sir, your obedient servant,

**JOSHUA CHICK**

Master of the late schooner Margaret of Weymouth, November 11th 1869.

Of note is the fact that the master describes her as a schooner, if her rig had been cut down it was not recorded in her register as it was never amended. Also it took 10 days from her loss for her registry to be cancelled.

**Michael Guegan**

## POW WOW!

### A get-together of the big white chiefs.

On Tuesday 14th August, Roy Sutton (consultant civil engineer to IWA) arrived at my house. It had been arranged that he would have a look at the work that volunteers have been involved with on the Furzebeam section of Lord Rolle's Canal as well as the inclined plane and wheel-pit in order to prepare a report to present to the RC&NDWS as well as Matt Edworthy (co-ordinator of Life's Journey Project), Bill Horner (Devon County Council Archaeology Dept.) and Mike Williams (Environment Agency) all of whom I was due to meet with the following day.



A revetment showing signs of deterioration

Recently considerable concern has arisen as a result of structural damage to parts of the high, dry-stone wall revetments along the length of the Furzebeam section. It has been known for some time that parts of these revetments were bulging in places. The severe weather we experienced last winter has resulted in some considerable collapses of these bulges. Roy's

expertise was being sought to quantify the extent of this damage and to assess what level of skill would be required to make good repair. So far most of the work that has been undertaken to create a safe permissive footpath here has been achieved by unqualified and unskilled volunteers. At the moment it is outside



Roy examining a hole where the edge of the towpath has collapsed.

the remit of this society to become involved in the re-building of any canal structures but it does seem sensible to plan for the future. It would certainly be a great shame if all the effort that has already been spent so far on creating footpaths was wasted as a result of sections of towpath completely collapsing and disappearing down the hillside!

A long time was spent whilst Roy, aided by myself and Chris Jewell, meticulously measured, sketched, photographed and wrote comments about the walls. We then returned home for a quick cup of tea before moving back out to the inclined plane.

Other than all the work that had gone into clearing trees and scrub, (already swamped by nettles and brambles!) Roy thought that there had been little change to make him want to alter the report he had prepared on this site back in 2007.

Chris returned to Bude whilst Roy and I went back home. The following morning whilst the rain fell heavily he and I met with Matt, Mike and Bill and were joined by Barry Hughes, Tony Barnes, Chris Hassall and Greg Smith of the RC&NDWS.

We set off across the newly created EA salt-marsh field to look at the course of the canal at this point. There was some discussion about whether there was a need for archaeological exploration across the canal here but it was decided that very little was to be learned from it so we moved on to the 'stable block' at the foot of the inclined plane, had a brief look at it but then directed our attention to the inclined plane itself. Much to the surprise of Mike Williams, two employees of SW Highways were working here erecting fencing and a gate to prevent cattle from leaving the meadow and getting onto the slopes of the Tarka Trail (what was the railway embankment) or falling into the stream which they had recently dug out and diverted to alleviate flooding which had recently occurred at this point.

Unfortunately when heavy plant was used to divert the stream the workmen cut across where the inclined plane would have entered the lower pound. Being totally unaware of the historic nature of this site no effort was made to look at what was being excavated or keep an 'eye out' for unusual 'things' and a pile of spoil had been left in the most inconvenient place!

There has been a bit of trouble about this, I think!

Resulting from this meeting is that Greg Smith has agreed to set out an approach as to how a proper archaeological investigation may be undertaken here. Digging a small trench may sound simple enough but intentions, reasons, method statements, time-scales, not to mention the dreaded *Health and safety* requirements, all have to be drawn-up and agreed before

any spade can 'bite the dust'. However, this is an exciting step forward and doubtless Greg will be keeping us fully informed of his progress.

Mike Williams, having no EA responsibilities regarding the head of the inclined plane nor the wheel pit, left the rest of us to clamber up the side of the embankment to look at the remains here. Much discussion followed as to the virtue of excavating the wheelpit. Roy says that the most important action to be taken is to remove all the invasive, woody plants from the roof of the wheel pit since roots will eventually penetrate the underlying masonry. This will enable water to penetrate the masonry joints and frost will break them down. Roy also says that the majority of the damage to the Furzebeam section is also caused by plant growth which again must be stopped as an absolute priority.

We have not received a written report from Roy yet but verbally he reports that whilst some of the repair work may be undertaken by volunteers, the areas requiring attention will need specialist contractors to erect scaffold before any repairs may be considered. This will necessitate clearing the bottom of the wall where the scaffold is to go from all fallen stone and felled wood which in itself is quite some task.

Somewhat surprisingly there is no lime mortar or otherwise in any of the supporting walls nor those on either side of the actual water course. The damaged walls will need to be dismantled from the top down until a sound level is reached before any rebuilding can commence. A specialist in dry-stone walling will need to be employed, to work with, and oversee, any volunteers engaged in this activity. This employment along

with the cost of scaffold is likely to be expensive.

The good news is that the voluntary work is progressing well. A clearly defined, safe footpath is approaching completion. The sections of towpath which are creating concern can easily be circumvented and the likelihood of any accidents to walkers caused by further collapses is very slight. Hopefully sufficient funding can be acquired in the future to fully repair the walls and towpath for all to enjoy this wonderful stretch of canal!



**A short section of canal wall clearly showing no sign of any mortar between the stones.**

A brief comment about the structure of the canal. As has been stated already, the walls have been constructed without the use of any mortar. The canal was made waterproof by applying a thick layer of clay to its base and to the back surfaces of the walls which were then supported with rubble and then another, retaining dry-wall or the natural cliff edge. **Adrian Wills.**

# 'Down the Cut'

## **VOLUNTEER'S DAY:**

It is always very pleasing to welcome new members to the expanding list of volunteers. All those who have been involved with clearing and preparing the section of Lord Rolle's Canal at Furzebeam, to make a permissive footpath, report the pleasure and enjoyment their experiences have given them. Certainly they have achieved great results.

The date when this path can be officially opened to the general public is approaching faster than was anticipated which is very satisfying and a credit to those volunteers.

But, and there is always a 'But!'

There is still plenty of work to be done and more volunteers are needed! You do not need to be built like 'Charles Atlas' to be actively involved. There is much light, gardening-style activities but also we need some one to take photographs of the work as it happens and of the people who make it happen. Someone to make a written report of each Volunteer Day would be a great asset. There is always a need for the most important job on any site or in any office — **TEA MAKER**. Don't be shy! Come and give a hand. It's actually good fun and very satisfying! The next Volunteer's Day is on **Wednesday, 5th September**

Full details of where and when to meet contact:

**Tony Barnes**

**Tel: 01237 473 801 or email: [anthonybar@gmail.co.uk](mailto:anthonybar@gmail.co.uk)**

He'd love to hear from you!

# OPEN DAY at SEA LOCK

***'A day out for the family'***

Starting at 2.00pm

**Come and view the progress of restoration of this HISTORIC SITE as well as the TUB BOAT PROJECT.**

**Maps, pictures** and some of the **artefacts** found on site will be on display as well as artefacts on loan from the

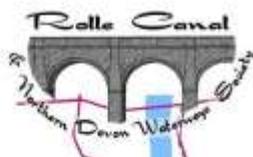
**North Devon Museum Trust**

**featuring** a very rare, **working, vintage tractor.**

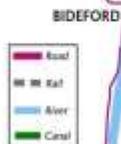
Entrance **£2.00** per person from Annery Kiln

**Refreshments will be available**

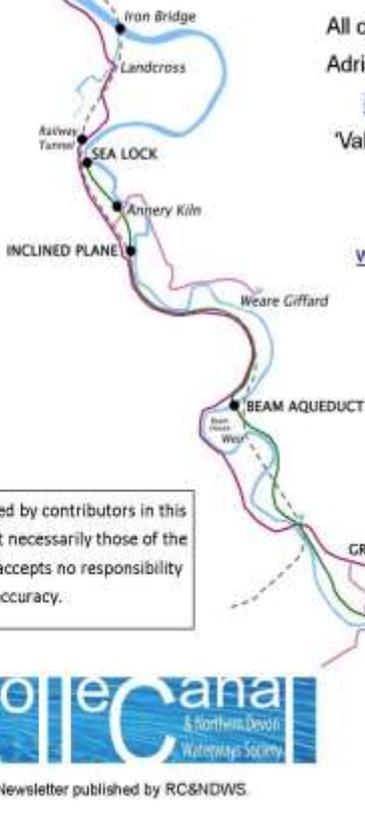
*Please note that parking at Annery Kiln is very limited and it is recommended that stout footwear is worn to access the canal site which may be muddy in parts.*



The RC&NDWS always welcomes volunteers who are prepared to help with a wide variety of society activities. Many of these tasks do not require long term commitment or massive physical ability but are all equally important to the successful running of the society. If you feel you can help in any way then please do not hesitate to make contact with the committee through the address below.



BIDEFORD



Our archives Officer, Norman Richards, is always looking for material, maps, pictures or text, relating to the Rolle family and canal. If you have anything which may be of interest to him, please contact hi by email at [norm@fhsinternet.com](mailto:norm@fhsinternet.com) or at the address given below:

All other enquiries to the Chair --  
 Adrian Wills tel. 01237 477705  
[info@therollecanal.co.uk](mailto:info@therollecanal.co.uk)  
 'Vale Cottage', 7, Annery Kiln,  
 Weare Giffard,  
 Devon, EX39 5JE  
[www.TheRolleCanal.co.uk](http://www.TheRolleCanal.co.uk)

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