

Rickmansworth Waterways Trust: a heritage education charity

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The Rickmansworth Waterways Trust at Batchworth Lock on the Grand Union Canal is run entirely by volunteers with a single paid member of staff (he speaker, who spent 30 years in the Metropolitan Police then took a gap year, started volunteering 5 years ago, on the retirement of the previous incumbent, 3 years ago turned a hobby into a job).

The Trust's vision is that everyone around Rickmansworth should know about the Trust and the waterways around. It looks after the heritage and provides amenities at Batchworth Lock, including a trip boat ("Pride of Batchworth"), information centre/shop and a fully working model canal. It provides an educational experience – "Learning at the lock" – for primary schools, undertakes outreach talks and cares for and presents the wooden 1936 historic boat "Roger", one of the last working narrow boats, which costs £10,000 per year to maintain. The Trust organises the Rickmansworth Festival in May each year (20-21 May 2017), with an expected attendance of 20,000 people over the weekend in the Aquadrome. It also provides experience and training to run the trip boat.

The history of Batchworth Lock

The Grand Union Canal was cut from London to Birmingham and opened in 1797. It is now mainly a leisure facility as opposed to the M1 of its time, carrying coal and other goods between London and Birmingham. Goods traffic reduced with the development of the railways and the canal declined in the 1960s and 1970s. In 1963 the winter deep freeze locked up the whole of the canal network for weeks. Pickfords were a major carrier on the canal way back in the 18th century. The area has not changed much since the canal was opened, though it is a bit more built up and there are more trees. There are now competing demands on use of the towpaths, e.g. between walkers and cyclists.

In its heyday, one man could pull one boat (20 tons) or one horse could pull 2 boats (50 tons), which was a considerable improvement on earlier goods traffic which was by horse and cart. There were stables all along the Grand Union Canal and there are still remnants of the original Grand Union Canal buildings, such as the floor of the stables at Batchworth. Canals have been misused a lot in the past with litter being dumped but the Trust works to educate people.

The Trust occupies the stables next to a former Benskins Pub, or two pubs, with the Railway Tavern at the higher level and the Boat Tavern at the lower level accessible only from the canal, a result of the fact that before 1948, the canal companies were all privately owned and the only people allowed on the canal towpath were canal people. Behind the Trust offices is the River Chess with a weir and fish ladder.