

Messing about on the water



The Wheelyboat Trust comes ashore to tell New Pathways how they're making boats more accessible for all

The Wheelyboat Trust came about as a result of a farmer's spinal injury and his friend's desire for the two of them to carry on fishing together.

Access on and around water for wheelchair users can be quite tricky, so when Bill Buchanan became disabled, it could easily have spelt the end of his interest in fly-fishing, but his friend Alan Faulkner had other ideas and set out on a quest to design and build a wheelchair-accessible boat.

In the early 1980s Alan's idea began to take shape. He began by setting up The Handicapped Anglers Trust in 1984 and with charities such as Action Research, Henry Smith and The Fishmongers' Company providing vital early funding support, his efforts culminated in the official launch of the Wheelyboat by Prince Charles at The

Fishmongers' Hall in September 1985.

Renamed The Wheelyboat Trust in 2004, it has been putting wheelchair accessible boats on the water for more than thirty years.

The charity does not operate the Wheelyboats, rather its role is to help public waters, groups and organisations to acquire Wheelyboats so they can provide the service themselves.

A Wheelyboat is a specially-designed boat which allows easy wheelchair access and movement around the craft.

All Wheelyboat models are designed to provide disabled people with a huge amount of independence and freedom on the water. They all have roll-on, roll-off access; their floors are open, level and accessible throughout, and they can be driven from a wheelchair.

The first Wheelyboat model looked

like a small landing craft, rectangular in shape and with a bow-door that lowered to form a ramp, its most noticeable feature. The boat was made of aluminium and 80 were built up until 1999, mostly supplied to trout fisheries.

However, since then a further six Wheelyboat models have been designed.

The original model was superseded by the Mk II which in turn was superseded by the Mk III in 2006. Each incarnation has become progressively larger with the capacity for passengers increased, better stability and improved design.

Two purpose-built fishing boats were added to the fleet, based on a standard design. They are specially fitted with a hydraulic platform that lowers the angler in their wheelchair to floor level.

The Trust's latest model, the V20, is

a fully-fledged inshore powerboat that seats up to ten people and can reach speeds in excess of 30mph.

Wheelyboats are open, powered, day-boats and can be used for a wide variety of activities. Most are self-operated, but some have a helmsman provided. People can use Wheelyboats for nature-watching, pleasure boating, angling and powerboating on inland and inshore waters. Some have bimini covers to give protection from the elements, but being open boats, users get to feel the wind in their hair quite literally!

Not only does the Trust design, build and supply Wheelyboats but it also raises funds to discount their cost. In order for a project to be successful, there needs to be a venue, a group of people prepared to operate the Wheelyboat, keep it insured and in good order, and people to benefit from using it.

The Wheelyboat's operators provide this infrastructure, but if there is a shortfall of funding to acquire the Wheelyboat then the Trust can step in and help.

In the Trust's early days demand for Wheelyboats mostly came from fisheries so the principal beneficiaries were disabled anglers. While angling remains close to the charity's heart, most Wheelyboats supplied today have a multi-purpose role.

They are used by people of all ages who have mobility impairments as a result of age, illness, accident or infirmity and by people with learning difficulties.

While Wheelyboats have been designed to be wheelchair accessible with a drive-from-wheelchair helm, it is not just wheelchair users who benefit but anyone who has some difficulty getting around.

Very importantly, it's an inclusive activity that mobility-impaired people and their friends and families can participate in together.

To date, 170 Wheelyboats have been supplied and the latest launch took place in October 2015 at Mylor Sailability near Falmouth in Cornwall.

Eight new Wheelyboats were supplied in 2015 - two went to fisheries in Ireland, two were launched on the Shropshire Canal and the Bridgewater & Taunton Canal and three Sailability groups and a youth group acquired

Right, director of The Wheelyboat Trust Andy Beadsley

Below, crowds cheer the new Wheelyboat on the Trust's 30th anniversary. Picture: Rob Judges

Bottom, The Mylor Sailability Launch. Picture: Tracey Boyne



If there is a suitable venue near you that should have a Wheelyboat but doesn't, let The Wheelyboat Trust know and they will help to acquire one. If you're part of a group that would like to operate a Wheelyboat yourselves, contact the Trust. If the Wheelyboat will benefit a group of disabled people or has a public role then the Trust will be able to help raise funds towards it and will visit with a Wheelyboat for a demonstration.
www.wheelyboats.org (01798) 342222
 E-mail: info@wheelyboats.org

Wheelyboats in England and Scotland.

Every time a new Wheelyboat is launched it becomes a favourite of the Trust, but there have been some more notable launches.

In 2014 the Trust celebrated its 30th anniversary with the launch of the Coulam Wheelyboat V20. The first V20 operates on the River Thames at Bisham Abbey Sailing School where it is used by the Accessible Boat Club to train disabled helmsmen to use the Wheelyboat independently and take out their friends and families on trips up and down the river.

In June 2015 the Overwater Wheelyboat project on the Shropshire Canal came to fruition with the launch of a Mk III, regularly used as a water taxi service for a local nursing home and recently featured on BBC Radio 4's Farming Today.

The 150th Wheelyboat launched operates in Chichester Harbour, where it provides pleasure and nature watching trips, the local population of seals being a popular attraction. In 2012, two Mk IIIs were launched at a Nature School in Denmark and in 2016, they will also be launching a V20 expanding Wheelyboats into Europe.



Top, The MK IV Wheelyboat which is fitted with a Suzuki engine Above, The Mylor Sailability Launch. Picture: Tracey Boyne
Left, a MK III Wheelyboat transporting villagers of Muchelney during the 2014 floods
Picture: The Wheelyboat Trust

Where to go for some fun on the water

Wheelyboats operate all over the UK, so wherever you live there should be a Wheelyboat near you. Here are a selection of some of the best:

Buckinghamshire
Accessible Boat Club – Pleasure boating and training on the River Thames.
www.bishamabbeyssailing.co.uk

Cheshire
Overwater Wheelyboat Project – Pleasure boating on the Shropshire Canal.
www.overwaterwheelyboat.co.uk

Cornwall
Mylor Sailability – Powerboating in the Fal estuary.
www.mylorsailingschool.co.uk

Dorset
Wareham Boat Hire – Pleasure boating on the River Frome.
www.warehamboat hire.co.uk

Norfolk
Norwich & District Pike Club – Coarse fishing on the River Yare.
Tel: 07776 221959

Renfrewshire
Castle Semple Centre – Powerboating and training on Castle Semple Loch.
www.clydemuirshiel.co.uk

Stirling
Lake of Menteith – Trout fishing and tuition. www.menteith-fisheries.co.uk

Teesside
Tees Wheelyboats Club – Pleasure boating on the River Tees.
www.tees-wheelyboats.org.uk

West Sussex
JQD Wheelyboat – Pleasure boating and nature watching in Chichester Harbour. www.jqdwhelyboat.co.uk

A new hope?

Last month the BBC aired a Panorama programme about a potential new treatment for MS. New Pathways editor Kahn Johnson sat down to watch...

Monday, January 18, seemed to be a day when people felt compelled to ask if I was going to watch Panorama's look at a new multiple sclerosis treatment being trialled in Sheffield.

I wasn't going to. I was off to watch Room.

Monday evening and Tuesday morning, the same people Tweeted and Facebooked me to ask if I'd seen the Panorama programme.

I hadn't. I'd watched Room. Enjoyed it too.

Which is more than can be said for the Panorama programme, which I sat down to watch on Tuesday as I had my lunch.

It being a programme by the BBC and Panorama, I was expecting a fair, balanced, honest look at a potential new treatment that could help people but comes with risks given that it involves stem cell transplants and chemotherapy.

Sadly, what I got instead was some kind of tabloid sensationalism, full of 'sufferers', 'miracle' cures and people with MS whose lives were over the minute they were diagnosed.

Now I know diagnosis is tough – it's taken me years to get my head round it. But at no point did I think my life was over. It had just changed. Radically, sure, but still on-ly changed. I was still alive.

And I know many fellow MSers who would say the same.

Panorama gave me the impression we're all marathon runners and snowboarders whose reason for living has been stripped away.

Personally I couldn't snowboard before I was diagnosed, never mind after...



So what message did that send out to the newly diagnosed? Or people, like me, who are doing OK at the moment?

Yes, I know Panorama aren't there to do a PR piece for living well with MS. But they shouldn't be there to scare the socks off you.

I like my socks. Leave them on.

And what about the side effects of chemo? Did I miss that bit? Or does everyone feel great straight away, if a smidge bald?

And what about all the other unanswered questions? Is the trial still open? Can it be carried out anywhere else? What about all the people who aren't relapsing-remitting but have primary or secondary progressive MS? What help is being pioneered for them?

Assuming the trials are successful, what would the cost be to the NHS in these budget-focused times? What about people who couldn't get on the trial but want to undergo the process somewhere else? How much would that cost an individual?

And crucially, who did it not work for? What happened to the people whose

immune system wasn't rebooted?

I know they only had half an hour, and could only cover a certain amount, but the 30 minutes we got served left me feeling disappointed.

Disappointed that only the extremes of the condition were highlighted. Disappointed that a more sensationalist approach was favoured. Disappointed that all the good work the MS charities en masse do in promoting a positive approach was being systematically undone.

Maybe it wasn't. Maybe people took something positive from the show and it was just me in a bad mood (hey, could happen...).

Part of me hopes so.

Here at New Pathways, we're planning to follow up on an interview we did with the team in Sheffield last year and get the answers to some of these questions.

When we do, you'll be the first to know. In the meantime, let us know what you thought by letter or e-mail. The details are on the letter's page.