

wheelyboats

HELP FOR DISABLED ON THE BEACH AND ON THE WATER

Words by **Sue Kittow**, photographs by westcountryphotographers.com

Sandchairs and Wheelyboats might sound like the title of a children's book, but are in fact two innovative designs to help the disabled enjoy summer activities. Getting onto a beach and moving around on sand can be almost impossible in a conventional wheelchair, so the Cornwall Disability Forum has come up with special wheelchairs with extra wide and bouncy tyres. These Sandchairs are now available for hire in Falmouth, St Ives, Bude, St Michael's Mount and Newquay.

All age groups can use these Sandchairs because of an adjustable lap strap which can secure younger users. If anyone wants a paddle, the Sandchairs can also go in the sea, meaning disabled users can enjoy a day on the beach as much as any able-bodied person.

Staying with a watery theme, The Handicapped Anglers' Trust was conceived in 1984 when Alan Faulkner's friend Bill Buchanan fell out of a tree and broke his back. He was left a wheelchair user, but Alan was determined that this wouldn't stop their regular fishing sessions. A group of people got together to get the project going, and Jonathan Jackson, a keen sailor and boatbuilder from Mylor, drew up the preliminary plans. "Designing yachts was a hobby of mine," he said, "so the offer of designing a Wheelyboat was an interesting challenge and a very worthwhile project to be involved in."

The first Wheelyboat was launched at Fishmongers Hall in 1985 by Prince Charles, and the Trust, now named The Wheelyboat Trust, continues to provide disabled people with access to waterborne activities. The first Wheelyboat cost £1,500 – now it's £16,000 and there are 132 of them around Britain including Stithians Lake, Siblyback Lake and Golant in Cornwall.

Accountant Andy Beadsley has been the director of the Wheelyboat Trust since 2002. "I got involved because I'm a fisherman and have been a Wheelyboat user since they first appeared," he told me. "I became involved with the Trust directly when I qualified as a fly-fishing instructor ten years ago. I offered my services to help demonstrate the →



Wheelyboat and was earmarked as a field officer. I'd met one or two of the trustees who said they needed a new director and was I up for it? I said yes and haven't looked back."

Wheelyboats provide their disabled users with their own independence: they make the entire water accessible, are easy to board via the roll-on, roll-off bow ramp and the level deck provides access to every corner of the boat including the helm. "Getting onto a boat is difficult if you're disabled and getting around the waters is also difficult, so the benefits are the same whatever the age," said Andy.

With Andy as director, the Trust has tried to look outside the 'one size fits all solution'. "We wanted to be able to offer a portfolio of different craft for different uses," Andy said. "The Mark III is our own design – it's more versatile with a wheelchair console so that even the most severely disabled people can experience helming the boat."

At 17ft long and 6.5ft wide, the Mark III Wheelyboat is significantly larger than previous designs and can accommodate up to eight people. There is also plenty of space on board for tackle and other equipment.

"The Wheelyboat Trust helped fund this latest model, which was launched in Golant and is operated by villagers Alan and Ann Barker," added Andy. "They will provide local and visiting disabled people with guided boating on the river for bird and nature-watching, pleasure trips and angling. There are more than five miles of navigable river estuary between Fowey and Lostwithiel for trips like these. Up until now, no public access to these activities has existed on the Fowey estuary for disabled people, especially wheelchair users."

This is the first Wheelyboat to be used in tidal waters but the Trust hopes it will be the first of many in the South West. "The Mark III complies fully with regulations governing the supply of boats for this purpose and is licensed as a trip boat by the harbour master," explained Andy. The creeks around the estuary at Golant are relatively sheltered, but are still salt water so will give Wheelyboat users a real flavour of the sea. "However," he added, "the most exciting feature of this project is being able to ferry disabled people to a secluded but accessible floating bird hide owned by Ann and Alan in Penpol Creek."

The Trust's patrons include Sir Matthew Pinsent.

Baroness Golding, Jeremy Paxman and Bernard Cribbins. "One of the trustees was an editor at the BBC and knew Jeremy Paxman quite well," said Andy. "He's a keen angler and has been a patron ever since. Bernard Cribbins also presents awards for us and phones to see how things are going."

Dick Strawbridge, local celebrity and campaigner for all things sustainable, launched the Wheelyboat Mark III at Golant in April 2010. Churchtown Farm at nearby Lanlivery is Vitalise's (national disability charity) accessible centre for adults and children with physical, sensory and learning disabilities. "The children from Churchtown Farm will be able to use this Wheelyboat and it will also be available for private holiday-makers," said Andy.

Seeing the joy on the Churchtown youngsters' faces as they had their first taste of the sea in the Wheelyboat reinforces the importance of such a charity, and must make those involved realise that all their hard work has been worthwhile. As

Dick Strawbridge said when he cut the ribbon: "The Wheelyboat will fill people's days and it will make them smile."

That sunlit afternoon

in Golant was an

excellent start. **T**

if you require more information about the work of the Wheelyboat Trust, or if you would like to explore the possibility of obtaining a Wheelyboat including arranging a demonstration, please contact: Andy Beadsley, info@wheelyboats.org, 01798 342222, www.wheelyboats.org

SANDCHAIRS

- ▲ Sandchairs can be booked in advance for £5 per day plus returnable deposit
- ▲ They are suitable for all ages/sizes and can also be used in the water
- ▲ Contact Disability Cornwall 01736 759500 or e-mail: info@disabilitycornwall.org.uk