

PRESS RELEASE

Issued: 20 February 2026

NATIONAL WATERWAYS MUSEUM, ELLESMERE PORT, CELEBRATES GOLDEN ANNIVERSARY YEAR (1976-2026)

A special Easter Historic Boat Gathering in early April will herald in an exciting year of 50th birthday celebrations at Ellesmere Port's National Waterways Museum.

Organised by the Canal & River Trust charity, the popular annual event (3-6 April 2026) will this year welcome around 40 colourful narrowboats and barges from across the country to the Cheshire museum, which is home to the nation's largest collection of historic boats.

Gifford, a former horse-drawn tar boat, will be one of the stars of the show as it celebrates its own 100th birthday with a fresh coat of paint by expert canal boat artist Phil Speight, who was awarded an MBE in 2024 for services to heritage crafts.

One of the highlights of the weekend will be a chance to pick up expert tips and techniques from Phil at two special 'Roses and Castles' boat painting workshops on Easter Saturday and Sunday.

The Easter Gathering weekend starts on Good Friday, about 11am, with the arrival of a spectacular historic boat flotilla along the Shropshire Union Canal. Visitors can then enjoy four days of boat trips, horse boating, harnessing and lock demonstrations, live music, craft workshops, stalls and family activities.

Later in the year, special events will include a fabulous, quirky Steampunk Weekend (18 & 19 April), special Golden Anniversary celebrations (12-14 June), a Vintage Vehicle Weekend (27 & 28 June) and World Chocolate Day (Sunday 5 July), as well as costumed characters bringing the old docks to life on several Canal Town Sundays through July and August.

Canal & River Trust

E: press.office@canalrivertrust.org.uk **W:** www.canalrivertrust.org.uk **Twitter:** [@CanalRiverTrust](https://twitter.com/CanalRiverTrust)

Canal & River Trust is a charitable company limited by guarantee, registered in England and Wales with company number 7807276 and registered charity number 1146792, registered office address: National Waterways Museum, Ellesmere Port.

On offer will be new exhibitions, a family-friendly museum trail and exclusive behind-the-scenes tours of the museum as a location for TV blockbusters such as *'Peaky Blinders'* and the new Netflix *'House of Guinness'* series.

The anniversary is also being marked by several restoration projects, including a Historic England-funded renovation of the site's Grade II Listed Pumphouse, which houses an impressive Victorian steam engine that once powered dock machinery for more than 100 years.

Preservation work will also be taking place on two important National Historic Fleet registered boats – Gifford and 'Basuto', the oldest surviving Clyde puffer boat (named due to the puffing sound of her steam engine).

Canal & River Trust North West director Jon Horsfall said: "The National Waterways Museum at Ellesmere Port plays an important role in preserving some of our nation's key historic boats and explaining the important story of how our canals made a vital contribution to Britain's Industrial Revolution.



Queen Elizabeth visiting in 1976

"We owe an immense debt of gratitude to those early volunteers in the 1970s, whose inspired determination to preserve the past resulted in the restoration of some of the wonderful port buildings and canal features we enjoy today.

“Now in 2026, volunteers still make a valuable contribution to the running of the seven-acre site, working alongside our staff to welcome more than 20,000 visitors a year. During our special anniversary it would be great to see even more people enjoying a fantastic visit to our superb waterside museum.”

The idea for a new boat museum was first floated in September 1970 at a meeting of passionate canal enthusiasts. The ‘North Western Museum of Inland Navigation’ group was launched a year later. Volunteer work parties began to restore the site at the junction of the Shropshire Union Canal and the Manchester Ship Canal/River Mersey, and in June 1976, the new ‘Boat Museum’ was officially opened to the public by canal campaigner and author, Sonia Rolt.

Since then, the museum has hosted over a million visitors and highlights have included a visit by HM Queen Elizabeth II and the Duke of Edinburgh in 1979, and a ‘Museum of the Year’ award from the Council of Europe in 1985.

In 1999, The Waterways Trust, a charitable arm of British Waterways, was invited to step in to manage the museum, linking it with similar museums at Gloucester Docks and Stoke Bruerne to become a new ‘National Waterways Museum’. In 2012 the Canal & River Trust charity took over responsibility for the museum, along with 2,000 miles of inland waterways in England and Wales.

Still volunteering half a century on are Hoylake couple Mike and Cath Turpin. Now in their early eighties, they regularly devote two or three days a week to the museum.

Former teacher, Cath said: “I’ve been proud to be part of something very special that continues to have relevance. Our early tasks included securing the decaying buildings against vandalism and looking after the increasing number of boats being acquired by the museum. We also got involved in fundraising. It was the industrial heritage that drew us in. This museum tells the stories of working boats and people that so often go unmentioned.

“I am still involved in the hands-on work, helping to look after the tar boat Gifford and Mike volunteers with the collections team and the boat activity group. I also volunteer in the archive, give talks and take visitors on guided tours. There’s always something to do!”

The Canal & River Trust would be delighted to hear from anyone wishing to support the charity by donating or joining the enthusiastic volunteering team at the museum.

For more information about visiting and to book discounted tickets, visit the museum website <https://canalrivertrust.org.uk/places-to-visit/national-waterways-museum>. The National Waterways Museum, Ellesmere Port, is open 10am – 4pm, five days a week during the winter (Wednesday – Sunday), six days in spring/summer (Tuesday – Sunday) and every day during bank holidays and school holidays.

Museum History - Key Dates

- 1970** Creation of a new waterway museum discussed at a meeting of canal enthusiasts in the Ring O'Bells pub in nearby Daresbury on 29 September.
- 1971** Inaugural meeting of the 'North Western Museum of Inland Navigation' (NWMIN) at Manchester University.
- 1974** First working party at Ellesmere Port site, led by Tony Hirst.
- 1976** Boat Museum officially opened by canal campaigner Sonia Rolt, wife of Tom Rolt, founder of the modern canal restoration movement. Staffed entirely by volunteers.
- 1977** First Easter Gathering of historic boats.
- 1979** Visit of HM Queen Elizabeth II and Duke of Edinburgh to Museum on 2 November.
- 1981** Creation of the Boat Museum Trust to run the museum. Financial support from Ellesmere Port and Neston BC, Cheshire County Council and NWMIN.
- 1981** NWMIN buys 10 Porters Row. Derelict land grant finances the restoration of the Island Warehouse and a new exhibition.
- 1981/82** Toxteth riots in Liverpool prompt the creation of a new Merseyside Taskforce, which leads to Government funding for the restoration of the remaining dock buildings. Visits from Michael Heseltine and PM Margaret Thatcher.
- 1985** The Museum is awarded the Council of Europe 'Museum of the Year'.
- 1987** Opening of the Porters Row houses to the public.
- 1990** Opening of the David Owen Archive on the ground floor of the restored slipway workshops by the Duke of Westminster.
- 2000** The Museum is rescued by The Waterways Trust, a charitable arm of British Waterways, after it experiences financial problems. It joins with waterways museums in Gloucester and Stoke Bruerne to become the National Waterways Museum.
- 2003** Heritage Lottery Funding is secured to revamp the Island Warehouse exhibition, shop and café.
- 2009** The Heritage Boatyard is opened.
- 2012** The British Waterways Archive collection is moved from Gloucester to an expanded archive facility at Ellesmere Port.
- 2012** The Canal & River Trust charity is created from British Waterways and The Waterways Trust and takes over management of the National Waterways Museum and Archive.
- 2017** The Big Lift. Many sunken boats from around the port were craned out and moved to a warehouse on nearby Rossfield Industrial Estate.
- 2023** Museum trip boat refurbished and run by volunteers.
- 2026** 50th anniversary celebrations

- ends-

For further media requests please contact:

Lynn Pegler

m 07783 686246 e lynn.pegler@canalrivertrust.org.uk

or Cath Logan

m 07788898052 e cath.logan@canalrivertrust.org.uk

Canal & River Trust

Notes to Editors

The Canal & River Trust cares for and brings to life 2,000 miles of canals and rivers across England & Wales. We believe waterways have the power to make a difference to people's lives and that spending time by water can make us all healthier and happier. By bringing communities together to make a difference to their local waterway, we are creating places and spaces that can be used and enjoyed by everyone, every day.

www.canalrivertrust.org.uk @CanalRiverTrust