

# Nene better!



After twenty-three years of trying to get to the IWA Northampton Spring Rally - always frustrated by the day-job - **Tim Coghlan** finally got there this year. But only because he had been invited to open it! Here he takes a lighter look at his first impressions of this very enjoyable cameo canal-festival

**T**here is a saying - perhaps made more appropriate in view of the Royal Wedding on the day preceding my opening of the three day IWA Northampton Rally – *Three times a bridesmaid, never a bride!* In my now rapidly approaching 23 years of running Braunston Marina, I have been involved in organizing nine Braunston Boat Shows and now the ninth Braunston Historic Narrowboat Rally. Regardless of with whom we have organized those events – and they have include the IWA - it has always been my task to find the celebs to open them, to brief them, and sometimes even writing their lines. They got all the glory for a ten-minute turn-up, when my team and I had done all the weeks and months of work. It all seemed so very unfair. But with my invitation to open the 2011 IWA Northampton Rally, it was at last my turn to turn-up and pose, and to say a few choice words. The bridesmaid was at last the bride!

The occasion also at last gave me the excuse to come to the now long established IWA Northampton Rally – an event which has been going on far longer than the all the rallies and boat shows I have organized put together. The reason I had not come before, is that this first May Bank Holiday is traditionally the opening of the summer season on our waterways, and not working that weekend is like Father Christmas opting out of Christmas Eve. But with an invitation like this, I just had to tear myself away.

It was a great honour for me to be there, as the more I have learnt over the years about the IWA, the more I stand in awe of its great achievements in saving and the restoring our waterways, and today keeping them alive. And this is no more so than in Northamptonshire, where thanks to the hard work of the IWA - bar the lost section of the Grand Union Buckingham Arm - every bit of its extensive ancient canals and navigable rivers both survive and remain navigable. This is in dramatic contrast to Northamptonshire's railways, where in 1900 there were 107 stations and today there are just seven, with two on the brink of closure.

At 11.00am, my five minutes of fame at last arrived, and I made a brief speech from the Town Lock footbridge to the mustered throng – for I ➡

**ABOVE: Bantock Banter:** Draco Crafts selling chandlery and canalware from their highly colourful historic late 19th century Bantock butty *Success*. They are a regularly feature at waterway rallies and festivals. The opposite bank of the River Nene shows the wasted opportunity to create a walkway there for residents in the new developments on that side. Instead the riverside edge of the redeveloped old timber wharf is now little more than an untidy mess, with bland modern flat developments beyond, and not a restaurant or pub in sight. The promise to reinstall the old wharf crane has never been met. Northampton planners just don't do vision! (*Tim Coghlan*)





The view from the bridge: Some of the seventy boats that attended, seen here moored four or five deep along the River Nene towpath, with ample room beyond in the river's wide waters for sailing and canoeing. The potential for developing this stretch of water for further water and leisure activities including pubs and restaurants is enormous – not to mention a possible future IWA National Rally. *(Tim Coghlan)*

⇒ share the belief that for a speech to be immortal, it need not be eternal. Joining me on this podium were John Pomfret, IWA Regional Chairman and Bernard Morton the Northampton IWA Branch Chairman. In my few words I said, 'I believe that no other county in Britain can match Northamptonshire in keeping its waterways open. Indeed given the visitors that come from all over the world to use and enjoy them, we have something in Northamptonshire qualifying for UNESCO World Heritage status.'

I then went on: 'However there is no excuse to relax. There are still plenty of challenges ahead, including continued cuts in government funding for the waterways. And now there is the threat posed by the new London to Birmingham High Speed Rail Link, with the proposed canal crossings sometimes a mere five feet above water level. There is also the challenge of creating a new generation of younger boaters, keen to preserve and take forward the great achievements of the IWA to date. And then there is still that Buckingham Arm down at Cosgrove to restore.'

I continued, 'Important in all of this, is the message that waterways are here for all of us to enjoy. You can just have fun, as everyone here today has chosen to do. And on my waterborne version of a busman's holiday, I intend to do just that!' And then with a fine flourish, I declared, 'Well done the IWA for saving and preserving our wonderful inland waterways. It now only remains for me to formally declare the 2011 Northampton Boat Rally open!' At last I had opened a rally, and a rather good one at that.

There then followed the Prince Charles bit of going round the Rally. But not before a visit to the IWA Members' beer tent where a pint of finest local Frog Island Brewery was quickly dispatched and where I was presented with a mounted rally plaque by Bernard Morton, the hard working Northampton Branch Chairman. There was lots to see and enjoy as a land visitor, with a number of former working narrow boats amongst the 70 odd boats that had come to the event. They included our own Braunston based *Raymond & Nutfield*, which are now very much stars of the summer circuit of rallies and boat shows.

One stall that really caught my eye was the Buckingham Canal Society. If an award were to be made for the canal society that just won't give up, they would be in contention. There was a fine display of their hopes and achievements in restoring where they could. Importantly I learnt that they had got the Buckingham District Council on side and convinced them they were serious to the extent that restoring the canal is now in the local



plan. Their stall also had a white elephant section to which you could give all those unwanted Christmas and birthday presents – no questions asked – for them to sell for the Cause. A lady volunteer told me of the large sums they regularly raised at rallies from this, and they make sure things are sold for their true value. My wife's eyes lit up at this, and I feared my bottom draw would never be safe again.

Then there were the interviews with the local media, which gave me the opportunity to air a view I have had in my twenty odd years living near Northampton, and that is the town's scandalous neglect and destruction of its potentially wonderful waterside. The *Northampton Chronicle & Echo* reported me as saying, 'Northampton has turned its back on its waterways shamelessly and I just hope it will change now.'

Things would have been a lot worse but for the endeavour of the Northampton IWA – who calls its excellent quarterly newsletter just that – *Endeavour*. Amongst the major waterside casualties was the still navigable riverside above the junction with the Northampton Arm of the Grand Union Canal which has been irreparably destroyed by a huge out-of-town style shopping centre with a Berlin Wall look-a-like flood barrier hard against the river. But now they are getting better. In the area of Becketts Park, there are some riverside walkways and the new 80-berth marina opened just in time for the Rally. This will welcome visiting boaters, and give their boats a safe haven, whilst their crews can explore this interesting town. There they will find one of the few round Knights Templar churches in England, and in the town centre what the great architectural historian Nikolaus Pevsner regarded as the finest English Baroque church outside of London and Oxbridge. There are also some good restaurants and what is regularly voted the best regional theatre in the country – the now beautifully restored *Theatre Royal*. And not to mention the rugby, the cricket and a load of cobblers.

Beyond and below Northampton are the waters of the River Nene, which was opened to navigation 250 years ago this year – another theme of the Rally. In the same article on the Rally in which I was mentioned,





the *Northampton Chronicle & Echo* quoted IWA's Regional Chairman John Pomfret as saying, 'The Nene is widely recognized as being one of England's loveliest rivers. But sadly it is under-used. We hope that this national festival will focus attention on the undoubted attractions of this waterway whilst also spot-lighting the benefits of a busy waterfront sited in a park so conveniently close to the town centre.'

And so after these interesting explorations, it was back to the beer tent



for a final Frog Islander, where the gossip was that, with the opening of the marina and other hoped-for improvements to the area around Beckets Park, the IWA National Rally might find its way here again in a couple of years time – as it did all those years ago in 1971. Well that would be another good excuse for me to give up the day-job on a Bank Holiday. And having enjoyed myself so much this year, I will be available to open it - if invited! 🍷

**CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: Jam Today:** Diana Golder of the Friends of Raymond selling pots and pots of homemade jam 'ole jam. Thanks of a gallant force of Friends, butty *Raymond* and its motor *Nutfield* are now regularly participators in the annual pageant of rallies and boat shows – often stealing the show. *(Tim Coghlan)*

**Boaters enjoying the spring sunshine:** David Danes on his historic narrow boat *Cyprus* and Julia Cook on her coal boat *Towcester*. *(Tim Coghlan)*

**A man who in his time has played many IWA parts:** - David Blagrove, author of *Waterways of Northamptonshire*, former Northampton IWA Chairman, and many other IWA roles, and now Chairman of the Friends of Stoke Bruerne Museum, enjoying the Rally. *(Tim Coghlan)*

**Five minutes of fame:** Tim Coghlan of Braunston Marina formally opening the Rally from the Town Lock Bridge, with (L) John Pomfret, IWA Regional Chairman and (R) Bernard Morton, Northampton Branch Chairman. Fixed to the bridge was information about the new 80 berth marina due for 'Completion in March 2011' - but fortunately just opened in time for the IWA Rally in early May. It will be a great asset for encouraging greater use of the River Nene and bringing visiting boaters to Northampton. *(Lynda Payton)*

