

CREATING A SENSE OF PLACE

A Q&A with GEORGE ROGERS, inaugural chair of the new Restoration Delivery Group, who is managing and coordinating IWA's restoration activities



George Rogers, Chesterfield Canal Camp 2011.
GEMMA BOLTON

What first drew you to waterways restoration and what has kept you involved?

I used to live by the Cromford Canal in Derbyshire and saw the early stages of that restoration. We did a few work parties, reed pulling etc. When I was 18, and in-between going from school to university, my dad was determined that I was not going to just sit at home for 10 weeks of the summer so he sent me the link to the WRG canal camps. I booked two weeks at the Hereford & Gloucester to build the slipway. I just fell in love with it really. There were people on that camp that I'm still friends with today.

As chair of the Restoration Delivery Group, what are your priorities for the next few years and where do you think IWA and WRG can make the most difference?

My priority is to get restoration moving again within IWA. Getting structure set up and things moving versus people wanting it to be functioning already is quite the delicate balance.

There will always be a focus on health and safety and general practice. You see early photographs of canal restoration with people in their bobble hats – it was a different world then! There's a lot that IWA can do – raising its profile, and supporting people with training and knowledge sharing. That's come particularly into focus with the CRT restoration delivery plan, because that's really pushing in the same direction.

Beyond that, I want to focus on supporting organisations to look more at sustainability in all senses. People think of sustainability purely as environment but it's everything. Canals that are being restored now – the canal societies will be the long-term guardians of those canals. They have got to be thinking about sustainability. Are they going to be able to keep attracting volunteers 100 years in the future to maintain it?

What's the biggest misconception that people have around waterways restoration?

A lot of people do it because of boating. I've done talks in the past and I've asked people in the room, "Why do you do it?" Put your hand up if it's about boating, economic regeneration, environment... Anecdotally, maybe 80% to 90% of people have said it is about boating for them.

I've written funding applications and I've engaged with local authorities but none of them is remotely interested in boats really. Fundamentally, they see canals and canal restoration as about regeneration. It does depend on the audience a bit but we need to understand: why are we doing it in the first place?

Why is waterways restoration still important in 2026 and what benefits does it bring to our communities?

It's massively important because of what it can achieve in an area. Think of some of the transformations that we've seen in Birmingham. With my day-job hat on, at

Chesterfield, we launched a masterplan last year to look at when the canal is restored and what was going to happen around it. It is about creating a sense of place and generating job opportunities, making towns a nicer place to be.

What would you say to people who'd like to support restoration but don't know where to start?

You can support restoration by going out there on the ground with the regional work groups. Or, if you have a local restoration society, go along and talk to them to see what support they need.

Of the restoration projects that you've worked on, which has taught you the most and why?

There's a very easy answer to that question: Chesterfield has taught me most. (There is a caveat to that – I work for the Chesterfield.) When you do something five days a week for seven years, you will learn a lot. Every restoration I've worked on has taught me something. For example, my first project on the Hereford & Gloucester was where I started to learn about restoration in general. I also volunteered with Friends of the Cromford Canal where I learned how to design a website, which is not something I knew much about. I have a lot of time for Lichfield & Hatherton – what they're doing is phenomenal. I went to Shrewsbury & Newport recently and was amazed by what they're doing at Wappenshall. I think it's important that all societies learn from each other.