

From Field to Festival

Richard Hill goes behind the scenes of the IWA National Waterways Festival for a look at how members of the Waterway Recovery Group turn a flat field site into a buzzing, thriving, mini town!

**waterway
recovery
group**

VOLUNTARY, but not Amateur. Nothing better can describe the work of the Waterway

Recovery Group (WRG) at the National Waterways Festival. In contrast to the chaotic image created at the pantomime and at the boaters games, the WRG is a highly organised group that functions in a manner that would put some commercial organisations to shame.

Members of the group, or WRGies as they are more affectionately known, are all volunteers who give up their time, even pay their own expenses, to provide free labour at work camps. Most are canal-restoration based, but this camp, the 19th this year, concentrates exclusively on the build up, running, and break-up of the National Waterways Festival.

Volunteers come from a wide range of backgrounds. Some bring their vocational expertise, while others use the opportunity to do something entirely different to their usual occupation. Some take part as part of the Duke of Edinburgh's award scheme. Volunteers come from all parts of the country, even abroad. This year, the Agency Movimento Cristiano Per La Pace arranged work placements at the festival work camp for students Sabine Rabourdin and Sophie Collet from Paris and Sabina Rocco from Rome.

Volunteers of all ages take part. 12 year old Luke Worthington isn't yet old enough to officially become a 'WRGie', volunteers must be over 16, so he helps out while the festival is open to the public under the supervision of his parents. This is Luke's sixth Festival. His tenth, in 2001, will be the year he can become a fully fledged 'WRGie' His WRG T-shirt reads:



◆◆◆ Helen Garner still manages a smile while doing one of the more unsavoury jobs; litter picking.

'2001, A WRG oddity.'

In contrast, one of the oldest WRGies is 72 year old Bill Crockett who joined the WRG in 1971 and the combined ages of volunteer plumbers; Ken, Pat and Laurence is 228 years. These three were amongst the first on the site some weeks before the festival opened. Between them they have laid around 2 miles of water and drainage pipelines around the site.

Six days before the festival opens, the work camp was already well established, and a complex catering operation gets under way. In charge is volunteer Maureen Amos who has the unenviable task of co-ordinating the planning and preparation of over 3000 meals for the duration of the camp.

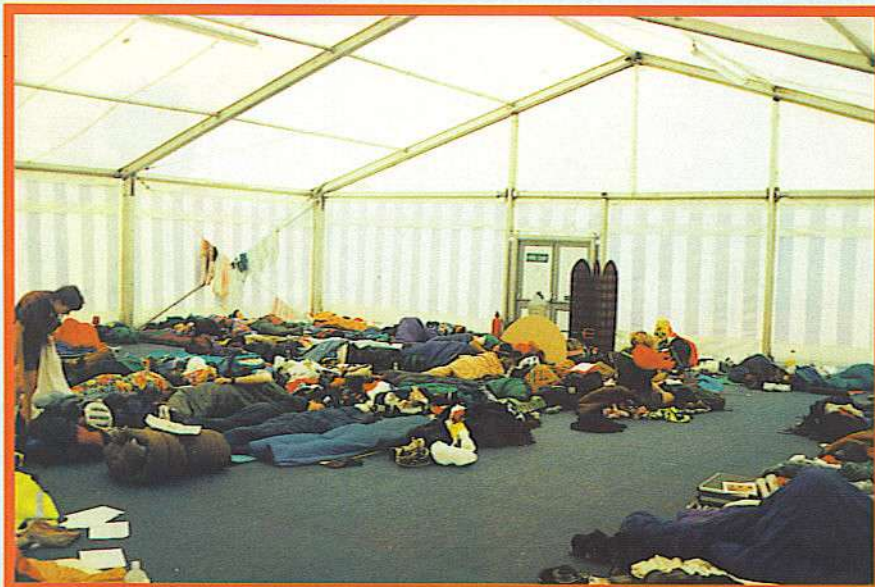
In the days leading up to the festival, more volunteers arrive daily. Some seasoned volunteers, others first-timers. All are given a short safety course as Health and Safety regulations apply to voluntary just as much as to any commercial organisation. In addition WRGies have to be aware of, and able to rectify, potential hazards in advance of the site opening to the public. Teams of volunteers regularly carry out general housekeeping checks on the site to ensure that everything is at its best.

At its peak, during the open days of the festival, the work camp is home to around 150 volunteers. Accommodation is lean, volunteers finding what floorspace they can for their sleeping bag and kit in the accommodation marquee.

In effect, these volunteers build and maintain a temporary town. A town that has over 1000 homes (680 boats and 350 camping units), 260 businesses and 30,000 visitors. Managing the creation, administration and dismantling of such a community is a tremendous task. Team



◆◆◆ WRG volunteers digging in cables. Left to right: Marcus James, Harry Watts, Ian Whitehead, Elinor Mathieson and Andrew Newman.



◆◆◆ 6 am Friday. No lie-in this morning. Breakfast is at 7 and lots more work ahead for the 130 volunteers seen here in their accommodation marquee.

leader Gavin Moor, and his assistant Mitch, co-ordinate the work of the volunteers and assign tasks in accordance with the workload. In the days leading up to the festival, the various 'department' heads have a meeting at 6pm each day to review the progress of the build up. The team includes those with responsibility for marketing, communication, media, security, waterspace management, camping site, traffic management, supplies etc. and, of course, WRG team leaders Gavin and Mitch. They call this the daily 'wash-up' meeting and it is an important administrative feature that ensures clear communication between the various departments of the festival.

Thursday night, the eve of the festival. A team of volunteers are still working after dark, with only 12 hours to go before the festival opens. Car headlights and torches illuminate their work area as they 'just finish this bit off'. It is

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◆◆◆ An evening meal is prepared for hungry volunteers at the Festival Work Camp.



◆◆◆ Working late into the night on the eve of the Festival (10.20pm), Roger Burchett (on excavator), Mike Palmer (WRG Chairman) and Ed Jones burying cables.



◆◆◆ A packed house for the WRG panto - Snow White and the Seven Wharves!

◆◆◆ BEHIND THE SCENES

➤ enthusiasm such as this that makes the festival such a success.

WRGies have erected over a mile of fencing, buried water and sewage pipes, electricity and communication cables. They have cleared weed from the Thames, reinforced, repaired or replaced broken and eroded piling. Car parks, camp sites, exhibition areas have all been surveyed and marked out. Fire extinguishers, gas bottles, litter bins have been installed. Toilet blocks have been plumbed in, electricity generators sited. They have made paths, and assisted erecting tents and marquees.

By Friday morning, the site is ready for the public. Now the duties change. WRGies become car park attendants, guides, announcers, litter pickers, maintenance engineers and... stage hands. WRGies prepare for one of the most popular events for boaters at the festival, the Saturday night pantomime.

An estimated audience of around 1000 crams the marquee, many of whom have queued for over an hour to get a good seat. *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, is probably the best amateur production in the UK. This is especially true considering the limited amount of rehearsal time available to the cast.

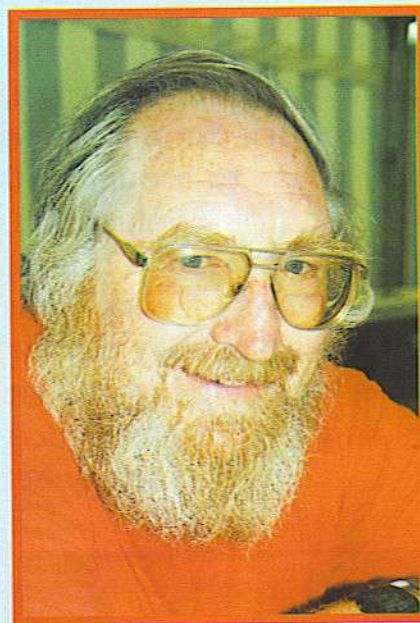
The WRG has a fleet of vehicles and plant equipment that are necessary for canal-restoration projects. All are funded by voluntary contribution, and at this years festival they took delivery of their latest acquisition, a Ford transit mini-bus. The money for this vehicle was raised through the IWA's Golden Jubilee Appeal. As a tribute to the late Richard Bird, who raised over £10,000 towards the appeal, WRG have had the vehicle registered with a personalised number plate bearing Richard's initials.

WRGies put an immense amount of effort into preparing the festival for us to enjoy and they're a great bunch of



◆◆◆ Car park duty is just one of the services provided by WRG volunteers while the Festival is open to the public.

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◆◆◆ Bill Crockett, the oldest WRG volunteer at the Festival Work Camp, is 72 years old. He joined WRG in 1971.

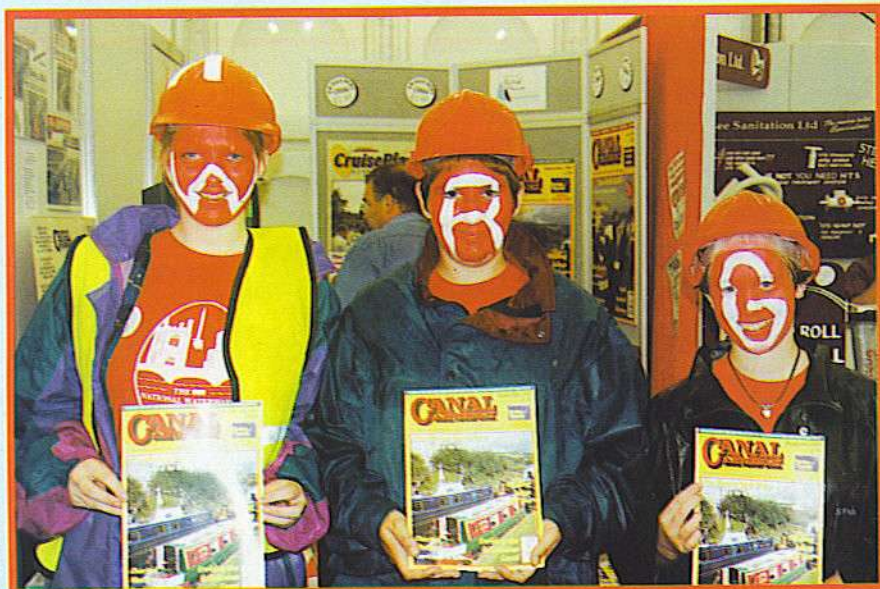
people who know how to work hard while at the same time, having fun.

When the festival closes, they take it all down again and turn it back into a field, and they'll do it all again next year.

If you would like further information on the Waterway Recovery Group, write or telephone: WRG Enquiries., 114 Regents Park Road, London, NW1 8UQ Tel: 0171 586 2510. ↓

MANY THANKS WRG!

The author would like to thank the organisers of the WRG Festival Work Camp 1997, and all volunteers for allowing unrestricted access in the course of researching this article, and for their considerable assistance and co-operation.



◆◆◆ WRG volunteers take time out to visit the Canal & Riverboat stand. Left to right: Izzy Gascoigne, Ally Mackender and Kirsty Wallace.