

CBOA freight by water

CBOA NEWS — SUMMER 2026

Decarbonising the Future of Marine: Looking to the next 30 years

London's Second River: The Commercial Potential of the River Lee

CHAIRMANS REPORT

SUMMER 2026



Lee Wilshire
CBOA Chair

This edition marks a new chapter for **CBOA News** and for the way the Commercial Boat Operators Association communicates with members, stakeholders and the wider water freight sector.

For many years, **CBOA News** has provided an important record of activity across the commercial inland waterways sector, bringing together updates from operators, navigation authorities, policy discussions and individual projects. This revised edition builds on that work while taking a slightly different approach.

The most obvious change is the format. We are moving from the previous smaller B5 style to a full A4 publication, giving more space for articles, photographs and clearer presentation. We are also moving to a single annual edition rather than two newsletters each year. This does not mean CBOA intends to communicate less. The annual publication will sit alongside more regular updates through the CBOA LinkedIn page and wider social media activity, helping us share members' work more often and keep the case for waterborne freight visible throughout the year.

The newsletter itself can then take a more editorial tone: less simply a record of recent news, and more a place to reflect on the wider issues, opportunities and challenges facing commercial navigation. That matters because the inland waterways sector remains too often overlooked in national freight, construction, planning and environmental discussions. CBOA's role is to keep making the case that moving goods and materials by water is not a historic curiosity, but a live and useful part of the transport mix.

Over the past year, the Association has continued to represent members through engagement with government, navigation authorities and industry partners. I continue to sit on CRT's Navigation Advisory Group and Moorings sub-group, while our Vice Chair, Tim West, remains an active member of CRT Council and sits alongside me on the Logistics UK Water Council. Jonathan Mosse continues to represent the Association in Scotland and on the IWA Freight Group, ensuring that the inland freight perspective is recognised in wider transport and logistics discussions.

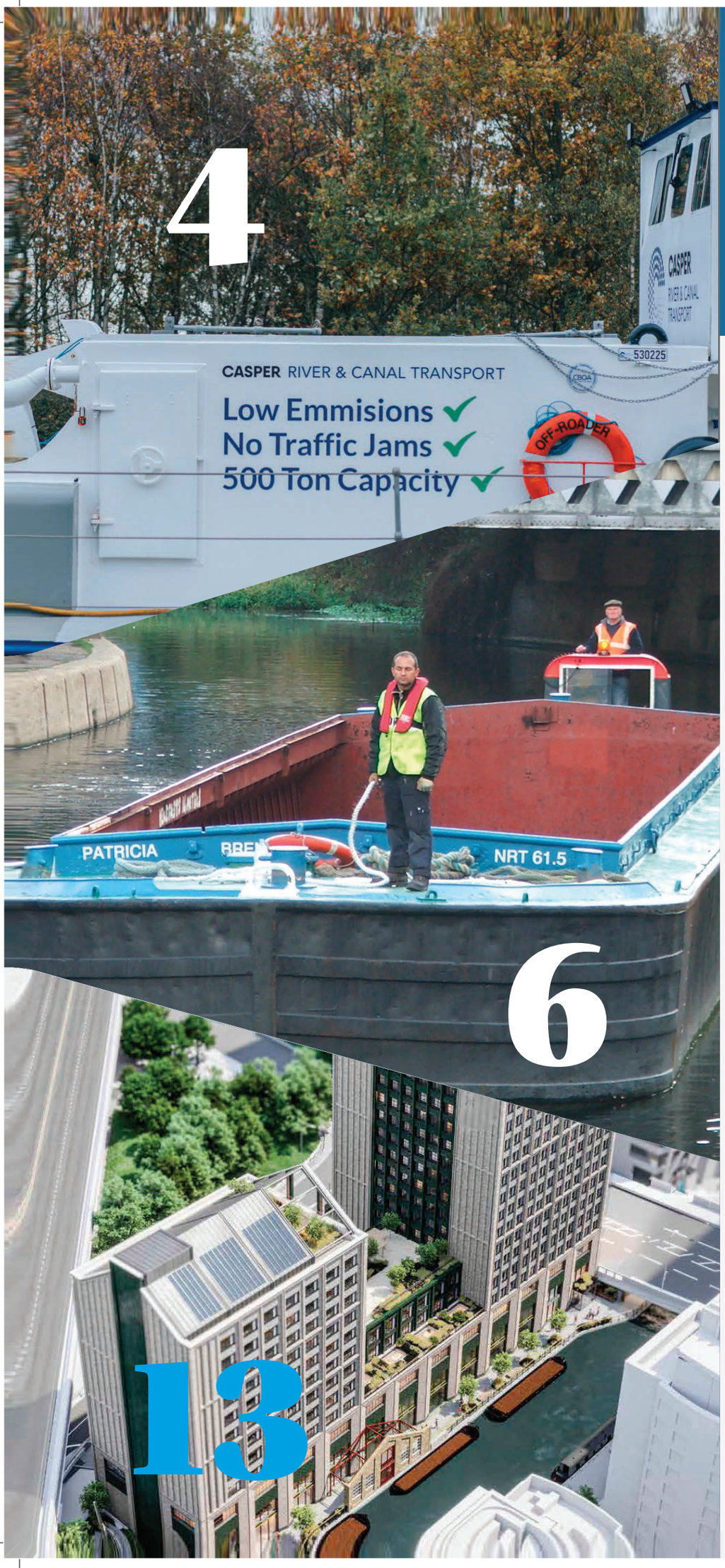
I would also like to record my sincere thanks to Richard Horne for his many years of service as editor of **CBOA News**. After twelve years in that role, he has stepped down as editor but continues his important work as Planning Officer. Richard has put a huge amount of time and care into the newsletter and has helped maintain an important channel of communication for the Association and its members.

For the time being, I have taken on the editor's role myself, alongside my responsibilities as Chair. I hope this first edition in the revised format provides an interesting and useful read, and gives a sense of the breadth of activity across the sector: from policy and infrastructure to member operations, planning issues and wider developments in water freight.

Looking ahead, I would like the newsletter, website and social media activity to work together more effectively. The annual edition should become something members can share with clients, policymakers and partners, while LinkedIn and other channels help keep the conversation active throughout the year. This will only work if members continue to send in stories, photographs, project notes and examples of water freight in action.

The future of commercial waterways will not be secured by nostalgia. It will be secured by showing where water transport works now, where it could work next, and what policy, investment and planning decisions are needed to unlock that potential.

Thank you to all members for your continued support, and to my fellow officers and committee colleagues for their hard work and dedication. Together we will continue to promote, protect and strengthen the case for waterborne freight.



CBOA
freight by water

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MARITIME DECARBONISATION

PLANNING FOR THE NEXT 30 YEARS

The UK Government's call for evidence on decarbonising smaller vessels marked a clear step in recognising the role of inland and nearshore operators in the transition to net zero. Focusing on vessels under 400 gross tonnage, the consultation sought insight into the costs, technologies, and infrastructure required to reduce emissions across a diverse and operationally complex fleet.

That exercise has now closed, but it sits within a broader and still-evolving policy landscape. A number of parallel consultations—some directly maritime, others more indirectly linked—highlight that decarbonisation is being approached across multiple fronts, not always with a fully joined-up framework.

Alongside the maritime-focused work, the Government has also issued a call for evidence on the future of the downstream oil sector. While not specific to waterways, this is highly relevant to inland operators. The availability and long-term role of conventional fuels will directly affect transition pathways, particularly for those reliant on diesel or considering alternatives such as HVO or methanol.

At the same time, energy market regulation is under review. Ofgem's call for input on maximum resale price rules for gas and electricity touches on an often-overlooked issue: how energy is accessed and priced in environments such as marinas, wharves, and off-grid moorings. For operators considering electrification, clarity and fairness in resale arrangements will be an important enabling factor.

Taken together, these consultations illustrate the breadth of policy areas now intersecting with the inland marine sector: vessel design and retrofit, fuel supply, energy infrastructure, and market regulation. Each is being considered separately, but the cumulative impact will depend on how well these strands align in practice.

This is an area where industry bodies such as CBOA continue to engage, emphasising the need for policies that reflect real operating conditions. Inland vessels often have long asset lives, limited margins, and operate where infrastructure is constrained or shared.

The challenge is to ensure that future policy recognises these interdependencies. Decarbonisation is not solely a question of vessel technology; it is equally about fuel availability, grid access, and the regulatory frameworks that shape cost and investment decisions.

EUROPE'S NEW WATERWAY LINK: CAPACITY OVER HEADLINES

Recent media coverage has dubbed the Seine-Nord Europe Canal "Europe's answer to Suez". It is a striking comparison, but not a particularly helpful one. This is not a global shipping shortcut, nor a rival to ocean routes. What is taking shape in northern France is something more grounded and, for inland operators, more relevant: a missing link in Europe's large-gauge freight network.

The Seine-Nord Europe Canal will run for 107 km between Compiègne and Aubencheul-au-Bac, forming the central section of the wider Seine–Scheldt corridor. Its purpose is straightforward: link the Paris basin directly with the inland and seaport networks of Belgium and the Netherlands, allowing larger vessels to move freely between these areas.

At present, the Canal du Nord acts as a bottleneck, restricting vessel size and limiting throughput. The new canal is designed to remove that constraint. Built to a wide-gauge standard, it will accommodate vessels of up to around 185 metres, with capacities of up to 4,000 tonnes or more. In practical terms, a single vessel could replace well over 200 HGV movements.

Forecasts suggest the canal could carry around 17 million tonnes of freight annually within a few years of opening. Across the wider corridor, this is expected to remove millions of lorry journeys and contribute to long-term emissions reductions. For operators, the significance lies in scale, efficiency and reliability.

What stands out is not just the canal itself, but the wider network approach behind it. The scheme forms part of a broader programme to create a continuous high-capacity inland route between the Paris region and the North Sea. Alongside the new build, France is also investing in modernisation—remote-controlled locks, extended operating hours and improved traffic management.

The project has not been without challenges. Costs have increased over time, and delivery has been slower than first envisaged, with opening now projected in the early 2030s. Even so, the strategic direction remains unchanged.

For UK readers, the significance lies in the intent as much as the detail. Continental Europe continues to treat inland navigation as a core component of its freight system. The Seine-Nord Europe Canal is a long-term investment in capacity and modal shift to sustainable water freight.



The lesson is a familiar one. Where waterways are connected, terminals are protected, and operations are modernised, freight can follow. The French scheme may be on a different scale to anything in the UK, but the underlying principle applies just as much here.

LONDON'S SECOND RIVER

THE POTENTIAL FOR FREIGHT ON THE RIVER LEE

"With the right investment in modest infrastructure, the River Lee could once again carry freight from sea to city — quietly, cleanly, and efficiently."



PATRICIA BRENT APPROACHING OLD FORD

While the Thames rightly dominates conversation about London's waterways, it is not the only river that flows through the capital with potential to deliver freight. The River Lee Navigation — often overlooked, occasionally dismissed — is in fact London's second commercial waterway, and it may yet prove one of its most valuable.

Designated as a commercial waterway under the Transport Act 1968, the River Lee was recognised by Parliament as part of Britain's strategic freight infrastructure. That status remains today. It has the width, depth, and navigability to handle substantial cargo — and it links directly into the tidal Thames, offering a rare inland route that can accommodate sea-river class barges from ports such as Tilbury, Dagenham, or London Gateway.

Yet despite its legal status and geographic opportunity, the Lee is woefully underused. Commercial traffic remains limited, infrastructure is fragile, and viable wharves are being lost or overlooked in the rush to redevelop London's eastern corridor.

The capital is sitting on a freight corridor that is ready-made, environmentally superior to road transport, and capable of integrating with other modes of logistics — but we are letting it slip through our fingers.



BARGES ENTERING BOW LOCKS

A NAVIGATION BUILT FOR WORK

The River Lee Navigation is no narrow backwater. Its upper reaches — particularly below Tottenham Lock — are far wider and deeper than most British canals. The channel was widened in the 1930s specifically to handle industrial freight, with locks and bridges engineered to allow for barges of up to 130 tonnes.

Standard Lee barges are typically 85 feet by 18 feet, a generous size by inland waterway standards. These vessels can easily carry three 20-foot shipping containers, and modern designs could increase capacity to as many as six — offering seamless intermodal integration with global freight arriving at Tilbury, London Gateway, or Dagenham Dock.

With the ability to navigate both the tidal Thames and the Lee Navigation, these barges can carry goods directly into East and North London without transhipment, offering a compelling alternative to road haulage.

No waterway can function without somewhere to load and unload. The great challenge — and opportunity — of the River Lee is the recovery and protection of wharf space before it disappears under new housing, commercial builds, or neglect.

WHARVES: AT RISK, OR WAITING TO BE REVIVED:

Here are just a few sites along the Lee that could support a renewed freight route into and through East London:

"London is sitting on a freight corridor that is ready-made, environmentally superior to road transport, and capable of integrating with other modes — but we are letting it slip through our fingers."

1. BOW FREE WHARF (THREE MILLS)

Still in existence and with direct river access, Bow Free Wharf is a rare, extant landing point near the junction of Bow Creek, the Limehouse Cut, and the Lee itself. It sits in a high-value area and is increasingly surrounded by residential development, with corresponding pressure to "beautify" the waterway — often code for removing industrial use.

But Bow Free Wharf could serve light freight, construction deliveries, or waste egress for nearby redevelopment. With minor investment in surface treatment and bollards, it could function as a micro-distribution point or transfer hub with boat-based or lorry-based cranes.

2. BOW WEST RAIL YARD

Just a few hundred metres from the navigation lies the Bow West rail yard — a potential tri-modal interchange combining water, rail, and road. While the railway is still active and the site's potential for development has been noted, no integrated plan has yet emerged to make use of the adjacent canal frontage.

If a wharf were reinstated or constructed here, freight could be moved from port to water to rail, bypassing central London roads entirely. This would be a model of multi-modal logistics — ideal for bulk goods, aggregates, or even containerised deliveries.

3. EDMONTON ECO PARK

This major redevelopment north of Tottenham is centred on waste management and energy recovery. The Eco Park is already set to receive significant tonnages of waste — the vast majority by road.

Yet the site sits close to the River Lee, offering potential to move some of this traffic by water. A small wharf here could allow for waste or recyclables to be shipped in or out, reducing HGV movements along the congested North Circular Road.

The site could also serve Meridian Water, a major residential-led regeneration project just to the south.

4. MERIDIAN WATER

Currently open and accessible, the Meridian Water site is undergoing staged transformation into housing, workspace, and public infrastructure. The River Lee runs directly alongside parts of the site — but there is little public discourse around preserving or establishing freight access points.

Simple decisions made now — preserving a few unloading locations, ensuring bridges have clearance, keeping towpaths accessible for vehicle access — could enable last-mile freight to serve the development once complete. This would support not just sustainability goals, but also quiet, efficient servicing of shops, materials, and waste.

A FREIGHT CORRIDOR FOR THE CAPITAL

The River Lee is already in the right place. It connects London's industrial past with its logistical future — reaching from the Thames to the M25 corridor, and touching some of the capital's fastest-changing neighbourhoods.

What it needs now is protection and promotion:

- **Safeguard key wharves** like Bow Free Wharf and integrate logistics potential into redevelopment plans.
- **Develop new multi-modal sites** like Bow West Rail Yard and Edmonton Eco Park before they are built out for single-use schemes.
- **Ensure planning frameworks** (at borough and GLA level) protect waterside access for future freight use.
- **Invest modestly in landing infrastructure**, signage, and access to make commercial use viable again.

Because while the River Lee may not carry fleets of barges today, it is still one of the few places in the capital where such a vision is possible.

As pressure grows to decarbonise freight, reduce congestion, and protect heritage infrastructure, **London cannot afford to waste its second river.**

BOW LOCKS IN RECENT TIMES



MEMBER FEATURE

POWERING LONDON THROUGH RIVER LOGISTICS

For more than two centuries, Cory has been part of the working life of the River Thames. Today, that maritime heritage remains central to the company's role in managing London's non-recyclable waste, generating energy, reducing road traffic and developing the next generation of low-carbon infrastructure.

At Riverside 1, Cory processes around 916,000 tonnes of non-recyclable waste each year, generating enough electricity to power 213,000 homes. By using the river rather than road haulage, the operation removes around 100,000 truck movements a year from London's roads — a clear example of the continuing value of waterborne transport in a modern urban logistics system.

Cory's marine operation is substantial. The company operates seven tugs and more than 60 barges, supported by 74 afloat staff, a shore-based support team and nine crews working six days a week on single-tide operations. Behind those figures is a highly organised lighterage operation that keeps material moving reliably through one of the busiest cities in Europe.

Investment in the fleet is a key consideration, and in early 2026 Cory took delivery of 61 new barges and more than 700 new waste and ash containers, reflecting a continued focus on improving the efficiency and resilience of its river operation. This investment is not just about replacement tonnage; it is about ensuring that waterborne logistics remains dependable, modern and capable of supporting London's future needs.

That future is now taking shape at Riverside 2. Cory is developing a second energy from waste facility at Belvedere, which is due to be completed by the end of 2026. The new plant will process a further 650,000 tonnes of residual waste each year and generate enough electricity to power an additional 176,000 homes. Riverside 2 will also be served by a new marine waste transfer station and terminal currently under construction at Barking in east London.

By September 2026, Cory expects to become the largest single-site energy from waste operation in the UK, with the capacity to process more than 1.5 million tonnes of non-recyclable waste each year. This will allow the company to support the waste management needs of several million people across London and the South East.

The scale of the operation is important, but so too is the way it connects waste, energy and transport. Cory's model shows how river logistics can form part of a wider infrastructure system: moving material efficiently, reducing lorry traffic, generating electricity and providing essential public services.

The next step in Cory's development is carbon capture and storage. In November 2025, Cory received approval from the Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero for its Development Consent Order application to build a carbon capture and storage project at its energy from waste facilities.

Once operational, the project will capture carbon dioxide from the Riverside facilities. The CO_2 will then be liquefied and transported by ship for permanent storage beneath the North Sea. Cory expects the project to begin operating in 2030.

The use of shipping is significant. Rather than treating the river as a legacy asset, Cory is continuing to place marine transport at the centre of its future operations. A new purpose-built export jetty will be constructed on the Thames to export liquefied CO_2 from the carbon capture facility to ocean-going vessels for geological sequestration.

From a CBOA perspective this commitment is a powerful demonstration of how established waterborne operations can evolve to support new infrastructure and emerging environmental markets. Cory's river operation is not an add-on to the business; it is fundamental to how the company works.



CORY'S PROPOSED 27 KM STRATEGIC HEAT MAIN WOULD CARRY HEAT FROM EAST LONDON INTO THE HEART OF THE CAPITAL.

Cory is also looking at the potential of heat. At present, heat produced through the energy from waste process is released into the atmosphere as waste heat. Once Riverside 2 is operational, Cory expects to generate enough waste heat to supply the whole City of London and half of the City of Westminster. Deploying heat at this scale could avoid around 600,000 tonnes of CO_2 emissions each year by reducing the need to burn gas for heating.

To deliver that opportunity, Cory is developing a Strategic Heat Main of around 27 km, which would carry heat from the Riverside facilities into central London. In 2025, the project received Nationally Significant Infrastructure Project designation, and Cory has started the Development Consent Order application process. The company hopes to receive consent in 2029, with construction planned to begin immediately afterwards

Cory's work brings together many of the themes that matter to the inland and estuarial freight sector: dependable marine operations, long-term investment, reduced road traffic, skilled crews, energy resilience and the practical use of waterborne transport in major infrastructure.

For CBOA, Cory's operation is also a reminder that commercial waterways still play an essential role in serving cities. The Thames is not simply a backdrop to London's economy. In Cory's case, it is a working transport route, an emissions-reduction tool and a foundation for future infrastructure.

As London continues to face pressure on road space, air quality, waste management and energy supply, Cory's use of the river shows what can be achieved when waterborne freight is built into the system rather than treated as an afterthought.



CORY'S LIGHTERAGE OPERATION REMOVES AROUND 100,000 TRUCK MOVEMENTS A YEAR BY USING THE THAMES AS A GREEN HIGHWAY.



RIVERSIDE 2, CURRENTLY UNDER DEVELOPMENT AT BELVEDERE, WILL SIGNIFICANTLY EXPAND CORY'S ENERGY FROM WASTE CAPACITY.



EDITORIAL

Canals and the Challenges of Water Abstraction Regulations

The principle of water as a public good has long been central to British law. Rooted in riparian rights, the idea that water is a shared resource for common benefit underpins how we manage rivers, reservoirs, and waterways. Yet, as the impact of changing abstraction regulations on canals demonstrates, well-intentioned legislation can sometimes undermine this core philosophy.

New requirements for abstraction licensing are designed to protect water resources and ensure environmental sustainability. In principle, this aligns with riparian doctrine. In practice, however, their application is having unintended consequences—particularly for canals, which paradoxically represent one of the most accessible and publicly beneficial uses of water. The situation on the Monmouthshire & Brecon Canal has highlighted these challenges starkly. Dependent on river-fed supplies since it's construction over 200 years ago, it has been especially vulnerable to restrictions, with limits on inflows threatening navigation, local businesses, and the wider canal environment. The irony in this is clear, while reservoirs and rivers are often remote, canals are inherently accessible—supporting boating, walking, cycling, waterside enterprise, and biodiversity. Treating the transfer of water into canals as a consumptive abstraction risks overlooking their role as conduits rather than consumers of water.

Encouragingly, recent intervention by the Welsh Government, following a Senedd debate and sustained stakeholder pressure, has secured a funding package to maintain water supplies in the short to medium term, alongside investment in infrastructure and a coordinated effort to develop longer-term solutions from all parties.

Though this outcome is welcome and has avoided the worst possible outcomes for the canal, it does little to resolve the underlying issue. If canals built around the use of river water are to remain viable, they must be properly recognised within water management frameworks—not simply as abstractors, but as strategic public assets delivering environmental, economic, and social value. If water for the canal is to have a cost attached it should be offset against the social and environmental value the canals deliver from the water while it is there.

Paddington development paused but moorings question remains



The withdrawal of Unite Students from its proposed Baltic Wharf scheme in Paddington brings a degree of relief — but not resolution.

The project, brought forward with Travis Perkins, had already secured planning consent despite strong objections from the local community. Those concerns centred largely on the scale and massing of the development, which many felt was out of keeping with the surrounding stretch of the Grand Union Canal.

For much of the wider waterways community, the scheme attracted relatively little attention. The more consistent and informed concern came from CRT, commercial operators and CBOA members, who recognised the potential impact on the secure operational moorings alongside the site.

These moorings are not incidental spaces, they are critical working berths in central London, supporting boats that rely on secure access, storage and safe operating conditions. A key issue within the consented scheme was the proposal to open up the canal edge as a public walkway, bringing increased footfall directly alongside working vessels.

While such measures are often framed as public realm improvements, they introduce practical challenges. Increased public access can affect the security of vessels and equipment, and raises health and safety considerations where working boats may have open decks, exposed machinery, or uneven surfaces not designed for public use. In a busy urban setting, there is a foreseeable risk of unauthorised access onto vessels, with potential consequences for both personal safety and operator liability.

Unite's decision to step away removes the immediate prospect of this particular scheme progressing. However, the planning consent remains in place, and the site may yet come forward with an alternative developer, potentially carrying forward similar design principles.

This position underlines the need for clear recognition of operational moorings within the planning and design process. As redevelopment pressures continue along London's waterways, ensuring that working infrastructure is properly safeguarded — including its security, functionality and safe separation from public realm — will be essential to maintaining a viable commercial waterway presence in locations such as Paddington.

COMMERCIAL SHIPPING RETURNS TO APPLEDORE FOR FIRST TIME IN 10 YEARS



Commercial shipping has returned in earnest to Appledore, on the River Torridge in Devon. Two cargo vessels docked on consecutive tides for the first time in a decade back in April 2025. The Sea Melody from Ghent with 3,200 tonnes of animal feed, followed shortly by the Fri Ocean delivering 1,800 tonnes of wheat gluten from Rotterdam.

The renewed use of Appledore's New Quay, operated by Navantia UK follows work by Torridge District Council to reduce road freight by bringing ships to Appledore that would have historically discharged further afield. With each docking taking up to 110 lorry journeys off local roads this strategy seems to be working and is a positive story of a local authority engaging with industry to reinvigorate a port and improve the wider community along with it.

NEWS BRIEF

MCA ML5 medical for skippers:

A CBOA member has recently recommended the firm D4 Medicals for the ML5, currently charging £75. D4 Medicals principally cover drivers' medicals and operate from a number of locations inland some at or near towns on the canal system and rivers. Their website has a map so you can select your location. D4 Medicals advise that the ML5 cannot yet be booked on their website, so anyone wishing to book/request more information can call them on 0300 30 30 668. https://d4drivers.uk/locations/

As mentioned in previous CBOA News issues, Just-Health also offer this service https://just-health.co.uk/seafarers-medical-ml5/ 01282 936900.

These two providers can offer the medical at often a lower cost than a local GP. CBOA cannot recommend either provider and this is not an endorsement. A regularly updated countrywide list of MCA approved doctors can be found at https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/mca-approved-doctors-uk-based.

EU Rewrites the Rulebook on Transport Aid:

The European Commission has introduced a revised framework governing state aid for transport, replacing the 2008 rules with the Land and Multimodal Transport Guidelines (LMTG) and the Transport Block Exemption Regulation (TBER).

The updated rules are intended to simplify and accelerate the approval of public funding for transport projects, particularly those that support a shift away from road haulage towards rail and inland waterways.

Under the new approach, certain types of aid can proceed more quickly, with expanded use of block exemptions allowing schemes to move forward without requiring full prior approval from the Commission. The framework also provides greater clarity on the types of projects considered compatible with EU objectives, including multimodal infrastructure and initiatives that reduce emissions and congestion.

For inland waterways, the changes are expected to make it easier to bring forward projects involving Port and terminal infrastructure, fleet upgrades and modernisation, multimodal logistics and pilot schemes aimed at demonstrating modal shift

The reforms form part of a broader effort across Europe to strengthen alternative freight corridors and improve the efficiency of inland navigation. In recent years, investment has focused on increasing vessel capacity, modernising infrastructure, and improving the integration of water transport with rail and road networks.

The Commission's revised framework is designed to support these developments by ensuring that funding mechanisms are more responsive to commercial timelines and project delivery requirements.

While the practical impact will depend on how member states implement the new rules, the intention is to create a more predictable and accessible environment for transport investment, particularly where projects align with wider environmental and logistical objectives.

NEWS BRIEF

Canals receive £6.5M funding boost

The Government has announced an additional £6.5 million for canal protection in England and Wales, aimed at helping safeguard some of the country's best-known inland waterways and strengthen their resilience for the future. The funding is intended to support repairs, maintenance and longer-term works to keep the network serviceable.

For commercial operators, the figure is modest when set against the scale of asset pressures across the system, but it is still a useful signal. Reliable infrastructure matters just as much to workboats, trip boats and freight operators as it does to leisure users. Better-maintained locks, embankments and water management structures reduce the risk of stoppages, disruption and unplanned costs. The key question now is where the money will be directed, and whether it delivers practical benefits on routes that support real commercial activity.

Ship Canal to deliver Old Trafford Redevelopment

Plans for the redevelopment of Manchester United's Old Trafford stadium could provide a striking example of how inland waterways can support major construction projects.

The proposals, developed with Foster + Partners, envisage a new 100,000-seat stadium forming the centrepiece of a wider regeneration scheme for the Old Trafford area. A notable feature of the construction strategy is the proposed use of modular, off-site prefabrication, with large components brought to the site using the Manchester Ship Canal.

This approach would make practical use of existing waterborne freight infrastructure, helping to move heavy and bulky construction materials with fewer lorry movements on local roads. Reports suggest the canal could also play a role in handling project cargo and potentially removing demolition material from the site.

For the inland waterway freight sector, Old Trafford is an important reminder that waterways are not simply heritage assets. In the right locations, they remain highly practical transport corridors, capable of supporting complex modern construction while reducing congestion, emissions and disruption.

▼ **OLD TRAFFORD FROM ACROSS THE MANCHESTER SHIP CANAL**
Copyright Steve Daniels - https://www.geograph.org.uk/photo/2693717



Drought Highlights the Value of Resilient Waterways

The dry spring and hot summer of 2025 placed real pressure on the UK's canal network, with low reservoir levels leading to lock restrictions and closures across parts of the system.

For commercial freight, the direct impact in the UK was more limited. Most larger freight waterways are rivers, estuaries or ship canals, rather than narrow reservoir-fed canals, and these corridors generally proved more resilient. However, the wider lesson remains important: water availability is now a strategic infrastructure issue.

Across Europe, the commercial impact was more immediate. Low water levels on the Rhine and other major rivers forced vessels to operate with reduced loads, increasing costs and requiring more trips to move the same tonnage. This directly affected bulk cargoes and industrial supply chains.

The contrast is useful. In the UK, drought exposed the vulnerability of parts of the historic canal network. In Europe, it showed how dependent modern economies remain on inland water transport. Both point to the same conclusion: if waterways are to play a serious role in sustainable freight, climate resilience, water management and infrastructure investment must be treated as core transport priorities.

New Leadership at the Canal & River Trust

Campbell Robb joined the Canal & River Trust as chief executive in October 2025, taking over at a challenging moment for the waterways.

The Trust cares for around 2,000 miles of canals and navigable rivers, much of it historic infrastructure now facing increasing pressure from age, climate change, funding constraints and changing patterns of use. Robb brings senior experience from the charity and housing sectors, including previous leadership roles at Nacro, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation and Shelter.

For commercial operators, the change in leadership is an opportunity to restate the importance of working waterways. Freight, maintenance, passenger operations and waterside businesses all form part of the living canal economy.

As the network faces difficult choices over resilience, investment and future priorities, it is vital that commercial navigation is recognised not as a legacy use, but as part of the practical future of the waterways.



PLA trade at 50 year high

Trade through the Port of London reached a 50-year high in 2025, with the Port of London Authority reporting 56.6 million tonnes of cargo handled over the year. That is a notable result for the Thames and a reminder that the river remains a major working transport corridor, not simply a backdrop to the capital.

From a commercial operator perspective, the headline matters beyond the port itself. Stronger cargo volumes reinforce the case for waterborne logistics, support investment arguments for wharves and river infrastructure, and help demonstrate that freight on the water is not a heritage idea but a live and growing part of the transport mix. For CBOA readers, it is a useful example of how inland and tidal waterways can continue to play a serious role in moving goods where the right facilities and policy support exist.

Casper expands its fleet:

Casper River & Canal Transport has announced the near-completion of extensive refit works to the MB Farndale-H, marking a significant step in the vessel's return to operational service on the inland waterways.

Following major dry dock repairs, the barge is now safely berthed in Grimsby, where she is receiving final fit-out works and fresh paint to match her working partner, MB Off-Roader

The vessel's return reflects Casper's ongoing investment in reviving commercial inland shipping, combining modern systems with proven tonnage. Once complete, the Farndale-H will rejoin the fleet as part of the growing push to re-establish freight by water across the north and beyond.

TRADE MEMBERS

AC Marine Aggregates Ltd
Bulk aggregate supplier associated with barge movements into Yorkshire and inland wharves.

AMA Storage
Rotherham-based warehousing, storage and freight handling business linked to inland barge logistics.
sales@ama-ltd.com

Birmingham & Midland Marine Services
Commercial marine support and safety specialist operating on inland waterways nationwide.
office@midlandmarine.co.uk

Branford Barge Services
Inland barge operator associated with aggregate transport on northern waterways.

Casper River & Canal Transport
Bulk freight operator working across the Humber, Trent and Yorkshire waterways network.
operations@casperriverandcanaltransport.com

Cory Riverside Energy Ltd
London Thames operator moving waste and materials by river to energy recovery facilities.
shiprepairs@corygroup.co.uk

Deans Marine Services
Hull-based marine services company providing vessel operations and marine support services.
info@deansmarineservices.co.uk

Esprit Group Ltd
Manchester Ship Canal operator specialising in bulk handling, warehousing and stevedoring.
Info@espritgroupltd.com

GPS Marine Contractors Ltd
Marine contractor providing dredging, towage, barge hire and civil engineering support across the UK.
ops@gpsmarine.co.uk

Greenman Environmental Management Ltd
Environmental management contractor delivering ecological and environmental support services nationwide.
info@gmem.org.uk

Humber Barges Ltd
Inland freight operator carrying cargo on the Humber and connected northern waterways.
enquiries@humber-barges.co.uk

John H Whitaker (Tankers) Ltd
Hull-based tanker operator transporting liquid cargoes in UK and European waters.
info@whitaker-tankers.co.uk

Jules Fuels
Canal fuel boat supplying diesel, coal, gas and boating consumables across the inland waterways.

Midlands & Coast Canal Carriers
Canal fuel and supplies operator serving the Bridgewater Canal and connected waterways.
liam@midlandsandcoast.co.uk

Livetts Launches Ltd
Thames operator providing workboats, filming support and marine event services in London.
liz@livetts.co.uk

Mainmast Ltd
Marine cargo operator associated with inland and coastal bulk freight movements.

MMS
Hull-based marine engineering and ship repair business supporting inland and coastal vessels.
info@mms-shiprepair.co.uk

Narrowcraft Ltd
Canal boat, marina and waterways services business based at Alvecote Marina.
narrowcraft@alvecotemarina.co.uk

Northern Floating Plant Hire
Floating plant and workboat hire company supporting inland waterway and civil engineering projects.
info@northernfloatingplanthire.co.uk

Phoenix Canal Carriers
Transportation of loose, bagged and palletised goods by narrowboat across the Midlands and South, including materials, plant, scaffolding and construction supplies.

Renaissance Canal Carrying Co
Traditional canal carrying and fuel delivery operator working across North West waterways.
nbalton102@yahoo.co.uk

Robert Wynn & Sons Ltd
Heavy transport specialist operating marine and inland waterway logistics for abnormal loads.
enquiries@robertwynnandsons.co.uk

Rothen Workboats
Workboat and floating plant hire specialist supporting UK inland waterway projects.
info@rothenworkboats.co.uk

S Walsh & Sons Ltd
Marine logistics and aggregates transport operator using barges on the Thames and beyond.
info@swalsh.com

Seddon Management Services Ltd
Trade association management, auditing and compliance support business.
becky@managementandauditing.co.uk

The Narrow Boat Trust Ltd
Charitable trust preserving and operating historic working narrowboats.

Thompson River Transport Ltd
River freight operator associated with aggregate movements on the River Severn.

Williams Shipping
Southampton-based marine and logistics company providing vessel charter and port services.
marine@williams-shipping.co.uk

Wood Hall & Heward Ltd
Inland waterways marine contractor supplying workboats, barges and floating plant across the UK.
info@whhbarges.co.uk

Workboat Association
Trade association representing the UK workboat and commercial marine sector.
admin@workboatassociation.org

Nick Wolfe Canal Carrying
Independent canal carrying operator working historic narrowboat freight services.

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