

North Walsham and Dilham Canal Trust

Boat-naming at canal open weekend

A pint of Wherry ale will be ceremoniously poured over a new pleasure boat, in honour of the craft which once plied a unique Norfolk attraction.

Ella II will be officially named by descendants of Nat Bircham, skipper of The Ella, the last wherry to use the North Walsham and Dilham Canal.

The 19th-century waterway, Norfolk's only sailing canal with locks, fell into disuse and became choked with vegetation after 1934, when Nat and The Ella made their last journey. His daughter Lilian Smith and four granddaughters will be at Ebridge Mill pond on Saturday June 2 at 1pm when a pint of Norfolk brewery Woodforde's Wherry will be used to "christen" the pleasure boat.

"Dad would have been so proud to know that the Ella II is to be named after his Ella, and it would be a lovely reminder of the wonderful though very hard life he spent on the Ella and other wherries," said Mrs Smith, from Salhouse, who remembers being on The Ella with her father.

The ceremony will be a highlight of the North Walsham and Dilham Canal Trust's (NW&DCT) open weekend, centred around Ebridge Mill pond.

Trust volunteers and The Old Canal Company, which owns a section of the waterway, are restoring a two-and-a-half mile stretch, from Ebridge Mill to Swafeld Bridge, which now attracts a wealth of wildlife, walkers and water enthusiasts.

Visitors on June 2 (11am-5pm) and June 3 (10am-4pm) will be able to take trips along the canal on Ella II and her sister boat Sue B. Other attractions will include canoes, paddle boards, vintage tractors, information on fishing, wildlife and the canal's history, an amateur radio shack, white elephant stall, canal souvenirs, a licensed bar, barbecue and other refreshments.

Ella II was given to the trust by the The Barnsley, Dearne and Dove Canals Trust, based in West Yorkshire. NW&DCT volunteers have restored and extended her to more than 21ft long and she can carry 10 passengers and two crew during her regular weekend pleasure trips. For more information on the mini-cruises, ring 07585 160 772.

Nat Bircham and The Ella

Nat Bircham (1905-1981) was at least the third generation of wherry-men in his family.

At just 17 Nat became the youngest-ever wherry skipper, sailing the largest pleasure wherry, Gaviota.

The Ella had been built in 1912 at Allens Boatyard, Coltishall, and Nat bought her for £250 in 1934.

Nat was a non-swimmer and his notes about his life, kept by his family, frequently refer to having survived 40 near-drownings during his 50-year career on wherries.

His notes record: "Last to sail a wherry (The Ella) from Bacton Woods North Walsham 1934 as Dilham Lock was broken had to heave gates open with the winch..... last to load sugar beet from Tonnage Bridge, the Faulks farm."

Cargo had been ferried and traded along the canal, which was once nearly nine miles long, since it opened in 1826. It served six mills and had six locks.

At the end of her life, in about 1962, The Ella was sunk in a few feet of water, blocking the entrance to Decoy Broad.

George Formby anecdote.

Nat Bircham always insisted that it was unlawful to stop a sailing vessel from mooring should its skipper deem it necessary.

His belief was tested one day while skippering the wherry Albion, which still sails The Broads. It ran into difficulties not far from Wroxham Broad and Nat went to moor at the quayside owned by the famous entertainer George Formby, who had removed the mooring bollards from his quay heading.

Nat's granddaughter Sally Blackburn takes up the story: "Nat jumped ashore with a large rond anchor which he threatened to plant in the Formby lawn. In the end Mr Formby acquiesced. Nat maintained to his last days that any form of emergency over-rode owners' rights - the definition of an emergency included fetching tea from the local shop!"



The photo of Nat Bircham on The Ella was taken at Wroxham Bridge in 1956 and shows the wherry laden with reeds. It is from his family's collection.



The photo of Ella II should be credited to the North Walsham and Dilham Canal Trust (NW&DCT).



Ebridge Mill and pond with the canal. Picture: Clive and Shirley James

The aerial shows the canal around Ebridge Mill pond. Credited to Clive and Shirley James.

Background information:

- The North Walsham and Dilham Canal was originally nearly nine miles long.
- The North Walsham and Dilham Canal Trust, formed in 2008, is hoping to restore about 7.5 miles and four of the original six locks.
- The canal stretched from Antingham ponds, north west of North Walsham, to Wayford Bridge, north west of Stalham.
- The waterway is Norfolk's only sailing canal with locks.
- 100 navvies from Bedfordshire started building work on the canal in 1825 and it opened the following year, 1826.
- It was used by wherries to transport cargo to and from mills and communities along its route.
- The last wherry, Ella, sailed the canal in 1934.
- Today, one family and three companies own different sections of the canal.
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