

Re-Union Boats: championing Edinburgh's canal



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Believe me, my young friend' said the Water Rat solemnly....'there is nothing – absolutely nothing – half so much worth doing as simply messing about in boats' (Kenneth Grahame *The Wind in the Willows*).



It's 11am on a Wednesday and we are gliding past banks of daffodils and snowdrops. A spaniel trots past; a little boy and his Mum wave. How lovely to be out of the city on this, one of the first sunny mornings for a while, far away from all the traffic, road works and general hubbub. Except we're not far away – in fact we're not even outside the ring road; we are cruising past Harrison Park on the *Lochrin Belle*, a beautifully fitted widebeam canal boat, as she makes her way towards Slateford.



The Lochrin Belle

The *Lochrin Belle* belongs to **Re-Union Boats**, a social enterprise set up in 2004 when its founders realised that access to the Union Canal was largely limited to an affluent minority. Anyone could walk along the towpath and admire the then newly-opened Falkirk Wheel, but few could afford to buy their own boat and enjoy the pleasures of life on the water.

Re-Union wanted to change that, to give as many people as possible a chance to share in this very special experience.

Funding was obtained, a pilot boat was found, volunteers were sought – and the project soon became so successful that a better boat was needed. In 2008, with the help of the the Heritage Lottery Fund, the *Lochrin Belle* was bought as an empty hull. Today it is a state-of-the-art resource used for everything from training to hen parties; it can accommodate up to 35 people and is fully wheelchair-accessible.



The Skipper

It took the volunteers, working under the supervision of a professional boat-builder, six months to complete all the cleaning, plumbing and electrics needed to make the *Lochrin Belle* 'canal worthy'; once the boat was on the water Re-Union began to train volunteers to act as crew and maintenance staff. People like working on the canal so much that many volunteers have been with Re-Union for years; skipper John is one of them. As Re-Union Manager Pat says 'no-one ever wants to leave'.



Sheila

Retired teacher **Sheila** is one of several volunteers who have gained their **RYA Crew and Helmsman** qualifications with Re-Union; like most people on board she is prepared to turn her hand to most things – including the washing-up – and enjoys just being on the canal and meeting so many new people. Another great aspect of volunteering with Re-Union, she says, is its flexibility; each month a timetable is circulated and she can sign up to work according to her availability. Training is ongoing and sessions take place every week, but there is no obligation to attend every time. Volunteers, says Pat, are pivotal to Re-Union's success, 'We couldn't do it without them; they're a vital part of the organisation'.



Sorted Project
volunteers show off
their certificates.
Image courtesy of
the Sorted Project.



The *Lochrin Belle* hosts many service groups throughout the week; the **Royal Edinburgh Hospital** has a regular booking, as does the **Sorted Project**, a charity working with people in recovery; there are **Waterways Trust** educational trips and even a floating **yoga club**. Many connections are made through referrals from other agencies, but any group can approach Re-Union with their own proposals. Re-Union also runs a unique **12-week Employability Course** for working-age adults on benefits; all sorts of transferable skills are taught, from boating itself to first aid and catering. Being on the water has been proven to be therapeutic, and learning boating skills is a huge boost to self-confidence – and a potential route back into paid work. A new project starting soon will focus on **health and wellbeing** for referred clients, with walks along the towpath to source plants for food and natural remedies. Community Development Worker **Jenny White** is looking forward to launching this venture in April.



Jenny of Re-Union with Suzy
of Healthy Edinburgh

Although the initial project relied solely on outside funding, Re-Union decided to become an income-generating social enterprise so that it could retain more control over its outcomes and concentrate on its main aims – working with communities and getting as many folk as possible on the water and working with boats. It now achieves this to the tune of

5-6,000 people every year, and it has lots of plans to do more. Funding is of course still needed for specific posts and projects, and the results of various applications are currently awaited.



Business Development Manager **Stuart Pownall** has been with Re-Union for a year now, having joined from the corporate sector. His children think his job is so exciting that they want to come to work with him (they may have to wait a little bit as they are both under 4...). One of Stuart's remits is to increase income from ticketed events and boat hire, and he's certainly getting on with that – from **tea and cake afternoons** to **whisky tastings**, the *Lochrin Belle* offers outings to suit all tastes; last week it was a **Mother's Day Prosecco Cruise**, and there are also **ghost tours**, **Santa cruises** and **history trips** – the next one is at 2pm on 6th April, when you can find out all about the history of the canal and the communities alongside it, all for just £10. In the festivals, Re-Union offers very popular 'Escape from the City' trips, giving weary visitors (and locals) the opportunity to spend the morning cruising down the canal before heading back into the cultural madhouse. There is no end of uses to which canal boats can be put – cafes, bookshops, art galleries – as Re-Union grows it might even be able to acquire more vessels and start new enterprises.



Hen Nights welcome!

And if you're looking for somewhere to hold your **children's party**, your **hen night** or even your **orchestra practice**, the *Lochrin Belle* is available to hire at very reasonable rates. Children, says Stuart, spend at least the first hour of the cruise just being excited about being on the water – so that's half of your party games sorted. Perhaps not surprisingly, the favourite theme is Pirates (*Rosie & Jim* are so yesterday...)

You can bring your own food (the boat has a small kitchen area) or Re-Union can book it for you. Re-Union are very happy to consider any requests for events, so if you've got an idea, do get in touch with them.



When you hire the *Lochrin Belle*, she comes complete with a skipper to do the hard part for you – but what if you want to have a go at skippering yourself? Re-Union now has the *Jaggy Thistle*, a 'cute and cosy' 32 foot narrow boat, that you can take out for a day after a short induction session from one of the staff. *Jaggy Thistle* is based at **Falkirk**, can carry up to 8 passengers, is easy to drive and well equipped with everything you need.



Want more than just one day? Re-Union has now entered into partnership with a private investor to run the former **Capercaillie Cruisers** (now **Falkirk Hire Boats**), a company based at Falkirk – you can take a boat through to **Glasgow** or up to **Edinburgh**, and you can now also admire the **Kelpies** at the **Falkirk Helix**; a percentage of the profits from the business will be ploughed back into Re-Union. There are about 16 locks between Falkirk itself and the Helix; Re-Union is trialling a pilot scheme to take these over from **Scottish Canals**, with volunteers providing the manpower. It's another example of Re-Union's increasing involvement in all aspects of the waterways.



Back in Edinburgh, Re-Union is just as active on land as it is on the water; Pat and her team organise the annual **Canal Festival** (it will be on 27th June this year), with everything from a **raft race** to **free boat trips**, **canoeing tasters** and **market stalls**. To keep the canal looking spic and span, Re-

Union takes part in a **canal clean-up** once a month...and on a secret date in the not too distant future you'll be able to see the results of **Craft Bomb 2015**; last year the **Leamington Bridge** was stunningly decorated with textiles of all descriptions.



And away from the towpath, Re-Union is still busy. **Fountainbridge** is changing rapidly just now; **Edinburgh Printmakers** have secured funding to transform the old **North British Rubber Company HQ** in Dundee Street into a hub of artistic endeavour and community spaces, the new **Boroughmuir High School** is shooting up opposite Fountainpark, **STV Edinburgh** is broadcasting from the canal basin and **Fountainbridge Canalside Initiative** is organising all kinds of 'meantime activities' on the old brewery site (eventually to be developed by EDI, the City Council's development group).



The range of innovative temporary projects that this community organisation has come up with is impressive, from the **Grove Community Gardens**, **The Forge** (a metal, wood and glass infusion workshop space), a **play area** and a **community pavilion** to a **Pianodrome** – yes, a **100-seater open-air amphitheatre** is to be constructed from 48 reclaimed pianos by local artist **Tim Vincent-Smith** and used as a venue in the festivals. The Initiative is not just about the temporary – it is also closely involved with the long-term development of the area, and Re-Union is a founding member of the group, whose purpose is to make Fountainbridge a vibrant and diverse community. Edinburgh Council, says Pat, is listening.



Grove Community Garden

So if you're looking for a venue for your party, business

meeting or social event, if you'd like to spend a few hours (or more) cruising, are interested in volunteering, or are part of a group who might benefit from a regular slot on a boat – contact Re-Union; they'll be delighted to help you with your ideas for messing about in boats.



The Wind in the Willows:
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STOP PRESS! Re-Union Boats will be featured on Channel 4's ***Great Canal Journeys*** programme on 5th April 2015 – set your recorders!