



Words Matthew Sutcliffe

Margaret Fletcher

A fond farewell to the woman who led the fight to restore the Manchester, Bolton and Bury Canal with patience and determination.

When work began late last year to reopen the first section of the Manchester, Bolton and Bury Canal, one of the Northwest's most dedicated and successful campaigners was able to savour a moment of personal triumph.

Restoration of the 500 m stretch of canal will link into the booming national canal network and allow boats to return for the first time in 40 years. It is also the first step in the planned Middlewood Locks development in Salford, which includes housing, hotels, restaurants, bars and leisure facilities and which is estimated to be worth around £600 million of investment. In the longer term, the full restoration of the entire 15.5 mile canal could be worth millions to the local economy and create thousands of jobs.

What is surprising is that the lynchpin in these ambitious plans was not a developer or council chief executive, but a retired nurse from Bolton. Margaret Fletcher was the chair of the Manchester, Bolton and Bury Canal Restoration Society for almost two decades. Sadly, Margaret passed away earlier this summer, but not before realising her dream of seeing the restoration of the canal finally get underway.

By all accounts what made Margaret Fletcher so effective in the long campaign to breath life back into the canal was a potent mix of steely determination and a canny understanding of the bigger strategic issues. As Chris Findley, head of planning and development at Salford City Council says, she had "commitment, stamina, intelligence, pragmatism and patience."

Dave Evans, who also works for Salford council, is closely involved with the Middlewood Locks development and first started working with Margaret in 2003. He says: "Margaret was the dynamo behind the restoration project. Her enthusiasm was catching."

No less important was Margaret's unflappable ability to influence the right people. Her husband John, who is himself the chair of the Inland Waterways Association (IWA), tells the story of when the couple were at a conference and found themselves seated behind Alun Michael, then a minister at Defra. In no time Margaret was bending the minister's ear to the importance of restoring the Manchester, Bolton and Bury Canal.

John and Margaret met on the night shift at the West

Cumberland hospital in Whitehaven in February 1971. John was a psychiatric charge nurse and Margaret a newly qualified staff nurse. Both were vegetarian, so to make it easier for the night cook they ate their meals together, and it was over these late night vegetarian meals that they first got to know each other.

They came to a love of the canals together during the 1970s. In the spring after they were married they holidayed on the Norfolk Broads and became hooked on boating. A few years later they took their first canal boat holiday on the Leeds Liverpool Canal from Addlington to Skipton. Ultimately, they had two of their own narrowboats – the first of which, the Tomar Joleen, was built in their back garden with the help of friends.

"Margaret was the dynamo behind the restoration project. Her enthusiasm was catching."

Soon they were becoming active in the fledgling canal restoration movement of the time. Eventually they moved to Bolton, where they helped the IWA set up a group of volunteers to look into restoring the local canal. Margaret soon challenged its lack of progress. The response, much to her surprise, was an invitation to become the chair of the Manchester, Bolton and Bury Canal Restoration Society.

In its heyday in the nineteenth century the canal was a busy waterway used to transport coal from local mines to the mills, factories and hearths of Manchester and Salford. But as rail and road competition increased and the mines dwindled and shut down, the canal fell into disrepair and finally closed in 1961.

These days it's a different story. The popularity of canals for leisure is soaring at the same time that towns and cities are willing to invest in them as powerful drivers of regeneration. It is estimated that canals are

now being reopened faster than they were constructed during the canal building boom two hundred years ago.

Yet the Manchester, Bolton and Bury is the last of Greater Manchester's canals to be restored. When John and Margaret first took an interest in it, much of it had already been filled in. You get a sense of the scale of the challenge from the fact that they had to trace its route by walking the streets looking for clues and drawing it onto an A-Z map.

It turned out that Margaret was the perfect person to lead the restoration campaign. Derek Cochrane, regeneration director for

the Northwest at British Waterways, says: "One of the special things about Margaret was that she understood that for the restoration to happen it had to be seen as part of a bigger regeneration agenda."

He adds: "The force of Margaret's personality put the Manchester, Bolton and Bury Canal high on our agenda at a time when it had a much lower profile than many competing schemes."

"She went out of her way to build very good relationships with all our employees and that was a huge factor in gaining support. To do all of that and still be such a pleasant person was an achievement indeed."

MORE INFORMATION:
www.mbbcs.org.uk