



**Canal &  
River Trust**

Making life better by water

Find out about...

# Waterways and the Arts

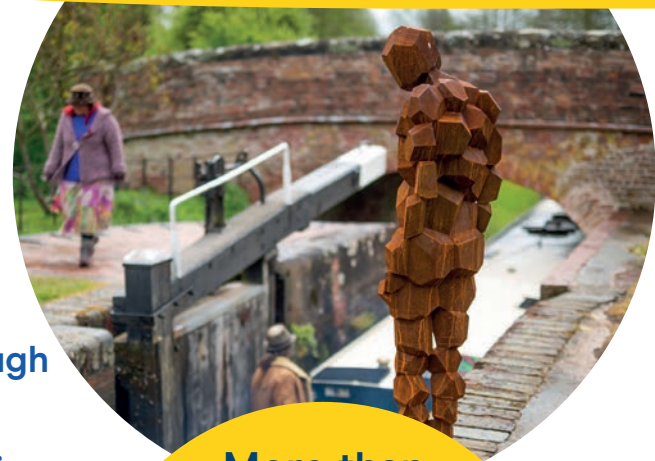


[canalrivertrust.org.uk](http://canalrivertrust.org.uk)

# Inspiring the Arts

The waterways in England and Wales have always enjoyed a strong connection with the arts; from colourful folk art used to decorate working narrowboats in the 19th Century, through to the contemporary street art and sculpture installations along many of our towpaths today.

But it's not just the visual arts that are celebrated. Our canals and rivers have inspired writers, poets, musicians and playwrights too. These waterways are special places where people, nature and the arts can flourish.



## More than just support for the visual arts

Many of our waterways offer year-round arts programmes featuring art, poetry, theatre, literature, music and workshops; celebrating long-standing traditions with the waterways.

## About this pack

We believe life is better by water. As the charity that looks after and brings to life over 2,000 miles of canals and rivers, we want everyone to enjoy these amazing places.

This pack will help you **Learn** about the connections between our waterways and the arts through the years. You can **Watch and Read** about the rich programme of arts and cultural activities taking place along our canals and rivers today, and we've included lots of '**Create and Do**' ideas inspired by our arts partners.

We'll also help you take your **Next Steps** to getting involved or volunteering to help the Trust deliver cultural opportunities to communities living alongside or visiting to enjoy our waterways.

## Improving wellbeing through the arts

Our canals and rivers run through hundreds of communities in England and Wales, providing green and blue spaces for everyone to enjoy. They can make a huge contribution to the wellbeing of millions of people. The arts help to change public attitudes towards canals and rivers by engaging a greater diversity of people who live near them.

That's why we're working with volunteers and communities across England and Wales to transform our waterways into spaces where local people want to spend time and feel better. Creating art and cultural experiences for everyone to enjoy (and even participate in) along our inland waterways, supports this mission to transform places and enrich lives.

## Make a positive difference

Volunteering and Social Action is a key strand of our youth engagement work. Every year, more and more young people are giving their time to the Trust and making a positive difference in their community. The **Youth Engagement pages** on our website contain details of the range of projects and activities on offer and how you can get involved.



# Learn about the Trust's history in art

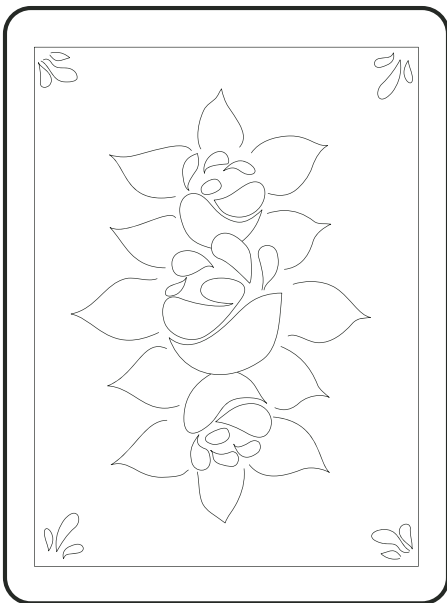
## Canal folk art

Working families living on board the narrowboats of the 19th Century took great pride in their homes and decorated belongings such as buckets, lamps and boxes, with bright and cheerful painted designs.

The artwork was distinctive, but there were regional differences in style. The most popular, 'Roses and Castles', featured stylised roses and fairytale castles, alongside cottages, churches, rivers, lakes, and wider landscapes. But the 'short boats' working the Leeds and Liverpool canal

were decorated with designs known as 'Brightwork', which featured scrolls, bright coloured borders, scalloped corners and geometric patterns.

Similarities can be drawn to graffiti and street art styles of today. The distinctive artwork was a way for the boating communities to express themselves, demonstrate pride and create solidarity. The colours are vibrant and the style is free flowing, developed so that workers could decorate quickly during breaks in their working week.



Traditional Roses template



Traditional Castles template

## Create and Do: Folk Art

### Have a go at canal art

The Roses and Castles worksheet can help you to design your own roses and castles patterns – See page 7 for where to download.

### Create your own folk art style

Nature was a major influencer for 'Roses and Castles' – you can read more about it at [canalrivertrust.org.uk/enjoy-the-waterways/canal-history/roses-and-castles-canal-folk-art](https://canalrivertrust.org.uk/enjoy-the-waterways/canal-history/roses-and-castles-canal-folk-art)

Can you develop your own unique style of art inspired by nature? Try decorating a box or other item in your new style.



Image courtesy of Francis Wilson



### Isabella Salt's chest

The Salt family (Isabella, her husband and their five children) worked four boats between them, which ironically carried salt to be used in Weaver craft. Isabella Salt's chest is decorated with castle and village scenes, floral designs on the sides and a keyhole to keep the family's possessions safe. It is one of the best and oldest examples of canal art, dating back to 1891.



## Art in the wrong places

When railways began to take trade away, many canal networks were closed and fell into disrepair. The areas around canals were neglected and became targets for vandalism, graffiti and anti-social behaviour.

Graffiti is particularly concerning for our heritage buildings, structures and equipment. It can be visually harming, but it is also physically damaging to

the surface it is sprayed or scratched onto. Historic brick and stonework is particularly vulnerable.

There are other challenges too. Anti-graffiti coatings can actually hasten deterioration of the structure, painting over graffiti can make the problem worse because paint bonds to the background material over time, and processes for removing graffiti can also be damaging. It's essential for us to remove graffiti as quickly as possible. This puts across a message that graffiti is

unacceptable, plus it is easier to remove at this time and less damage is caused through the removal process.

At the Trust we believe in working with our communities to make life better by water. We run hundreds of programmes to clean up towpaths, repair heritage buildings and remove negative graffiti. It is estimated over £1m is spent every year on graffiti removal from designated heritage assets. This work helps to regenerate surrounding areas, reduce anti-social behaviour and ensure people feel that canals are special places that are beneficial to wellbeing.



## Case study

A level students were invited to design a mural for an area under a bridge that was neglected and vandalised. Local artists selected a winning design and young people from the YMCA helped paint the site. The project changed perceptions to help the community feel proud of its canal.

## Art to engage our communities

Through our Arts on the waterways initiative we're turning unloved spaces alongside canals into beautiful places, with the help of local artists and community groups. The work addresses important social, environmental and heritage issues and supports our wellbeing agenda. We understand that regeneration makes people feel better and builds a sense of belonging and ownership.



Here's just some of the things to look out for:

- Our street art trails around England and Wales bring street art canal-side; creating outdoor galleries featuring specially commissioned art pieces for communities to cherish
- Group murals and 'Concrete canvas' community walls for budding artists
- Artist-led community art projects combined with community clean-up programme focussed on removing graffiti from heritage buildings



- Similarly there are sculpture trails and walks along our towpaths such as The Line alongside the Lea Navigation in east London. Sir Anthony Gormley installed a temporary iron figure at Lowsonford that inspired many boaters and locals. [www.the-line.org](http://www.the-line.org)
- We have a photographer in residence, curate socially engaged, immersive arts projects and design bespoke projects for schools and colleges.

The inland waterways provide a unique teaching environment for the arts. There's even a floating art school, and a bespoke narrowboat designed for and by women as a theatre and arts centre.



Image courtesy of Jane Russell

## Create and Do: Art inspired by the canals

### Art for your street

Think about your neighbourhood in the past, present and future – design a piece of street art that represents your community. Think about your inspiration for the piece and write inspirational lyrics for the artwork.

### Art for all seasons

Why not sketch, paint or photograph your favourite part of the waterways in each season and create a series of artworks in a contemporary style.

# Learn about the history of canal crafts

## Hobby crafts

Boating families learned basic crafts to help brighten up their floating homes with crocheted lace and rugs made from rags for the cabins. Cabin crochet was a statement of pride. Strips of 'lace' ran along shelves and over porthole windows – for privacy as well as decoration. Aprons and bonnets were laced, belts and braces were crocheted for boys, and the horses wore crocheted ear flaps to keep away flies!

Ribbon plates, horse brasses made by local craftsmen, and brass plaques, earned from attending canal rallies, were hung up for all to see.

Craft skills were passed through the generations. Some of the best examples were found on board 'Friendship', a narrowboat owned by the Skinners – last of the long-distance horse-boaters. Up until her retirement in 1968 Rose Skinner stuck to the traditional ways of doing things. She would wash her laundry in a dolly tub on the towpath and crochet lace to decorate the cabin of Friendship.



## Sign writing

Boat owners employed sign writing craftsmen to apply the name of the boating company in corporate colours. Sign-writing styles varied over the years and across the regions.

Passers-by would recognise boats and the most famous earned nicknames such as 'The Chocolate Boat' which carried cargo to Cadbury's factory in Bournville. The boat's real name was Mendip,

with a driver named Chuck, affectionately known as 'Chocolate Charlie'.

## Celebrating the past

The waterways archive contains photos and documents tracing the history of Britain's canal network back to the 17th Century. We interviewed one of our collections managers to find out more – you can download the interview and read about the archives – [see page 7 for download address](#).

## Create and Do: Craft inspired by canals

### Brighten up your bedroom

Why not visit the waterways and see what you can find to inspire a nature sculpture or collage. Use natural, recycled or discarded materials to craft your piece. [See page 7 for web address to download a useful worksheet](#).

**Remember:** Please send us a picture of anything you create. We love to see what you are up to. Details of our social media, email and postal address are given at the end of this pack.

## Create and Do: Try your hand at canal crafts

### Make your own crochet lace

There are lots of online tutorials and books to teach yourself how to crochet. Our worksheet shows you how to start by learning one of the simplest stitches. Once you've learned the double crochet stitch, there are so many different ways to use it. All you need is a crochet hook and some yarn.

### Make your own rag rugs

There are lots of different ways to make rag rugs. Follow the steps on our worksheet to make a simple rag rug from any old pieces of fabric.

**Download our worksheets at [canalrivertrust.org.uk/youth-resources](https://canalrivertrust.org.uk/youth-resources)**



Clay Cargo,  
Clayground Collective,  
Ikon Gallery, Birmingham,  
Image: Caroline Gervay



Fabrications (Super Slow Way), Harriet Riddell performance  
Image: Richard Tymon

## Crafts and the waterways today

The Trust's socially engaged arts programme, 'The Super Slow Way', recently hosted a festival celebrating textiles and the cotton industry served by canals. Through this we explored local craft and heritage sites and a vision to redefine the area as a centre for making.

We want to keep the traditional canal crafts alive. Our contemporary arts programmes include opportunities to learn about traditional arts and crafts, the National Waterways Museums invite in specialists to demonstrate canal crafts to visitors, and our traditional craft courses sell out fast.

## Find out more: Arts and Crafts

**Read** more about our Arts on the Waterways programme and find out more about our National Street Art Trail, our socially engaged arts programme: The Super Slow Way, and more – [see page 11](#).

**Explore** over 22,000 images and 37,000 historic records in our digitised archive at [canalrivertrust.org.uk/places-to-visit/national-waterways-museum/the-waterways-archive](https://canalrivertrust.org.uk/places-to-visit/national-waterways-museum/the-waterways-archive)

**Listen** to one of our museum archivists talking about the arts and crafts items in our collection – [canalrivertrustwaterfront.org.uk/heritage/film-pos1-3883/](https://canalrivertrustwaterfront.org.uk/heritage/film-pos1-3883/)

**Get involved** in events and activities happening near you – [canalrivertrust.org.uk/enjoy-the-waterways/events](https://canalrivertrust.org.uk/enjoy-the-waterways/events)

# Learn about Music, Dance and Drama



The Cut, The Dead Rat Orchestra  
Image: Bruce Therton and Jana Chiellino

## Music

Folk songs or 'ditties' were a great way for boaters to connect as a community and boost morale. Workers had little opportunity to listen to music but singing helped to pass the time on long stretches of canals and to entertain each other while at dock.

Musical boaters played small, simple instruments that could be easily packed; such as small pipes, harmonica, ukulele banjos, concertina and melodians. The basic melodies of their songs could be learned easily and passed on. Many songs gained popularity in the inns and taverns along the towpaths.

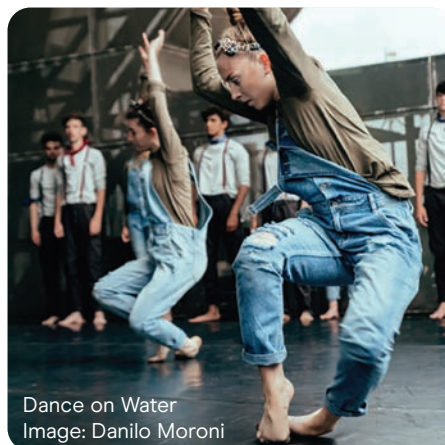
Traditional boating songs, similar in style to sea shanties, told stories of the way of life on the inland waterways, as well as the wider story of the British canal system: Songs were used to celebrate the opening of canals, the difficulties of hand digging the waterways were recorded in song, and when the railways began to take trade from the canals, songs lamented their fall from glory. More recently, skiffle-style

songs have been written and performed by enthusiasts at folk festivals and canal-side venues, to celebrate the reincarnation of the waterways for leisure and historical interest.

We are always looking for contemporary ways to bring music to our waterways. From our Slow Boat 'Bring your own vinyl' nights, to drumming workshops and waterside performances from beatboxers. Performance Butty is a customised canal boat for live events, readings and music, and sounds made by the water are the heart of music-based installations, composition and environmental sonic workshops.

## Dance

Although there is no specific dance tradition associated with boaters, the men did enjoy occasional step dancing. Boaters had their own step rhythm, dancing to the beat of the engine (often referred to as a 'bangers and mash' beat). They incorporated 'body percussion' as part of the dance – stamping feet, clapping hands and tapping



Dance on Water  
Image: Danilo Moroni

bellies – or playing the spoons against parts of their body to create a rhythm.

Traditional music and dance are still performed at the narrowboat rallies or canal festivals that take place across England and Wales. Contemporary styles of dance and movement are also celebrated, thanks to collaborations with dance companies and curators. Our waterways showcase performances combining dance with live music, visual display, and even the movement of a narrowboat in the choreography.



Super Slow Way, Rhapsody to the Leeds and Liverpool Canal, Image: Matthew Savage

## Theatre and Drama

Working boaters would have had little opportunity to enjoy theatre, or the shows and concerts that were often performed by the waterside from the mid 19th Century. Many theatre companies are still found close to our canals and rivers today and stretches of canal towpaths are used as galleries and theatre space for canal-side performances. Some, such as the puppet theatre barge on the Regents Canal, are based on and perform on the water.



## Create and Do: Performing Arts

### PLAY:

#### A ditty to enjoy

If you play a musical instrument, try playing or singing a simple ditty. The worksheet includes an easy arrangement of 'The Erie Canal' for the recorder.

#### Build your own folk instrument

Use our worksheet to make a simple harmonica from popsicle sticks.

### DANCE:

#### Dance fusion

What happens when you mix traditional canal folk dance with hip hop? You can learn how to dance and have a go yourself using our worksheet or follow the tutorial with Alice from Folkdance Remixed – search [folk-dance-remixed-with-alice-cade](#)

### WRITE:

#### Rap through history

Use the rich history of the inland waterways as inspiration to write your own rap or contemporary piece of music. Why not ask an older relative or others in the community to tell you their stories, or take a look at the lyrics from boating folk songs for inspiration.

### PERFORM:

#### Performing is sharing

Share your musical creations

Download our worksheets at [canalrivertrust.org.uk/youth-resources](http://canalrivertrust.org.uk/youth-resources)

with others – swap ideas for music and lyrics, work on a creation together, or make a special recording to send to friends or family members. Why not surprise them for a birthday or other special occasion?

#### Virtual performing

Organise a remote concert amongst a group of friends, or speak to your school or youth group leader and see if you could organise a special performance for the school or club, or streamed to the wider community to view via an online sharing platform.



### RELAX:

#### Sonic nature walk

Next time you visit the waterways focus on the sounds – from the water or the surrounding green spaces. Use your phone to record the things you hear. Think about editing these together to make a relaxing soundtrack or set your friends a sonic quiz – can they guess the sounds?

### Find out more:

Visit our website for details of events where you can experience traditional song, dance and theatre.

This podcast for the Invisible Folkclub puts songs about canals and boating into historical context – [invisiblefolkclub.libsyn.com/ray-butler-at-the-invisible-folk-club-part-1](http://invisiblefolkclub.libsyn.com/ray-butler-at-the-invisible-folk-club-part-1)

If you are interested in the performing arts, take a look to see if there is a theatre company based near your local waterway. Here are a few examples:

- 'The Boaty Theatre Company' meets at The National Waterways Museum, Ellesmere Port
- Mikron Theatre Company spends every summer touring venues by canal, with the cast living on the Company's narrowboat 'Tyseley'.
- The touring Alurum Theatre Company brings theatre to the canal-side telling stories of ordinary women doing extraordinary things, with many plays having canals as a central theme.

Find out how to make lots of other musical instruments, including ones that were popular with boaters like ankle and wrist bells, tambourines, and mini banjo – [feltmagnet.com/crafts/Music-Instruments-for-Kids-to-Make](http://feltmagnet.com/crafts/Music-Instruments-for-Kids-to-Make)

Follow [@folkdance remixed](#) or [@flatfootAlice](#) to find out more about traditional dancing.

# Learn about The Written Word

## Storytelling and writing

Money was short for working boatmen and many brought their wives and families on board to work in place of a crew. It was almost impossible for children constantly on the move to attend school,



Workshop installation on the Selina Cooper, Image: Jill Jennings

and many were illiterate. Storytelling was the only way to pass on information to the younger generations, helping them learn about their ancestors and life on the boats, as well as popular folklore. What we know of their stories has been mostly told through song.

It was only in more recent years that boating enthusiasts such as Mollie Lawlor began to keep diaries, photograph albums and scrapbooks of travels on the waterways, recording information about

the experience of travelling by water. BBC archives also contain rare recordings of the recollections of narrowboaters and firsthand accounts of boatmen, lockkeepers, toll keepers and others talking about every aspect of life on the canals.

Our previous writer in residence – Jasper Winn – blogged about people living, visiting, working and volunteering on the inland waterways, highlighting current events and issues affecting our waterways.

## Create and Do: The Written Word

### Capture your stories or thoughts about the waterways

- Write down special words and phrases inspired by a visit to the waterways, a walk along a canal towpath, or a virtual tour via our website.
- Use the 'Word catcher' worksheet to capture your thoughts. Once it is completed you can turn it into a fun 'fortune telling' game to reveal words and phrases to inspire your writing.
- Think about your theme.
- You could put yourself in someone else's shoes and write about their experiences. Perhaps it's a modern-day boater, a lock keeper or a woman raising a family in the cramped cabin of a 19th Century narrowboat.
- Why not think about the role

of working horses and their life on the towpath. There are so many other animals and plants found in the natural habitats around our waterway to introduce too.

- Or simply explore your own thoughts and emotions.

### Write a group poem

Everyone can add to a group poem – you can each write a line or a verse, or work on a piece together – inspired by shared experiences of the waterways. Or maybe take turns to come up with a theme and write the first verse for others to add to.

### Community words

Think about the potential for a community art piece to tell the story of, and/or speak for the inland waterways. How could you weave words and stories into the art piece? What story would it tell and where could it

be displayed? Speak to your school or youth club about the possibility of turning your ideas into a reality.

**Start your own blog or video diary** to record your time by the water and share your experiences – what you enjoy, the people you have met and things you discover along the towpaths. This is also a great way to campaign about a local issue and to tell others about any of your experience in volunteering and how to get involved.

### Take action

If you have identified an issue affecting your local waterways, are interested in cleaning up a stretch of the towpath, or are concerned about activities that could be damaging to wildlife or heritage buildings, take a look at our activity sheet to see what you will need to consider.

There is even a floating bookshop – Word on the Water... It's a 1920's barge selling old and new books with a rooftop which hosts talks, open mic sessions, readings and poetry slams!

## Poetry and water

Poet Richard Knight, recently claimed that the canal network was the first internet – with its power to connect people, ideas and products. At last, our waterways are getting the attention they deserve!

And thanks to a historic partnership with the Poetry Society, the Trust has its own Canal Laureate – Nancy Campbell – who makes sure our inland waterways are inspiring and being celebrated through poetry.

As Canal Laureate, Nancy gives talks to encourage young people to create their own poetry and is working on new water-inspired poems. These include a special 'rain-poem' to be stenciled onto towpaths in hydrophobic paint so it is only revealed in wet weather and a new film-poem in response to the Regent's Canal.

In contrast, John Betjeman was one of only a few poets to feature canals in his poems about industrial towns and their landscape during the late 19th and early 20th Century. As a mark of his respect for the waterways, he was invited to give the speech when the Queen Mother re-opened the Stratford on Avon Canal in 1964.

# Watch and Read

Find out more about our arts programmes as well as some of the organisations working to deliver these exciting cultural experiences.

## Visual arts

Our Arts on the Waterways programme takes place throughout England and Wales – [canalrivertrust.org.uk/waterway-arts](https://canalrivertrust.org.uk/waterway-arts)

Read more about our National Street Art trail and other community projects – search [bringing-street-art-to-the-canal-side](#)

## Performing arts

One of the biggest collections of canal and boating songs, archive BBC recordings and other references can be found by visiting the website [waterwaysongs.info](https://waterwaysongs.info)

Check out the 'references' section to find recordings such as 'Straight from the Tunnel's Mouth', 'The Bold Navigators and the BBC 'Narrowboats' album.

Upcoming performances and events in your area can be found on our website.

## The written word

Sit back and enjoy the stories of people that live, visit or work on our canals and rivers – [canalrivertrust.org.uk/news-and-views/your-stories](https://canalrivertrust.org.uk/news-and-views/your-stories)

Nancy Campbell's writings, observations and ongoing events will be published on the Canal Laureate's website [waterlines.org.uk/poems/](https://waterlines.org.uk/poems/) You can learn more of her adventures via Twitter [@CanalPoetry](#)

Jasper Winn was our first ever writer in residence in 2018-19 and has also written a book called Water Ways about a year spent exploring Britain's waterways on foot, by bike, in a kayak and on narrowboats. He shared his journey with some of the last working boat people and others that have made the waterways their home.

## Bringing the magic of our waterways to you!

Our towpaths are open for you to exercise and be outdoors, closer to nature. We want you to enjoy your local canal or river, but please follow the government's advice on social distancing at all times at [gov.uk/guidance/national-lockdown-stay-at-home](https://gov.uk/guidance/national-lockdown-stay-at-home) Keep your distance from both other people and moored boats, where people may be living aboard and could be self-isolating or shielding.

Events taking part on Trust land will be reviewed on a case by case basis and no event which could put both those attending or our staff and volunteers at risk will be permitted. We will continue to follow the latest government advice and will post updates if the advice changes. Please check individual event details, follow us on social media and sign-up to our email for the latest information.

# Next Steps

We've given you lots of information about the Trust's connections with the arts. Now you can share what you have learned with others.

## Create a video or vlog

to capture examples of art along the waterways. Or you may want to share your own performances, works of art or writing inspired by the canals and rivers of England and Wales. These could be contemporary pieces or a celebration of the history of the connections between waterways and the arts over the years. For more information please see our 'Creating a Vlog' hints and tips – [canalrivertrust.org.uk/youth-resources](https://canalrivertrust.org.uk/youth-resources)



Image courtesy of Porl Medlock

**Celebrating the arts in your area?** Contact your local comms lead at the Trust so we can help you share your ideas and encourage others to get involved in creative performances or community arts events – [canalrivertrust.org.uk/contact-us](https://canalrivertrust.org.uk/contact-us)

**Don't forget to tag us in your social media posts** and share your pictures, stories and news on Facebook, Instagram and Twitter. Or you can send us all your amazing ideas and creations via email or post.

 [/canalrivertrust](https://www.facebook.com/canalrivertrust)

 [@canalrivertrust](https://twitter.com/canalrivertrust)

 [@canalrivertrust](https://www.instagram.com/canalrivertrust)

Always remember to keep yourself safe online at all times. Speak to your parent, carer, teacher or group leader for advice and check out this guidance from [www.thinkuknow.co.uk](https://www.thinkuknow.co.uk)

## Get involved

If you've been inspired by everything you've learned and done we'd love you to get more involved! Contact us to find out about opportunities in your local area.

And if you can see an opportunity for an arts programme in your area, please tell us all about it and how it could help your community. Maybe you have identified the ideal community art wall, the perfect spot for a sculpture trail, or an area that needs to be made more inviting. We'd love to hear all your ideas.

We hope to hear from you soon!



**Canal & River Trust**

Making life better by water

0303 040 4040

[canalrivertrust.org.uk](https://canalrivertrust.org.uk)



## To get involved:

visit: [canalrivertrust.org.uk/volunteer](https://canalrivertrust.org.uk/volunteer)

email: [volunteer@canalrivertrust.org.uk](mailto:volunteer@canalrivertrust.org.uk)

For more information on our youth & community engagement work please email [lucie.unsworth@canalrivertrust.org.uk](mailto:lucie.unsworth@canalrivertrust.org.uk)