

AGM 2024 CHAIR REPORT

This Annual General Meeting marks a change in direction for our yearly review based on the successful 'hybrid' gathering last year which mixed in-person attendees in London with members all over the world online. The numbers attending on-line were high and the Board was asked to consider the future format for AGMs hence the decision to have this year's meeting as a totally virtual event in the hope even more will take part. This has benefits and challenges so will be monitored after the event when this report is presented. Have we seen more attendees? Is the loss of personal contact (for those who can be there) been a significant loss? Has the revived Flag Day helped replace the AGM Dinner? I look forward to views in the discussion now or after the formal part of the meeting.

On a social front, the past year has seen two splendid rallies on the Thames and in Auxerre which reinforced how well events & activities work when members work together. This augurs well for the future with planning for Shepperton and (possibly) Zandaam in 2024 well advanced. The aforementioned Flag Day meet ups will increase member to member contact too but the individual gatherings during the cruising season are where many of us share our enthusiasm and expertise. It was noticeable before and after the French rally last year how much informal gathering and socialising went on, in some cases for weeks after, across the inland waterways network of Northern Europe!

At a business level, the past year has been one of busy development and change on several fronts. Our new business, financial support, membership, editorial and online people & systems have all worked hard to maintain as seamless a service as possible and have largely succeeded. Thank you to all who have been involved in navigating the changes as this underpins our organisation. Some of these schemes, like Member Gets Member recruitment are visible to all members, others fuel our services, such as developing our print and online offerings, while it is crucial that our back office processes are maintained. Without doubt the greatest investment in time and money this past year and ongoing is in the complete overhaul of our website www.barges.org to make it 21st century proof. Much of this work is invisible but has had knock-ons in one or two areas as whole subjects have had to be recreated using new software which has taken down one or two services temporarily. This only reinforces how dependent DBA is, like all organisations, on its technical base and how that needs to be robust as well as reminding us how thankful we are for the massive efforts of those in the past decade who have kept the website running and up to date.

The greatest outward-facing engagement of DBA as an organisation is to represent members with other bodies, especially for navigation and the wider boating world. The two areas of most concern continue to be France and the UK, in both cases about resources, canal conditions, funding, governments and navigation authority priorities. As you would expect, DBA has been very active. In France, huge thanks must go to all those members who give up a lot of time to attend VNF meetings at regional level to both represent DBA member interests and to feed back information. This is incredibly valuable and our strong network is a great service to us all. In the UK, our representation is very much driven by the straightened conditions both CRT and EA find themselves in as government fails to provide enough support while the management perhaps fails to give boating and navigation enough priority. Myriad organisations meet and campaign with DBA in the forefront providing much expert knowledge. To all our Representation team, thank you from all of us.

To finish this report, I want to return to the hot topic of 'helping DBA'. You will have seen this coming up in all of the association's channels – Blue Flag, the newsletter, e-mails and the Help DBA page on www.barges.org . You may wonder why this focus on volunteers but then again you may well be able to compare DBA's messaging with that of other organisations as many if not most are in a similar position. For DBA, your Board has discussed this at length and has attempted to spread the message widely that helping can also be enjoyable and not overly time-consuming. Today's AGM attendees will see how successful this has been when the new Board members are elected.

As Chair, can I close by thanking all your Board members, the contractors, suppliers, the volunteers across so many facets of this great association and to you as a member for your contribution through your participation this past year and in the year to come.

Mike Gibbons