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Jo Bell appointed the first ever 'Canal Laureate'

*A collaboration between the Canal & River Trust
and the Poetry Society, bringing a new perspective
to the nation's historic canals and rivers*



Jo Bell. Photo: Andy Pratt

Britain's waterways are gaining a new voice as the Poetry Society and the Canal & River Trust announce the appointment of the first ever 'Canal Laureate', boating poet Jo Bell. She will work to bring a new perspective to the nation's historic canals and rivers, and to encourage people to see their local waterways in a new light.

The appointment is part of a wider partnership between the Canal & River Trust and Arts Council England, which aims to attract more visitors to the waterways while surprising and delighting existing communities through exciting and innovative art projects. The Trust and the Poetry Society worked closely together to find the right candidate for the post. In her role as Canal Laureate, Jo will actively engage new and existing audiences through community workshops, performances and blogs. She will write new poems inspired by canals and rivers, and will begin 'anthologising' the waterways by bringing in work by other poets.

Jo is a poet, archaeologist and boat-dweller, working all over the UK on poetry projects large and small. As well as her recent role as Director of National Poetry Day, Jo has also been Glastonbury Festival poet in residence and Cheshire Poet Laureate. Her most recent show, *Riverlands*, is about the river Nene in Northants. She is also working on a new book, *Fireships*, with poet Martin Malone. Her work has appeared in many journals, in National Trust restaurants, on Radio 4 and even on a milestone in her native Derbyshire.

Jo came to the canals through her work as an archaeologist, working with historic narrowboats. "Eventually I went native and became a boat-dweller myself," she says. She has lived aboard her 67ft narrowboat *Tinker* for a decade, mostly on the canals of the Midlands and North West. This summer Jo made an epic journey of 249 miles from Manchester to Honeystreet in Wiltshire over 29 days. This slow odyssey gave her "a constantly changing crew of friends, a constantly changing landscape and enough time to look at it properly. The canals are England's truest way to travel; long green lines where people go to think, to walk, to fish and to gongoozle – that's boat-watching."

What can poetry bring to the canals? "Good poetry is about *noticing*," says Jo. "I want people who already know the canals to notice how lucky we are to have them. For people who haven't really noticed them yet, I want to show them the still green space on their doorstep, full of wildlife and histories. The Canal & River Trust and Arts Council England Partnership gives us a

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chance to combine good public art with good public service, and to make people all over the UK take time to breathe, in their own landscape." She invites people to follow her on Twitter @CanalPoetry for news of her journeys and projects as Canal Laureate.

The Canal Laureateship is the latest partnership project between the Poetry Society and the Canal & River Trust, as part of a wider collaboration. Earlier this year, Yorkshire poet Ian McMillan celebrated the launch of the Canal & River Trust with a new poem, 'Canal Life', whilst the Locklines project, managed by Chrysalis Arts, will see Ian's words carved into new lock gates, along with those by Roy Fisher and Jo Bell. A further range of poets will join them in working with Jo, throughout her period as Canal Laureate.

Tony Hales, Chair of the Canal & River Trust, said: "Many poets have been inspired by the magnificent canals and rivers that form the green veins of Britain's landscape, and they are firmly part of the national creative consciousness. I'm delighted to welcome Jo Bell as our first ever Canal Laureate and hope that her work touches people and encourages them to explore their local waterways, and maybe even craft some words of their own."

Judith Palmer, Director of the Poetry Society, said: "Our inland waterways offer 2,000 miles of poetic inspiration, with half our population living a mere stone's skim away. As our first Canal Laureate, Jo Bell will be harnessing her twin passions of poetry and canal-life, and bringing people across the country more joy in both. The Poetry Society and the Canal & River Trust already have an active collaboration, working together with poets including Ian McMillan and Roy Fisher; and as an exciting part of her role as Canal Laureate, Jo Bell will also be finding ingenious ways to rope in many more poets along the way."

Liz Forgan, Chair of Arts Council England, said: "From Constable's Flatford Mill to Ted Hughes's 'Pike', our waterways have long provided a rich stimulus for artists working in all artforms. Our work with the Canal & River Trust is a great opportunity for us to take that work forward into the 21st century; to generate new and captivating artworks for everyone to be inspired by and enjoy. Jo Bell's appointment as the first Canal Laureate represents a positive new development, celebrating the imaginative relationship that artists continue to have to the waterways."

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Notes to Editors:

About the Poetry Society

The Poetry Society was founded in 1909 to promote a "more general recognition and appreciation of poetry". Since then, we have grown into one of Britain's most dynamic arts organisations, representing British poetry both nationally and internationally. Today we have nearly 4,000 members worldwide and publish the leading poetry magazine, *Poetry Review*. Our dynamic education programmes provide inspiration and support for teachers and young people, while our publications and awards (such as the National Poetry Competition and Foyle Young Poets of the Year Award) nurture new writing. With innovative commissioning and residency programmes and a packed calendar of live performances and online events, the Poetry Society champions poetry for all ages. www.poetrysociety.org.uk

About Canal & River Trust

The Canal & River Trust is the guardian of 2,000 miles of canal and river across England and Wales, including the nation's third largest collection of listed structures as well hundreds of important wildlife habitats. www.canalrivertrust.org.uk

The Canal & River Trust has a partnership with Arts Council England to deliver a pilot contemporary art programme in 2012 and 2013 which will encourage more people to experience and be inspired by the arts, a key goal of Art Council England's 10-year plan for the arts, Achieving great art for everyone. The arts have historically been used to win new supporters for the waterways' cause, and the programme will find creative new ways to introduce more people to the canals and rivers as friends and supporters while also engaging with existing communities.

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The programme can be separated into three strands:

1. The Trust is actively helping artists and arts bodies who want to use the waterways for their projects. The Trust can offer in-kind support and technical expertise, enabling an exciting array of projects to take place. These projects are attracting new audiences and drawing attention to local canals and rivers.
2. The Trust is building closer links with arts organisations based along the canals and rivers and is looking at partnerships that will help improve the waterways, attract new funding and educate new people about why the canals and rivers deserve their support.
3. The Trust is involved in developing a number of projects that can be used as part of its fundraising and community engagement activity.

For more information on art and the waterways, please visit: <http://canalrivertrust.org.uk/news-and-views/features/art-and-the-waterways-bringing-new-supporters-to-the-cause>

About Arts Council England

The Arts Council champions, develops and invests in artistic and cultural experiences that enrich people's lives. We support a range of activities across the arts, museums and libraries – from theatre to digital art, reading to dance, music to literature, and crafts to collections. Great art and culture inspires us, brings us together and teaches us about ourselves and the world around us. In short, it makes life better. Between 2011 and 2015, we will invest £1.4 billion of public money from government and an estimated £1 billion from the National Lottery to help create these experiences for as many people as possible across the country. www.artscouncil.org.uk

About Jo Bell

More information is available on her website, www.jobell.org.uk or follow her on Twitter @canalpoetry for news on her journeys and projects as Canal Laureate.

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