

HERITAGE

November 2008

BRITAIN'S RICH PAST AND HISTORIC PRESENT

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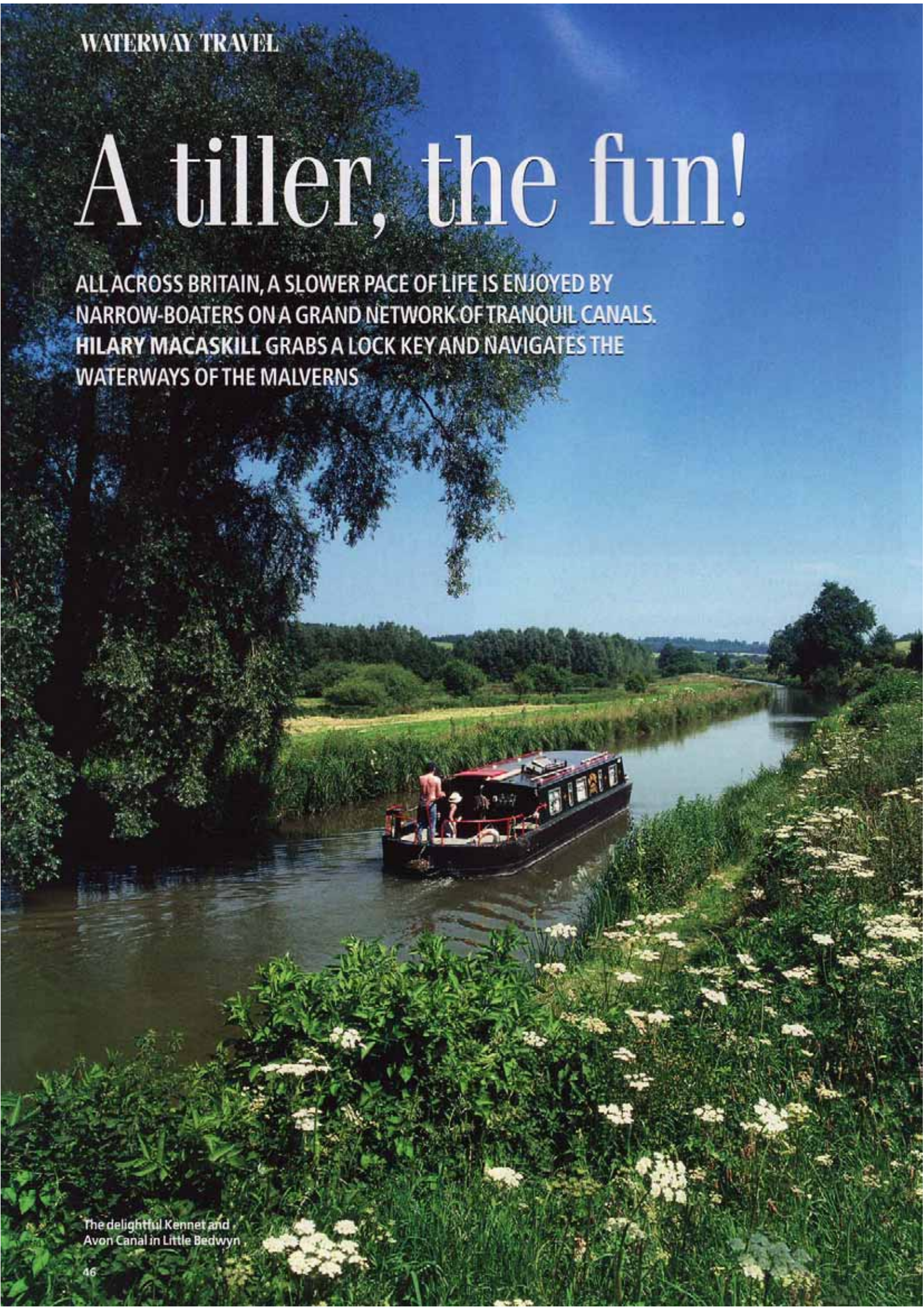
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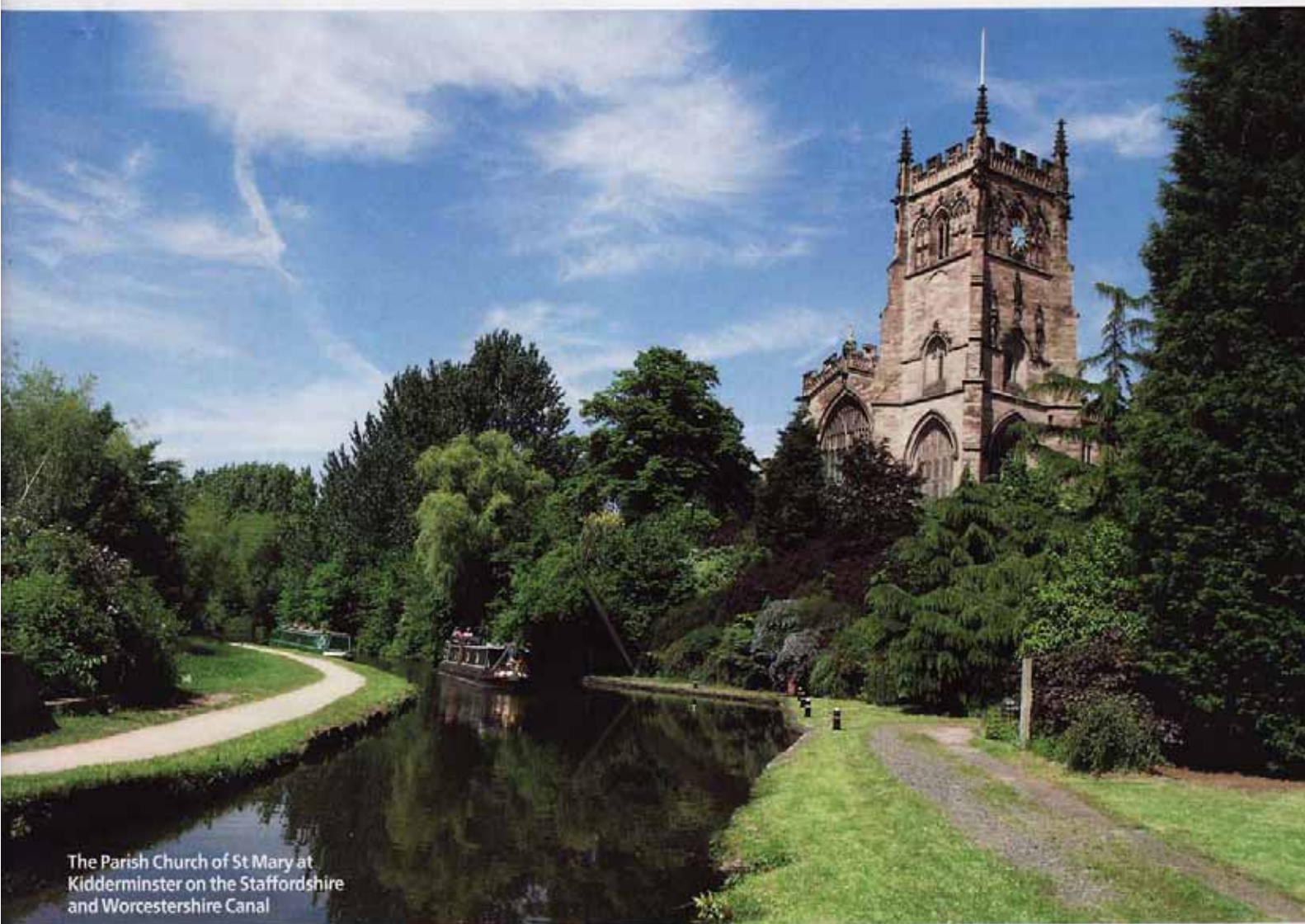


A tiller, the fun!

ALL ACROSS BRITAIN, A SLOWER PACE OF LIFE IS ENJOYED BY NARROW-BOATERS ON A GRAND NETWORK OF TRANQUIL CANALS. HILARY MACASKILL GRABS A LOCK KEY AND NAVIGATES THE WATERWAYS OF THE MALVERNS



The delightful Kennet and Avon Canal in Little Bedwyn



The Parish Church of St Mary at Kidderminster on the Staffordshire and Worcestershire Canal

The summit of the Tardebigge Flight on the Worcestershire-Birmingham Canal, the longest flight in Britain, with 30 locks rising 220 feet over a two-mile stretch, is an historic spot. With the slender spire of Tardebigge's glorious 18th-century church – a landmark for walkers and boaters – you are surrounded by glorious view of the Malverns. What better setting for where the idea of the campaigning Inland Waterways Association was born in 1946 on board the narrowboat *Cressy*, belonging to writer Tom Rolt.

It is because of this organisation that the canals of Britain are among the industrial wonders of the world. With over 4,000 miles of waterways, they are an amazing plethora of aqueducts, bridges, tunnels and locks, as well as the hundreds of listed buildings along their banks.

Here at this watery vantage point, on what seems like the top of England, a line of privately-owned moored boats (each with a pretty patch of garden planted by the towpath) inspires would-be water dwellers.

At the bottom of the Tardebigge Flight, the boatyard at Stoke Prior is ideally placed for a

trip either deep into rural Worcestershire or up towards Birmingham and the leafy pleasures of the Stratford-upon-Avon Canal.

This quiet corner of Worcestershire is unexpectedly pleasing, with attractions within easy reach of the canal. The Forge Needle Mill at Redditch, which once dominated the needle trade, was delightful. Its waterwheel, mill-pond and vivid displays showcased the nine stages of manufacture. The Avoncroft Museum of Historic Buildings, a short walk from the Tardebigge Flight, is a collection of lovingly-rescued structures, from windmills to three-seater earth closets. It also has the National Telephone Kiosk Collection which, in the age of the mobile phone, proved very fascinating. Even the more modest museum at the black-and-white, half-timbered town of Bromsgrove – which in days of yore was a centre of nail making – made the most of its history.

Within easy boating reach is the county town Worcester. Famous for its porcelain, a racecourse (one of the oldest in the country; racing has been taking place on the banks of the River Severn since 1718) and its fine cathedral. This important building had a

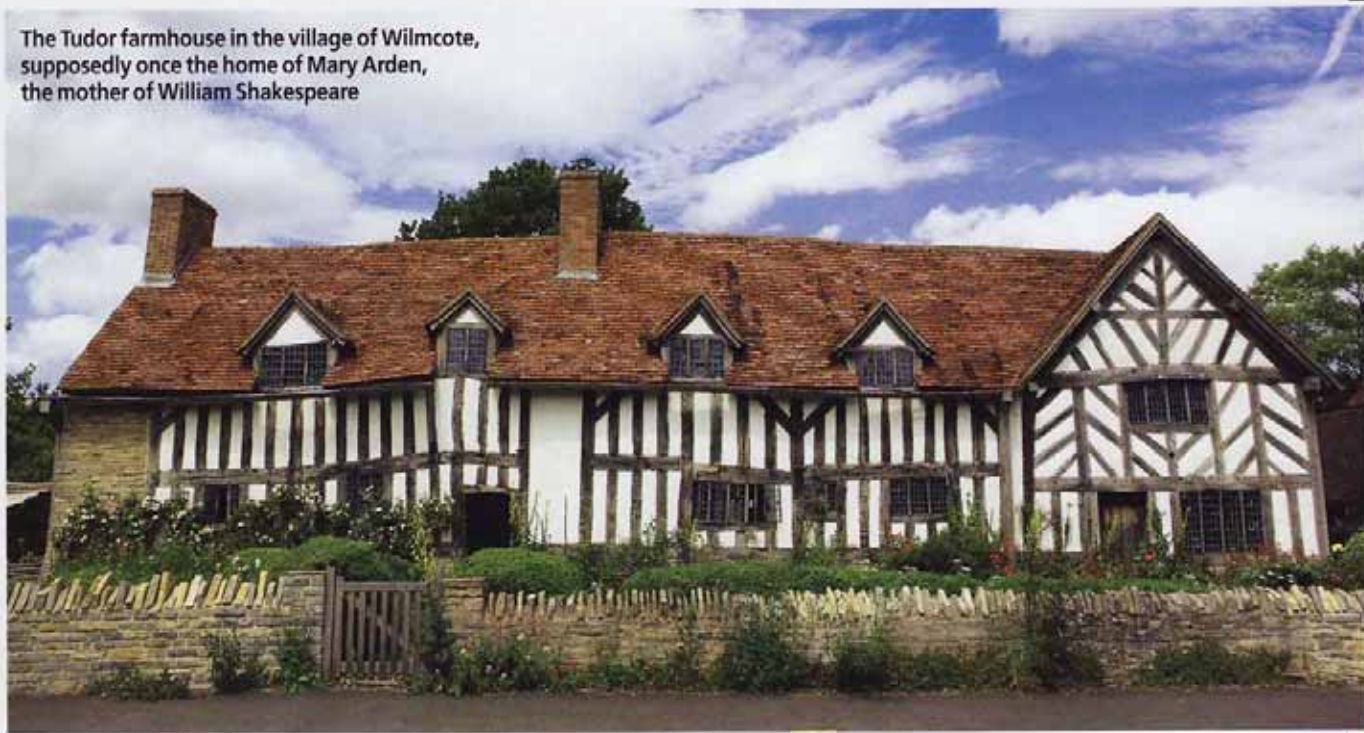
grandstand position in the Civil War – King Charles I watched the Battle of Worcester (1651) from its tower. The cathedral, not surprisingly, is one of the high points of a visit. You'll experience glassed-in cloisters where the monks once had desks; the tensided chapter house and the crypt, held up ▶



Lock gates at Brierley Hill, Birmingham

WATERWAY TRAVEL

The Tudor farmhouse in the village of Wilmcote, supposedly once the home of Mary Arden, the mother of William Shakespeare



by 120 pillars – no two alike; and the carved misericords, displaying different scenes, from jousting knights to suckling piglets.

On a more practical level, Worcester used to be famous for gloves. The glove factory close by the canal has now been turned into Fownes Hotel, and is still famous for its china. After a visit – where the practical porcelain of wartime such as spittoons and shaving bowls are vividly displayed – a walk round the factory shows the process of mould, firing and delicate painting in lively detail.

On the way back to Stoke Prior one can visit The Commandery, a hospital founded by St Wulfstan in the 11th century. It later served as a key Royalist stronghold in the Civil War, with its timber-framed Great Hall, medieval wall paintings and peaceful gardens. Don't miss Hanbury Hall either – a

fine early 18th-century house surrounded by parkland in Droitwich (famous since Roman times for its salt baths, although they are now in a very modern spa building).

We, however, made our way towards Birmingham, along a very pretty route in Warwickshire. Our narrowboat, *Holly*, emerged from Victorian brick tunnels to a vista of bright yellow water lilies, pale pink dog roses and blue forget-me-nots. Just outside one of the world's longest tunnels at King's Norton Junction you'll find a white finger post – pointing one way to Birmingham and the other way to Stratford-upon-Avon and Shakespeare's birthplace.

The first sight on the Stratford canal is unique. Just in front of the mellow red brick bridge, and permanently raised, are the guillotine gates of King's Norton Stop-Lock. Once, stop-locks were common. They were originally constructed to separate one company's water from another. But this is the only one left and remains as it was, complete with winching gear, despite having been disused since the 1950s.

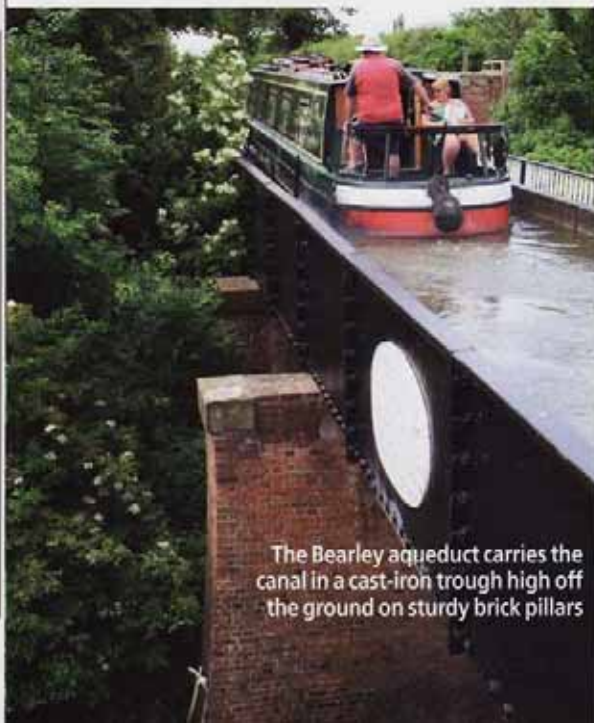
The route to Stratford wound its way round Birmingham's leafy suburbs, though you wouldn't have known, as the route was so lush. Pretty little gardens with cute water-side seats soon gave way to fields with horses. Although the canal is fairly short, it goes through some quintessentially English countryside, cutting, rather thrillingly, through the ancient oaks of the Forest of Arden and Stratford's water meadows.

The villages have wonderful names such as Preston Baggot and Wootton Wawen, each suitably provided with Norman or Saxon churches, inns and manor houses. Wootton

Wawen, indeed, has the oldest church in Warwickshire. Situated amid meadows close to the 17th-century Wootton Hall, St Peter's with its tower dating back to 900AD, is known as the Saxon Sanctuary.

Not far beyond Wootton Wawen is a superb navigational novelty: the Bearley aqueduct. The canal is carried in a cast iron trough supported on slender brick pillars high above the fields. Oddly, the towpath on the aqueduct is at the level of the canal's bottom so walkers look up at boats as they pass by.

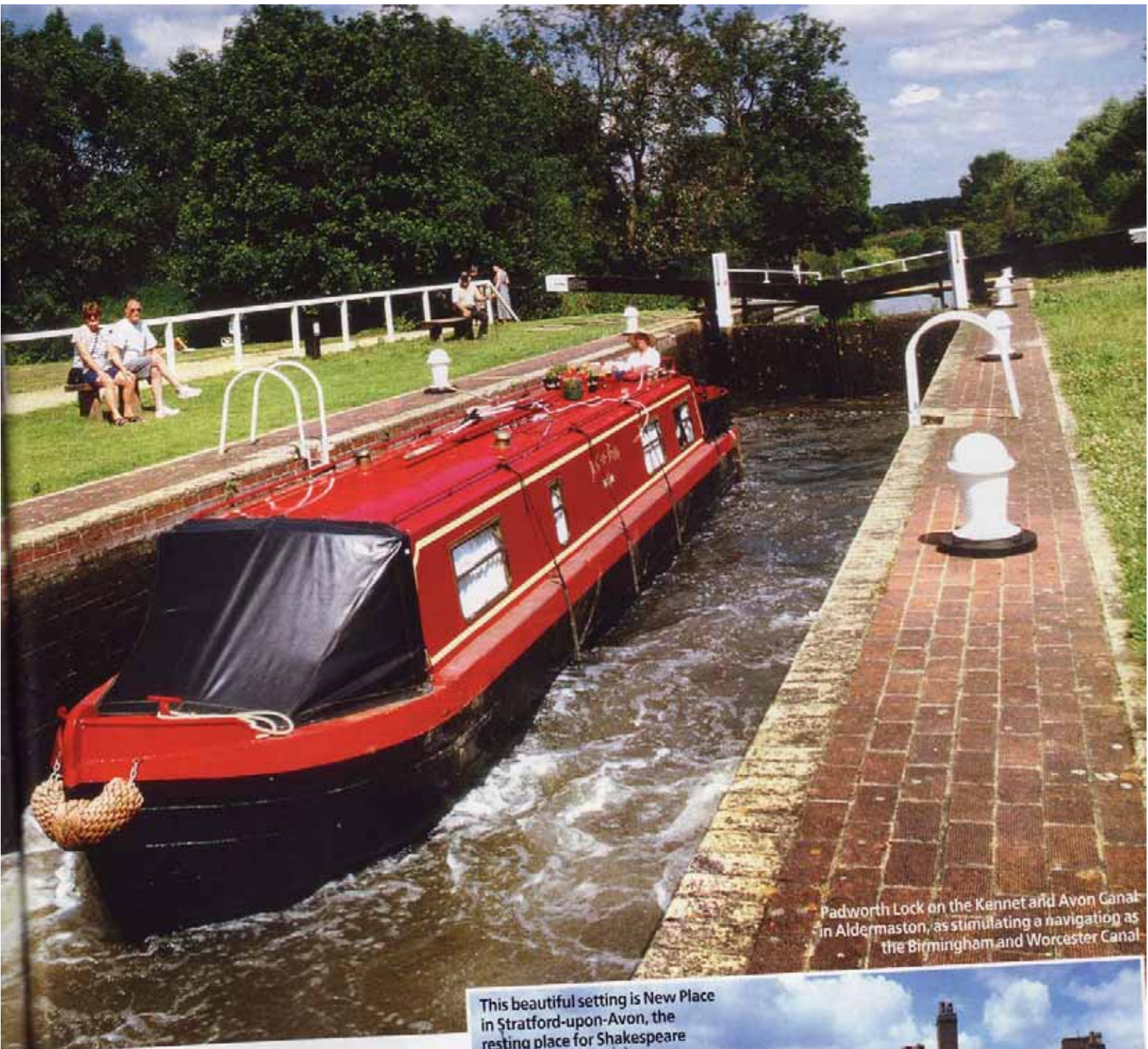
Farther on at Wilmcote is the purported house of Mary Arden, Shakespeare's mother. The timber in the house is oak from the Forest of Arden, while the local quarry at Wilmcote provided the stone. At the back of the house is the original farmyard with the old water pump and the original



The Bearley aqueduct carries the canal in a cast-iron trough high off the ground on sturdy brick pillars



Wootton Wawen, home to the oldest church in Warwickshire



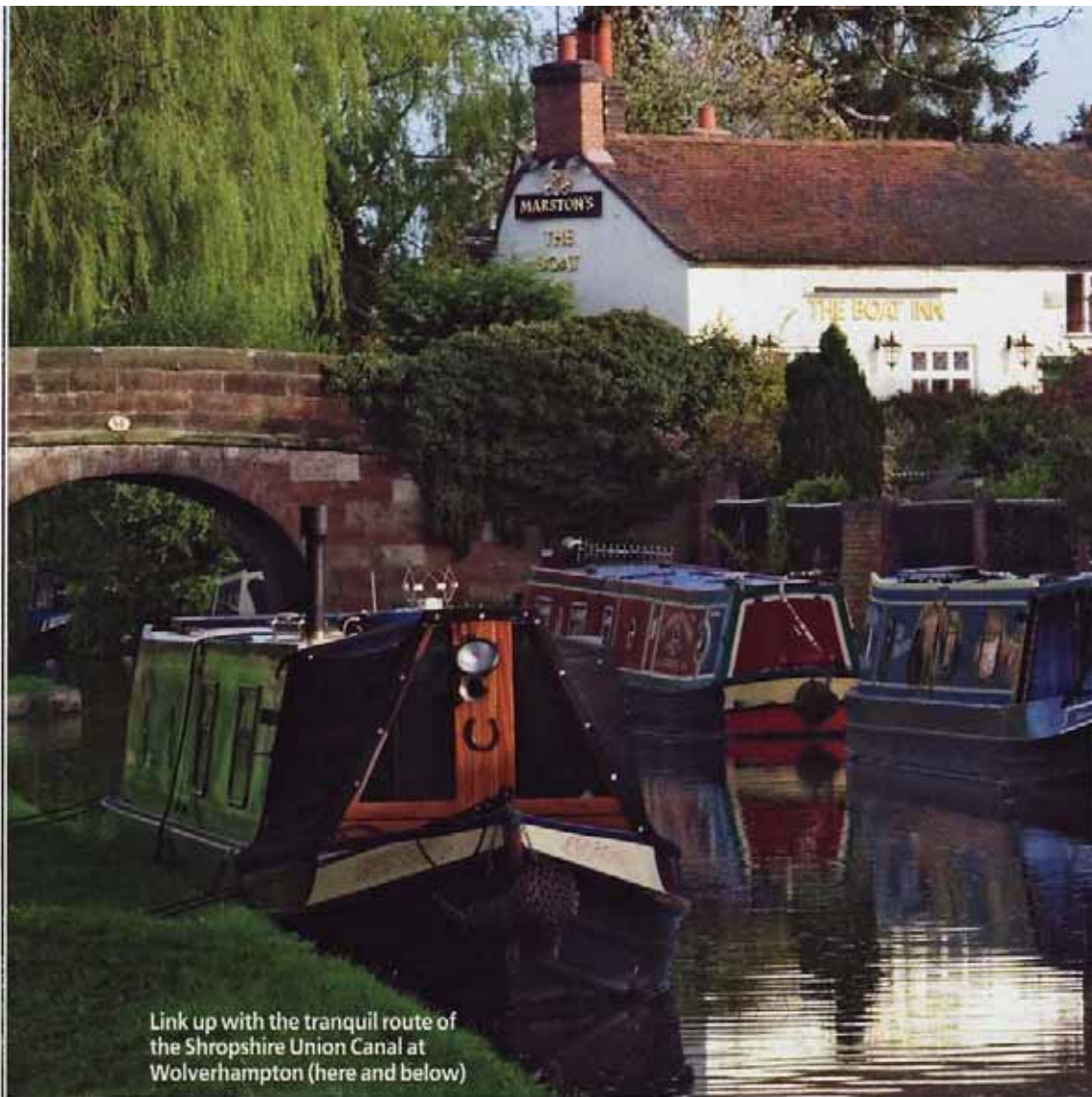
Padworth Lock on the Kennet and Avon Canal in Aldermaston, as stimulating a navigation as the Birmingham and Worcester Canal

stone dovecote. The barns and outbuildings, together with the adjoining Glebe farm, now house a countryside museum devoted to country life from Tudor times to the present day, with a working blacksmith's forge and rare breeds of sheep, cattle and poultry.

The approach to Stratford through suburbs brings you under a low bridge, and as you emerge, the buzz of the Stratford Basin alongside the River Avon and Shakespeare Memorial Theatre rings out. After the calm of the canal, the famous town's hordes of visitors and Shakespeare devotees can seem rather daunting. But after the statutory visit to the house where Shakespeare was born (and probably lived when he was first married) and, if there are tickets, an excursion to one of his plays, the narrowboat can provide a calm refuge.

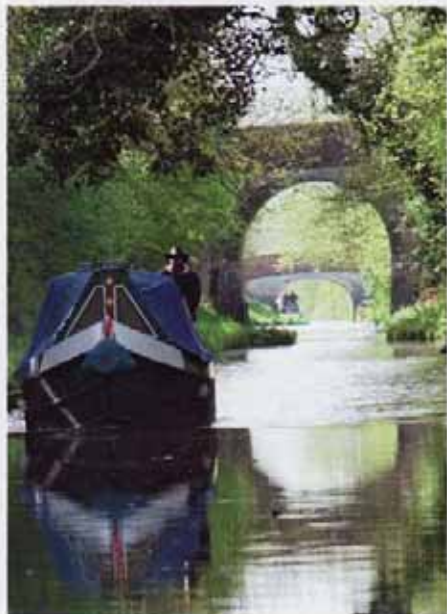
This beautiful setting is New Place in Stratford-upon-Avon, the resting place for Shakespeare





Link up with the tranquil route of the Shropshire Union Canal at Wolverhampton (here and below)

◀ Our journey back along the Stratford-upon-Avon Canal was tranquil and, fortunately for us, unaccompanied by other boats. At one point when we needed to turn around we got stuck in the winding hole (designed especially for turning long boats). Our rather too-long narrowboat, under our rather inexperienced guidance, kept getting grounded or jammed against the bank, but it was the only trouble we had on our excursion.



On our last day, back at Tardebigge Flight, we found we'd become more adept with the steering and had also got the hang of the locks – so much so that we were chatting knowledgeably to other boaters. Between locks 31 and 32, we spotted Lock Cottage, one of the six built when the canal was opened. The last lock keeper fell into the canal in 1966; his widow lived in the cottage until 1986, without running water or electricity. Restored by the Landmark Trust into a cosy wooden-floored cottage, it makes a wonderful retreat from the busy world. We knew how lovely it was because we had stayed in that very cottage the previous year.

Utterly remote, it lies three fields, two locked gates and one humpy redbrick bridge away from the road. Inside the snug house, the bookcase – in a customary Landmark Trust practice – is stacked with relevant books, such as the autobiography of the daughter of a local lock keeper and *Three Men in a Boat* and *The Tale of Jeremy Fisher*. Appropriately, they were all chosen by the widow of Tom Rolt, who described the cottage as having “a misty, moisty towpath life in a setting which becomes increasingly rare”. Apart from being on the deck of a narrowboat, there is no better place to savour the canal life. ■

HERITAGE TRAIL

DISCOVER

To find out more about canals and to plan a trip,

go to www.waterscape.com.

To book a boat go to **Drifters Waterway Holidays**:

a consortium of holiday boat companies;

tel: 0845 762 6252; www.drifters.co.uk.

For hire of boats in Worcestershire and

Warwickshire go to **Black Prince Holidays**,

tel: (01527) 575115; www.black-prince.com.

UK Boat Hire, PO Box 232, Worcester; tel: 0845 126

4098; www.ukboathire.com.

Go Barging: European Waterways Ltd,

Wraysbury, Middlesex; tel: (01784) 482439

or from the USA, tel: 1800 394 8630.

Rose Narrowboats, Stretton-under-Fosse,

Rugby, Warwickshire; tel: (01788) 832449;

www.rose-narrowboats.co.uk.

Kennet Horse Boat Company, Kintbury,

Hungerford, Berkshire; tel: (01488) 658866;

www.kennet-horse-boat.co.uk.

Cambrian Cruisers, Pencelli, Brecon, Powys;

tel: (01874) 665315; www.cambriancruisers.co.uk.

Snaygill Boats Ltd, Skipton Road, Bradley,

Skipton, North Yorkshire; tel: (01756) 795150;

www.snaygillboats.co.uk.

VISIT

Forge Mill Needle Museum, tel: (01527) 62509;

www.forgemill.org.uk.

Avoncroft Museum of Historic Buildings;

tel: (01527) 831363; www.avoncroft.org.uk.

Hanbury Hall, Droitwich; tel: (01527) 821214;

www.nationaltrust.org.uk.

The Commandery, Worcester; tel: (01905)

763888; www.worcestercitymuseums.org.uk.

Worcester Cathedral; tel: (01905) 732900;

www.worcestercathedral.co.uk.

St Peter's Church, Wootton Wawen; tel: (01564)

792659; www.saxonsanctuary.org.uk.

Shakespeare's Birthplace; tel: (01789) 204016;

www.shakespeare.org.uk.

Royal Shakespeare Theatre; tel: (01789)

403444; www.rsc.org.uk.

For more information on staying at properties

owned by **The Landmark Trust**; tel: (01628)

825925; www.landmarktrust.org.uk.

See Shakespeare Country from a different angle travelling on the canal at Stratford

