

THE LOCK OF LOVE

By ANTHONY LAMBERT

Go on a tour of British countryside.. at 4mph

THE contents of the boatyard shop were slightly alarming... piles of 1,000-piece jigsaw puzzles. Is this how you are expected to pass the time on a canal holiday?

But then it was just about the only thing missing from our narrow boat, rather modestly if inaccurately called Little Gull, despite being 66ft long.

On board there were two shower rooms, a TV, DVD and CD player, a coffee-maker and microwave as well as oven and hob.

And there were other thoughtful touches such as an umbrella and waterproofs.

As a greenhorn crew, we were happy to let Little Gull's owner extricate it from the row of boats at the marina in Alvechurch in the Worcestershire countryside.

With breathtaking nonchalance he executed a sharp right-angled turn into the Worcester & Birmingham Canal, while passing on instructions about how to steer the thing and operate the locks we'd have to negotiate.

Taking the tiller long, long away, beyond the canopy roof.

You might only chug along at a modest 4mph, but on sharp bends you soon discover things can happen very fast.

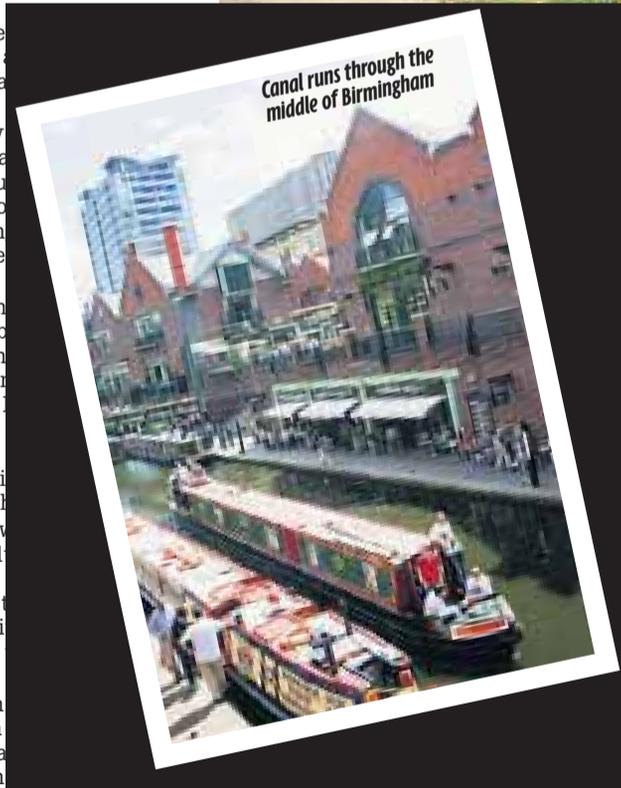
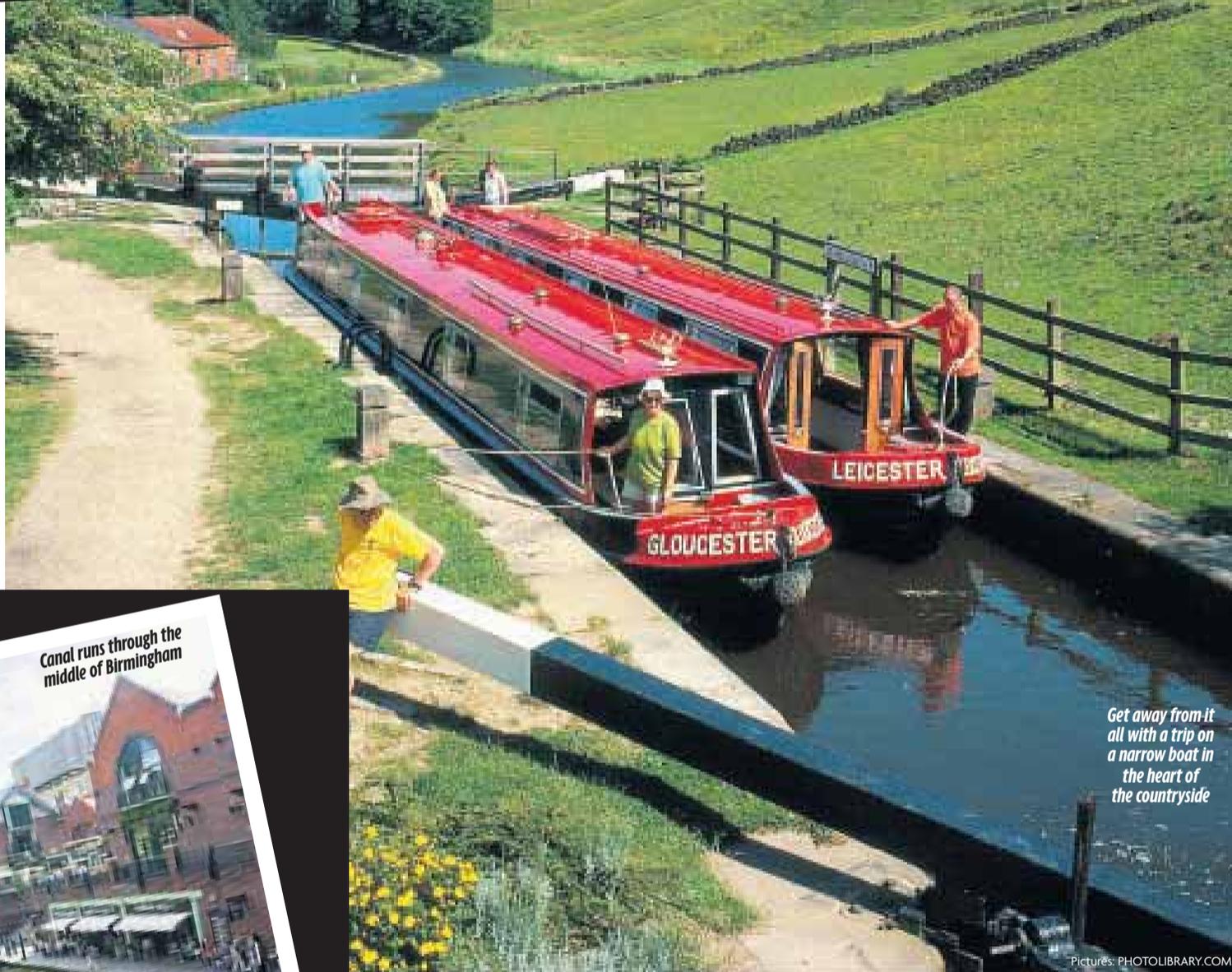
Thankfully there were few other boats as we headed north with the late afternoon sun bathing the Bittell Reservoir and the young Bill developed his love of bird-watching.

The reservoir was to provide an alternative power source for owners after the waters of the River had been tapped canal.

Pootling along at a sedate pace with birdsong and laughter drowning out the feel as if you have slipped back in time, gliding under 18th Century red brick bridges and passing waterside pubs which all seem to be called The Navigation.

Only the occasional towpath jogger and cyclist jerk you back to the 21st Century.

Mooring up for our first overnight stop we soon discovered the double beds were not exactly king size, but they were comfortable and the shower



Canal runs through the middle of Birmingham

Get away from it all with a trip on a narrow boat in the heart of the countryside

Pictures: PHOTOLIBRARY.COM

two narrow boats to pass each other. And despite a light as powerful as a car headlamp in the bow, it was difficult to steer until we switched on the cabin lights to illuminate the canal walls.

Passing through the tunnel we moved from Worcestershire countryside into the heart of Birmingham.

But it was hardly grim as the route through the city is lined almost continuously with rows of trees and shrubs, only interrupted by the back gardens of homeowners who have made a feature of their canal side location with patios, summerhouses and docks.

At King's Norton Junction we turned east on to the Stratford-Upon-Avon Canal and to make sure everyone realises they are heading for Shakespeare's birthplace, there is even a plaque of the bard between laurel

sprays on the western end of Brandwood Tunnel.

At Lady Lane Wharf near Earlswood a fete was in full swing with cake stalls and a barbecue, organised by residents of the boats that are permanently moored near here and the Water Rat Club.

There's no mistaking boats that are homes as they are usually more elaborately painted with their roofs transformed into mini-gardens full of flowers.

Sunbeams filtering through the trees along the banks lit patches of green-black water, while ducks followed our low-rippled wake, hoping for easy pickings. Every leafy

curve revealed another up ahead, taken at a pace that allows you to really admire the beauty of the countryside.

But soon we were fully occupied with probably the trickiest manoeuvre on a narrow boat... turning around.

It's done at a bell-shaped broadening of the canal known as a "winding hole" as boatmen had to rely on the prevailing wind.

Luckily no other boats were around to watch in amazement as we carried out a 50-point turn and set off on our return journey to Alvechurch.

Yes, it's fun messing about on narrow boats.

What's the deal

● DRIFTERS is a consortium of holiday boat companies with bases throughout the UK. For more info go to www.drifters.co.uk or call 08457 626 252. Prices for boats sleeping up to four from £775 for a week and from £545 for a three- to four-night break.

● SUNDAY Mirror readers can get discounts of £50 to £75 on short break by quoting Castle Wharf Promotions/12.