

MESSING ABOUT ON THE WATER

GUY WHITMORE GOES OFF-ROAD TO SAMPLE THE TRANQUILLITY OF BRITAIN'S BEAUTIFUL CANALS

Imagine driving a 50ft-long bus with its steering wheel at the rear – on sheet ice. Then, just to add to the challenge, put it on a narrow road with plenty of tight turns and a constant stream of oncoming buses. Oh, and why not adjust the steering mechanism so that you turn right to go left and vice-versa.

Sound like fun? Well no, not really, more like some madcap challenge from the 1970's game show *It's A Knockout*.

But that's more or less what you're dealing with when you take the helm of a narrowboat.

Although I spent three grand days travelling the Oxford Canal, I have to confess I spent most of my first day wondering why our waterways are not littered with crashed and abandoned narrowboats.

'To think people call this relaxing,' I muttered to myself in true Victor Meldrew style on more than one occasion as I extracted my craft from the canal-side shrubbery.

You don't really appreciate what a skill



it is to manoeuvre these boats until you have a go. My baptism by fire took place on the canal between Rugby and Coventry one bright and sunny Friday afternoon. I arrived at Rugby's Viking Afloat with my brother Scott – who had been press-ganged into sharing my epic voyage – to collect the craft we'd be using for the next three days.

Like a couple of excited schoolboys, we jumped aboard our vessel eager to set

off and make the most of the glorious weather. But as we waited for our introductory tour of the craft, I suddenly had a sinking feeling.

As I looked along the 50-foot boat, called *Ingrid*, I became increasingly concerned about the wharf's exit with its frightfully narrow tight turn half way along. It just didn't seem possible to steer the boat through it without hitting a number of the lovingly kept crafts moored on each side.

As Scott eagerly inspected the boat to ensure all was 'ship shape', I couldn't shake the image of a crowd of angry boat owners chasing us along the canal's footpath as we crashed from one craft to another. The option of making a quick escape in a canal boat is also a bit of a non-starter. The speeds these crafts go, the owners could have a cup of tea and a slice of cake before giving chase – and still catch us within a mile.

Thankfully, my fears were unfounded, as the member of Viking Afloat's staff who gave us our introductory tour of

MEANDERING: Take a gentle ride along the Oxford Canal and you will reach the village and marina at Napton

A brief history of the Oxford Canal

The canal was constructed in several stages after Parliament authorised its construction in 1769, to join the industrial Midlands area with London via the River Thames.

Starting at Hawkesbury Junction where it connects to the Coventry Canal, the waterway runs through Oxfordshire, Northamptonshire and Warwickshire to Oxford, and is considered one of the most scenic in the country.

The canal, which has 43 locks and numerous cast iron bridges, links to the Grand Union Canal to provide access to Birmingham, and the River Thames at Oxford to provide access to London. The canal's construction was originally supervised by celebrated engineer James Brindley, however he died in 1772, leaving his brother-in-law Samuel Simcock to take over and complete the canal.

After overcoming financial problems, the final part of the canal was opened in 1790, and for 15 years, was of one the most important and financially profitable waterways in Britain thanks to the movement of coal, stone and agricultural products.

Like all other canals, the Oxford did its part in



driving the industrial revolution. With the invention of the steam engine, coal was increasingly sought after, but the high cost of moving it from the mines over badly made roads made it an extremely expensive commodity.

That changed with canals, as it became much more cost effective to transport the fuel. One horse drawn barge was capable of pulling 30 tonnes of coal, ten times the amount possible with a horse and cart.

While the section of the Oxford canal between Hawkesbury Junction and Braunston were straightened to make it more competitive with railways, the section south of Napton never was. This un-straightened section is one of the

most winding stretches of canal in England, with one part using 11 miles of canal to connect two points less than five miles apart. The canal was nationalised in 1948, and became part of the Docks and Inland Waterways Executive, which later became the British Waterways Board.

While diesel and steam powered boats were becoming increasingly common, the Oxford still had a number of horse drawn vessels. It is claimed that one narrowboat that used a mule to carry coal along the canal until 1958 was the last horse-drawn freight narrowboat in Britain.

While the Oxford Canal remained profitable until the mid 1950s, the developing road infrastructure meant canals went into decline.

By the 1960s, only a small amount of traffic was left on the Oxford, however its fortunes – like all other canals – took an unexpected twist. In the following decades, more and more people saw the waterways as an ideal leisure pursuit, resulting in a number of canals being re-opened.

Today, thanks to recreational use, traffic on the waterways today is higher than it was at the peak of canals during the industrial revolution.

Ingrid guided it out without any problems at all.

I'm sure I noticed a look of amusement on his face as he jumped ship and waved cheerily from the towpath, wishing us luck as Scott and I realised we were now on our own.

As we travelled along, we soon realised just how manoeuvrable these boats are. As they are steered from the rear, it is quite possible to turn them in a surprisingly tight space if you are brave enough to pile on the power to push the boat around quicker. This, I would add, we found later on into our journey.

For our first day's excursion, we had chosen to travel to Hawkesbury Junction 15 miles away on the outskirts of Coventry.

This part of the canal was originally built as a contour canal – meaning it was constructed around hills to minimise vertical deviations – but as railways became an increasing threat to the



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canal, it was straightened to reduce navigation time.

Straightened, however, does not mean straight, and it wasn't long before our craft made its first – and nearly our most spectacular – unscheduled landing.

While the concept of turning the tiller the opposite way to the way you want to go doesn't take long to grasp, I soon discovered that when things start to go wrong, your natural instincts take over and your brain insists on doing what it knows best – i.e. steer right to go right.

Our dilemma started as I began steering around a sharp left-hand bend, which had an oncoming boat on it.

In my efforts to miss it, I started to negotiate the corner too late, meaning it soon became obvious we weren't going to make it. With the momentum of the craft and water's current pushing it along,

Scott and I were quickly heading into troubled waters.

It is said that when people are involved with accidents, things happen in slow motion. Well in the topsy-turvy world of canal boating, where you drive from the back and turn the wrong way, the opposite applies here too.

Canal boats cruise along at walking speed, that's the point. They let those on board relax and enjoy the views, while swans float gently by. But as soon as something starts to go wrong, a little-known aspect of physics takes over that states everything speeds up 100-fold.

As we headed for the canal bank, the bushes and trees started rushing up towards me like Beckett's Corner during a Grand Prix at Silverstone. As I pulled and pushed the tiller trying to get the boat to do something, it was clear disaster was

ABOVE: The Millhouse at Braunston is perfectly placed for a well-earned stop along the canal

BELOW: Guy navigates through one of the canal's many small tunnels

seconds away. But all was not lost, and my decision to bring my brother was about to pay off.

After initially finding the situation very amusing, Scott realised that we really were up a certain creek without a paddle, and laughter turned to alarm.

Just as I was about to reach for the life jacket, however, he came up with a simple, and effective plan. Put the craft into reverse and maximised the throttle.

The roar of the diesel engine filled the air and water splashed furiously, but in no time at all the boat had slowed up, and when impact finally came, it was hardly noticeable.

Despite this, and one or two other skirmishes with the scenery, when we arrived at the junction we had got Ingrid under control.

After mooring up without any fuss, we made our way to the Greyhound pub, in Hawkesbury, to soak up the last of the evening sun, and complete our day with a beer and cooked meal.

Hawkesbury junction's key role in the industrial revolution means it is now a conservation area, and, thanks to its cast iron bridge, makes an enchanting sight at night. As the temperature fell and the evening chill started to bite, we decided to return to our boat to relax.

With all mod cons including DVD, CD player, television, hot water and central heating, the boat was extremely comfortable, so we rounded off the day by watching a film – and it wasn't Titanic, as some bright spark suggested.

Our second day was much more trouble free – in fact, you could say it was





ABOVE: A section of the Oxford Canal at Napton
RIGHT: The Ingrid survived three days in Guy's care

plain sailing. Our route was back to Rugby, past the Viking Afloat and on to Braunston Junction. This was an estimated eight-hour journey, and after an early start, we reached the three locks at Hillmorton, to the east of Rugby. Hillmorton was a village when the canal was built around it in the 1770s, but the growth of Rugby in the 20th century meant the village became subsumed, becoming a suburb of the town in 1932.

Because the weather was still warm and sunny, the lock was packed with narrowboats and people walking along the canal. As Scott guided the craft in and out of the locks, I joined other boat users, passers-by and enthusiastic children in opening and shutting the gates to the locks. After an hour or so we had worked our way through all of the locks, and continued our journey to Braunston.

Taking it in turns to steer, we motored Ingrid along the waterways, chatting away while enjoying the tranquillity, fresh air and surrounding countryside.

Not even the occasional downpour could dampen our spirits, although I have to say though, if I was to own a narrow boat I would certainly get a canopy.

Being caught in a long downpour on the back of one of these boats would certainly kill the enjoyment for me.



PICTURES: GUY & SCOTT WHITMORE; ALAMY

Two to three hours later, we arrived in Braunston, a picturesque setting and one of the points where the Oxford canal connects with the Grand Union.

Perhaps we should have tried out the boat's kitchen facilities in the name of journalistic research, but the lure of the beer garden we just happened to moor up next to got the better of us.

So, as the sun went down, we spent a second evening sat in the beer garden at The Millhouse, overlooking the canal, and watched the world go by in an extremely civilised manner.

By the start of the third and final day, we were quite sad to end the trip. We had got to grips with the boat, it was another fine day, and the idea of spending more time on the water was a tempting one. Reluctantly, however, we turned the craft around and headed back to Rugby.

In an effort to eek out the journey for as long as possible, we took our time motoring along the waterways, but

finally we swung Ingrid back into the wharf. By now we had the experience to easily manoeuvre the craft along the narrow waterway that had initially caused me so much concern. Soon after, we were driving home, reflecting on our three days. Perhaps the biggest surprise for me was how much I'd actually enjoyed the experience, despite the trip's first couple of hours. After pledging I'd rather walk the plank than continue, I actually became quite a fan of narrowboats.

With a pace of life that makes you relax, plenty of fresh air and fantastic views, a canal trip really is a great way to unwind. You also have the flexibility to travel on or stay moored and venture off into the surrounding countryside, town or city, depending on your mood.

On top of that there are no traffic fumes, no traffic jams and no roadworks to endure – and the equivalent to the motorway service station is a waterside pub, which certainly gets my vote. 🌿

Further information

- For further information, contact Viking Afloat on 01905 610660 or email info@viking-afloat.com. Alternatively, visit www.viking-afloat.com. If you are interested in finding out more about waterways, visit The Inland Waterways Association at www.inlandwaterways.org.uk or British Waterways' leisure site at www.waterscape.com