



Above: Granny, Mum and Dad set sail
Right: meander through sleepy Bettisfield

For a family holiday with a difference, try meandering down the river in a narrowboat — it was certainly all plain sailing for three generations of the Wilson family...

It was a five-berth narrowboat called *Humbly's Heron*, which we picked up from a marina on the Llangollen Canal at Wrenbury near Nantwich — as picturesque a parish as you will find anywhere in Cheshire, with a gorgeous 16th-century church.

There were five of us. Granny and me (call me Grandad), our toddler grandson and his mum and dad. It was impossible to guess at the range of our individual expectations of what lay ahead on this three-night trip to Ellesmere in Shropshire, all the while straddling the Welsh border. But, except for the toddler for whom it was an adventure, it was apprehension, anxiety and fear of the unknown that dominated our emotions.

Nearly two-and-a-half days

later, the anxieties had melted into a distant memory, replaced by a handful of highlights which made the trip a once-in-a-lifetime experience for each of us.

Along with enjoying the daytime community of the ever-helpful canal fraternity and the tranquillity of the water at night, for Granny the highlight was the bizarre pleasure of not having to miss the Saturday shop at Tesco. Except, instead of driving into the car park, we manoeuvred the 58ft narrowboat into a mooring spot at Ellesmere and hopped out with our shopping bags right on the



Clamber aboard at pretty Wrenbury and you're off on a once-in-a-lifetime adventure

supermarket's doorstep as if it was the most natural thing in the world.

For Grandson, the best part was being fitted out with a toddler's lifejacket and being able to wear his favourite wellies all the time — and occasionally getting hold of the tiller to help Dad steer.

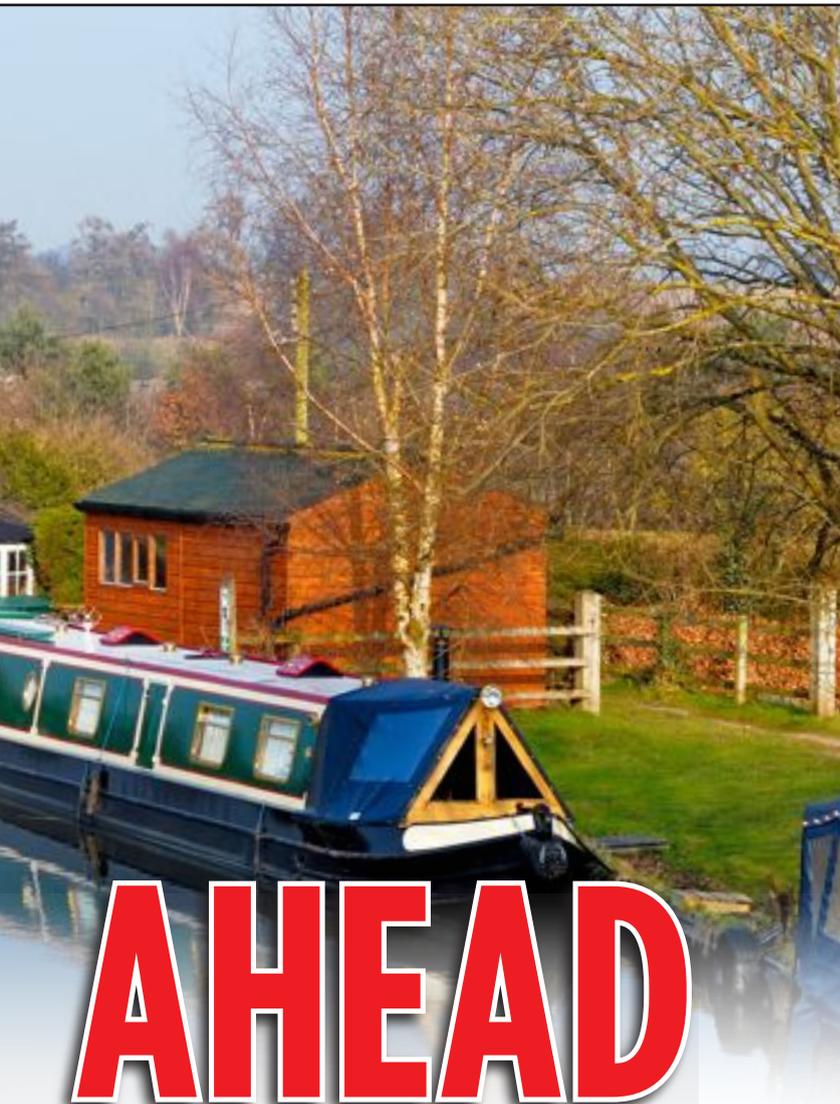
For Mum, it was the time she spent sitting with her son at the front of the boat, taking in all the sights nature had to offer. Along with all manner of beasts in the meadows, we saw ponies, squirrels, families of ducks and swans, eagles, herons and even a kingfisher. Books on water life are

great, but seeing it all through our own eyes was so much better.

For Dad, the hand that steadied



Above: Grandad gets to grips with a lock
Right: Granny and Grandson enjoy the ride



AHEAD

the tiller throughout the odyssey, the most magical moment came near the end when most of the hard work had been done, just before we travelled the last hour back to return the boat.

It was early in the morning and there was still a mist waiting to lift along the canal. The sky was clear and sunny. It was a picture postcard moment and he soaked up every second — in a world a million miles from his busy life in the city.

For me, the highlights were most

of these but more. They included the luxury of a high-tech sit-down shower and stopping off for a pint at a local tavern when the work of the day was finished.

But there was also a great sense of achievement at having helped the boat through some 20 locks and under about six 'lift bridges' (drawbridges) along a total of 40 miles of canal, and in using a pole to help set us adrift when the boat almost ran aground near the reeds.

It was hard work, but far from daunting. Besides, there were always people around to help if we needed it. We were lucky enough to enlist the aid of a friendly boatman at our first lock, and after that it was



L-r: there was much wildlife to enjoy en route, including mallards, ponies and a kingfisher

plain sailing — even getting through a 'staircase' where a series of three or more locks was needed to get the boat up or down to the right water level.

There were other chores, too. Somebody had to lay on the boiled eggs and soldiers for breakfast, the bacon butties for elevenses and various lunch snacks in space conditions that were surprisingly well organised, but not what we're used to at home. And somebody had to find water-points on land where the boat could take on fresh water.

But the hard work made the pleasure moments even more pleasurable — and exhilarating. Moments of utter stillness, the peace of the evening when we explored local villages such as Ellesmere and Marbury, Grindley Brook and Bettisfield, and stopped at a pub for dinner. Not forgetting, of course, that all-important weekly shop at Tesco.

In all, the boating experience was reminiscent of Jerome K Jerome's observation in his 1889 book *Three Men in a Boat*: 'There is no more thrilling sensation I know of than sailing. It comes as near to flying as man has got to yet — except in dreams.'

Robert Wilson

Here we go!

Robert's waterways holiday was with UK Boat Hire, members of DRIFTERS, a consortium of award-winning holiday boat companies who have bases throughout the UK. Call them on 0845 762 6252 or visit the website www.drifters.co.uk

Take a Break readers can obtain discounts (£50 off a part week, £100 off a full week or £250 off two weeks up until the end of 2011) by quoting Castle Wharf Promotions/197.



Above: sailing into Ellesmere, at the end of our journey. Below: Grindley Brook



Robert's tips

- Try to get the hang of a few sailors' knots beforehand. Watch the pre-trip instruction video carefully and listen to the advice from the professional boatman who sets you on your way. Never be shy of accepting help from more experienced canal-users along the way.
- You will be told before setting off what to do in case of certain snags and emergencies — such as when the propeller gets caught in weeds or debris — but you can read up on all this beforehand in *The Boater's Handbook*, published by British Waterways and the Environment Agency. Download it free from www.waterscape.com/media/documents/1784.pdf
- Get hold of a copy of one of the nine *Pearson's Canal Companions*, published by Troll Publishing (£8.95), which have large-scale, highly detailed maps and descriptions of the popular canal routes. They're available at hire bases, boatyards and canal shops.
- The boat-hire company will help you plot a route that you can cover comfortably in the time available. But make sure you plan your overnight stops so you never have to navigate in the dark.
- Take along a pair of binoculars and a book on water birds. You may not catch sight of a Humblot's heron (our boat was named after an exotic Madagascan species), but there will be plenty more to see!