

LITTLE BOOK OF

CANAL BOATS



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First published in the UK in 2013

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Printed and bound in China

ISBN 978-1-909217-39-3

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Introduction

Today, the British inland waterway network covers more than 4,000 miles of man-made canals and navigable rivers that not so long ago were part of a much larger system whose tentacles touched nearly all corners of the country. With towpath walks stretching for miles following not only canals that have been the subject of restoration but also those arteries, once important but long since abandoned, there is much to see and do providing all manner of interests to different people.

Many will be attracted to the still and quiet waters simply for the solitude, isolation or the abundance of wildlife so quintessential to the canal landscape. Others will take enormous satisfaction and enjoyment from navigating forgotten backwaters, conveying them out amongst open fields, across windswept moorland and through beautiful vistas aboard vessels representative of another era.

And then there are those who marvel at the utilitarian yet graceful architecture of renovated warehouses, keepers' cottages, locks and aqueducts serving towns and cities that in Victorian times would have reverberated to the sounds of factories, mills and furnaces. Without mile after mile of canals connecting these ever sprawling conurbations during 18th Century, the Industrial Revolution that shaped Britain into a nation of vast wealth might never have happened.



An early morning sunrise of the still waters of the Kennet & Avon

With the cessation of war in 1945, many who in the preceding five or so years had been restrained by the shackles austerity measures had imposed, set about rooting out and saving those elements that once made Britain great. With an overriding feeling of sadness, sentimental nostalgia and despair, they could see the ways of life from a bygone age rapidly disappearing. Tom Rolt and Robert Aickman were amongst the most prominent instigators and in 1946 founded the Inland Waterways Association, an organisation whose primary aim was to conserve the remnants of Britain's canals and navigable rivers that formed such an intrinsic part of the country's economic heritage.

For the industrialists of the 1700s, it was an enormous task building a canal and there were many challenges, obstacles and setbacks to overcome. In writing this book, I hope I have given a brief insight into life on the waterways during the heyday of commercial operation as well as a look at how they have been adapted for today's leisure market.

In some of the chapters, I have focussed on particular examples of civil engineering that are still in daily use thanks in no small part to the dedicated bands of

enthusiasts always willing to lend a hand in the restoration of such landmarks. It is because of the sheer effort and time dedicated by such individuals that the rest of us can gaze in awe at these engineering wonders of the Georgian and Victorian period, whilst enjoying the peace and tranquillity of the surrounding countryside. The popularity of holidaying by boat has, since the 1960s, grown to enormous proportions with close to 30,000 vessels registered by British Waterways today.



Modern fibreglass 'cruiser' type narrow boat, Zena, under construction in 1997



Zena was owned for five or so years by Paul and Diana Woods, the author's in-laws.

I would like to show my wholehearted appreciation to the following for their assistance in putting this book together:

Jeremy Beresford; Peter Clews; Tom Marshall; and Ken Warden; to Paul and Diana Woods for allowing me access to the log books, diaries and photo records of their extensive trips aboard *Zena* – an early example of an all-fibreglass construction narrow boat – as well as many pleasant hours joining them on their navigations along the Kennet & Avon and River Thames; and finally to my Mum and Dad who

probably do not realise just how important the teas, lunches, invaluable use of their conservatory and endless words of encouragement are to me.

Thank you all for your help.

Steve Lanham 2013



The brand new Zena is lifted into the Kennet & Avon canal at Newbury in 1997

Taming Britain's Waterways

Before the advent of the railways and the ease with which a network of steel rails could convey goods and passengers across country at great speeds, most travellers relied on the rutted and unpaved roads to get about. In the days before roads were properly metalled, large waggons pulled by strings of horses would churn up the surface so that in times of inclement weather, these routes would become muddy, flooded and often impassable.

Many of Britain's largest inland towns and cities had usually prospered because of their location at a suitable bridging point on a major river. As the condition of highways and byways continued to deteriorate, businesses, small industries and the town's people took to using waterborne craft for the transportation of raw materials, minerals and essential goods.

As far back as the 2nd Century AD, the Romans had realised the potential of canals to link their more established centres of commerce. It is generally understood that around AD 120, the first such waterway in Britain was excavated between Torksey on the River Trent and the city of Lincoln on the River Witham. Stretching for 11½ miles, Fossdyke must at the time have been an extraordinary feat of engineering, not least for the fact that it was dug entirely by hand and without the use of mechanised equipment.



Fossdike

At around the same time an even more ambitious channel, Car Dyke, was begun forging a course through the Lincolnshire countryside and by joining up with other similar arteries, providing a continuous watercourse from Peterborough to York, much of which skirted the edge of the Fens. It was first thought that this system may well have been intended to drain surrounding farmland but there is strong evidence to suggest small cargo vessels navigated the route to supply goods to settlements and Roman Army garrisons it passed along its journey north. Possibly due to Car Dyke's extraordinary length and the manpower required to maintain the banks, it fell into disrepair during the 12th Century and many sections are now silted up completely.

Fossdike on the other hand was only 11½ miles long and in 1121 was the subject of remedial work by order of King Henry I. In Medieval times there were a number of schemes designed to improve the navigation of rivers especially as they were an ideal solution to the movement of large stone blocks from quarries to the building sites of castles and monasteries. But the importance of Fossdike as a link to the Trent and a vital trade route was only realised by the people of Lincoln in the 1600s. Samuel Fortey was

commissioned to oversee a complete restoration and look into improving the junction at Torksey where the river is tidal and prone to flooding the surrounding land. In 1672 a sluice-type lock was installed providing a more reliable interchange between the two waterways.



Had it remained in use, Car Dyke would have been one of the longest waterways in Britain today

Exeter Ship Canal

One of Britain's oldest mad-made waterways to be built since the Roman occupation was the Exeter Ship Canal completed during the 1560s to link the city's docks to the sea.

For centuries, Exeter was an affluent and strategic trading port with vessels sailing up the estuary in order to deposit their cargos. In the late 1200s, Isabella de Fortibus Countess of Devon, decided to build a weir across the River Exe to provide power to her mills and in doing so blocked access to the docks! In fact it was the establishment of this unfortunate landmark that gave rise to the name Countess Wear, today a suburb on the south-eastern side of the city. Naturally, this caused much opposition and the weir was removed within ten years of its completion. Nevertheless,