

# Fresh Blows the Caldon wind

When **ADRIAN GARDINER** invited friends for a relaxing narrowboat trip in North Staffordshire, it turned into quite an adventure

**G**REAT furnaces gleamed red in the twilight, and their fires were reflected in horrible black canals . . . acres of mean and miserable architecture!”

“What are our sailing orders, Captain?” asks one of my three crew, fellow Scotsman as the Tartan Army heads south.

“From Knype — er, Stoke,” I say, banishing Arnold Bennett’s Five Towns novel from my mind, “we turn east onto what I hear is one of Britain’s most charmingly picturesque canals, the Caldon, and if the weather is kind we might get to Froghall, the end of the line.”

The 58ft Ruby was moored at Festival Park Marina. Apart from late September clothing, we had to provision the ship: supermarkets tend to be built near roads rather than canals, and all over the country small shops are going out of business. Best to be prepared. (Normally boatyards will provision for you).

With Mr Mole and Mrs Rat as novices, I invited Ms Toad as Mate, since it is best to have a minimum of two with some experience, and we have been on the River Severn together: an experience that should have reminded me to bring the cat o’ nine tails.

“Cast Off!” And amidst quips about hoisting the Saltire (Scottish flag) or the Jolly Roger, we are underway. Few cities have changed in a generation so much as Stoke. In the 1970s I walked from my flat in Hanley to Stoke down the stinking black canal to college (equally stinking, keeping a student from his social life). Almost incredibly, those were the days when no one hung out washing on a Monday, as the bottle kilns fired up.

Now in Hanley Park willows waft in the wind and ducks come to see if we have any stale bread. There are herons,



and the blue flash of a Kingfisher, the shyest bird to honour you with his presence. Mr Mole, whose hobby is industrial architecture, is fascinated by the few remaining bottle kilns, and by a few dilapidated factories awaiting redevelopment. “I’ve been in a kiln,” says Captain Badger, “at the Gladstone museum.” “Pity they let you out,” says the Mate.

Up through Milton, four locks and three lifting bridges, all conveniently spaced apart, then it’s a flight of five at Stockton Brook. I’d heard — because both boaters and Staffordshire folk are naturally friendly people — that the middle lock ran dry the day before; but as there’s been so much rain it seems likely that someone carelessly left paddles open, allowing millions of

gallons of water to pour straight through. This is the summit. Behind us is the city conurbation sprawl; ahead the Peak District and a rolling landscape of farm and pasture. We find no moorings, so spike in and settle down for the dinner Mrs Rat made earlier, when not engaged with windlass and ratchets. A peaceful night, and the last we were able to get.

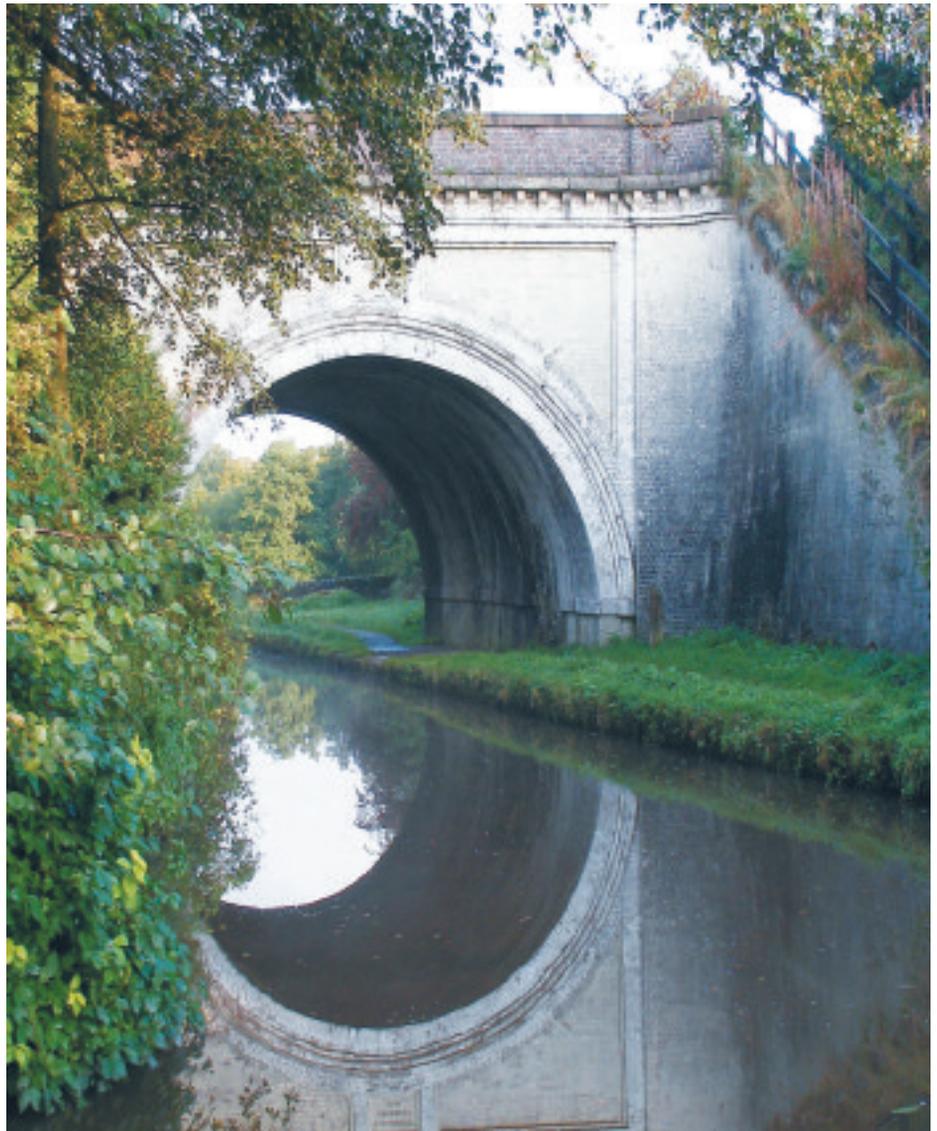
Beyond Park lane, where British Waterways have a new station, a place you can re-water and dump er, ‘recycle’ your trash, is a real gem for Mr Mole. Rarely in Britain does one canal cross another. This is the Hazelhurst aqueduct, a beautiful arch, and in the climate of today’s international junk culture I wonder if those brikies realised the pleasure they left for posterity, 170 years ago.

Enough philosophy. Time for the pub. We tie up Ruby in the pretty hamlet of Denford and lunch in the Hollybush, deservedly popular — though they don't take the Scottish money, which always seems strange to me. Legally they don't have to, but there are so few in circulation they are unlikely to be forged, unlike English twenties.

On to the Churnet Valley, beautiful and the very essence of England. Captain Badger is having some trouble steering, as the canal has narrow stretches and bends sharp for a 58-ft boat. The pleasant autumn weather has changed: we have squalls and narrowboats are not designed for gusty winds. In Cheddleton we have no time to visit the church and its fabulous William Morris windows, as a gust blows us towards another boat and bridge. I opt for the bridge, which we take a sizeable chunk out of. Glasses smash in the galley. The crew are stoical, sweeping up the debris. Ms Toad looks at me disapproving: "that pint of ale you had . . ."

Unusually in Britain, the canal (Caldon) joins the river (Churnet), because there wasn't room in the valley for both, and the carefully restored steam railway too. Now it's getting dark and scary — it's against British Waterway's rules to travel in darkness and anyway it's dangerous to do so with the current we are careering down looking for a place to park. Which we find, just upstream of a weir. Mr Mole and the Mate in drenching rain try to find a spiking place, that bit of the towpath free of concrete and rocks. We're all dripping wet and tired, but Captain Badger has the answer. One of Staffordshire's best pubs, the Black Lion, is just across the road. It turns out to be under new management, and worth a mention in anyone's guide book (I used to write them).

We make it to Froghall the next day, despite the torrential overnight rain, and the umbrella incident. The engine died and, used as I am to supermarket plastic bags and baler twine, this is far more serious, "It's all your fault," says Ms Toad. The boatyard sends out Mr



Piglet (thanks Mark) who, after three hours fishing about in freezing water, finds a huge parasol wrapped around our propeller. Chance in a million, and I have some explaining to do when we return the boat. And the damaged bridge too. "Don't worry about it," says Steve at the boatyard (Staffordshire people are so friendly). "That lifting bridge where you had to stop the traffic? Some Americans didn't realise you had to lift it. You can imagine."

### FACTFILE

Canals have been reclaimed in the last thirty years, and offer great potential for carbon free footprint leisure. Boats burn fuel: our footprint was 0.17 tonnes

— between four —which is less than one tenth of a flight from London to New York. You can find more details online, and though the Caldon canal is quite challenging, you don't have to jump in at the deep end. There are other canals less demanding.

In Britain, I use Nicholson's Guides to Waterways. They are informative with good maps though, like all guide books, not 100 per cent accurate. Seek local knowledge.

Our holiday was with Black Prince, members of the DRIFTERS who have bases throughout the UK — they are a consortium of holiday boat companies: [www.drifters.co.uk](http://www.drifters.co.uk) (08457 626252). Enjoy the waterways on [www.waterscape.com](http://www.waterscape.com).