WATER WAYS

A thousand miles along
Britain's canals

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CONTENTS

Preface

The Narrowboat Pub

REGENT'S CANAL

SUNLIGHT REFLECTED off the Regent's Park Canal as I made my way to the Narrowboat pub to meet a man called Ed. We were meeting to discuss a job – well, a job of a kind. Ed worked for the Canal & River Trust and they had an idea they might appoint a writer-in-residence. Someone prepared to spend the next year or two travelling the length of Britain's canal network, getting a sense of life on the modern waterways, and fashioning a book at the end of it. My name had been put forward by a publisher friend on the strength of having written a book called *Paddle*, about a kayak trip around Ireland. (Actually, not just any kayak trip around Ireland – but possibly the *slowest ever* – having chosen what turned out to be Ireland's stormiest summer in living memory.) The only trouble, I reflected, walking along the towpath, was my complete inexperience of canals. I'd never been on so much as a narrowboat holiday.

On the other hand, I knew how to travel slowly (canals operate at a horse's walking pace), and over the years I had picked up odd bits of knowledge of canals. After all, most of us in Britain live within five miles of a stretch of canal, so they are hard to avoid. As a nineteen-year-old, I'd paddled a heavy,

yellow fibreglass kayak along the Kennet and Avon Canal across the southwest of England. Back then, restoration was still in progress and I'd had to pull the kayak up the flight of twenty-nine locks at Caen Hill on a pair of pram wheels I'd found in a skip. Then, a couple of decades later, I'd walked the eighty miles of Ireland's Grand Canal – one of the earliest built in the British Isles – from Dublin to Shannon Harbour. Why I chose to do that in the depths of a cold winter, with the waters iced over, I no longer entirely recall.

At other times I'd followed lengths of rural canals in the Midlands to seek out kingfishers or spot Daubenton's bats wheeling through the dusk. And once I'd walked for a few days along a summer-warmed Oxford Canal, guitar on shoulder, as the happiest way to get to a gig in Banbury. On many an occasion, too, there'd been canalside pubs, and escapes from London traffic by cycling along towpaths.

Perhaps boating wasn't the whole point of the waterways?

I reflected on all these claims as I followed the Regent's Canal towpath past Camley Street Natural Park, and then over and around the Islington Tunnel. I felt a growing excitement at the prospect of spending time with canals as I passed intriguing remnants of boatmen's wharfs and stopped to watch a pair of coots head-bobbing across the water. The boats moored along the bank – with their wafts of chimney smoke from the salvaged pallets and foraged branches piled up on their roofs – were invitingly the homes of steampunk eccentrics, some of them doggedly preserving the traditional livery of 'roses and castles' painted panels. Then there was the bewitching cleverness of the locks – at Kentish Town and again at St Pancras – with their simple stone chambers and heavy gates, able to lift huge boats uphill with the soft power of water alone.

There was a thrill, too, at the realisation that these water roads and towpaths could carry me – or anyone – out of the city and into the countryside and on to the distant coastal ports of Liverpool, Hull or Bristol. Britain's 2,000-odd miles of waterways

can transport one through (and at times under) the Pennines, along river navigations and into mill towns, on to tiny villages or across corners of the countryside, even less busy now than they would have been in the canals' nineteenth-century golden age.

I arrived at the Narrowboat in a flurry of enthusiasm and met Ed sitting on a balcony overhanging the canal, watching boats go by. We got our pints in and it began to snow, which felt magically odd on an April morning. We ordered venison sausages and mash – suitably hearty fare for the weather – and I listened as Ed told me how the canals had almost been lost in the 1940s, before being rescued and renovated by activists, enthusiasts, volunteers and government agencies. He had been at it himself for the past twenty years, first at British Waterways and latterly at the Canal & River Trust (CRT), the charity set up in 2012 to continue steering the canals' journey from industrial carriers into a sustainable haven for boaters, walkers, cyclists and anglers, and as wildlife habitats and corridors.

Ed talked of 'wellness' as a key aim of the charity, maintaining the canals as a resource that benefited the nation's health – both physical and psychological. He enthused even more about canal nature, about the growing populations of water voles, otters and kingfishers, and reeled off bird species that had found sanctuary in the linear wilderness. And there was art, too, he told me – the Trust has commissioned site-specific works for the centenary of the Leeds and Liverpool Canal, but wherever I went I would find canal-themed art and sculpture, plays and poetry.

I listened to all Ed had to say, occasionally chipping in ideas for the book. My enthusiasm, I told him, was for spending a year or so roaming the towpaths and waters on foot, by bicycle and kayak, as well as by narrowboat. 'We're quite keen on stand-up paddleboarding, too, if you want to give that a go,' added Ed. Meeting people and finding stories was the brief: slow adventures on the 'cut' (as boat people call it). Nothing more specific. I was, it seemed, their first writer-in-residence. Or, as Ed suggested, their 'writer-in-motion.'

There was just one thing that was worrying me, I confessed. As the whole reason for the canals' existence was their boating history, and as some of the most committed canal enthusiasts were boaters, it seemed perhaps a gap in my CV that I hadn't been on a canal boat ... nor did I know very much about the history and workings of barges, narrowboats, locks, wharfs, navvies and the rest.

Not to worry, said Ed, it wouldn't be a problem for long. The waterways are full of people who know *everything* about *everything* to do with canals ('far more than me,' he confided). And the great thing about them is they like nothing better than to explain and demonstrate things. It is a welcoming community, he assured me, entirely free of the exclusiveness of yachties and sea dogs. My ignorance of puddling, bow-hauling, inclined planes and the like might well serve in my favour.

But it did seem a good idea to find someone to take me off on the canals on a boat sooner rather than later. Someone, Ed suggested, who knew what they were doing and could show me the proper way to handle a boat and work locks.

1

'Have you ever been on a boat before?'

OXFORD CANAL

'HAVE YOU EVER BEEN ON A BOAT BEFORE?' Kate Saffin was framed in the square opening that formed the side hatch of *Morning Mist*, as if leaning out of a tiny proscenium stage. Her face was lower than mine as I stood on the towpath of the Oxford Canal and I crouched down to introduce myself properly, seeing only fringed hair, hard-worked jeans and a practical blue wool sailor's jersey.

Kate was to be my host for the next three days and she wanted to know my credentials. 'Well, I've done a bit of sailing ... crewing, mostly ... quite a bit of sea kayaking ... but no, it's actually my first time on a barge.'

Kate recoiled theatrically. As well she might, given that she was amongst many other things, an actor. As well as a theatre director, playwright and historian of the canals.

'First thing,' she admonished, 'this is not a barge, it's a narrowboat. They are not the same. A barge is a particular boat, found on tidal waterways, estuaries, maybe on navigations, or on a few wider waterways. You won't find a barge on most British canals.

It wouldn't fit. This—', she gestured out of the hatch and along the long, midnight blue and burgundy hull, 'is a narrowboat. It's designed to fit a canal. Which is, as you can see, narrow.'

I looked across the ribbon of water that ran eastwards across the Midlands into Rugby. This particular stretch was wide enough to have room to moor narrowboats against both banks and still allow other narrowboats to navigate between them. But I took her point.

'Of course,' she continued, 'there are canal boats which aren't narrowboats, even though they look like them. So unless you know what you're talking about it's best just to call everything a boat. Oh, and it's always *boating*, never barging.'

Boats, I reflected, must be a bit like horses, which I do know about, having grown up with them in Ireland. Horsey people might say 'horse' about some non-specific animal but normally use something more precise – pony, cob, hunter, warm-blood, vanner, Hackney, Arab. However, you can only use that kind of vocabulary if you know what you're about. Saying 'horse' for 'pony' was like mixing up barges and narrowboats.

Kate turned back into the boat's interior. 'Now we've got that straight ... coffee? Bacon sandwich?' A thought struck her. 'You're not a vegetarian, are you?' I shook my head. 'Okay, then, get your bag inside – make sure it's well out of the way. We'll eat on the move.' She got busy in the galley (or is it just a kitchen?), sizzling and boiling, and smells wafted up of bacon and Colombian roast.

I looked around for a place to put my rucksack that was out of the way. It wasn't easy. *Morning Mist* might have been nearly the length of a tennis court, but I could almost touch both sides of the cabin if I stretched my arms. A window onto the water gave a ducks' eye view of a flotilla of ducks swimming past, while to my left was a burrow-like corridor, with doors leading off to what I assumed were cabins and perhaps a bathroom, and beyond the galley a boat's width of livingroom, jam-packed with things.

I found an alcove to one side of the ladder I'd just come down and squeezed the bag into it. I was glad that when I had called

Kate Saffin, my canal mentor, at the tiller on *Morning Mist*.

Kate and asked if I could join her for a few days of boating along the Oxford Canal, I'd told her that I'd have my sleeping bag and bivvy bag with me and would sleep on the towpath. Though big for a boat, *Morning Mist* was small for a house, and that's what she was: a floating home, cargoed with all the things that made up Kate's life. It would be all too easy to intrude.

Kate had taken me on, rather kindly, as crew on *Morning Mist*, to give me a taste of canal life, and to instruct me along the way in its mysteries and etiquette. Along with the land-based Heather Wastie, Kate forms one half of Alarum Theatre, a

company that put on canal-themed plays, travelling between shows by narrowboat. Their current production was inspired by the 'Idle Women' – the canal equivalent of the Land Girls, who as 'Trainees' had learnt to take narrowboats laden with coal and other essential cargoes between London and the Midlands during the Second World War. Their next show was at the Folly pub at Napton-on-the-Hill, two days' boating away.

Kate had lived and travelled on *Morning Mist* for the past seventeen years, and knew the waterways as well as the working boat people had a generation before. Before moving onto the canals she had worked as a nurse and public health researcher in the NHS, which perhaps explained the breezy practicality and efficiency. She had adopted canal life with a spirited enthusiasm, making a point of getting to know some of the last working boat families on the Oxford, Grand Union and London canals.

As we munched on bacon sarnies, Kate gave me a quick résumé of *Morning Mist*'s life. She was a steel sixty-footer, built in 1988 by Dave Thomas of Braunston, a town that generations of boat families thought of as 'home' and which still has one of the busiest narrowboat marinas. Kate was the boat's second owner. There were better narrowboats around, she told me, but 'never one I liked more – though I would like to fit a Rayburn'. Rayburns are only slighter smaller versions of Agas and incredibly heavy. But, as Kate explained, weight doesn't much matter on a canal boat; carrying is what they're designed for. You can have a quarter-ton cast iron and fire-cement cooker on board a boat and it'll sit just a tiny bit deeper in the water. Weight isn't any issue.

Space, however, is crucial. A narrowboat is the horizontal equivalent of living in one of those thin, three-storey houses where you're always leaving things upstairs and having to run up and down. Boaters need a system to avoid finding that what they want is at the other end of the boat just when they need it. Kate's method seemed to be having everything useful gathered round her chair in the long living room. Papers, a library of books on canal history, well-worn computer, music, coffee mugs

spread across the sofa, or in tottering piles on shelves, or heaped on the floor. Likewise in the kitchen, where most things were kept handy on the draining board, or on the floor. It underlined how on the still waters of a canal there were none of the sea-going concerns of having to tie everything down or corral it in boxes to stop it all sliding into the bilges. Boating on the canals wasn't at all like sailing, it seemed.

We carried our mugs of coffee back along the gunwale, the narrow ledge between the hull and the sides of the cabin, and set them on the roof. Kate reached through the door into the back cabin and turned a key in a control panel on the side wall. There was a deep rumbling down in the bowels of the boat. 'Can you undo the front rope, coil it up and put it on the deck and then come back and get on here at the back,' she told me.

I set off along the towpath, jogging the sixty foot to *Morning Mist*'s bow and unhitched the rope from the ring.

'Push out,' Kate hollered. I put both hands against the top of the cabin and pushed. Slowly but easily the front of the boat pivoted out towards open water. I straightened up before I found myself with feet on land and hands on boat and the distance between too far for recovery, and walked back to where Kate had unfastened the stern rope but kept it looped around a mooring ring. I stepped onto the thin ledge of gunwale even as Kate pushed on the two small levers that increased the engine's revs and put it into gear. There was a bubbling of water at the back as the propeller turned and we began moving forward and out into the water road.

'Sometimes I think I might like a traditional boat,' Kate mused as we – well, she – cast off, slipped the engine into forward and steered us off between the moored boats. 'But she handles so well, she's solid, and I like the wide gunwales. We've got used to each other.'

The tone had changed. Kate was soft about her boat. And, with that, she set about teaching me to drive. 'First, then, the tiller ... You stand in front of it, not to the side. If you stand to the side of it and you need to pull it right across, where are you going to go? Into the water!' She shook her head, theatrically miming her disbelief: 'You won't believe the idiocy of some boat people – hirers or newbies or people who never learn.' There may not be a single right way to do things but there is at least a proper way to do them. And there is certainly a stupid way.

I was steering the boat now, standing in the companionway, my hand at the small of my back grasping the worn, warm, wooden handle. There was a gentle vibration from the boat's engine, ticking away slowly and powerfully underfoot. And the long stretch of *Morning Mist* ahead of me receding into the distance. It was enjoyable. And really, it seemed, rather easy. The boat moved gently along, following the shiny rail of water without much help from me. I took a gulp of coffee and looked around appreciatively.

Kate's voice cut into my complacency. 'Look out! Slow down. There's someone mooring up, ahead ... see them ... between those boats. Put her into neutral and just drift past ... they haven't finished tying up ... you should have seen him standing there with a rope in his hand.' There were laws and lore on the canal. All based on the courtesy of a shared space, and on the traditions that boat folk had worked out as the most efficient and safest way of doing things, and not being in a rush. Kate's courtesy towards others was ingrained – and indeed was a norm for the waterways. There are few Mr Toads 'poop poop-ing' along the canals.

Kate's teaching was calm and assured. She knew just what *Morning Mist* would do and stayed ahead of my ineptitude. 'There's a fairly sharp bend coming up. Now, steer the centre of the boat, not the front.' It seems counter-intuitive if you are used to driving cars, but on a heavy, long and narrow craft with a rudder at the back, when the tiller's pushed over, the boat pivots on the water at a point roughly halfway along its length. 'Okay, push

the helm over ... a bit more ... right.' The front began moving around whilst the back swung out alarmingly in the opposite direction. 'You always need to leave enough room between the back and the bank when you're turning, to allow for that. You're always best in the centre of the water.'

We were travelling at walking pace – the plodding horse's three miles an hour for which the canals were designed – but another corner, obscured by a curtain of willow drapery and a screening of reeds, seemed to be sliding towards us at an alarming rate. Throttling back produced little effect. The boat, feeling as unwieldy as a liner, had its own weighty momentum. I was sweating as I pushed the tiller right over the side of the boat (Kate was right – where would I have gone if I'd been standing to the side of the handle?) *Morning Mist* swivelled, her bow almost touching the bank, and turned down into the clear water opening up ahead. But her stern flounced out, towards the bank, and I winced in anticipation. Kate seemed relaxed: 'Give her a quick burst of throttle to push her around, and then drop it back again.' The engine's beat increased slightly as I nudged forward the small lever inside the hatch. There was a burbling and bubbling under the counter and, although it was the boat that moved forward and followed the curve of the canal's waters, it seemed as if the actual bank was bending round to accommodate us. It was like a stately dance, guiding a partner across a crowded floor.

But, oh, the responsibility. I wasn't just steering Kate's boat along this absurdly narrow water road, but her home. A crash, or (best not think about it) a sinking, would be a disaster squared. Narrowboats make such good houses because of all that they can carry – hundreds of books, pots and cast-iron pans, wardrobes of clothes, workshops of tools that would take a shed on land to store. Boats encourage hoarding things, anything that 'might come in handy one day.' And Kate had this aspect of canal culture to a T.

The one place that there wasn't much clutter was the roof. Cruising boats need to have their tops kept reasonably clear to get

under low bridges and to allow unrestricted vision. Nonetheless small things do pile up. Within an arm's reach were two mugs of coffee and a box of ginger cake, the cranked handle of a windlass for opening locks and a well-used *Nicholson's Guide – No 1: Oxford, Grand Union and the South East* – which detailed all the canals between London and Birmingham, and had been made all the more valuable by Kate's pencilled notes on bus stops near the canals, shop opening hours and the best places to moor for the night. In the middle distance of my rooftop view was the centre rope and its fixing eye, a couple of rope-work fenders, the solar panel, a car tyre ('might come in handy') and a folded canvas tarpaulin. Further along were Kate's bicycle, buckets and a mop, a ladder, and a box affair that was some obscure part of the dry toilet recycling process.

'I'll take the tiller now,' Kate said. "We've got Hillmorton Flight coming up ... three locks in a row ... and you're going to be busy.' Hillmorton had always had been one of the busiest flights on the whole canal system and so there were two separate lock chambers side by side to double capacity. 'I'll drop you off,' instructed Kate, 'then I'll use the right-hand lock – take that windlass and don't drop it in the water.'

I hopped ashore, the heavy cranked metal windlass in my hand, and clambered up a slope to the height of the next pound of water. Looking down from the edge of the chamber, I could see Kate nosing the boat into the dank depths. My bird's-eye view showed that there were mere inches between the boat's hull and the stone sides of the chamber. I was learning that the canals were a precisely made water machine with all the pieces, including the boats, finely measured. It seemed a ridiculously tight fit, though it did show just what was meant by a 'narrow' canal.

Kate had already shinned up the ladder from the depths and was on the other side of the chamber. 'Close the gate,' she called

across, already pushing on the big balance beam that pivoted her gate shut. I did the same and the two massive 'doors' came together in a shallow 'V'-shape. The boat was now enclosed at the bottom of a deep, dark box. We walked up to the single gate at the other – 'uphill' – end of the lock. The water road on this far side was the new, higher level, and *Morning Mist* was still far below it. The miracle of the lock was to lift tons of boat merely by filling the box with water and floating her up.

'Raise the paddle – slowly ... we don't want her thrown all over the place,' Kate told me, as she fitted her windlass onto the spindle of the rack and pinion to raise the paddle and let water into the lock chamber. 'You're winding the wrong way ... that's it ... right, just about halfway ...' There was a rattling sound of the pawl on the gear as I swung the windlass round a few times, and a bubbling in the depths under the boat. The water and *Morning Mist* rose ... and kept rising until the boat's cabin roof was up by my shoulder.

'Open the gate.' Kate was already aboard. I pushed on the beam of the single uphill gate. It opened easily with the weight of the water in the lock and the level on this higher stretch of canal now equalised. The boat thrubbled its way slowly out of the chamber, eight or nine feet higher up than it had been. Back on the boat, Kate told me not to get too comfortable – there were two more locks coming up, and more after those. I was going to get plenty of practice 'lock wheeling', she promised. Seeing my puzzled expression, she explained that the phrase came from when boaters had first got bicycles – 'wheels' – in the early-twentieth century and a crew member would pedal on ahead to set locks and speed up the process of getting through them.

We, though, were in no such hurry, and I could ride on the boat to the next lock. A couple of dozen – maybe a hundred - more locks and I imagined I'd have lock wheeling cracked.

As we chugged on, I noticed the number of boats moored to the bank – grown into the ban, in some cases. There were boats that hadn't troubled a lock in decades and were more house

than boat, and quite often near-derelict house at that. With the absence of cellars or attics, their roofs were nearly always piled high with findings: salvaged branches, logs and other burnables; colourful plastic kayaks, buckets and tanks, planters and grow-bags, wheelbarrows, old car roofboxes and rusty bicycles. I was reminded of the caddisfly larvae you see in streams, which pull up bits of gravel and twigs or plant stalks to make a camouflaged and protective casing.

We passed a narrowboat shop, the *Hype Hardware*, which could clearly supply any missing items. Moored on a remote stretch of towpath, waiting for passing custom, it had the familiar look of those 'we-sell-everything from a needle to an anchor' shops of my childhood in West Cork. Hand-painted boards hung along the boat's hull advertising its wares. Fire rope, glue,

Hype Hardware ... the Amazon of canal living.