



Beers, boats and belonging

Hollie Stephens celebrates the canalside pubs of Britain, which now host beer lovers and tourists rather than hard-working boatmen

On a warm, cloudless summer's day in the UK, there is no better place than a beer garden, but for me, an ambling stroll along the towpath comes in at a close second. Along my favourite stretch, I'm enveloped by trees, and I can see nothing but blues and greens as the glassy water reflects the clear blue sky

above. At the exact spot that I have in mind, I feel a unique sense of tranquillity. All road traffic is muffled, and the only sounds are birds, the gentle scratches of my boots on the gravel path and sometimes the low, soothing hum of the engine of a canal boat, following me to the next lock.

I think pubs and canals go together perfectly. As a former narrowboater, I may be a little biased, but my love for spending time on the towpath began before I got into boating, when I was living close to the Grand Union Canal. This canal did not originate as a single waterway, but rather, its modern form



is an amalgamation of several. It is the longest canal in the country, and the main line links Birmingham to the Thames at Brentford in west London via miles of gentle meandering through picturesque countryside.

Ask anyone who has ever been a boater and they will tell you about a moment they felt a powerful connection to the water. For me, I was standing outside a pub, the Rising Sun, Herts, with a pint of cask ale in my hand, one evening in late spring. The pub is situated right on the Grand Union Canal, and there is a lock directly in front of the entrance. As a boat entered the lock, I noticed a handful of drinkers waved to the boaters, and someone reached out to take something made of metal from the person stood at the boat's stern. I later

Clockwise from main: Where it started for Hollie – the Rising Sun; the Grand Union Canal stretches for 137 miles; moorings on the Bridgewater Canal

learned this strange object – L-shaped with a square at one end – was called a windlass (or lock key), and is used to operate the locks. I was intrigued by it all – the sense of shared labour and the kindness of helping a passer-by, all while enjoying a pint of Tring brewery beer. Half an hour later, another boat entered the lock, and I asked someone to hold my pint so I could help.

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Many months later, I'd caught the boating bug. I returned to the same lock aboard my own boat, and I enjoyed another pint in the Rising Sun beer garden after navigating it (with some help from a few other punters, of course).

The construction of the Bridgewater Canal by engineer James Brindley led to a waterway-building boom in the late 18th century. The first canal boats were drawn by horses, which could move much more weight than they would be able to by cart. The waterways were key to the Industrial Revolution, as they were used to transport coal and other raw materials to factories. By 1850, 4,800 miles of inland waterway had been constructed.

Back when the waterways were critical for transportation, the pubs played a

crucial role as rest points for weary travellers. "The first canalside pubs were farmers selling home-brewed beer, firstly to the navvies digging the canals through their land, and then to the boatmen that followed," says Jonathan Ludford of the Canal & River Trust.

"Waterside pubs were the coaching inns of their day, where horses were baited [fed] or changed, and travellers refreshed or lodged for the night. For working boaters, pubs were a place to tie up, exchange stories, rest and forget the stress of a hard day's work, and would have been a haven of refuge from the overcrowded boat cabin and rowdy children."

Jonathan says pubs might have served multiple functions as important touchpoints for boaters.

"They were the hub of the boaters' community and would often have been a pub, general store and butchers all rolled into one," he says. "Pubs that grew up alongside the canals often reflect this

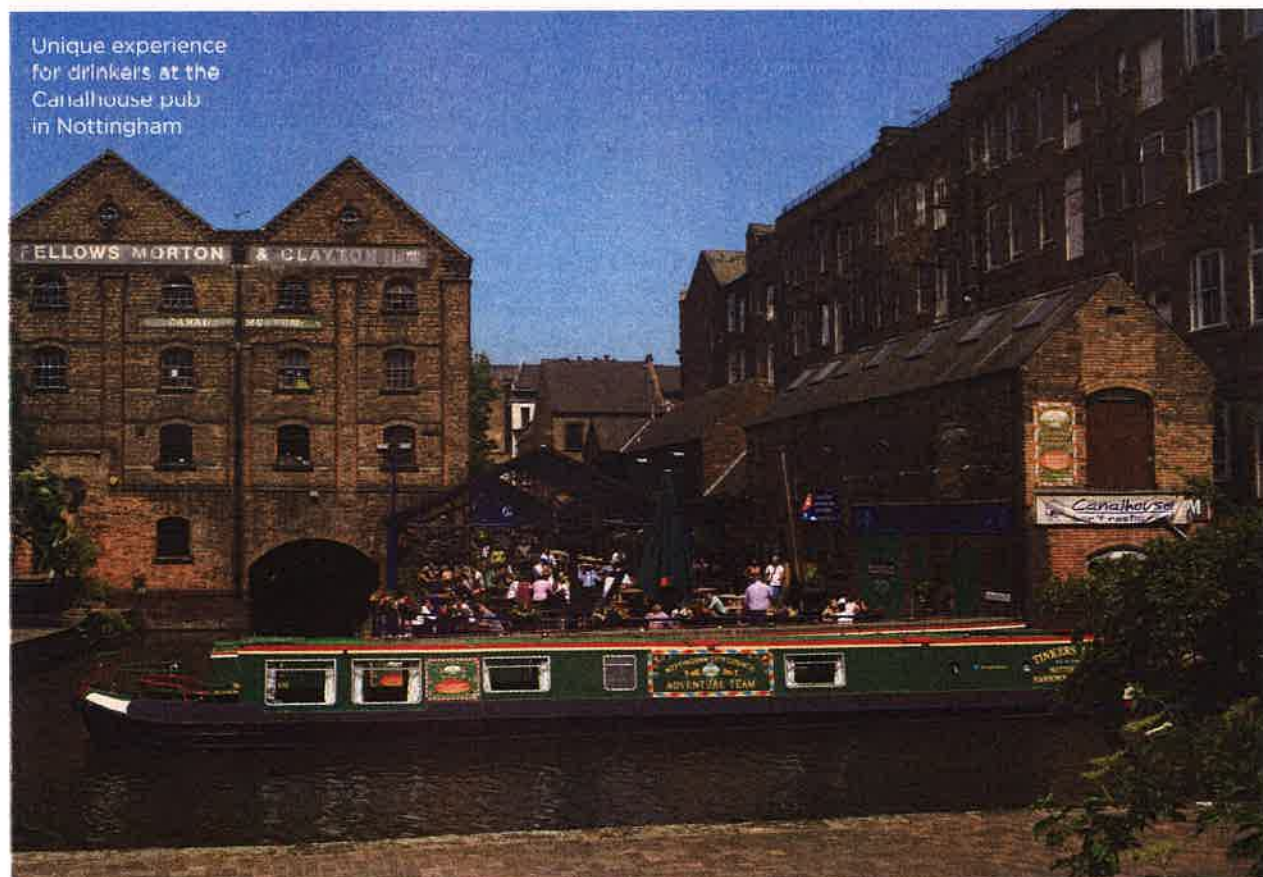
in their names: the Boat, the Navigation, the Barge or simply the New to distinguish it from the old, established pubs in the area." Today, the UK's canal network is home to more than 2,700 listed structures, 50 scheduled ancient monuments and no less than five UNESCO World Heritage sites.

Stepping inside the Grade II listed Canalhouse pub in Nottingham for the first time is a unique experience. Across the wooden floorboards, metal railings about an indoor mooring space. To reach the bar, visitors cross the water over a footbridge, with a view of the resident narrowboats below. "It's definitely a bit of a wow factor," says general manager Wayne Harvey. He tells me the pub gets

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a lot of passing trade from tourists on their way to the castle. Wayne explains the site was once owned by Fellows, Morton and Clayton, a haulage company that used the canals to move goods up and down the country. The building the Canalhouse now occupies was used as a warehouse, and a large crane was used to lift heavy loads from the boats that cruised into the space the resident narrowboats now occupy, providing a way to quickly move goods on and off the boats indoors out of the rain. Later, the building housed a canal museum.

Today, the beer garden – once the wharf – is a beautiful spot to sit with a pint. Gerry Mulvaney, who is the chair of the Nottingham Narrowboat Project board of trustees, and one of the skippers, tells me the organisation operates from the wharf and occupies offices upstairs in the Canalhouse building. "Castle Rock brewery is a fantastic host for us," he says. He adds the project provides day





Clockwise from left: Royal Oak in Pencelli, Wales; working the locks at the Admiral Nelson; the Kings Ransom has a prominent spot on the banks of the pioneering Bridgewater Canal



trips, as well as overnight trips, aboard two 70-foot narrowboats seven days a week, for groups from local schools, care homes, charitable organisations and businesses. Gerry and his team are preparing for a busy season, after having a lot of trip plans disrupted last year due to Covid-19. "We're looking forward to getting the boats back up and running," he says. "But what we're really looking forward to most of all is sitting down with a pint of Castle Rock in the sunshine at the end of the trip."

Pubs are at the heart of communities, and in rural areas they often provide a particularly important role as a meeting place for locals. This is especially true in Pencelli, a small village in Wales, where the family-owned Royal Oak is positioned close to moorings and campsites along the Monmouthshire & Brecon Canal. Aimee Griffiths, who owns the place along with her husband and parents, tells me the whole family moved to the area from Cardiff to take

over the pub together a few years ago. She says she loves the area and the welcome respite from city life.

"It's absolutely beautiful," she says. "It's invigorating, totally different." She says the pub benefits from plenty of tourist trade thanks to the canal, as well as a fantastic local community. "We've built up a rapport and a bit of a relationship with the regulars. Not just the villagers, but also the boaters."

As I speak with Aimee, I realise rapport is a great word to describe that sense of comfort I've felt in both pub and boating communities, and especially at the intersection of the two. In boating, I found a sense of subtle belonging, which sometimes feels like the only kind that is available to a somewhat socially awkward Brit. I would offer a kindly nod to a not-quite-stranger on the towpath, and a bright smile to the helmsperson at the tiller of a boat travelling the opposite way on a chilly morning. There was something comforting about maintaining a calm familiarity with other canal

residents, just as there was with fellow pub regulars. Feeling part of a community is what makes our pubs what they are, and it is also what keeps our canals welcoming places to be.

It takes community spirit to maintain the canals, too. In conjunction with the Canal & River Trust, groups of volunteers work together to maintain their local stretch of canal, by lending a hand with essential upkeep, such as giving lock gates a coat of paint. This sense of community is key to preserving tourism for the canals and the pubs that are close to them, ensuring boaters, beer drinkers and towpath walkers alike will be able to continue to enjoy all they have to offer for many more years to come.



Hollie Stephens is a freelance beer writer. She contributes to publications including *Ferment* and *Pellicle*. Follow her on Twitter at [@GlobeHops](#)