A waterway experience 210421

Today was my first trip on a larger narrowboat, taking a route along the Grand Union canal from Water Eaton travelling towards Stoke Hammond then winding (turning) and heading back towards Fenny; at a leisurely 3 miles per hour. And if you have never experienced a narrowboat trip, I hope this article gives you a taste of what the experience has to offer.

First things first, my aim was to find my hosts Jane and David. Thanks to an efficient onboarding email from Jane with a clear map it was easy to find them.

So, leaving my usual mode of transport behind I was about to enter another world.

Meeting Jane and taking to the water was something that I had been looking forward to since coming out of lockdown. Exploring a new destination in Milton for the first time by car, then canal boat felt like a secret mission away from the confinement and conundrums of everyday urban life.

Then, a familiar face appeared in the car park and called out to me. It was Jane the owner of the Harlequin and Chair of the Trustees who is immersed in the management of the electric narrowboat project that I have been volunteering for.

"Hi jo! I’ve come from 89, I'll walk us to 90 where David is waiting for us to board Harlequin"

(These numbers could be incorrect, but it was a great introduction to the language of the waterways having twigged Jane was speaking about the bridges.)

Meeting Jane and hearing for the first time canalboat speak led me to a different world. A waterway world.

David and Jane provided me with a warm welcome as I stepped down into the bow of their home, the Harlequin. She was a beautiful boat with an oak interior giving her a sense of achievement and status. The atmosphere was cosy and yes narrow and long, as I looked ahead along towards the front of the boat.

I was expecting the Harlequin to be a bit of a diesel jugging along but was I pleasantly surprised. In fact, the electric boat soon to be on the waterway, Electra, will be even quieter which means the Heron’s may well prefer her silent presence helping photographers snap the perfect wildlife still shot.

As we gracefully set to it, what struck me most about being down on the water, was the sound of wildlife bombarding your sense of hearing. It would be an opportunity for wildlife sound technicians or wildlife enthusiasts to learn more. The call of Chiffchaffs was all around you was immense.

I'm one of the lucky ones, having spent my career with a balanced lifestyle enjoying the vast choice of walks in nature in Milton Keynes. Therefore, for me Milton Keynes is a city in the countryside and today was no different as we began our cruise, I saw ducks, ducklings, and fluffy goslings.

Exploring the waterway world provides a new visual perspective because you sit on the boat and are arms-length from the water’s edge. I was drifting along the surface of the water watching the side of boat cut through the water while David at the helm took charge of navigating boats moored on the side and other active narrowboats selling their fuel to the boat community.

For me, there were different sets of observations and wonderings that my mind was churning as I travelled along the water. Different to the thoughts I would usually have if I were walking next to canal negotiating other ramblers, dog walkers or cyclists. On a boat you are protecting from the entourage of people having their share of the towpath.

Another example of what I noticed at water level was a series of spills or slips acting as overflows into the river behind. I only noticed the overflow structure with their metal railings because I was level with the water. It is of course, a system fundamental to balancing the waterways, but a system I did not given a second thought to before now.

I also saw swaths of small yellow flowers along the towpath and Jane told me they were Celandine. There is something refreshing for the senses travelling along the waterways.

There is a deep rooted and purposeful wildlife connection that perhaps I miss when I travel in any other way. I guess, as a visitor onboard today, I could simply relax while the boat crew took charge. There is also something soothing about sitting on a narrowboat and letting the boat carry me along rather than the effort of walking, it was very relaxing.

It was fascinating to see the back of family homes and farmland that back onto the canal. Some with pretty flowers next to the riverbank with handmade wooden benches to perch on and pass the time away next to the water’s edge. I also, I nearly forgot to mention I discovered the boat fixing yard looking all oily and full of wood shaving where Electra will be hoisted into the canal very soon.

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