



# Float your boat

Britain's network of canals are the perfect, stress-free way to see the countryside from a whole new perspective, as we discovered...

WORDS & PHOTOS ANDREW MARSHALL



There is nothing – absolutely nothing – half so much worth doing as simply messing about in boats,” declared Ratty in *The Wind In The Willows*. Myself and countless other holiday sailors would certainly agree. Hiring a canal narrow boat to explore England's peaceful inland waterways offers entry into a unique and fascinating world.

A network of canals criss-cross the country from the Pennines to Oxford, the Cheshire Plain to the Welsh hills, all playing a vital role in the industrial history of Britain. Lumbering, horse-drawn wagons, which for centuries had carried the inland commerce of Britain, proved inadequate to cope with the growth of trade brought about by the Industrial Revolution in the 18th century. The answer was found in canals, and from 1760 to 1840 more than 4000 miles (6400 km) of navigable waterways were engineered and built. A grand era for transport in Britain had begun.

Owing to the advent of faster, cheaper rail transport, the canal system has tended to fall into disuse. However, in recent years the canals have witnessed a resurgence of interest, with narrowboat enthusiasts paving the way for a thriving boat-hire industry.

Imagine waking up to the pleasing sounds of water slapping idly against the bow and the sight of a flotilla of moorhens, swans and ducks all confidently waiting to share breakfast. Or picture savouring the mouth-watering smell of sizzling bacon and steaming coffee before setting off for a day's exploration of beautiful river and canal landscapes.

My introduction into canal life begins on the Calder and Hebble Navigation, one of Yorkshire's most scenic waterways. Rod, a good friend of mine, joins me at the Pennine town of Sowerby Bridge on a Monday afternoon for a four-day canal jaunt. It's like leaving the world that we knew behind. The canal is a ribbon of green running >>

## FACT FILE

### EASY HANDLING

Simplified controls make narrowboat-handling easier, and even if you are a novice, the trial run given to everyone before setting off independently should turn you from landlubber to seasoned sailor in half an hour. Driving a car is 10 times more complicated. If you are prone to seasickness, it's a pleasure to know that life on the canals is 'smooth sailing'; no waves – no motion sickness.

### CHILDREN

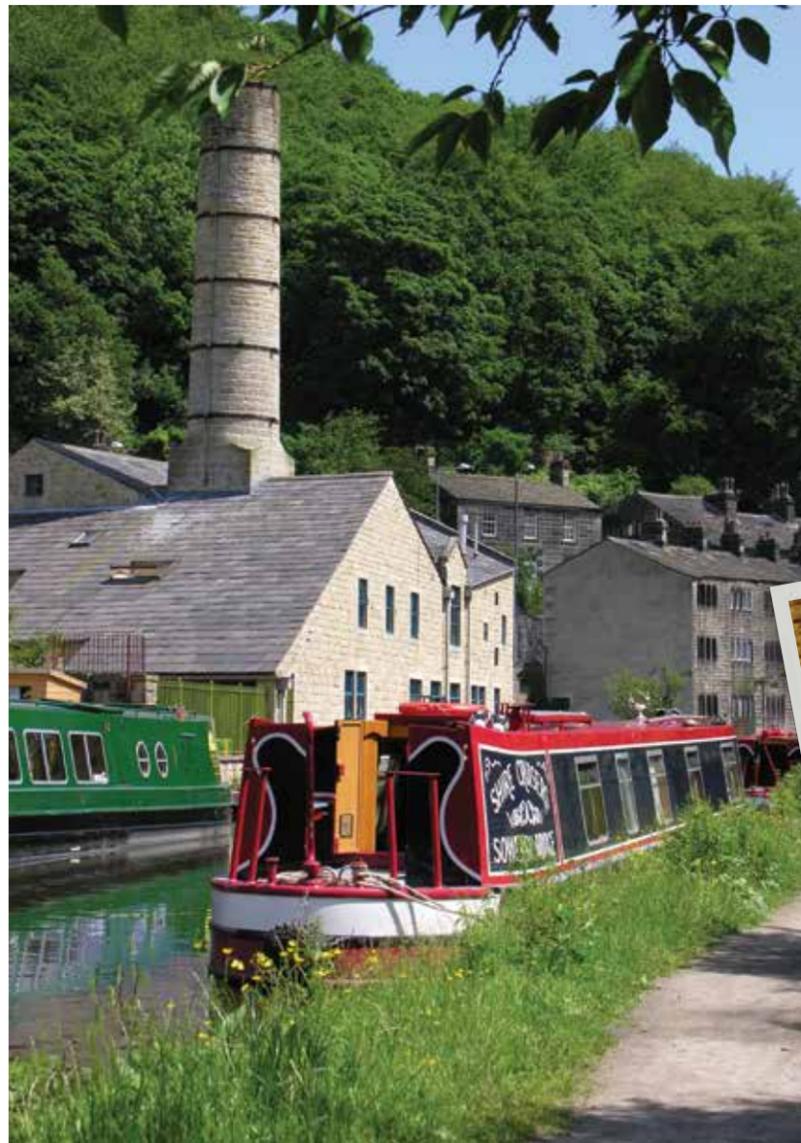
Children take readily to a boating life especially when encouraged to take part in manoeuvring and lock work. Sensible precautions should be taken, and most boat hirers provide life jackets free of charge. Toddlers will be a liability unless there is someone to watch them constantly.

### COMFORT

There's no roughing it on a narrowboat. Most come fully equipped with bed linen, cooker, fridge, pots and pans, hot and cold water, shower, stereo, toilet, television and central heating. Times have changed a bit since the working narrowboats.

For further enquiries about narrowboat hire in the Yorkshire Pennine District contact:

**Shire Cruisers**  
[www.shirecruisers.co.uk](http://www.shirecruisers.co.uk)



**PREVIOUS PAGE** Cruising through meadows on the Leeds-Liverpool canal near Skipton; springtime on the Calder and Hebble Navigation **CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE LEFT** Meet the locals on the towpaths; 'going up' on the Rochdale Canal; an old wool mill, a canalside remnant of the Industrial Revolution **OPPOSITE** 'Going down' on the Leeds-Liverpool Canal

between the bricks and mortar of everyday life. Nigel and Susan of Shire Cruisers put us through our paces at the three locks at Salterhebble. Simply and patiently they explain the technicalities of lock operation. It all sounds rather complicated but it turns out to be dead easy. "Plain logic," says Nigel, who has been into boats for some 40-odd years. "It's doing everything in the right order, that's all. Practical experience is worth a thousand words. You'll be all right."

A typical lock is a watertight compartment with gates at either end that are generally constructed from well-seasoned oak or elm, and sometimes still fashioned with the old carpenter's tool, the adze. The lock gates can only be opened at one end or the other when the level either side of the gates is equal.

The only reason for opening the gates is to let a boat in or out of the lock. When the boat is in the lock, the top gates and the bottom gates are both closed, forming the watertight chamber. Then a special tool called a windlass is used to open paddles to allow water into the lock from above, or out into the lower level, depending on which way the boat is going. When the water is level with the lower (or upper) level, the gates at that end can be opened

to let the boat out. It's an ingenious idea that enables canals and boat traffic to cross up and down over hills and dales.

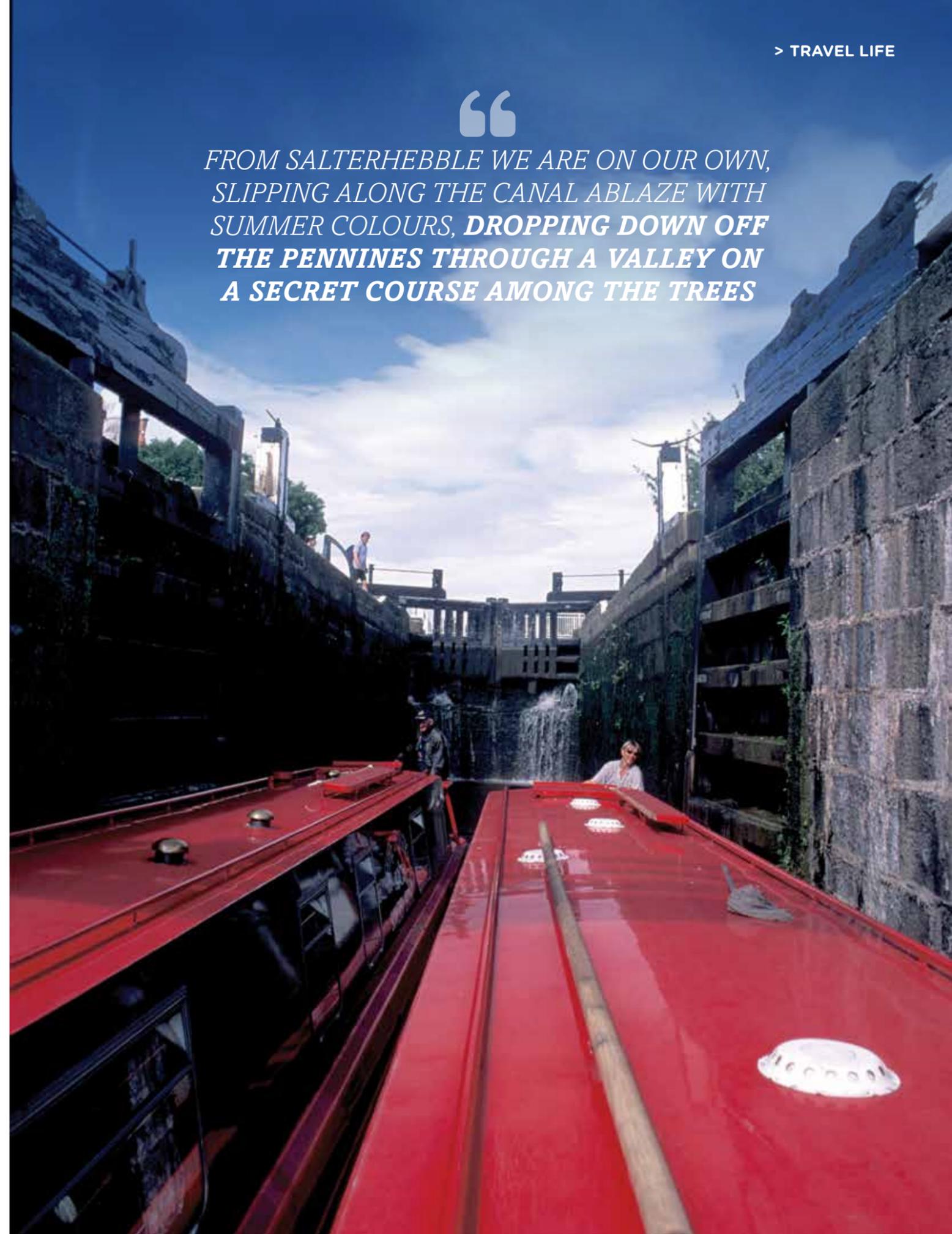
From Salterhebble we are on our own, slipping along the canal ablaze with summer colours, dropping down off the Pennines through a valley on a secret course among the trees. To begin with, the canal seems impossibly narrow, more so because of the reeds that grow on either side. Above these, in rich profusion, grow small woodlands of birch, hawthorn, willow and alder orchestrated with the liquid song of robin, wren and blue tit. This, and the winding towpath flanked by a drystone wall, are typical of the scenery we would become familiar with.

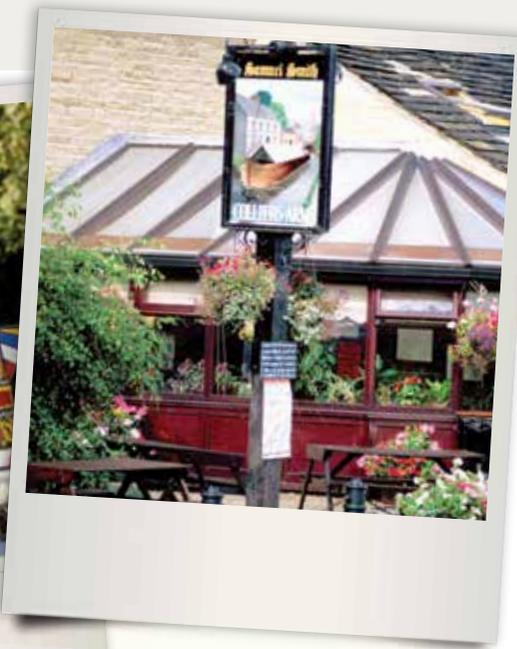
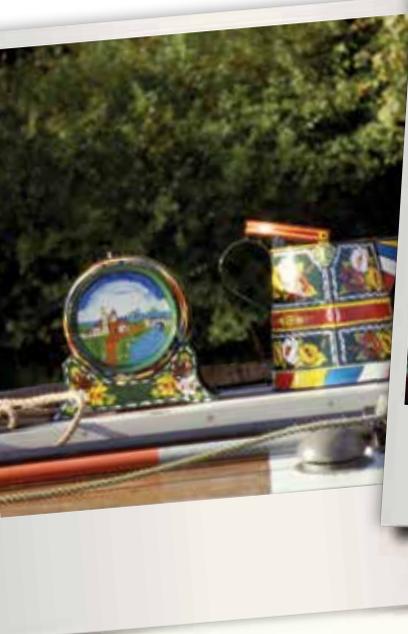
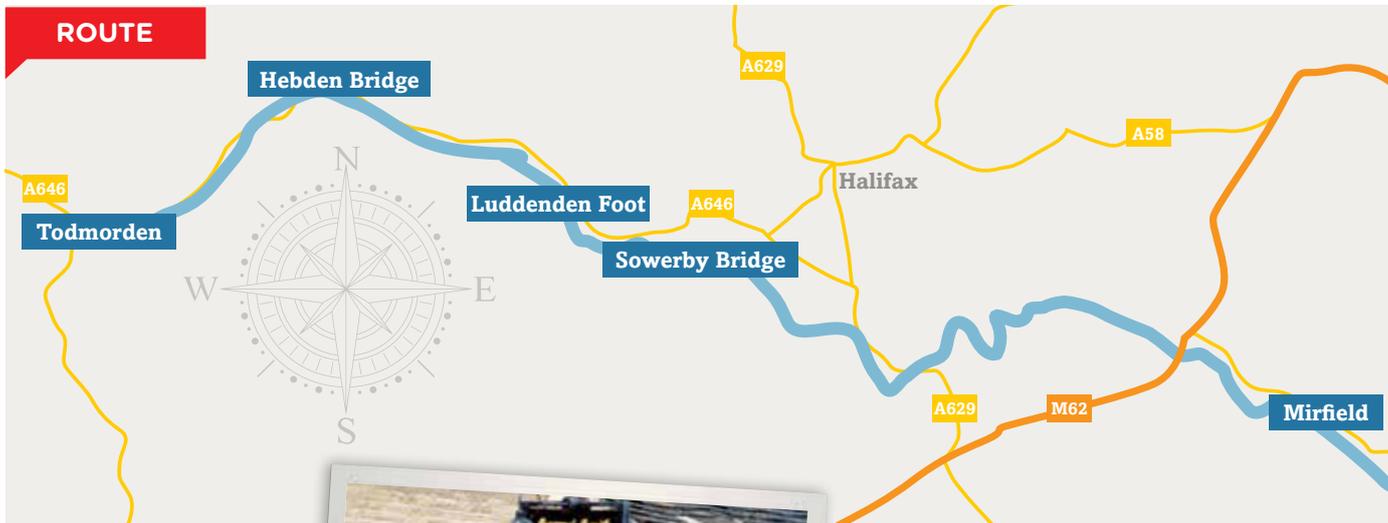
In the late afternoon we pass through the mill town of Elland. Remnants of the old mills border the canal banks, with stone walls complete with mooring rings and graceful archways of former cargo loading bays. As the light thins, we begin to search for a snug mooring. The Colliers Arms, a canalside pub, provides the answer with its free visitor moorings. What better way to end a day's canal run than enjoying a pint down the local?

In the coming days we settle into a leisurely pace, popping ashore when we want to investigate a canalside >>

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*FROM SALTERHEBBLE WE ARE ON OUR OWN, SLIPPING ALONG THE CANAL ABLAZE WITH SUMMER COLOURS, DROPPING DOWN OFF THE PENNINES THROUGH A VALLEY ON A SECRET COURSE AMONG THE TREES*





LEFT TO RIGHT The colours of tradition; canalside pubs like The Colliers Arms near Elland offer moorings and meals

village, shop for provisions for a meadow picnic or seek out a local hostelry for a 'Boatman's Lunch.'

Heading west from Sowerby Bridge, in the opposite direction to the Calder & Hebble, is the Rochdale Canal (the first of the trans-Pennine canals to open in 1805), which packs in a huge variety of scenery on the way over the Pennines to Manchester. A well-recommended short break section of the Rochdale is from Sowerby Bridge to Todmorden (20 miles in length, 34 locks and a total of around 16 hours of boating). This trip allows plenty of time for walks, the pub or simply to sit and unwind.

One of the highlights along the way is the old mill town of Hebden Bridge nestling in a fork in the hills, with its distinctive houses piled tier upon tier. Hebden is the original alternative plastic-bag-free town, and has not succumbed to a big supermarket, so has an amazing selection of independent shops, organic cafés, bookshops restaurants and pubs.

After Hebden, the Rochdale gradually winds up the valley, with woods, crags and the River Calder running

alongside, and views of the moors high above. Pause perhaps at the Stubbing Wharf pub, but then keep going in order to reach Todmorden, a town schizophrenic as to whether it's Yorkshire or Lancashire, wool or cotton.

Todmorden is a grand small town with impressive buildings, a market and a good selection of restaurants and pubs. It's also the home of Incredible Edible, so you will notice vegetables growing along the towpath for anybody to pick. Then you pass the Great Wall of Tod, supporting the railway high above, and start climbing more steeply towards the summit (the second highest in England) with the county boundary with Lancashire just below and for those with more time, Manchester off in the distance.

Most towns we pass through sport a cluster of narrow boats in a colourful combination of tradition and modern. A hundred years ago, few boats were built from anything other than wood. Oak-sided, elm-bottomed narrowboats slid silently along the canals, hauled by gentle-natured horses trudging along the towpath. In recent years, however, motors have replaced the horses and steel has become the favoured structural material for boats.

We find that one of the great pleasures of our canal holiday is enjoying the friendly community spirit that prevails among canal folk. They always seem ready to pass the time of day or lend a hand when mooring or manoeuvring. There is never a shortage of invitations for cups of tea aboard another boat or for a few brews down the local. A highly-social life and a most agreeable break. Thinking about messing in boats for your next holiday? Take it from me – there's simply nothing half so much worth doing.

 **FLY** Flybe has flights to Leeds Bradford from Belfast City. Flybe's franchise partner Loganair has flights to Leeds Bradford from Glasgow.