

## BRITAIN'S LONGEST ART GALLERY

*There's a venue near you which is a theatre, art gallery, sculpture hall and comedy club all in one – it's your local waterway. **Richard Fairhurst** asks why artists flock to the towpath*

Watercolour artists might not be the best known of the “towpath tribes”. But head down to a busy waterway on a sunny afternoon, and they'll be there – quietly concentrating as the world of boats and bikes, walkers and wildlife makes its way by.

The stark black-and-white of lock beams and cast iron bridges, set against the colour of passing boats and the muted rural tones of the waterway itself, are a beguiling subject for any artist. But it's only in the last 60 years that Britain's waterways, once the most workaday of transport networks, have taken on artistic airs.

### **Down to earth, or great art?**

Though today's watercolourists think of the canals as beautiful, they weren't built to be so. The later railways had airs and graces from the start: think of the pomp of St Pancras, the Euston Arch (now lost), the castellated and crenellated tunnel portals. The canals, in contrast, were built simply to float boats full of cargo.

Even the most picturesque structures, such as the slender Pontcysyllte Aqueduct or the cutesy roundhouses on the Cotswold Canals, have a beauty that derives solely from their skilful and functional engineering. There was no ornamentation, no architectural pretension. Just unfussy, robust engineering.

So for 150 years, artists ignored the canals. There were a few exceptions: J.M.W. Turner, Britain's greatest landscape artist, set his easel by the Chichester and Grand Junction canals. Much later, L.S. Lowry brilliantly captured the frenzied industry of Manchester's waterways in his unique matchstick-men style. By and large, though, artists saw richer pickings elsewhere. Not least Britain's rivers: think Constable's Stour, or countless paintings of the Thames.

Meanwhile, the canals developed their own folk art. No-one quite knows where 'roses and castles' painting comes from: gypsies? Biscuit tins and chocolate boxes? Whatever its origins, the colourful style was commonplace on long-distance carrying boats by the late 19th century. It was at its most extravagant on the boats of the 'number ones', owner-boatmen who took great pride in their vessels. You'll still see it on the back doors of modern boats, and on the 'Buckby cans' used to carry water.

Still, for the most part, the canals were a stranger to the art world. It was not until the 1950s that this would change.

### **A company of artists**

After the Second World War, the future for the waterways looked bleak. Slow, outmoded, and overgrown, they could easily have been lost forever. Their survival was thanks to an idealistic group of campaigners who formed the Inland Waterways

Association.

These campaigners were not businessmen, not historians, but artists. Robert Aickman and Tom Rolt, the two guiding lights, were writers. Peter Scott was a painter, Elizabeth Jane Howard an actress; A.P. Herbert a playwright, Eric de Maré a photographer. Among their supporters were conductor Malcolm Sargent, ballerina Margot Fonteyn, and poet John Betjeman.

The arts were at the heart of their campaign. (They were especially close to Robert Aickman's heart; he was rarely to be seen without a dashing young actress on his arm.) The IWA's ground-breaking 'National Rally of Boats', staged at Market Harborough in 1950, was as much an arts festival as a canal event. The Arts Council lent items from its collection, while the town Assembly Rooms became a professional theatre.

This was no one-off fling. When the Oxford Canal was threatened with closure, it was Betjeman who chaired the public meeting, advertised by a stunning poster that was an artwork in itself. The artists had taken to the water, and were showing no signs of leaving. Not just to obvious Bohemian areas such as London's Little Venice, with its Rembrandt Gardens and Canaletto Gallery – but to all corners of the system, aboard narrowboats offering a frugal home for the aspiring artist.

### **Art on water**

Little Venice is perhaps the best known example of an on-water artistic community. Its 'Pool' is home to the Puppet Theatre Barge and Alex Prowse's Cascade Art Gallery, all overlooked by the Canal Café Theatre. But the waterside does have more than its fair share of galleries: the Lowry in Manchester, Tate Modern and Liverpool, the New Art Gallery in Walsall, Wakefield's new Hepworth. Henley's River & Rowing Museum is of particular note, its galleries often showcasing the art of the Thames.

These galleries, to borrow a phrase, are static exhibits. Waterways are all about movement, and the canals have a peculiar attraction for travelling theatre companies. Perhaps the seeds were sown in the Second World War, when several actresses volunteered as wartime trainees on the working boats – nicknamed the 'Idle Women' after their IW (Inland Waterways) badges. Among them were Susan Wolfit, wife of the actor Sir Donald; Sonia Smith, who would become Tom Rolt's second wife; and ballet dancer Kit Gayford.

Their story was recently retold in *Imogen's War*, a production by the best-known narrowboat theatre company, Mikron. Its first waterborne tour was in 1972; the ever-changing troupe has returned every year since, a stepping-stone in the careers of such as Mark Williams (Arthur Weasley in the *Harry Potter* films), Buffy Davis (Jolene in *The Archers*), and even Kate Winslet's older sister Anna. Founder Mike Lucas's memoirs, *I'd Go Back Tomorrow*, are one of the best waterway books of recent years.

Mikron are far from the only waterborne thespians. In the '80s, the Magic Lantern Narrowboat Theatre promised "the most original show in England", a nostalgic

cinematograph experience harking back to the entertainment that working boatmen might have enjoyed. This year even saw a narrowboat stand-up comedy tour on board the *Pleasance Ahoy*, making its way towards the Edinburgh Festival via a series of canalside venues.

### **A 3,000-mile art gallery**

If you're lucky enough to catch a touring theatre performance, or you live near a waterside art gallery, you'll have experienced the artistic life of the waterways at first hand. Yet the towpaths reach many more people – in their role as Britain's longest art gallery.

Since the 1990s, sculptors have chosen the canals as the setting for a vast array of public art. Sometimes the subject matter is the waterways themselves: a navy with pick and shovel, a boatman pushing a lock-gate. Elsewhere, the subject might be literally a million miles removed – as in the case of the Somerset Space Walk, along the Bridgwater & Taunton Canal. It might be hewn out of stone, or gently fashioned from fine steel.

Above all, this is a very democratic form of art. There's no gallery entry fee, no opening hours. You can run your hands over the sculpture without being admonished by a stern-faced attendant. Essentially, you can relate to the art any way you want to.

The Coventry Canal Art Trail is the finest example. Along the 5 1/2 mile cul-de-sac to Coventry Basin, 39 artworks have been installed, each relating to the canal or the history of Coventry. They bring to life the whole history of the canal in three-dimensional form. At the basin, James Brindley looks magisterially over the canal he designed. Further along, a set of primitive navvies' tools remind the visitor that this waterway was built by hand, without the aid of excavators or pneumatic drills.

The Brindley statue was the work of none less than Royal Academician James Butler. But there are local artists represented here, too, and Coventry's schools were invited to become involved. The whole project cost just £350,000, the price of just one middle-ranking painting displayed in a gallery, yet with far greater reach.

The Somerset Space Walk is a mile longer, but comprises just one artwork. It's a size model of the solar system, with the planets strung out at proportional distances from the sun. Seven miles' walk will take you all the way to Pluto. In a neat nod to waterway heritage, these space-age installations double as traditional canal mileposts.

The form and furniture of the waterways are popular sources of inspiration. On occasion, the object itself becomes the artwork. End-of-life lock gates have often been reused as simple sculptures; one set was recycled as a bullring at the Glastonbury Festival, bringing the canals to a whole new audience. The technicolour 'circle of light' which illuminates Newbold Tunnel, on the Oxford Canal, has inspired a thousand photos.

And though the famous James Brindley has been immortalised in sculpture in both

Coventry and Stoke-on-Trent, canalside art also serves to celebrate the ‘unknown boatman’, the thousands who worked the waterways in their commercial days. At Sowerby Bridge in West Yorkshire, a sculpted lock-keeper and his son push open a lock gate, just yards from the present day equivalent at Tuel Lane Lock. Next to Market Harborough’s canal basin, a timber-toting labourer has been reborn as a sundial sculpture, drily christened ‘Frank the Plank’. In Scotland, the age of the boat-horse is to be commemorated with two gigantic horses’ heads guarding the entrance to the Forth & Clyde Canal.

### **What’s the point?**

But hold on. Aren’t we in an ‘age of austerity’? How can spending be justified on giant horses and sculptures of lock-keepers when there is precious little money to go round?

The arts needn’t be expensive. It doesn’t cost anything to donate a set of redundant lock-gates to an artist, nor to give them the use of vacant waterside property as a temporary studio. These are two of the ideas in a new partnership between the Canal & River Trust and the Arts Council England, seeking to bring more contemporary art to the waterways – just as the Arts Council supported the Market Harborough Rally and Festival 60 years ago.

And just as pioneers such as Aickman and Rolt intended, it aims to attract more people to the waterways. High-profile buildings such as the Hepworth in Wakefield can bring crowds to what was previously a rather neglected waterside, but modest, affordable ideas like the Somerset Space Walk attract hundreds of visitors too.

Crucially, the waterways thread themselves through every part of Britain: city centres, suburbia, rural idylls and undeveloped edgelands alike. Towpath artworks in less well-off areas can attract visitors who would never dream of visiting a London gallery.

Few of these projects happen in isolation: an artwork isn’t simply purchased from a sculptor then bolted into the towpath. Instead, workshops are held with local residents, in schools and community centres. Debates, film screenings, talks, all encourage people to believe that this is ‘their’ art – not just a painting on a wall somewhere. Then, in turn, that sense of ownership rubs off on the waterway, turning it from an unloved backwater to something really valued and cherished by local people.

At least, that’s the idea. It’s a long-term plan. So too was the work of the artists who flocked to the waterways in the 1950s – and no-one would doubt the worth of their work. Most of our canals would have been closed without their dedication. Today’s waterway artists face a less urgent challenge, but the rewards could still be great.

### **An artistic journey**

If anything, the breadth of art on the waterways today is greater than ever, reaching far beyond the staples of travelling theatre and landscape paintings.

Poetry, for example. The work of three poets – boat-owner Jo Bell, Radio 3's Ian McMillan, and Birmingham-born Roy Fisher – is to be inscribed into the balance beams of four canal locks, from Warwickshire to the Pennines. It's reminiscent of the verses carved into the new Snowdon visitor centre, but on a more human, everyday scale. As artist Peter Coates explains, these 'Locklines' are "working words", bringing a poetic view to a familiar, approachable location.

A similar project this summer saw 91 poems commissioned for the Rochdale Canal Festival, one for each of the canal's locks – adding up to a 33-mile poetry trail through the waterways' most spectacular, and varied, scenery. The works, by established poets, local people and canal users alike, provide a changing commentary on a waterway that passes from Yorkshire mill-towns through Pennine moorland to the urban heart of Manchester.

Meanwhile, several waterborne productions have been criss-crossing the waterways. The prosaically named *Slow Boat* is a floating outpost of Birmingham's Ikon Gallery, bringing film screenings, art workshops, and debates to young people along the length of the Grand Union Canal, from Birmingham to London. In Nottingham, modern dance troupe TUG has staged a series of performances along the city's canal, inviting walkers to follow their boat from the towpath – a moving, floating stage.

Perhaps most creative of all is 'The Rootless Forest', a floating woodland aboard an old maintenance boat which seeks to evoke feelings of dislocation and removal. Conceived by artist Beth Derbyshire, it is dedicated both to the British soldiers serving far from home, in Afghanistan, and to the Afghans who have settled in Birmingham. It illustrates the versatility of the waterways as an art venue: the same canals can welcome both this abstract, thought-provoking piece, and the belly laughs and cartoon cheerfulness of the *Pleasance Ahoy* comedy tour.

There has been much more this summer: a northern "Olympic village and boating lake" in an unused canal basin in Manchester, a Grand Union-themed exhibition by the Departure Foundation in Birmingham, a striking cast-iron globe installed by the Rochdale Canal in Todmorden. But this is no flash-in-the-pan, one-off legacy event. Next year, a Floating Cinema will seek to bring 'A Strange Cargo of Extra-Ordinary Objects' to the East London waterways, with quirky canal tours and a playful film programme. The new 'Port of Sheffield', supported by the city's theatres and university, promises a series of performances reflecting the heritage of Sheffield and its canal.

And still it continues. The partnership between the Canal & River Trust and the Arts Council England has been signed for four years. For the new charity, it's an eye-catching way to attract not just new supporters, but active involvement in the waterways. It showcases the waterways as living, changing places rather than simply museum pieces.

Few galleries could compete with the variety of art on Britain's canals and rivers: sculpture and theatre, poetry and comedy, architecture and dance. This unpredictability might be the most delightful aspect of waterway art. Finding a sculpture every mile would soon become predictable, and spoil the simple, rural

character of so many waterways. Instead, we have a glorious, creative *mélange* of styles – something for everyone. The pioneers of the 1950s knew that the arts would draw people down to the water, and 60 years on, it still holds true.