

COMEBACK OF THE CANAL

Britain's historic man-made waterways – 5,000 kilometres of canals and navigable rivers – are undergoing a remarkable renaissance, writes **Lynn Pegler**

PHOTOGRAPHS *by* MIKE POLOWAY

EASTERN PROMISE

A view from inside a tunnel on the Limehouse Cut in Tower Hamlets, East London. The canal was originally built in 1766 to provide a shortcut to the Thames from the River Lee (or Lea), making it London's oldest canal. Since being redeveloped in 1968, it connects to the Limehouse Basin, a former dock now surrounded by apartments

Take a walk along your local canal and you might notice a quiet revolution sweeping across the country – sailing along at six kilometres per hour.

Derelict and unloved in the latter half of the 20th century, the waterways of Britain have benefited from millions of pounds of regeneration investment over the past decade. The introduction of the National Lottery and the Millennium Commission coincided with a national drive to reinvent our canals as places for fun, relaxation and tranquillity.

A major turning point came in 2000 when the government published the 'Waterways for Tomorrow' white paper, which set out its vision for the network. John Prescott, deputy prime minister at the time, championed the cause, and government funding suddenly became available to tackle the huge backlog of maintenance work. Regeneration schemes popped up everywhere. Engineers who, only 20 years before, had been filling in urban canals found themselves digging them out again.

About 320 kilometres of canal have been added to the network since 2000, and major new visitor attractions have been opened at the renovated Anderton Boat Lift in Cheshire; the Falkirk Wheel, the impressive 21st-century boat lift in central Scotland; and at Standedge Tunnel, Britain's highest, longest and deepest canal tunnel, carved through the Yorkshire Pennines. Only recently, canals were being restored more rapidly than they were being built two centuries ago.

Leisure boats are returning in their thousands, and millions of people enjoy cycling, walking or angling along the towpaths. Wily developers have also been quick to get in on the act: living by an attractive canal can add up to 20 per cent to the value of a property. Water has been a major regeneration catalyst, particularly in our towns and cities.

URBAN RENEWAL

Robin Evans, chief executive of British Waterways, the government body that manages about 70 per cent of Britain's 5,000-kilometre navigable network, is well aware of the power of water. 'In this hurly-burly life we lead, many of us are very fortunate to have on our doorsteps these beautiful, tranquil waterways where we can feed the ducks, glimpse a kingfisher or watch the brightly painted narrow boats glide by,' he says. 'That beats living next to a main road or working in an office block,



Above: Middlewood Locks in Salford undergoing renovation prior to reopening in September. This is part of a wider scheme to fully restore the 24-kilometre Manchester, Bolton and Bury Canal, which it's hoped will create jobs, bring derelict land into use and attract private investment. In the background is the 169-metre Beetham Tower, Manchester's tallest building; **Above right:** a canal boat traverses the Pontcysyllte Aqueduct in North Wales. Completed in 1805, it's Britain's longest and highest aqueduct and is now a Grade I listed building; **Right:** visitors to nearby Llangollen Wharf have enjoyed horse-drawn boat trips along the canal for more than a century

and this is something that local authorities, RDAs [regional development agencies] and developers have increasingly woken up to in the past decade.'

Public lottery funds has unlocked other grants from RDAs and local authorities eager for change. Formerly neglected, weed-strewn canal basins in cities such as Leeds, Birmingham, Nottingham, London, Gloucester and Manchester have been restored and are now surrounded by swanky new offices, restaurants and apartments.

One developer, Brian Jervis of Valley and Vale Properties in Manchester, is so convinced of the added value brought by water that he was prepared to sell his land to British Waterways for a nominal £1 to enable it to carry out the first phase of the Manchester, Bolton and Bury Canal restoration in Salford.

At £6.8million per 500 metres, it's not cheap. But the project will restore an important link into Manchester's River Irwell

and has included the creation of two new tunnels, a new deep lock and two balancing ponds, the refurbishment of an existing lock, the widening of a bridge, the excavation of a filled-in channel, and the installation of a back-pumping system.

As part of the team managing the project, British Waterways engineer Fran Littlewood needs no convincing of the merit of her work. 'Everybody wants to be by water,' she says. 'It has a very calming effect. I cycle to work along the Bridgewater and Manchester ship canals and it's a great way to start the day.'

City centre schemes are always fraught with engineering challenges, but the British Waterways contractor Volker Stevin has delivered a transformation that must gladden the hearts of those who live and work in the area. Once a brownfield site covered by scrap metal and industrial dereliction, it's now an attractive blank canvas for the creation of a ten hectare, £600million waterside quarter: Middlewood Locks.

Opened last September, this first phase of the canal restoration enables boats to sail from the national waterway network into the Manchester, Bolton and Bury Canal for the first time in more than 50 years. Given the financial climate, the second phase to extend the canal for another 1.5 kilometres through the University of Salford's campus, which will include the restoration of three locks, is unlikely to happen soon, but achieving small, manageable projects such as this is clearly the way forward.

CASH FLOW

Canal restoration is still on the national agenda, but proceeds



FIERY RECEPTION

Below: a spectacular pyrotechnics display during the Waterfire event, the conclusion to Aquafest, a celebration of Manchester's waterways held at Piccadilly Basin during the 2002 Commonwealth Games. Dozens of boaters congregated for the event, which marked the reopening of the newly restored Rochdale Canal, which starts its 91-lock journey over the Pennines in Manchester city centre



more cautiously. The days of the Millennium Commission bonanza and unlimited funding pots are, sadly, a thing of the past. British Waterways had its fingers burnt after accepting responsibility for the upkeep of extra canals without adequate external funding, and there's general agreement now that the main beneficiaries, such as local authorities, should be footing more of the maintenance bill. It was forced to withdraw from a restoration partnership with the Cotswold Canals Trust after the collapse of a section of the Monmouthshire and Brecon Canal in October 2007 landed it with a £15million repair bill.

But on the bright side, the recently launched £11.5million restoration of the Droitwich Canals is set to create up to 200 new jobs and generate extra annual visitor expenditure of £2.75million. The new 2.2-kilometre Liverpool Canal Link, which will once again connect the city's docks with the Leeds and Liverpool Canal, is nearly finished, and East London's neglected Bow Back Rivers are being transformed by the creation of the £20million Prescott Lock.

This latter development is significant for London's waterways: due to open in March, it will allow much of the construction traffic for the Olympic Games site to move by water, removing heavy lorries from the capital's congested streets.

LEISURE TIME

These days, there are regular calls to get more freight onto the waterways, but how realistic is such a move? In 2007, in a blaze of publicity, Tesco announced it would be transporting wine along the Manchester Ship Canal – but in reality, moving freight by water remains a niche market.

'There is a disconnect between romance and what is possible,' explains Edward Fox, British Waterways' head of communications. 'The fact is that it just isn't economical any more. Destinations aren't on the canals any more. When canals were built, they were the only transport network of their day. Around 30 million tonnes of freight was moved on the inland waterways at the height of their use in the early 19th century. Today, it's approximately 1.5 million tonnes.'

'Today, much of the network is used for leisure purposes, not freight,' he continues. 'Unlike on the Continent, the UK network was never systematically upgraded for freight and was allowed to run down in favour of rail and then motorway development. Today, much of the network can only take around 60-tonne vessels, whereas 500-tonne barges are standard on the Continent. In fact, our counterparts in France are upgrading to even larger boats and canals to keep them competitive and economically viable.'

British Waterways and other waterway operators are actively promoting any opportunities to get freight onto the water, but in most areas, it's just not practical. Take a trip over the Pennines from Greater Manchester to Yorkshire, for example: do hauliers negotiate 91 back-breaking locks on the Rochdale Canal or enjoy a 30-minute drive over the hills on the M62?

It's clear that leisure is the key to a healthy future for the UK's canals. The boating population is growing steadily – 32,566 licences were issued by British Waterways in England

and Wales in 2007–08, a five per cent increase on the previous year. And 3.3 million of us now visit a waterway at least once a fortnight on average – a 13 per cent increase on last year.

The Llangollen Canal in North Wales is one of the most popular on the network: in 2005, British Waterways constructed a much-needed 32-berth mooring basin to cope with the town's boating congestion. Local brothers Peter and Bill Furniss are just two of the many boating enthusiasts who run successful businesses based on the water. They attract more than 100,000 visitors a year with their horse-drawn boat trips, waterside tea rooms and motorised barge cruises over Thomas Telford's amazing 38-metre-tall Pontcysyllte Aqueduct (which is currently bidding for World Heritage status).

Peter took over the business with his brother and sister-in-law in March 2006 after serving 30 years with the Merseyside Probation Service and is delighted he made the move. 'It's a challenge and an opportunity to do something different,' he says. 'There was clearly some risk but I don't regret it at all.'

Long hours during the busy holiday periods are tempered by the enjoyment that his visitors derive from being by the water. 'It's very relaxing and so peaceful. I guess people think it's harking back to a former age,' he says. 'Life is so hectic these days but once you are on a boat trip, you can't go faster than four miles per hour [6.5km/h]. I think it's that whole thing about taking time out and slowing down the pace of life.'

As freight is a niche market, leisure is the key to a healthy future for the UK's canals

ON LOCATION

Increasingly, people are also now working on the canals. For around £30,000 a year, you can lease an attractive business barge on the Regent's Canal at Holborn Studios in Islington, London. Nick Goldsmith is half of the partnership that

makes up Hammer & Tongs, the films production company behind *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* and *Son of Rambow*.

Goldsmith's company started leasing a business barge there about seven years ago, after the rent on its offices in Chinatown skyrocketed. He was looking for something a little unusual, and after rejecting lighthouses and submarines, fell for Poppy, a 24-metre converted barge. He and his partner enjoy their waterside location so much that, with the company's expansion, they now occupy two barges – boasting an edit suite and two sound studios – moored side by side.

'After coming from Chinatown, it's so much calmer,' he says. 'You used to get so much noise inside, not to mention the cars, and people screaming, and junkies on the doorstep and up the alley. Here we have geese, ducks and kids' canoes – that's about as annoying as it gets. Tranquillity is important, especially for the kind of work we do. The calmness of the area is good. And if London flooded, we would be alright!'

British Waterways, too, is so convinced of the attractions of waterside living that it has formed its own specialist property company, ISIS Waterside Regeneration, and is currently engaged in ten development projects across Britain.

Only a few decades ago, our canal network was heading for a slow, lingering death. Now it is at the heart of a national zeitgeist for regeneration and the reinvention of old treasures – the waterways of Britain are sailing into a new golden age. 