

ME & MY BOATS



Watering up beneath a giant willow at Berkhamsted on the southern GU

Taking the *Ruffian* with the smooth



Years of dogged persistence finally lead Jim Batty and his partner Karen to 53ft *Ruffian*, the narrowboat of their dreams, just as they were about to give up the search

TEXT AND PICTURES **JIM BATTY**

When I was a boy growing up in Montreal I used to go fishing with my father on the quiet lakes of Ontario and Quebec in our nine-foot, punt-nosed, flat-bottomed wooden boat. It had a small outboard to get us to the furthest corners, and creaking oars for fine-tuning our position over the perch, pike and bass.

In the early 1980s my partner, Karen, and I arrived in London with two bags after a

European camping adventure... and we never left, making it our home. We are two romantics at heart and when we first saw colourful narrowboats chugging up the Thames from the towpath, or spied them slipping through London on the Regent's Canal, we laughed and swore that one day we would live on one.

Roll on 20 years of 'life' and busyness. By 2004 I was desperate to get onto the River Thames in one way or another. After a little online research

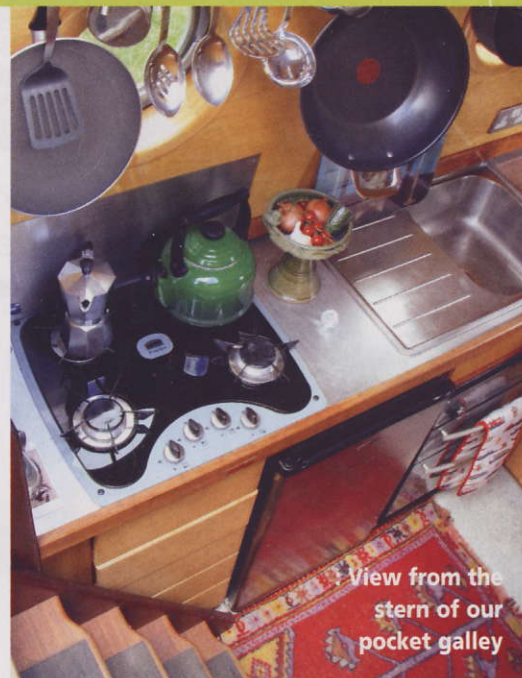


I went out, inflated, test drove and bought a Stearns Spree One kayak. For an investment of less than \$400 I was on the river!

The Spree was a marvel of German rubber weld technology, with three heavy-duty inflatable chambers zipped into a sleek nylon outer shell. It was light, stable enough to take photographs from and folded down, with collapsible paddle, to the size of a medium suitcase that could be strapped to a folding



A guest for breakfast during our first week cruising on the Oxford



View from the stern of our pocket galley



Hobbes, the 12-year old cat, peers out. Note the narrow gauge table



Jim, Karen and Hobbes relax at Christmas. Right: The unusual 'cheese-grater' stern



luggage trolley and taken by train to any river within walking distance of a station. The process was reversed at the end of the day from a different rail station downstream. I christened her *Little Wing* – after the Jimi Hendrix tune that often surfaced in my mind while paddling her beneath shadowy willows.

I began to spend every second weekend on her exploring the non-tidal Thames and other local rivers. After a little preparation I rode the swift outgoing tide from Teddington Lock to the mud flats below Kew Bridge. I even loaded *Little Wing* up and did a week's journey from Oxford to Henley, camping on islands in the Thames along the way.

I also began to meet a whole new world of boaters in and around locks and enjoyed their open friendliness and laid-back independence. This was a community I wanted to be part of. All of my boating talk at home rekindled our old dream of living on a narrowboat, so we hired a

58-footer (from an outfit I'd visited in *Little Wing*) in deepest October to test our enthusiasm. We loved it, so slowly began to look for a boat we could afford and fit ourselves into.

To us it now seems hard to believe that we spent almost four years seriously combing the

'The highlight of the third year's search was having a broker insist on returning our deposit'

second-hand market and visiting boats moored on obscure cuts and in remote marinas all over the south-east: from Wiltshire to Northants, Oxfordshire to Surrey. All by train, local bus and foot as neither of us drive.

At first we looked at everything, and almost bought an old widebeam built by the owner with a unique 'towering' wheelhouse, but were gazumped at the last moment. As we covered more of the system we realised we actually wanted a narrowboat so that we could explore the narrow canals. In year two we found a

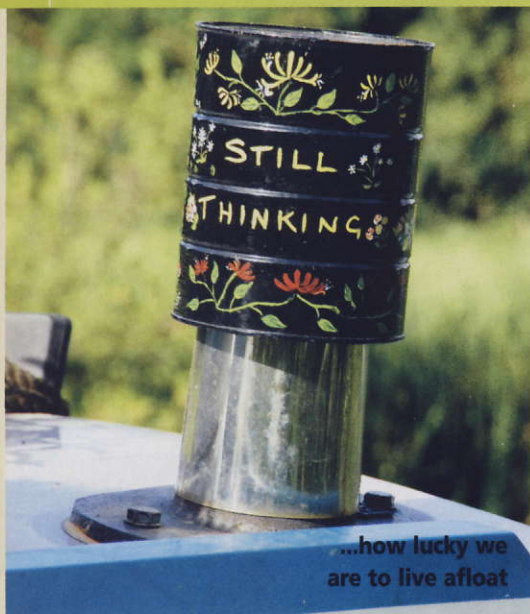
'perfect' 24-year-old ex-hire boat. It took three months (and £800) to organise the pre-sale survey – orchestrating the diaries of the four owners, the crane-out yard, surveyor and ourselves – only to find on the big day that there was 4.5mm external pitting and 1.4mm internal corrosion on the hull's 6mm steel base. You do the maths. We fled. Never take celebration champagne to a survey!

The highlight of the third year's search was having a broker insist on returning our deposit – I like to think out of embarrassment – after a number of quality issues arose and the boatyard's own mechanic admitted the engine couldn't be serviced without being removed from the boat!

During the following winter Karen gave up on our finding a narrowboat and we argued over our next move. The following spring I persuaded her to go on one final long-weekend jaunt to visit all the Northamptonshire marinas and boatyards we could manage. We ended up in Braunston on the Bank Holiday Monday to find the boat we'd come to see had been sold two ▶

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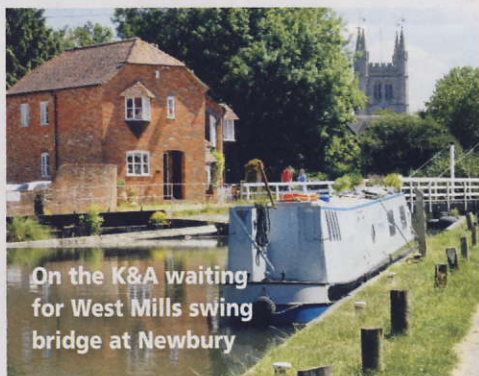
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...how lucky we are to live afloat



The delight of early autumn just below Stoke Bruerne



On the K&A waiting for West Mills swing bridge at Newbury



Little Wing loaded up on a week-long Thames paddle

◀ days previously, and in our bones we knew that was the end of our boating dream.

And then, in the last hour of our last day, we discovered *The Ruffian* by accident – a quirky, modern looking 53ft narrowboat not on the broker's books yet. Cool light blue on the outside, with her name hand-lettered inexplicably in wild west graphics on the side and sporting what is best described as a semi-trad 'cheese-grater' stern. Inside she is beautifully warm and 'boaty' with lots of ash panelling and contrasting cherry trim. It had the ideal compact layout: the lounge and cabin were combined into one long space, which

Frozen in for two weeks at Cowroast on the southern GU in January 2010

Stretches of the K&A require a little ingenuity to get ashore and back again

made it seem huge. The original owners must have been giants because the ceilings were over 6½ft high. There was the essential clothes closet, ultramodern loo, and a neatly fitted galley in the stern below a set of clever fold-up steps, and a narrow-gauge dinette with a hatch either side. We grinned at each other and thought this might be the one. Fools to the end.

But we had a bus to catch so had to leave abruptly. But we were excited about *Ruffian* and the next day put in an offer by phone, then counter-offer, and suddenly she was ours, subject to survey. I knew the Mel Davis hull would be fine, but all else was in pretty good

condition too, if a little over-engineered for the tastes of our traditionalist surveyor.

After some boat handling lessons and a tour of the north Oxford Canal we moved permanently onto '*Ruffy*' in November 2009 – just in time to experience the coldest winter in 30 years. And we loved it, even hauling water over the snow in a plastic container when we were frozen in.

Watching the willow, hawthorne and buttercup fields blossom in spring along the Kennet & Avon has been a magical experience, and the hot summer of 2010 has been like an energising balm. It has been a long journey of arrival, but we feel we are really home for the first time. So, we believe dreams can come true, given enough sheer, dogged persistence. **CB**



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TELL US ABOUT the boats – or just the boat – in your life. Your story should be about 1000 words and must

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Write in or email to editor@canalboat.co.uk. All photos will be returned. What's more, we pay £100 for every story used.