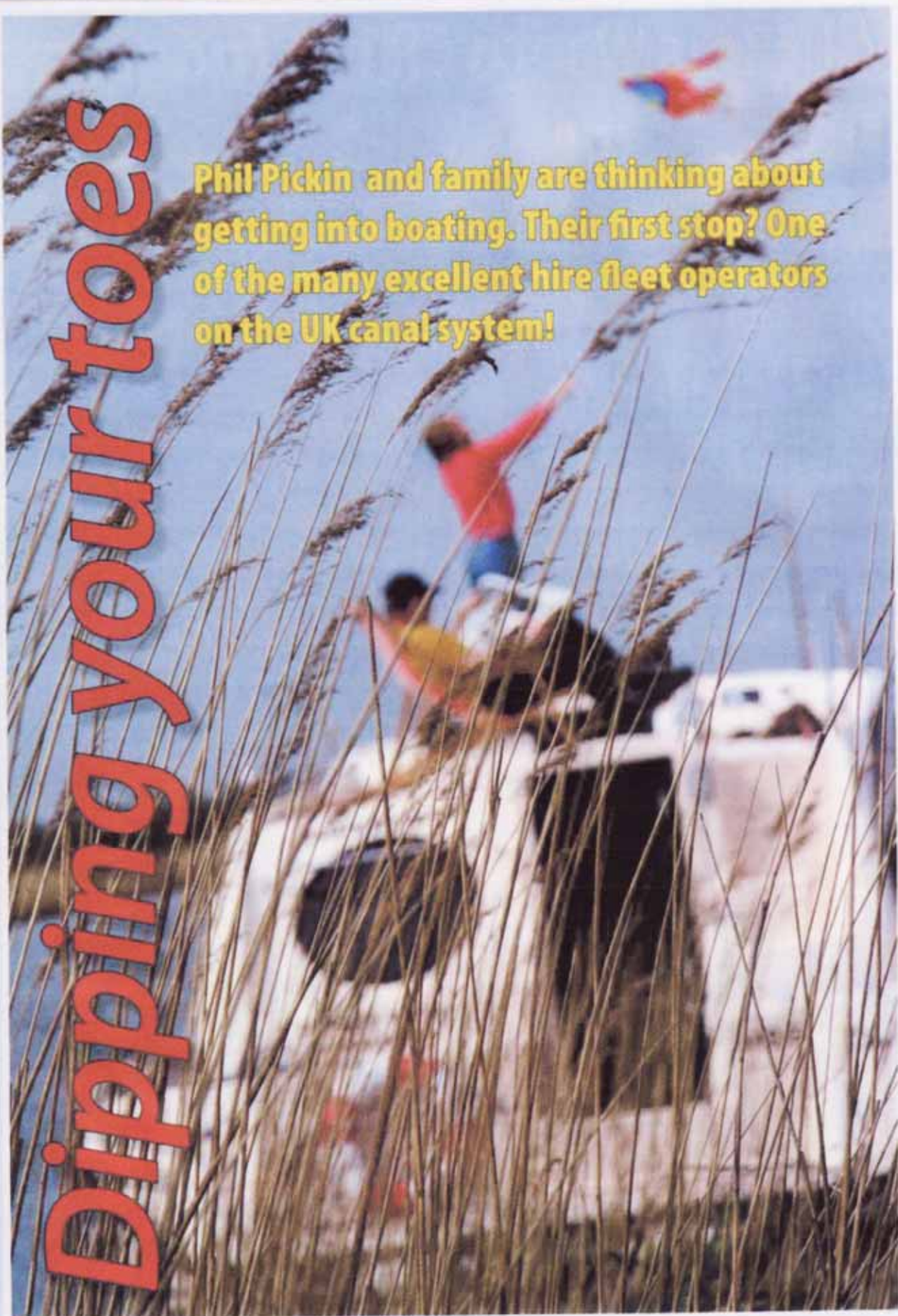




Dipping your toes

Phil Pickin and family are thinking about getting into boating. Their first stop? One of the many excellent hire fleet operators on the UK canal system!



Try hiring for a week to see if you like it...

Boating is one of those pastimes that has many variations. Sailing, dinghy racing, canoeing, motor cruising, they all fall under the title of boating but are all very different. All too often boaters stick to their own area without ever experiencing one of the many others however, sticking with one type of boating means they could well be missing out on a whole new area to enjoy if they never try anything new. Not only that but who knows where this could all lead.

It's with this in mind that we approached our first break on the canals. As someone born and brought up in the Midlands it's quite an admission to have never spent time on 'the cut', but it's true. Although there have been a few excursions on the canals, and there have been more than a few trips to look at new boats being built for canal and river use, that's about the limit of experience to date. We really did approach this with an open mind but safe in the knowledge that we were already confirmed boat enthusiasts.

Hire to try first

So, a whole family of inexperienced canal boat users arrived at the Anderton base



Typical top quality hire boat

of Alvechurch boats late one Friday afternoon to take charge of a 58ft boat for a few days experiencing the delights of the Trent and Mersey Canal in Cheshire. The staff at the marina were full of advice and assistance and, knowing the most daunting thing for any novice would be the thought of using a lock, spent time showing us the ropes on a model as well as providing written instructions. The children especially enjoyed this and must have taken it all in as our later excursions through the locks went without a hitch.

After being shown the basics of the boat we were left to our own devices, having already forgotten most of what we'd just been told! Navigating our way out of a crowded marina was something of a baptism of fire but there's no better way of learning - or so we're told. Having taken advice from the staff at the hire base we decided on heading towards Middlewich and, having pin-balled our way up the first few bends in the canal we decided to tie up to buy supplies. Although most of the readers of C&R are experienced, a word of advice for any novice users: take supplies or be sure of where you can buy them. A two mile walk and a return taxi ride from the nearest Tesco to your boat is not the best way to start a trip! If you don't want to carry too much I'd suggest you plan well in advance knowing where you can easily get to supplies.

Entertaining and educational

The following days saw us cruise up to Middlewich and enjoying some wonderful countryside and views. The journey took in a small aqueduct and both large

and small locks all of which proved to be entertaining and educational to all concerned. Being so close the Anderton boat lift it would have been foolish to have not visited one of the most impressive constructions of the Victorian age. And, having looked at many of the routes suggested by the majority of the hire firms, it's worth planning to take in these icons of the industrial revolution. Trips don't mean you have to endure a list of museums etc. The wildlife and surroundings you pass through can make a trip worthwhile in themselves. It's this aspect of the time we spent afloat

that most inspired us and, somewhat surprisingly, the children.

We didn't once get a moaning teenager laying on a bunk with a Nintendo in hand.

Camaraderie

It's true that boaters, by and large, are a friendly bunch and there is a high degree of camaraderie between those afloat. It would seem that this is as much in evidence on the inland waterways as in coastal marinas, and in some cases more so. Wherever the canal meanders it seems to attract interest, which was very obvious to us but maybe long-term boaters may have got used to this. The issue of boat speed did crop up for us



Showing us the ropes

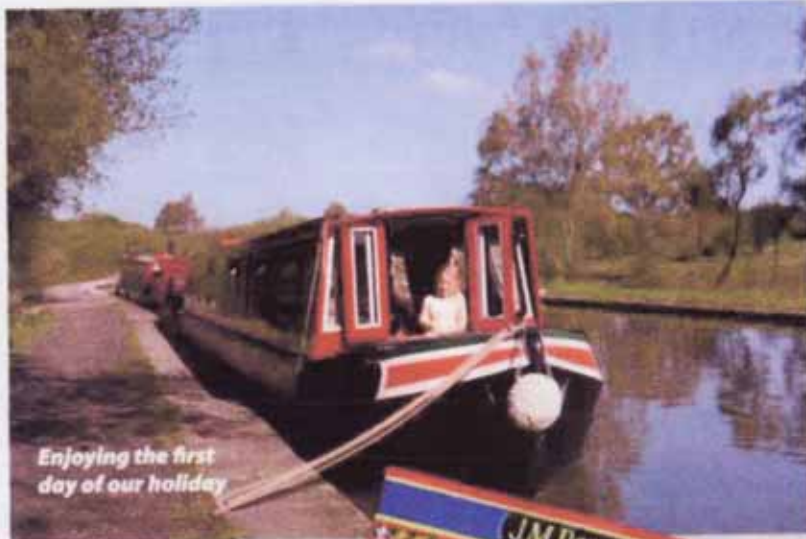


and we know a few of our fellow hire boaters had problems. Sadly the result of one of these clashes resulted in the hire boater vowing never to return to the inland waterways ever again due to the foul language used against her and her children.

As for using a hire boat, the boat we used could not be faulted for its cleanliness nor for its inventory of equipment and supplies, and we are sure this would be the case with the majority of the boats on offer from other firms. For anyone thinking of a first canal break, rest assured that you would not be stuck for choice, both in the levels of accommodation or overall size of boat, when choosing one to hire. Having been lucky enough to have been able to have tried out a wide range of boats over the years (all in the line of duty you understand) it's true that any novice will find even the most modest canal boat quite different to their usual craft, if you are a regular boat user. But, like everything, the more you do it the easier it becomes. Even the locks, which can put a lot of people off, are nothing to be frightened of, but then you canal boaters will know that!

Buy a route planner

Having been on the 'other side' of canal boating (as a hire boat user) I would advise anyone to buy a book. Not a 'how to do it' book but try to find a decent route planner for the area you are look-



Enjoying the first day of our holiday

ing to cruise. We used one of the Pearson's *Canal Companion* books for our area and it proved invaluable as it not only tells you where you are but also where the nearest water points, pump-outs can be found etc. Most of these guides will also point you in the right direction of the nearest places of interest ensuring you won't miss anything along the way. It may sound basic stuff but it's easy to miss things when out, especially on your first trip. Also, ask questions of the staff at the hire firm. Don't be put off about sounding stupid despite being a seasoned boater in other areas. It's better to ask the basics than to save face and end up having problems some way off down the canal.

Lovely, slow pace

We found that canal life is at a different pace to anything else you may well have experienced. You have to move slower. There are a fair number of characters on the cut who live and work in this unique environment. You do see, and experience, more of the environment from the canal than you do whizzing through it in your car. Unique is a good all-encompassing phrase to cover the inland waterways system. Where else can you enjoy the joys of the countryside in the same way as caravanners and campers and still have the feeling of a boat beneath your feet?

The trip was entertaining and very enjoyable – despite the moans and groans of the dear lady wife after spending a day winding the lock paddles, and I for one would encourage any boater to have at least one trip to say they've tried it.

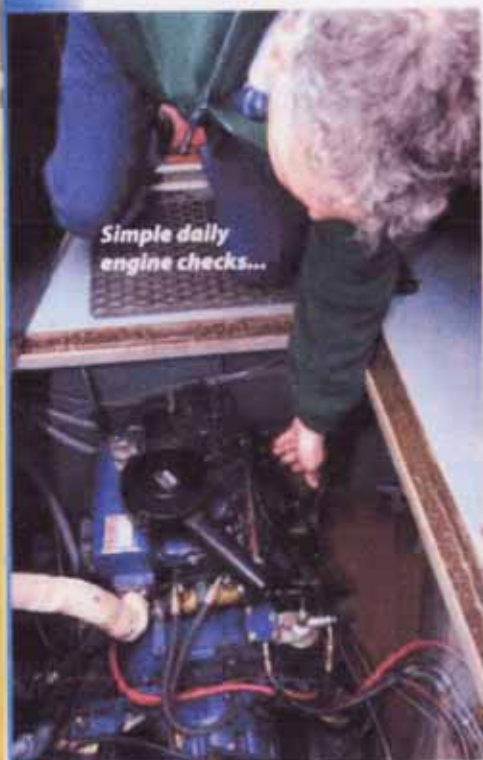


It may not change you from your chosen path but you will have experienced a unique part of our country's heritage.

As for the outcome of all this, well it so captivated us that we have become more and more involved in the issues surrounding the inland waterways. We joined the IWA and are now in the process of looking at buying our own boat. In the shorter term we intend to cruise as a holiday boat but in the longer term (and assuming ownership proves as enjoyable as we hope) it may become a more permanent home. Readers may groan at yet another holiday hire boater seeing the life on the canals with rose tinted glasses but we are realistic and are not rushing into anything.

One side issue to all of this is that canal boat use, either as a holiday hire or a home, is more environmentally friendly. As a holiday home it avoids air travel and if you use bio diesel the impact on the climate is minimal. As a home these factors are even more desirable as you can add in solar panels, wind power generation and lower requirements for heating fuel due to a smaller area to heat. So now it's just the matter of choosing the the boat and it's equipment. Oh! and the small matter of affording it!

C&R



Simple daily engine checks...