

THE TIMES

Renaissance for canals as new boaters come aboard

More than 200 years after the nation's canals ferried materials that fuelled the Industrial Revolution, inland waterways are enjoying an extraordinary resurgence. Rather than carrying coal and cotton, however, the boats of the 21st century are crammed with families, couples and friends all seeking a fast way to slow down.

Today British Waterways will announce a record number of boats on the country's canals - a stark contrast to the decades of apathy, neglect and underfunding that they were subjected to during the last century, when they were largely abandoned.

A programme of regeneration and restoration has transformed the canal network to such an extent that more than 31,000 boats travelled on the waterways last year and 11 million anglers, walkers and cyclists used the towpaths, a rise of 13 per cent.

Robin Evans, chief executive of British Waterways, the public body responsible for the 2,200 miles of canals, rivers, docks and reservoirs, said: "The waterways today are being used and enjoyed in ways that few people could have imagined when they were built 250 years ago, or even when they were nationalised 60 years ago.

"The leisure use of the canals has been central to their revival but it is the adaptability of the network, including the ways in which it remains relevant to canalside communities, which hold the key to a prosperous future."

The popularity of canals now is a far cry from the 1960s when, struggling to compete with the opening of motor-ways, derelict canals became standing jokes in comics such as *The Beano* and local authorities started filling them in. Narrowboat enthusiasts had to wait until the 1980s for crucial redevelopments in Birmingham and London's Docklands and the beginning of a shift in attitudes towards waterways. A key turning point was the realisation in the 1990s that properties next to well-maintained canals and rivers attracted a premium of up to 20 per cent.

Harrison Ford added kudos to canal boating by hiring a narrowboat for a holiday with his partner Calista Flock-heart in North Wales, on the Llangollen Canal.

Depending on the size of the boat and the time of year, hiring a narrowboat can cost as little as £370 or as much as £1,600. Edward Helps, the managing director of UK Boat Hire, says that the average age of his customers is in the late forties.

Some 200 miles of new or restored waterway have opened in the past decade and tens of millions of pounds are committed to future canal building and restoration.

In the North West, the heartland of the industrial revolution, a £600 million regeneration scheme is under way on the Manchester, Bolton and Bury Canal. The 15-mile-long canal is one of the last major waterways in Greater Manchester to require restoration.

Last year Tesco began to move bulk tanks of wine from Liverpool docks to a bottling plant near Manchester along a 40-mile stretch of the nearby Manchester Ship Canal, becoming the first major retailer in England to transport goods by canal.

John Fletcher, chairman of the Manchester, Bolton & Bury Canal Society and chair of the Inland Waterways Association, said: "Urban canals are a green lung for a city, they are pleasant to see and become a linear park in an regeneration area. At their lowest level, they are somewhere pleasant to walk the dog. In rural areas, canals, among other things, help to keep shops open because they attract passing trade as well as trade from the indigenous population."

British Waterways plans to spend £160 million over the next four years on a backlog of maintenance repairs to the canal network.

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