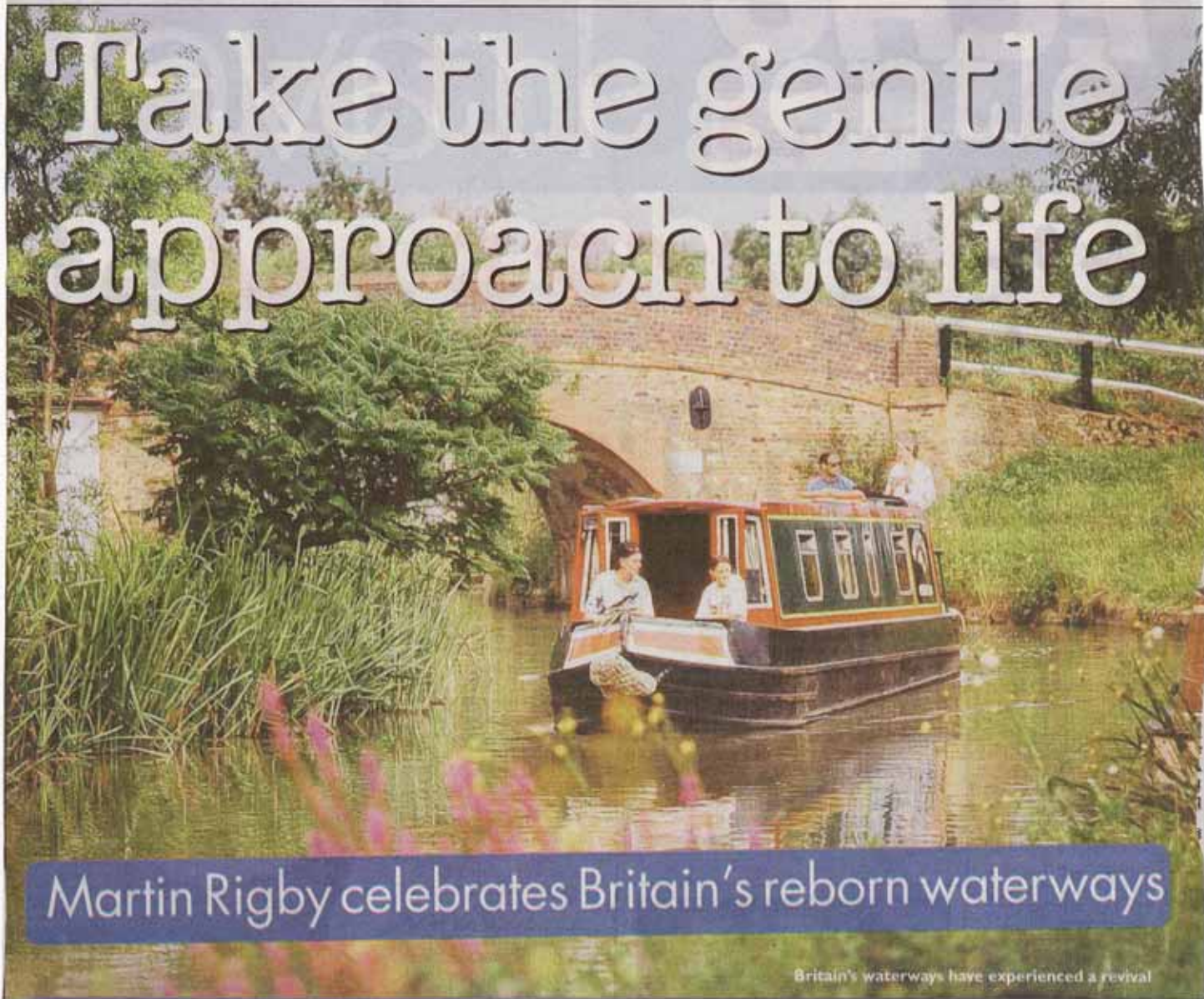


Take the gentle approach to life

Martin Rigby celebrates Britain's reborn waterways

Britain's waterways have experienced a revival



NEGOTIATING your first lock on a canal at the controls of a narrowboat while your crew members are on dry land working the lock gates is a little nerve-racking, to say the least.

As the water plunged into the lock, I kept thinking about the words of advice from the boatyard lady – keep it off the cill at the back or you'll be in trouble!

In the event, I passed my first test with flying colours and, 17 locks later, it had become second nature.

It is all part of the fun of holidaying on Britain's canals.

And how the canal leisure industry has grown over the last decade or so.

In fact, last Saturday, the industry celebrated 40 years since the passing of the 1968 Transport Act which recognised for the first time the leisure potential of our canal network.

In the 60s, the canals and rivers had been in decline for a number of years and serious consideration had been given to closing the canal network for good.

Fortunately, the 1968 Act nationalised the waterways and gave British Waterways a remit to develop the canals for leisure, including boating and angling.

Since then, Britain's waterways

have enjoyed a remarkable revival, with people using them in greater numbers than ever.

And on the sunniest weekend of a really miserable summer, we were fortunate enough to be a part of that revival.

Starting off from the Alvechurch boat centre's yard at the famous Anderton boat lift near Northwich, we meandered slowly towards Middlewich on the Trent and Mersey canal.

There is a huge variety of scenery on this particular stretch, from the rural tranquility of the Marbury country park area to the industrial setting of the old chemical and salt works on the canal banks.

This part of Cheshire was at the hub of the country's salt industry and the Lion works next to the canal at Marston, which closed in 1986, is now being restored as a working museum and visitor centre.

Upwards and onwards to our overnight stop. And I have to say the first impression of Middlewich was the town that time forgot! It really is in need of a lick of paint and a bit of investment.

Nevertheless, we spent an enjoyable couple of hours at a local bar/restaurant before taking to our beds on board.

Next morning, a massive fry-up in the confines of our on-board

kitchen was accomplished without incident and set us up for the next stage of our trip.

We negotiated four locks before turning onto the Middlewich branch of the canal and then there are five more locks in fairly quick succession, but with a seasoned hand at the tiller, these were now no problem!

Halfway to our planned destination at Wardle, we moored up for a spot of sunbathing/fishing on the canal bank with just the sounds of birds and a shed full of cows nearby for company.

On this stretch of canal you really do see the Cheshire countryside in all its glory and with the sun shining it really takes some beating – enforced relaxation, as a seasoned boater told me in a canal-side pub.

A few hours later, we reached Wardle. Here the meeting of the Middlewich branch and the Shropshire Union at Barbridge Junction is a hive of activity, with boats converging from all parts of the canal compass.

It was busy enough when we arrived, at the end of September, so in the height of summer it must be frenetic.

We eventually found space to moor up and another excellent visit to a waterside pub sealed a fantastic day. It is essential to plan your journey in advance as there

are only certain places big enough to turn the boats around. So, after a night at Barbridge Junction, we turned and retraced our route back to Middlewich and back to base at Anderton the next morning.

And my assessment of the break: Really enjoyable and a fantastic way to see some of Britain's countryside and wildlife. Do it!

Travel Tips

◆ Martin Rigby travelled courtesy of Drifters – a consortium of award winning holiday boat companies – which has bases throughout the UK. Log on to www.drifters.co.uk or call 08457 626252.

◆ Find great ideas for enjoying the waterways on www.waterscape.com

◆ A three-night break ranges from £400 to £500 depending on the time of year and availability. Full instruction on the operation of your boat is given. If you are a novice the yard owners will take you out to show you the ropes.

◆ Readers can enjoy the following incentive to get out on the water and celebrate 40 years on if they quote Castle Wharf Promotions/145 when booking their break: £40 per head off a two week holiday; £40 a couple off a one week holiday; £40 per boat off a short break (up to a six berth boat for 2009). This offer cannot be used in conjunction with any other offer.