

# Living on Infrastructure

*Community and Conflict on the Canal Network*

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*“We are now beginning to discover a lost world.”<sup>1</sup>*

This article is a brief study of what it is to live permanently on the UK inland waterways – a way of life which in no way fits within sanctioned views of ‘good housing’ or even ‘good communities’ but which challenges assumptions about what these things are. Such a study is particularly timely, given the recently announced shifting of the waterways to charitable status, a spirit of ‘heritage’ which threatens to calcify a viable and rewarding existence whilst failing to learn from it.

The UK house-building industry is in a time of unprecedented regulation and guidance, a process of standardisation and normalisation that has a profound effect on the shape of our places and homes.<sup>2</sup> It is believed that we can achieve good housing through the application of standards, pre-determined methods of ‘designing out crime’, and complex point-accruing processes to ideas of longevity and sustainability. The way we build homes is predicated on the belief that some external ‘expert’ – professional or governmental – can ensure we live well, rather than in our inherent capabilities to do so.

The story of British housing in the past century, however, is one of alternating between extremes: “One generation’s model housing becomes

the next generation’s slums.”<sup>3</sup> Despite extensive efforts by generations of experts, planners and architects, we have clearly not yet found the ‘ideal’ home, in terms of what it is, what it does, and who makes it. Despite our constant failure to achieve an applicable ‘model’ of good housing, we continue to strive and legislate towards such a model, in the process excluding alternative ways of life.

In this context, and in a time of financial uncertainty at that, it seems useful to broaden our definition of what good housing might be, and what good communities might be, rather than continuing blindly down the path of ever more predetermined models. It is in precisely this spirit that the current essay focuses its attentions on living on the waterways – one particular ‘alternative’, not to say excluded, lifestyle among many.

The inland waterways are and always have been a commercial proposition – industrial infrastructure at its most ambitious and hard-headed. But they have always been places to live as well.

Two hundred years ago a number of independent speculators<sup>4</sup> began building canals across the country, transforming the age-old principle of efficient water transportation by river and fen into an industrial proposition. Beginning with the premise that “a waterway would bring raw materials to the factory, carry away the finished products, and supply the people with coal more cheaply than land carriage”,<sup>5</sup> these initially fragmentary and privately funded canals became a vast network joining up the manufacturing and logistical operations of industry – the “superhighways of the industrial revolution”.<sup>6</sup> In so doing, the canals transformed the country through connecting previously disparate places, and shifted the scale of the economy from the county to the nation.

The heroic period of the ‘canal age’ ended with the coming of the railways, though canals as industrial transportation continued, in dwindling numbers, well into the 20th century. Increasingly obsolete, many canals were bought up

by the private railway companies themselves as they provided a pre-existing slice through complex land ownerships – all the better to construct a railway on. In 1947 Clement Attlee's Labour government began a policy of nationalising public services including the railways and, as a result, the UK government found itself owning a substantial part of the remaining canal infrastructure.

The following decades saw the formation of the British Waterways Board, an organisation charged with maintaining and enhancing the waterways network, and an ongoing process of restoration. The idea of the canals as a site of leisure – particularly those in rural rather than urban locations – also took root at this time, owing a great deal to the popularity of L. T. C. Rolt's 1944 travelogue, *Narrow Boat*, and the efforts of the independent Inland Waterways Association. In parallel with this, canals also drew the attention of industrial archaeologists and emerging ideas of the UK's industrial heritage and preservation,<sup>7</sup> with volunteer action in dredging and re-opening stretches of waterway, mirroring similar efforts in restoring branch-line railways across the country.

In the 1990s the canal system became swept up in processes of regeneration; categorised as having “special amenity value”<sup>8</sup> alongside parks and rivers in the government vision of urban renaissance. Ideas that had been floating around on the edges of urban discourse for several decades,<sup>9</sup> that the post-industrial canal infrastructure might have much to offer to both the UK economy and to the public life of its towns and cities, suddenly found themselves in the mainstream.

The canals have transformed from ruthlessly efficient arteries of the industrial revolution – unconcerned with notions of place or community – through periods of neglect, closure and abandonment, to key sites of ‘regeneration’ – costly to maintain but also potentially massive cash cows.

In the city, this process can be seen very clearly in the huge quantities of new developments, principally residential, which have been built in the

past ten or so years in direct relation to the canal – and with the canal cited as an important ‘amenity’ benefit to the development. This is occurring in the context of an increasing interest in water as a development asset, most obvious in London along the River Thames. With their industries gone, industrial waterways take on a marketable romantic character, which plugs into the urban desire for ‘nature’ and tranquillity in the city.

This claiming of the canals for urban redevelopment can be seen as part of a general process of ‘backs becoming fronts’, wherein areas or arteries once considered undesirable become the focal point of attention and investment. The clearest example of this in contemporary London is the transformation of the Lower Lea Valley for the 2012 Olympic Games and associated projects – a spectacular transformation of ‘back’ (the Lea being where London's dirtiest industries were, as well as its highest concentration of canalised waterways) into global ‘front’. Inherent in this is the transformation of such places into commodities.

Throughout this story of commerce, industry and regeneration, people have chosen to live on boats on the waterways network.<sup>10</sup> As a piece of infrastructure, the canals themselves once provided an economic grounding to this choice, though nowadays the ‘canal economy’ is largely limited to the coal boats that tour the network selling fuel and gas directly to boaters. Today, there are varying degrees of ‘living aboard’ – even if one only includes those who live permanently on the waterways. These range from people who own or rent private moorings and therefore have relatively full access to services like gas, waste disposal, an address etc., through to those whose residence on the canal is limited to ownership of a boat and possession of a British Waterways (BW) licence, and who are therefore reliant on external systems for their services.

The reasoning behind living on the waterways, of course, varies from person to person, but some fundamental ideals can be ascertained and are perhaps best explored here through describing my own occupation of the canal

network – living on a friend’s boat for a couple of winter months while they were out of the country. This boat did not have, nor had it ever had, a permanent residence (or mooring) other than the canal system itself, but did have a BW licence.

Firstly, there is the ‘home’ itself, generally but not exclusively a narrowboat of timber or steel, a box, powered by an engine of some kind. Quick to heat, endlessly customisable by its owner, a narrowboat can be as grand or as simple as required. A machine as much as a home, such a boat pays back effort with a breathtaking immediacy and directness, though with the obvious caveat that this effort goes way beyond the daily processes of a more ordinary house. The chopping of wood to begin the fire, care taken in the use of lights and the management of batteries, are all rewarded directly. The interior of a lived-in narrowboat, sitting low in the water, and particularly after dark, speaks strongly of home, all the time checked by the movement of water and counterpointed by the potential of the ‘home’ to move off in search of a new place. The clear, equal relationship between what is put into the home and what it gives back is a lesson in actual sustainability, a manifest refutation of the culture of excess.<sup>11</sup>

Owning a boat is not tied in any way to owning land, territory or rights. Many restrictions placed on this lifestyle by the waterways authorities, such as precise limits on mooring and the term ‘continuous cruising’ used to denote such permanent boat dwellers, are all grafted on to the law of the waterways rather than laws in themselves. Terms such as ‘continuous moorer’ and even ‘place’ seem to be the subject of permanent negotiation.<sup>12</sup>

For many boaters, the capacity to exist harmlessly on infrastructural water with minimum consequences to that environment is a profound act, a lived statement in counterpoint to bankrupted ideas of property as investment. This act sits in a long tradition of ‘squatting’ as a culturally embedded political act,<sup>13</sup> also expressed by phenomena such as the ‘one-night house’ (the folk belief that if a house can be built in one night, the owner of

the land it sits on cannot expel its builder), but arguably transcending such traditions by abandoning the idea of land ownership altogether and in the process achieving a strong sense of autonomy and freedom.



Regents Canal, London, 2010, FUGITIVE IMAGES

When I took over the boat, it had been moored for a few days against a scrap of land away from the towpath and close to the centre of the city. Obviously owned by someone (but not British Waterways), this land was on the margin of a stalled development site and provided only a solid edge in which to drive a mooring pin – not a territory, but a point of access. This place is not on any map (though no doubt it will be once the development begins again) or any guide to the waterways, but for a while it provided one innocuous stopping place on the network among many more-or-less sanctioned locations. This situation echoes the tradition, well documented

in Britain but surely not limited to it, of building roadside cottages along particularly wide roads or lanes, which according to Oliver Rackham, “took the form of a narrowing of a road, either by a neighbouring farmer pushing his frontage or by a third party setting up a smallholding within the road itself”.<sup>14</sup> Rackham goes on to highlight how such marginal structures were often condoned on the condition that smallholders would pay an annual ‘fine’ for the privilege.

If more than one boater is present at any one place, an informal human settlement takes place. The kinds of human association that occur in such situations could offer food for thought to anyone pursuing the ‘sustainable communities’ agenda. A community of boaters is an entirely negotiated one, in which a home can be moved a few inches or a few hundred metres on request, homes can travel side-by-side if their owners pair up, and where trade happens naturally in the way we are told it used to happen in ‘the good old days’. Everyone understands the joys and labours of living aboard and the willingness to assist other (particularly novice) boaters is generally very high. Boaters are also making full use of communication and social media technologies to protect isolated boaters in isolated places and rapidly spread the word about stoppages (temporary closures on the network), coal boat schedules, threats and opportunities. In this sense, boaters exploit a certain flexibility and sense of autonomy not experienced by ‘settled’ communities.

When guidebooks, historians and ‘leisure’ websites talk about the heritage of the canal, its particular “history, culture, architecture and people”,<sup>15</sup> they include in this definition the people who live on the water, who provide its colour and an opportunity for spontaneous conversation which no public body could ever hope to provide. Not a simulation of ‘real boaters’ or a heritage spectacle.

As a way of life, boating fits into a tradition of mediated travel stretching back centuries. It is fundamentally constrained by an economy, access

to essentials, farming systems etc., and of course limited to the inland waterways network as it currently stands. Boaters are in a permanent state of negotiation regarding how long and how close they can stay in a particular area – a state which is frequently, and increasingly, antagonistic.

Another example of such nomadic existence in the UK can be found by looking at the history of gypsy and traveller groups. Until the 1960s travel was an essential component of their economic as well as cultural lifestyles. The trade and movement of horses, made possible by the traveller lifestyle, provided strong stock for working horses in local areas. The idea that one might follow work was, of course, not exclusive to ‘travellers’, and indeed in the late 19th and early 20th centuries working-class Londoners would join traveller groups in the seasonal exodus from the city to work in hop picking.

The canal network of today might be seen as an equivalent to Britain’s road network prior to the mid 1960s, which is known among certain travellers as ‘Wagon-time’, a period when the existence of people dwelling (permanently or temporarily) on the margins of roads was accepted as part of the social structure of the country. When the majority of the population began mobilising for leisure purposes as never before and the private car was becoming more and more common, the UK government cracked down on the possibility of a roadside existence for those who had been pursuing it for generations, in the stated hope that such travellers would become integrated with the majority of the population. This crackdown was largely framed by the 1968 Caravan Sites Act that handed local authorities the duty to provide sites for travellers, diminishing acceptance of roadside or informal temporary dwelling in favour of officially sanctioned ‘traveller sites’.<sup>16</sup> The informality of past systems was replaced by a formal segregation.

Today, the ‘foregrounding’ of the canal network as a heritage and leisure industry, as well as its adoption as a regeneration asset and current trends in its management (a ‘national trust for the waterways’<sup>17</sup> is proposed by

2020), risks putting boaters into the same situation as travelling people in the years post-1968, yet again turning a viable existence into ‘heritage’, erasing one of the practices that makes the canals worth visiting in the first place and further limiting the conversation about how we might live. ‘Living aboard’, in the history of the canal system, has shifted from being a key part of the waterways’ economic viability to the low-impact exploitation of a public resource, and in both cases not to the detriment of the canal’s appearance, function or economy. In the current context this may no longer be seen to be the case – the alternative way of life represented by living aboard does not always sit neatly with the watercolours and computer-generated imagery of the leisure and regeneration sectors.

The waterways are becoming a territory where marginal but valuable ideas of living confront institutionalised tendencies toward normalisation, heritage and private development. Following current processes of procurement, design and guidance, homes and places continue to be built which disappoint, and which fail to live up to the diversity and richness of people’s lives. In situations like the inland waterways, however, the potential of an engineered, background landscape to provide a specific, enriching way of life is clearly evident: determined by individuals and groups doing it for themselves, and in ways which have remained relatively constant whilst ideas of mass housing have swung between extremes.

1. Eric de Maré, *The Canals of England* (London: The Architectural Press, 1950).
2. See, for example, Finn Williams and David Knight, ‘The Rule of Regulations’ in *Hunch 12: Bureaucracy: The Berlage Institute Report on Architecture, Urbanism and Landscape* (Rotterdam: NAI Publishers, 2009). While the majority of documents affecting the way we design affordable housing in the UK are guidance rather than regulation, they frequently have the same impact as literal regulation through being tied to central government funding.
3. Emily Greeves, *The Development of Housing in Britain 1870–2008* (London: British Council, 2008). To look at the period’s two extremes: in the 1900s, housing experts advocated the de-densification of our cities, whilst the emerging public sector was taking its first steps in providing mass-housing; in the 2000s, experts have pursued various measures for re-densifying city centres following principles such as the ‘urban

renaissance’ and ‘compact city’ whilst putting responsibility for delivering our housing in the hands of private developers.

4. Beginning with Francis Egerton, the third Duke of Bridgewater. See for example [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Francis\\_Egerton,\\_3rd\\_Duke\\_of\\_Bridgewater](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Francis_Egerton,_3rd_Duke_of_Bridgewater) (accessed 29/04/10).
5. Charles Hadfield, *British Canals: An Illustrated History* (London: Phoenix House, 1950) p. 32.
6. Bryan Hodgson, ‘Exploring England’s Canals’, *National Geographic*, July 1974.
7. The post-war rise of industrial heritage as a popular idea, and the preservationist ethic in general, is well documented in L. T. C. Rolt’s collected autobiography, *The Landscape Trilogy* (Stroud: Sutton Publishing, 2001).
8. The Urban Task Force, ‘Towards a Strong Urban Renaissance’, 2005, <http://www.urbantaskforce.org/> (accessed 29/04/10).
9. See, *ibid.*, de Maré (1950).
10. In 2010, according to British Waterways, the number of boat licences on the network was 33,800. This figure includes boats other than those permanently used as dwellings. <http://www.britishwaterways.co.uk/listening-to-you> (accessed 29/04/10).
11. See the LILO (Low-Impact Life Onboard) website, <http://www.liloontheweb.org.uk/> (accessed 29/04/10).
12. See, for example, British Waterways’ definition of ‘place’ in an effort to restrict ‘continuous mooring’ culture in its guidance, <http://www.britishwaterways.co.uk/license-it/boating-essentials/mooring-information> (accessed 29/04/10).
13. For more on this tradition, see Colin Ward, *Cotters and Squatters: Housing’s Hidden History* (London: Freedom Press, 2002).
14. Oliver Rackham, *The History of the Countryside* (London: Dent, 1986) p. 278, as cited in *ibid.*, Ward, 2002), p. 125.
15. <http://www.coolcanalsguides.com> (accessed 29/04/10).
16. For more on this history and context, see Sue Konu and David Knight, ‘Mapping the Traveller’, in Lucy Orta, *Mapping the Invisible: EU-Roma Gypsies* (London: Black Dog, 2010).
17. <http://www.britishwaterways.co.uk/newsroom/all-press-releases/display/id/2673> (accessed 29/04/10).

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