

All Aboard

A happy story of life on the canals.





The phrase 'minimalist living' conjures up images of spacious rooms with white walls and no-fuss furniture. But then you meet somebody like Heather Duncan. She lives quite happily in a space seven foot by seven foot in the cabin of a traditional working boat and you ask yourself surely this is minimalist living?

FEATURE BY SHARON DAVIES
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Heather has lived on her boat, Bideford, for several years and although she is planning to move into a house in the near future, she is very attached to her little abode.

Moored near Rugby, Heather's rather unusual home has obvious advantages and disadvantages. For instance, trying to store one's possessions in such a confined space requires crafty storage ideas and ruthless organisation. But with a view to die for, living on the water does have a certain appeal.

So how did this obsession with the canals and working boats begin? "I can't remember exactly when in my childhood it happened," says Heather. "Early one misty morning at about 6.00am I saw a pair of working boats slowly drift by. I was mesmerised by this sight. Instantly I wanted to find out more about them. I was intrigued by the canals, why are they here? Who built them? How had such a massive network of waterways grown up around England? The fascination had taken root and I have been hooked ever since."

Heather has now been on the canals for just over 15 years. She bought her first boat in London, but it was when she moved to Birmingham that she was properly introduced to working boats. "I got involved in the canals by helping out on camping boats, working on them during all my holidays and weekends," explains Heather. Whilst holding down a full time land job, she spent every spare moment of her time on the canals. ▸

MAIN PICTURE Bideford in her pride and glory.
INSET Heather in her tiny cabin.



'Pushing open the two rear cabin doors reveals the interior of the cabin. Although a small space, one instantly feels at home in the cosy room.'



Eventually, Heather took the plunge and started working on the canals full time. Buying a pair of working boats, she set up a carrying business with a partner. Very few canal carrying companies exist today so it's quite rare to see a pair of working boats carrying on the canals. For the next few years she carried coal on her working boat around Birmingham to Sharpness. Canal side pubs and private dwellings were her main customers.

Heather gradually moved from carrying into doing community work with the canals. She was very keen to promote the canals and make people more aware of their beauty and uses. Following this path has resulted in her current job as an Education Officer for British Waterways.

Heather has lived on her current boat Bideford since 1993. A town class boat of 71½ feet long and gauged for 30 tonnes, Bideford is more than sixty years old. Built for the Grand Union Canal, the exterior of the boat is still painted in the Grand Union livery

colours of blue and yellow, and despite her age, Bideford is in very good condition.

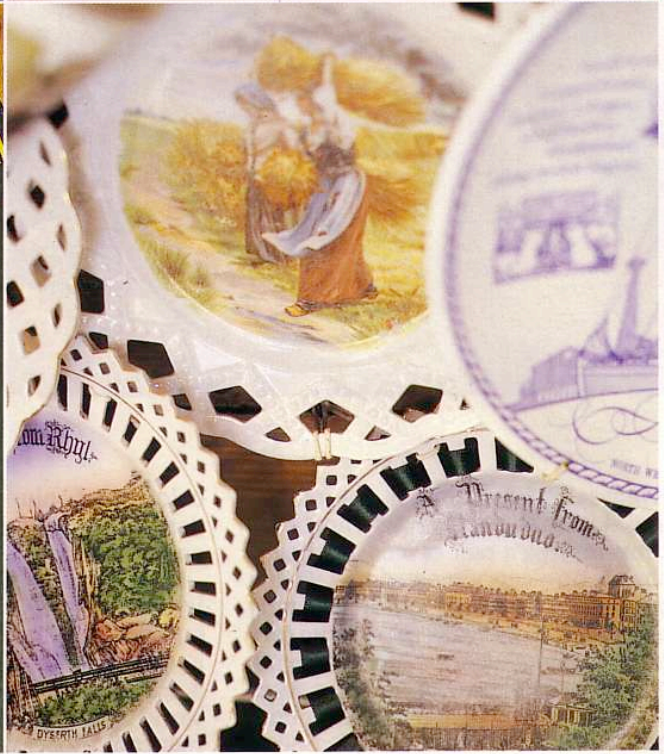
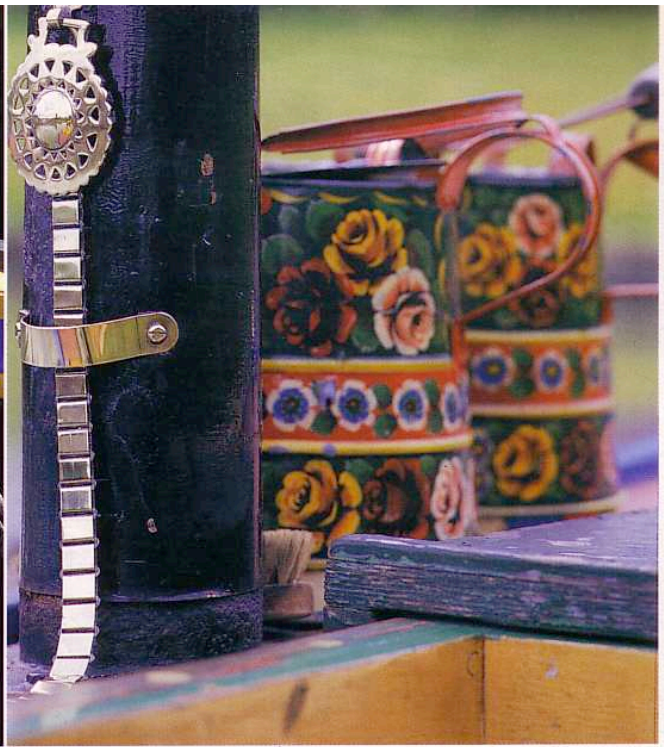
Stepping onto the back of the boat is like stepping back in time. The exterior is painted with bright colours and decorated with roses and castles - a traditional design seen on many working boats. Pushing open the two rear cabin doors reveals the interior of the cabin. Although a small space, one instantly feels at home in the cosy room. Heather heats up the kettle on her small solid fuel range for a cup of tea and delves into a deep larder for a packet of biscuits. The narrow larder has a drop-down front which becomes a handy table. Opposite this is a bench seat, also used as a bed. Underneath are some hidden cupboards for storage. Moving further into the tiny cabin is the main double bed, spreading the width of the boat. This would have been mum and dad's bed years ago, at a time when whole families would quite happily live and sleep in the back cabin. ▶

LEFT A traditional rope fender protects the front of Heather's boat.

TOP RIGHT Heather enjoying a spot of lunch on Bideford.

ABOVE The interior of the working boat. At the height of canalmania, this would have been filled with coal and aggregates to be carried all over the country.

OPPOSITE PAGE Heather's homemade crochet lace adds a cosy feel to her little abode. The traditional cooking range is also used for heating.



The walls and cupboards are made from wood and decorated with brass ornaments, pretty plates and pieces of lace. Heather has accumulated many decorative plates on her travels, which were often bought as gifts by some of the many children she has introduced to the canals. As Heather explains, the back cabin of a working boat is traditionally a very private place and few people are allowed to venture inside.

"People can't quite believe that I manage to live in such a small space. Many of the children who have come

on board are quite astonished that I don't even have a television!" exclaims Heather. Not being the materialistic type, Heather is quite happy with her radio and selection of books to pass the time.

Despite the smallness of Heather's back cabin you can't help feeling envious of her floating home. Heather love of the canals, is very evident and whilst promoting the waterways and its uses, she also tries to preserve some of the old boating skills, many of which, she sadly explains, have already been lost. □

TOP LEFT & RIGHT Bideford is painted in the Grand Union livery colours of blue and yellow and decorated with traditional rose and castle designs.

LEFT The larder with its drop-down door, is painted in traditional artwork.

RIGHT Heather's pretty collection of decorative plates are displayed all over the walls.

USEFUL CONTACTS

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