



## On the Canals

In my first springtime in England, in 1966, I spent a week or so with friends on what is called a narrowboat, cruising on the canals near Stoke-On-Trent. The English canal system forms a network in the Midlands that was created in the late 1700s as a way to transport coal and iron ore more rapidly and efficiently than by horse and cart. The network was designed to connect key mining, manufacturing, and distribution centres at the dawn of Britain's Industrial Age. The original canal boats were pulled by horses from a towpath, but it wasn't long before they were powered by little diesel engines that propelled them along at speeds of about four miles per hour. Then came the railways, in the mid-1800s, and canals just couldn't compete with the technology they had helped to create. The network was all but abandoned for a few years, until owners started refitting their narrowboats to accommodate tourists like us.

We rented one with a cabin that could sleep six. It was a bit rustic, not one of the newer ones, but it suited us perfectly. It had a small stove to boil water for tea, considered a priority by all. We had other beverages too, of course—bottles of wine and beer were kept cool in a canvas bag attached to the stern just below the waterline. We stopped here and there during the day at villages or pubs to buy sandwiches and things for lunch and dinner, and pastries of all sorts for breakfast. Sometimes we'd tie up alongside the back lawn of a pub and stop for a sausage and a pint. The best of those stops was at a pub serving fish & chips. Second was the one with steak-and-kidney pie.

There's nothing much to do on a narrowboat while puttering along on a canal. Someone takes the wheel and everyone else finds a spot to perch and watch the landscape drifting by. Fields of wildflowers, graceful old trees drooping down to touch the water, clear blue skies dotted with puffy white

clouds, then dappled greens and muted shades of red and yellow on rippling water sliding past the bow. Or read. We all brought a book or two to share, sometimes reading bits aloud. One day it rained. It started in the early hours and was falling steadily as we huddled under the awning on the stern deck for breakfast. Raindrops exploding on the surface of the water like little depth charges. Teacups in hand, we sat and watched the rain and smoked our Woodbines. At night, tied up to a mooring, we lit candles, and the flames reflected off the dark water, expanding the visible space around the boat. Sleep came easily on the canal. The water was almost still, but there was a gentle swell and a peaceful sense of being immersed in nature, completely enveloped by the natural world.

Birds were our constant companions and we got used to watching ducks and geese gliding serenely along beside us. At dusk we listened for owls hooting in the shadows. Foxes darted away up the towpath as we rounded a bend. When we met another boat coming from the opposite direction we drifted past each other carefully, waving or shaking hands and wishing each other bon voyage. There was a feeling of community on the canals, a sense of sharing something special with a limited circle of devotees. The most exciting parts of the trip were the locks, which are remarkable feats of eighteenth-century engineering designed to raise and lower boats when transitioning from one level of canal to another.

The sad day finally came when we returned the narrowboat and caught the train back to London. It had been a shoestring trip. None of us had any money at the time, but those days on the canals were idyllic in ways that had nothing to do with money. Being back in the city felt jarring and unnatural and for weeks I dreamed of the simplicity and tranquillity of life on the canals.