

## BRITISH BREAKS

# Raising my glass to a life in the slow lane

Looking for an antidote to the frantic pace of modern life? **Paul Taylor** took a slow boat to nowhere in particular and found a gentler world

**W**HEN American tourists chance upon the Anchor Inn at High Offley, Staffordshire, they gasp in wonderment. Here in this canal-side ale house is the very quintessence of the old England they seek

Mein host Olive Cliff pulls foaming pints of Wadworth 6X in a pub which has been in her husband's family for over a century.

The time-worn décor runs to wooden benches and tables, some seeming like huge slices out of a tree, simply planked on legs and left to be seasoned by spilt beer.

The menu runs to little more than cheese sandwiches, with or without onion or pickle, and the pub's loos are in an outbuilding.

And as Olive tops up my pint, a friendly labrador puts its paws up on the bar to say hello. I think this could be my favourite pub in the whole world.

Whisper it to those Yanks, but such a fine old-fashioned, "unimproved" hostelry looks pretty much like a time capsule even to us Brits.

Chancing upon the Anchor Inn on a sunny spring day chugging up the Shropshire Union Canal was one of the highlights of a week spent in aimless enjoyment of life afloat.

Of course, a century ago, when Olive's husband's fore-

bears were pulling their first pints, the patrons of the Anchor Inn would have been boatmen, living a tough life shifting horse-drawn barges full of goods hither and thither, keeping the arteries of the industrial revolution pumping.

Today, the pretty Shropshire Union Canal is enjoyed by an intriguing mix of people.

There are the holidaying boaters, like us, putting an uncertain hand on the tiller, and trying to wield a windlass at the locks as if we know what we are doing.

There are legions of hale and hearty baby boomers for whom a canal boat is



a much-used second home. And there is a younger crusty fringe for whom life on the water is their chosen alternative lifestyle.

The clue to the frame of mind of this floating fraternity is often proclaimed in the names of their craft: Kashgone, Life O'Reilly, Sir T. Fiable.

In among all this are the odd mind-boggling slices of canal life of which you can never quite make sense.

In a thickly-wooded stretch of canal near the Anchor Inn, a boat is hitched to the bank near to a makeshift awning in the trees beneath which sits a white vintage Daimler.

It's a little like finding a double-decker bus on the moon.

We began our journey at Autherley Junction, Wolver-

hampton, at one of the two bases of Napton Narrowboats.

Here we were introduced to Sophie, a two-berth narrowboat boasting an extra large bed, "ideal for couples, honeymoons, anniversaries", says the firm.

The big comfy bed is only one of Sophie's impressive features.

There is a full-size bath, shower, flush loo, gas-powered central heating, well-appointed kitchen with a microwave and a TV.

Our week saw some pretty foul weather, but Sophie was a very cosy place to be when we tied up at the end of every day and tottered back down the towpath after another gargantuan helping of pub grub.

It took only minutes on the journey north to get into unspoilt countryside, the canal widening

and narrowing by turns, going through deep cuts and then into open vistas where curious cows and sheep watched us go by.

After several days, we became blasé about spotting a heron. We saw dozens of them standing like lanky sentries by the waterside.

More exciting were our fleeting glimpses of kingfishers, flashes of iridescent blue fluttering down the waterway.

Although much of the "Shropshire" goes through unspoilt and rural terrain, there are welcome village stops such as Brewood, where the Bridge Inn's massive steak, ale and mushroom pie provided welcome ballast for very little cash. Gnosall, a proud 2010 winner of Staffordshire's best kept large village award, or Norbury Junction, packed with

boats and boasting a chandlery and a pub, the Junction Inn, specialising in the kind of fare which fills the belly without emptying the wallet.

Skipper Taylor coped remarkably well the unfamiliar task of helming a narrowboat, I'm happy to report.

I began zig-zagging down the canal until the logic of the tiller slowly dawned on me.

By the end of it, I was confidently navigating the tightest of bridges with not a scrape.

The best thing about a canal holiday? It gives you a unique viewpoint on the world, even when you are going through territory you think you know well.

And, when you least expect it, you may even chance upon the best pub in the world.



**UP THE UNION** Above and left, narrowboats on the Shropshire Union Canal. Right, the Anchor Inn at High Offley in Staffordshire

**FACTFILE**

Paul Taylor was a guest of Napton Narrowboats (01926 813644 and see [napton-marina.co.uk](http://napton-marina.co.uk)) which has bases at Autherley Junction in Wolverhampton, and Napton Marina at Stockton, Southam, Warwickshire. Napton's fleet includes boats suitable for parties from two to 12. Weekly hire of an Elite two-berth narrowboat varies from £735 in low season to £1,157 in high season, plus a fuel deposit charge of £100 and a damage waiver charge of £50. Short breaks and 10 to 11-day holidays are also available. Pets can be taken for an additional charge of £35 per week.

