

Newsletter

Issue 342

June 2000

Motley crew who are saving our heritage from a watery grave

The following article appeared in The Express on 22nd April.

One man and his boat trace the journey Britain's canals have made from national institution to rubbish dump and back again

By David Aaronovitch

Last summer I wedged my long, bulky self awkwardly into a long, thin kayak and set out to paddle a great ellipse through the country using only the canals and rivers. Starting near London Zoo and ending up back at the Millennium Dome, via Milton Keynes, Leeds, Shrewsbury and Oxford, it was possible to complete the circuit with only the smallest breaks where the boat had to be transported by road. In two months on the water, I experienced the quiet glories and the damp indignities of canal and river life. And discovered why it is that so many others are doing the same.

There's a watery revolution going on in Britain. Over the course of 50 years, we had closed many of our hundreds of miles of canal, believing them to be ugly, outdated and inefficient. Some were paved over by motorways, filled in for agriculture or simply left to stagnate, their locks rotting, their towpaths home only to voles and junkies and their waters filled with old lavatories and dead rats.

But back in the Industrial Revolution, we built so many canals - using them to ship goods at speeds impossible on the appalling roads - that by the Seventies, badly though we treated them, we still had an extraordinary network of manmade waterways.

By then, conservation was coming into fashion and groups of canal restorers became active, holding youth camps by the banks of waterways such as the Kennet and Avon in southern England and the Montgomery in Wales. Their volunteers dredged the waters, repaired the locks, rebuilt the banks and - inch by soggy inch - began to recover part of the nation's heritage.

Thirty years on and our image of the canal system is almost the opposite of what it was so recently. Far from being shunned as the lairs of murderers, winos and strange waterborne diseases, canals have become bijou, chi-chi, voguish. In cities, from London to

Manchester, warehouse apartments, for the young and affluent line towpaths which hum at commuting time to the sound of a hundred thousand bike wheels. In between the cities, new housing estates aimed at older, married folk are rising along the Grand Union and the Shropshire canals.

Last week British Waterways, which controls our canals and most of our navigable rivers, calculated that we are now reopening canals as fast as the speculative builders and great engineers of the 1790s built them.

You don't have to be Fred Dibnah and wear a flat cap to appreciate the wonders of the canal age. There is the monster lift at Anderton in Cheshire, which used to take large boats from the river and place them and their cargoes gently on the canal 40ft above the flow. Or the flight of five locks at Bingley in Yorkshire, which rises like a Mesopotamian ziggurat from the middle of the canal, transporting boats upwards towards the Pennines. Or the great river locks on the Trent, their huge gates opening at the press of a button to swallow up great barges as though they were minnows.

But what about the people of the canals? If you were to charter a narrow boat this year, and follow your fancy at 4 mph, who would you encounter? Who would be your friends, your helpers and - let's be candid here - your enemies?

By far the biggest group that I encountered on rivers and canals were the Fraternity of Committed Narrow Boaters. If you've ever wondered what happened to the thousands of skilled engineers and blue-collar workers who were paid off to leave BT or the electrical companies when they were privatised, then you'll find your answer on the canals.

For several months every year (and, for a few, all year round) men and women take to the water and cruise. Their boats carry their identities painted in gold and red on the long hulls. "Les and Denise Biggins Sunflower Watford" they read. Inside, old canal brasses compete for pride of place with brightly painted panels. Rosie and Jim dolls line the windows. Everything is sedate, dunworryin', the product of Middle England adopting the gypsy life.

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May Meeting

We were visited at our May meeting by Richard Drake who is the National Chairman of the IWA. However, it was in his capacity as Chairman of the Anderton Boat Lift Trust that he gave us a talk about this unique structure which was the precursor of a number of similar structures elsewhere in the world.

Richard began by giving us a brief history of this part Cheshire. Industry in the area of Northwich, Nantwich and Middlewich is based on the extraction of salt dating back to Roman times.

Our speaker also covered inland waterway transport in the Anderton area. In view of the long history of salt industry, it is somewhat surprising that the River Weaver was not improved for navigation before 1732. However, it was the completion of the Trent & Mersey Canal that opened up the transport facilities in the area. The canal passes very close to the River Weaver at Anderton but 50ft 4in higher.

In the face of competition from the new canal, the Weaver Trustees began a series of improvements to their waterway. As early as 1810 they were considering the construction of a boat lift. In the meantime a series of salt chutes and a tramway inclined plane were used to connect the two navigations.

In 1856, Edward Leader Williams was appointed junior engineer of the Weaver Navigation and he oversaw a series of improvements to the river. In the early 1870's he proposed a hydraulic lift to transfer boats between the canal and the river and parliamentary powers for it were obtained in 1872.

Edwin Clark was the engineer chosen to design the lift and the structure was finished in 1875 with two counterbalanced troughs supported on hydraulic rams. However, the presence of chemical effluent in the water started to create problems with the mechanism.

This led to major modifications to the lift where the caissons were suspended on wire ropes passing over pulleys on top of the lift, with counterweights at the free end of the ropes. These changes were completed with only three stoppages of traffic of around 14 days each in 1908.

In 1983, during routine repainting of the structure, it was discovered that there was serious corrosion in the structure and the lift was immediately closed to

traffic. To lighten the load on the structure, the cogs and gears were removed and stored in the field adjacent to the foot of the lift. In 1986, when there appeared to be no effort being made to repair the lift, the Anderton Boat Lift Development Group was formed to campaign for full restoration.

In 1995, the Anderton Boat Lift Trust was formed with representatives from BW, Trent & Mersey CS, IWA, Cheshire County Council, Vale Royal Borough Council and the Mid Cheshire Chamber of Commerce. English Heritage promised £500,000 towards restoration. A Heritage Lottery grant of £3.3m was the turning point in raising the £7m required for restoration and making the lift into a viable running concern. Just a final £¼m is now required to complete the fund raising.

After the tea interval, Richard showed us some slides of the lift and its present condition. Work has already started on restoration to its 1875 method of working but with the 1908 modifications left in situ. Indeed, Richard was confident enough to state that re-opening of the lift would happen at 5.00pm on the 26 September 2001.

The talk was interesting and gave many titbits of information that would never be gleaned from reading about the lift or the work now being undertaken on it. For a least one member of the audience, a fascinating evening.

For his efforts, Richard Drake earned the Trust a donation of £100 from the Society and he was presented with a cheque by Brian Evans. In a letter thanking the Society, Richard Drake wrote,

“As you are aware, restoration of the lift is at an exciting point. We have the majority of the money needed and are going through an exercise to secure the final £250,000. Your donation is very much appreciated. Do not think that because we are talking about very large sums of money that donations such as yours are not welcome, they are, very much so. It is the donations like yours that encourage the trustees to continue the struggle to get this restoration done; it tells us that we have support out there and that we are not working on our own, other people believe as we do that the lift is important and must be restored.”

Peter Oates

Exploring Britain's Canals

A copy of this book has recently been donated by members Alan and Sonia Moorse to the Society Library. Written by Paul Atterbury, its 192 pages present many fine photographs, all in colour, of canals from the Wey & Arun to the Caledonian, from

the Bude Canal to the Grand Union. Around a dozen canals are treated in more detail and the book includes places to visit on or near these canals.

Now, thanks to the generosity of Alan and Sonia, you can borrow and browse through this interesting book from the library which is open at Canal Society meetings.

WATERWAYS DIARY 2000

The following is a list of waterway events taking place within approximately 50 miles of Southampton.

Hopefully you can find something to interest you. If YOU know of an event taking place that should be in this list then contact the editor.

Date	Organisers	Details of Event	Contact
Thu 01/06/00 7.45pm	Southampton CS	Annual General Meeting followed by more waterway videos by Hugh Gough	Peter Oates: 01794 517614
Sat 10/06/00 8.30am	SUIAG	Trip to look at parts of the Wey & Arun Canal - see invitation on page 2	Jon Sims: 023 8073 2868
Sat - Sun 10-11/06/00	Ashby Canal Ass, Moira Furnace Trust & IWA	National Trailboat Festival, Moira, Ashby Canal - On newly restored, 3/4 mile length of canal	Cyril Blackford: 01455 6148169
Thu 06/07/00 7.45pm	Southampton CS	Day-Star Theatre with "The Last Run", their new show for 2000. Tickets £3.00	Peter Oates: 01794 517614
Sun 09/07/00	Local Rotary Clubs	River Arun Paddle - tide assisted from Littlehampton to the Black Rabbit (Offham) with barbecue at the pub. Entry fee passed on to RNLI. Contact Peter King, 20 Admiralty Road, Bognor Regis PO22 7DN	Peter King (see left - phone unknown)
Sun 09/07/00 2.00pm	Chichester Canal Society	Guided walk & Strawberry Cream Tea. Start Salterns Lock, Chichester Marina. Adult £3.50, child £2.50	Canal Basin (day): 01243 771363
Sat 15/07/00	Chichester Canal Society	The 19th Annual Beer Barrel Races. Commences 2.00pm at the Canal Basin, Chichester	Entry forms: 01243 671051
Sat 22/07/00 7.30pm	Chichester Canal Society	Mikron Theatre presents "Traveller's Fare" at The Geoffrey Osborne Conference Centre, Stockbridge Road, Chichester (close to Basin). Adult £5.00 child £4.00	Canal Basin (day): 01243 771363
Sun 23/07/00 9.45am	IWA Avon & Wilts Branch	IWA South West Region Boat Trip from Wapping Wharf, Bristol to Bath. Fares: Adults £15.00 Children £10.00	Dave Chalmers: 0117 9720423
Sat - Sun 29-30/07/00		Newbury Waterways Festival	Bob Wetton: 01635-41018
Sun 30/07/00 9.30am	IWA Solent & Arun Branch	River Itchen Cruise - Itchen Bridge to Woodmill and Mans Bridge - on both tidal and non-tidal parts of the river.	Alan White: 01243 573765
Sun 20/08/00	Chichester Canal Society	Canalside Water Fair with a Pirate Theme. Chichester Basin. Adult 50p child free. Starts at 12 noon.	Canal Basin (day): 01243 771363
Sun 20/08/00	IWA Solent & Arun Branch	Chichester Canal Cruise in association with Canalside Water Fair	Alan White: 01243 573765
Fri - Mon 25-28/08/00	IWA	IWA National Waterways Festival at Waltham Abbey on the River Lee	Ian Gall: 01925 740291
Thu 07/09/00 7.45pm	Southampton CS	Archaeology on the River Itchen with Dr Andrew Russel	Peter Oates: 01794 517614
Fri - Sun 15-24/09/00	National Boat Shows Ltd	Southampton Boat Show, Mayflower Park, Southampton	
Sun 17/09/00 10.30am	IWA Solent & Arun Branch	Beaulieu River Picnic Cruise - Buckler's Hard first downstream, then upstream to Beaulieu for a picnic	Alan White: 01243 573765
Thu 21/09/00 7.30pm	IWA Avon & Wilts Branch	"The Severn Passage" by Tom Higgs. Venue: Riverside pub, Saltford Marina	Bob Kelly: 0117 9744221
Thu 19/10/00 7.30pm	IWA Avon & Wilts Branch	"The Monmouthshire, Brecon and Abergavenny Canal" by Phil Hughes. Venue: Riverside pub, Saltford Marina	Bob Kelly: 0117 9744221
Thu 02/11/00 7.45pm	Southampton CS	"Navigating where others cannot reach" with Chris Coburn	Peter Oates: 01794 517614
Thu 07/12/00 7.45pm	Southampton CS	Annual Inter-Society Waterways Quiz and American Supper	Peter Oates: 01794 517614
First Wed of month	IWA Dorchester Group	Evening meetings. Further details from Graham Pugh.	Graham Pugh: 01305 262305
4th Thursday of month	Wey & Arun CT	Interesting but not too arduous walks in Sussex come rain or shine. Lunch at well chosen establishment en route or at end. Donation to WACT appreciated.	Don Gibson: 01903 201375
All year	Wey & Arun CT	Cruises on n/b <i>Zachariah Keppel</i> on the restored canal at Loxwood.	John Lisk: 01493 752403.
All year	Chichester CS	Cruises on n/b <i>Egremont</i> on Chichester Canal.	Bookings: 01243 670786

Keep on about it

Madam Chairman says that I cannot converse for more than five minutes without turning the subject to canals.

The following press cutting was sent to us by an American friend living in Charlotte, South Carolina.

✂

CALIFORNIA

British canals on canvas

John Virtue, a contemporary British artist whose soaring, often incandescent landscapes put one in mind of his yesteryear countryman J.M.W. Turner, has a new show at the L.A. Louver Gallery, 45 N. Venice Blvd., Venice. "John Virtue: New Paintings of the Exe Estuary," is devoted to the countryside along England's Exe Canal and its river opening on the English Channel. There's lots of sea and sky, and one canvas that's 10 by 24 feet. Details: (310) 822-4955.

Which just goes to prove that if you keep on about it long enough your friends, and sometimes those not so friendly, begin to notice what is written about inland waterways.

Brian Evans

Waterways Quiz

A few more questions to test your knowledge. There's no prizes but the answers will be given next month.

- 1 What was unusual about the now defunct lock at Thurlwood?
- 2 Where were Starvationers employed?
- 3 Name a tunnel on a British river navigation.
- 4 Which is the deepest lock on BW waters?
- 5 Where is The Jolly Tar public house?
- 6 The RMD (Rhine-Main-Danube) Canal is not the first to cross the watershed. What canal previously took this route?
- 7 What was the last regular commercial traffic on the Caldon Canal?
- 8 Who officially re-opened the Stratford Canal in 1964?
- 9 How long is a peniche?
- 10 Name the junction of the Staffs & Worcs and Trent & Mersey Canals.

Trip to the Wey & Arun Canal

Jon Sims is organising a trip on behalf of the Southampton University Industrial Archaeology Group (SUIAG). He has extended the following invitation to all members and friends:

I would like to ask if anyone at SCS would like to go on the trip I am organising to the W&A Canal. I have fourteen seats available. The coach will leave the Boldrewood Centre car park at the University, Basset Crescent East at 8.30am on Saturday June 10th.

We will be looking at the Loxwood Link (1.5 miles towpath stroll) including Drungewick Aqueduct (or at least where it will be). We also hope to have a look at the mill and gas engine owned by Trust Chairman, Peter Foulger. The Onslow Arms will no doubt welcome all or packed lunches may be taken. In the afternoon, those who can cope with a modest walk of 3 miles can visit the really good bit, viz Orfold Aqueduct with its waterwheel for raising water from the river to the canal and the nearby turf sided lock. The less ambulatory may like to enjoy a boat trip on the Link, passing through some of the restored locks. Any left over time will be used to explore other bits.

Cheques made to SUIAG for £12 will secure a place. Send them to me at 24 Nutshalling Avenue, Rownhams, Southampton, SO16 8AY. First come, first served.

Cheers, Jon.

Last month's Quiz answers:

- 1 The Barton Aqueduct crosses the Manchester Ship Canal
- 2 The River Wey was made navigable to Guildford by Sir Richard Weston.
- 3 Hampton Court was built by Cardinal Wolsey.
- 4 The Regents Canal is linked to the River Lee Navigation by the Hertford Union Canal (also known as Duckett's Canal)
- 5 Blisworth Tunnel is 3056 yds long.
- 6 The Wey & Arun Canal first navigable to commercial traffic throughout its length in 1816.
- 7 James Brindley has a pub at Gas Street Basin named after him.
- 8 The Worcester Bar was originally used to prevent water from passing from the Birmingham Canal Navigations to the then new Worcester & Birmingham Canal.
- 9 A Sheffield keel is 61ft 6in by 15ft 6in.
- 10 Locks on the Oxford Canal below Banbury have single bottom gates.

Canal Journey

(Continued from page 1)

I could see the fun of it. Rarely travelling more than 10 miles in any day, the skipper (usually, though not invariably, the man) would be standing in the back of the boat, eyes ahead and hand on the tiller, while the crew (usually, though not invariably, the woman) would bring tea and sandwiches, or jump on to the towpath ready to open the lock gates or swing the

bridge. When they had had enough of this, or just fancied a break, they would stop somewhere near a hostelry or a scenic spot, drive two mooring spikes into the soft ground of the canal bank and hole up for an hour or three.

FROM my lowly spot on the surface of the canal, prevented by high banks from seeing anything but nettles, I regarded these boaters with envy. Though the women sometimes seemed less enthusiastic than their husbands, there was something about the business of moving slowly and deliberately along a quiet stretch of water that was infinitely appealing. And, unlike me, they had loos on board.

Just as permanent were the aquatic equivalents of the New Age travellers; the dreadlocked boys and girls whose battered boats were moored at odd secluded spots, spilling happy, dirty children and happy, dirty dogs into the hedgerows beyond. Near Reading, I saw three of these craft, lashed together, side-by-side, making their way up the Thames - a crew of marijuana-smoking grungies enjoying the afternoon sun with no one conspicuously at the helm.

I was more alarmed by the inexperienced boater types, such as the ones who had hired a 40ft narrow-boat for the first time and were now out there, gradually realising that tight bends and negotiating locks in something the length of an articulated

lorry was not as easy as they had imagined. Canals in the school summer holidays are full of them.

Close to towns, I was happier to encounter pleasure boats full of cheerful old biddies out on a short cruise between Lincoln or Skipton or Abingdon and a picturesque pub a few miles- downstream. But on the rivers, in particular, a new breed of boater made its appearance. Particularly on the Thames, the white cruiser, varying in size and height from an E-boat to a pocket battleship, was everywhere. These were often driven by leery middle-aged men, anxious to impress their son's girlfriends whose bikinied bodies littered the fore-decks. The boats were called Mitzi, Lovely Lady and Naughty But Nice.

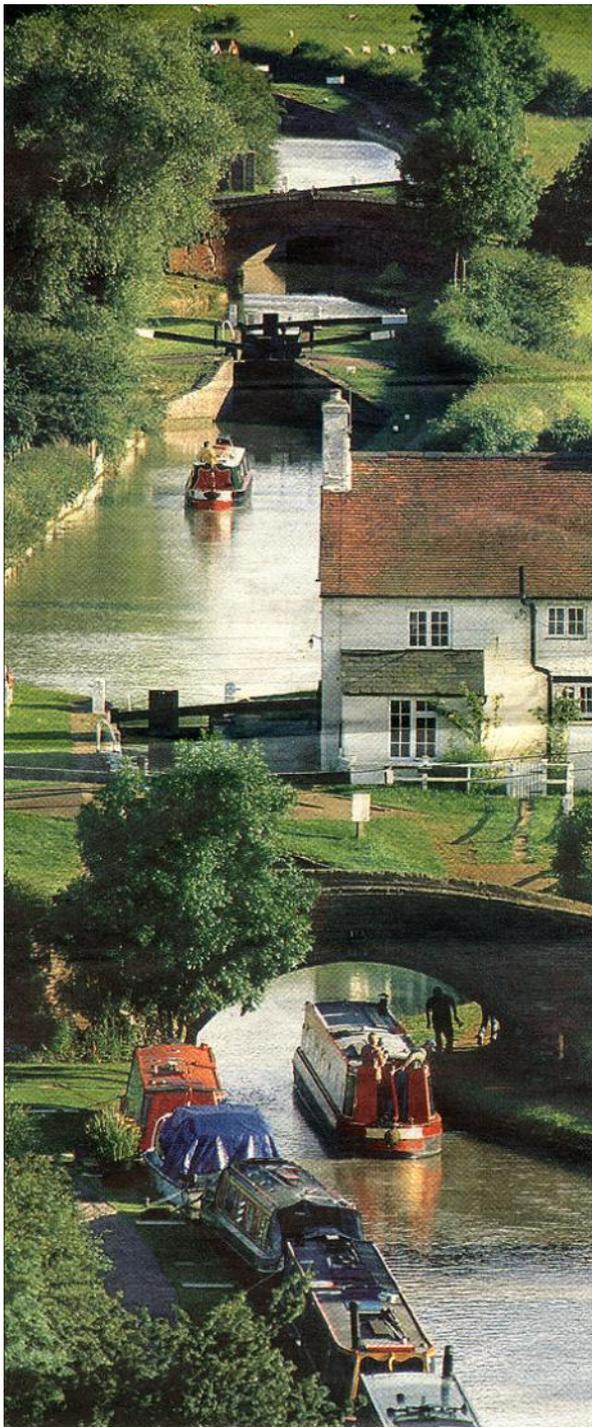
Cruiser or New Age, the British inland boater faces only three natural predators: urchins, swans and anglers.

Urchins are quickly dealt with. A sunny weekend brings out, on to bridge and bank, little boys who like to throw stones and run away, or to are out over the water on one of those precarious swings made of blue baler twine that always feature in -programmes such as You've Been Framed. My advice: keep a catapult to hand.

At cygnet-rearing, time, the dimmer male swans assume the worst about boaters and will attack in a flurry of powerful wings, jabbing beaks and nasty hissing. This be surprisingly frightening and - for unpowered boaters - actually quite dangerous. Keep a boat-hook or paddle on hand to beat off the initial attack, then scarper.

But the boater's biggest historical enemy is the angler. There are millions of them, and they have competed for the use of the water ever since fish-weirs first began to dam our navigable rivers (the Magna Carta mentions them).

Today, roach poles will reach from



(Continued on page 6)

Hi-tech steering clogs canals of Venice

Brian Evans spotted the following article in *The Independent* on 9th May 2000 under the above headline:

BY FRANCES KENNEDY
in Rome

THE GRAND Canal, as mistily filmed in *Death in Venice*, is now the location for scenes more fitting of *Carry on up Venezia*, to the consternation of tourists and locals.

Pilots of *vaporetti*, the city's motor ferries, are struggling with a new navigation system that has led to three accidents in nine days. The transport authority invested in vessels that use a joystick rather than a tiller but not all the lagoon drivers have adapted to the videogame-style technology.

The largest *vaporetto*, *Sandra Z*, veered off its route to the island of Murano, hitting a wall on San Michele island. Another ferry went out of control in the Grand Canal and hit four other boats and another *vaporetto* collided with two taxis moored at Piazza San Marco.

There were no serious injuries or damage and the authorities said there was no safety risk but the new ferries are now only being used on one dedicated route and all pilots are being escorted by "instructors". Antonio Stifanelli, the transport authority director, said: "All it is is a lack of familiarity with new technologies."

The pilots said their training was too brief and some said that the old tiller system should never have been replaced.

Canal Journey

(Continued from page 5)

one side of a canal to the other, anglers will clutter designated mooring points with baleful obstinacy and a ton, of plastic shelter and coolboxes, the waterway will be criss-crossed by fishing line, invisible except in certain light. My advice here is to be civil; anglers look lonely and socially isolated but - at a whistle - can always find silent support from fellow fishermen. It's a bit like *The Night Of The Living Dead*.

AND if things get tough, rooting for all of you - from grunge granny to Captain Custard - you'll find the

green-clad girls and boys of British Waterways, in my opinion one of the most wonderful relics of Merrie Brytain. They keep the locks, dredge rubbish out of the canal, operate the reservoirs that maintain the canals full of water (thousands of gallons are lost every time someone passes downwards through a lock) and tend to beautiful gardens and lawns.

During June and the early part of July last year, when I was on the water, there were sometimes very few boats out. Many of the manned locks would be lucky to see 20 craft pass through in a day.

For whole stretches of the year there is no one moving except the lock-keepers. This may seem inherently inefficient but the result has been the one of the great projects of the last 20 years - the restoration of our waterways, and some excellent lawns.

They're worth it. As I splashed around the country, I had days of rain and despair (canoeing on canals is, essentially, a silly thing to do). But I also had days of epiphany. The Leeds and Liverpool Canal, for example, sounds unpromising to someone wanting to get away from the city. But the reality

is a waterway that passes through hilly countryside so beautiful it makes your heart ache, and through villages and towns of great history and rare interest.

And, in the case of Skipton in Yorkshire, of a remarkable race of high-breasted young women. But. that's another story.

David Aaronovitch's book, *Paddling To Jerusalem*, will be published in September.



RIPPLES OF CONTENT: Aaronovitch observed the transformation from his canoe

SOUTHAMPTON CANAL SOCIETY

Established 1967

The objectives of the Society are to foster interest in canals and inland waterways, to assist in their preservation, restoration and development, and to give practical help on waterway projects.

Meetings:

1st Thursday each month at 7.45pm
St John's Ambulance Hall, King's Park Road,
Southampton

Chairman:

Brian Evans, 19 Lansdowne Gardens, Romsey,
Hampshire, SO51 8FN. Tel: 01794 517115

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Vacant

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Society Website:

<http://www.users.waitrose.com/~whitenap/index.htm>



Don't forget that the Day-Star Theatre will be visiting the Society again this year on 6th July. They will be presenting their new show for the year 2000 which is entitled "The Last Run".

It is the story of an old wooden narrow boat, a quirky mystery which surrounds her and touches all who come in to contact with her over the last fifty five years.

Tickets for this event are now on sale at a cost of £3.00 each including the light refreshments that will follow. These are available from Peter Oates at meetings or by post from the address given above (sae appreciated). These will be sold on a first come, first served basis so buy yours as soon as possible.

FORTHCOMING SOCIETY EVENTS

1st June 2000

Annual General Meeting followed by more waterway videos by Hugh Gough

6th July 2000

Day-Star Theatre with "The Last Run", their new show for 2000

7th September 2000

Archaeology on the River Itchen with Dr Andrew Russel

2nd November 2000

"Navigating where others cannot reach" with Chris Coburn

7th December 2000

Annual Inter-Society Waterways Quiz and American Supper

CANAL SOCIETY SALES STAND

GEOProjects Maps:

Inland Waterways of Britain	£4.75
Basingstoke Canal	£3.00
Birmingham Canal Navigations	£3.75
The Broads	£3.75
Caledonian Canal & the Great Glen	£3.75
Coventry & Ashby Canals	£3.75
Grand Union Canal (each).....	£3.75
Map 1 Birmingham - Fenny Stratford	
Map 2 Braunston - Kings Langley	
Map 3 Fenny Stratford - Thames	
Map 4 Leicester Line - Soar - Erewash	
Kennet & Avon Canal	£3.75
Llangollen and Montgomery Canals	£3.75
London - City and Docklands Atlas	£3.75
Oxford Canal	£3.75
Shropshire Union Canal	£3.75
Staffordshire & Worcestershire Canal with the River Severn and the Gloucester & Sharpness Canal.....	£3.75
The Thames Map	£3.75
Trent & Mersey Canal - Map 1 Preston Brook to Fradley Junction..	£3.75
Trent & Mersey Canal and River Trent - Map 2 Great Haywood Junction to Cromwell Lock.....	£3.75

Ball Point Pens: Embossed 50p

Burgees: Navy Blue - screen printed Society logo on each side £8.00

Decorated Mugs: £2.25

Notelets: with drawings of canal and Romsey scenes £1.00
(by Brian Evans)

Shopper Bags: Cotton with screen-printed Society logo each side. £2.25

Society Members Badges: Enamel 75p

Sweat Shirts: 30th Anniversary in Light Grey £16.00
with multi-coloured embroidered Society logo on breast

Sweat Shirts: Standard in Navy or Royal Blue £15.00
with Society logo embroidered on breast

Tea Towels: Various colourful designs £2.50 & £3.25

Tee Shirts: Screen printed with Society logo across chest £6.50
in Navy Blue - medium, large & extra large; in Red - medium

Visit the Sales Stand at Society meetings and place your orders with Paul Herbert or Ray Brooks - or ring Paul on 01703 262365