

STAYING AFLOAT

GILL BARRON reports on the current conflicts of interest on London's canals.

Debbie Humphry

Boat-dwelling is an admirably can-do response to the housing crisis and takes up no space on land, leaving more for the growing of potatoes or other such appropriate purposes. On both counts, *The Land* applauds boat-dwellers of all stripes, and greets the proliferation of habitable boats — now some 34,000 — on waterways with enthusiasm.

However the Authorities take a narrower view, and are threatening this low-impact lifestyle with high-intensity regulation and an escalation of enforcement against defiant live-aboard boat-dwellers. Boaters' associations are organising large protests with dramatic slogans — “Boats are Homes!” Yes indeed, but how about: “Stop the Boat Cull!”? Is there really a “cull” taking place? Is some of this conflict orchestrated by canal-side property developers, seeking to gentrify waterside areas by removing the scruffier elements of the live-aboard community? Is it really Class War? The normally placid surface of canal life, especially in cities, is currently much ruffled by such questions.

This is most obvious within London, whose extensive canals provide a refuge for thousands of workers who could never afford the crazy rents. The strategy is, allegedly, to introduce unrequested luxuries and impose unfeasible charges, thus pricing these marginal inhabitants out of the City. At moorings around Angel, Islington for instance, off-grid boaters are being given electrical hookups, want them or not, but more restrictions and higher mooring fees at the same time. The implication is that if you can't afford this, you're an undesirable neighbour.

There are over 2,000 miles of State-owned canals in England and Wales, with all their complex infrastructure — 2,980 bridges, 1,580 locks and 335 aqueducts, plus towpaths, quaysides and so on — mostly built around 200 years ago. Managing and maintaining all this is a huge task. British Waterways, the overseers of all things canal in the name of the Government, in 2012 ceded their managerial functions under the Waterways Act 1995 to the Canal & Rivers Trust, a newly set up charity/quango which is now one of the country's largest, with around 50 trustees, 1,600 employees and countless volunteers, plus an income of over £200 million pa.

Argy Bargees?

Representing the 5,500 “continuously cruising” boat-dwellers is the National Bargee Travellers' Association (NBTA, +L for London), with a few members sitting on the advisory board of the CRT, where, by their own account, their voices are largely ignored. However their own website is vocal in their defence, covering the wide range of threats which boat-dwellers feel they are up against: exemplified perhaps by the fact that, in 2020, CRT found £395,000 for enforcement proceedings against boat-dwellers but only £350,000 for facilities for them. (While salaries for the two top executives came to almost half a million). Further grievances abound:

CRT would like to start charging ‘extra’ for Towpath Moorings. Normally your licence includes the right to



moor on any towpath without extra charge. CRT would like to turn 1.1km of London's regular towpath into new ‘Chargeable’ Moorings that would cost an additional £84 extra a week. Why? Because CRT believes financially excluding people from these moorings will somehow make them ‘fairer’. Boaters who can afford it will be able to reserve themselves a guaranteed mooring space, at the expense of less wealthy Boaters.

Adding,

In reality this would financially exclude many residential boaters without a home mooring from 1.1km of the mooring space they rely on for their livelihood. Much like every other CRT Policy, this prioritises Leisure Boating over Residential Boating — CRT have no actual adjustments in any of their strategies that actively support itinerant, residential boating. ... Do CRT believe that holidays are more important than homes? Evidence suggests that these new chargeable moorings will often remain empty and unused.

For people who live on boats in hope of a peaceful and simpler life, the escalating conflict between activist Live-aboards and the Trust that manages their environment — their landlord, in effect — is counter-productive, and unwelcome. Some feel that this politicisation is engineered, and that perceived threats have been exaggerated. Like it or not, however, life on the canals of Britain is highly regulated, and the more boats there are, the stricter the enforcement is likely to be.

Both Pricey and Dicey

It costs an average of £825 a year for a boat licence. This has gone up by eight percent, roughly £65, in 2022. Licences are compulsory, and help to pay for Rangers, whose job it is to spot and sanction (in practice, confiscate) unlicensed boats. To get a licence you must have third-party insurance of at least £2 million, and a BSS Boat Safety Certificate, costing around £200 every four years. (And described by one Boater as “a fine line between genuine concern for people's safety and a stitch-up in favour of the service providers”). The rent for a residential mooring will be between £3,000 and £18,000 a year, depending no doubt on how posh the postcode is. Council tax? Yes, probably

Continuous cruising, without any fixed home mooring, is the cheapest alternative, but the rules insist (and those CRT rangers will ensure) that you keep on the move; no stops longer than 14 days, or in some places, 48 hours. So that too



The Regent's Canal, London fifty years ago (above) and nowadays (right).



Eric Gaskell

carries a cost, for diesel for the engine. On top of financial worries, add the insecurity of relying on an unaccountable (and allegedly unfriendly) authority for the award of that crucial licence. However, as NBTAL point out:

CRT cannot legally refuse to license a boat if it has Third Party insurance, a BSS certificate and the boat either has a home mooring or will be used bona fide for navigation. The right of navigation includes the right to moor, as stated in Halsbury's Law of England 5th edition: "The public right of navigation includes the right ... to remain for a convenient time, to load and unload, to moor and fix temporary moorings in the waterway". Boaters have the right to moor reasonably and lawfully without interference from an authority.

Leisure vs Living

Inevitably, the CRT's charitable aims have been updated to include (besides the physical upkeep of the canals — an immense task), much emphasis on "wellbeing", "because life is better by water": ensuring free public access often in urban areas to what their website calls "a green-blue ribbon, that connects hundreds of wildlife habitats ... Being by water makes you feel good. Find somewhere beautiful where you can relax, think, exercise, picnic, walk, commute and more, all for free". And indeed these relaxing water-side aspects of canals are highly enjoyable and valuable in a stressed-out world.

Adding greatly to the traffic on the waterways themselves, rowing clubs have become increasingly popular, perhaps because rowing provides a gymnastic work-out for fitness enthusiasts. As space for any sporting activities in London is shrinking by the day, their needs are part of the bigger picture. These clubs have successfully lobbied CRT to introduce so-called "Safety Zones" to facilitate the movement of small fast boats through the moored homes of boat-dwellers. These safety zones are, by other accounts, not so much a new rule book as a re-statement of the existing one. Rules of which many newly-onboard live-aboards may be unaware.

NBTAL refute CRT's claim that "operational reasons" justify all these changes, saying "that's a meaningless catch-all phrase with no basis in existing regulations". They are of course right to keep fighting their corner. Given that canals in

London are some of the widest in the country, the presence of some skinny boats along the banks hardly constitutes any obstruction. Yet the new Zones will abolish, by one estimate, some 295 moorings. That's a lot of homes deprived of a place to be, and seems gratuitously counter-productive at a time when housing is in desperately short supply.

Is it true that the CRT's priorities have been skewed in favour of recreational use by the masses, and away from the housing needs of the permanent boat-dwelling community? If so, it's ironic that the Chair of CRT's trustees is one David Orr CBE, recently CEO of the National Housing Federation and with at least 12 other housing-related roles to his credit.¹

Any itinerant lifestyle is by definition insecure, and the escalating politics between CRT administrators and Boaters are exacerbating that insecurity. Stress levels are rocketing. Whether the animosity is entirely justified is open to question. The CRT, for all their faults, maintain a previously delapidated national network of canals which is now available to all classes of users, and they attempt to balance these often contradictory interests in an even-handed way. Calls by the NBTAL to re-nationalise the canals — hand them back to administration by the Government — may be ill-advised, given the Government's chronic inability to manage the responsibilities it already has. Meanwhile, encouraging a live-and-let-live culture among assorted canal users may be the best way back to the peaceful existence for which live-aboard life was previously famous.

Refs:

1. <https://canalrivertrust.org.uk/about-us/how-we-are-run/board-of-trustees>

RECOMMENDED FURTHER READING:

- <https://freedomnews.org.uk/2021/04/20/boat-dwellers-protest-new-waterways-safety-zones-proposal-aimed-at-gentrification-of-waterways/>
- <https://www.thirdsector.co.uk/canal-river-trust-income-hits-210m/fundraising/article/1592545>
- <https://nbtalondon.files.wordpress.com/2022/09/nbtal-safety-zones-position-paper-3.pdf>
- <https://nbtalondon.wordpress.com/2022/06/25/gentrification-of-london-waterways-crts-chargeable-moorings-policy-will-price-boaters-out/>