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NATURE AT THE HEART OF HOLM OAK LIFE

Crafting life on the water

Each month writer, Alice Elgie, will delve into the lives of those who live, work and travel on the waterways of Great Britain. This month she meets Sylvie and Ben Doleman-Lount of The Holm Oak Trading Co. who, along with their dog Badger, travel the canals in their handcrafted narrowboat.

THE LATE autumn and early winter landscape can sometimes feel unforgiving, and yet it is the richness of colour - the all-consuming hue of burnt orange as trees slowly give over their leaves, or the depth of lichen reflecting green in the winter sun, shining with droplets of rain - that most pervades our consciousness, sinking us into the truth of nature and reminding us of the importance of moving in time with the seasons.

For Sylvie and Ben Doleman-Lount it's clear they are consistently inspired by nature and their narrowboat, The Holm Oak, attests to this. Sylvie tells me: "Ben is a joiner and has lots of experience working with timber, so our interior is quite unique and all handcrafted meaning our boat has a very earthy, natural feel.

"Ben handmade our tree window at the front out of oak and we went on a stained-glass course in Loughborough to complete the 'leaf and branch' panels."

It is within this lovingly created space that Sylvie nurtures and nourishes her craft shop and there's no doubt the outside world inspires her creations, which include everything from hair scrunchies, scarves and bunting, to greeting cards and even fabric pumpkins!

She tells me: "We both love the outdoors and appreciate the natural world, and there's no better way to do that than being on the water. I enjoy observing the changing seasons from our narrowboat window and particularly love autumn and winter when I'll pick warmer fabric colours for my creations. In spring and summer I tend to pick fresher, more vibrant colours, to reflect all the blooming flowers!"



Sylvie, Ben & Badger the dog





Scarves!



Fabric card creations



Sylvie with fabric pumpkins



Sylvie certainly has a wonderful seat to work from as rather than build the standard dinette many narrowboats have, the couple decided instead to have a big open breakfast bar space, which also doubles up as a work area where she can do all her sewing: "It has a cupboard underneath for all my supplies and Ben also made me a cabinet for the wall to neatly store all my sewing threads and sewing needles."

This attention to detail in making sure each and every part of their home is not only functional, but also beautiful, was intentional as rather than buying a second hand boat, the couple decided to build one from scratch themselves.

Sylvie excitedly relays their journey after meeting in 2018: "I met Ben in 2018 and he lived in Sawley, which is close to the River Trent and the Trent and Mersey canal. We went for many walks along the canals and river and loved visiting Trent lock. Ben had been on a few narrowboat holidays as a child and said how fun they were, but I wasn't even aware they were a thing and had no idea really that people lived on them!"

"But I had always been fond of the idea of alternative living and had thought about 'van life' so this opened up a whole new world."

By the time the couple started to seriously look at buying a boat though, it soon became obvious that building their own from scratch would be more suited.

"We didn't want to rip out a good interior that would be suited for someone else, but we also felt passionate about making our home exactly how we wanted it," explains Sylvie.

Once the decision was made to buy a shell and fit it out entirely themselves, Sylvie and Ben worked full time and ensured each month they bought something for the boat such as solar panels and their fire: "When the boat was ready to be put into the water we had a collection of stuff ready to get started."

They took ownership of their empty shell in August 2019 and moved aboard in October 2019 and Sylvie laughs when she tells me that living on a boat whilst fitting it out is very hard work: "It was exciting to be living on our boat and finally having our own space as it felt like an adventure, but it was also really difficult."

"However, it spurred us on to get it completed and it was good to have the insight into what was going to work and what wasn't!" Reminiscing about lack of running water and only having a one-ring gas camping cooker, Sylvie acknowledges



ABOVE: Sylvie at a land-based craft fair
RIGHT: Making stained glass window

BELOW: Holm Oak in winter

those early days were some of her favourite times: "It was all new and it also made us appreciate the little things like having warmth, nice home cooked healthy food, and a place to call our own."

It was this commitment to their joint vision that kept Sylvie and Ben on track and as they steadily chipped away things began to take shape. Predominantly they used recycled wood throughout, with their wall panelling coming from a church floor, parquet flooring reclaimed from an old house, and a sofa handmade by Sylvie using offcuts of foam and left over remnants from an upholstery company: "Using recycled materials wherever we could was more in our budget but also added the charm and style we wanted."

This theme of recycling continues into Sylvie's crafty creations as her favoured material to use is recycled saris, which highlight another of her passions: Indian culture. She first visited the country as part of a school expedition, but it was always somewhere she'd been interested in



Sylvie and their boat shell

seeing. Sylvie tells me more about that trip: "I went for a month and did a mix of staying in hotels but also with families on a trip to the Himalayas for two weeks."

During the trip they visited lots of markets in the North of India and this is where Sylvie fell in love with the textiles: "There were women on the streets making patchwork beaded wall hangings and they were incredible. I loved all of the clothing, the vibrant colours and different patterns and I just knew it was something I wanted to work with when I came home."

At the same time it was highlighted to Sylvie that there was a great deal of textile waste from saris and lehengas and so the idea was born to turn these remnants into something new: "I always get excited to go fabric sourcing and I get all of my fabrics from a charity which supports eight charities across India, East Africa and Pakistan."

Self-taught on the sewing machine Sylvie credits her mum and dad for the inspiration: "They love crafting, gardening and doing DIY and I remember having crafting evenings with my mum after school and I'd always look forward to them!"

It seems those times nurtured a talent for turning



I always get excited to go fabric sourcing and I get all of my fabrics from a charity which supports eight charities across India, East Africa and Pakistan

beautiful fabrics into unique eye-catching designs, which in turn means the couple now get to spend the summer trading season exploring different stretches of the canals: "We always knew we wanted to sell off the boat so we had rails welded onto the cabin top to create the shop display and Ben made all of the trading equipment such as shelves, hangers and display boards."

Some of their favourite routes are the Shropshire Union and The Llangollen and Sylvie tells me they have plans to explore new areas next year, first heading north onto the Macclesfield canal. However, when they're not travelling, they stay closer to home: "We spend a lot of time on the Trent and Mersey canal as it's closer to our family and where our boating journey began."

Whilst Sylvie had no particular tie to the canals as a child, the pull to a wandering lifestyle has always been strong: "I've always felt like there's more to life than just working the same job, paying a


mortgage, and staying in the same place, and I found it inspirational whenever I met people who had broken away from this 'mainstream' view of how to live."

This connection to those unafraid to follow their true path - in terms of the way they want to live, or the way they dress or their different views - is something that has deeply influenced Sylvie so she's glad to have found a way of life that fits with her own expression and it's clear that her time in India has also greatly influenced her life, and not just from a craft point of view: "Everyone in India is so friendly and excited to show their culture, which is very focused on community, sharing and cooking together, so I guess in some ways this is why I'm also attracted to boat life... sharing towpath barbecues and stories!"

With a trip back to this fascinating country on the cards for both Sylvie and Ben in January, it remains to be seen the



TOP: Sylvie models one of her creations
ABOVE: Creations

ideas they will return with, but I'm certain that just as their nature-inspired narrowboat has merged seamlessly into the seasons of our waterways, any inspirations that weave their way into future plans and visions, will also enrich our towpaths. 

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Alice Elgie is a nature-loving writer who shares words about her wandering lifestyle through hold-in-the-hand letters and podcasts. aliceelgie.com

SHARE YOUR LIFE ON THE CUT

We are always on the lookout for inspiring people who live and work on the waterways. If you've got a new venture afloat or have been working on canal boats for decades, we'd love to hear from you to feature in a future edition. Get in touch with us by email to editor@canalboat.co.uk