

LOCKSIDE LIVELIHOODS: NEW LIVES FORGED ON THE WATER

The floating record shop that's striking a chord

Each month writer, Alice Elgie, delves into the lives of those who live, work and travel on the waterways of Great Britain. This month she meets Luke Guilford, who since 2014 has been bringing music to the waterways with his floating second-hand record shop.

Freedom is the word that stands out time and time again when it comes to boating. For me, it's the word I mused on longingly whilst firmly entrenched in a 9-5 office job. The word that propelled me to first take the leap away from a life of normality back in my twenties and also, it's the word that inspired me to buy my first narrowboat 16 years ago.

Having the freedom to live and work from your own home, whilst travelling this beautiful country, is an option that's hard to resist and perhaps that's why once you discover the waterways, it's difficult to leave.

For Luke Guilford it's been 27 years since he first moved onto the water and it was the lifestyle he could achieve afloat that most captured him.

He takes a moment to share more: "I think it's a way of life engrained in all boaters; that sense of setting your own schedule. I never got on with the 9-to-5-type lifestyle so I love the freedom and a big thing is also getting to spend so much of the year outdoors and travelling."

Luke loves the life and goes on to say: "There's nothing quite like the feeling of heading off on a long cruise, never knowing exactly what it'll be like: the wildlife, towns and countryside to be

discovered, the people you'll meet... and of course, the records I might come across, too!"

Since 2014 Luke has been trading in second-hand vinyl, initially from a 40ft narrowboat on the River Lea in London and in more recent years, from his 60ft tug narrowboat, Tansy.

"I first saw other trading boats at the Cropredy Festival on the Oxford Canal and that's when I started thinking about what I could trade myself," Luke tells me.

"Records were the obvious answer as I was an avid collector and knew I would never get bored discovering new music."

For the last six years Luke has mostly been trading between Bath and Cropredy and has enjoyed the Kennet and Avon Canal.

He shares: "There's a fantastic liveaboard community there and also it's great to spend a week or two on the Thames each summer. It feels different from the canals, like a real holiday."

However, this year he's booked to attend lots of festivals and floating markets on the Grand Union Canal



Set up for trading





Luke at the hatch



All set up



An 'On-Store' session in London

between Rickmansworth and Cosgrove. I ask Luke about this new direction: "I'm just trying out some new events and areas when it fits into the schedule so I can meet all the local music addicts!"

It's clear these new locations also present opportunities to discover intriguing new stock: "I'm looking forward to finding interesting record collections, enjoying the music and then slowly distributing them to folks about the country via the canal system."

Luke's passions of boating and music began in childhood. He explains when canal life first came to his attention: "I saw folk living and leisuring on boats around Northamptonshire where I grew up, but I think what particularly sowed the seed was visiting the canals when I studied Industrial Archaeology for a year at college."

As a group, the students explored Stoke Bruerne, Weedon Depot and other heritage places and Luke's interest was piqued: "I bought a boat about five years later and I think those visits were what started the wondering!"

When it comes to music, at 13 Luke began collecting records and his passion - or obsession! - quickly became apparent. He tells me how he and a friend managed to indulge their interest: "We had massive paper rounds and would collect as much money as we could then go to record fairs and come back with bags full. For sure we also skipped a school dinner or two to get a couple of extra quid!"

The first record he ever bought was the Greatest Hits of Wings but in his youth Luke had various phases of being obsessed with a wide range of artists from Talking Heads to Black Sabbath, Neil Young to The Stranglers.

"I've been a huge music fan and collector since then and I've always loved the treasure hunt aspect," he says.

This is still very much alive as he tells me that often when moored up outside someone's house they'll see his sign and rush back indoors. Luke elaborates: "I'll get chatting to a passerby and then end up buying a collection from their attic, but the best times are definitely when someone sees the sign and says 'I'm glad you're here as I'm just clearing out' or 'hang on a minute while I pop up into my loft!'"

It seems customers never tire of the sight of a floating record shop as it takes them back to their youth. Luke shares: "Customers will often stumble upon my store and then start flicking through, reminiscing and telling me stories: the bands they went to see or rock musicians they've met. Some are even inspired to go back and get their record player out of the attic, which is always nice to hear."



ABOVE: Set up for trading
RIGHT: The listening booth!

It's not just those reminiscing though, as our younger generation are finding themselves increasingly attracted to vinyl. Luke muses: "I think people who have grown up with the digital age get a lot from a physical object and all that comes with that, like the artwork. In fact, a lot of my customers are pretty young and whilst not every past artist or genre appeals, bands like The Doors are always popular."

But Luke has also seen a surge of interest in second-hand vinyl when a particular song comes out on a show. For instance when a Kate Bush song featured in Season 4 of *Stranger Things* on Netflix he laughs about how, "everyone wanted Running Up That Hill!"

Certainly vinyl is going nowhere as people young and old are buying it alongside streaming, re-connecting with that sense of ritual when it comes to listening to music. I know my 19-year-old daughter was thrilled to receive a record player for her birthday last year and relishes building up her collection thoughtfully and meaningfully.

She would also definitely agree with Luke when he says: "For me it



feels the best format for sound and the visual and tactile aspects are the same reason lots of people prefer real books to Kindle."

This appreciation for retaining tactile options resonates with me as, in a world where everything feels all at once at our fingertips and yet remote, real books that take me away from the computer and music force me to switch off and give it more of my attention. So the needle stays where it should be, offer what seems like an increasingly rare opportunity to get truly lost in the present moment. Luke feels a similar pull, favouring the physical shop experience over the online. He shares: "Despite online selling being a great help, I do enjoy the markets and festivals as it's way more fun to be part of a group of boats and activities, rather than solo trading."

Appreciation of the boating community is a huge part of this lifestyle for Luke,



I think people who have grown up with the digital age get a lot from a physical object and all that comes with that, like the artwork

TOP: Luke with a rare find!



Luke's boat ready for customers



All set for browsing



Luke's vast collection

for which he offers me a deeper insight: "The Roving Traders and other liveaboards are a great bunch, organising and promoting the canal events, working together and helping each other out." This was never more apparent than when he spent a winter on the Kennet & Avon several years ago.

"The regular coal boat stopped running but the community there worked together to provide the service with everyone volunteering their time. It was a lifeline to many."

Winter can be a tough time on a boat, but even more so when you're reliant on setting your stock out and having customers wander by. Luke tells me how business ticks along: "The seasonal





Luke's tug narrowboat, Tansy

aspect of canal trading can definitely present a challenge, but between on-line selling and returning customers up and down the towpath, I seem to manage. I've also spent many winters in London, so the boat is very well known there."

This awareness of The Record Deck in our capital has also allowed Luke to indulge his love for promoting live music, particularly from artists with a new record to share. He tells me how in the past he has had bands perform on his front deck:

"On-stores' I call them and I've had various folk play but it's been a few years now as it's hard to gather a big enough audience for that sort of thing outside of London."

However, Luke has plans to resurrect this at some point in the future so look out for live music on a towpath near you one hazy summer's evening - the perfect

season to bring people together on the canals: "A summer of boating about feels like months and months. You really cheat time, which can fly by when you just have a regular routine."

Freedom from the monotony of a 9-5 routine is clearly one of the things that has kept Luke on the water for 27 years and he certainly has no immediate intention of moving back onto dry land. As many of us boaters know, once you've been captured by this lifestyle it's a challenge to return to the confines of anything else, but I for one am glad the sound of meaningful music will still be traversing our waterways!

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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 recorded reflections.
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Artist Sophia Shaw swapped the high cost and fast pace of West London for life afloat. Nine years on, she lives with her family on a narrowboat, growing vegetables and creating beautiful, illustrated maps, portraits and prints from a studio she built from recycled materials. Discover how canal life transformed both her home and her art...

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