

Inspired by nature

Cocooned in the natural world, England's canals offer unrivalled opportunities for artistic inspiration. Here, **Alice Elgie** talks about how this inspiration fuels her own creative work, and meets other liveaboard artists who are similarly energised by their surroundings.

Birdsong wakes me slowly from my slumber and I lie still for a while allowing the transition from night to day to unfold in increments. The air is still, which means the water is unmoving and the only pitter patter on the roof is that of an adolescent moorhen who has become our companion at this mooring. The realisation of a perfectly hot and motionless August day ahead inspires slow sentences to form loosely in my mind, about how I might begin this piece of writing.

I rise quietly and pad gently through to the living room where the green of surrounding trees filters in through every window and early-morning sunlight dances on the water, brightening and darkening leaves as it rises. Wrapping my arms around myself I smile toward the greater hug of nature then yawn, fill the kettle, place it silently on the stove and move to the sofa, tucking my feet beneath me and drawing the table near. There is a comforting ritual as I set the stage for this day of creation and commit these first words to a blank page. Pausing between taps I am reminded of all those writers gone before who also uncovered their words - their inspiration - beneath nature's gaze.

I'm not the only one whose work is endlessly punctuated by elements of this lifestyle on the canals of England. In fact, our network of waterways is bounteous with creatives who feel just as I do, such as Fran Pike, a weaver who has lived aboard her narrowboat, Laura Maisie, for seven years. Alongside husband, Rich, they have cruised around 70% of the canals and these years under hull have inspired an increased leaning toward slowing down and taking time to really see and feel what is around, thus integrating more of nature into her creations.

"Sometimes it's something physical like a kingfisher, a particular flower, an



autumn palette or even the colours in the stones on bridges or locks. However, sometimes it can just be a feeling or a mood such as a steamy, hot summer's day, or sitting watching a cosy fire," reveals Fran.

These sights, colours and feelings, quite literally weave their way into Fran's work as she sits on the boat with her Saori loom: "Saori weaving is a freeform weaving





Fran on the canalside weaving on her foot-powered Ashford Traveller



Fran is weaving with her chance discovery of two bags of fleece in a rubbish bin. Pictured right is a lap loom used to make bookmarks and mug rugs.



process which has no rules and allows me to create weavings using any colours, materials and textures which feel right. I either just use colours for my inspiration or sometimes I try to replicate patterns such as a beautiful silver birch, which my latest shawl was modelled on."

Fran also uses a tiny lap loom to make bookmarks and mug rugs and with her passion for re-using, all her scraps - including trimmings, fabric and ribbon - are incorporated back into her weaving by making unique blends with an Ashford Wild Carder, meaning that absolutely nothing gets wasted.

Fran and husband Rich love living a simple life and try to do so with as little impact on the environment as possible.

They cook as many meals as they can on their stove in winter, refrain from thirsty electrical gadgets and forage for fuel where they can, so when Fran found a friend with well-cared-for alpacas and decided the time was right to upgrade from spinning with a drop spindle, she steered clear of electrical options: "I chose the Ashford Traveller, a small foot-powered traditional-looking wheel. The gentle repetitive noise seems to fit in



with our relaxed life and the bonus is that it looks great too.”

Currently enjoying a chance discovery of two bags of fleece at a boater’s rubbish bin, Fran is now slowly washing and spinning it into beautiful soft wool. “It is terrible that wool has no value now and it is easier for farmers to throw it away or burn than pay someone to process it.

“Weaving with my own spun wool is my favourite thing to do and the next step is to start dying this wool with natural plant dyes.” Fran concedes that this will be difficult on a boat, making a very long process even longer, but her slow approach to life seems up for the challenge and it is this sense of decelerating that so enamours people about the canals, and can also bring comfort to those simply looking from afar.

This is something filmmaker Dave Thompson has been able to tap into for his YouTube Channel where he shares meditative, nature-inspired videos.

After the passing of his wife he found himself couch surfing and then, waking up in hospital having tried to take his own life, recognised he needed a new direction.



Filmmaker Dave Thompson has owned and lived aboard his boat for seven years and dedicates his time to promoting canals. He says nature has been a great healer.

“A friend persuaded me to take a job with the Canal & River Trust working as a fundraiser on the towpath and I found I loved the tranquility and nature.

“I’d always been interested in cameras, so after work I started filming.” Dave soon realised that by capturing the beauty and spirit of the canals he was embarking on his own healing journey and through meeting lots of boaters who shared their lifestyle, the answer took shape in front of him.

With the help of family, Dave has now owned and lived aboard his boat for seven years and dedicates time to promoting what he enjoys about the canals, so as to be a positive beacon for others around the world.

“Nature continues to inspire me: The space and tranquility. Some people call it escaping, but we need to retreat sometimes into our own space. For me, I’d rather do this than go for a meditation in a Buddhist monastery, because this way of living can feel like a continuous retreat.”

Dave is quick to mention that while his narrowboat life does offer a retreat, it is not without challenges and can also invite the benefit of living among people: “The great thing about living on my narrowboat is that you don’t end up isolating yourself. You can have that space but also interact with other people, which is important in this world. Also, when there are challenges I am now in a much better place to reflect and deal with them positively.” Nature really is Dave’s great healer and he’ll often sit for hours



watching dragonflies and butterflies: "This is my entertainment. No telly, just nature - the great teacher!" Through these observations Dave has been able to share with others the joy of sitting still, which in these modern times of information overload, is an appreciated reminder:

"Not a lot of people can sit in silence, they get bored but they only want to do something because they get into the mindset of thinking about getting bored. They're not really bored, they're just not used to stillness and silence."

The message is clear in Dave's videos: That allowing space for stillness nurtures time to reflect on our life, our story, which then allows us to begin our individual healing journey where we become focused on the present moment.

"We can sit in the past and dwell, but here in the moment is the most important thing because if you take time away, it doesn't exist. Everything is in the now," says Dave.

His own experiences in life demonstrate that there's little point in making big plans as everything can change in a moment, and I'm certain many of us can relate to this, myself included.

As Dave shares: "Moment-by-moment is how I like to live. For instance, I don't go looking for wildlife when I take photos, instead nature appears in front of me. I simply push the button and then share it with the world."

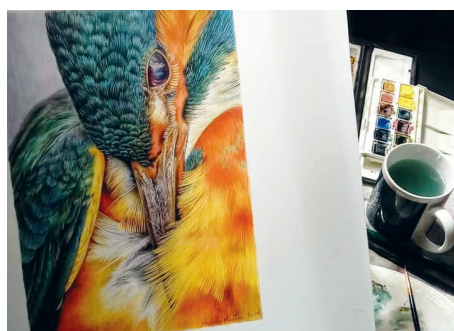
As I write these words my hands pause to hover over the keyboard as I ponder this moment-to-moment observation and once again recognise the power of truly absorbing each individual bird call, or the way reeds sway softly in front of me, the tips of yellow irises just beginning to appear.

I know there is a whole world going on in a city just 10 minutes away, but here on my narrowboat I can instead be mesmerised by the picture outside of my windows, a picture that not only encourages me to reflect on myself and this life experience, but also compels me to write.

Michelle Martin, an artist who has lived on her 1979 Harbour Marine ex-hire boat since 2009, is someone else compelled to create amidst the calm of the waterways.

She says: "Peace means a lot to me and my surroundings give me this. I cannot cope with busyness, traffic, noise, people bumping into me, as I find it scary. Some people love crowds, but I long for water and countryside and what I love doing best, which is painting."

Initially Michelle bought her boat in



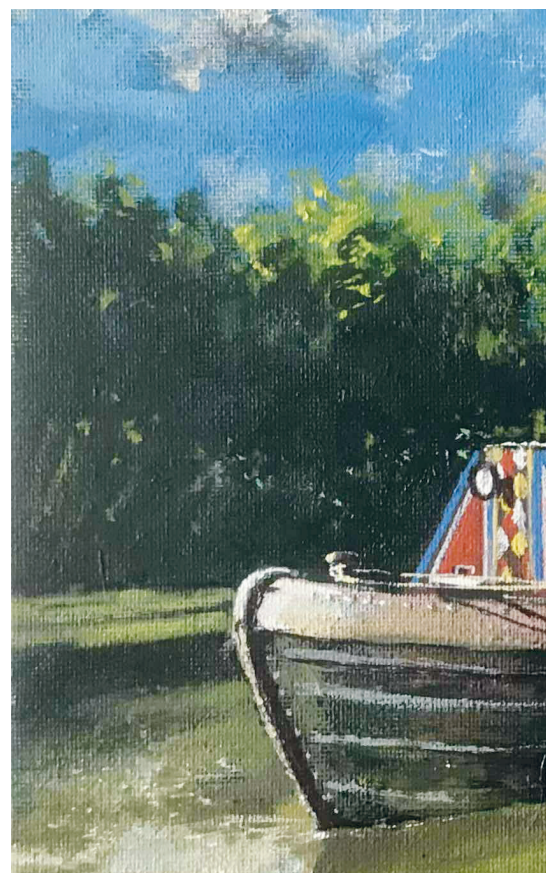
Michelle Martin painting on her 1979 Harbour Marine ex-hire boat where she has also lived since 2009.

2004 to use as a floating art studio and gallery. She would moor it in front of a local museum and offer classes and demonstrations, as well as share her paintings with the public. However, when her marriage broke down the possibility of living afloat full time came to the forefront:

"I realised that I loved being on my boat selling my art and always hated going back to the house, so I decided to move aboard full time."

Michelle's lifestyle is an uncomplicated one and she strives to maintain that simplicity, opting to live without a car and unnecessary trappings. Instead she tunes in to the natural world around her:

"I love waking up on my boat every day and I breathe with relief when I have been somewhere hectic and then return back



home. I can see why people get stressed, because for me getting back to the towpath means returning to a sense of calm."

Both living and working from her boat means Michelle likes to moor in quiet locations, but with just enough footfall to attract customers to her pet portrait business. She will often spend hours watching the world from her window as she paints: Dogs at play, birds, trees, and she is steadfast in protecting this discovered peace, which is no doubt what



enables her to produce such intricate and captivating paintings, described as botanical in their style. Mostly a self-taught artist, Michelle was fortunate to go with her dad to an art class run by adults from the age of 12 and eventually left school and went to work in the potteries around Stoke-on-Trent: "I never stopped painting and the skills gained during that time have been invaluable for what I paint now," she says. For Michelle there is certainly no hint on the horizon that she will be leaving the water anytime soon, but for others it is a period in time that while now over, will forever linger.

Until recently fellow artist Pete Tuffrey had lived on a narrowboat for 10 years. He hadn't meant to live on the canals, but an accidental discovery created the opportunity to merge his art and home: "After being turned down by a London gallery I went for a walk at Little Venice. I was entranced by how the canals were hidden away - another world right in the middle of a city - and I just loved the atmosphere." Upon returning home Pete tried something new: An industrial nighttime scene with working boats in it. The painting immediately sold and so his path was set and he soon moved onto his own boat where the community, nature, and living as part of the seasons all became important. "I think boats are

great for teaching us what we really need in life and I always appreciated the view from my window, the weather, winter days painting with the fire burning."

Developing his impressionist style over the years has seen Pete's paintings imbued with the ambience of dawn and dusk on the canals: "I love their atmospheric side, the history that lingers, and I try to portray what it feels like to live this life - both now and in the industrial past - without sugar coating. I want the viewer to smell the smoke!"

Even though his studio and life recently moved to land, Pete tells me he's good at remembering the things he has seen during a decade on the canals, therefore these beautiful scenes will still be made into paintings.

"I take a lot of photos on the canal and I will continue to do this to keep the connection. While my family and living situation means a positive new chapter in life, I know I'll always miss the water and that boats will always inspire me, especially in moonlight. It's just a big part of what I do."

I can vouch for the fact that there is certainly something about the narrowboat lifestyle that gets under the skin and there's no doubt it is inextricably linked to being surrounded by the natural world, whether it be as a reminder to slow down, be in the moment and from that moment of stillness tap into the inspiration to create, or whether the vivid scenes quite literally make their way into our creations.

For me, it is through words that our waterways are permanently imprinted, onto hold-in-the-hand letters to those desiring to preserve the old ways of communication, as well as through articles such as this. But I am not naive enough to believe that there is not more at work here than just my own mind. Instead I know it is the ever-changing landscape and varying palette of seasonal colours that inject the heart into my words.

Taking a rest, along with a mouthful of hot tea, I stare out of the window and acknowledge that thankfully the only thing this lifestyle asks of me in return is that - once I have bashed metal against metal and moored up beneath the boughs of trees that protect like loving arms, or opened the hatch to a view across endlessly undulating fields of gold - I pay attention: That I still myself, observe, listen and allow myself to be inspired. In a world that more often than not encourages us to speed up and become even more disconnected, I accept this invitation with eager gratitude. 