

HOW HANNAH AND ANT TRADED CONVENTION FOR A CREATIVE LIFE ON THE WATERWAYS

The art of living afloat

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 Ant and Hannah Savage who live an artistic wandering life on the water along with their dog, Mabel.



Ant and Hannah on their boat

An artist's life can be one of whimsical unpredictability, often lived off the cuff and hand to mouth, and always with the necessity to discover new inspiration to fuel the fire of creativity. So, whilst many dream of giving up the nine to five and walking away from conventionality, few have the gumption to actually do so.

This is not the case for Ant and Hannah Savage who appear to have initiative in abundance and through a fair amount of risk-taking and sheer determination have, for the past five years, been travelling the canals as full-time artists sharing their story as they go.

Originally trained as a dancer and having worked as a professional contemporary dance artist for many years, Hannah knows what it means to follow dreams so when illness, injury and burnout led to her reluctantly taking a step back more than a decade ago, she chose not to rest on her laurels and instead allowed her creativity to explore new directions.

She shares with me: "In the space between resting my bones and figuring out what my next move would be, I started engaging in other creative outlets such as performing as a musician alongside contemporary dancers, drawing, and studying for a diploma in clinical herbalism and Ayurveda."

This last foray led to Hannah creating her own herbal teas to sell and as this little business grew she began wood burning boxes using pyrography techniques to hold the blends. Tea boxes soon led to wood-burned commissions, which included side hatches and narrowboat decor and she also found her hand with illustrative paintings.

Hannah muses: "Although I have always been considered an artist in some shape or form, drawing was not something I thought I was any good at, but it seems I found myself a little style and to my surprise people wanted to buy my paintings!"

Known as The Floating Tea Picker for a number of years she recently decided to



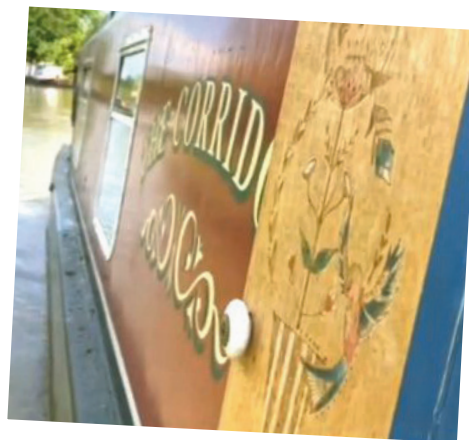
Narrowboat The Corridor



Hannah at work woodburning



ABOVE: Ant at work
RIGHT: Narrowboat The Corridor view from hatch



begin trading under her own name Hannah Savage, alongside husband Ant who with her support also took the leap into a creative life five years ago.

"I wanted Ant to have the same opportunity as I had growing up, to do something he loves, is good at, and something that makes sense to him."

When I ask Ant about his journey to becoming a full-time Lino print and soft pastel artist, he shares candidly: "Growing up in a working class family on a council estate in Bedfordshire meant that despite knowing I had a love of drawing from a very early age, the idea of that becoming a job was pretty much unimaginable."

Instead Ant spent 23 years working in multiple factories and as a builder's labourer, before eventually settling into life as a full-time painter and decorator but a life-changing event forced him to re-think.

"In November 2020 my best friend Dale Rudge passed away at the age of 40. At this time I was working as a decorator on a building site in Rugby, but the day he died I came home and messaged my foreman to inform him I had quit my job. My plan was to take the rest of the year off to grieve the loss of my friend."

During this period of mourning Ant began filling sketchbooks with illustrations inspired by memories of previous jobs as well as his surrounding environment.

"There were industrial looking buildings, painters at work, narrowboats and canal scenes, also scenes inspired by the pandemic and I quickly began making these into hand-carved Lino prints."

Ant reflects on how his friend's death made him realise just how short life can be and so he decided it was time to take a gamble and instead of returning to painting and decorating, he committed to art and sharing his creations on social media, slowly began to nurture a solid following.

"Art has always been my natural ability, something I could do from an early age, but I never actually studied the subject beyond GCSE level at school so it's been quite the journey to see myself as a professional artist."

However, with every print sold, his confidence grew and in November 2021- exactly one year after the death of his best friend - Ant received an invite from Dr Brian Edward Hack of the Kingsborough Art Museum in Brooklyn, New York, asking if he would like to show four of his works in an exhibition: "When this



ABOVE: Ant and Hannah on their boat, The Corridor

RIGHT: All the family: Ant, Hannah & Mabel

happened I felt like I should just keep going.”

This talented couple work from their 50ft boat, The Corridor, which has been their home for 11 years now and Ant shares some of their story to moving afloat.

“In 2014 we decided to move on to a narrowboat after struggling to get ourselves onto the property ladder. We had lived in various flats in Bedford over many years and decided we’d had enough of renting and dealing with rogue landlords but unfortunately we found it difficult to get a mortgage as we were both self-employed and also struggling to save for a deposit.”

Hannah shares more about the frustration they both felt at that time: “It felt like each turn we took something went wrong, despite working our bones off and trying to do everything right, so we started looking into alternative ways of living that were actually achievable and that would meet our needs.”

Living near a marina meant that soon the idea of buying a narrowboat with some savings and a loan came



up with the plan being to pay it off over a few years so that they would then have something to sell for a house deposit. However, it wasn’t long before this way of life captured them.

“After adjusting to boat life we quickly fell in love with it and decided we wanted to continue,” Ant tells me.

Experiencing a newfound sense of freedom to live within their own means was a huge player and for Hannah - whose best memories before meeting Ant were always entwined with travelling and being outside in nature - a boat would anchor down some stability and calm within an ever-moving natural landscape.

Making their space work both as a home and a floating studio no doubt in some part feeds their inspiration, but it’s not without challenges as Ant shares: “My kitchen worktop is essentially my art studio and as I’m sure you can imagine, combining a limited living space with a work space can cause issues especially as my Lino prints need to be hung to fully dry and I’m usually making editions of around 25-30 prints of each image I create.”

In reality, a completely separate studio space would be a welcome addition allowing Ant to produce much larger works and he laughs whilst musing: “I might be an artist with struggles rather than a struggling artist!”

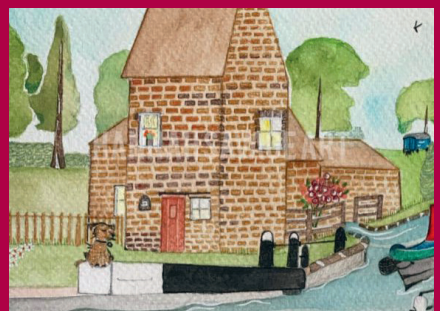
Hannah agrees that there is a need to constantly figure out how they can work together in the space whilst keeping their own individuality and independence.

“I wouldn’t say it’s necessarily the space that is always the challenge, but more the headspace - two people

focusing on two very different things, with individual needs along our individual processes. For Ant this looks like talking through everything he’s doing, having stuff everywhere, and jumping from one thing to the next like a pin ball machine!

“Whilst I very much like going into a completely quiet zone, where I hyper focus until I’m finished.”

Over the years of working in close proximity Hannah and Ant have discovered that the secret comes down to creating their own little zone: “Mine is the sofa often with headphones and Ant’s is at the kitchen top with his radio.” However, there are



Various pieces by Ant and Hannah Savage




Various pieces by Hannah Savage

of course times when they meet in the middle, such as with a podcast they can enjoy listening to together or when each other needs help on packing and posting days because, as Hannah highlights: "Ultimately we both have the same goal- to keep us afloat."

One thing that has played a big part in Ant and Hannah's success as full-time independent artists has been social media so despite at first being a little reluctant when fellow boating friends suggested they start a YouTube channel, they eventually decided to give it a go and surprisingly Hannah has found the process of editing and creating their

weekly videos very satisfying: "It has also been a motivation to keep going, something to keep us making, and very organically we're building a small community of likeminded people."

Choosing to take the leap into an independently creative life, which is one often lived precariously, endlessly teetering on the edge of uncertainty, is definitely not the easy option and yet, I know from personal experience that in these leaps of faith there is the potential to discover a deeper sense of joy. As Hannah herself says on a recent vlog: "In Only Fools and Horses there was an episode where Del Boy sold a pocket watch

for millions of pounds but he was miserable because then he had nothing to fight for. Well, I would rather be in our little boat fighting to keep us afloat than sat in some fancy house bored!" 

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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.

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