

SOUNDS OF THE CUT

Alice Elgie meets podcaster and previous boat reviewer for Canal Boat, Adam Porter, to find out more about how he brings the unique sounds of our waterways to listeners all over the world.



Hearing the familiar hum of a narrowboat engine along with the distinctive sound of metal on metal as a windlass turns, dropping the paddles of a lock, I rest my head back, close my eyes and find myself immediately transported to being out on the cut. At this particular moment I'm static on dry land so it's a welcome opportunity to live vicariously through presenter Adam Porter's wonderful podcast *The Water Road*.

As a long-term leisure boater of 14 years, when Adam and husband Adrian stopped work in March 2025 they decided to move full time onto the water, leaving Adam with more time to ponder how he might like to spend this new chapter.

He shares with me: "My whole career has been in radio, first local radio and then working in the national BBC Radio Newsroom, where I read the news on Radio 2 and 6Music. So when I was thinking about how I could fill my time after stopping work and do something that could spread my love of canals to a wider audience, a podcast seemed like the natural thing to try."

With so many canal vloggers already out there and given Adam's wealth of radio experience, it was an obvious choice to delve deeply into audio: "The canals offer lots of things that make distinctive noises; from the clicking of winding paddle gears, rushing water, the clink of mooring rings - all those things help me bring the canals into people's ears."

But it's not just the ambient sounds of the canal that are so soothing to the heart, but also the cadence of unique voices of those who also live, work and enjoy the canals. Adam tells me what it is that inspires him to interview people as he continuously cruises Great Britain's canal network: "Canal people are generally pretty enthusiastic about the waterways, and it's usually not difficult to get them to talk. And often you'll discover that they also have a fascinating history and stories to tell."

Whilst Adam finds all the people he talks to incredibly interesting, a recent favourite guest was lock keeper Chris Chambers who works Frankton Locks on the Montgomery Canal. "His colleagues





THE WATER ROAD



Out on the cut

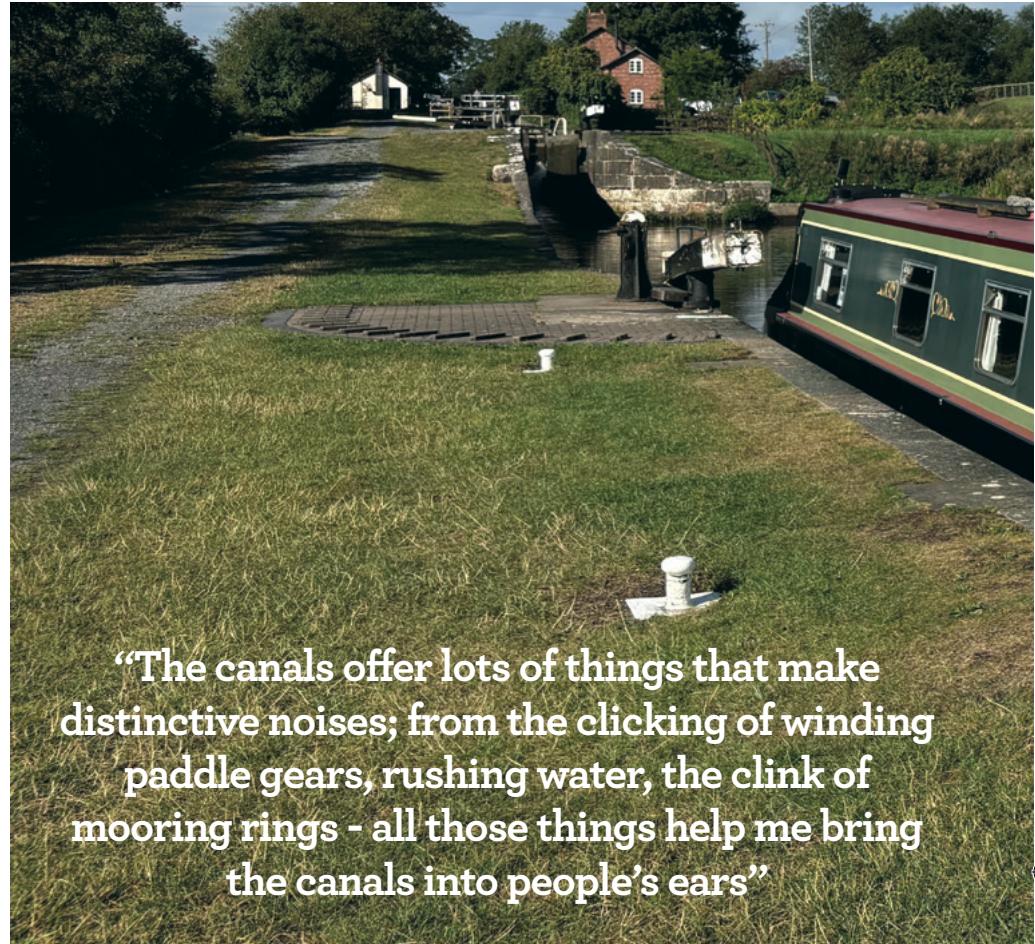
had told me he was the person to interview because he knew everything about the Monty. Even so, I was amazed to discover as I was talking to him, that he's been involved in the restoration of the canal since the late 1960s.

"He's a mine of information about the canal, the restoration, and the celebrities who've passed through."

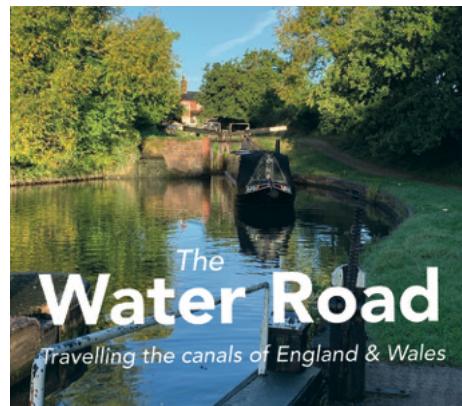
However, if you had previously thought podcasts were all about people sitting around chatting for hours, you'll be pleasantly surprised by *The Water Road*. Each 10 to 15 minute episode is more like a mini radio programme, focusing in on a particular place or event, with the voices of knowledgeable boating folk woven seamlessly throughout. With wonderful reviews from *The Guardian*, who describe it as "a soothing sound effects-packed listen (that) wouldn't sound out of place on Radio 4" and *The Times*, who's columnist James Marriott asks: "How do I join this world? We need more of this sort of thing", you don't need to take my word for it to know it's worth a listen.

For Adam his love of all things canal is something that in later years he has attributed to growing up in the shadow of watery adventures

"I hadn't really appreciated until much later that in the 1960s before I was born,



"The canals offer lots of things that make distinctive noises; from the clicking of winding paddle gears, rushing water, the clink of mooring rings - all those things help me bring the canals into people's ears"





Shared boat Debdale



my parents, uncle and aunt used to go on boating holidays, so maybe there is something in the blood."

However, I think Adam speaks for most of us seasoned boaters that often it's a way of life that simply gets under the skin.

"There must be a few people who try boating and decide it's not for them, but in my experience people are captivated by the history, the way you get so close to nature and wildlife, and the way the waterways make you slow down and relax," he says.

It was a boating holiday on the Thames in a plastic boat called Oxford Tobago that first captured Adam and Adrian, although they found themselves immediately jealous of the narrowboats they saw on that trip as their boat was too wide for the canals. This prompted them to next hire Bluebell from Trevor at Anglo Welsh on the Llangollen and Adam recalls that trip.

"The boat was very beige inside and out, and we could only afford a midweek break, not a whole week, but the Pontcysyllte Aqueduct was the first thing we did!"

Rather than leave them daunted this experience simply whet their appetite for more waterways adventures. "After that we did the Stourport Ring and then after a

break of a few years we hired again from Kate Boats in Warwick, first doing the Warwickshire Ring in a week, and then an extended version of the Leicester Ring in a fortnight, during which it rained almost the whole time."

But it was whilst sharing a big double lock on the Trent and Mersey that they met a boater who suggested share boats. Despite never hearing of the concept the couple did their research and ended up with a share in Debdale for several years and when three or four weeks a year no longer seemed enough, bought their own boat, Briar Rose.

Aboard this 59ft, traditional stern narrowboat, Adam and Adrian have enjoyed many weekends as well as longer trips away and coupled with Adam spending 15 years writing boat reviews for this very magazine, it's perhaps no surprise to see how the next chapter of their boating life is shaping up.

"I have a pretty good idea of what works and what doesn't as I've also seen virtually every style of boat imaginable! So having always liked the idea of having a boat built to our own specification we came up with a long term plan several years ago, that we would do it when we stopped work."

They pre-booked a slot in November 2021 for a boat to be built during 2025 and so the past year has been spent visiting the build every three to four weeks. Adam tells me a little more about their new floating home: "Kingley Vale, which is named after a part of the South Downs in West Sussex close to where we lived, is the same layout as Briar Rose because we know that works for us. But it has portholes and side doors rather than big windows, and it's a hybrid drive with a huge battery bank. There's a diesel stove rather than solid fuel. It means the boat is gas free and coal free, so as we get older we won't have to be lugging heavy gas bottles and bags of coal around."

Since the end of March the couple have been continuously cruising aboard Briar Rose rarely staying anywhere more than a couple of days: "Because of all the water shortages this year, we've ended up being where supplies are more secure, so the Shropshire and Llangollen mostly."

Deciding to do just a couple of hours cruising each day Adam and Adrian have been able to truly soak up places they've only passed through before, with several areas becoming firm favourites.

"I love the Caldon - its Leek Arm is really pretty, and the bit from Hazlehurst Locks down to Consall Forge and Froghall



Launch day for new boat Kingley Vale

is lovely and feels very remote. I also love the southern half of the Staffs and Worcester, from Autherley Junction down to Stourport, which has some dramatic sections carved out of the rock. I must also mention the Chichester Ship Canal, as I'm a patron of the trust which runs it. There's only a couple of navigable miles and they're not connected to any other waterway, but the canal is a great asset to Chichester and the trust has a popular cafe and runs trip boats."

Despite the undoubtable attraction of cuttings rooted in some of Great Britain's most beautiful landscapes, Adam also pulls at my own heartstrings when he shares his equal appreciation for the more gritty, industrial navigations that are home to our canal boating history, but it's the waking up somewhere different almost every day that captures him the most, as well as seeing wildlife close up.

"I know people who've never seen a kingfisher, and I feel privileged to have seen dozens, sometimes several in one afternoon. When you live on board you also see the progression of the seasons so

much clearer, in the colours of the hedgerows and trees, to the ducklings and cygnets growing up."

As I continue to listen to the rest of Adam's most recent episode I feel comforted knowing that the soundtrack of this unique way of life is being so thoughtfully and respectfully preserved for generations to come, so that they might also have the opportunity to experience the gem that is Britain's Waterways in a more immersive and tangible way. **CE**

Podcast: The Water Road can be found on virtually all podcast platforms or visit: podfollow.com/the-water-road

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