

Canal boats: the last option for affordable city-centre living?

“You have to be very aware of the batteries, power, how much water you have got and where the nearest water point is. Certainly emptying the toilet every week is not everyone’s idea of bliss,” says Emily Morus-Jones, one of the growing number of people choosing to live on the canals in London.

5 The 28-year-old, who is looking to make her way in the entertainment business, says the community of the canal has been a lifesaver.

 With house prices and rents soaring, a growing fleet of narrow boats and other craft is carrying workers into the capital. But the trend is bringing its own problems, including a “fleet versus street” conflict between boaters and those
10 whose properties border the towpath. The influx of a new generation of canal users in a city where there are now sometimes 3,000 boats chasing 2,000 moorings means there is a shortage of places to stop.

 Hilary Norris, who has heart disease, and her partner Steve, who has chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, live in a flat near the canal at King’s
15 Cross, where boats are often parked two and sometimes three abreast. “The waterways are meant for free flowing of traffic,” says Norris. “If they are stagnant with what appears to be a floating bungalow site out there, other boats can’t get past. If they were to build a new village of 1,000-plus homes, they’d have to follow very strict guidelines concerning the environment.
20 Allowing this number of boats to moor along here is the equivalent, but we have no planning, no infrastructure, and the impact is huge.”

 Local councillor Paul Convery accuses boaters apparently wanting “a zone-one location to live, work and play” of opting to live on boats instead of finding housing in lower-cost locations. “Boaters use public services provided
25 by councils but do not pay taxes towards those services. A few send their kids to Islington schools claiming they live in the borough and a few dozen have even registered to vote,” he said.

 Some insisting on an alternative lifestyle disregard basic rules over mooring, smoke and pollution, says Convery, and the Canal & River Trust¹ is
30 failing to control them.

 Richard Parry, the trust’s chief executive, says: “Canals are almost linear villages, you have services and communities growing along the canal. We have to make sure it is done legitimately and doesn’t become an impediment to other users. We have been wrestling to come up with the right response.
35 We have limited legal powers and actually we don’t want to be belligerent and to make the experience of using the waterways insufferable. If you adopt² not

to have a home mooring, provided that you move regularly, you can live that way.”

40 Over the past 18 months, he says, the trust has appointed more “towpath rangers” and volunteers operating “caretaker” boats – “encouraging good behaviour, making sure people do not stay too long, promoting mutual respect”.

45 The city within a city growing on London’s waterways is presenting other problems. The CRT¹ has seen an increase in the number of vulnerable people along the canals, who are often older than the new water commuters, and has appointed its first welfare officer to help ensure they do not slip through the social safety net.

50 The growing group of vulnerable people include some who live on boats after marriage breakups and other life crises, former soldiers, and those who have spent redundancy packages on a new life in retirement, only for it to not work out.

55 Parry says: “We don’t want to have individuals in some sort of downward spiral and end up with having to take enforcement action against them because they don’t have a licence or they are sitting in some popular spot when actually they are obliged to move.”

60 But the waterways, like the cities that often surround them, are a diverse community. Back on the canal, Yan Yates, 34, who works in entertainment media as well as being a keen musician, insists people like him will become “part of the fabric” of a river community.

“For me, you arrive somewhere else in London. You live in different places every two weeks. As long as there is public transport nearby, there is a petrol station for the diesel and a pub, then everything is fine. I would never get tired of London.”

65 It is also a bohemian world. “I know puppeteers, clowns, a lot of people are musicians, artists, actors. This lifestyle is increasing. It just needs more support. Changing the rules could affect everybody on canals who are raising kids, have jobs; it’s their bread and butter. We mean no harm.”

From: James Meikle/Phil Maynard, “Canal boats: the last option for affordable city-centre living?”, in: <http://www.theguardian.com/society/2014/nov/11/canal-boat-affordable-citycentre-living>, November 11, 2014 (adapted; last visited: November 24, 2014)

Annotations: ¹ Canal & River Trust (CRT) charity that manages 2,000 miles of waterways in England and Wales and issues boating licences

² adopt here: choose