



# Autum's blaze aboard Grew Wren

This is the second in an *AllWays Traveller* series on narrowboating in the UK.

It focusses on stretches of the Trent and Mersey and Bridgewater canals in the English county of Cheshire during Autumn.

The trip was aboard the *Grey Wren*, one in a fleet of narrowboats by ABC Boat Hire out of Anderton Marina in Nantwich, Cheshire.

The company is a member of Drifters Waterway Holidays, which comprises nine of the UK's premier hire boat companies.

<https://www.abcboathire.com> and <https://www.drifters.co.uk>

**Ashley Gibbins**  
Commissioning Editor  
AllWays Traveller





## To boldly go where many have ventured before

These are *voyages* of the narrowboat Grey Wren.

By Ashley Gibbins

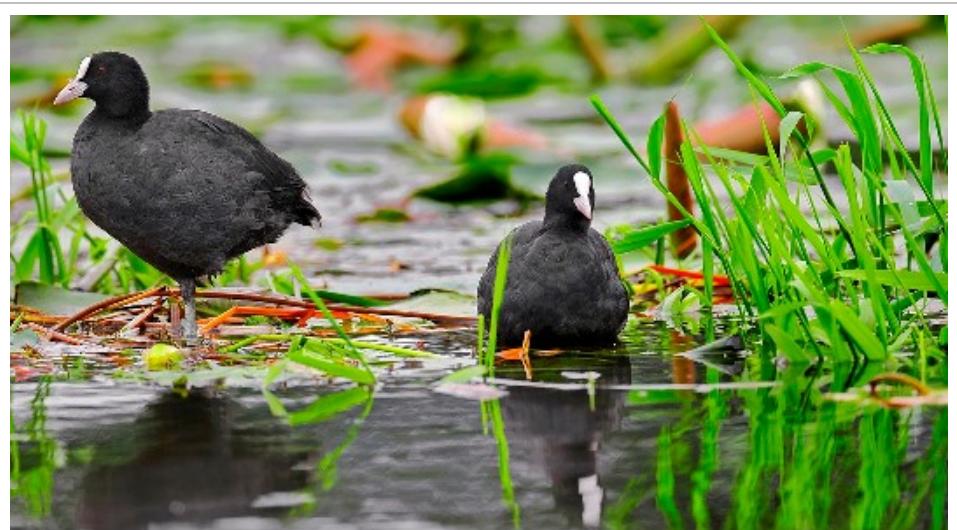
Its three-day mission, to explore meandering Cheshire waterways. To boldly go where couples, families and groups of friends, from around our planet have done many times before.

I accept the thread of my journalistic analogy between *Star Trek*, and our trip along stretches of two Cheshire canals is quickly unravelling.

If only because, while the SS Enterprise can travel at a top 'warp speed 10' of 4,354 times the speed of light, the Grey Wren's reaches just under four miles an hour.

And with an idling speed, when passing moored boats, that drops to less than half this.

Moreover, rather than encountering 'Klingons on the starboard bow', and on boarding the Grey Wren, we were approached by a white swan craning its neck up to us in the hope of a little something.



While leaving the Anderton Marina we chug past a trio of coots perching on a bobbing log, giving little outward sign of making a surprise attack.

And while a couple of mallards were having a real set to, the focus of their aggression was very much on each other.

What we did experience on this trip aboard our narrowboat was the most relaxing and rewarding slow travel.

Particularly so was autumn when the waterways are less crowded, and the leaf fall season can transform overhanging trees into a blazing canopy of golden browns.

## The Grey Wren

We had opted for the *Grey Wren*, one of ABC Boat Hire's fleet of 15 narrowboats based at its Anderton Marina in rural Cheshire.

She is a 49ft 'Semi-Trad stern narrowboat' that sleeps up to four and is well suited to couples or small families.

On arrival at the Marina, ABC's Sue Harrison welcomes us with a smile, gives the low down on the trip we are about to take and hands over the ABC briefing pack with all one could hope for by way of follow up information.

## Our canal companion

We also get a copy of the invaluable J M Pearson & Sons *Canal Companion to the Four Counties and Cheshire Ring*.

This has the route we will be taking in page-by-page sections, with mileage and suggested timings; bridges and their numbers to identify where we are at any given time and the location of the winding holes, where we can turn the *Grey Wren*.

J M Pearson also provides very helpful information on what we can find along the way, with the little tankard symbol, denoting the pubs, an essential focal point.

## Life on board

This was our second time on a narrowboat (see *Narrowboating in the UK* : <https://www.allwaystraveller.com/continents/europe/life-is-good-on-the-grand-union-canal>).

The experience we gained, and mistakes made, during our first trip put us in very good stead.

Particularly in packing comfortable clothing that can be layered, bringing essential provisions and the Bluetooth speaker that goes with us wherever we go.

ABC, as with other narrowboat hire companies in the Drifters organisation, provide handy tips with the initial booking that have been honed from experience.

When first boarding a narrowboat, its long thin interior can feel a little awkward, but one very quickly gets to grips with this.

## Keeping 'ship shape'

The *Grew Wren* has its living and fully equipped kitchen area in the bow, with the shower/toilet mid-boat and a double bunk at the stern.

Ensuring we keep her 'ship shape and Bristol fashion' is very much the trick.

Stowing the clothes and packing all provisions away at the outset and keeping everything neat and tidy from then on.

This done, life on board is a 'cosy' and enjoyably rewarding experience.



## An initial induction

We receive a brief induction from John Mitchell, one of ABC's maintenance team that do everything needed to get the narrowboat fleet in tip top condition.

John then accompanies us on a short trip out of the marina and gets us to moor up across from the Stanley Arms at Anderton.

This is where we will spend our first night on board.



# Cruising two Cheshire canals

Our voyage on Grey Wren saw us taking in parts of the historic Trent & Mersey and Bridgewater Canals.



## The Trent and Mersey Canal

The Trent & Mersey Canal stretches some 93 miles from the River Trent in Derbyshire to the River Mersey at in Cheshire

When it opened in 1777 it was one of the country's first long-distance canals, and integral to in the industrial revolution Britain, particularly in carrying pottery from the factories in Stoke-on-Trent

## The Bridgewater Canal

The Bridgewater Canal stretches 41 miles from Worsley in Greater Manchester to Runcorn in Cheshire.

It was commissioned by Francis Egerton, Duke of Bridgewater, to transport coal from his mines in Worsley to Manchester.

Within a year of it opening, in 1761, the price of coal in Manchester fell by about half and the Bridgewater's success as an industrial waterway led a period of intense canal building in Britain in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century.

While both canals have long since lost their industrial usefulness, the role as a leisure waterway has grown steadily.

### Our journey

Taking Sue's advice, we set the small town of Lymm as our Saturday evening destination.

This would allow us to use the 'winding hole' (narrowboat turning place) at Lymm, with the return trip getting us back to just before Anderton late Sunday afternoon.

Our journey would have us negotiating three tunnels (see below) but just one lock, the Dutton Lock Stop Lock.

This has an almost negligible drop in water levels, but one needed to prevent the slightly higher Bridgewater Canal losing water to the Trent & Mersey.

Ann and I found taking an autumn canal cruise an excellent option, given that the narrowboat holiday is becoming ever more popular.

### The canals in autumn

With this just our second time on a narrowboat, we greatly appreciated cruising with little 'traffic' in either direction.

It helped to build our confidence and gave us real confidence in all that is required with narrowboating.

We were able to become accomplished at steering the Grey Wren.

And were able to build up our confidence in navigating the tunnels, getting through the lock at our novice pace, doing a proficient two-point turn in the winding hole and mooring up without panics.

In high season the canal networks are naturally far busier.

And although one can moor almost anywhere along the canal, with common sense, the popular mooring places like Lymm are liable to get pretty congested in late spring and summer.

Not so in mid-October.

Not having to keep too watchful an eye on what's heading our way meant we could take a more relaxed look at the scenic Cheshire countryside in its autumn 'garb' while spotting the birds along the way.

While it might get a little chilly, at this time of year, the narrowboat heats up very effectively, and the crisp clear autumnal mornings provide stunning cruising.

There is, of course, a higher chance of inclement weather (waterproofs are provided by ABC), but this can be invigorating in its own right.



## Getting through tunnels

We have to negotiate three tunnels along our trip to Lymm.

The first, the Barnton Tunnel is upon us shortly after leaving Anderton.

It is two-way, but relatively short and one is able to see the light at the end of this tunnel and any boats are coming through.

It's a case of 'first come first serve' and, if all is clear a couple of blasts on the horn and through at idling speed.

The Saltersford and Preston Brook Tunnels are longer and with an allotted time for boats to pass through, depending on the direction of travel.

So, it is important to time one's arrival at each of these.

It was getting through the long, dark and narrow tunnels that caused most trepidation on our first narrowboat trip

We were ready for them this time, alert to the need to turn on the bow spotlight and the interior lights and open all curtains.

My other strategy was to let Ann steer through the tunnels while I shouted encouragement. That's team work!

# Some suggestions for your trip

I know that discovering places to visit and dine, for oneself is part of the pleasure of travelling.



The Anderton Boat Lift



Lynn

That said it may help, just a little to let you know what Ann and I did during our three nights aboard the *Grey Wren*.

## A marvel of Victorian ingenuity

With a couple of hours to spare on our first afternoon, and being moored up just outside it, we decided to visit the Anderton Boat Lift.

The Lift, which connects the Trent and Mersey Canal to the River Weaver, is a particularly unique and historically significant piece of industrial engineering.

It consists of two large caissons, or watertight containers, which move up and down, allowing boats to be lifted or lowered some 50feet between the canal and river.

The boat was constructed in 1875 to a design by engineer Edwin Clark and was originally powered by water pressure until 1908 when the lift was converted to electric power.

This amazing structure was notoriously difficult to maintain and fell into a slow and gradual decline, being closed in 1983.

A restoration project during the 1990s saw the Anderton Boat Lift reopen in 2002.

It is now an attraction, run by the Canal & River Trust, with tourist boats using the lift and visitors getting the chance to see this feat of Victorian engineering in action and an exhibition charting its history.

<https://canalrivertrust.org.uk/things-to-do/museums-and-attractions/anderton-boat-lift-and-visitor-centre-cheshire>

## Lynn

After a full-days cruising we arrived at Lynn and were grateful to Sue for suggesting this as a stop.

This is a canal side Cheshire village of real character, with an historic centre offering local shops, cafes and restaurants and five, yes five, pubs including the Brewery Tap which serves ales from the Lynn Brewery, in the same building.

What better place for someone who appreciates tasting local ales.

<https://lynnbrewing.co.uk/>

## Eighteen the Cross

For our evening meal we decided on *Eighteen the Cross*.

This is a splendid restaurant using fresh ingredients for a range of small plate sharing dishes and British and European classics, either in the restaurant itself or the adjoining *Wine Kitchen* wine bar.

There is a wide range of wines available and continental beers.

<https://thewinekitchen.co.uk/eighteen-the-cross/>

## The Ring O' Bells

Travelling back from Lynn to Anderton we moor the *Grew Wren* and take a twenty-minute walk for an excellent Sunday lunch at the *Ring O' Bells* in Daresbury.

The building itself was Daresbury's courthouse, the early 19th century, and one can dine a session room where court proceedings once took place.

This is a traditional pub in the best possible sense, with menu serving the best of British seasonal dishes real ales.

<https://www.chefandbrewer.com/pubs/cheshire/ring-o-bells>

## An evening on board

Having dined out at the *Stanley Arms*, *Ring O' Bells* and *Eighteen the Cross* and enjoyed an excellent Sunday lunch at the *Ring O' Bells*, we decide to spend our last evening on the *Grey Wren*.

One of the joys of the narrowboat is that one can moor up in the proverbial "middle of nowhere" and have everything one needs for an enjoyable evening in.

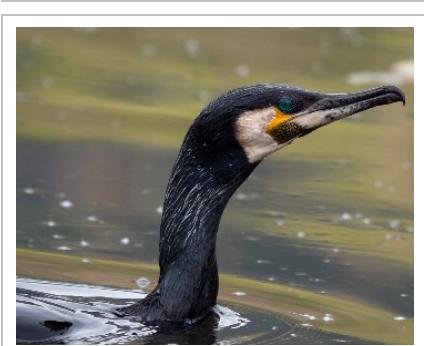
Music playing gently on the Bluetooth player, wine chilled in the fridge and, for us cheese and 'nibbles'.

Had we needed to, we could have used the microwave and/or cooker to prepare almost any dish.

It was a fine end to a wonderful couple of days aboard a narrowboat we had become greatly attached to.

We looked forward to the next trip, maybe a winter excursion which would reveal a different side of narrowboating.

A snapshot on board the Grey Wren





## The Canal and River Trust

The Canal and River Trust had guardianship of canals, rivers, reservoirs and docks in England and Wales.



It maintains 2000 miles of waterway network with the 2,949 bridges, 1,582 locks and 280 aqueducts along the way. In Scotland this role is performed by Scottish Canals.

This enables everyone to make the most of this tremendous natural resource and the wildlife habitats it embraces.

The face-to-face contact between the Trust and those who live, trade or enjoy leisure time on the water comes through the band of dedicated volunteers who provide information, advice and support that might be needed.

They are excellent ambassadors for the Trust and 'worth their weight in gold' for narrowboat novices, like Ann and myself.

More information :

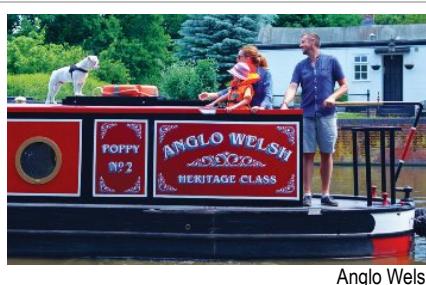
[www.canalrivertrust.org.uk](http://www.canalrivertrust.org.uk)  
[www.scottishcanals.co.uk](http://www.scottishcanals.co.uk)



## Drifters Waterway Holidays



ABC



Anglo Welsh



Black Prince



Countrywide Cruisers



Foxhangers



Kate



Napton



Shire Cruisers



Union Canal Carriers

## Drifter's covers the UK canal network

Taking a narrowboat in England, Wales or Scotland offers the ultimate slow travel experience.

With the right provider, the standard of narrowboat is likely to be of a similar high standard, so it comes down to choosing the canal to go on.

### Drifters Waterway Holidays

Drifters Waterway Holidays is a group of nine independent canal boat holiday operators with 500 narrowboats for hire from 45 bases.

Each Drifters operator will be independently assessed and accredited by British Marine.

[www.britishmarine.co.uk](http://www.britishmarine.co.uk)

Drifters also works with the Canal & River Trust in highlighting the enjoyment of canal boat holidays.

[www.canalrivertrust.org.uk](http://www.canalrivertrust.org.uk)

### Drifters operators

#### ABC Boat Hire

ABC Boat Hire has 16 locations across England, Wales and Scotland, as well as day boat hire, holiday cottages, caravan parks and a full range of marina services for boat owners.

[www.abcboathire.com](http://www.abcboathire.com)

#### More information

[www.drifters.co.uk](http://www.drifters.co.uk)

#### Anglo Welsh Waterways Holidays

Anglo Welsh Waterways Holidays offers the choice of more than 100 boats from nine locations across England and Wales, day boat hire from six bases and operates the Little Star Trip Boat at the Pontcysyllte Aqueduct.

[www.anglowelsh.co.uk](http://www.anglowelsh.co.uk)

#### Black Prince Holidays

Black Prince Holidays offers canal boat holidays from nine hire boat locations across England, Wales and Scotland.

[www.black-prince.com](http://www.black-prince.com)

#### Countrywide Cruisers

Countrywide Cruisers is a family business offering narrowboat hire from Brewood on the Shropshire Union Canal in Staffordshire

[www.countrywide-cruisers.co.uk](http://www.countrywide-cruisers.co.uk)

#### Foxhangers

Foxhangers is family owned and run boating holidays on the Kennet & Avon Canal at Devizes

[www.foxhangers.co.uk](http://www.foxhangers.co.uk)

#### Kate Boats

Kate Boats is a family business offering boating holidays from Stockton Top Marina on the Grand Union Canal in Warwickshire

[www.kateboats.com](http://www.kateboats.com)

#### Napton Narrowboats

Napton Narrowboats is a family business offering canal boat hire from Napton Marina in Warwickshire and Atherley in Staffordshire.

[www.napton-marina.co.uk](http://www.napton-marina.co.uk)

#### Shire Cruisers

Shire Cruisers offers canal boat hire in Yorkshire on the Calder & Hebble Navigation and Rochdale Canal and on the Leeds and Liverpool Canal.

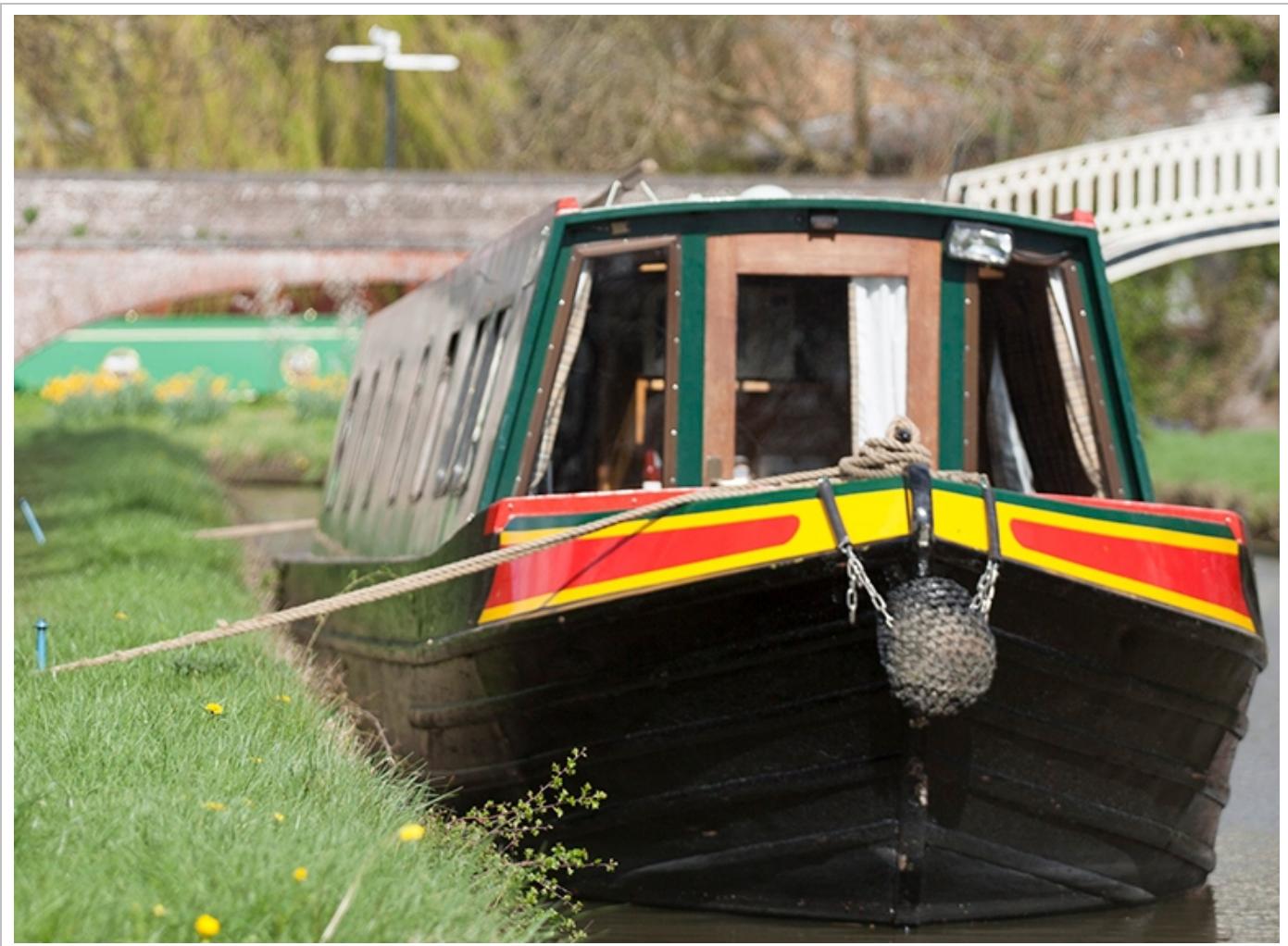
[www.shirecruisers.co.uk](http://www.shirecruisers.co.uk)

#### Union Canal Carriers

Union Canal Carriers offers canal boat holidays and day boat hire from Braunston on the Grand Union Canal in Northamptonshire

[www.unioncanalcarriers.co.uk](http://www.unioncanalcarriers.co.uk)

If you enjoyed Autumn on the Grey Wren



# Life is good on the Grand Union Canal

**A narrowboat is one designed to fit the UK's integrated network of canal waterways and locks.**

These canals originally provided a nationwide transport network during the Industrial Revolution of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> Centuries.

The narrowboats that plied them were first horse drawn and then powered by steam and then diesel engines.

With the coming of the railways, canal use for commercial traffic gradually diminished and had virtually disappeared by the end of the 1960s, though a small number of dedicated boat owners still make a living hauling goods.

But from the 1970s, the renaissance of these same canals began as their use for leisure and recreation was discovered.

Over the last 50 years the canal narrowboat holiday, the ultimate in slow travels, has become firmly established, and with it the flourishing of this wonderful natural resource.

Family run operator, 'Union Canal Carriers', based in Braunston, Northamptonshire, provide 10 narrowboat routes, from the relaxing nearly lock free to the more energetic with many locks and tunnels to negotiate.

They offer day trip, short break and longer hire opportunities on the Grand Union Canal and have a dedicated following of long-time guests and those new to this type of holiday

## More information

[www.unioncanalcarriers.co.uk](http://www.unioncanalcarriers.co.uk)

<https://www.allwaystraveller.com/continents/europe/life-is-good-on-the-grand-union-canal>



## AllWays traveller and the International Travel Writers Alliance



**AllWay**

**AllWays traveller** is the consumer travel magazine from the International Travel Writers, providing independent travellers with views of the world from Alliance travel journalists.

[www.allwaystraveller.com](http://www.allwaystraveller.com)



**The International Travel Writers Alliance** is the world's largest association of professional travel journalists.

[www.itwalliance.com](http://www.itwalliance.com)



**Ann Mealor** is a professional travel writer and photographer and Managing Editor of *AllWays Traveller*



**Ashley Gibbins** is a professional travel writer and photographer and Managing Director of the International Travel Writers Alliance.