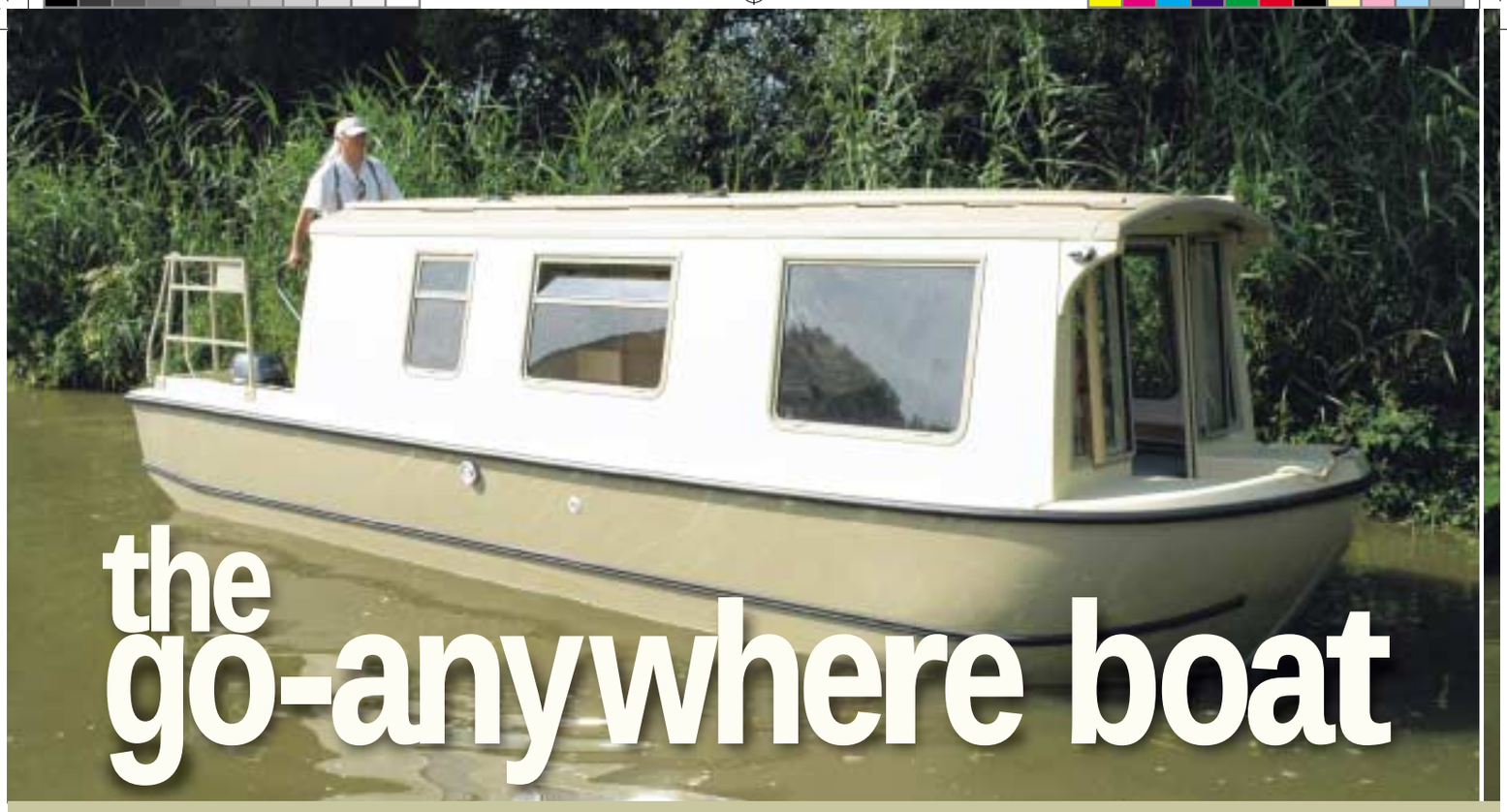


the go-anywhere boat

Just 23ft long, the Wilderness Beaver can be towed behind a 4x4 to any waterway you like – and you don't need to buy a mooring. Tempted? **GRAHAM BOOTH** certainly is

If you have visited a major boat show in the last year, you can't fail to have noticed that Wilderness Boats are being built again. The new company made its first appearance at the IWA Festival at St Ives exhibiting one of the original Beaver Cub boats. At subsequent shows, it brought along the prototype of the new 23ft Beaver with a partly completed interior so that potential buyers could see how it was progressing.

That boat is now finished and is on the water as the company's demonstrator. The first of the production boats has recently been completed and I was pleased to be invited to the launch and handover to its owners, Tony and Lindsey Radstone.

above
The new boat has aluminium windows all round.

below left
The prototype on display at the NEC.

below right
The Water-Rat Gypsy soon gained a loyal following.

The concept

In the early days of canal cruising, anyone looking for a small glass-fibre cruiser that could be towed easily behind a family car found that the choice was pretty limited. The main contenders were boats like the Norman 20 or the 18ft Birchwood which were designed for weekend fishing trips in sheltered coastal waters. When used for pottering along the canals and rivers, their streamlined hulls left little space for storage and the facilities they offered were decidedly primitive.

Enter Ian Graham, a planner from Wiltshire, who decided to design a boat that had the full headroom of a narrowboat but was easier to tow and launch than a cruiser. The 18ft 6in Water-Rat Gypsy was the first off the

***"Owning a Beaver makes financial sense** – licences are cheap and you can avoid the cost of mooring"*

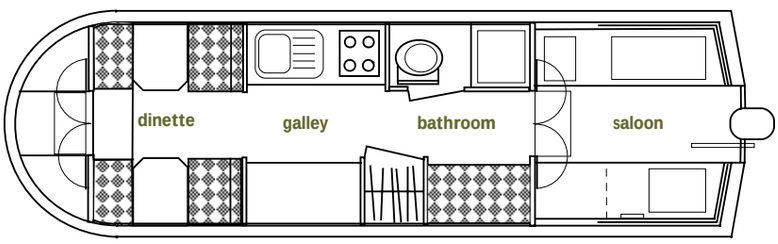
production line of the newly formed Wilderness Boats. It was superseded by the 19ft 6in Otter and the range was later extended by the 23ft Beaver. A few 17ft 6in Beaver Cubs were also produced.

The Water-Rat Gypsy had a square bow reminiscent of a pontoon conversion but it soon gained a loyal following and an owners' club was formed. Later models had a rounded bow which made them look less boxy. All the Wilderness range had flat bottoms so that they sat low on the purpose-built trailer for ease of towing. While on the trailer, they could be used as a caravan for night stops on the way to distant foreign waterways. Internally, the caravan theme continued with multi-purpose furniture designed to extract the most use from every inch of space.

Everything was going swimmingly until 2000 when a fire at the Wilderness factory destroyed most of the mounds for the glass fibre hulls and superstructures. This proved to be such a blow that Ian decided to stop production and to concentrate on providing maintenance and refurbishment services. He also set up a brokerage facility although, with no new boats being built, second-hand models became increasingly hard to find.

above
The Beaver's attractive two-tone livery.

above
The roof consists of a sandwich of many materials.



Wilderness reborn

Would-be owners, Bob and Margaret Howell, found it impossible to buy a Wilderness boat so they approached Ian Graham about restarting production. He was still not keen to take this step but agreed to help them set up their own company. To avoid any possible confusion, the new venture is called Wilderness Trailboats.

Together with a business partner, Don Grocott, Bob discussed with Ian and the original glass-fibre fabrication firm the possibility of remaking the 23ft Beaver. They found that there was an existing hull from which a mould could be made and that the deck mould was, thankfully, undamaged. Unfortunately, the cabin sides, roof and end moulds had been completely destroyed and so had to be rebuilt from scratch. With the advice of the MD of the glass-fibre company, they decided to take the opportunity to improve the construction process.

Original models had a screwed joint between the cabin sides and the gunwale which was prone to leaks. On the new boats, the whole superstructure with the exception of the roof now consists of two mouldings which are bonded together and joined to the hull at the outer edge of the gunwale. The roof overlaps the cabin sides and is also bonded to form a permanent, water-tight joint.

The hull and superstructure are made from layers of glass-fibre, while the roof is formed from a sandwich of glass-fibre and end-grain balsa wood. The hull and cabin sides are then lined out with foam insulation before the wall and ceiling coverings are applied. As well as providing excellent insulation, this produces a very rigid structure to withstand the inevitable rigours of canal cruising.

The original model had some aluminium windows with opening vents and some fixed glazing that was held in place by those clever 'H'-shaped rubber seals. These have been abandoned in favour of smart colour co-ordinated, powder-coated aluminium frames all round. ➤

With the shell production arranged, Bob and Don needed to find someone to fit out the boats. After one false start, they settled on Oxfordshire Narrowboats run by David Dare at Lower Heyford on the Oxford Canal. David fits out and maintains his hire fleet to a high standard so the pair were convinced that he could provide the one-stop service they were looking for.

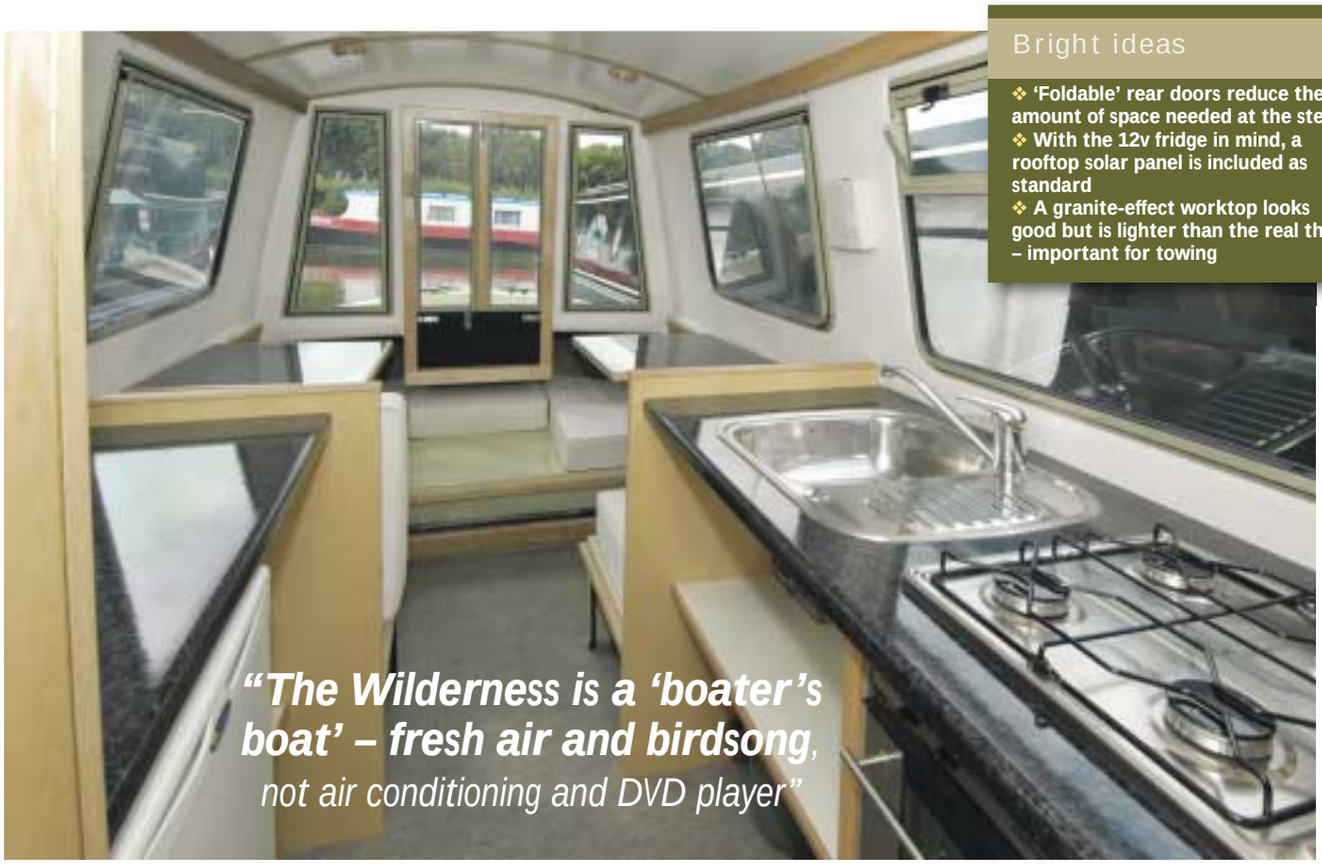
The new Beaver

Stepping onto the rear deck of the Beaver, you are immediately aware of two things. One is that it is nowhere near as tippy as you might imagine, due mainly to the wide, flat bottom. The second is that, although the boat is only 23ft long, almost 7ft is given over to the rear deck. This confirms the Beaver's status as a 'boater's boat' in which the crew can enjoy the fresh air and birdsong rather than the air conditioning and DVD player.

To either side of the well deck are separate lockers containing the batteries, gas bottles, petrol tank and deck gear. On the transom – reinforced with aluminium plate on production models – sits a 9.9hp, four-stroke Yamaha outboard. Buyers of the original Beavers had the choice of wheel or tiller steering but the new model offers only the much more positive and easy-to-master tiller. The single-lever engine control is mounted on the side rails within easy reach of the steerer.

The rear doors into the cabin seem, at first sight, to be a rather odd arrangement but, like every other part of the space-saving design, they are the result of careful

above left
The rear deck has lockers to petrol batteries, gas and deck gear.
above centre
Large rear deck for open air living.
above right
There is a small well deck at the bow.
below
The galley has everything you would expect on any recreational narrowboat.



"The Wilderness is a 'boater's boat' – fresh air and birdsong, *not air conditioning and DVD player"*

Bright ideas

- **'Foldable' rear doors reduce the amount of space needed at the stern**
- **With the 12v fridge in mind, a rooftop solar panel is included as standard**
- **A granite-effect worktop looks good but is lighter than the real thing – important for towing**

consideration. Had they been a pair of double doors as most narrowboats have, the side lockers would have prevented them opening right back, so they would have restricted space on the rear deck. Instead, the bottom third is hinged at the lower edge and drops down to form a step. The top two-thirds then clear the lockers so they can be fixed back to the rear bulkhead and out of the way.

Internal layout

The cabin sides and roof are predominantly white and this makes the whole interior seem surprisingly spacious. Ash-veneered plywood with solid cappings are used for the fixed furniture which is well up to the standard of modern narrowboat fitting.

Two internal layouts are available giving two/three or four berths, and most of the differences occur at the rear. The two/three-berth version has a compact but adequate bathroom on the starboard side, containing a Thetford cassette toilet, drop-down basin and shower tray. On the port side is a single berth that requires the occupant's feet to project under the rear bulkhead and into the locker space beyond.

The four-berth version has similar berths on both sides of the corridor and a smaller bathroom – containing just a toilet and drop-down basin – forward of this on the starboard side. To form a bigger space when using this bathroom, its door and the door of the wardrobe opposite can be opened across the corridor.

Next comes the galley which is slightly larger on the two/three-berth model. In both versions, the designers have managed to fit in a stainless steel sink and drainer unit, a four burner gas hob, separate gas oven and a 4 cu ft, 12-volt electric fridge just as you would expect on any recreational narrowboat. With the fridge in mind, a rooftop solar panel is included as standard to supplement the outboard motor's relatively modest battery charging performance.

The hob and sink are set in an attractive granite-effect laminate worktop – the real thing would add too much towing weight. Under the worktops are open shelves for storage of food and pans. These may suit the habitually tidy but I suspect that most of us may appreciate some lightweight doors or curtains to conceal the contents. There is also an Alde Compact gas boiler providing hot water and central heating via finrads.

At the front – surrounded by large windows giving a panoramic view out – is the multi-purpose saloon. During the day, there are normally two, two-person dinettes, but if you want to accommodate more people for a drink and a chat, the tables can be lowered and the seating extended. At night, the furniture converts to two single berths with under-deck foot wells or, with some optional base boards and mattress sections, to a king-size double bed. A three-section door, similar to the one at the back, leads to the small front well deck.

The launch

Having inspected the prototype, it was time to launch the first production boat, called *Haricot*. The main purposes of the exercise were to transfer the boat from the company trailer on which it was fitted out to the customer's trailer, and to conduct some stability trials for the Recreational Craft Directive certification.

One of the things that has always set Wilderness boats apart from most other trail boats is that they are towed backwards. This has the advantage that they are launched into the water facing forwards, and the outboard motor is well out of the way in the event of a mishap on the road.

The trailer is purpose-built and has four carpet-covered longitudinal supports that fit neatly between the three strengthening rails under the boat. It has torsion rubber ➤

top
Light finishes make the whole interior seem surprisingly spacious.

above left
Narrowboat-style switch panel.

above right
Berths have a footwell in the locker space.

above left
Purpose-built trailer.

above right
The most suitable towing vehicles are medium to large 4x4s.

suspension, four wheel braking, auto reverse braking and hydraulic over-run coupling all to the EC standards. Also included are a spare wheel, security straps and an integral winch.

The all-up weight of the trailer and boat with normal personal kit is around 2,000kg so it is well beyond the scope of the family car. The most suitable towing vehicles are medium to large 4x4s like the Land Rover Discovery or Mitsubishi Shogun.

We lined up the boat, trailer and Land Rover on the slipway and gently reversed until the rear wheels of the towing vehicle were just in the water. The security straps were removed and the engine tilted upwards to avoid the trailer. By this time, the carpeted runners had become saturated so there was little friction to stop the boat sliding on them. It was then a matter of taking ropes from the front and back of the boat onto the bank and gently easing the boat forward, off the trailer.

Pulling it into the bank so that we could climb aboard, the boat unfortunately sustained the first scratch to the hull gel coat. Part of the reason for this is that there is only one rubbing strake on the hull. Even allowing for the fact that they are never exactly where you need them, a couple more strakes each side would probably give greater peace of mind when mooring in windy conditions.

Inaugural trip

Tony and Lindsey plan to use the boat on the Thames and their first holiday on *Haricot* will be on the River Yonne and Canal du Nivernais in France. Tony therefore decided to opt for the 15hp Yamaha in place of the standard 9.9. As well as giving 50% more horsepower for going against the current, the power tilt and nearly twice the charging capability make the extra £360 seem very good value.

Starting the engine using the electric starter was easy and it ticked over so quietly that only the tell-tale cooling water convinced us that it had not stalled. Once on the move, the Yamaha pushed the boat along smartly and, with the throttle pushed towards the upper limit, with thoroughly indecent haste for the canals.

The best steering position is to stand on the side locker and lean against the guard rail so that you have a good view over the cabin roof. The tiller on this boat is not the

Oxfordshire Narrowboats

Oxfordshire Narrowboats' owner, David Dare, originally ran the hotel boat pair, ***Rose*** and ***Castle***. On one trip along the Oxford Canal in 2001, he called in at Lower Heyford and discovered that the hire base was for sale. The thought of owning it had instant appeal and, in two weeks, the deal had been done.

The boats he inherited were not the most up-to-date – one was reckoned to be 24 years old. He immediately set about replacing the whole fleet with boats fitted out in-house using Colecraft shells. These are retired after three years and sold to private buyers. David now has 16 hire boats and 4 day boats. A further 6 day boats will be available at a newly acquired base at Thrupp.

Boat building, repairs and paint jobs for privately owned boats are carried out in the wet dock or the dry dock which has a 20-tonne electric hoist.

Three years ago, David extended the building at Lower Heyford to create a shop and bistro known as Kizzie's. He is particularly pleased that he managed to recycle so much building material that only one skip was needed for the whole project.

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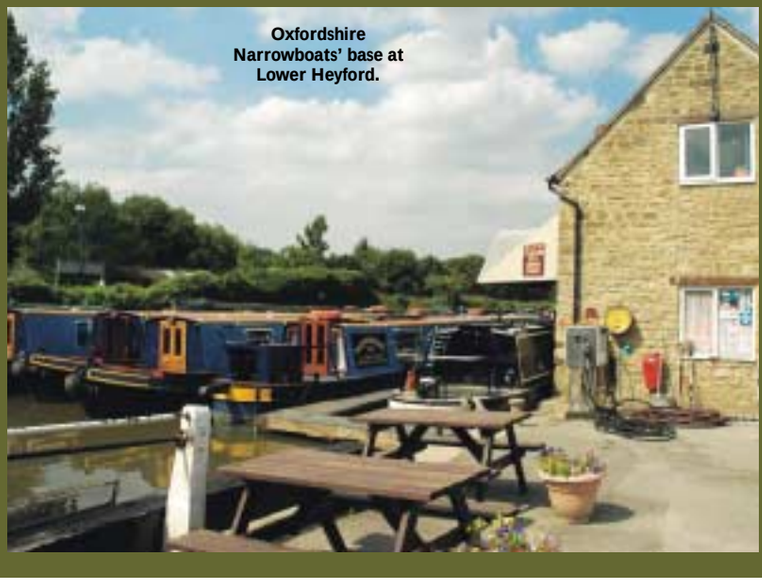

Oxfordshire Narrowboats' base at Lower Heyford.

Tony Parkinson

straightforward tube with a single crank of the original model but resembles a narrowboat swan's neck. It would normally have a tiller extension to give greater leverage and a taller tiller is now fitted to make it a more comfortable height.

On the move, the boat proved to be just as stable as it had been on the mooring. The only movement was the gentle response to the rippling water that all glass-fibre boats have, giving you the satisfying feeling of being afloat.

At the first winding hole, we made a U-turn and found that the boat turned so tightly, we could probably have done it virtually anywhere we wanted. Impressed with this, we tried an emergency stop at normal canal speed and were amazed that this was achieved within the boat's very modest length.

Finally, we decided to go for the stability test. The four crew assembled on the port side of the rear deck while the steerer made a tight left hand turn. Even with the speed gradually increased to near the maximum, the boat stayed remarkably level and felt perfectly safe.

Recovery

Getting the boat back on the trailer is very much like launching it, but in reverse. We backed the boat up to the semi-submerged new trailer and went to attach the winch strap. This has to pass through a hole in the transom before being fixed to an anchor point on the rear deck.

above left
Backing down to the water.

above right
Pulling the boat off the trailer.

right
Winding in the winch and wetting the runners.

below left
The Yamaha pushed the boat along smartly.

below right
The tiller has since been raised to a more comfortable height.

Tony Radstone

Since the anchor point was on the centre line of the boat to ensure a straight pull, this meant we had to release the engine and move it to one side. A possible solution would be to have two anchor points – one each side of the engine – and a strap in the form of a 'Y'.

All that was needed then was for Tony to wind in the winch and Nigel to splash the dry carpet on the new runners with water to ensure that the boat slid into place.

Summing up

Having examined the boat at close quarters and put it through its paces, I can see why Wilderness boats are so sought after and held in such affection. The internal accommodation will never match the average narrowboat for space but it has all the amenities needed for a comfortable holiday combined with the ability to explore the places the average narrowboat owner can only dream about.

Owning a Beaver also makes good financial sense as boating costs continue to rise. An annual licence with prompt payment discount currently costs £382 and, provided you have somewhere suitable to keep it on the trailer, you can avoid the cost of mooring altogether. But perhaps the best reason of all is that they are such enormous fun to cruise.

The total price of the Beaver in standard but very comprehensive trim and including the 9.9hp engine is £38,500. To this you can add items like a shore power connection, an inverter or navigation lights from a priced menu. The trailer costs £3,995 and the lighting board a further £70.

WILDERNESS TRAILBOATS
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