

In 1991 Dorothy Hardern wrote a delightful article for *CUTTINGS*. In it she tells the story of the early days of Chas Hardern's boat business, but running through the story are vivid glimpses of Dorothy's own enthusiasm for canals and her new-found love of boating.

The article is reprinted here in memory of Frank and Dorothy Hardern.

A passion for boats

It started with a boy who could not keep out of boats! Even in his youngest days, seaside holidays meant 'sea and sand' to his brother and sisters — but not to Chas. On the beach would be drawn up a variety of boats, and into every one of these would be Chas.

He grew up on a dairy farm near Baddiley Locks on the Llangollen Canal, but for his first ten years this did not mean 'boats' — in the early fifties, the chief occupants of the Cut were weeds and misplaced towpath. His father, Frank, remembers the trading narrowboats, especially Arthur Sumner's from Wrenbury Mill, which regularly passed up and down.

Then as the fifties turned into the sixties, a new breed of explorer might sometimes be spotted, knife in hand, usually clad in bathing trunks as they were likely to spend more time under the boat than in it, battling their way through the weeds or stuck fast on the submerged towpath. They came to the farm for milk, cream, eggs and so on, and Chas had a wonderful time winning his way onto the boats to help them. A most interesting and inventive variety of boats they were too — converted lifeboats, pontoons, strange small ex naval vessels, and ex working boats chopped in two with ends added.



Chas wove his way down the Llangollen to the Shroppie main line, on the way haunting the Hurleston Locks, hotly pursued by Mrs Sauerland, the redoubtable wife of the lockkeeper! But Walter Sauerland seems to have been rather well disposed towards this very keen and inquisitive youngster.

Chas had his heart set on old working boats and down on the Shroppie he met Dick Edgley, who was running day trips on the ex Mersey-Weaver *Dorset*. *Dorset* was, and is, a real challenge to any steerer. She draws nearly three feet, and most of her usual day trip from Henhull Bridge down to the winding hole which used to be at Beeston did not readily provide that amount of water. Also, to get her engine started, you spend about fifteen minutes heating up a hot bulb, then grab a handle and seek to turn an enormous wheel. Chas quietly graduated to steerer, leaving Mr Edgley free to look after the passengers inside. The rival claims of milkrounds, haymaking, and at first school, took a bit of working out.

Then came the winter evening when Chas, aged seventeen, came home and announced 'I've seen a boat!'. The boat was the joshier *Chiltern*, unconverted, lying at Braunston and costing £1,000. This would have been quite beyond us, except that in the garage we had a vintage Rolls, bought for £65 ten years before. We had worked it hard, and it now needed a lot of work doing on it, but it was a rather unusual model with various sought-after features. The sale of this provided the necessary cash for the purchase of *Chiltern*.

So came February 1st 1971 and Frank and Dorothy, Chas' parents, stood on the bridge at Braunston and watched in the dimness of wet and wind as Chas brought the long dark shape which was to change their lives steadily up between the lines of moored ex working boats. She was reversing in rather more than half a gale, but if any watching old boater was expecting his boat to be clonked he was disappointed.



Frank had to get back to look after the farm and the other children, with the aid of Chas' elder sister Emma. Dorothy stayed to crew for Chas. Some crew! A woman in her mid-fifties, far from athletic, who had never even seen a lock key before let alone used one. But she lost her heart to *Chiltern* and the canals on that first winter journey. She did have a few qualifications for the job — at boarding school she had learned to break the ice on the water (and preferably not the jug!) on the dormitory washstand for the compulsory morning wash, and to concentrate on lessons instead of watching the snow wheedling through window gaps and piling up on the floor at the back of the classroom. Later, she had experience of fit-up repertory — of sleeping in village halls or schoolrooms where there might not be a stove, sink or water.

These things were carried in the vans with the scenery and costumes and two large spades, because the first job might be to bury the hall's outside inconveniences before setting up 'King Lear' or 'Twelfth Night'!

Chiltern's cabin had a small Calor gas stove with oven! Pots and pans as well as gas and bedding had been brought from the farm. Water on that first trip had to be collected in carriers from taps on the way. An Elsan lurked in the engine room, which was really only expected to contain the large Russell Newbery engine. Chas slept in the hold which cannot have been very snug because, although clothed up, the cloths were distinctly scrappy in places. Subsequently *Chiltern* got new cloths, two toilet tents in the hold plus a small stove and washbasin. A large water tank was fitted, from which two traditional Buckby cans were filled daily to serve the cabin.

To return to the trip from Braunston in 1971... Bringing an old deep draughted boat up through Birmingham in the middle of winter one can expect adventures. A fine new bridge for example — but most of the old one had not gone far. *Chiltern* sat firmly on a section of it all through one night. All things possible landed on the prop (no weedhatch on a narrowboat!). Chas hung over the stern or actually got into what passed for water to grope around with the sharpest available knife. (A bolt cropper was subsequently added to the inventory.) Twice, friendly lockkeepers lowered small pounds so that Chas could drop her on a lock cill to see what he was doing, and finally she had to go briefly into the drydock at Norbury. The trouble was mostly wire, and some of it was still on until she had a proper drydocking at Chester.

The British Waterways Board allowed her to be moored at Henhull Bridge with *Dorset*. The next vital question was 'How was she to earn a living?'. Commercial carrying, Chas' preference, was by that time a non-runner. Some boats were doing camping trips for schools, groups and large families, and this seemed much more feasible. All the family set to work to repair, repaint, recloth, build two-tier bunks and find all the equipment necessary for twelve customers.

The farm stood in the names of 'Mr & Mrs F S Hardern and Son', but it was decided that the new venture should be Chas Hardern and Co — the 'Co' being Frank and Dorothy. But how to get bookings? Some leaflets were printed with the intention of getting interest from local schools and so on, but it was already well into the 1971 season and there were no bookings forthcoming. Chas and his Ma were not much disturbed by this — they were having a whale of a time — that old boat was their passage into a whole new world of sheer magic. There were rallies up the Caldon, at Congleton, and later the National at Northampton. Up the Llangollen, down the Stratford she went, and also to the Narrowboat Owners Club Christmas Rally at Brum. And all the time the steerer and crew learned the tricks needed to get an old boat around the system, such as carrying chains to pull the sides in on tight locks and concrete blocks which could be shunted forward to raise the back-end on shallow bits.

When travelling to the Easter Rally of the Narrowboat Owners Club at Snarestone there were cries from the towpath of 'When are you going to bring us some more coal?' — the Ashby coal run had been her last commercial carrying. The trip to Snarestone was the first journey for Bosun, the Belgian barge dog who crewed with Chas for the next sixteen years.

On these journeys contacts were made, and the first bookings for 1972 were made. By then there was more to offer as *Dorset* had joined *Chiltern*, and she had a conversion with windows, tables and seats. A big stove was added, as well as a fridge, a full-size sink with hot and cold water and a small library. Thus the customers 'camped' at night under *Chiltern's* canvas, and spent the day on *Dorset*. Chas was to steer *Dorset* and be in charge of all matters of navigation, while the person in charge of the hiring party was responsible for their safety and behaviour. Since both boats were motors, competent members of the hiring party might steer *Chiltern* or, if need be, one of the boats could tow the other. This came in handy when 'things' got on the prop.

One day in that spring came a leaflet from a proposed new waterways magazine, to be called 'Waterways World', asking whether the company would like to place an advert. It certainly did, and from that date things really took off.

In 1972 the Shropshire Union Canal Society organised a rally at Chester to celebrate the bicentenary of 'the cutting of the first sod of the canal'. *Dorset* and *Chiltern* both took part in the ceremony. *Chiltern* carried the band in her open hold and *Dorset* carried VIPs in her conversion, and also provided a convenient platform for photographers, being positioned in the top Northgate lock just opposite the stone to be unveiled.

Over the next few years a faithful clientele of schools, canal and university societies, and some large families was built up. Many of them, especially the Oxford University Canal Society and the Surrey and Hants Canal Society, came year after year, sometimes more than once a year, and getting steadily more adventurous. For example, *Dorset* was reversed into the



mouth of Leek tunnel for a photo — but then it seemed a pity not to find out what the other side of the tunnel was like. It turned out to be more like a rough meadow than a waterway (this was the mid-seventies) but they persevered to the end to the amazement of all beholders, and an interview with Radio Stoke. We also have a photograph of *Dorset* and *Chiltern* breasted up and with both engines running against a background of London Bridge.

Meanwhile we were getting so many enquiries for ordinary hire boats that we added *Etruria* — the ex Stourport boat *Bredon Hill*, and *Espathea* — a three berth converted lifeboat, to the 'fleet'. *Espathea* was clinker built, 23 feet, with a 5 hp Stuart Turner petrol engine. She never went on hire in the end, but she opened up a whole new world for us. We could at last get up the Leeds & Liverpool east of Wigan, to the Aire & Calder and the Calder & Hebble, where the coal boats were still working, including *Ethel*, now at Ellesmere Port Boat Museum. Up to Sheffield Basin, out onto the tidal Trent at Keadby (among the big stuff!), up to Chesterfield — beautiful, remote and full of character. We couldn't get up the Witham because of ice, and we couldn't get into Derwentmouth for the same reason, so we spent some days cruising around on the Trent below Shardlow.

During 1974 it became increasingly obvious that we must find a proper base. We had so far been running the campers, by permission of the British Waterways Board, from the bare bank at Henhull Bridge, transporting customers to and from the farm by Landrover, and running *Etruria* from the canal bank in one of our fields.

This arrangement made it difficult to service the boats properly, and the new Crewe and Nantwich District Council was new-brooming with a vengeance, with the declared intention of 'tidying things up'. Other people's boats regularly tied up for the night by that field, but for us to actually start a boat there was said to be 'changing the use' of the field — though we had taken two cuts of hay from it and were grazing young stock in it when the Inspectors called. And where was the Office? We led them into the farm kitchen and showed them the typewriter in its corner, the little pile of account books, and the kitchen table whereon these things could be set out when needed to deal with the business of farm, milkround or boats. It seemed that this last item also constituted a change of use — of the typewriter, or the table, or pens and pencils.

Towards the end of 1974 the lease for Beeston Castle Wharf came up for sale, and we snapped it up. We repaired the fences, planted a rose hedge, did some painting and so on, brought down the campers, *Etruria*, our new small steel boat *Kehaar*, and opened for business in time for the very frosty Easter of 1975. Having had a taste of selling things to the canal folk even at the farm, we had an itch for a small Shop, but finding suitable merchandise to put in it was quite a problem in those days. We found some hand-crafted jewellery and a few 'roses and castles' buckets and trowels. Frank had made some pieces of pottery, and some wooden boxes which Chas painted. The opening stock was about £75. The Shop opened officially for the Spring Bank Holiday 1975. We wondered if any customers would come. On the Saturday a gentleman arrived on the Wharf and introduced himself as Tim Tyrer of Premier Narrowboats at Acton Bridge. He said that he did a wholesale round in canal souvenirs and wondered if we needed anything? We said that we had some stock and did not know if we would have any customers. He gave us his card saying, 'Well, if ever you do find that you need anything, just give us a ring and I'll be with you. We're only just up the road, after all.' On Monday afternoon we were on the 'phone to him, desperate for stock — and

he was as good as his word, then and always. In him first of all, and in so many others since, the Shop has been blest in its suppliers.

Later that year we added our first Springer boat, calling her *Goldberry* after Tolkien's 'fair river daughter'. Our second was *Tom Bombadil*, Goldberry's husband, 'master of wood, water and hill'. These two have since been replaced by Springers of the same name. We have also had *Thorin*, the dwarf, replaced by the larger *Yavanna*, 'Queen of the earth and of all living and growing things', and *Elbereth*, 'Queen of the stars', replaced by *Silmaril*, a great jewel, later a star. Two of the smaller boats come from Beatrix Potter — *Simpkin* the cat was replaced by *Mr Tod*, the fox. The early Springers were all second-hand from private owners. Their replacements we got direct from Springers as empty shells, to be fitted out by Chas himself.

Fitting out takes a lot of time, but even if we are not fitting out a new boat, no winter is ever long enough for all that has to be done. We always try to get in a bit of cruising ourselves. A couple of years ago this took us back to the Yorkshire Ouse, up the Ure to the Ripon, with two more locks open than on our first visit, and this time — a real treat — down river to go up the Derwent and the Pocklington. It is very much to be hoped that the Inland Waterways Association and others campaigning for this river will succeed. It is a faerie tale little river, exquisitely beautiful, and surely not likely to be overrun with boaters, having the tidal Ouse to contend with.

This winter we repeated another journey, right out of this world in a different sense. The Dee below Chester — a broad, utterly lonely waterway, a grey eerie landscape crowded with the busy ghosts of its great past. Down under the sweep of Queensferry Bridge, past the old seawall and fishing village corner at Connah's Quay, turn at last where a small lighthouse thing sits on a small rock, seeming to mark the end of all things, since nothing is visible ahead but grey mist. And on the way back you have to be careful, because you are likely to run out of water.

Apart from such goings on, there is a great deal to be done to hire boats in the winter, however carefully you maintain them during the season, and Chas and Lindsay do work hard on them every weekend when they come in on their turnaround days.

The Shop is in turmoil from Christmas to Easter — it takes that long to do the stocktaking, which is in theory done after closing on March 31st. In fact it has to be done before one can tell what new stock must be ordered. And some suppliers are asking about that in November. The new stock arrives in fleets of huge boxes which must all be



humped around and found room for somehow, so that it becomes possible to move in the Shop or office. Meanwhile Frank, in the intervals of putting up shelves for all these things, is coping with the season's bookings which started last year as people coming back from their cruise rebook for the following year. A lot of them do this. We have many faithful friends, as once we had with the campers, who come year after year and sometimes more than once. Some people may take their main holiday abroad, but an extra one in the spring or autumn on the canals. Or they may have a family holiday on a six-berth boat, and one just for Mum and Dad on a smaller boat.

We have six Springers now, the largest — still just a six-berth — being Lindsay's *Myrrdin*, after the Welsh magician and also a much loved dog of Chas'... This dog departed not long after his fellow boat dog Bosun, so Chas and Lindsay now have two dogs, a lurcher and a mixture, and upstairs we have three — two French bulldogs and a mixture.

When most hiring firms were calling their boats 'luxurious' we called ours 'comfortable' and still do, aiming at the friendly country cottage with added amenities, of course, rather than the luxury yacht.

Other things happen. Chas and Lindsay have developed a good line in repairs and refitting of other people's boats, and are now planning an extension of the downstairs chandlery, which is theirs, as distinct from the upstairs souvenir shop, which is a real Glory Hole and belongs to Dorothy. In addition to all this, Chas and Lindsay manage to do cross country riding for charity, and to breed and show Anglo-Nubian goats.

1990 added a new generation of Hardern boaters. Chas' and Lindsay's baby daughter Ruth has been overseeing her parent's work among boats and goats, usually perched on their backs, almost from birth. We hope to pass on to her the same boating bug with which we have tried to infect our customers — to quote Messrs Hadfield and Streat: 'virus nauticus, an infection of the head and heart leading to years of happiness'.

Dorothy Hardern