Sometimes you find a company that would seem to have got the balance just right. Doesn't happen too often, but in the case of Chas Hardern Boats of Beeston Castle Wharf we might just have found it!



f you expect to find a hire fleet's offices made up of chrome and smoked glass when you visit Beeston Wharf in Cheshire, the base for the Chas Hardern Boats fleet, then you are going to be disappointed. It just isn't their style. Chas and his team have been at this location since the 1970's, but Chas himself has been involved in the inland waterways since growing up on the family farm through which the Llangollen Canal ran. As a youngster he had always been fascinated in the canals, far more than in the

dairy herd they milked. At the age of 13 he took control of a trip boat (this was in the days before too many rules and

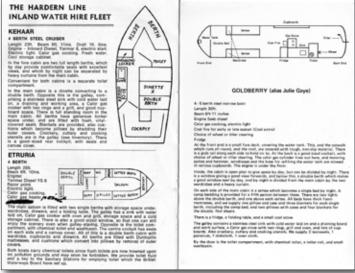
regulations). Ironically, that same boat now provides the family with a home.

Some time later, and before foot and mouth decimated the family herd and business, Chas had begun to offer camping boats for hire from the



farm but when the herd was wiped out, and after the council objected to him running a hire fleet from the farm, he looked for a new location from which to work. As luck





Hiring on the Shropshire Union Canal

would have it the wharf at Beeston became available so in the early 1970's he moved in and set up the business. The business included boat repairs as well as the small hire fleet and a gift shop, which was run by his mother and father. Some years later Chas got married and the rest, as they say, is history. Children, dogs, horses and goats followed, with the human element living on the restored boat, mentioned earlier and which was moored at the Beeston base.

Not much change

Apart from these additions things haven't changed much since that time, and this is not a negative point. The kids have grown up, with one at university and one helping on the hire fleet. The goats have apparently gone, but other than that the biggest change is to the size of the hire fleet. The camping boats went early on but since that time they have built the business - initially - by buying, refurbishing and then selling some boats. Then they began to buy in hulls which Chas fitted out himself. In fact, this is a point they are very proud of and all of the boats are built in house. They don't build for others but do still carry out repairs and refit work but the biggest part of their business is the hire fleet. It's not the biggest fleet by any standards, but that is by choice as they feel that the seven boats they operate are enough for them to handle.

Service is paramount

Unsurprising for such a small business, but rare in all too many businesses today, customer service is important to them and they allow enough time for each handover to be conducted thoroughly. They even allow an hour between each pair of boats as they leave. This is to avoid the "M25 on



a Friday" effect, as they put it. This is just one thing they've noticed and allowed for over the years they've been in business. They've built and equipped the boats to not only keep costs down but to also incorporate the many changes that have come about over the years. At one time TV's were looked upon as additions but now they are almost essential for most families. The result of all this effort and attention to detail is an excellent reputation ensuring that the business already had, in mid July 2009, many weeks bookings for 2010.

The latest addition to the fleet is *Strider*, a 65ft, 6 berth, semi-trad boat fitted out in house using a Price Fallows of Shrewsbury hull. Equipped with everything you'd expect from a boat of this type and age, *Strider* looks like it will provide a comfortable and spacious holiday for its occupants. The colour TV/DVD and radio are now standard and if it drops cold, diesel fired central heating has been fitted. The boat has been designated a four star boat and





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at 65ft is the longest in the fleet. Despite all this room they have found that they get good numbers of couples booking boats that can accommodate far larger crews. They provide that bit more room will be the thinking behind it.

Pets welcome

Although they get couples, as well as families, they also get plenty of pets as well. Being a family of animal lovers

RESOURCES

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they are only too happy for clients to bring pets and over the years have welcomed a veritable menagerie of species. Dogs and cats are standard but a tortoise, ferret and a number of birds have also been sailing with them. The holiday-makers also come from far and wide with many coming from Norway and Scandinavia for some reason. All, however, are made very welcome.

With bookings doing OK you might expect the business to be looking to bigger things but that would risk changing what is a very traditional outlook. Very much in keeping with the spirit of the waterways this hire fleet, from its equally traditional base, is keeping things just as they are without trying to over-stretch themselves. They've done



