

Four decades of hiring & perspiring

At the age of 17 Chas Hardern began a hire-boat business on the Shropshire Union and over 40 years later it is still going strong. Speaking with Chas and his wife Lindsay, **Andrew Denny** relates the company's fascinating story...

The very first *Waterways World* of Spring 1972 carried an unassuming 1-inch high advertisement. "Farm shop & camping narrow boats", said the strapline.

"Brochure from Hardern, Starkey's Fam, Wrenbury Heath, Nantwich, Cheshire." The second paragraph continued: "Milk, cream, butter, cheese, bacon, local honey, potatoes, canal ware, handmade pottery. The 12-berth narrow boats, for hire with skipper, are based at Henhull, Nantwich, on the Shropshire Union, convenient also for cruising on the Macclesfield, Trent & Mersey etc."

This was the first public outing of a young Chas Hardern, a Cheshire dairy farmer's son barely out of school, who grew up fascinated by the Llangollen Canal alongside his father's fields.

When *Waterways World* published a facsimile edition of our very first issue for our 40th birthday last year, we were gently reminded of this remarkable family business. As old as this magazine, it is still going strong as an independent family business – holding out against the giant leisure interests that now control the industry – and, remarkably, it is still largely run by the boy inside the man.

Chas grew up on the family farm alongside Baddiley Locks, though for his first ten years this did not mean 'boats'. In the early 1950s the Llangollen Canal meant a modest waterflow, weeds and a muddy towpath falling in the cut. His father, Frank, remembers a very few trading narrowboats, especially Arthur Sumner's from Wrenbury Mill, which regularly passed up and down.

As the 1960s dawned, Chas noticed a new breed on the canal, more explorer than boater, battling through weeds or stuck on the towpath. They came to the farm for milk, cream and eggs – and he spent his time winning their confidence and helping them through the weeds.

Having set his heart on old working boats, down on the nearby Shropshire Union Canal he began to help Dick Edgley, running day trips on the ex-Mersey Weaver wooden boat *Dorset*. In between milking, haymaking and school, Chas learned to work and steer the old Bolinder-powered boat, and he learned fast.

FARM SHOP & CAMPING NARROW BOATS

The Farm is on the Llangollen Canal on road between Bridges 14 & 15. Milk, cream, eggs, butter, cheese, bacon, local honey, potatoes, canal ware, handmade pottery. The 12-berth narrow boats, for hire with skipper, are based at Henhull, Nantwich on the Shropshire Union, convenient also for cruising on the Macclesfield, Trent & Mersey etc.

Brochure from:—

HARDERN, STARKEYS FARM, Wrenbury Heath, Nantwich, Cheshire. Telephone Aston (Nantwich) 342.

ABOVE: *Waterways World*'s first issue of 1972 included a Hardern advertisement.

In the spring of 1971, still only 17, he saw the joshier *Chiltern* for sale at Braunston and persuaded his parents to buy it for £1,000, financed by the sale of a vintage Rolls-Royce stored in his father's barn. The schoolboy Chas had an idea to earn a living using *Chiltern* as a camping boat, and during the summer the opportunity came up to acquire the day trip boat *Dorset* as well. Travelling as a pair, customers could camp at night under canvas on *Chiltern* and spend the day on *Dorset*.

In the first year Chas had no idea how he would find customers, and it was fortuitous that a letter arrived in early 1972 from a new publication, *Waterways World*, inviting him to advertise. That modest advertisement generated most of his business for the first year, drawing in schools, family groups and some important canal societies. Two of the latter – which went on to have an important influence

on later waterways restoration – were the Oxford University Canal Society and the Surrey & Hants Canal Society.

Within two years it was obvious the business needed a better base than the family's dairy field at Henhull, where the nearby farm kitchen was used as the office. The lease of the historic Beeston Castle Wharf came up for sale, and they snapped it up, opening during the frosty Easter of 1975.

Initially working mostly alone or with his parents – particularly his mother Dorothy – Chas soon turned the business into a more conventional hire fleet. They were soon getting so many enquiries for more conventional family hire boats that they bought an ex-Stourport hire boat, which they named *Etruria*, and a three-berth wooden clinker-built converted lifeboat, *Espatheia*. The latter never actually went on hire, but became the family's private boat, being used to explore the system.



ABOVE: Chas steering *Dorset* in Chester, with Dorothy at his side.



ABOVE: Chas takes his own boat on holiday in 2008.

RIGHT: Chas and dog Judy aboard *Dorset* in 1975.

FAR RIGHT: Beeston Wharf in 1978.

The family sold the farm in the 1980s, moving exclusively to the wharf. In later years, Dorothy managed bookings and also the upstairs shop, which she filled with a huge range of stock, including one of the best collections of waterways books in the country.

Dorothy died in 2005, meriting an obituary in *WW*'s June 2005 issue, and two years ago the Harderns finally donated her unsold and extraordinary stock of over 700 books to waterways societies.

Nowadays, the business is managed day-to-day by Chas's wife, Lindsay, who took time out to answer a few questions.

What happened to your original boats, *Dorset* and *Chiltern*?

We sold *Chiltern* after a few years, when camping boats fell out of favour. We still kept *Dorset* and ended up converting it to live aboard in the 1980s after the family farm was sold. It's still our home, and we have raised two daughters on it – they've only recently flown the nest to university.

Your boats all seem to be named after characters in *Lord of the Rings* and other Tolkein books. Is that your personal enthusiasm?

No, that was Chas's mother, Dorothy. She was a great reader and started the tradition. When we added our first Springer boat in 1975, she called it *Goldberry*, after Tolkein's "fair river daughter" – it seemed appropriate. The second was *Tom Bombadil*, Goldberry's husband, "master of wood,

water and hill" – just as appropriate for a canal boat. Most of the boats since have had Tolkein names. Two of the smaller ones had names from Beatrix Potter.

I have asked boating friends what their impression is of a Chas Hardern boat, and several say "Oh, the Springer boats".

I wish they wouldn't say that! We haven't had Springers for a decade. It's nice that they have long memories though.

We did use Springers from 1976, but started to phase them out in the 1990s, and sold the last one in about 2005. It's still kept nearby by its present owner.

The Springers were very good for their time. One big advantage was that they were V-bottomed, so they could get closer into the bank when a lot of the canals weren't as well dredged as they are now.

So who makes your current boats?

We buy them as empty shells, and install Barrus Shire engines and do all the fit-outs ourselves.

Our latest boats are made by Price Fallows, which we think have solid shells that can take the bumps hire boats inevitably suffer. Older ones are from Bettisfield and Liverpool Boats.

We buy them as sailaways with Barrus Shire engines and do all the fit-outs ourselves. We put in Hurricane heaters and macerator toilets now, so they are warm and

have the comfort people expect. Chas does almost all the engineering and main fitting out, and I do the furnishing and interiors. We make them to be very easy to clean, so they can be turned around quickly.

We also repaint them every year, ourselves, usually at the wharf. If the weather's bad, we'll use the bridge as cover. We use Aqueduct Marina near Nantwich for dry docking.

Is the business just you two?

Just about. Chas's mother, Dorothy, was an essential part of the business until she died in 2005 and she is still missed. But for 15 years we have also relied on Chris Caplin, who is very popular with our customers. He does most of the instruction to new hirers and is excellent at putting customers at ease and explaining and demonstrating how to handle a narrowboat.

How has the average holiday changed over the years?

Well, we don't do camping boats any more. I don't think anyone does, do they? The camping holidays were important for the first couple of years, but the more conventional cruiser was becoming the main canal holiday boat of choice.

We included small steel cruisers after two years when hire parties got smaller and more families came. Over the years people expected more conveniences on





Chas and Lindsay
aboard Strider.

a boat, and the boats became bigger and better equipped. Forty years ago they would happily camp in sleeping bags on bunks in a narrowboat hold.

Recently there's a lot more last-minute booking, and many more short breaks – especially a lot of long weekends.

The biggest market is in holidays for early-retirement people, and the average age has got much older. There aren't as many children as there used to be. In fact, it's now much busier out of school holidays.

Fewer people now want to 'go boating'. Customers are more likely to treat the boat as a floating hotel.

What are the favourite routes?

About three-quarters of our customers go up the Llangollen, and you can see why. It's beautiful, with so many attractions, and at its best in early summer. May is an excellent time.

We are at one corner of the Four Counties Ring, so we often recommend that route if they have a week to spare in the busy season. Not so many people go down to Chester and Ellesmere Port, but it's a good route for a weekend.

How has the internet affected your business?

It's completely changed it – for the better. I don't know what we'd do without the web now. It's much easier to find customers, and even though there are many more hire companies than when we started, our customers stay loyal and can contact us easily. All our customers contact us via the website or email. I think we now get maybe two or three old-fashioned letters a year enquiring about bookings.

There's also a bigger variety of customers, we get bookings from all over the world now. Before the web, we hardly had any foreign visitors.

Do you offer other services apart from hiring?

Well, as a wharfside business we do sell diesel and give pump-outs, and have the chandlery and supplies. We can do a certain amount of servicing, and Chas also goes out on call for emergencies for River Canal Rescue. If your boat gets into difficulty, you might well find him turning up to your boat in an emergency.

But the boat servicing side has grown in the last ten years or so. Mobile phones have made it much quicker and easier to run a call-out service.

How 'tying' is the job?

It's completely our life – we live on site and we'll always answer the phone – our business phone is effectively our home phone. It's probably like being a pub landlord!

But for us this is a lovely way to live. Chas has never done anything else, and never wanted to. He says it doesn't feel like work, it feels like life. For me, I married the job when I married Chas, I love it, and I can't imagine doing anything else either.

DON'T MISS!

Next month

**JUNE 2013 ISSUE
ON SALE 9TH MAY**



PULL-OUT GUIDE

THE LEICESTER RING

Join us for a tour of the attractive and varied waterways of the East Midlands: the Northern Oxford, Coventry, Trent & Mersey, River Soar and GU Leicester Section, concluding at Crick – just in time for the nation's premier narrowboat show!



BOATS FOR CRICK

We take a look at a selection of new boats that will be on display at the Crick Boat Show

BANBURY THEN AND NOW

Contrasting present day photographs with those taken 50 years ago, Roger W Butler examines the changing canalside scene of this Oxfordshire town



ABOVE: A historical picture showing Beeston Wharf circa 1900, with a horse-drawn boat.