

A WATERWAY OF LIFE

Dennis Needham talks to Roger Preen, hire fleet and moorings operator, engine mariniser, surveyor, Dutch barge owner . . .

“I grew up by the water. As far back as I can remember, the Thames ran past our garden. I’m told that I fell out of a punt aged two, and was underwater for quite some time. When I surfaced, I was still holding my rusk.”

Thus Roger Preen describes his life-long love affair with the waterways. Now a very successful hire fleet operator, innovative engineer, boat surveyor and ardent admirer of continental waterways and boats, Roger could really be said to enjoy his WaterWay of Life.

His initial training was as an engineer in the motor trade. He left school to work at the old Rootes car factory in Coventry, and was involved with the revolutionary – at the time – Hillman Imp. Prior to that, as a schoolboy, he earned his pocket money on the Thames, first sweeping out the famous Thornycroft launch works, and then helping to turn round the Maid Line hire fleets on a Saturday.

Seeing the way things were going in the English car industry, he started to look for a different challenge. That resulted in a ten-year stint as a mining engineer in Zambia. This was a thoroughly enjoyable time, hard work but well paid. Not that he got away from boats even then. He was appointed Vice-President of an ex-pats boat club and was involved in preparation of power boats for racing and water skiing, and maintaining clinker racing shells from Salters in Oxford and Banhams of Cambridge.

On his return to this country, he decided that boating was something he would like. After first looking for a Thames boatyard, he went to the canals. It was the late '40s when, with

his parents, he had first cruised the nearly derelict Oxford.

“A keel and winch were vital in those days. We were once stuck two days in Oxford trying to persuade the railways to move that low bridge by the station so we could get through.” It was on a ‘Granny to Granny’ boat trip that he first saw Calcutt. His parents lived by the Thames, his

was a huge amount of work to do, and no road access. Much of what was needed had to come in by boat.

It took two years of negotiation with the local farmer before it was possible to build the road so vital for customer access. But, in 1972, Calcutt Boats were under way. One steel narrowboat and a 26ft Burland GRP cruiser were the foundation of the fleet. But the outboards proved very unreliable.

“I pretty soon decided that steel was the way forward, and designed our first hull with Roy Willoughby. We still work together, have stayed with that shape, and I’ve been very satisfied,” Roger observed.

With the hulls organised, engines were next.

“I soon realised that the available engines then were marinised for seagoing boats, and unsuitable for canal work.” With that thought, Roger Preen attacked the engine market, initially for his own fleet, now as a very successful adjunct to the hire fleet. The BMC/Leyland was his choice.

“We’ve done over 600 now, which doesn’t count some of the early rebuilds, and still have a strong demand.”

The marinisation process suffered a hiccup several years ago when the Leyland engine went out of production in the UK. Fortunately, a high quality BMC 1.8 replacement was available from their plant at Izmir in Turkey.

“The number of hire fleet users who stick with us is testimony enough to that quality,” Roger said.

He also buys every scrap engine he can. These are stripped down and refurbished as necessary. It’s a meticulous process and produces a high quality job.

The popularity of Calcutt’s hire fleet burgeoned, and currently stands at 18



Elizabeth Fowler

● Roger Preen clutches one of the eggs laid by his roaming but resident Aylesbury ducks.

wife’s at Wootton Wawen on the Stratford. This was to be a grand exploration looking for somewhere to settle.

What drew him to Calcutt he is none too sure. The place was totally derelict, and due for demolition. At that time, British Waterways Board had a policy of selling nothing, but eventually offered a long lease. There

boats. The company books through Hoseasons, which Roger finds a good system. The fleet is one of the more popular ones. The quality of the boats is clear, even from the outside, and the geographical location is particularly useful, offering the wide variety of routes that brings back hirers year after year. In addition to his own boats, Roger turns round another four which are used by various social groups in the navy and banking.

That very choice of routes – there are no less than ten one-week out-and-back cruises and up to four circular ones – saw a steady increase in demand for moorings from private boats. Having bought some surrounding land, Roger Preen decided that horizontal integration was needed. Thus was permission sought and obtained for the huge off-line marina that now graces the bottom of Calcutt locks.

This area has received the 'Preen Touch' with painstakingly landscaped surroundings and the building sympathetically designed and constructed. Much of the area was once a dredgings tip for BW, and careful drainage needed building, much of it done before the scheme was ever considered. There is a communal area for boaters to forgather, and in a few years, as the newly planted trees mature, the whole area will be one of even greater delight. Some land behind the marina, also owned by Roger, is a wetland SSSI, and he spends his own time and money – completely unbidden – maintaining this as a delightful habitat, mainly for flora at the moment, but increasingly with fauna in mind. (After talking with Roger, as we drove out on the roadway alongside the wetland, a weasel was seen scurrying along the bank: a rare sighting indeed.)

And as if running a successful hire fleet, engine marinisation business and the marina was not enough, Roger still likes to keep his eye on the engineering side. This he accomplishes by surveying boats.



● Roger Preen enthuses over one of his BMC 1.8 marinisations.

Elizabeth Fowler

"I find it very satisfying to get my hands dirty now and then, and it's a day away." He grinned. "But pressure of work means that I limit myself to one a fortnight."

Roger's work in this field had gone on for many years now. He was actually only the third inland-waterways-dedicated surveyor to be accepted into the YDSA.

One aspect of canal boating that concerns Roger, and a subject he feels has not yet been properly addressed, is the question of older boats.

"There are a lot of steel narrowboats, built in the '60s and early '70s whose hulls are starting to show their age. It won't be long before these need expensive remedial work, costing more than the intrinsic value of the boat. What happens then? Probably they'll sink. Do the owners abandon them where they lie? Who picks up the bill to move them? They're questions that someone is going to have to ask before too long, and I see no recognition of this problem within BW yet."

For relaxation, Roger uses a Dutch barge in Holland. He takes a couple of days off in midweek. Leaving after work in the evening, he catches the overnight ferry to Holland, spends a

couple of days over there, and travels back overnight, arriving refreshed the next morning and ready for work. He loves both the country and the people.

Being not too far from Birmingham, Roger and his wife Rosemary, who is also involved in the business, take regular trips to indulge in one of their few interests away from waterways in some form or another: theatre and concert hall.

"We're very lucky to be only a short drive from the new Symphony Hall in Birmingham. It's a wonderful building, and the acoustics must be some of the best anywhere in the world." Stratford is also close by and is another regular theatrical destination. Then, reinforcing the

impression that here is a man who lives and enjoys life to the absolute limit, Roger Preen manages to fit in a couple of skiing trips every year.

His children are now fully grown and play no part in the business. Catherine is a landscape architect and has been involved in a number of prestigious projects including London's Canary Wharf and EuroDisney. Her husband serves with the Royal Horse Artillery in London, which involves an extensive social life. Son Matthew designs and opens fitness centres, leading a peripatetic existence. As soon as one is up and running, he moves along to another part of the country.

Reflecting on his life, Roger is very glad that the opportunity to travel early in his life presented itself.

"If it hadn't, I'm not so sure that I would have settled here so well. It got the youthful wanderlust out of my system."

The whole aura emitted by Roger Preen is one of boundless energy. Although based in Calcutt for almost a quarter of a century operating a very successful diversified business, one can only wonder what challenge will stimulate him into further action in the years ahead.