

People and Craft of the Narrow Canals

By C. P. and C. R. Weaver

THERE seems little doubt that the canal boats introduced in the days of Brindley, the pioneer of British waterways, were of the simplest construction with little or no decoration, being bow-hauled by men who worked on the "day system." Their direct descendants can be seen to-day on the Birmingham Canal.

As the waterways spread further afield and journeys became longer, the necessity arose for living accommodation aboard and so came the family boats. These boats, between 69 and 72 ft. long with a beam of 6 ft. 10 in. to 7 ft. 2 in., were made expressly to fit the narrow locks and so conserve water. They had rounded bilges, as this form of hull took less energy to propel, but when manual haulage gave way to horses the added power available and the need for more cargo space brought the square bilge into being.

Evolution from that day has given us successively the gay decorations of castles and roses, and brass work, mechanical propulsion to oust the horse, steel to replace wood, and now since nationalisation a standardised colour scheme of blue and yellow. Still, whatever the official attitude, the painted boats will be a permanent reminder of those happier days when man had time to live, and moreover, time to embellish his work with beauty.

British Waterways' choice of blue and yellow has led to much controversy, but it is only fair to say that the two main carrying fleets, those of Fellows Morton and Clayton and The Grand Union Canal Carrying Co., which were merged on nationalisation, did not operate such beautifully painted craft as those of

Samuel Barlow Co. Ltd. and The Mersey Weaver Carrying Co. There has only been a change of house colour—the cabin interiors and many items of running equipment are still painted in traditional pattern.

Early records have little to offer in the way of information on the subject of boat decoration. Many theories have been put forward, but we think the decorations may well have been developed by the boat people themselves. After all, they lived in close contact with every item portrayed—



The "Ovaltine Boats," run by Mr. Stokes and family, Hawkesbury Junction, Oxford Canal. The buttery, on the right, has a fine ropework Swan's neck. The illustrations to this article are from photographs by the authors.

flowers, the castellated towers of stately homes, bridges, water, etc. Telford himself used the turret to decorate some of his aqueducts and Rennie made full use of all architectural embellishments.

How the highly coloured diamonds and circles came to be used is also a matter of some conjecture, but it could be that these figures, made up from basic geometric shapes, were easily drawn with simple instruments and then coloured with readily obtained paints.

No hard and fast design exists for building the traditional narrow boat, at least not for the wooden variety. These were, and still are to a very limited extent, fashioned and constructed by a departing race of craftsmen using basic woodworking