

FOR Timothy West and Prunella Scales, nothing compares to narrowboating. Yet they both developed a passion for canal cruising for diametrically opposing yet surprising similar reasons: "I'm rather a 'snail' person," explains Prunella, "I like to carry my home with me. I don't really like travelling, to do with childhood, being evacuated and careering round the world when my father was in the army." Similar reasons had the opposite effect on Timothy; "I adore travel, having been evacuated and my father being an actor so it's strange really."

Neither Prunella nor Timothy's childhood love of boating stems from canals.

"Not canals but rivers," says Timothy; "My father was very fond of boats. We used to go on the Thames in launches." Prunella fondly remembers the sea; "I've always had the most tremendous thing about water," she says, "I remember when I was little wanting to sail around the world in a square rigged ship. I grew up spending a lot of time by the sea and always longed to sail like the kids in *Swallows and Amazons*."

"I can crew, I do what I'm told, but I couldn't sail single handed. We took care that the boys went to sailing school

swim, actually quite a competent swimmer, but he'd been told never to drop a windlass." says Prunella. "He sank like a stone," laughs Timothy, "and as he came up for the third time we had to tell him to drop them!"

"Canal people are tremendously helpful," says Timothy, "and there's a community and if you're in trouble, they'll always help you." They were grateful for such help last year. Timothy explained; "We lost a mooring and the boat drifted out into the middle of the canal with nobody on board." Fortunately for both, a passing canoeist came to their rescue, recovering the mooring rope.

Timothy obviously draws an enormous pleasure at the helm. "There's just enough to do to think that you're not being carried along on somebody else's say-so. There's a certain amount of skill involved in navigating a narrow boat and handling all the locks and bridges is interesting and informative. You learn an awful lot about a fascinating and important part of our economic and engineering heritage which has really been alive in more or less the same kind of way since the 1770's or before."

"What I love about the canal system is that you're always

# An actor's life afloat

*Richard Hill talks to thespian couple Timothy West and Prunella Scales about their love of inland waterways and how they make the best use of their boat when away from their land-based home*

when they were little to learn to sail properly. But they love the canals as well. We tend to think that people who sail in dinghy's and yachts won't abide canal boats, but actually they love it."

Timothy explained what brought them to canals years later; "We were lent a boat by an actress friend on the Oxford canal when our kids were very young. They had the most marvellous holiday, and the great thing was that they got so wonderfully tired, working locks and swing bridges." Prunella agrees; "They'd have supper and go to sleep. We'd chat and play chess or whatever and it was a wonderful holiday for us all." They were hooked. "That was our first canal holiday and we both fell for it completely and in the end bought a half share in that boat."

Some years ago, their son Joe, then aged ten, took his parents instruction a little too literally when, while carrying a windlass in each hand, he fell into the canal. "He was perfectly able to

seeing England from the back. If a river is an actual thoroughfare of a town or village, the canal is its' service road. You find bits of a town or a village or a city that have not really altered around a canal because nobody goes there much any more. Since the mercantile aspect of canals has tailed off, you find wonderful old wharves and warehouses, cranes and landing stages, which have just stayed as a forgotten monument to Victorian technology."

"On the other hand," adds Prunella, "out in the open country, it's instant countryside and deep countryside. The flora and fauna and the birds, on the whole, are quite specialised, and there are plants you see along the canal you don't see in other places."

Both are well known for their association with the Kennet and Avon canal, and Timothy explains their special relationship with this waterway: "I went with old school friends in Bristol in ▶



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► the early 1950’s to the first meeting of the Kennet & Avon Canal Society. It was saving the canal at that time from a Government Bill planning to abandon the canal completely. The meeting was held at the bottom of Widcombe lock in Bath. It was a very lively meeting, the Bishop of Bath and Wells spoke and Tudor Ede MP who was then, I think, Home Secretary spoke very movingly. There was a very strong faction of farmers who had begun to feel that the canal bed was their own and they didn’t want it open at all. They were quite vociferous and a fight broke out in which one of the farmers was actually ‘ditched’ into the dry, but very muddy, Widcombe lock.”

The meeting sufficiently impressed Timothy to keep a watchful eye on its proceedings and progress. “Then I heard that it was getting on and that things were getting done,” he says. “Of course, restoring the canal is one of the major engineering feats of this century. It’s absolutely astounding what’s been done in terms of rebuilding and reclaiming back the route of the canal.

Dredging and sealing, building locks, building bridges, reclaiming wharves and aqueducts. But particularly of course, the enormous staircase of locks at Caen Hill, which in anybody’s terms is a major engineering feat.”

When finally the canal re-opened in 1990, Timothy and Prunella’s boat was the first to travel the entire length of the Kennet and Avon, all but for a 400 yard stretch encompassing lock 43 at the summit of the Caen Hill flight. “The four hundred yards were reserved for the Queen to open,” explains Timothy, “We were craned-out and taken on the back of a low loader through the streets of Devizes and put back in the canal.” The Queen officially re-opened the Kennet and Avon canal by navigating through lock 43 on the 8th August 1990. Timothy emphasises the role of volunteers in canal restoration, citing his own experience of the K&A: “It was restored almost entirely by voluntary work under the direction of skilled engineers.”

But do they think commercial carrying will ever return to the canals? They both doubt it. “Canals are only really viable if you can take the goods by rail to a rail-head where you can

load it immediately onto barges believes Timothy. If you’ve got to put it onto a lorry, you might as well drive the lorry to the destination.” “But also the expense,” adds Prunella, “two men to carry coal from Manchester to London is terribly expensive, to put it on a train is infinitely more sensible, economic and efficient.” Nevertheless, they do believe there is a place for commercial carrying, as Timothy pointed out: “If you don’t mind things happening at a slower pace and both you and your business co-respondent live on the canal, it’s the obvious way to do it.”

Neither would see living on their narrow boat as a permanent ‘home’ because of the hectic and varied nature of their work, though they have from time to time. “When we were living on it while working in Bristol,” explains Prunella, “we were rehearsing a very, very difficult play and we were iced-up. But we were very warm, and very comfortable because we’ve got bottled gas central heating.” They were in fact better off than the rest of the cast, as Timothy pointed out; “They’d all been frozen up in their digs. They used to come on board for a shower because our water was OK. We were in a marina, which was totally snowed over. There were a couple of inches of thick ice, and snow all over that. Around us there was this little one inch ‘moat’ generated by the heat from the hull, and we were very comfortable.”

They have travelled the canal system quite extensively, and have in the past taken their boat by road quite a long way. “There are a few land-locked canals we’d like to try,” they say, “but if you do own your own boat, it means either craning it out or hiring someone else’s boat, which doesn’t feel quite right.” The Monmouth and Brecon canal is one of Timothy’s ambitions, while Prunella would like to try the Chichester Canal.

They’ve owned their current boat for over ten years. “It was built for us,” explains Timothy, “custom built onto a standard steel hull and our friend Barry Morse of Morse Marina in Banbury fitted it out.”

And would Timothy West and Prunella Scales have to say to people who see canals as dirty ditches and narrow boats as cold and comfortless? “Try it,” they say, “Just try it.” ⚓