



Stylish Showcase

It certainly looks the part – but is *Aqua Vitae*'s eye-catching appearance matched by a fit-out of equal quality? **Graham Booth** finds out



above
The traditional rear
half of the boatman's
cabin.

left
Dave Moore's lively
decoration in the

One of the first things a prospective customer wants to know when considering a boatbuilder is what the finished product will look like. If the builder is long established and has some amenable clients, there is usually no problem in arranging a visit to one of his previous boats. Builders with fewer completed boats in their portfolio – and especially those in more remote parts of the system – sometimes find it more difficult.

Mick Wilson of Aquarius Narrowboats realised he was in this position. He had built eight boats since setting up the company and most of these are now moored some distance from his base near Guildford. His answer was to build a boat for himself and his wife, Suzanne, so that they could enjoy the waterways and, when the occasion arose, show it to customers as an example of what he can produce. The boat is called *Aqua Vitae* and it was finished at the end of 2008.

The shell

Mick is happy to fit out any make of shell that the customer chooses but, given a free hand, he uses Orion Narrowboats. Orion's boats are based on a Bantock tug and are characterised by their generally flat profile and side decks that are slightly lower than on a typical modern narrowboat.

Having lower decks has the advantage that less nimble owners and crew find it easier to get on and off the boat. They also make the boats look as though they are sitting lower in the water, although the typical draught of 2ft should ensure that mooring is not a problem on most canals.

One of the downsides of low-waisted boats is that the gas locker can usually only accept 6kg bottles. Here, the

unit housing the Zanussi washing machine and, above it, the Spinflo oven.

All the remaining storage units and equipment are below the light-coloured reconstructed granite worktops which have large radius rounded corners. The cupboard doors throughout the boat are custom-made by Mick using matching router cutters to produce an attractive frame and panel design with integral mouldings. One of the galley doors opens to reveal a slot just wide enough for an extending towel rail. Under each unit are the usual recessed skirting boards, except that these are actually drawer fronts so that the space behind can be used for easily accessible storage.

Dinette

Backing onto the L-shaped galley is an L-shaped fixed seat with a similar large radius internal corner. It is intended primarily for lounging or, with a collapsible table, for dining. It could also be used as a single or double berth although the fact that Mick has yet to make the infill piece suggests that the Wilsons plan to keep the boat to themselves for a while.

Saloon

The rest of the cabin is an open saloon area with a free-standing leather recliner. To one side of the front doors is a floor to ceiling, angled corner unit. This is divided into three parts with a glazed display cabinet at the top and a solid-doored cupboard for DVD and other equipment at the bottom. In between is a triangular recess for the



“The rear cabin may sound like a travesty, but it actually works very well”

above
L-shaped bench seat with collapsible table.

flat screen television which is normally hidden from view by a pair of centre-hinged doors so that the saloon is not dominated by the ‘one-eyed monster’.

A useful range of cupboards and shelves provides more storage. Under this, and all the way along the boat, are grilles that cover the finrad radiators heated by a 5kW Webasto diesel boiler. The front step has a characteristically solid oak lid that lifts to give easy access to the water pump. To make sure that the pump does not disturb the peace of the saloon, the whole enclosure is lined with acoustic foam.

On the Water

Aqua Vitae was moored at the northern end of the Wey Navigation so we were able to take her for a short cruise down through Town Lock onto the River Wey, turn and come back. The Beta Tug engine started easily and ran smoothly throughout the whole trip. The engine note inevitably betrays its agricultural origins but, as you start to enjoy its power and flexibility, these are soon forgotten.

On the relatively still waters of the Wey, the engine was hardly above tickover but a few short bursts of acceleration suggested that it would be more than adequate for cruising upstream on faster-flowing rivers.

As with the vast majority of traditional engine installations, the exhaust pipe exits through the roof some 15ft in front of the steerer. In this location, it was easy to check that there was no appreciable smoke from the engine.

Having separate engine controls may seem strange to anyone used to a single lever, but they are not as difficult to master as you might think. The important thing to remember is to reduce the engine revs before changing gear, but this soon becomes second nature. One advantage of the speed wheel is that it is easier to make small adjustments to the speed to suit conditions. Another is that the controls are easily to hand without having to stoop or look to one side to find them. ➤

right
The speed wheel allows you to make small adjustments to the speed to suit conditions.



above
Large radius curves to the galley worktops.

left
Drawers under the galley cupboards increase storage.

right
Towels are kept out of sight in a narrow cupboard.





Conclusion

In case you haven't guessed already, I suppose I should admit that that Aqua Vitae is definitely my sort of boat. While I can appreciate quality in the design or production in any type of boat, traditional boats like this seem to me to have far more character and blend far better into our historic canal system.

But setting my own preferences aside for a moment, Aqua Vitae is a very practical, well designed and well produced boat. Its plan is nicely balanced, avoiding a long corridor down one side; its materials should ensure that it has a long life with minimum maintenance and the whole boat is a pleasure to use both internally and externally.

Although the boat was built for the Wilsons' use and to demonstrate Mick's skills, he would probably not refuse a reasonable offer for it – after all, he can always build another. If you preferred to commission a similar boat, you would need to find something in excess of £100,000 depending on the exact specification. 🚤

above
Front part of the saloon with a free-standing leather recliner.

right
Sound proofed front step contains the water pump.

top right & below
**Saloon cupboard closed...
 ...and open to reveal the television.**

right
Useful cupboards in the saloon – note the finrad casings beneath.

AQUARIUS NARROWBOATS

Mick Wilson ran his own joinery company for 35 years, producing staircases, windows and the like. During this time, he owned several boats and moved from sea fishing to the canals around the late '80s.

Four years ago, he decided to sell the business and set up as a boatfitter. He works mainly on his own but is assisted by Suzanne, who is a seamstress, and his son, Stuart, who is a diesel engineer and exterior painter. Aquarius Narrowboats produces two boats a year which are generally based on Orion shells, although the boat currently being fitted out is a 'wide beam narrowboat' using a shell supplied by Graham Reeves.

AQUARIUS NARROWBOATS
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ORION NARROWBOATS

Orion Narrowboats was started by Richard Ibbotson in 1992 and is based at Ashwood Marina on the Staffordshire & Worcestershire Canal. The son of an engineer, Richard originally studied management but decided he wanted to earn a living from the family hobby of boating.

He works with one experienced fabricator and builds about four narrowboats a year. These are supplied as shells, part fit-outs or completed boats with traditional, semi-traditional or cruiser sterns. He is also planning to introduce a new 30ft x 10ft 6in Category C motor cruiser that will have the same amount of accommodation as a 60ft narrowboat. As well as boatbuilding and repairs, Orion Narrowboats sells new and used boats through its brokerage division.

ORION NARROWBOATS
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www.narrowboatsearch.co.uk (brokerage)