



Introduction

Waking up in the middle of the night to the creaking of ropes and the sound of water lapping the bow is an experience I will never forget. What is that consistent plopping, dripping sound? Is the boat sinking? Why is everything rocking? Is someone on my roof? Many times I would pull back the covers and see my breath freezing in front of my face in the reflected street light coming through my windows. Then I would realise that my fire had gone out during the night and I was in for a cold morning. At that point, I would usually wonder how I got here and why I was afloat, on my own, on a little boat somewhere in the East End of London. If that was strange though, far stranger was the feeling, after a few months of this life afloat, of discombobulation every time that I went 'home' to sleep in my old bed at my mum's house. The bed would seem to rock around in ways that my 'boat bed' had long ago stopped doing. The room would feel stuffy, with stale air, and was unnaturally quiet unless I opened the window and let the sounds of the town in past the double glazing. I would wake up in the night in a panic; had I left my phone on charge and would my batteries cope with the load? I would remember that it did not matter here, that my phone was plugged into the wall and that electricity was 'free' and not a source of anxiety. It would then be time to return to my 7 ft wide home and the creaks, burlbs and drafts that had come to feel truly like home.

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Between July 2012 and October 2018, I lived on a 37 ft long narrowboat named 'Druscilla'. Like many others who live on the water, I moved my boat every two weeks from place to place around a network of canals and rivers. However, this book is not just about my boat but those waterways

and those travels; it is about the canals and rivers of South East England and (mainly) London. Further, it is about the people that I met who also live on boats and travel around those places. Sometimes they are called 'boaters' or 'bargee travellers' or 'liveboards' or 'continuous cruisers', but all of these names are contentious, as we shall see. I want to write about these people and introduce you to their boats and their lives. I wish to do so not out of some exoticisation or fascination with a life that may look 'other' or different to how you live your life (probably, the statistics would suggest, in a house or a flat), but rather, I want us to learn from the boaters that I met about an alternative way of living in big cities. I wish to give people living 'differently' the time and space to let us understand their motivations and their desires, and to go a step beyond a distancing and an 'othering' response that looks at the peculiarities of boaters' dwelling choices but fails to take any lessons from them. Fundamentally, it is also about how my thoughts about what makes a 'home' in the city, my understanding of what it means to be mobile in a landscape, my bodily dispositions and broadly my *self* changed across six years afloat. It is about what becoming a boater taught me about how to live.

It is not well known, or widely written about, that the waterways of the UK are home to an unknown number of people, but possibly as many as 9,000,¹ who practise a radically alternative lifestyle aboard boats. Deep within many of us is a fascination with the unknown, with escape, with travel and with a life outside of the conventional. This fascination is perhaps best captured by the escape offered to our imagination by waterscapes, be they rivers or seas. Water is a space, physically, psychologically and socially, of alterity and escape. This book interrogates the nature of the 'alternative' community that emerges from processes of boat dwelling in the UK. I hope that this text here will be a significant addition to the scholarship around the anthropology of the city and urban spaces, the anthropology of alternative forms of dwelling, and the anthropology of the contemporary neoliberal governance of space. Its significance lies partially in it being the first book-length social science study of the boat-dwelling population, and it therefore fills a real gap in our understanding of London, alternative forms of dwelling and mobilities. Partially, however, this book is also venturing into new conceptual spaces, encouraging us to think differently about space, home and dwelling in our overcrowded and crippling expensive cityscapes. What other modes of dwelling and moving do the boaters remind us are possible? How do their mobile lives critique the systems of neoliberal governance, financialisation and housing exploitation in which so many of us are trapped? The significance of this story about freedom, mobility and struggle goes further than the discipline of anthropology and strikes at the heart of contemporary political and ethical concerns about

how we can imagine different and better lives in cities. It is also, I hope, an entertaining journey to follow. The boaters that you will meet are fascinating people with great stories, and I hope that I can do justice to them, their motivations and their tales, in my ethnography.

I intend this to be a book that you can read whether or not you have a background in anthropology. The text is a shorted and, in some sense simplified, account of my work with London's boaters. Some of this research has also been published in journal articles and edited volumes, and other parts derive from research I conducted whilst studying at Brunel University – London, finishing in 2015. I will use anthropological theory in order to illuminate some of the ideas here and to provide an analytical frame that will help us to understand more about the boaters' lives. I have made a conscious effort, however, to remove dry portions of theoretical writing where it is not useful and to focus on the stories of boaters and what boat dwelling can tell us about contemporary life in London, about housing, about what it means to dwell in an 'alternative way', about people and their environments, and about travelling people and the others (including those representative of the state) that they exist in relationship with. Before we begin though, it is worth keeping a few core ideas in mind, especially if you are new to anthropology or ethnography. If you are an experienced reader of ethnography, please do skip to the next section.

The first of these core ideas is that this book is an ethnographic monograph and that such pieces of writing are rather strange if you have not come across them before. They were, in the early days of ethnography, designed to be relatively holistic accounts of a particular society, people's lives and their cultural practices. These days, anthropologists realise that it is impossible to write the whole of a culture in a book (no book could encapsulate how to be a boater just as no book could encapsulate how to be a stockbroker in the City of London, a ship-builder in Newcastle, or a Trobriand islander in Papua New Guinea), and yet some of the classical features of the ethnographic monograph remain. For example, here there are several chapters that describe various aspects of the lives of boaters – including their economic and consumption practices, their way of thinking about community and their ways of organising politically – if not as a holistic account of culture then at least 'in the round' and taking account of the ways in which these aspects are inseparably entangled with one another. This is not just a story about a number of boaters; it is an attempt to talk about a good number of the things that are meaningful to them and that shape their lives.

A second thing to know about the ethnographic monograph, if you are new to the form, is that it is a mixture of *ethnography* (literally 'writing about culture' but meaning really the things that the anthropologist has noticed, including stories and details about people and practices) and *theory* that

is used to interpret or analyse what is going on. Ethnography is produced through the particular and rather unusual methods of anthropology (more later in this chapter), which include reading sources, interviewing people and, importantly, participant observation. This is, in its basic form, a complicated way of saying that the anthropologist lives with a group of people, *participates* in their lives and, at the same time, *observes* them and what they are doing. Anthropologists, unusually even in the social sciences, tend to have a completely *inductive* approach to theory. This means that we try not to go in with pre-conceived theoretical frames or to nail our particular theoretical colours to a particular theoretical mast (it is rare that an anthropologist will say 'I'm a Marxist' or 'I'm a Foucauldian' or 'I'm a Practice Theorist'), but rather that we see what the ethnography is doing and then use theory as a kind of scaffold to make sense of what is going on and to allow us to have conversations with other ethnographies and other anthropologists. I tell my students that, in their fieldwork writings, ethnography should 'be in the driving seat'. If the ethnographic evidence counters a particular and popular way of theorising, say, the formation of community, then this is a good thing. The ethnography should be used to critique the existing theory and create new theory. Academic theory can be abstract, distancing and inaccessible. Anthropology is, to my mind, special because of its ability to lead with the people and only use theory when and where it is useful. I hope that this is a balance that I have achieved here and that what you have here is, predominantly, a text that tells you something about a particular way of life and that secondarily engages some theoretical debates in an accessible way.

Finally, it is worth mentioning two core principles of ethnography; *cultural relativism* and *making the familiar strange*. Cultural relativism, associated with the American anthropologist Franz Boas (Boas 1887), is the idea that actions, morality and beliefs should be understood in relation to the rest of the culture in which they exist. Cultures are not innately superior or inferior to one another, and what people do, even if we may find it unusual, needs to be understood first in its context. Why does this make sense to the people that do it? Once we understand that, we are a step closer to getting beyond the destructive and divisive 'culture wars' that characterise the contemporary moment. Cultural relativism relates closely to the maxim that the anthropologist should endeavour to 'make the strange familiar, and the familiar strange'. I tell my students that good ethnography is like taking off a pair of 'cultural glasses' and trying your best to enter into the imperfect process of putting on another person's pair. The world is going to look different: the 'weird' things that they do may suddenly make a lot more sense and, looking back over our shoulders, the things that 'we' (whoever that anthropological 'we' is) do can look very unusual indeed. This is what I am

trying to do here with my monograph on the boaters, to create a book that does not exoticise, so that if you are a boater reading it you feel properly represented (even though this is, of course, not about all boaters but draws on those people I met in the six years I spent on the waterways), but that also makes it clear to an outsider (who may think that living and travelling around in a 7 ft wide floating miniature apartment is an outlandish idea) what exactly is going on, why some people live on the waterways, and why we all could learn a thing or two from London's waterborne population.

'Alternative Lifestyles'

As an anthropologist working with this particular travelling population, there was a point when barely a week would go by without a fellow student recommending a kind of 'alternative lifestyle' that boat dwelling was 'a bit like'. These ranged from the new traveller (or New Age Traveller) communities who move around Britain in buses and vans, to the showmen travellers who move with fairs and circuses, to the 'van lifers' of predominantly North American origin who make their home and travel in RVs (recreational vehicles), to 'downsizers' who move to tiny cabins often in very rural areas. Some things do link these disparate groups, and sometimes gentle comparison in anthropology (whilst recognising that all societies and cultures are distinct) can be useful. For one thing, many of these groups have rejected a sedentary mode of dwelling where they are 'tied down' to houses and apartments and have taken on some form of travelling life. The other thing that is common to all of these suggested comparators is that there is some level of choice in these communities, some rejection of 'conventional' dwelling. This, however, can easily be overstated, as I know many boaters, van lifers and new travellers who have taken to this life as something of a last resort to avoid street homelessness. This is one of the reasons why grouping these forms of dwelling together as 'alternative lifestyles' and grouping the people that do it together as 'alternative communities' is so problematic. It is important not to romanticise the idea of an alternative lifestyle, or indeed to bracket together ways of living that do not involve living in a house or apartment, even when they have some similarities on the surface.

Having delivered this caveat and issued a warning about romanticising 'alternative lifestyles', however, many boaters that I spoke to did describe their choice to live on a boat as motivated by a desire to have a different set of relationships with things, including the city, nature, money, work and other people. Many of them made very utopian statements about their hopes for a life aboard a boat. For many boaters, living on a boat was a way of carving out a desired life that allowed them more freedom from systems

that they experienced as repressive or undesirable. The chapters here are about some of these different relationships that the boaters try to create. Interestingly, different boaters emphasised different kinds of freedom that boating allowed: for some, it was a way of living cheaply in London and therefore they could leave a job they hated and set up a small business from their boat; for others it was a way of reconnecting with nature; for others, being able to travel and not be 'stuck' in one place was important; for some there was a desire to be part of a kind of community and to connect with others; and for some it was about going 'off-grid' and away from the management and surveillance of systems (including systems like taxation and the type of day-to-day surveillance that goes alongside being part of a modern bureaucratic state). For many more, it was a combination of many of the above. Some boaters used the word 'alternative' to describe the ways in which boating allowed them to live outside or parallel to the systems of 'normal' sedentary life, and many boaters would certainly recognise van lifers, new travellers and downsizers as doing something similar and connected to what they are attempting.

What is the value of noting this utopian alterity? In an influential paper called 'The Romance of Resistance', the anthropologist Lila Abu-Lughod notes that resistance can be a useful diagnostic of power; through looking at how people resist certain things, it can tell us a lot about the actions of power and domination (Abu-Lughod 2000). I agree, and I think that by looking at what boaters do in order to avoid what they see as the unpalatable bits of life in the city – including the way in which the economy and capitalism work, the way that the state operates, the cost of living, the way that communities work – we can find out a lot about important topics such as gentrification, neoliberalism, privatisation, enclosure and life under late capitalism. Further, we may be able to crib ideas and imagine alternatives. At the very least, we are reminded that some spaces are 'free' in some important ways; hard to privatise, hard to enclose and home to a community who want to live there for a time. It is worth spending some time, as I do in this book, thinking about why this may be and how else we could create other utopian spaces and spaces of difference: what Foucault would call heterotopias, or spaces that are 'other' and where intense, different, disruptive or creative ways of being can be attempted (Foucault 1984 [1967]).

Therefore, even when it is not directly using the term, this is a book about alternative lifestyles and alternative dwelling. It will use comparisons (called comparative ethnography) with other alternative communities where it is relevant to do so, but I try to do this lightly as they are so different in so many important ways. The waterways of London and the UK have a very specific geography, history and set of legal and political arrangements, as we shall see. There are populations who live and travel

aboard boats in continental Europe (see Daffe 2018), in the United States, in the Mediterranean (see Rogelja 2017) and elsewhere, and they have some similarities with the boaters of the UK, as well as significant differences. I will focus on the ethnographic portrait of a particular community and be slightly more tentative in my suggestion for more general conclusions that we can draw from the example of the boaters, because the boaters have developed a way of living in interaction with a particular (natural, material, legal) environment. What works on the waterways of London would not work everywhere. However, I hope that the boaters help us to think *outside* of sedentary assumptions and to imagine radically different possibilities. One alternative lifestyle may be as different from another as it is possible to be, and maybe the term itself is not very useful or instructive, but by diving deeply into the lives of the boaters, then maybe we can understand life in contemporary London (and big cities more generally) a little better, and start to create edge spaces of resistance, heterotopias replete with possibilities, within the metropolis.

I have provided summary paragraphs at the end of chapters, marked by section markers that summarise, in plain language, what we can learn about alternative lifestyles. These summary paragraphs will, I hope, help you, if you are not in this for the anthropological theorising, to get your ‘sea legs’ and stay with the thrust of the argument. First, the story of how this all started.

Finding My Way Aboard a Boat

It all began with a chance meeting in 2008 when I was not yet eighteen years old. I was at a party in Maidenhead, meeting my best friend’s more glamorous and intellectual college mates and feeling thoroughly intimidated. I began talking to a young woman named Asha, who had just recently bought her first boat to live on and was moving it ‘down’ from the Midlands to Reading in a matter of days. ‘You’re going to live on a boat?’, I asked. ‘Can people do that?’ Asha laughed and explained that she had lived on a boat for some years as a child, ‘a little plastic boat with my mum and step-dad.’

So began my engagement with the waterways. Asha quickly became a firm friend, and when it was time to move her boat from Reading to Bath, where she would be attending university, I was invited, along with Tom, a mutual friend, to ‘crew’ her small (26 ft) Springer narrowboat² on the journey, covering the complete length of the idyllic Kennet and Avon canal through the Wiltshire countryside. My memories of this journey are added by time and by the consumption of ‘cider and black’ (cheap cider and black-currant squash, a sweet cocktail that we consumed until we fell asleep, top

to tail, on the floor of Asha's tiny boat). The memories that come most clearly to the fore are the tiny canal-side pubs, with their main doors at the rear for access from the waterways and so infrequently accessed from the dirt tracks at their front that they are known locally as 'Boaters' pubs' and have been since the days of the working or carrying boats³ on the canal, or 'cut'.⁴

Rural Wiltshire is notable in that one can travel by canal throughout the day and not see anything that will remind the traveller that they are in the twenty-first century. Roads, modern houses and electricity pylons are rare – the main man-made furniture of the landscape is the cut itself, the farmers' swing bridges⁵ and the nineteenth-century locks, the passing of which punctuates the boater's journey and marks the passage of time and distance. After two weeks without showers, Facebook or mobile telephone signal, we had succumbed to the rhythm of the waterways.⁶

This trip, and Asha's friends, became the basis for my undergraduate dissertation at Durham University. After leaving Durham, I was fortunate to be awarded funding from Brunel University to continue working with the boat-dwelling community. Through Asha, I found a 37 ft narrowboat (this is relatively small, but the size kept the price down and would allow me to 'single-handle'⁷ the boat far more easily), which I purchased for £20,000. This boat was named 'Druscilla'.⁸

And so, on 26 July 2012, after a period of pre-field research into the history of the canals but with little idea of the practicalities of boat living other than what I had gleaned over my time aboard Asha's little Springer, I moved those of my personal possessions that had survived a brutal down-sizing 'purge' onto Druscilla where she lay at a private mooring at the Better Boating Marina in Caversham.⁹ I would not be able to remain in marina-side relative luxury for long; I was to become a 'continuous cruiser', a travelling boater compelled by law to move to a new location every two weeks.¹⁰ Those boaters who were also bound to this itinerant lifestyle were to become my research participants, friends and neighbours for at least the next year (in the end, it was six). This is how, entirely as a product of luck and chance encounters, I came to be a boater living on the waterways of London and South East England.

Structure

I chose to start my story with an autobiographical account of finding my way aboard a boat, as it parallels both the experience of other boaters I have met and the overall structure and shape of this book. As shown in the following chapters, many boaters come to the waterways for economic

reasons, in order to escape crippling rent or mortgage payments or even homelessness. Many then come to 'love the lifestyle', becoming increasingly embedded in the social life and practices of the waterways. Like these boaters, I was pushed into boat dwelling by financial imperative,¹¹ in my case, in the years after my 'fieldwork year', in order to justify my Ph.D. stipend, an income that would not have supported any other way of living in London than squatting or living in a tent. I also came to love my time as a liveaboard, learning more about my boat as I travelled through new neighbourhoods and discovered those communities and areas of London and the South East that I thought I knew from a new angle, an angle often invisible to those who dwell in houses and travel on the roads that pass within meters of the canal and river network.

After explaining a little about the history of the waterways, and the legal situation that the boaters find themselves working within (Chapter 1), I move on to some thematic chapters that talk about different aspects of boaters' lives. Chapters 2, 3 and 4 of this book deal with these personal narratives of becoming part of a community of practice (Lave and Wenger 1991; Wenger 1998): a community that arises from the knowledge and practice of specific acts on the waterways, learning to be skilled in the necessary art of being a liveaboard boater and becoming the sort of individual who 'fits in' to the boat-dwelling community and who can interact well with their environment and can live at the correct pace for boating. I ask, essentially, what kind of a person a boater is and how are they 'created'. In these chapters, Tim Ingold's work on dwelling (2000 and 1993) has been invaluable in that it can help us to understand how the landscape and materiality of the world in which a person dwells is central to shaping their worldview, sociality and sense of identity.

The book then enters a bridging chapter (Chapter 5) in which the boaters, now introduced to the reader, are described through their interactions, both with each other and with people and institutions based in the sedentary world (continued into the second half of the book). This again parallels my own experience: I slowly discovered that, as a result of my dwelling choice, I had become a different type of citizen within the neighbourhoods through which I passed. Unable to vote or register with a doctor, viewed as a curiosity by many and as a threat by others, considered by some to be part of an 'ethnic category' of 'bargee travellers',¹² I became a marginal presence somewhat outside of the normal sedentary 'housed' world.

The centre of the book, both literally and philosophically, is this bridging chapter on community, the emic (local) use and importance of this term being an important key to understanding the social life of boaters. 'Community', in the complex way that it is understood by boaters, connects the community of practice described in the first chapters with the

community of support and protection that marks the boundary between boaters and outsiders.

The book then goes on to interrogate this relationship between the boaters I met and the outside world in Chapters 6, 7 and 8, detailing how boaters become subject to surveillance, security threats and political interventions from agents of the state, ending in a description of how and when the boaters I met organised collectively in response to these threats.

In the second half of the book, when the point of view has been expanded in order to look at the boaters in relation to the wider world, another piece of theory, in this case the work of James Scott, particularly his concepts of legibility (1998) and state avoidance (2011), comes to the fore as I attempt to integrate power and politics into my description of life on the waterways. In recent years, critics of Ingold's dwelling perspective have argued that it does not include the wider networks of power and politics in its frame of analysis (Lounela, Berglund and Kallinen 2019). This book, in moving from leaning on Tim Ingold's writing on dwelling towards a point of view rooted in theories of political economy and statecraft, attempts to show that these two frames are not incompatible and, given enough space for examination and enough ethnographic detail, can be harmoniously combined. Such an expansion in scope – from the individual boater to the world of the boating community, and onwards to examine opposing forces originating in the sedentary world – allows for the creation of a detailed view of the boating world, situated within the contemporary UK state and not in isolation, to be built up, like a film shot that starts from a close up and pulls back to reveal the whole scene.

Therefore, this book paints a picture of a fast-growing 'liveaboard' boating community, a community that has adopted an 'alternative' (but by no means new) lifestyle, and that has made its members somewhat marginal or liminal (meaning in between categories) from the purview of agents of the UK state and the sedentary neighbourhoods through which they pass. The book reaches a conclusion that highlights a thread that can be seen within every chapter; namely, that the boaters have created on the waterways a way of life that privileges an unfixed and flexible mode of being, building a kind of heterotopia (to return to this idea of Foucault's) in the process. This is what Turner (1990) would describe as the 'subjunctive mood of culture', where the rigidity of structure gives way to a situation where new possibilities are able to emerge. To this end, the ways in which the boaters' position within the nation state or compared to their sedentary neighbours is uncertain or liminal is emphasised throughout the book so that this is not just a collection of stories about people and a place but rather tells us something deeper and more profound about how people attempt to carve out an 'alternative' life in spaces where this is a possibility for them.

Chapter 2 onwards describes the ‘how’ and the ‘why’ of life aboard a boat. Before I address these questions, however, it is necessary to outline a rough demographic profile of those who live aboard these boats and the nature of their boats, so that the reader may have a basic understanding of who my participants are, before we have the privilege of getting some more in-depth details about their lives, and what is meaningful and interesting to them, a little later in the book.

Introducing the Boaters and Their Boats

You could think that it would be simple enough to say, at least, roughly how many boaters there are. However, even this relatively simple question is quite complex. According to the licensing authority’s figures, there were 35,130 boats licensed in the UK in 2018 (Bryant 2021). Many of these are registered at residential moorings (where you can live at a permanent mooring at a marina or along a stretch of towpath), although a total number of residential boat dwellers is not part of the data. Canal and River Trust (CaRT), the owners and operators of the majority of the UK waterways and the group I approached to access this information, own only 11 per cent of residential mooring spaces and do not have detailed data for the rest. From survey data, CaRT estimate that 25 per cent of the overall total of boats in the UK are used as permanent residences, just from extrapolating based on the number of respondents who answer their surveys and say that they live on a boat (ibid.), but I know firsthand that liveaboard boaters are more likely to answer surveys from CaRT than those who use their boats for holidays and short trips, simply as the liveaboard boaters have more to gain, and more to lose, in their interactions with the authorities. Some very old data that I received from CaRT’s Press and Communications Officer near the start of my research in 2012 suggested that approximately 4,500 boats at that time were registered without a home mooring and are therefore counted as being for ‘continuous cruising’,¹³ moving from place to place as part of a journey through the waterways (Damien Kemp, personal communication). However, even if we take these rough estimates seriously, there are several reasons why it is difficult to state how many people actually live on boats.

Firstly, many registered moorings are not officially residential but do unofficially allow boaters to live aboard. Secondly, many moorings – residential and non-residential – may not actually be used residentially for even the majority of the year, as boaters may move between houses and holiday extensively aboard a boat. For example, I have met many retired persons and couples who live in a house or flat over the winter and spend five or

six months in the summer aboard their boats; it is hard to know whether or not to count these cases as liveaboard boaters. Thirdly, many of those with continuous cruising licences have gained such a licence in order to avoid paying for a mooring, or due to a lack of mooring availability, and may move their boats from place to place whilst continuing to live in houses. CaRT employee Damian Kemp (personal communication) listed this as one of the main reasons why it is difficult to estimate liveaboard numbers, as ‘some CCers don’t live on their boat; they “weekend” it around the system.’ Lastly, there are, certainly in rural and isolated part of the waterways system, a very few cases of licence avoidance, whereby boaters manage to live for months and years without CaRT finding them and demanding that they pay their licence fee and making them part of the official number of boaters.

Therefore, when I say that my work is with the liveaboard boaters of the South East of England, as opposed to those who own boats for pleasure and for holidays, this is problematic. Also problematic is the category of ‘continuous cruiser’. Boaters may have an official, usually cheap, end-of-the-garden mooring and yet cruise frequently; equally they may be ‘continuous cruisers’ in terms of their licence but not live on a boat. Travelling, not having a home mooring and living aboard a boat are not mutually inclusive categories, and so when I describe my participants as being ‘travelling live-aboard boaters’ without home moorings, I am describing the status of the majority, the community norm, and I am having to ignore a large degree of variation and to gloss over some more complicated individual situations (for example, where someone has a deal that means that they have access to cheap moorings, or where some boaters have effectively ‘squatted’ at a mooring site but do not move etc.). Many of the boaters who formed part of my fieldwork have moorings (although all of them have spent at least some time as continuous cruisers), and even more take temporary moorings, such as CaRT’s ‘winter moorings’,¹⁴ in order to remain in one spot over the coldest months of the year. The cruising liveaboard boater is something of an ideal type that I construct here, with people’s licences and travelling histories being subject to major change as much as their circumstances (related, for example, to families, finances and employment). As I describe in Chapter 2, when we are trying to define who is a boater, more important than mooring type and amount of travel is how much you participate in the life of the waterways, becoming part of the boating community of practice and learning, through your boat, the skills required in order to do so successfully. These people who consider themselves to be part of a liveaboard community are *usually* those who call themselves boaters: they are *usually* permanent liveaboards, they *usually* do not have a permanent mooring and so are ‘continuous cruisers’, and they are the people who this book is primarily about.

I have not made a demographic study of these boaters using questionnaires, and, as such, I have no statistics concerning their age, gender, ethnic makeup or any other such basic information (not that an anthropologist would usually collect this sort of data anyway). Due to the massive scale of the waterways and the complex movements of both myself and the other boaters from locality to locality, a meaningful demographic study of this type would have been impossible to compile, even within the comparatively limited section of London and the South East, where I conducted my research. Therefore, I must rely on my observations, based upon the sample of boaters with whom I met and interacted, and, for flavour, introduce to you some now rather old data produced and published by CaRT. This data (Canal and River Trust 2016) is based on a self-selecting number of boaters who were well-disposed enough towards CaRT to answer the authority's survey. This survey revealed that the boating population in London who answered the survey had the following demographic make-up:

- 58% of respondents to the survey say they use their boats as their primary home.
- 69% of respondents said they are currently living on a boat in the London waterway area.
- 50% of those who responded said that affordability/financial reasons was a motivation for living on a boat.
- 50% have been living on boats on London's waterways for three years or less.
- Over 70% of respondents to the survey said that they owned their boats outright, a further
- 11% said they owned their boat with a loan or mortgage. . . .
- 34% of those living on boats are under the age of 35
- 5% of those living on boats are over the age of 65
- 63 children under the age of 16 living on boats identified through the survey.
- 43% of those living on boats live alone.
- 42% of those living on boats live as part of a cohabiting couple.
- 12% of those living on boats live as part of a wider family group. . . .
- 77% of respondents said they are white (English, Welsh, Scottish, Northern Irish or British), this rises to 89% when white other is included. (Canal and River Trust 2016)

What these numbers do not reveal is the difference in demography from area to area on the waterways. For example, outside of London I mainly met liveaboard cruising boaters who were older couples, often retired, or

individual middle-aged people, usually men. In Reading, during the early part of my fieldwork, I was enthusiastically taken under the wing of a young couple and two local single male boaters, one of whom confessed that they were pleased to have me as I was ‘one of the only young boaters around’ and they were ‘tired of all of these boring old blokes.’ In London, however, particularly at the lower end of the River Lee,¹⁵ a great many boaters are younger, including many young couples, and many young men and women live on their boats alone. Whereas outside London I met very few live-aboard cruising boaters who were not born and raised in the UK and of predominantly white British ethnicity, in London there is a growing population of non-British European boaters, often students, and boaters who have other non-white ethnic origins.

Such demographic variations could be seen as (and are sometimes spoken about in terms of) a difference between boaters outside of London doing it for the ‘lifestyle’ and a rapidly increasing set of individuals in London who are being forced into boating for economic reasons, as economic uncertainty, recessions and the increase in house prices¹⁶ continue to grip the capital. However, it is not as simple as this. In London, there are canals passing through low-income neighbourhoods, close to where students and young people rent, squat and sofa-surf. Boating represents an obvious route out of the housing problems of the city for these individuals, who see many of their peers doing the same. Outside of London, on the River Thames and in other parts of the waterways system, there are fewer boaters scattered across wider distances, and liveaboard boating is less frequently encountered and less likely to be considered a viable option.

As I explain in Chapters 2 and 3, however, while a boater’s economic situation may provide a catalyst to boat dwelling, this is simply the first part of the process of becoming part of the community of practice that makes an individual a boater. Perceived wisdom is that one must be ‘the right kind of person’ in order to live on a boat and that those doing it to escape their council tax and rent bills ‘won’t last’ beyond their first winter (we will hear more about ‘doing a winter’ as a rite of passage in Chapter 2). What is certain is the rising numbers of young boaters, affluent or middle-class boaters, single women boaters, boaters of non-white ethnicity and boaters of non-British nationality on the canals of the capital. And it is these rising numbers that have led, as will be described, to certain intra-community tensions and prejudices about the quality of these ‘new’ or ‘newbie’ boaters, and about whether or not they have the ability to become ‘proper’ boaters given time.

Boats and Boating

Having now briefly introduced the boaters, I move on here to a description of the boats on which they make their homes. There is no such thing as a ‘typical boat’ on the waterways, although the wide spectrum of vessels represented do fit into some main categories that are outlined below. I describe the categories of boat in rough order of monetary value, from cruisers through narrowboats to barges, followed by more unusual vessels that do not fit into this pattern. It is important to note that an order of monetary value is not the same as an order of status. As I discuss in Chapters 2 and 3, what matters most is entry into a community of practice, not material goods (and included in this category of material goods is one’s boat).¹⁷ Indeed, more expensive boats can often be a marker that a boater is too affluent and lives in too much luxury to really be part of the social life of the waterways. This discussion is important, as the material condition of the boat and the particular challenges of life afloat are the central conditions from which all of the later arguments and descriptions in this book stem. Included here are brief discussions of the most common types of boat to be found on the inland waterway.

Fibreglass Cruisers

At the cheapest end of the boating spectrum¹⁸ lie fibreglass ‘cruisers’, ‘cabin cruisers’ or ‘river-cruisers’. Many of these boats have been constructed for day trips out on the river for pleasure, with maybe the occasional night onboard. Smaller fibreglass vessels are vulnerable to damage by larger steel boats; they are not designed for long-term domestic use and so are unlikely to come with sophisticated cooking facilities, powerful domestic batteries or a stove for warmth in the winter (although these can be fitted). Further, they are susceptible to condensation and the consequences of such trapped moisture. I have heard these boats jokingly called ‘yogurt pots’, ‘toasters’, ‘fridge magnets’, ‘plastics’ and ‘appliances’ due to their being small, plastic-looking and with a white glossy finish.

Boaters often buy a ‘cruiser’ as a first boat due to their comparative cheapness in relation to narrowboats before seeking to upgrade, maybe after ‘doing up’ their cruiser as a first ‘project boat’. When I started my fieldwork, the cost of a well-equipped cruiser of 25–30 ft was around £5,000–£7,000, but a friend in Reading managed to purchase a cruiser with a sound hull and an engine for £500 cash, which he succeeded in coaxing back to life. He made a rudder out of a bathroom door and a banister and then he was away, with what he claimed was ‘the cheapest floating home on the



Figure 0.1. Inland marina on a sunny day. Photograph by Simon Annable. Shutterstock Standard License. Stock Photo ID: 1942703881.

river'. Small cruisers in less than peak condition that need a 'fit-out' to be habitable can be purchased for under £3,000 from most marinas, offering an entry-level option for many first-time boat buyers. Because of the relative poverty of many cruiser dwellers, in London they are most likely to be found on the River Lee, where a cheaper 'river only' licence is required as opposed to a 'standard' licence.¹⁹

Large, luxurious cruisers, often looking like or even functioning as small luxury yachts, form another category again. They are typically extremely expensive (upwards of £50,000) and are known locally on the rivers as 'gin palaces' due to their owners' propensity to cruise the river drinking gin and tonics whilst, as the prejudice runs, wearing a captain's hat and breaking all of the existing rules of boat etiquette. They are not used by liveaboards but rather by affluent holidayers and weekend pleasure boaters. 'Gin palaces' and their owners are considered by many boaters to be an annoyance and a threat, as I describe in later chapters.

Narrowboats

By far the most numerous vessels on the rivers are narrowboats. These boats have a long history and were originally unique to the British waterways. This is because, due to the narrow gauge of many of the early canals, particularly narrowboats were required for navigation. The original narrowboats that were used for dwelling date from approximately 1820 (see Chapter 1). Early liveaboard pioneers²⁰ modified these old 'working boats' for residen-

tial use, but most boaters now live aboard boats designed for residential use or for pleasure cruising. Boaters told me that narrowboats have been built for residential and holiday use since the late 1960s or early 1970s, with the Springer company being an early entrant into the marketplace.

There are now a great variety of boats available for sale, in sizes ranging from the smallest – approximately 20 ft long *Springers* and similar variants – up to 72 ft, the longest a boat can be in order to get through every lock on the system. Some boats designed only for rivers with large locks can be of even greater lengths, up to 90 ft or more, but these over-long vessels are rare. The width, however, is more standardised, somewhere in the region of 6'10" so as to get through the 'narrow' single gate locks on the remaining narrow canals; for example, the Huddersfield Narrow and Oxford canals. It is, of course, this long and thin appearance that gives narrowboats their name, and which led to their precursors being called 'starvationers', due to their skinny or 'starved' appearance (Burton 1989). Many boats in London are now 'widebeams', which are effectively the same as narrowboats but have a wider width or 'beam' (up to 14 ft in some cases).

Widebeams are wider narrowboats – although I realise that this sounds like a contradiction in terms. The widebeam is typically 10–14 ft wide (approximately the width of two narrowboats). They can be used along most of the waterways system, except the narrow canals and those waterways where the sides of locks are so badly maintained and bowed that they have not maintained their original 14 ft width; for example, some parts of the River Stort. Widebeams are generally more expensive than traditional width narrowboats due to the extra space.

These narrowboat-type vessels are typically based on a welded steel hull, although narrowboat-shaped vehicles have been produced with fibreglass hulls, wooden hulls and riveted steel hulls. The cabins above these hulls can also be steel, wood or fibreglass, each material with distinct advantages and disadvantages. Wooden cabins, for example, need regular maintenance and have a propensity to leak; fibreglass cabins are said to be magnets for condensation; steel cabins are sturdy but insulate poorly, making them cold in winter and intolerably warm at the height of summer.

Externally, narrowboats are characterised into three rough groups: traditional, semi-trad and cruiser stern. This distinction refers to the composition of the rear (also stern or aft) of the boat: traditional stern boats have an enclosed engine room and almost no back deck; semi-trads have a very small back deck and an engine room, and cruiser sterns have a large open back deck, which has the engine underneath. In these latter examples, the engine can only be reached by the removal of deck boards and the owner or mechanic descending down into the 'bilge' (the area at the bottom of the boat where waste water collects). Boaters are sometimes vocal in their

preference of different types, and there are advantages and disadvantages to each setup; for example, cruiser stern boats allow a convivial driving experience, whereas ‘trad’ boats have an engine that can be easily accessed for maintenance and checks.

The internal fit-out of narrowboats varies, like any home, according to the preferences and skills of the owner, and the historical choices of all previous owners. They are mosaics of projects, half-formed ideas, ill-judged wallpapering choices, bad carpentry, good carpentry and myriad other factors. Narrowboats often have a bedroom at the stern (although having a bedroom at the bow, ‘a reverse fit-out’ as it is also known, is becoming increasingly common). They will often also have a galley kitchen, with gas-powered cooking appliances, fridges (more rarely, due to the high power requirements of heating and cooling elements), and any of the other accoutrements of the contemporary kitchen, although with far fewer electrical goods. There will also be a toilet room, often doubling up as the shower room, which will have either a chemical toilet (also known as an ‘elsan’, ‘cartridge’ or ‘cassette’ toilet), which must be emptied by hand at the geographically-scattered elsan facilities provided by CaRT, or a pump-out system, which leads to a waste tank that must be ‘pumped’ out by a coal boat (also called ‘working boats’ or ‘fuel boats’) or at a marina. Less common than these two options, but increasing in popularity as the technology gets better, is the ‘composting toilet’. The debate over the relative merits of pump-out vs. cartridge facilities between boaters is heated but good-natured, and boaters sometimes describe themselves as split into two ‘tribes’ over their toilet preference.

The boat will also almost always have a solid fuel stove for heat and (frequently) for cooking, in which the boater will burn smokeless coal, purchased from the ‘coal boats’ and marinas, and wood, much of which is scavenged and split into manageable portions with an axe, which is one of the boater’s most essential items. Heating may occasionally be supplemented by coal or diesel radiator heating systems (but almost never electrical, due to the power usage). The maintenance of a good store of coal, wood, gas, diesel and water for the water tank is an important part of most boaters’ daily life.

Narrowboats may have ‘traditional’ Rose and Castle artwork decoration²¹ or, increasingly, a more modern ‘paint job’ or even a money-saving DIY effort. ‘Traditional’ sign painting is increasingly rare, with few practitioners of the art still in business, although boats may still have their old signs visible. Most boaters display the name of their boat in some way, with stick-on signage, expressive graffiti, stencilled work or, in some cases in London, by paying a street artist to paint the boat as a piece of individual floating artwork.



Figure 0.2. Scenic view of narrowboats on the Kennet and Avon Canal in Wiltshire, England. Photograph by 1000 words. Shutterstock Standard License. Stock Photo ID: 2153711855.

As these variations demonstrate, it would be impossible to describe a ‘typical’ narrowboat. In line with this unpredictability, narrowboats can cost anything on a massive range from £5,000 to £100,000 or more, with a 60 ft boat, reasonably well-maintained and kitted out for liveaboard use (the closest you could come to describing a ‘typical’ vessel), costing anything from £25,000 to £40,000 at the time of my fieldwork. One boater told me about a rule of thumb whereby a reasonably high-quality narrowboat should, as a guide, cost around £1,000 per foot of length. Some narrowboats are ‘hire craft’, being taken out onto the system as a holiday rental, and these are easily spotted due to their brightly-coloured hire company liveries and signage.

Barges (Including Dutch Barges)

It is common for those who are not boaters to call all boats ‘barges’ or to ask the boater ‘so, you live on a barge?’ In reality, barges are a small subsection of boats on the waterways. Barges tend to be converted ‘working’ (commercial) river barges, or ‘Dutch’ barges, typically imported from the Netherlands, where they also had a commercial past. Dutch barges are

marked by their curved centre sections and often have a covered 'wheel-house', whereas narrowboats are mainly driven from the stern by a tiller attached to the rudder. Dutch barges can be old, some of them nineteenth-century, and typically have thick riveted steel hulls.

Barges tend to be larger than narrowboats in terms of both width and length. Barges are not necessarily historical vehicles, and some are being made new (including luxury models for very high prices, up to the price of bricks-and-mortar houses); I met a couple who had ordered a barge to be built new for them, with a luxurious design and high-quality fittings they chose themselves, by a company that charged them £250,000 for the project. This is the most expensive boat I encountered and is very much an outlier when compared with the norm.

Due to the relatively high price of barges (well-maintained 70 ft Dutch barges with a good fit-out typically cost £100,000 or more) and the cost of their maintenance and upkeep, they tend to attract an affluent crowd of boat buyers, although, as I described previously, this does not imply that these individuals are of comparatively high status in the community; indeed it is often the opposite. Some boaters, however, manage to make enough money from completing projects on their old boats, 'doing them up' to be worth more money than they were previously, and thereby climb up what I have heard called the 'boating housing ladder' to higher-value homes, including barges. Barges can also be far cheaper when purchased in the Netherlands and sailed over – often, it was rumoured, around half the



Figure 0.3. Dutch barge passing Splatt Swing Bridge, Gloucester and Sharpness Canal. Wikipedia Commons, Public domain. Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 2.0.

price that they would fetch in the UK. Therefore, boaters who are not particularly affluent when compared to the rest of the community can through clever dealing and getting a cheaper ‘project’ boat become barge owners if they feel the need to. Some boaters have this as a stated intention and a dream for the future due in part to the degree of personal space afforded by barges and their aesthetically pleasing shapes.

It is commonly recognised, however, that higher-value boats are not intrinsically better. My boating friends in Reading, for example, deemed it sensible that I purchase a 37 ft boat for ease of single-handed navigation and turning in mid-stream. In another example, a couple justified ‘moving up’ to a widebeam as they were soon to have a child. In other words, the boat must, first and foremost, suit the needs of the owner. It is also important to note that some boaters make an income brokering the sale of boats from the Netherlands, taking advantage of this difference in price on either side of the North Sea. This means that barge ownership is often associated with paying too much and not being a canny and knowledgeable boater unless the owner somehow got ‘a good deal’.

Coal Boats and Unusual Vessels

Coal boats (or working boats or fuel boats) are old ‘working pairs’ (see Chapter 1), which are now run as businesses in order to provide the boaters of London with coal, wood, gas, diesel, common chandlery²² items and pump-out services. They are about 70 ft long, with the majority being stores with small back cabins in which the modern working boaters live, either whilst they are on a working ‘run’ of deliveries, or permanently if they do not have another boat as their permanent residence.

In addition to the types of boat described here, other idiosyncratic vessels can be seen on the waterways. Some have been built by the boaters themselves, either from a hull or even merely from some pieces of wood and barrels. London has a small population of sailing boats, small yachts, tug-boats, tall-ships and other sea-going vessels, which have, through various methods, found their way from the coast to the inland waterways. Some boats defy categorisation – for example, that of a former neighbour of mine, who lives in a Tudor-effect wattle-and-daub vessel with a thatched roof and no obvious engine or steering mechanism mounted on what is possibly a set of wooden struts.

During my fieldwork, an increasing number of boaters began purchasing former oil-rig lifeboats, which tend to be extremely cheap (£3,000–£8,000) and comparatively spacious compared to cruisers. These boats, however, tend to be shells when purchased, with absolutely none of the



Figure 0.4. A typical assemblage of boats on a London mooring. Photograph by the author, 2013. © Ben Bowles.

necessary ‘fit-out’ for ‘liveaboard’ purposes. They tend to arrive with excellent, well-maintained and barely used engines due to oil-rig safety regulations but with the significant disadvantage that they are too tall to fit under the lowest bridges of the rivers and canals without heavy ballasting or the roofs of the driving towers removed (one boater resorted to lowering a bathtub full of bricks over the side when an extra foot or so of hull immersion was required).

Because of this, stating that one lives ‘on a boat’ is, to a knowledgeable interlocutor, merely the start of a long conversation and is not an indication of very much at all. Even the follow-up question ‘what kind of boat?’ is not particularly instructive. I could answer that I lived aboard a 37 ft Colecraft-built narrowboat, dating from 1982, with a cruiser stern, a 1500-BMC engine and a pump-out, but this would, again, not reveal more than the basic structural data of my idiosyncratic and unique vessel, with its own complicated social history. It would be the rough equivalent of trying to understand a person through their census data. Boaters understand this, knowing instead the deeper questions to ask about the minutiae of boat and engine maintenance, the narratives of boat history and origin, the shared locations and acquaintances, indeed the type of ‘thick’ description that the following chapters portray.

Ultimately, we cannot know very much about life on the waterways just by looking at some pictures of boats and talking about ‘trad sterns’, ‘pump-out toilets’ or whatever degree of demographic change. Anthropology holds that we only really know anything about people’s social life through

doing, through engaging with them and getting beneath the skin. Quite how I tried to do this is the subject of the next section.

When, Where and What?

When

Officially the fieldwork that makes up this book took place between 26 July 2012, when I started living on my narrowboat Druscilla and began taking daily field notes, and September 2013, when I returned to Brunel University to begin the process of writing. Unofficially, my personal history with the waterways began in 2008, and I continued living on my boat and engaging with the waterways until October 2018. I have remained in contact with some old friends and contacts from the field since then. In many ways, it is hard to say quite what period this book covered, although most of the anecdotes and examples in this book are from that fieldwork year that, at the time of writing, was almost a decade ago.

I have not ignored events – particularly legal events that have changed the relationship between boaters and the waterways authorities²³ – that occurred over the period of my write-up. However, I use them sparingly and for the sake of providing a deeper and more valid historical picture. Events from my earlier travels on the waterways and from my undergraduate research period are also used sparingly; some of the individuals I met during my earlier fieldwork became key participants in my main period of fieldwork and, as such, their stories and perspectives may originate from pre-2012. In short, my long and continued engagement with the waterways has created a flexibility in the timescale of my work. As a consequence of this, the chapters presented in this book are not a chronological description or timeline. While I clearly emphasise the changes that have occurred between the beginning of my engagement with the boaters and the present day, the chapters are built up in a kind of mosaic from events experienced throughout a long immersion in my field of study. By the time you read this, some of what you read about will have happened quite some time ago; if you went to speak to people on London’s canals, you may well feel that some things are exactly the same while other things subtly different. This is unavoidable. This book is not a ‘snapshot’ of the canals in 2012 and 2013, as it deals in both some of the before and after, but it is also to be understood as about a time, a place and a set of interactions and not about ‘the waterways’ as some kind of unchanging monolith, as flow and change are constant.

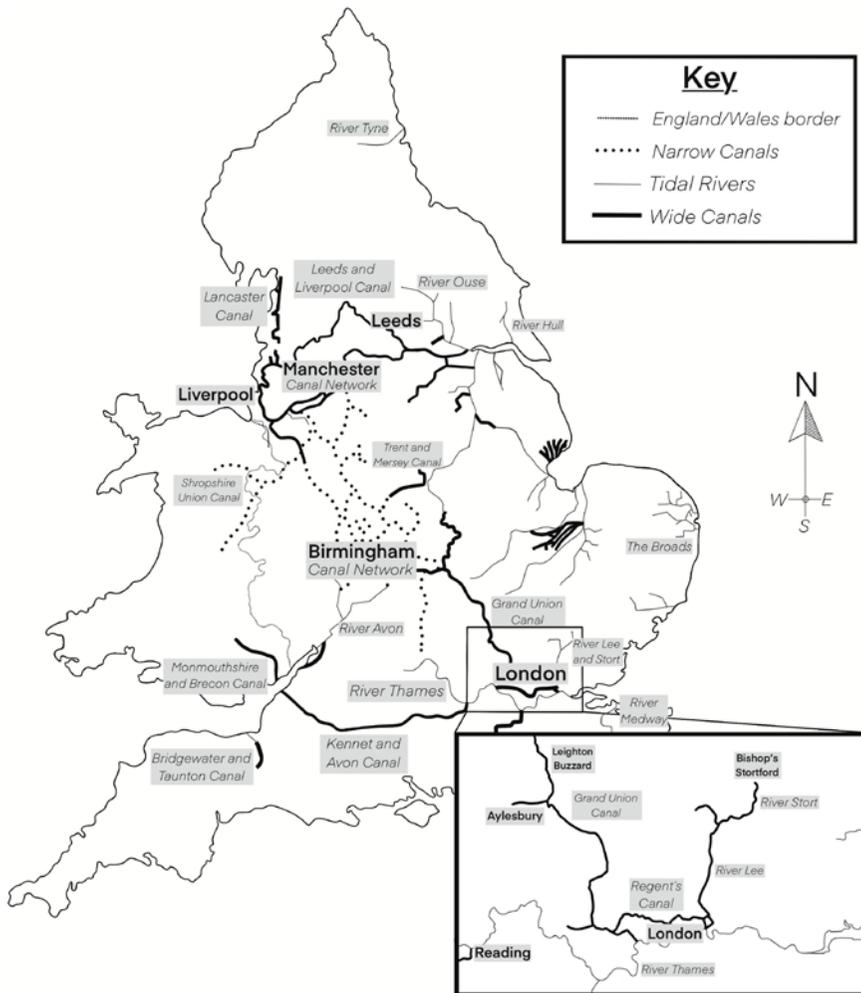
Where

In addition to this temporal flexibility, there is also a necessary flexibility of geographic focus. As is described in more detail in the next chapter, I, like my participants, was bound by law to move to a new location every fourteen days as part of a continuous navigation. As such, I did not have the opportunity afforded to Okely (1983) to stay in one site and get to know one travelling community as they moved through. I could not have afforded a ‘home mooring,’ and even if I had had one, I would not have met the travelling boaters that this book is about. Equally, I could not stay in or around one location without a mooring as I would have been taken to court by CaRT and ultimately lost my home. I had seen the evasive, generally polite but closed and private way in which boaters generally responded to potential researchers and journalists who were not themselves boaters, and it was clear from this that I would have to become a liveaboard boater myself to have any kind of access to my intended participants. It was a challenge that I had some trepidation about, but one that I was willing to take on!

I started living on a boat close to Reading and immediately began making friends with members of the close boating community there. I could have stayed around that area for the duration of my fieldwork. However, the large number of boaters in London, the tales of their recent difficulties caused by London’s hosting of the 2012 Olympic Games, and the contrast I expected to find between the waterways and the crowded urban space of the capital together convinced me to move ‘up river’: to join the Grand Union canal at Brentford and to make my way through the Grand Union – the Paddington Arm, the Regent’s Canal and the River Lee. These are the waterways that are spoken of as the ‘waterways of London,’ and they serve as the home of the ‘London Boaters.’ Whilst in London, I could have moved less frequently, but I was scared of legal repercussions and, as such, my cruises around the city’s waterways were extensive.

What

In keeping with traditional ethnographic research, my primary methodology was participant observation: keeping detailed field notes, long-hand, in field diaries and living as a boater for a long period whilst being mindful of the experience and having as good a set of conversations as possible with as many boaters as I could meet.²⁴ In addition to ‘hanging out,’ informally interviewing my boating neighbours, engaging with those who work on and around the waterways and attending relevant boaters’ organisation meetings and consultations (see Chapters 6 and 8), I also conducted



Map 0.1. A map of the inland waterways of England and Wales with canals and rivers labelled and major towns and cities identified. The waterways of London and the South East that are the subject of this book are inset. Reproduced with the kind permission of Fionn Hargreaves, 2023. © Fionn Hargreaves.

fifteen semi-structured (sometimes recorded and transcribed, sometimes simply minuted) interviews with boaters from London, three with boaters from outside of the capital, and one with a senior member of CaRT. These interviews were mainly conducted in the early period of my time spent in London, when, as is described in Chapter 5, I was finding it hard to meet boaters with whom I could speak without contriving circumstances

through which to do so. The interviews were only partially about collecting data; they were more a way of meeting boaters and getting further 'in' to a community on the waterways (see Skinner 2012). There are so few interviews for a year of work because this was not my main methodology, and I really only saw them as a way in to engage with my field.

Given the somewhat unusual nature of my fieldwork, the ethnography on which this book is based draws heavily on my own experiences as an individual learning to be a boater. I share with Nancy Scheper-Hughes (1992) her 'distain for anthropologists who write ethnographies which are essentially autobiographies' (summarised in Skidmore 2004: 34); ethnographies are texts about *selves and others*, and yet I recognise, with Skidmore, the need to use the self as a research tool under circumstances where one is attempting to describe the affective experience of life in a particular location. Boaters learn about the waterways through the medium of their own unique boat and through the course of their own travels around the system, gaining the skills, knowledge and access to networks (the 'symbolic' and 'cultural' capital; see Bourdieu 1977) that help them to become a 'proper' boater, embedded in the waterways' community of practice (see Chapter 2). Because of this, my own journey into this social world became central to my analysis, even beyond the normal level of 'reflexivity' expected from the contemporary fieldworker.

After this brief introduction to the 'how' of my research, I now move on to the last bit of context and framing that we need before we can go deep into the boaters' social lives. We need, before we get into the deep ethnography, to know a little more about the history of the waterways, the boaters and how there came to be a travelling group on the canals and rivers of the UK. We also need to know a little about their recent history, mainly through the prism of the laws that govern their lives and movements, in order to understand some of the challenges that boaters face and why there has already been so much talk about 'authorities,' 'conflict' and 'contested' law.

Notes

1. Bryant (2021) uses (limited) survey statistics that suggest around 25 per cent of the 35,130 people who registered for a boat licence in the UK in 2021 may well be 'liveaboards' (people who live aboard their boats). However, as we will see, getting a firm number for how many people are boat dwellers in the UK is notoriously difficult.
2. See the later section of this chapter concerning types of boat.
3. See Chapter 1.

4. The canal is known as the 'cut', as it is literally cut out from the earth.
5. Small bridges designed to allow the passage of cattle and foot travellers, operated (swung across on hinges) by the boat travellers themselves.
6. This rhythm, also known as 'boat time', is discussed in depth in Chapter 3.
7. The term used for navigating a boat by oneself.
8. All boats are named, and as shall be seen in Chapter 2, a boat name is important, as one is often known by it on the waterways. Boaters tend to think deeply about the name and its connotations before finding *le mot juste* for their vessel.
9. In the English language, all boats and ships are traditionally referred to by female-gendered pronouns (Curzan 2003), which is unusual considering how rare gendered forms are in a language that favours neutral pronouns. The boats of the inland waterways are no exception. This appears to be a simple historical convention that has persisted, and none of my informants attached much significance to it. When I asked the boaters whether they saw boats as being female in any meaningful way none of them answered in the affirmative.
10. This will be fully explained in Chapter 2 and will be a recurrent theme throughout.
11. I do not wish to imply that my financial situation, caused by indulging my academic curiosity and not from actual unemployment, poverty or homelessness, is the same as the experiences of my informants, some of whom do come to the waterways in a state of severe financial hardship. I was nonetheless able to experience, as do many of my informants, life in one of the world's most expensive cities as a person on a seriously limited income.
12. See the later section of this chapter introducing the National Bargee Traveller Association (NBTA) and the question of boater 'ethnicity'.
13. As described in Chapter 2, those who travel and do not have a home mooring are called 'continuous cruisers' in common parlance and in Canal and River Trust's documentation.
14. Moorings that allow boaters to stay at one assignment mooring for three, four or five months over the coldest months, for which they are charged quite a considerable set fee.
15. The River Lee is also, entirely interchangeably, known and referred to as the River Lea. To avoid confusion, I shall use the spelling 'Lee' throughout the book.
16. See Pinkstone (2022) and Fenton (2022).
17. Visual markers on an individual's boat are, however, evidence of one's approach to the waterways, including where one lies in respect of the 'shiny'/'dirty' boater distinction outlined in Chapter 2.
18. Most boaters own or co-own their boats, as legal rent agreements on boats are rare. Renting is usually used in order to get a 'taste for' boating life and to see whether one is prepared and suitable. The increase in requests for boats to rent in recent years and months has caused many boaters to frustratingly send e-mails and Facebook posts reminding prospective renters that renting narrowboats is often illegal, dangerous for both renters and landlords, and is very expensive in the long term when compared to the price of buying a boat.
19. License fees for 2021/2022 show that 'prompt payment' for twelve months on a boat of between 27'11" in length and 31'1" in length will cost £701.84 for a 'standard licence', as compared with £421.10 for a 'river only licence' (Canal and River Trust 2021a).

20. See Chapter 2.
21. For a detailed discussion of rose and castle artwork, its origins and its history, see Hill (1983a), De Maré (1950) and Rolt (1999 [1944]).
22. Shops providing boat items, often housed in marinas, are known as chandleries. Chandleries in medieval times were responsible for candles and candle-making. Ships' stores would be filled by particular commercial soap and candle dealers, and these became known as 'ships-chandleries' (Palmer 1987).
23. As shall be explained in greater detail in Chapter 2, the boaters use the term 'authorities' to refer to the groups who manage and hold legal sway over the waterways. This is, for the majority of UK waterways, Canal and River Trust (CaRT), but on, for example, the River Thames, the government's Environment Agency (EA) has legal responsibility for the waterway, for keeping the current free, for maintaining locks and other equipment, and for the boaters who live on the watercourse. The term 'authorities' may also refer to the police force or workers holding the authority of local government (the council) when making claims over the boaters.
24. I could not regularly use my laptop for updating field notes, as both using (and charging) it would have wasted too much electricity and put too high a demand on my boat's batteries.