

A Collection of photographs and film from  
research held on the English canals.  
All content by Annie Gibson.

Research carried out as part of the University  
of Manchester Visual Anthropology Masters.  
Many thanks to Rupert Cox for his  
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their kindness and enthusiasm.



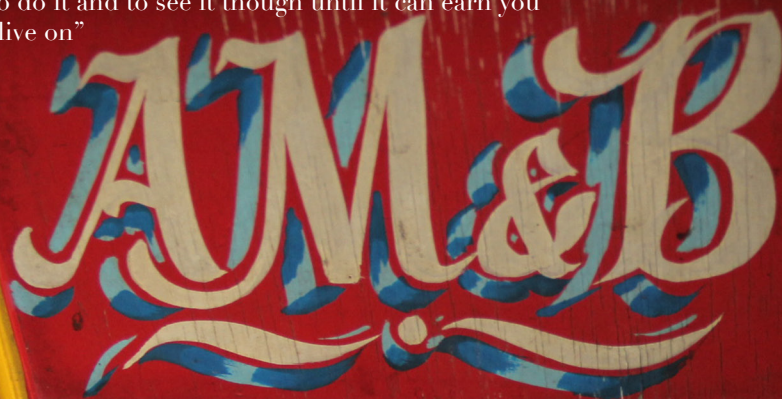
## The Coal Boat



The Coal Boat travels and trades along the Inland Waterways keeping alive the working tradition that the canals were built for. Whilst its presence may be evocative of a past industry, the canal's waters are home to a very active community of live-aboard boaters. The photographs and film included in this book take a journey along these waters joining working boats and meeting their customers, the people who represent this current chapter of life on the English canals.



"It's a special place, not everybody gets it, but it's a wonderful environment, you're so close to nature. A lot of people have an affinity with the sea or rivers or water, it's a calming thing and to a lot of people it's a dream. To run the coal boat, we had to learn the skills and knowledge. It is an incredibly hard thing to do and you've got to have an absolute passion to do it and to see it through until it can earn you enough money to live on"




A M & B

Brian and Ann Marie McGuigan on their coal boat, Alton- Macclesfield Canal.







A woman with long dark hair is seen in profile, looking out of a window. She is holding a white object, possibly a bag or a piece of clothing, in front of her. The window has a decorative glass pattern consisting of a series of interlocking arches. The light coming through the window is bright and warm, creating a soft glow. The woman's face is partially in shadow, and her expression is contemplative.


“I like it because I have to think about where I get my water, how i’m generating electricity, how I’m going to get my wood and natural resources, so I’m connected very much to the outside.

When I haven’t moved for a while, I forget, but there’s life on the canal. It can be quiet for quite a long time and then all of a sudden something random happens to connect us”







A man with long dark hair tied back, wearing a dark jacket, is shown in profile, focused on carving a large, dark, textured wooden object, likely a boat hull. He is using a chisel and a yellow pencil. The background is a blurred, overcast landscape with bare trees.

“On the Caldon canal in the winter, it was minus 20 degrees and we were stuck for 13 weeks. It was me, Michelle and one other boat, cut off and secluded all together. We set up a little community, I had a big christmas tree on the tow path and a spare battery with lights, it was great”

Jez Squire- Macclesfield Canal








"I think it chooses you the canal, as if it was meant to be. I had been a mother and had been living in a house for such a long time on this estate, and I said to myself, I can't die here. So now I had a boat and could travel. I like to keep moving, you've always got a different garden once you've stopped, that's the beauty of it and if you get bored you can move on, if you don't like your neighbour you can move on. I don't think we're meant to be stuck in one place you know"

Michelle Martin- Macclesfield Canal









“For me, Monday to Friday was existing and the long weekends on the boat was living, and that was troublesome because it meant you didn’t enjoy all your life. That’s the elation, with living on the boat, is that you just feel yourself, there’s nothing in the way.

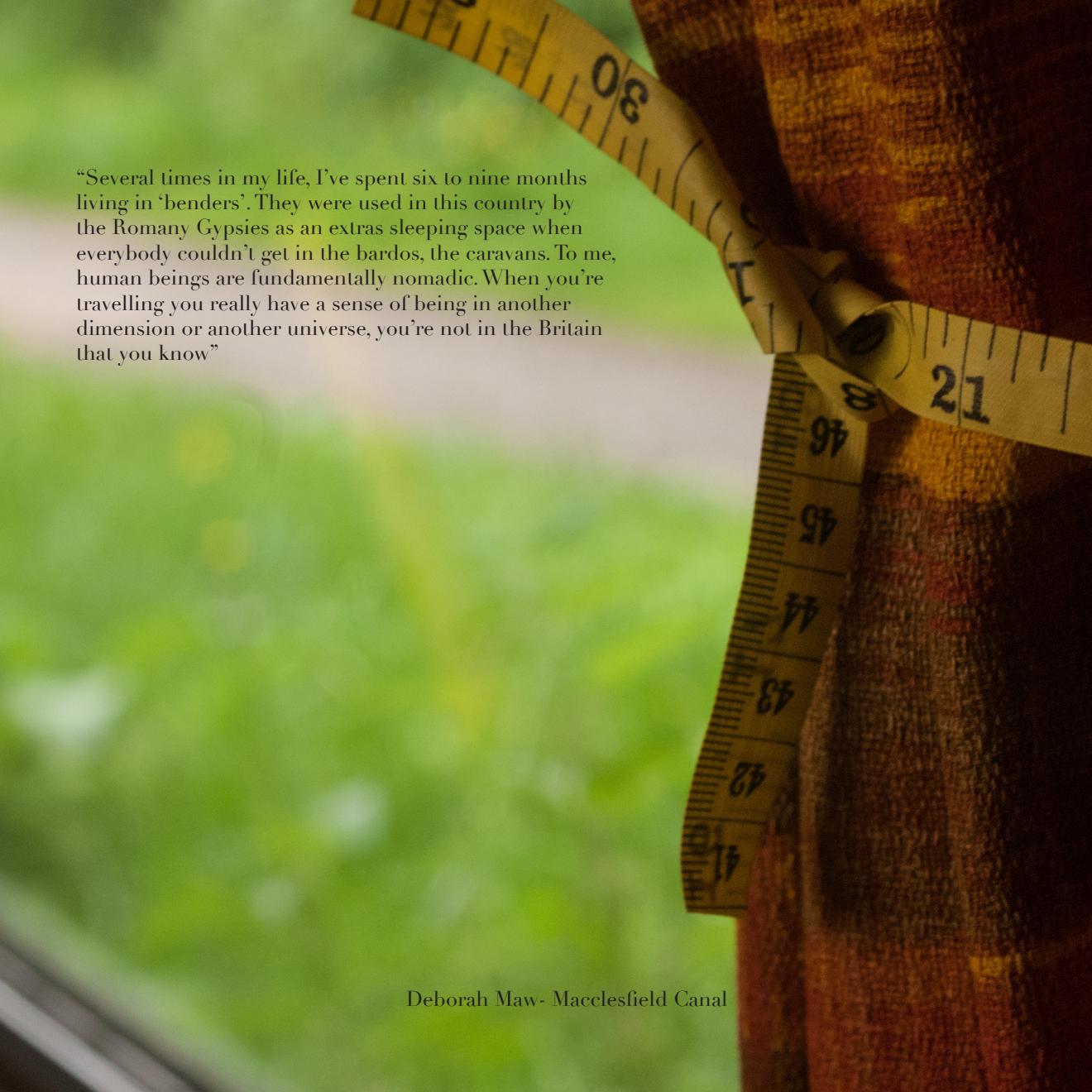
There is a live aboard culture on the canal, not the weekend warriors who come out from the marinas for a fortnight every summer. They’re bad mannered and don’t want to talk to you anyway. They’re in a rush, that’s the problem”

Mel and Roy Nicol- Peak Forest Canal









“Several times in my life, I’ve spent six to nine months living in ‘benders’. They were used in this country by the Romany Gypsies as an extras sleeping space when everybody couldn’t get in the bardos, the caravans. To me, human beings are fundamentally nomadic. When you’re travelling you really have a sense of being in another dimension or another universe, you’re not in the Britain that you know”

Deborah Maw- Macclesfield Canal







"We've sold boats to women all over the country, Deborah, Miranda, Tessa, and they've ended up mooring together on the Macclesfield canal, totally by chance. The thing with boaters is, it's like the world's biggest cul-de-sac. Everybody knows each other, you might be 60 miles apart, but if something bad happens, you'll all be there. It might take 10 days to get there, but you'll do it."

Huw's been on the canal for 20 years, and I have for 12. To us, it's incredibly important that our work is on the canal. We take the train to the trip boat we have in Leeds, doing 40 miles in 40 minutes, but then it's back into work and back into boat time"




Jenna Gill, Huw Cross and their daughter, Eva- Leeds and Liverpool Canal







A photograph of a cluttered room. In the background, a television set on a wooden stand displays a person in a white garment. To the right, a bookshelf holds several books, including 'A WEEK IN DECEMBER' by Hay House, 'COSMIC ORDERING The Next Step' by Hay House, and 'Before you'. In the foreground, a large, unlit white candle sits on a black stand. Below it, another smaller white candle is visible. A yellow balloon with the text 'Miracles Do Happen' is partially visible in the bottom right corner. The room appears to be a living space with various items scattered around, including a remote control and some papers on the TV stand.


"I wanted to make this a house, I wanted it to be a home. I remember the man who fitted it out saying, it's not a house you know, it's a boat and it was very hard to get my brain to think of it as a piece of machinery. Now I understand that, the only thing I can think is: I'm on my own and getting older. Like this fire, I can't light it, I have to wait for my son-in-law to help so that's a pain"

Christine Emery- Macclesfield Canal.







A photograph of the interior of a canal boat. On the right, a wooden door with a brass handle and lock is partially open, revealing a window with a view of the outside. To the right of the door is a dark red curtain with a gold-colored floral pattern. On the left, a metal chain and pulley system are visible, likely used for moving the boat. The background is a bright, hazy view of the canal and surrounding landscape.


“When we were first married back in the 1970s, our first home was a canal boat, but that was before canal boats became the popular thing they are now. There weren’t many on the market, and the boat we bought was an old wooden hull butty boat, which had been cut into two parts. We got the 40 foot section, which someone had put the top of a double decker bus onto. It was a real Heath Robinson affair, which would have crumpled had we moved it. You see everybody else going past like they’re on an adventure, although then we were in Birmingham and you rarely saw anyone moving about. Not much passing traffic and if you saw anyone moving it was quite an event. I always regretted being on the canal and not being able to get around to anywhere so I always said, “one day I’ll buy a proper boat and I’ll do it properly” and this is it”

John Pugh- Macclesfield Canal.










"Before I lived on the boat, I was working full-time as a Reiki teacher. I was working mostly with teenagers with ADHD, and as part of that, we had a boat that you could hire for a weekend. So we took a group of 8 teenagers with ADHD on the boat, kids that I'd worked with for about a year, teaching them Reiki, teaching them meditation. On the boat, I found that when they went into meditation they went way deeper than they did on land; I was starting to panic when I couldn't bring them back as easily! The only thing I could put it down to was that being in flowing water is extremely relaxing. You're in the flow, you're living in the flow. The thing is, I don't think the Canal and River Trust want people continuously cruising anymore, but I don't want to live in a marina. To me, a marina is a horizontal block of flats"

Jenny Ray- Coventry Canal.







A man in a red shirt is in the foreground, waving his right hand towards the camera. He is wearing a black watch. In the background, a woman in a white shirt and pink skirt stands on a small boat. A red crane is visible in the distance. The scene is set on a canal or river.


“I consider what people do in London as a loophole and you’re kind of exploiting the loophole in the fact that you can move every 2 weeks and you can move within a very short distance, like literally 2 spots and it’s so overcrowded. I came back to my boat last week and there was a broad beam moored alongside me! You see people triple mooring here. It’s education and learning that etiquette. The problem is it’s just a floating flat for a lot of people here”

Adam Hayden and Clara de Los Arcos Diez.- The Regent’s Canal







A photograph of a cluttered kitchen sink area. The sink is white and contains various items like a red bowl, a white bowl, and a black pot. Above the sink, several mugs are hanging from a rack. To the right, a large, patterned towel hangs. The background is a window looking out onto a river. The text is overlaid on the window area.

“Nobody else lives in the Thames, nobody officially lives on the Thames, We’re on our own a bit out here. But it’s very active the river, you get to know a lot of people going past on boats. There’s this thing in the Wind and the Willows where Mole says, ‘doesn’t it get dull on the river’ and Ratty says ‘goodness me, dull, no!’, and tells him about all these characters that he meets on the river and it’s just like that”

Christina, Ian, Jasmine, Ashley and Arthur Hogg- Upper Thames.









“It’s been working its whole life, all the way through. Without us youngsters, my generation, I don’t know who will take on the boat after that. When it’s an older crowd, it’s always a dying thing, the youngsters have got to take it on and keep it going. Otherwise it’s just another one of those old working boats getting scrapped. The best thing about it is days like these where you get your freedom, you still have your home, but you can go anywhere you like”

James Bill- Upper Thames.







