

# ABOARD BOATS ON THE INLAND WATERWAYS OF ENGLAND AND WALES:

Three vignettes from London and Alvechurch, Worcestershire

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**ABSTRACT:** In three vignettes of boat-dwelling on the canals and rivers of England and Wales, authors from across disciplines find common themes of the emergent precarity of life afloat, desires for freedom that, for many, motivate a life on the water; and the importance of boat-dwelling as offering an escape from, and an alternative to, economic crises and inequities. The example of an ‘Eco-Mooring Zone’ in central London prompts a discussion of anxieties around urban clean air regulation perceived as a threat to a ‘way of life’. A second vignette interrogates the off-grid characteristics of London boating and explores how some citizens respond to disillusionment with mainstream life – and experiment with alternative values and lifestyles centered on dignity, solidarity, freedom, and responsible consumption – through boating. A final vignette takes on the under-explored topic of ‘stable’ mooring spaces. The cul-de-sac nature of marinas with relatively static boats is discussed and applied to the example of two marinas in Alvechurch, Worcestershire. Taken together, these examples advance ongoing academic debates around the social and political relevance of boat dwelling on the inland waterways of England and Wales. The heterogeneity of perspectives and themes in this article reflects the broader diversity of boaters as a political group, allowing for reflections on the contemporary canalscape as a complex, dynamic, contested and occasionally chaotic stage for action, with significant implications for housing and mobility.

**KEYWORDS:** boat-dwelling, freedom, precarity, moorings, United Kingdom

## Introduction

The canals and rivers of England and Wales (Figure 1) are sites of accelerating attention in both academic and popular spheres. Channel 4's *Great Canal Journeys* has gained unexpected status as a 'slow television' classic on UK television<sup>1</sup>. Books in the travel-writing and popular history genres concerning the waterways have become bestsellers, including the funny and whimsical *Narrow Dog to Carcassonne* (2006) and *Narrow Dog to Wigan Pier* (2012) by Terry Darlington, Paul Gogarty's poetic *The Water Road: A Narrowboat Odyssey* (2011), and Steve Haywood's informative, engaging and somewhat cynical books about life afloat, *Narrowboat Dreams* (2009) and *One Man and a Narrowboat* (2009). Lifestyle blogs for those who have made their homes on the waterways, including *Minimal List* (@nbminimallist on X) and *Cruising the Cut* (on YouTube, X and Facebook), have engaged fans excited for the possibilities of a 'radical' or 'alternative' life on the inland waterways. People have been living aboard boats on the canals of England and Wales for decades, and the phenomenon has its roots in the working boaters who lived aboard whilst carrying their cargo during the industrial heyday of the canals. In the past decade life on board has become an attractive option for an increasing number of people. The Canal and River Trust (CRT) count over 34,000 boats on their waterways; whilst the majority of these are used for leisure, a significant - albeit unknown - number are permanent homes (Canal and River Trust, n.d.). There is a particular concentration of boats used as primary residences, both with and without a home mooring, in urban areas such as Bristol, Bath, Manchester and London. Many of those living on the canals feel ambivalence around this increased attention, not least the raft of newspaper articles describing boat dwelling as a low-cost alternative to sky-high rents and a cost of living crisis, out of fear that the waterways may become unmanageably busy through an influx of new boaters, ill-informed and unprepared for a life afloat (see Keegan, 2023; Okanrende, 2023; and Leasca, 2024 for some recent examples of this media attention).

Previously, the academic investigation into liveaboard boating and the 'boaters' (as the UK's boat-dwelling population tend to describe themselves) trailed behind accelerating public interest. However, the last decade has seen research flourishing in this area. Maarja Kaaristo, both as a solo author (Kaaristo, 2018; Kaaristo, 2020; Kaaristo, 2024) and in partnership with Steve Rhoden (Rhoden and Kaaristo, 2020; Kaaristo and Rhoden, 2018; Kaaristo and Rhoden, 2017) and Francesco Visentin (Visentin and Kaaristo, 2024; Kaaristo and Visentin, 2023) and other authors (Kaaristo et al, 2020) has produced a series of conceptually powerful articles on the experience of boating in the North of England, focusing on diverse themes such as the materiality of water, pace and the experience of time, techniques of placemaking, and implications for tourism. Ben Bowles produced the first ethnographic monograph about boat-dwelling in the UK through a study of boaters in London and the Southeast of England (Bowles, 2024). Laura Roberts, a boat dweller and ethnographer, has written about gendered aspects of living aboard boats on London's canals, including experiences as a female boater within the "taskscape" of the waterways (Roberts, 2019). Titika Malkogeorgou (2019) has written about boat-dwelling in London as forming a "linear village," a space of sociality she describes as both "a working space and a private place" (Malkogeorgou, 2019, p. 260). Hannah Pitt used experience on the waterways to challenge the nature of 'blue spaces', writing that inland waterways take:

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<sup>1</sup> This longstanding series aired between 2014 and 2021 and follows a pair of celebrity presenters on their boating travels across the canal network in the UK, and later waterways around the world. For ten of its twelve series, the original presenters, Timothy West and Prunella Scales, also reflected on the passage of time, ageing and the experience of dementia. Both their popularity as actors, and the poignancy of the show's themes, have brought boating to new audiences in the UK.

*geographers beyond the blue to consider a wider palette of water experiences and variations in their enabling potential. They are emblematic of waterscapes more brown than blue, offering deep waters for human geographers to wade into.* (Pitt, 2018, p.161).

Mike Duggan (2022) has also focused on the materiality of boating, considering the role of waterways guides for wayfaring and constructing the boating experience as both touristic and middle-class. Lorna Flutter (2022) writes about ephemeral “fluid” friendships and “shifting socialities” caused by the pattern of movement on London’s urban waterways. Also in London, Klaudija Alauskaite (2021) writes about eco-moorings in London as a push towards a process of “eco-gentrification”. In the sphere of water, sanitation and hygiene provision, Ruth Sylvester and Helen Underhill (2024) have described how boat-dwellers exist in a “dwelling paradox,” where they are not counted as customers of private water companies and, as such, are “at greater risk of water and sanitation insecurity” (Sylvester and Underhill, 2024, p. 94), describing these insecurities of provision through their effects on the daily lives of boaters. Agatha Herman and Richard Yarwood (2023) also focus on daily experiences of precarity that emerge from boat dwellings. They coin the term “mobile precarity” and write that, on the UK waterway “precarity emerges as not something restricted to ‘vulnerable groups’ but an ever-present ontological condition” (Herman and Yarwood, 2023, p.1). In a more historical and poetic piece than the previous ethnographic set of articles by sociologists, geographers and anthropologists, Andrew Wallace and Katy Wright describe the transition, over time, of the UK waterways from “enclosed and abandoned urban ruin to thriving but contested urban landscape” (Wallace and Wright, 2022, p. 185). In keeping with the deep themes of precarity and boating as a reflection of societal changes and challenges that appear throughout many of these other texts, they contend that “canals deserve closer social scientific attention in and of themselves but also as a creative entry point for understanding the instabilities and ambivalences of contemporary urban life” (Wallace and Wright, 2022, p. 185.).

Underpinning the examples collected here, and the analytical connections that arise between them, are the twinned issues of how boaters exercise mobility through navigating the system, and how they assert their rights to take up space through mooring. The CRT is the central institutional influence on the activities of boaters on the UK’s inland waterways, alongside the Environment Agency (EA), a non-departmental public body which operates at arm’s length but under supervision of Parliament, and which is responsible for several river navigations including the Thames. On waterways managed by CRT, as discussed in this article, the activity defined as “continuous cruising” is protected by the *British Waterways Act 1995*, which makes provision for boat owners without a home mooring to navigate the inland waterways, “provided they do not stay more than 14 continuous days in any one place” (National Bargee Travellers Association, 2012)<sup>2</sup>. The interpretation and enforcement of this Act has been the subject of intense debate among waterways campaigning groups and individual boaters. Opinions differ on what constitutes moving on a continuous progressive journey, in terms of how many miles must be covered in a licence period, and the interpretation of the wording of *place*. The 1995 Act does not stipulate a minimum distance

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<sup>2</sup> *British Waterways Act 1995* Chapter i Section 17 (3) (c) (ii) states that it is necessary, in order to licence a boat, that: “the applicant for the relevant consent satisfies the Board that the vessel to which the application relates will be used bona fide for navigation throughout the period for which the consent is valid without remaining continuously in any one place for more than 14 days or such longer period as is reasonable in the circumstances.”

to be travelled, but CRT has interpreted its wording using case law<sup>3</sup> to require an overall range of more than 20 miles. The Trust employs a team of licensing officers to take down boat licence numbers and location data which is fed into a central database. Boaters who are deemed to have stuck to one area, not made up enough miles, or to have otherwise transgressed can be allocated a six month licence (as opposed to the usual 12 months), during which they will have to cover their 20 miles and prove their navigation to be bona fide. If this process fails, CRT may initiate legal proceedings (which can be lengthy, if the boat is an individual's primary home) to remove the vessel from their waters using powers granted by the *British Waterways Act 1983* - Section 8 - which entitles CRT to remove an unlicensed or abandoned craft from the waterway (*British Waterways Act 1983* Chapter ii Section 8).

CRT was created in 2012 as a charitable trust which took over the property assets and responsibilities of British Waterways (a state-owned public body), including statutory obligations to maintain navigations (in England and Wales). A major implication of this transfer was responsibility for future funding. In 2012, DEFRA (the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs) agreed fixed funding until 2027, after which time CRT anticipates that its income will have to be found from other channels (notably including boat licensing, capital infrastructure projects and property rental income). Without central government funding, the charity is increasingly looking to individual giving and has attempted to recruit members of the public as 'friends' of the waterways, paying a regular subscription to support the charity. This move accompanies a rebrand to position itself as a charity focused on wellbeing (typified by the slogan 'Making Life Better by Water') - widely criticised by boaters for its expense, and for removing the focus of the organisation's remit on boats and boating (Ridgeway, 2018). There is growing concern among liveaboard boaters that their residential usage of the waterways network is becoming a nuisance for CRT, who would prefer its canal spaces to be sanitised leisure spaces.

It was in the context of this increased attention to England and Wales' inland waterways and their population of boaters that the International Conference on Inland Waterscapes at Udine in May 2024 contained a single parallel session with three papers detailing research that had taken place with boat-dwellers in England since 2019. Taking this serendipity as a cue, the authors of those papers and the chair of the session (all of whom are engaged in ongoing research projects on the inland waterways and three out of four of whom have lived on boats) undertook to produce a co-authored piece using the conference presentations as starting points from which to expand the ethnographic record around boat-dwelling in the UK. In doing so, we here present three vignettes from the three authors that together shine a small light on boat-dwelling on the canals and rivers of England and Wales and, together, combine to give a fractal or kaleidoscopic understanding of some of the emerging complexities of contemporary life aboard. In the first vignette, boater and anthropologist Helen Underhill describes how, on London's waterways, the consultation around CRT's imposition of an 'Eco-Mooring Zone' in London reveals boaters' anxieties around the myriad threats to their way of life, the contestation around rights and responsibilities on the canal, tactics employed to restrict the mobility and freedom of boaters (including the use of environmental regulation as a vehicle to monetise mooring space) and boaters' ambivalent status as precarious, vulnerable, and often also (maybe paradoxically) as gentrifiers. Staying in London, an interdisciplinary scholar, Senija Causevic writes about her decision to live aboard a boat during the Covid-19 pandemic in London and her coming to understand the waterways as a site of off-grid lives that offer "alternatives to dependency on the financial

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<sup>3</sup> British Waterways Board v Paul Davies, sealed judgement, Bristol County Court, 2010.

industry and crony capitalism” (Ateljevic, 2020, p. 472). In doing so, she presents boat-dwelling as allowing individuals freedom. However, that freedom is twinned with (ecological) responsibility, demonstrating the power of the ethic “consumption with a purpose” (Causevic, 2024). Away from London, tourism and leisure scholar Julia Fallon looks at some of the push-pull motivations that lead to individuals choosing to live aboard a boat, in this case in a pair of marinas in the village of Alvechurch, Worcestershire. She finds a complicated mixture of personal and economic motivations leading to the choice of boat dwelling, similar in their complexity to the motivations that those who write about itinerant boat-dwellers also find. Fallon points out that much of the growing scholarship on boat-dwelling is about itinerant boat-dwellers and privileges themes of mobility, leaving a large number of marina dwellers somewhat invisible and their specific desires and needs under-examined.

Across these vignettes, the theme of the inherent precarity of life afloat comes through strongly, with a certain fragility appearing to be an inevitable emergent condition of the environment (see Herman and Yarwood, 2023). This is often put at a counterpoint with the importance, for boaters, of a desired life ‘off-grid,’ with other emergent responsibilities and freedoms that come from boating and differ from the sedentary experience. Similarly, throughout the vignettes, the broader political and economic context emerges as a series of ‘push-factors’ that lead to the need to create and curate different modes of resistant living. However, in none of the vignettes does life afloat emerge as a utopia, but rather a life that is challenged, stretched, materially difficult, and that requires sacrifice. Individuals emerge from the story as ‘characters,’ but so too do the communities that they become part of, and it becomes clear that there is a power within these communities to produce political effects and to make political action. These three vignettes justify the intensification of attention paid to the inland waterways. Our canals and rivers are spaces where people engage in a life that has subtle and engaging differences from the sedentary mainstream, spaces that hold power over the popular imagination. The painted narrowboats themselves, the faded industrial splendour of the canals as an environment and, in the case of London, the dramatic contrast of skyscrapers and apartment blocks with the muddy blue/green/brown space of the canals and rivers all make for heady and potent images of difference, and yet there is also a familiarity and grounded practical mundanity (such as emptying toilets at elsan points,<sup>4</sup> everyday acts of care) that emerges from the stories here. It is worth noting that, taken as a whole, boaters are a heterogeneous group, united by what they *do* (the physicality of boat life itself) rather than by shared demographic designation. These short vignettes from long and complex fieldwork will not reveal *everything* we may want to know about the lives of boat-dwellers in England and Wales, but they open avenues for ethnographic attention that, in turn, reveal more tales from the ‘cut’ and, like a kaleidoscope, will reveal something a little different to the reader with every turn.

As we go on to connect in the concluding section, the following vignettes address themes of housing as emergent precarity, boating as an activity with connotations of freedom and the exercise of rights to space, and the politics of (im)mobility and dwelling. As increasing ethnographic, analytical and policy attention is paid to canal spaces, our aim here is to provoke reflections on canals as complex spaces with specific (and shifting) politics, inhabited by a heterogeneous group of boaters (and other users). Moreover, by drawing together examples from London and Worcester, we gesture towards a future research agenda that can mobilise the unique nature of the contemporary canalscape, traversing as it does

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<sup>4</sup> The term ‘Elsan point’ is a generic reference for chemical toilet and sewage disposal points and derives from the name of the company that originated them in 1924.

the politics of dwelling in both rural and urban locales under uncertain futures in relation to consumption (of energy, land and resources), precarity, and austerity.

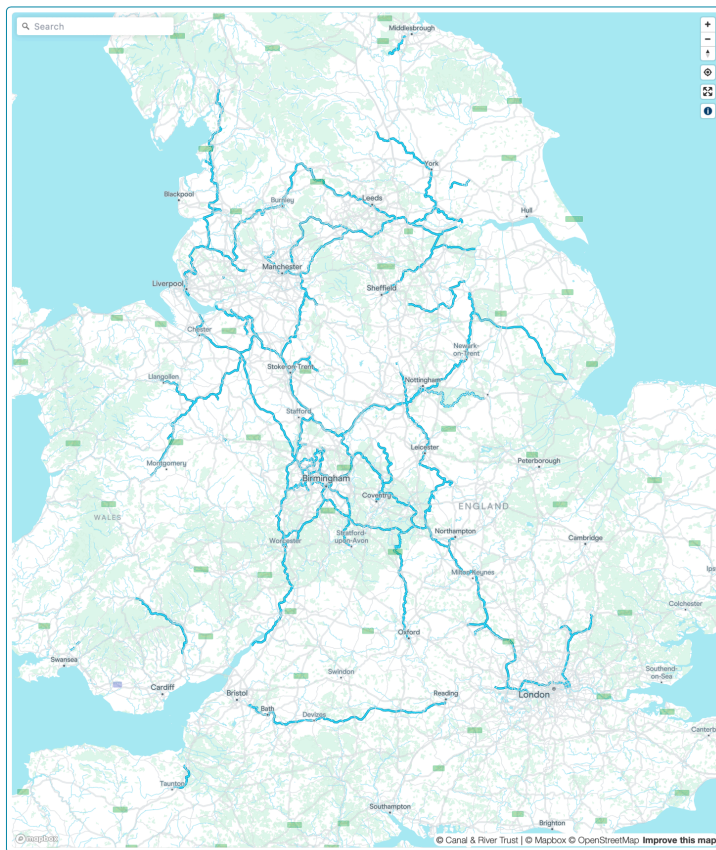


Figure 1 - Wales and England Canals and Rivers Network map (Canal & River Trust, 2025).

***Vignette 1:*** London's 'Eco-Mooring Zone' reveals tensions, contradictions, and power relations on the waterways  
- HELEN UNDERHILL

This vignette centres on itinerant boat dwellers' responses to proposals for an 'Eco-Mooring Zone' in London, examining anxieties around urban environmental regulation perceived as a threat to a 'way of life'. These anxieties are becoming urgent in light of clean-air regulations and are relevant to debates around the governance of canal spaces, protecting diverse waterways culture, and equitably responding to a chronic housing crisis that puts pressure on urban waterways as dwelling spaces.

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In Autumn 2019, I found myself rushing through Kings Cross to arrive at the London Canal Museum for 6.30pm. After dodging commuters on York Way, I found two spare seats in the

large but unexpectedly busy room; plenty of people had turned up for this consultation meeting, held by CRT and Islington Council to discuss the proposed 'Islington Eco-Mooring Zone Trial' along the Regent's Canal in Islington, an inner-city borough that lies to the north of the City of London. The audience was mainly composed of liveaboard boaters, who came to fight their corner against a plan that threatened to reclassify one of the country's most popular mooring spaces, placing it off limits to those unable to afford to comply with new rules on power supplies. I glanced around and attempted to work out who was a boater (any cork ball keyrings on display?), who came from waterways campaign groups such as the National Bargee Travellers Association (NBTA) or the Inland Waterways Association (IWA), and if I might recognise anyone from their profile pictures on the *London Boaters* Facebook group. The evening started with presentations by two representatives from CRT, and two from Islington Council, detailing their plans.

The Eco-Mooring Zone trial (subsequently implemented in 2020) entailed addition of electricity bollards on the towpath in Islington, creating a set of bookable moorings set on a stretch formerly available to all boaters as general 14-day mooring space (Figure 2). The initiative was intended to curb the need to run diesel engines or generators to provide power for boaters' floating homes and was set out within CRT's wider London Mooring Strategy and Islington's Air Quality Strategy of 2019. Islington Council representatives at this meeting explicitly stated this programme was part of action in relation to their recent declaration of a Climate Emergency. A Council representative opened by explaining it was his job to address 'direct' pollution, defined largely by visibility – hence a boat chimney smoking at public eye level will be more likely to receive unfavourable attention than a house chimney pouring out similar pollution. As complaints of air pollution constitute a statutory nuisance, subject to a potential £1,000 fine, he explained he was bound by law to investigate. The proposed scheme came in response to a history of complaints from Islington residents bordering the Regent's canal. The council had been collecting baseline data from the summer of 2019 onwards, monitoring air quality with particular attention to PM<sub>2.5</sub> – finer particulate pollution from cars, public transport and both boat diesel engines and smokeless heating fuel used by most boaters. Audience questions began to pile up, demonstrating suspicion and mistrust of this process: 'Where were these (pieces of testing equipment) sited?', 'How did you exclude readings from road transport or houses?', 'How will you evaluate this pilot?' As they began to challenge the presenters, subjects of specific anxiety for liveaboard Boaters emerged. The addition of these bollards was seen as a keen threat to boating life and rhythms in central London, and part of a wider – possibly existential – threat to the lifestyle of continuous cruising.

An evaluation of the trial was scheduled to take place after two years. Several audience members queried what form this would take. Incredulity followed when the council representative explained *his* criteria for success would be "an absence of complaints" from land-based residents. This admission undermined the central premise of carbon reduction and air quality improvement, which were relegated to convenient side effects of shutting down vociferous complaints from local residents. Given the lack of reference to comparison with baseline air quality data, or other metrics, this seemed an admission that the issue of air quality has become conflated with other (anti)social behaviour issues. This acted as an accelerant to the simmering outrage in the room, and several boaters stuck up their hands at this point, firing a barrage of questions that threatened to derail the presentation: 'How is a complaint evaluated?', 'Are all complaints upheld?', 'Can we be told how many complaints are being made and from which locations?'. The boaters present clearly articulated their core concern: 'Boaters will be excluded from mooring here' – initially by system incompatibility



and the material unsuitability of some vessels to take advantage of electricity services, but also by their capacity to both plan ahead and access online booking systems, and finally by their financial freedom to respond by retrofitting sufficient (and safe) electrical equipment on board. Although moorings were supposed to remain free to book, many vocal audience members were nonetheless concerned about social cleansing under a friendly 'green' banner. My writing on this topic is not intended as a review of the implemented Eco-Mooring Zone's success (or validity), but rather to examine flashpoints of uncertainty, anxiety, and discomfort that accompanied its proposal and planning. Boaters are a diverse group, who of necessity practice or aim towards low impact lifestyles, embodying creative and alternative ways of approaching various crises (of housing, biodiversity, carbon consumption and climate change) threatening to engulf us. The boating community is driven by participation, action, and involvement, and often conceptualised with words around care and support rather than any pre-conceived or static identity politics. This is not to say boaters have all the answers, but they may have some: many concepts and actions emerge on the canals that are worth keeping afloat, celebrating, and protecting as we seek equitable solutions to complex problems.



Figure 2 – Eco Mooring Signage, Kings Cross, London, January 2025 (author's photo).



The post-GFC/2008<sup>5</sup> housing crisis has led to an increase in boat numbers in London and an attendant increase in interest in boaters from the public, press, and authorities. This crisis manifests itself across the spectrum of boats – from those barely surviving, one step from homelessness and shivering in uninsulated cabin cruisers covered with tarpaulins, to luxury wide beams that act as placeholders for similar properties on land, saving their occupants from funding someone else's mortgage for long enough to put down a deposit on their own. Boaters have opened previously no-go or low-go areas across London to wider publics, making canal space accessible, desirable, and eventually profitable to developers. This is not to say the presence of middle-class or well-resourced boaters negates fundamental principles of the waterways as a commons. My aim is rather to note this set of ambivalences, complexities, and tensions on the capital's waterways.

This article is part of a growing social science conversation around boat dwelling that picks up on rich ethnographic themes and power analyses that boat life inspires. This small contribution stands as an encouragement to recognise precarity among boaters without flattening our understanding of the overall picture that *does* implicate *some* boaters in London as agents of gentrification even as they partially evade capitalist structures to float *somewhat* untethered on the waterways. Doing so sketches the complexities of a situation in which people choose to live here as a 'lifestyle' alongside those doing so out of necessity. The former can work with environmental restrictions (e.g., burn only smokeless fuel - no wet wood; fit a solar array; improve electrical systems to make them compatible with 240v shore power provided via bollards) whilst others – unable to adjust – will be excluded.

Finally, a brief update on the present situation in central London. As feared, the trial of *free* bookable moorings with electricity bollards has very rapidly become a permanent zone of monetisation. It will now cost you £35 per night for the privilege of mooring here.

**Vignette 2:** : Living off-grid on boats in London in the context of precarity, austerity and the Covid-19 pandemic  
- SENIJA CAUSEVIC

The awareness that the imposition of austerity on the majority of society during the 2007/2008 GFC and COVID-19 was a political choice rather than a necessity left citizens to seek new systems of governance (Tarazona-Vento, 2024). The impact of austerity on society is profound, leading to a re-evaluation of lifestyles and governance systems. Some citizens got attracted to populist right-wing rhetoric, often accompanied by sectarianism, racism, homophobia and chauvinism (Tarazona-Vento, 2024). Thankfully, this was not the option for most of London's population. The GFC and, later, post-COVID-19 austerity, brought to the fore various discourses about unorthodox lifestyles as alternatives to dependency on the financial industry and crony capitalism, where businesses grow as a return on money accumulated through a nexus between the business and political classes (Hughes, 1999), co-called crony capitalism. Further, the global arms trade, planet destruction, energy poverty, food insecurity, and social exclusion motivate further discourses about breaking away from systems that cause injustice to the planet and its people. Some London citizens realised they could not do much to change the system that perpetually damaged the planet and its people,

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<sup>5</sup> The 2007/2008 global financial crisis, emerged from a confluence of factors including sub-prime mortgage lending in the USA, risk taking by global financial players, and a lax regulatory environment, and resulted in a stock market crash and international banking crisis in 2008.

creating so much injustice globally and locally. Some citizens were inspired to achieve micro-sustainability instead and experiment with a legacy of solidarity with the environment, society, and personal well-being. Some citizens contemplated this change voluntarily, yet some were forced into this living situation, challenged by precarious zero-hour or fixed-term contracts and poverty. As of 2022, approximately 165,000 workers in London were on precarious zero-hours contracts, the most of any region of the United Kingdom, while in 2010, only 14,000 people were on them (Office of National Statistics, 2023), with the estimation that the number will further rise. Renting or buying a flat in London is almost impossible if one is not permanently employed or has inherited wealth. Thus, the 'off-grid' community does not always voluntarily adopt the 'off-grid experimentation lifestyle;' rather, they are pushed into it due to job insecurity and precarity. This demonstrates their remarkable resilience and adaptability in facing challenges, which can inspire others.

Living temporarily on a boat and continuously cruising on the London's Rivers and Canals (Figure 3) is a prominent manifestation of off-grid living. Boats consider alternative energy resources such as solar, wind power, biomass, etc., offering options that reduce environmental impact and provide energy independence, a vital advantage of this lifestyle (Guttridge-Hewitt, n.d.). This growth underscores the practicality and benefits of off-grid living, particularly in the context of London's waterways.



Figure 3 - London Waterway Map (Tims London Waterways Photos).<sup>6</sup>

Living on a boat temporarily, I found myself in an uncommonly privileged position as both an insider and an outsider, thus positioning myself situationally through self-reflection through which this positionality was recognised. The houseboat continuously cruised down the Lee Navigation; the last stop to dock was Limehouse, where the canal meets the Thames and the City of London and where a global financial hub breathes. A reflective thematic

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.timslondonwaterwayphotos.uk/index.php/london-waterway-map>

analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2020) discussed the dimensions of *dignity, solidarity, freedom, and responsibility* in living on a London boat, mainly off the grid and continuous cruising, in the presence of global financial institutions headquartered nearby. This unique perspective provides a fresh and intriguing view of the socio-environmental and politico-economic context of off-grid living. *It* engages and invites us to delve deeper into the research.

### *Freedom and Responsibility, Dignity and Solidarity*

Renting or buying a flat in London is more challenging if the potential tenant has no permanent work contract. The high rents and challenging agreements with the property developers, estate agents and energy suppliers were very stressful; thus, living on a houseboat, i.e. being a liveaboard boater, was considered a 'ticket for freedom' as mentioned by the boaters. They detach from the energy suppliers while producing energy off the grid. The electricity is provided by solar panels and, in fewer instances, by the wind. One can sleep tight, and there will be no more energy price hikes. Yet, resources are limited, particularly space, place and time. It needs time to produce the energy; one may need some extra wood to warm up a place in the winter. It takes time to find the discarded tree branches, cut them, and prepare them for the fireplace. It takes time to fill the water tank with fresh water. The space to store fresh water is limited on the houseboat. One must consume *with a purpose* while learning and adapting more ethical consumption. One needs to be *responsible*. The space on the boat is limited.

The boaters need to limit the consumption of water, electricity, and space due to the scarcity of each while living on the boat. *Freedom* is thus directly related to *responsibility*, as freedom can only be freedom if there is awareness that one needs to remain responsible. Freedom and responsibility are embodied in the context of living on the houseboat. It is not a responsibility that can be redeemed through greenwashing but a responsibility to be earned. The responsibility is exercised by observing the lifestyle on the boat that counteracts impulsive consumption, commodification and greed for ownership of material items. The question is not only about buying the items but also about disposing of them. This behaviour is only sometimes observed voluntarily, yet it has become a norm due to adopting a lifestyle suitable for off-grid living.

Besides reducing consumption patterns, there is also the context of learning how to limit the use of resources and share limited resources in the community of boaters. Through living off-grid, communities develop an awareness of the importance of caring for one another and sharing as the resources are limited. Sharing provides dignity and caring leads to solidarity. Therefore, alternative local communities may be seen as examples of a paradigmatic shift in the meaning and creation of value. Off-grid communities such as boaters possess vernacular knowledge, understanding, and awareness of the limitations of resources such as energy and water supply, and they consume them with a purpose. The concept of *consumption with a purpose* may have its merits for researching and theorising sustainable and ethical consumption as one of the critical factors in creating and experimenting with new value systems, emphasising the importance of responsible and sustainable consumption and empowering the audience with this knowledge. This empowerment from responsible and sustainable consumption can motivate and inspire others to adopt similar practices, fostering a sense of enlightenment and information in the audience.

Some boaters live on boats by choice, while some are forced to do so due to austerity and regain their dignity by doing so. The community thus cuts across class lines (Polanyi, 2024

[1944] p. 202) to observe this lifestyle embedded in social and economic practices different from those whose aim is consumerism and commodification, competition and individualism. The ethos of solidarity, dignity, responsibility, and freedom enjoyed by boaters on London's inland waterways is slowly commodified and reclaimed. New homes marketed as luxurious are built on the shores of the Lee Navigation, as it passes through East London. The new dwellers are very upset by the houseboats' presence; more mooring spaces are replaced by 'luxury' homes overlooking the river. In addition to houseboats, some new dwellers are upset by the presence of (migratory) birds in their natural habitat as they roam around these new homes. Some new owners are even installing spotlights to deter the birds from coming near.

Living off-grid on a houseboat is thus taken over by commodifying public ownership, such as rivers and canals, for the material benefits of a fraction of society. CRT, the charity in charge of the waterways in England and Wales, acts according to the mainstream paradigm, i.e., moorings are removed to open up spaces for more profitable activities, such as building more luxury homes and eliminating houseboats so as not to spoil the view. There needs to be solidarity with the natural habitat to counteract these tendencies. To prevent the removal of the mooring spaces and natural habitats, solidarity with other marginalised communities fighting for their existence is required. Off-grid boaters in London are marginalised communities due to the challenges and systemic injustices inherent in mainstream systems. This is not a class struggle, as boaters in London are not a single community, yet they are together, fighting for justice along class lines to protect their homes and lifestyles. Thus, it is essential to politicise the movements to save London's waterways as a symbol of an alternative to the dystopian future. One of the ways of achieving this is through normalising the acts of carrying and sharing within the local community and the notion of solidarity with other marginalised communities and societies.

There is a need for dialogue between vernacular knowledge and governance to create a better understanding between different users of the London inland waterways. This can be achieved if the main aim is not linked simply to class struggle but cuts across class structures, as is the case of the boaters living off the grid on London inland waterways.

### ***Vignette 3:*** Choosing to live aboard in a marina in Alvechurch, Worcestershire - JULIA FALLON

The CRT, which takes responsibility for the inland waterways, says there are over 34,000 licensed boats on the waterways. Section 17 of the British Waterways Act (1995) clarifies that the licence held is for those with or without a permanent mooring. However, according to their March 2022 census, 27,000 of those with licences have a home mooring, leaving only 7,000 on the move (Canal and River Trust, n.d.). Current proposals exist to surcharge those who choose to roam the waterways, and there is amongst them considerable concern about the way they are treated, so much so that a charity (the NBTA) exists to protect the interests of those wishing to pursue a nomadic way of life.

On the Canal Junction website, they acknowledge the belief that living aboard was deemed as a way of opting out from paying rent and rates or accelerating the way through council house waiting lists. Yet, the freedom of life on the move offered was seen as attractive for retirees like Terry Darlington who records his journey into retirement in the book *Narrow Dog to Carcassonne* (Darlington, 2006). The nature of this nomadic life varies, and many

‘shuffle’, moving their boats every fortnight but just a short distance, staying in their particular corner of the world (Flutter, 2023).

The recent pandemic allowed for this precariousness to be lifted somewhat, providing continuous cruisers with some stability. The CRT’s census limited the response rate to approximately 9000 licence holders. However, almost a quarter intended to seek a long-term mooring in future, reinforcing the desire of the majority to settle (Canal and River Trust, n.d.). The desire to settle and own homes has been highlighted in recent UK electioneering; undoubtedly, this has become increasingly difficult for anyone except the wealthy. The Home Builders Federation, in a research study called *Housing Horizons: Examining UK Housing Stock in an International Context* (Home Builders Federation, 2023) using data from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), UK Government and European Union, highlights all the difficulties facing UK residents in finding an affordable home and the seeking of alternatives has been a pattern of recent years with boat buying featuring, for many see canals and rivers as accessible to the urban areas where they are working. Additionally, the Office of National Statistics (ONS) informs us that there were 80,057 divorces in 2022,<sup>7</sup> splitting households and with average house prices that year at £294,000,<sup>8</sup> understandably, the cost of relocating is a challenge. An average narrowboat is significantly cheaper, appearing to many as the solution to managing their changed situation.

The costs of living aboard a boat need to be added, and it’s interesting to note that the housing charity Shelter now has a section detailing all the necessary costs and emphasising this is not “free living” (2024). CRT need income for their running costs, and boat owners must pay for a licence and moorings, which can cost over £2,000 a year. These are all subject to the size and type of boat, whether moving or static. Still, there are essentials like the aforementioned licences, boat safety certification, fuel and maintenance, and annual insurance coverage. The NBT, a community-led organisation for itinerant liveaboard boaters, would no doubt advise that there are ways to live on a modest budget while moving to different moorings. Still, sometimes there are also permissions needed by a mooring provider, especially if renting a boat and these, plus, say, gas cylinders for heating in cold weather, all add up. Challenges such as the effect of tidal waters on rivers are also not to be ignored, so deciding to live aboard a boat requires research and preparation.

Mintel’s (2007) *Boating Holidays Report* reported that “the domestic inland waterways sector still accounts for around half of all UK boating holidays with an estimated 242,000 holidays in 2006, and an estimated value of £62 million.” They reported some stagnation in the market, with the only beacon of hope being that consumers were becoming more environmentally aware, but this was well before the pandemic and economic downturn influencing choices to holiday at home. Holiday boaters in busy spots like London and Avon can cause concern on the waterways because they can exceed the speed limit of 4 mph and create a wash that rocks stationary boats, causing damage. They can also be noisy and not sympathetic to the workings of a lock or the natural world, which creates antagonism. At the same time, leisure boaters complain that short-term visitor moorings are full of long-stay liveaboards and many canal users and local people complain about unsightly boats moored in long lines. Local authorities have also expressed concerns about extra pressures on their local services (Canal Junction Ltd., n.d.). Tensions exist too between other different user

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<sup>7</sup> <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/divorce>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.ons.gov.uk/economy/inflationandpriceindices/bulletins/housepriceindex/december2022>

groups like those on the towpath, e.g., anglers versus cyclists; dog-walkers versus cyclists; walkers (or *gongoozlers* as boaters refer to them) versus boaters or perhaps those who selected a more alternative lifestyle alongside those just trying to get by. So, finding a friendly boating community to stay amongst is deemed to be an important factor in the CRT census, and this brings us to the point of this vignette about where boaters moor and stay. Long-term moorings may be found in marinas, but these residential moorings are in short supply, especially near towns and cities where housing has become prohibitively expensive and living abroad is deemed a cheaper option. While an annual mooring might cost £2,000 in some parts of the country, in places like London, where demand is particularly intense, that figure could easily be more than £10,000.

The Canal Junction website pragmatically uses the heading 'Boatyards, Marinas and Moorings' to cover all eventualities for advising where boat owners may stay on board their boats along British canals. There is a mix of terminology and rules to grapple with when understanding the potential and possibilities, and websites like the boating section of the Scottish Waterways have a long-term moorings section to advise on specifications like length and width suitability. On the Canal Guide website, there are 11 marinas listed, one boat company and a hire boat company (Black Prince Holidays who have boats in 6 marinas). Information abounds on amenities; for example, on the Trent and Mersey Canal in Rural Staffordshire, they claim, "Our jetties feature electric gates on the berth with mains water, WCs and showers for disabled and baby changing, docking repair services, refuse disposal, diesel/coal/gas refuelling, laundry machines and more" (Canal Junction Ltd., n.d.).

At the same time, some basins provide moorings that appear to be very similar to marinas. Some marinas are noted for their stunning locations, access to attractions and activities, or chandlery. Notable examples are St Katherine's Dock on the River Thames, Chirk Marina on the Llangollen Canal, Gayton Marina on The Grand Union Canal, White Bear Marina on the Leeds and Liverpool Canal and Bath Waterside Marina on the River Avon. Aside from these, CRT claims there are around 1,600 long-term mooring sites on their network, varying in size from very small sites with just one or two berths to large marinas with 100+ berths. The CRT's Waterside Mooring team directly manages 323 sites with 3,720 berths representing about 11% of the total long-term mooring space available on the network; private mooring providers manage the rest. In Hampshire, on the Basingstoke Canal, they offer three types of mooring, depending on the bank you moor to, and these are:

- Private – Mooring against private property or council land with a garden licence
  - Standard – Mooring against council land without facilities
  - Premium – Mooring against council land with nearby boating facilities
- (Hampshire County Council, n.d.)

Alvechurch is a village in North Worcestershire, in the West Midlands. It lies on the Worcester to Birmingham Canal with a train to central Birmingham every 30 minutes, generally with a journey time of about half an hour. Tripadvisor lists the Number 1 Thing to Do there is to visit the Marina, but Alvechurch is interesting because there are two sites for liveaboard boaters near each other. One marina is well-established; the other was granted planning permission in 2008 and was under construction for a few years, finally opening in 2018. These two different developments for liveaboards provided an opportunity to discover more about what seems to be a relatively unreported area in the burgeoning literature about waterways.

The ABC Leisure Group (formerly known as Alvechurch Boats Centre Ltd) has been operating for over 45 years. While it has grown to be a much larger business operation since its takeover in 1993, the head office remains in Alvechurch, where the marina and the boatyard exist. ABC Leisure Group has been expanding in recent years and seeking direct routes to market via the Internet to pool resources and achieve economies of scale. Residents in their Alvechurch marina benefit from free access to other marinas in the group, and there is also a franchise in Scotland.

The second site for liveaboards in Alvechurch is Withybed Moorings, whose website describes itself as a “recreational mooring facility” for narrowboats near ABC’s Alvechurch marina with its pub, shop and boat services. There is room for 54 boats only, and while there is a shop and some services, this is an enclosed cul de sac of moorings that can be seen from the train as an enclosed space. In listing their services, they acknowledge their location close to Alvechurch Marina and boat chandlery. Withybed Moorings is located on land belonging to Coopers Hill Farm, and just as ABC Leisure Group has horizontally integrated with other canal boat hire companies and marinas, the Coopers Hill Farm family business has demonstrated the entrepreneurial innovation that was encouraged by the Common Agricultural Policy (Yoshida et al, 2019). In 2006, the then-British Waterways encouraged the building of 50 more inland marinas because berth costs had significantly increased (Pickard, 2006).

Speaking to residents from each site provided some insights into the liveaboard experience of people choosing life on board a narrowboat in 21st century Britain. Conversations about what makes an ideal long-term mooring are similar to those expressed in the CRT report about selecting a safe, attractive place with facilities and amenities like nearby car parking and Wi-Fi (Canal and River Trust, n.d.). Populations reflect those affected by life-changing circumstances; for instance, divorce forces many men onto a boat. Young couples are also drawn by attractive locations and the lesser financial burden of house ownership. Difficulties described are heating in winter, overheating in summer, and environmental concerns about the grey water entering the canal. Rising costs, too, are a worry.

In sum, much of the research about Britain’s canals and waterways has concentrated on boat routes and movements. The places that people choose to moor have received less attention, but as economic pressures continue, they are worthy of greater consideration. This is not just a concern in London but also in the whole country.

## Conclusions

We have seen many of the emergent complexities of life afloat, many of the motivations that individuals may have to ‘take the plunge’ and become liveaboard boaters and many of the points of contest and conflict between boaters and sedentary people and authorities come through strongly from each vignette. It is tempting to (over)emphasise connections between liveaboard boating and other off-grid lifestyles, especially given the popular interest in ‘off-grid living’ in the wake of films such as the Oscar-winning *Nomadland* (2020), and already being echoed in increased academic attention (see the special edition of the *Anthropological Journal of European Cultures* in September 2023; ‘Off the Grid and on the Road in Europe: Living in an Age of Uncertainty and Polycrisis’ [O’Regan, 2023]). However, before doing this we should carefully consider the relationship between the term ‘off-grid’ and the activities of people who still use certain services and utilities via the state. Is ‘off-grid’ an *aesthetic* and a



*motivating desire* as much as a cohesive and singular movement to a different relationship with capitalism or the State? Rather than overstating similarities, we might pay closer attention to the ways in which the liquidity of water makes a difference to life afloat (compared to, say, life on the solid road); a factor lacking in these vignettes due to their brevity and focus in other areas, but of great importance to the question of what makes boating lives special.

The three examples presented here each reflect on recent changes affecting boaters, evidences the changing deployment of both urban and rural spaces for dwelling. This is seen in relation to the implementation of top-down measures such as the Eco-Moorings, more spontaneous, diffuse actions such as individual choices to move onboard, spurred by the housing crisis and Covid-19, and the increasing demands being placed on the canals as dwelling spaces that leads to the development of new marina spaces. Relatedly, threads of consumption, precarity and austerity run throughout the narratives presented in this article, whether in consumption of energy onboard, in motivations for adopting low-impact lifestyles as an agential response to elevated housing costs within a damaged economic and social system, or in the complexity of CRT's status as a charitable trust and the effective privatisation of a countrywide network of infrastructure, land, and assets that was previously in public ownership under British Waterways.

Finally, Julia Fallon's vignette demonstrates how scholarship in this area shows a tendency to focus on mobility as opposed to boaters who stay (in a marina or agreed on mooring site), a tendency to focus on liveaboard boating against boat hobbying and boat tourism, and how writing about the waterways can also be London-centric. In the introductory literature review, London's boat culture emerges as comparatively over-represented in a country with over 2,700 miles of joined-up navigable waterways. We will be missing important parts of the story until we can appreciate more the variability of experiences of being aboard boats across the country - from rural marinas to the cruising areas around London, Birmingham or Bath - even before we begin to contemplate potentially fruitful international comparisons with the waterways of Amsterdam, France, or further afield. This article functions as an opening provocation to myriad future conversations concerning the contemporary relevance of the canalscape, in England and Wales, and further afield. We believe that the themes explored tentatively here bear further examination, in particular the complex and contested politics of (im)mobility and fixedness, approached through the examination of boaters' desires both for moorings, and for the freedom to conduct their boating lives without fixed moorings. If we diligently invite in other experiences to expand our palette of boating stories, we will begin to reveal some very different boating lives, for the benefit of a sub-field that is, we believe, just beginning to set sail.

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