Narrowboats in London

Past, Present and Future

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The Thames is a river full of history: it has witnessed coronations, battles and plagues, but it has its own story as well (Ackroyd, 2007, p.11). The interaction of the people of London with the Thames and its canals has changed drastically over the centuries, and here we will explore specifically how narrowboats have evolved over time to adapt to new ways we interact with the river.

Narrowboats were originally used to transport raw materials, goods and merchandise throughout the city. At the same time, they also worked as homes for the families who worked on them, having to manage their everyday lives in very small spaces (Malkogeorgou, 2019, p. 210).

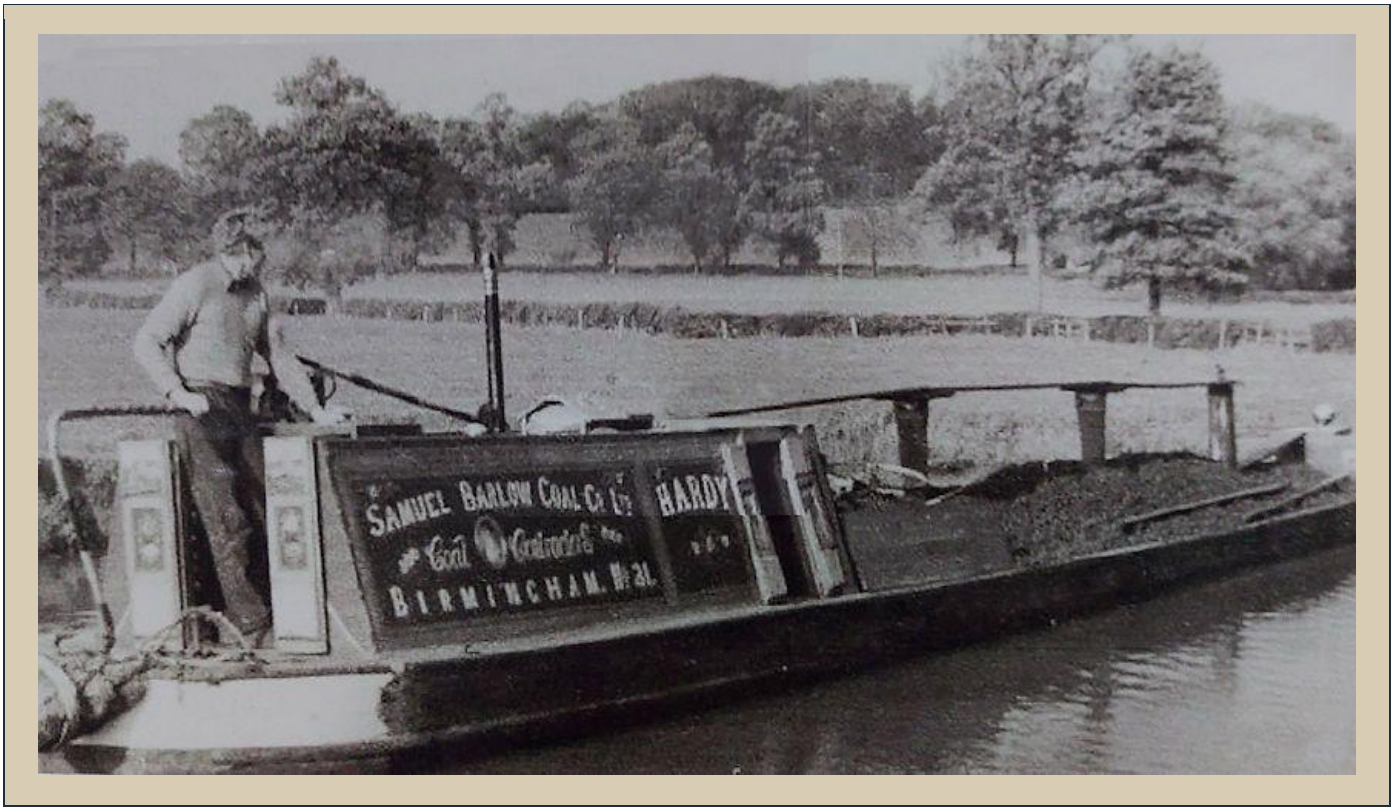

Fig. 1. The narrowboat *Hardy*, loaded with coal (Source: Tooley's Boatyard, 2025).

In this picture (Tooley's Boatyard, 2025), we can observe a coal boat at work, loaded almost entirely with cargo. This shows how little space was actually left for everyday life on board. According to Freer (1991, p. 228), these spaces could be as small as 8ft in length, 6ft 6in in width and 5ft in height. With the arrival

of the railways, the use of these boats slowly began to decrease, until the 1960s, when the last of them ceased operating as carriers.

Over time, the use of these vessels has shifted towards recreation and living spaces for a community of people who have found life on London's canals to be their way of living (Kaaristo et al., 2020, p. 845). ***As a future interior architect, I am interested in the sociological and architectural aspects that bring people to choose these boats as their homes.***

> *"What makes someone choose a narrowboat to live in? What is it about this lifestyle that attracts them?"*



Fig. 2. A view through a narrowboat window on Regent's Canal (Source: Palmer, 2020).

This change can be seen, for example, through the photographic project *Knitting – A Window into Canal Boats on Regent's Canal*, by photographer Rose Palmer (Palmer, 2020). Through her work, we get a glimpse of domestic life on canal boats, seeing how people live through the windows of their homes.

As part of my research, I plan to conduct a survey exploring questions such as: what attracts people to this lifestyle? What kind of person would enjoy living on a narrowboat? What do they like most about this way of life, and what would they change to improve their living experience? I also want to understand which aspects are related to the lifestyle itself and which are influenced by the space they live in.

Looking ahead — Once the research is complete and I have gathered the responses, I plan to present my own vision of a narrowboat adapted to what I believe a home on the canals could look like in the future. I will present a 3D render made in Architect 3D, where I will take all the information gathered throughout my research to produce a design that considers the requirements of the lifestyle of the future and secures a place for narrowboats in the living history of London for many years to come.

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