

Exploring England's Canals

By BRYAN HODGSON

SENIOR EDITORIAL STAFF

Photographs by LINDA BARTLETT



WE HAVE SAILED TOO FAR. All day the canal has carried us through gentle English countryside, but evening finds us in a wasteland of abandoned factories. We plunge beneath dank, echoing bridges and scrape over reefs of drowned rubble. In the bone-gray dusk a single human figure hurries along the towpath, eyes downcast as if we did not exist.

We moor beneath towering smokestacks whose fierce breath once blackened the city. As our engine dies, only a drab wind gutters in their throats. Chilled and silent, we hasten below to the cabin's cheerful warmth.

My wife Linda and I are unlikely mariners on a strange voyage. Our track is the Trent and Mersey Canal, part of a 2,500-mile network of man-made waterways that lace the heart of England, from London and Oxford through Birmingham to Leeds, Manchester, and Liverpool.

It is late October, and the weather has been bad. But there have been consolations. Yesterday we awakened to the squabbling of wild geese on a misty lake. Last night we baked away the chill before a blazing fire in a 16th-century pub. This morning a kingfisher escorted us for half a mile, etching its skyrocket brilliance of green and

Two's a crowd as aptly named narrowboats squeeze through a lock at Stoke Bruerne on England's Grand Union Canal. Skippered by proud boatmen who still decorate cabins, gear, and lanterns (above left) with bright designs, the craft once carried coal to fuel England's Industrial Revolution. Now pleasure boaters use them to trace the old routes that vein the island heartland.



blue across the mournful day. And tonight, in the comfortable cabin of our chartered cruiser, we feast on new-laid eggs, fragrant country ham, and crusty bread bought just hours ago in a tiny village store.

Before turning in, I take a last cup of tea and stand on deck in darkness. Beyond the ruined factories the modern industries of Stoke on Trent cast their fiery light upon the clouds. To the north the sky is clearing. Slowly my tumbled thoughts begin to clear as well.

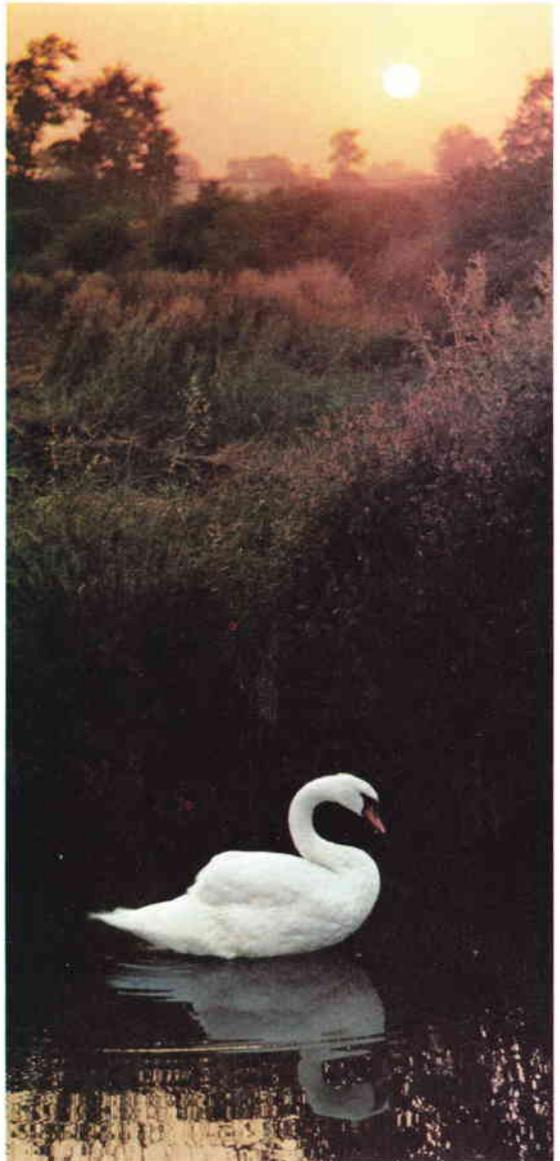
I was born in this land. My childhood memories are hazy, except for the vivid images of Spitfires and German bombers swirling like toys in the autumn skies above my home; and later the sirens in the night, and the ring of fire, like angry dawn, that was London burning. Now, after 33 years in America, I have returned to explore a country that has changed as much as I.

TWO CENTURIES AGO England's canals were engineered as the super-highways of the Industrial Revolution. The first opened in 1761. By 1850 five thousand miles of waterways linked the four great estuaries—Mersey, Severn, Trent, and Thames—with the potteries, textile mills, collieries, and ironworks of sprawling new cities in the Midlands and the North (map, page 83).

A generation ago the canals were almost dead, their narrow locks and shallow channels inadequate for modern needs. Before nationalization at the end of World War II, some fell into disuse except for drainage or industrial water supply. But a passionate conservation movement led by the Inland Waterways Association awakened citizens and government alike to the unique recreational value of the canals. Today, the cruising waterways controlled by the British Waterways Board have become pathways to peace and pleasure for millions of boaters, hikers, and fishermen each year.

We embark on our own adventure at Fradley Junction, an old canal port at the intersection of the Trent and Mersey and Coventry Canals ten miles northeast of Birmingham. Today its warehouses and stables serve as headquarters for the Swan Line Cruisers Ltd., one of scores of boat-charter companies now operating on the canal system.

Mrs. Helen Theakston, the owner, proudly introduces us to *Fradley Swan*, a steel-hulled 36-foot diesel cruiser with accommodations for four. The carpeted cabin glows with



Taking its good old time, the Oxford Canal (right) browses through farmland near Napton on the Hill. Its gently winding course makes it one of the most popular for boating.

Silent as a sigh, a swan idles on the canal at sunset. Haven for birdlife, England's waterways lure herons, coots, mallards, wary kingfishers, and the darting swallows that search the dusk for an insect supper.



"I raised two children on the canals," says Mrs. Doris Collins with a smile as bright as her boat, the *Belmont*, moored at Braunston (facing page). "Gave birth to them right on board. I'd lie in for ten days, then the family was off again, carrying coal."



"Number One"—a canal man who captained his own craft—Jack James made the run from Coventry to Oxford for 34 years. Fancy ropework and a model of his boat adorn the porch of his Stoke Bruerne cottage.

hand-finished wood cabinets. A shower, chemical toilet, and galley equipped with gas stove, water heater, and refrigerator indicate we will not be forced to rough it.

"Diesel fuel is aboard, and bottled gas—more than you'll need in two weeks," says Mrs. Theakston. "She's a beautiful boat. I'll be taking her out myself this winter—the only time our boats are free. The summer season is usually fully booked by mid-March."

With our gear and groceries stowed in *Swan's* commodious lockers, we are ready to get under way. One of the Swan Line dockhands comes along to see us through the first lock, a chamber somewhat like a giant bathtub with gates at both ends. Filling and emptying it raises and lowers boats from one canal level to another.

The principle is simple, the practice arduous. Gingerly I attach our "key," a large windlass handle, to the ratchet gear that raises the "paddles"—sliding panels in the bottom gates—releasing 25,000 gallons of water to boil beneath *Swan's* bow as Linda struggles with the unfamiliar controls to keep the boat in place. When the chamber empties, I heave on the giant beams to open the gates. Linda steers into the lock, I heave the gates closed again, wind down the paddles, then wind up similar paddles at the top gate to send another 25,000 gallons surging into the lock. Five minutes, one blister, and a slightly strained back later, we are seven and a half feet higher and ready to cruise.

"You'll get the hang of it," our instructor says cheerfully. "Just remember to close everything behind you—leave a paddle open and you can drain a whole section of canal."

As he bids us farewell, threatening clouds deliver their first spattering of rain. We cruise northward at four miles an hour under a canopy of trees. The rain begins in earnest. Soon it is dark. We moor in a meadow, utterly alone in the heart of England's countryside, and utterly at peace.

LINDA AND I are novices on the canals. But in a way we are veterans. For six weeks we have surveyed the canal system by car—a journey that would take a year or more by boat. Our driver's-eye view of modern Britain is one of teeming motorways, juggernaut lorries in narrow-laned villages, and hordes of tourists whose gaudy buses surround beauty spots and historic sites like squadrons of jukeboxes on wheels.



Amid this furor, we have found the old world of the canals, followed their gentle wanderings through farms and woods and villages, climbed staircases of locks across the Pennines, cruised the hills of Wales, and entered crowded cities through forgotten byways of the past.

JACK JAMES is a man of both eras. At 78, he is almost the last of the "Number Ones"—the independent skippers whose gaily decorated 72-foot narrowboats were once the clipper ships of the canals. Now he is an honorary custodian of canal history at Stoke Bruerne, a busy boating center on the Grand Union Canal midway between London and Birmingham (page 80).

"I was born on a boat on the River Thames near Oxford. In 1896 that was. There were ten of us kids. No school for us—we learned our letters off the sides of railway wagons. Earned our keep as soon as we could lead a horse or handle a tiller. I was a skipper at 17, with two of my sisters as crew.

"Met a pretty girl named Emma Bray goin' through a lock one day at Rugby. Courted her three years, up and down the canals. Spent our honeymoon haulin' coal to Oxford. Raised six kids of our own, all on the boats. Emma's gone now—died one afternoon while having a cuppa tea. We never even had a chance to say good-bye."

Declining business forced Jack to sell his boats, but he captained a pair of Grand Union Canal Co. boats for the Ministry of War Transport during World War II. In 1947 he became lockkeeper at Stoke Bruerne.

"The place was a proper eyesore then. I painted things up, started a little museum with some of my own bits and pieces. Then the pleasure people began to come. It was them that saved the canals. It was sad to see the working boats go. But now—well, I've got more friends than I ever had. Put m' feet up in the evenin', have a yarn and a pint or two, and I'm my own gaffer still!"

Jack's "little museum," enlarged by the Waterways Board, now attracts crowds of sightseers eager to learn the history and lore of the canals. The most popular display shows the life of canal families—their costumes, tools, and the intricate ropework, bright brass ornaments, and traditional paintwork that decorated their floating homes.

At Braunston, where the Grand Union joins the Oxford Canal 20 miles northwest of Stoke

Bruerne, Rose and Bill Whitlock can show you the real thing aboard *Lucy*, their traditional narrowboat. *Lucy's* sleek 72-foot hull glistens with fresh tar, and crisp new canvas shelters the 30-ton cargo hold. Bow, stern, and cabin sides sparkle with painted roses, castles, and curlicues.

"Mind your head—it's a bit cramped down here!" With one wave of her arm, Rose gives you a complete guided tour of her 7-by-9-foot stern cabin. Forward, a screened-off sleeping area occupies half the space. The "living room" contains a tiny coal stove, miniature china cabinet, a settee, and multitudes of drawers and cupboards. Every spare inch of bulkhead gleams with brass ornaments and gay decorative plates.

"I've lived afloat for 50 years—wouldn't know what to do if I had to move ashore," she says. "Course, in the old days, a family'd have a second boat—a 'last,' or butty, boat—and you could fit a lot of kids into two cabins. We lived small, you might say. But we had the whole country to call home."

THE OXFORD CANAL was a main route of the Number Ones, whose horse-drawn boats took four or five days to make the 77 miles to Oxford from the coalfields north of Coventry. Today's diesel-powered skipper can "fly" it in three days.

"And I suppose there are some damn fools who do it," growls John James. "But they miss half the pleasure. Might as well drive, and be done with it." John is a canal man like his father, Jack. For 22 years in London he combined careers as an artist and skipper of the tour boat *Jason*, which has ferried hundreds of thousands of tourists from Paddington's Little Venice to Camden Town on the Regents Canal.

Now he paints full time in his studio at Napton on the Hill, near the Oxford Canal. His favorite subject is canals, and his favorite viewpoint is a hilltop meadow beneath an old windmill that looks out over Warwickshire. Below, the canal wanders amiably through woods and meadows. Toylike boats move slowly through locks and under bridges to disappear in summer haze toward Oxford.

"The canals really are magical," John says quietly. "They reflect and enhance their surroundings—a perfect marriage of nature with man's necessities. I think we've forgotten how to do that now."

Travel a few miles south and you can get





Cross of nails gleams in the ruins of the old cathedral in Coventry. As the church roof blazed during one of the worst air raids of World War II, hand-forged 14th-century nails rained into the sanctuary. Parishioners fashioned three of them into the cross.

some tips on gardening from Sidney Feltham, a young ex-Coldstream Guardsman who has marshaled regiments of marigolds and mums around his lockkeeper's cottage at Cropredy. You can also learn some military secrets.

"We did lots of ceremonials in the Guards—troopin' the color, guardin' the Tower of London, and whatnot. Stood on parade four and five hours at a time—with a 14-day detention if you fainted. The trick is to keep your weight off your heels. That's why Guards' boots bulge in front—lots of room to wiggle your toes without anybody knowin'."

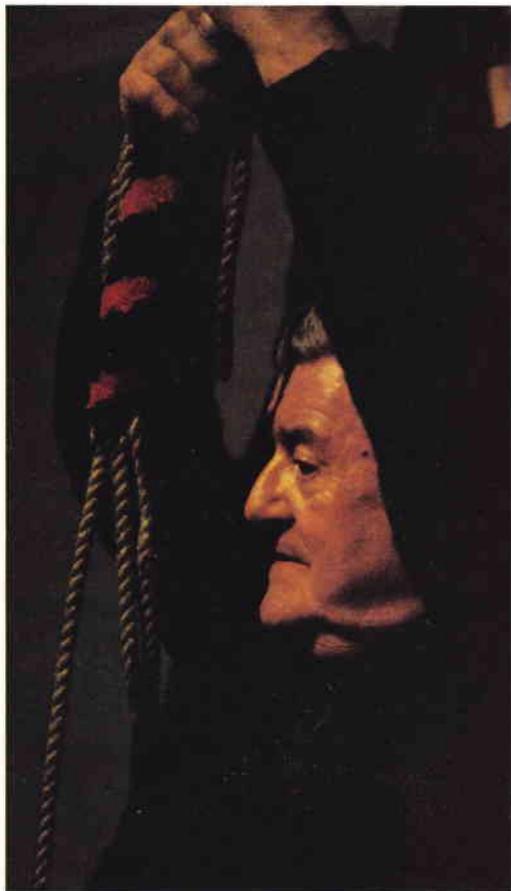
At nearby Banbury, toes are part of history. The lady of the nursery rhyme who rode a white horse to Banbury Cross wore rings on her fingers and bells on her toes—but very little else. She was in reality the symbolic earth mother, or goddess of fertility, in pre-Christian times. In 1600, Puritans destroyed

the original cross; its replacement overlooks a giant parking lot.

So it is a pleasure to visit Aynho, where the village green is still intact, and citizens espalier fruit trees along walls of Cotswold stone.*

In Oxford itself, where the canal joins the Thames, you can spend a day and see too much, or a year and see too little. We climb the 14th-century steps of Carfax Tower to look over a panorama of spires, many of them belonging to the 34 colleges of Oxford University. In a quiet cloister at Balliol College, we see the names of hundreds of students who died in the trench warfare of 1914-18. Their deaths prompted the Oxford pacifist movement that helped make England so ill-prepared for Adolf Hitler. Perhaps tragedy is the mother of chivalry—a shorter list of

*James Cerruti described the Cotswolds in the June 1974 NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC.



Hands and mind poised, a bell ringer at St. Michael's Church in Stone, on the Trent and Mersey Canal, prepares to join in a tuneful chorus of the church's eight bells.

World War II casualties includes names of Germans who studied at Balliol.

Later, near the northern end of the canal, we visit Coventry's modern cathedral, built as a symbol of renewal beside the shell of the 14th-century church of St. Michael. The old church was burned on November 14, 1940, in a massive air raid that destroyed much of the city and killed 554 of its citizens.

Amid the ruins of the church, a blackened altar bears a small cross made of nails from the charred beams. Carved on the wall behind it are two words: "Father Forgive."

66 **B**IRMINGHAM'S an engineer's town," says Alan Green as we sit chatting on the *Brummagem Fly*, his floating pub and tour boat. "Building cars is what we're good at, so of course we're rebuilding the city for cars, not people."

Alan, a sandy-haired young lecturer on urban planning at the University of Aston, is sympathizing with our harrowing encounter with the city's new Inner Ring Road—a high-speed maze of roundabouts, forks, and underpasses totally devoid of meaningful directional signs. We had whizzed around it like prisoners on a toy racetrack, passing our hotel four times before finding a way to reach it. Later we shuddered through a matching maze of gloomy pedestrian subways, strewn with windblown rubbish and providing a sinister forum for Birmingham's graffiti artists.

"God knows, we need urban redevelopment. But why put motorcars on the surface and people underground? Ring roads are destroying half the cities of England. Whoops! Excuse me a moment!"

Alan dives for the throttle, throws it into neutral, and gently eases the *Brummagem Fly* to the bank of the Birmingham Canal. Leaping ashore with a barge pole, he untangles a large bedspring from the propeller, and then we continue our cruise through the Black Country—so called for the scores of iron smelters that once spewed smoke and ash over 50 square miles around Birmingham.

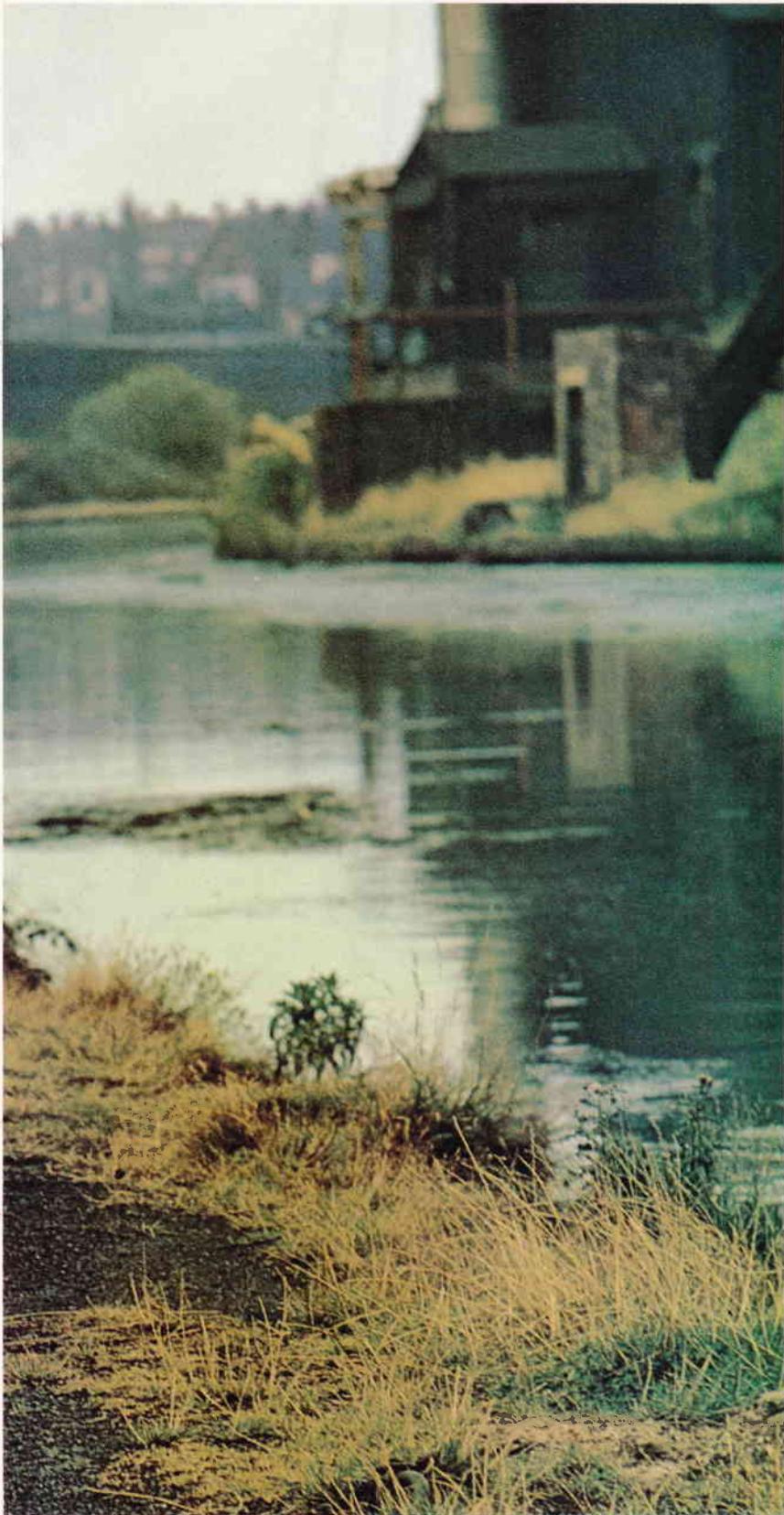
"I think every old bed, bike, and pram in the city winds up in the canal," Alan sighs. "There are a hundred miles of navigable water here, priceless recreation space. But for years we've turned our backs on them, fenced them off, dumped our rubbish in them."

We glide past towpaths purple with fireweed—the rosebay willow herb that lends strange beauty to silent factories and warehouses. Graceful arches of cast iron and brick carry roads and other canal levels across the channel. At Tipton we tie up alongside the main street to buy fish-and-chips worthy of three stars in any gourmet guide.

At lunch Alan tells of taking up boating three years ago as a hobby. It became much more—today he and his partner, architect Barry Stanton, operate two tour boats and a fleet of rental dinghies. Last year they carried 30,000 passengers. In 1974 they hope to launch six 40-foot charter cruisers.

"Ready for the next treat?" he asks. We embark and soon plunge into a 3,027-yard torture chamber called Netherton Tunnel, which carries the canal beneath Rowley Hill. The eerie darkness thunders with our exhaust, while icy water cascades on our heads from ventilation shafts. After about half an hour we emerge into (Continued on page 90)

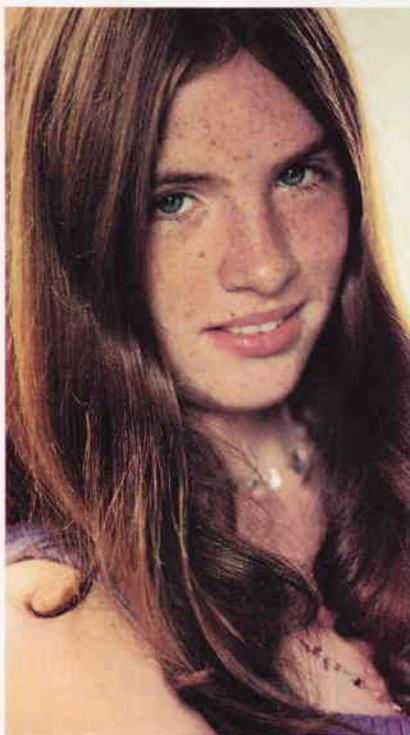




In bowler and bonnet and vest and shawl of the canal people of old, Charlie Alldrick, his wife, Marjorie, right, and Mrs. Betty Foakes stroll along the Birmingham Canal at Smethwick.

Seeking relief from the day-and-night demands of his job as an electrician, Charlie hired a canal boat and took his wife on a weekend trip. The ride turned into a hobby, then into a crusade. When the government threatened to close most of the city's canals, he and hundreds of other canal lovers joined ranks to fight the plan.

"The canals are still on the map," Charlie says, and he is still on the canals, managing a fleet of tour boats and cruising the waterways. "There's lots of restrictions on cars and such here in Birmingham," he says, "but on the canals you're as free as the wind."



Flames warm the spirits as well as the bodies of Birmingham boys after a swim in the canal at the city's Hockley Port (above). Crowded into the slums, the boys formerly had no place to play. Gangs roamed and fought in the streets. Crime and vandalism flourished. Then the Hockley Port Trust, a group of concerned citizens, leased the disused basin and gave the youngsters a place to let off steam.

During his 14-month stay as youth adviser, Tom Hodgson (right) counseled and consoled hundreds of teen-agers such as freckle-faced Kathy (left).

"We took down the fences and cleaned up the rubbish," says Tom. "Everybody pitched in. Volunteers hauled debris away in their own trucks. They took the boys and girls on canal and hiking trips, taught them how to paddle canoes, and to repair boats."

The result? Tensions eased, crime fell. As police superintendent Frank Broadbent observed, "Kids do not get into trouble when they are messing around with boats."





Savoring a moment of solitude, the author stands at the entrance to Birmingham's Gas Street Basin. Here narrowboats rest near warehouses and

open country, where green fields have replaced abandoned collieries.

Nearby, in 1619, "Dud" Dudley tried to solve Britain's first energy crisis. Ironmasters were depleting the nation's oak forests to get charcoal for their furnaces. Dud made early experiments in using coal. He failed—partly because of the ironmasters' fear. They destroyed his furnaces and prevailed on Parliament to revoke the patents it had granted him. Not until 1709 did Abraham Darby develop the smelting process that was to help catapult England into the Industrial Age and give the Black Country its name.

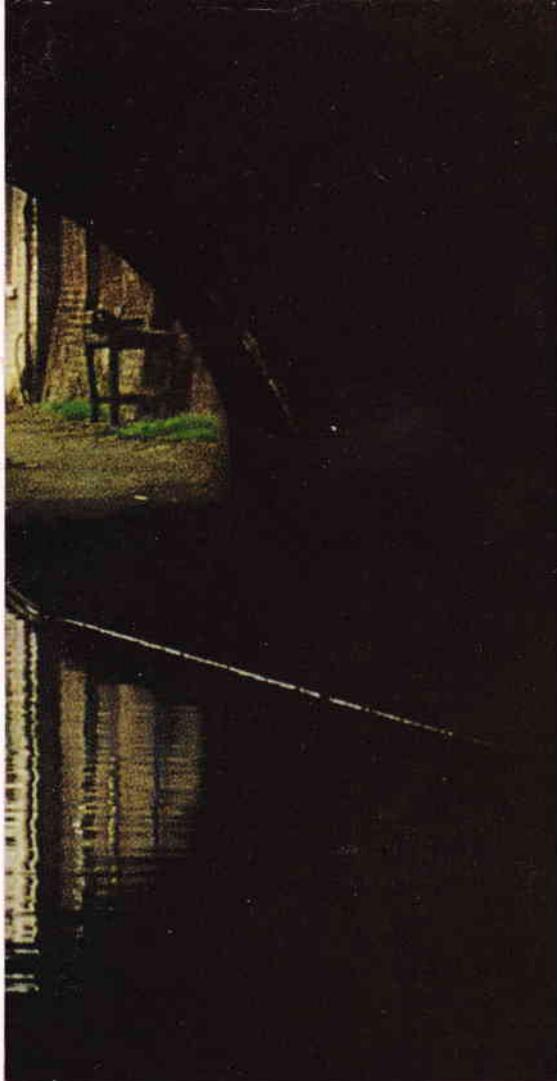
"Not so black now, though," Alan says. "People are surprised to see open space so close to the city. Speaking of blackness, I hope you like tunnels, because we're going to give you an encore. It's another day's trip if we go

back to Birmingham by way of Wolverhampton." So we plunge through Netherton again. It hasn't changed.

At dusk we tie up at Cambrian Wharf, our starting point nine hours earlier, and go ashore to the Long Boat pub, cheerful centerpiece of Birmingham's first canalside redevelopment. Tall apartment houses overlook terraces of restored 18th-century cottages, and throngs of Brummies—as Birmingham's citizens call themselves—stroll around the basin.

"This is just a sample of what the canals could be," Alan says. "There are dozens of old dock areas like this. Come on—I'll show you a better one."

A 300-yard voyage takes us under Trinity Church on Broad Street Bridge, and we emerge into Gas Street Basin, home port of the *Fly*. Old warehouses form a comfortable



workshops little changed over the past century. Families still live aboard boats moored at Gas Street, where a woman (above) bathes her doleful pup.

wall of brick against the city's glass-and-concrete skyline. The basin is crowded with colorful old working boats, many occupied by young families. Children and dogs scamper among the boats, and smoke from cooking stoves spirals from brassbound chimneys.

"It's another world here, almost another century," Alan says. "It will be redeveloped someday. But I hope they don't tart it up too much. We may not be able to build things like this anymore—but we can still keep them part of our lives."

SO YOU'RE A HODGSON, eh? Don't find too many of us this far south, but it's a good Yorkshire name. Means 'strong spear.' The speaker is Tom Hodgson (page 89), whom we meet as he deftly coaxes an ailing engine back to life at Gas Street.

He is a master boatbuilder, served five years in the Queen's Household Cavalry, earned a divinity degree at London University, and has spent 12 years as a counselor in an "approved school"—as the English call reform schools. For 14 months he won the trust of hundreds of slum children as director of Hockley Port, a youth center on the Soho Loop of the canal a mile from Gas Street. He still serves as volunteer counselor.

"Name a problem, we've got it. Poverty, racial tension between whites, blacks, and Asians, uprooted slum families, 'aggro' [for aggression] gangs, vandalism, crime. Come and visit—you might call us the citizens of Birmingham's second city."

On a gray Sunday in a neighborhood of deserted buildings and raw new housing developments we find Tom surrounded by



youngsters at the basin. Noisy groups stage mock battles in battered canoes. Others learn the rudiments of boatbuilding in a new workshop built by the Hockley Port Trust, a charitable organization of Birmingham citizens.

"Should have seen this place at first," Tom says. "It was ten feet deep in rubbish. The kids helped clean it up. Most of them had never seen a boat, let alone sailed in one. They're tough kids. A lot of 'em will get drunk, steal, break things. And you'll hear a lot of lies."

"But, if you listen, you'll hear a lot of 'em

lying about good things—like having jobs, or good homes, or doing well in school.

"Maybe if somebody believes them enough, some of those lies will come true. You can't run a place like this without the necessary idiot adult."

A TWO-DAY VOYAGE along the Stratford-upon-Avon Canal takes you from the Dickensian grime of Hockley Port to the Elizabethan quaintness of Shakespeare's birthplace. The trip took David Hutchings three years—but he had to dig



much of the way. An architect by profession, he quit his job with the city of Coventry in 1961 to direct a successful volunteer effort to restore the derelict canal.

We found him knee deep in mud, helping workmen wrestle with dredging machinery on the last stretch of another project—the four-year, \$750,000 restoration of 17 miles of the upper River Avon. This summer boats will sail to Stratford from the River Severn for the first time in a century.

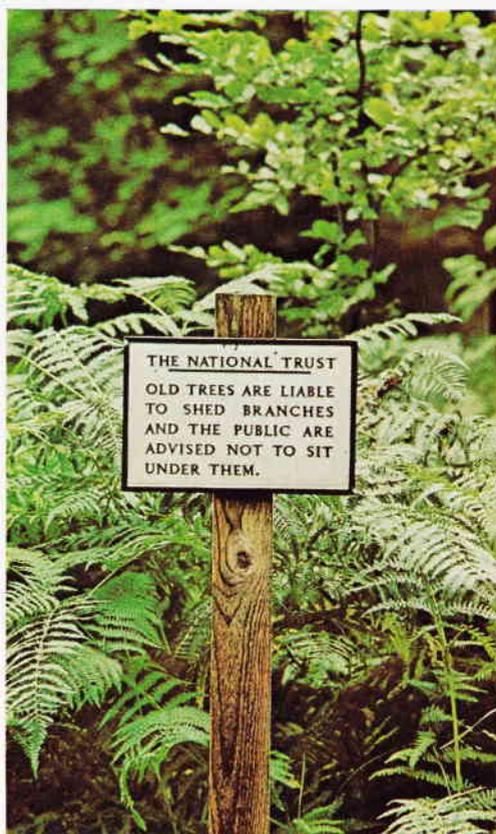
“We’ve dredged 14½ miles of river bottom. Built nine locks out of scrap steel and sweat.

At the speed of adventure—four miles an hour—the author steers his chartered boat, *Fradley Swan*, through Stoke on Trent. Here in 1759 Josiah Wedgwood first crafted his distinctive earthenware and revolutionized England’s pottery industry.

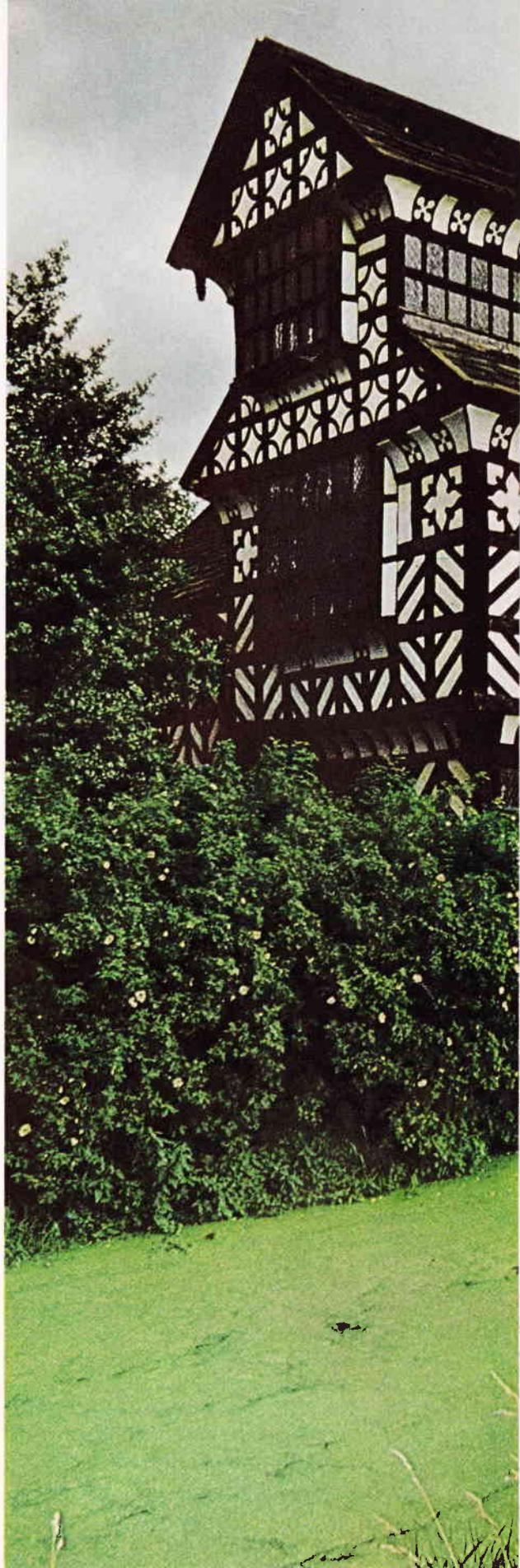
Wedgwood wares still travel on the Caldon Branch of the Trent and Mersey aboard two specially built narrowboats that ply between plants on the canal.

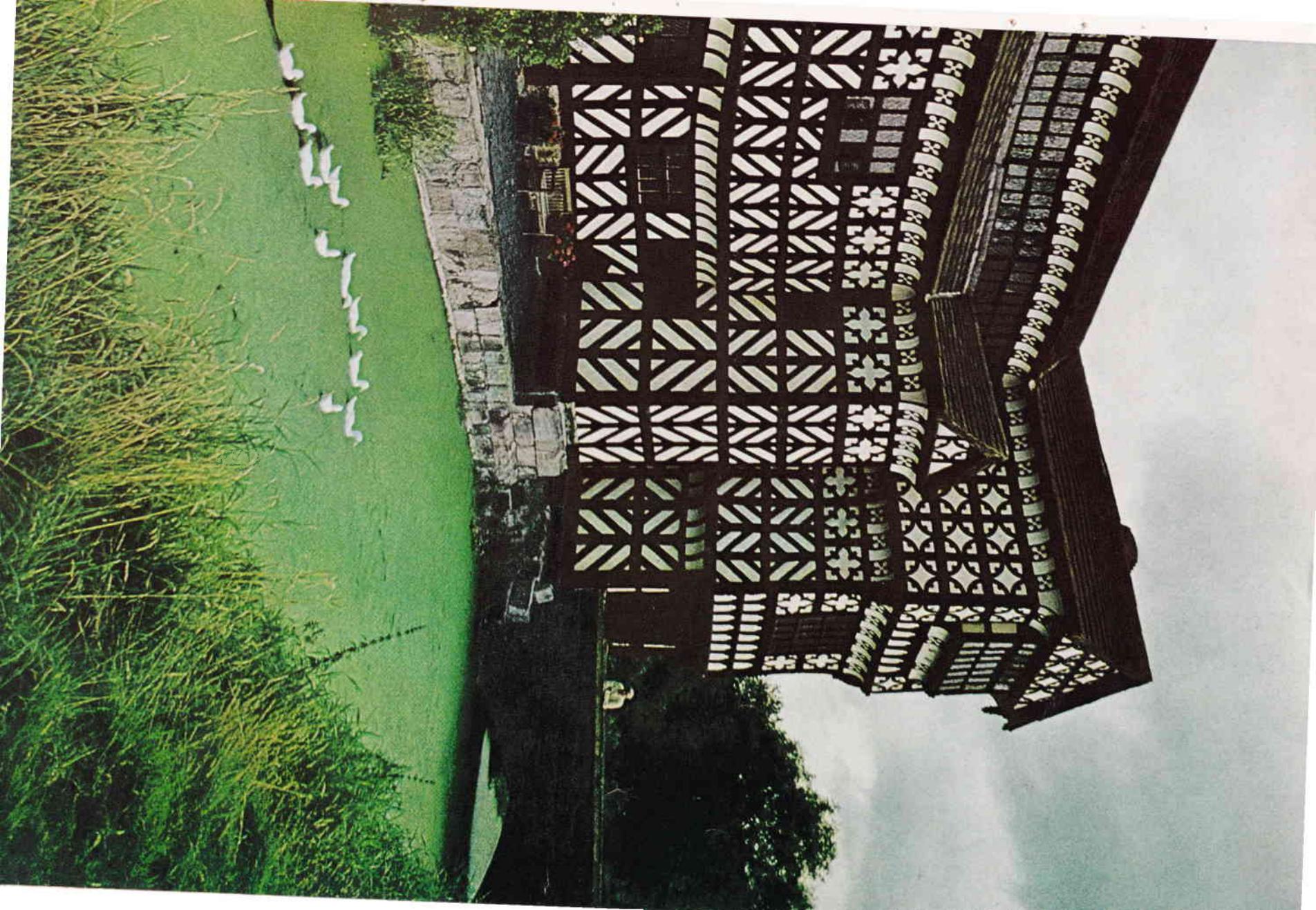
Elizabethan elegance in plaster and black oak, Little Moreton Hall looms above its moat near the Macclesfield Canal. In 1514 owner William Moreton quarreled with his neighbor Thomas Rode “concerning which of them should sit highest in church and foremost go in procession.” Local records fail to disclose the outcome of their dispute.

Now throngs of summer visitors tour the restored 15th-century residence administered by the National Trust, which preserves some 200 properties throughout Britain.



Tree, spare that woodsman! A sign cautions visitors to the gardens of the Shugborough estate at Great Haywood near Stoke on Trent.







Worn by countless tow ropes, this old iron bridge guard still protects the masonry at the base of the Autherley Junction span. For more than a hundred years after the first of England's canals opened in 1761, traversing them was literally a long haul. Men aboard the boats "legged" them through tunnels by pushing with their feet against the walls; horses labored on towpaths.

Each of them cost us about \$25,000 and six weeks' work—five times cheaper and five times quicker than the government could get it done. But we don't have a staff of consultants or labor bosses to tell us how to do the job—just a few hundred volunteers and a small crew of professionals. So of course we're right on schedule and budget."

The Stratford Canal project was a notable victory for canal enthusiasts. A government decision to close the southern stretch of the canal brought agonized protests from the Inland Waterways Association. The National Trust came to the rescue with private funds to take over the waterway and restore it.

Shortly afterward the British Waterways Board was formed, with the task of administering the canals. And now organizations such as the Navvies (named for the laborers who dug the original "navigations"), part of IWA's Waterway Recovery Group, recruit thousands of weekend workers to help dredge channels and repair locks.

"We've seen the last canal close," Hutchings says. "We need to reopen more. We could do it a lot faster if they were in private hands."

Before leaving Stratford, Linda and I stroll along the restored canal, which drops almost secretly through the town, hidden from the tourist throngs. A final lock opens on the broad basin near 15th-century Clopton Bridge. We leave sight-seeing to the restless souls ashore and spend a pleasant hour rowing among the swans that live in the gentle reflection of Holy Trinity Church.

JOSIAH WEDGWOOD was another of those Englishmen who, like David Hutchings, believed in dirtying their hands for an idea. He dug the first shovel of earth to start the Trent and Mersey Canal in 1766, a gesture in keeping with the long years he spent at potter's wheel and kiln to develop the techniques that revolutionized the ceramics industry. Self-educated, he became a friend of the greatest minds of the age; his independent soul exulted at the victory of George Washington's do-it-yourself armies: "I bless my stars . . . that America is free!"

Appropriately enough, the Stars and Stripes floats beside the Union Jack as we enter the Wedgwood pottery at Barlaston, on the Trent and Mersey south of Stoke on Trent.

"We always fly the flag of visiting buyers, and you Americans are our biggest overseas customers," says William Billington. He leads

us through the company's museum, with its exhibits of Josiah's handiwork—each a landmark in potters' history. There is his reproduction of the pre-Christian Portland Vase, which took him four years and hundreds of experiments to create; it was the culmination of his famous line of jasperware. There is his original earthenware, so elegant that royalty preferred it to porcelain.

In the pottery-throwing room, where Billington began his own career 50 years ago, we watch malleable mixtures of powdered china stone, flint, clay, and coloring blossom into graceful jasper vases under the skilled hands of potters at a battery of wheels. In another building scores of women apply printed patterns to dinnerware, or hand-paint designs with tiny brushes. The room is silent as a library; workers paid by the piece find that silence is golden.

Our tour ends in the cafeteria. Billington brings us tea in elegant Wedgwood cups.

"Company policy," he smiles. "Wouldn't do not to use the best."

STOKE ON TRENT is a municipal conglomeration of six towns—Burslem (where Josiah Wedgwood was born), Tunstall, Hanley, Stoke, Fenton, and Longton. Traditionally called the Potteries, it is an endless sprawl of gray roofs, chimney pots, and factories interspersed with the volcano-like slag heaps of North Staffordshire coalpits.

The Trent and Mersey threads Burslem near the early home of Arnold Bennett, whose novels—such as *The Old Wives' Tale* and *Clayhanger*—immortalized what he called the Five Towns at the turn of the century.

We visit the tall Victorian house at 205 Waterloo Road, with its horsehair divan, ponderous cabinets, and heavy drapes. Gray light filters through lace curtains that were flags of respectability in an age of soot. Surreptitiously, I heft the author's fat gray fountain pen, hoping for inspiration in my own scribbles. Bennett was among the first British writers to treat tradesmen and working people as humans of dimension and feeling rather than caricatures or figures of melodrama.

The custodian is Mrs. Irene Hault, pert and practical image of a Five Towns housewife. She prepares tea for us and tells us her own tale—one Bennett might have relished.

"I'd never heard of Mr. Bennett until the council advertised for a live-in caretaker. We needed a place to live, so I stayed up till

three one morning reading one of his books and the family history. They picked me from 20 applicants.

"I was born in the Potteries. We were poor, but we didn't feel poor. I painted cups, free-hand—four colors for threepence ha'penny a dozen. Granny dressed us by sewing. If we didn't have a penny for the gas meter, we read by candlelight. And we'd make our own pretty things for the house. It's a lovely feeling to make something out of nothing.

"During the war I worked in London—my daughter was born in a cellar during an air raid. Everybody helped. When you're poor, or there's a war on, people seem closer. Now it's different. It's 'I'm all right, Jack,' and everybody out on strike."

ENGLAND CAN SHOW nothing more beautiful and nothing uglier than the works of nature and the works of man within the limits of the county," Bennett wrote of Staffordshire. The scenic route of the Macclesfield Canal bears out his brighter judgment as it leaves the Trent and Mersey a few miles north of Stoke and passes Mow Cop, "... a hill famous for its religious orgies."

Primitive Methodists held their first camp meeting there in 1807—a 14-hour marathon of hymn singing and gospel shouting that shocked the pale rectitude of conventional divines who preached acceptance of poverty and hunger as the price of sin.

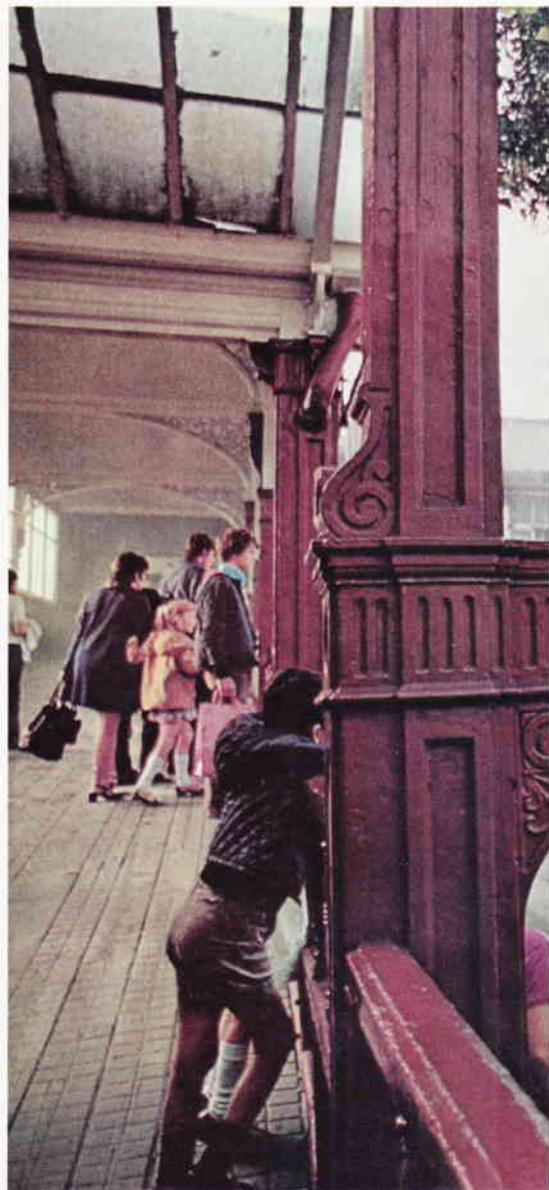
Stand on the 1,100-foot summit and you can understand why the Primitives found it a suitable spot. Gazing over the panorama of industrial gloom, perhaps they felt that if they could shout away sin, they could also shout away the grimness of their lives.

Today much of the smoke is gone. The slag heaps are being turned into parks. On a clear day you can see across the Cheshire Plain into Wales.

Below the hill Jack Whitaker still dispenses refreshment and acerbic wit in the Bird in Hand pub, just as he did to generations of working boatmen.

"Very down-to-earth, those old canal men. Settled their differences with a round of damns, then came in to share a pint.

"But you young people, hurryin' around—why, you haven't stopped long enough to see anything properly. I'm 70, and I've lived in this house all my life, and my father and grandfather before me—and none of us have seen all the
(Continued on page 102)



Darkened with the patina of time, bronze maidens valiantly lift their lamps in the city square of Leeds (left).

"There is energy and cheerfulness here," says the author. "The north-country voices, broad and low, are full of personality. It is nice to be called 'luv' instead of 'sir.' Traffic is dense but marvelously patient. I never hear a horn."

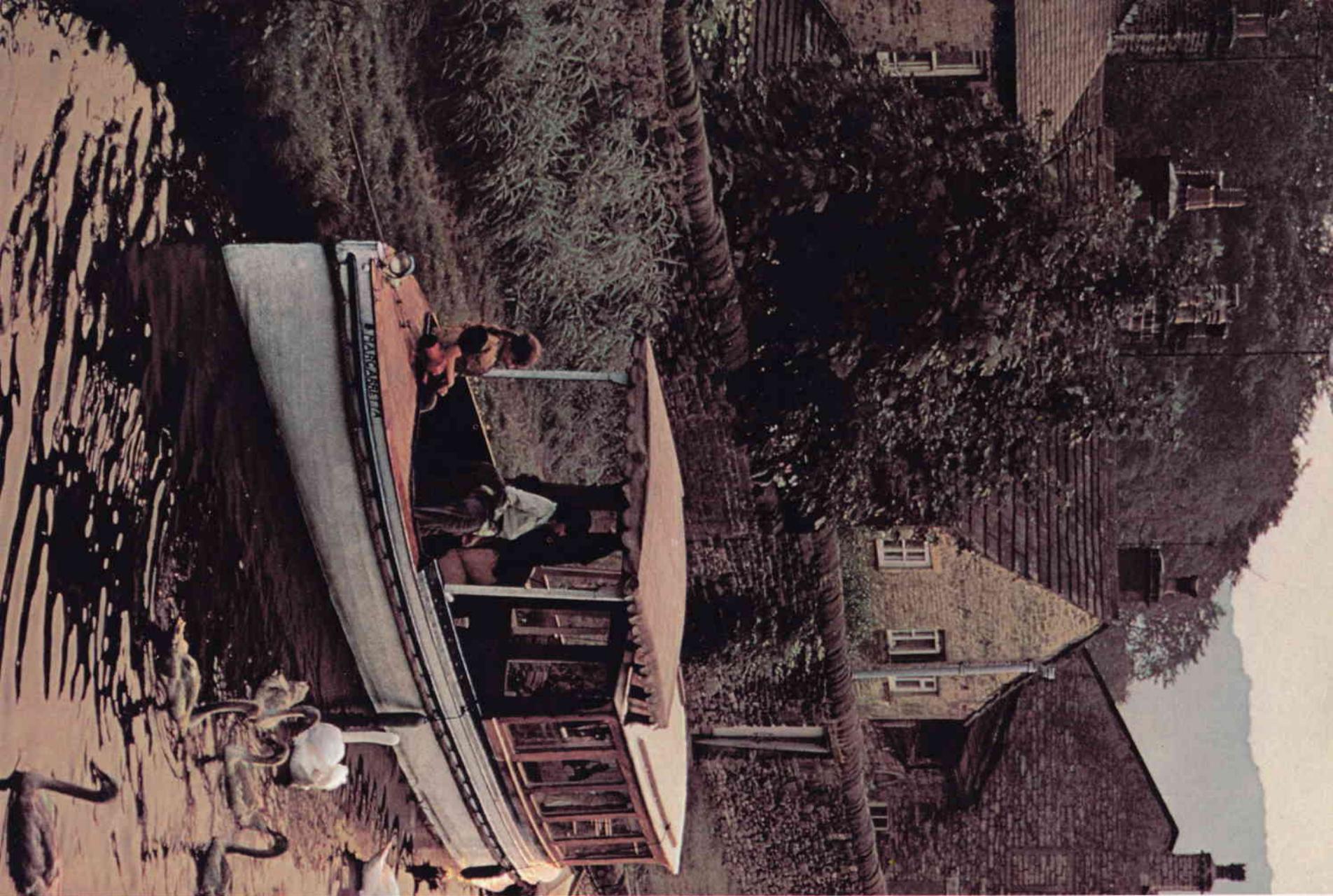
At Keighley, railroad nostalgia reigns as an antique locomotive (above) chugs into the station. Operated by a group of rail buffs, the Keighley and Worth Valley Light Railway offers visitors a five-mile trip to Oxenhope, including a stop at Haworth, where the Brontë sisters lived.

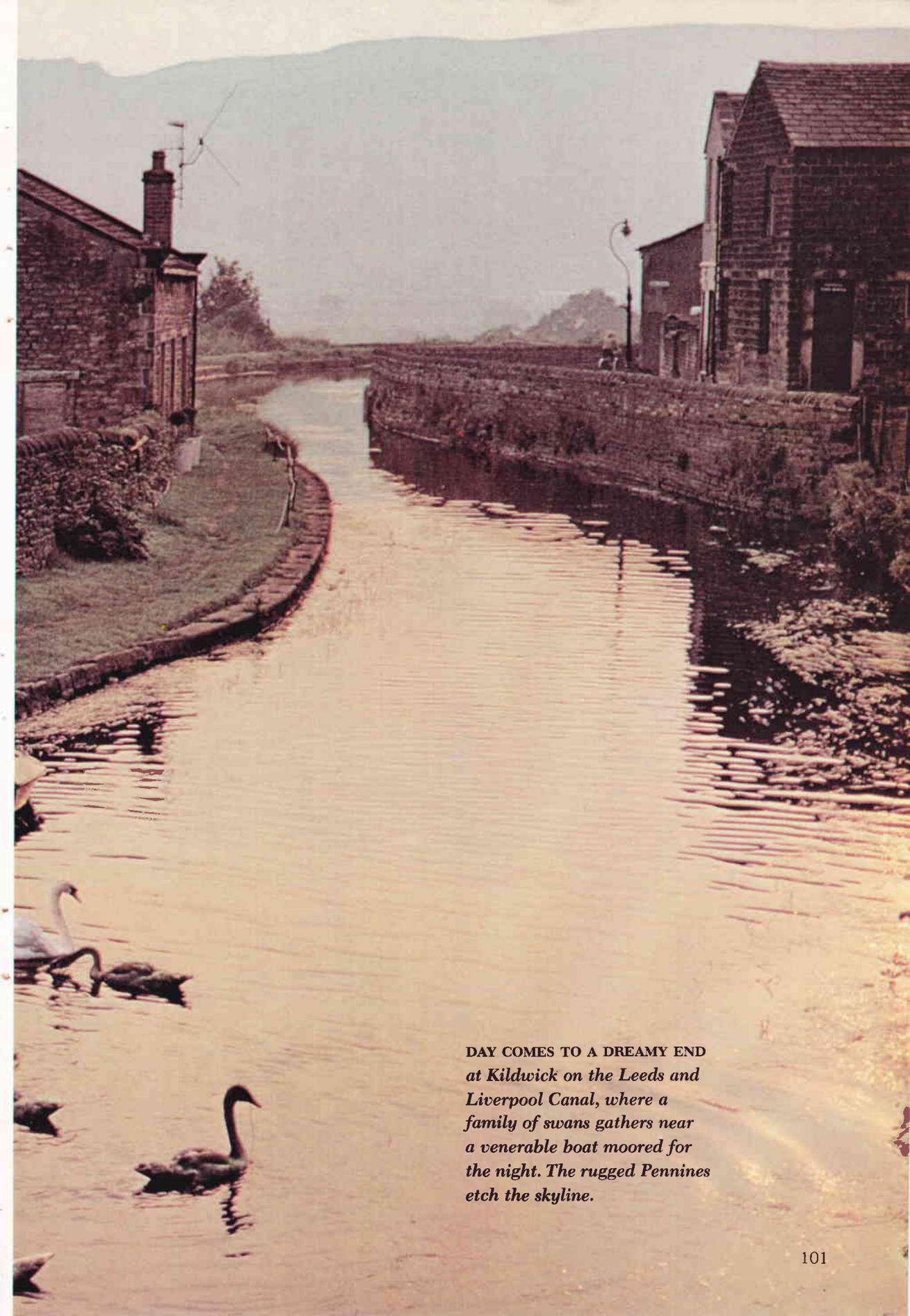


“High as your elbow, that’s the best length for a walking stick,” says Frank Meeson, who stands among his hand-carved specialties.

After a bracing trek along the canal towpath or through the Yorkshire Dales, foot-weary hikers hole up at Meeson’s hostelry in Gargrave.

“They come in looking like tramps,” he says. “Then they dry out before my fire to become doctors, professors, scientists, and other respectable people.”





DAY COMES TO A DREAMY END
*at Kildwick on the Leeds and
Liverpool Canal, where a
family of swans gathers near
a venerable boat moored for
the night. The rugged Pennines
etch the skyline.*

things there are to see beneath Mow Cop.”

The Bird in Hand is a free house—meaning that Jack is an independent publican not contracted to a single brewery. He prefers to accommodate the varied tastes of his small group of regulars. He fetches their pints from kegs in the cellar.

“None of them fancy pumps here. No barmaids, either. Let a woman in, and there’ll be arguments.” He catches Linda’s eye: “And any bloke who’ll argue with a woman is devoid of common sense!”

NEAR CONGLETON we find hospitality of a different order at Little Moreton Hall (pages 94-5), an Elizabethan fantasy of black timbers and white plaster owned by the National Trust.

George Belfield, a ruddy-cheeked retired farmer, is superintendent and guide. He

shows us through the age-tilted rooms. We admire the skill of one of the builders, who in 1559 signed his work: “Rycharde Dale Carpenter made thies windous by the grac of God.” Beside the weed-filled moat, we cater to the endless appetite of resident ducks.

Then, in the huge old kitchen, Edith Belfield gives us afternoon tea. Her homemade jam of strawberries, gooseberries, and rhubarb stimulates an endless appetite of my own, which I discipline by eating twice as much as I should and half as much as I want.

Thus fortified, we follow the Macclesfield to its end at Marple, where restoration work on the Ashton and Peak Forest Canals would enable boats to reach Manchester.

With silent apologies to loyal Mancunians, Linda and I skirt the city to make a pilgrimage to Worsley, where the Duke of Bridgewater built England’s first major canal in



Old soldier entertains passersby on the River Dee at Chester (left). “I taught m’self, and I’ll play just about anything you want,” says World War II veteran Dominic Deponio. Wolfie, part airedale and all patience, sits by his master.

Somber centerpiece recalling the bloody days of England’s Civil War, a carving of King Charles I adorns a Chester furniture shop, formerly an art gallery (right). From a tower in Chester, Charles watched the defeat of his cavalry during the Battle of Rowton Moor. A frieze of Biblical figures appears below the king.

Mouth-watering display in a Chester shop (far right) tempts the hungry. The array includes traditional dishes, pork-and-egg gala pies, Cumberland sausage, and two mavericks from the Continent—French liver pâté and Danish salami.

1761 to link his collieries with the lucrative markets of Manchester.

More remarkable than the canal itself were the 46 miles of underground waterways on which miners sailed in small boats called "starvationers." Local legend tells of a certain Mr. Withington who disappeared from view in mid-halloo while fox hunting, having ridden into one of the colliery's air shafts. He was rescued by miners in a passing boat.

The Bridgewater provides convenient access from southern waterways to the Leeds and Liverpool Canal, which arches across the Pennines, England's backbone. The convenience, Northerners will tell you, renders their southern brethren fortunate indeed.

IN THE NORTH, people "luv" one another. When you hear the greeting, "How are you, luv?" spoken in the rich accents

of Yorkshire and Lancashire, you know you have entered a different world.

In Leeds we sense a different mood.

Perhaps it is the chorus line of eight bronze ladies, scantily clad in rose garlands, who raise their torches in the city square (page 98) and seem the true forebears of platoons of miniskirted girls who teeter past on incredibly tall platform shoes.

Perhaps it is the old buildings, whose sandstone fronts glow like faces of fresh-scrubbed youngsters as workmen sandblast away a century of soot. Or perhaps it is the people themselves, tough and cheerful descendants of Englishmen who endured the ordeal of the Industrial Revolution.

It was in northern towns like Leeds and Bradford, Burnley and Preston that the invention of water-powered looms and spinning jennies brought mass production of textiles



in the mid-18th century. Millowners found mass labor in a peasantry driven from cottage looms by the new machines, or forced from the land by Parliament's sale of the traditional common fields to the gentry.

The new city dwellers, including tens of thousands of Irish refugees from the potato famine of the 1840's, battled to survive in disease-ridden slums of "back-to-backs"—brick boxes 12 feet square, unventilated, unheated, undrained. As many as 50 children in every hundred died before the age of 5. Others labored 15 hours a day in clattering mills under the eyes of "strappers," who whipped them awake and fined them sixpence if they still had the spirit to laugh or sing.

The rage of loom-smashing Luddites and Chartists gave birth to the labor movement here and in the northern Midlands. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels nourished their hatred for capitalism amid the awesome wealth and epic misery of the North. And a new literature was born in books like Dickens's *Hard Times*,* written about Preston in 1854, and the Brontë sisters' *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights*, which excoriated the ruthless propriety of the rich.

Some back-to-backs still exist beside huge developments of tidy council houses. In an older section we walk a tiny grid of streets called Hope—Hope Crescent, Hope Place, Hope Avenue, Hope Mount, Hope Grove.

THE NORTHERNERS engineered the Leeds and Liverpool on a more heroic scale than most southern canals. Sixty-foot boats of 14-foot beam plied the 127-mile channel, begun in 1770. Today its path across the Pennines makes it popular for cruising.

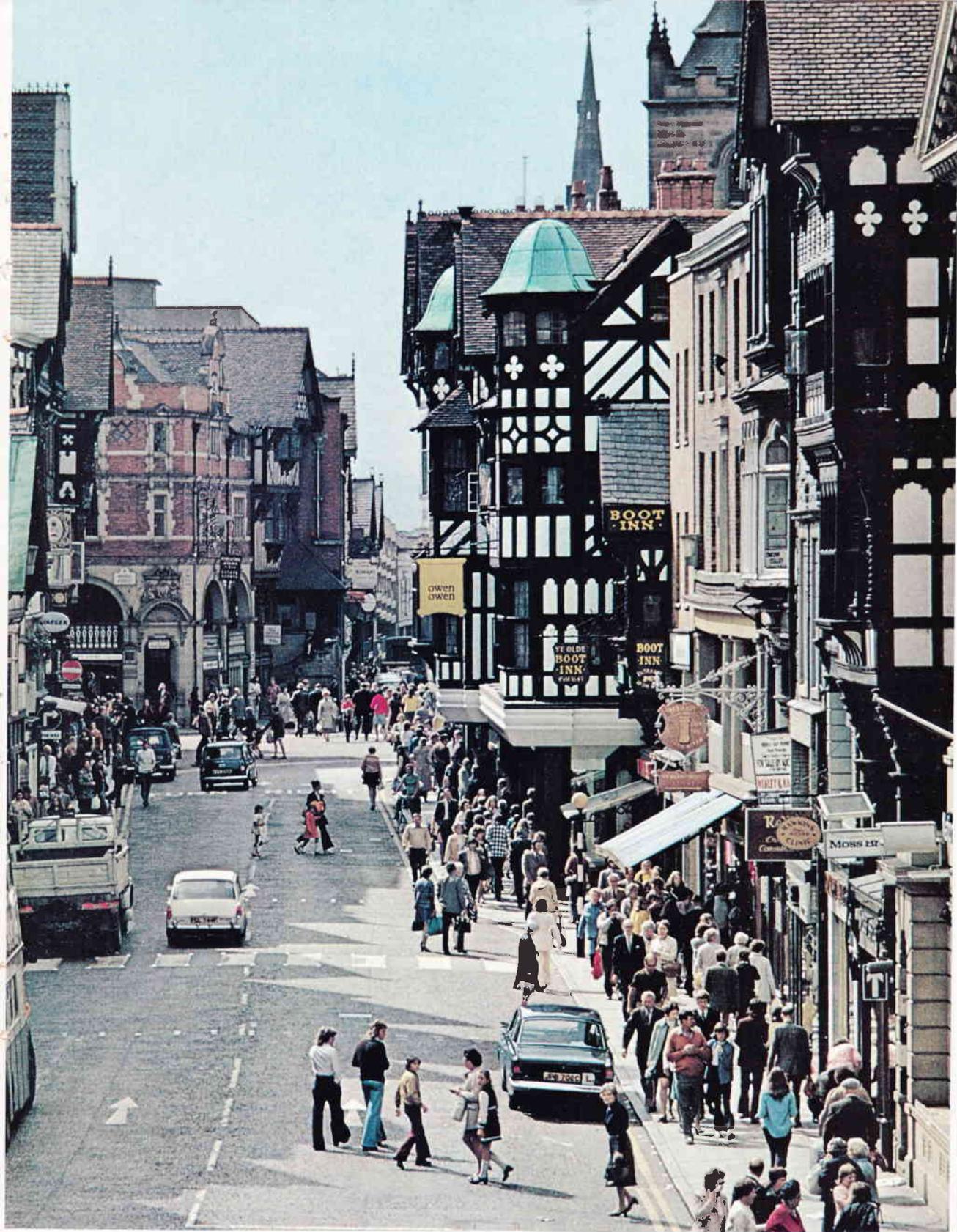
On our way to Gargrave, the northernmost point of the canal, we stop at Bingley, where a battery of five cavernous locks carries the channel 60 feet down a hill overlooking an old mill. There, munching superb cream pastries from the village bakery, we watch as boaters perform the arduous 30-minute ritual of swinging huge lock gates open and shut, and cranking the heavy paddles.

At Keighley, a few miles northwest, we discover the Keighley and Worth Valley Light Railway (pages 98-9), which sends antique steam engines puffing five miles to Oxenhope, stopping at Haworth, home of the Brontë sisters. We climb the steep cobbled main street

*The April 1974 NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC featured "The England of Charles Dickens."



Yesterday's facades mask today's fads along Chester's "Rows." The Tudor and



Victorian buildings house boutiques and restaurants. Founded by first-century Romans

and ringed by a Saxon wall that still stands, Chester strives to keep its historic heritage.



There's a good meal waiting along the Llangollen Canal, Mike and Carole Gregory serve up steak-and-kidney pies, spice cakes, and scones to those who moor beside their dairy farm. Here they take a break with their children Helen

to the Parsonage, where Charlotte, Emily, and Anne lived their brief, passionate lives. Then we walk the nearby moors. In silence we watch a hawk fluttering delicately in perfect stasis with the wind, a small angel of death seeking prey in the purple heather.

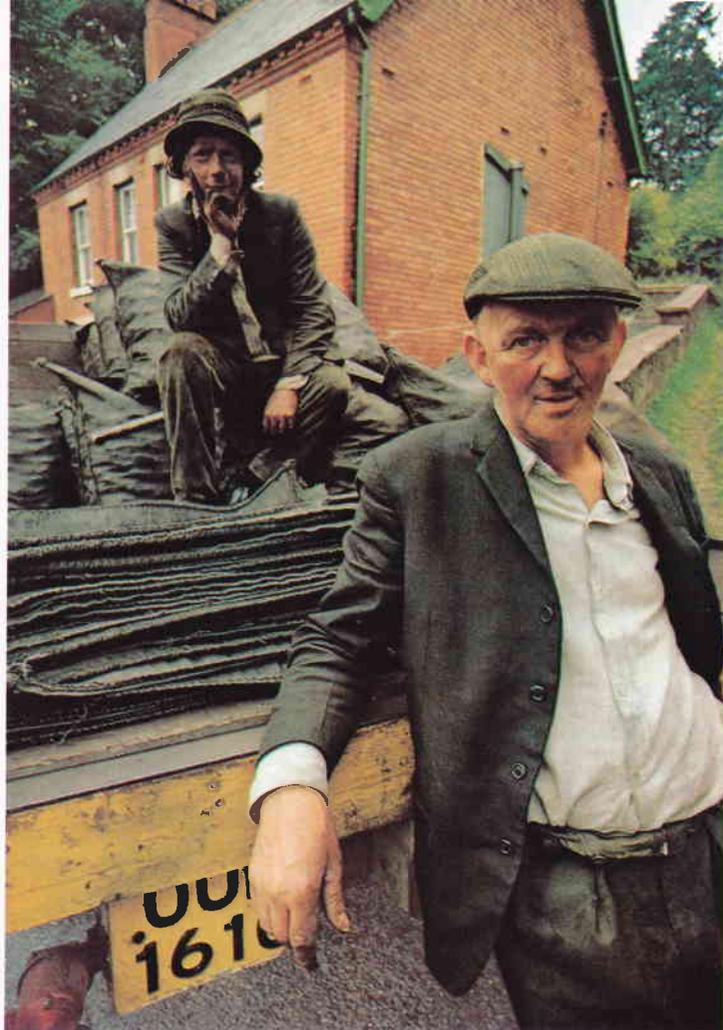
66 **T**HESE MOORS give us all a bit of the country that can't be taken away," says Bryan Pearce, a 30-year-old Leeds factory worker. He lowers his heavy pack and stretches out for a breather on the Pennine Way, which briefly follows the canal towpath near Gargrave. There is a crash behind us, and Bryan's 17-year-old nephew, David Minter, ruefully surveys the wreckage of his pack, fallen from a low wall.

"Sounds like scrambled eggs for breakfast," Bryan laughs. "David, here, is a world traveler—just got back from Spain. Wants to be

a scientist, and he'll do it, too. The schools are better now. When I came up, there wasn't much chance to go on."

Comparing Bryan's teen-age experience with David's tells much about recent change in England. Money is spent now on things undreamed of in the postwar years of austerity. But inflation and high taxes are eroding the gains, and British workers are no longer stoic. In the canal towns of Burnley and Wigan, you'll still hear the miners' complaint: "The muck stays north, the money flows south." Bryan's factory produces undercoating for automobile bodies. His job is threatened by the strikes and slowdowns that plague the auto industry—but he also suffers from rising costs. Like millions of other Englishmen, he is caught in the middle.

"Ah, but we shall survive," he says. Shouldering their packs, he and David march off,



and Mark, and Widge, their Welsh Mountain pony. This canal ends at the Welsh town that gives the waterway its name. Arthur Jones and son Philip (**above**) deliver 112-pound sacks of coal to heat the homes of families in the Llangollen area.

singing a sentimental Gaelic ballad of unrequited love:

“Oo owns that horse outside the door
Where my old horse should be?”

Bypassing Liverpool, the Beatles' birthplace, Linda and I cross the Manchester Ship Canal and journey to Chester, where the 66-mile Shropshire Union Canal presses like a moat against the last medieval city walls preserved intact in England.

Walk the two-mile circuit of those battlements, and you might well proclaim, “Two thousand years, and all's well!” Historians will quibble that the Roman founders didn't arrive until after A.D. 50, and that the walls weren't built until 907. But even they might agree that the city that repulsed the Vikings and the Welsh, and was one of the last to fall to the Normans, is fighting well against today's barbarians of “progress.” The walls

shelter streets of half-timbered buildings with two-level arcades of shops and restaurants. Some are Tudor originals. Others, of Victorian vintage, have outlived their sin of imitation. A huge new shopping center is screened by ancient buildings, and the visible modern architecture shows elegant restraint.

We spend a blissful day testing our appetites against food shops fragrant with Cheshire cheese, noble pork pies, fresh-ground coffee, and smoked fish. Our budget suffers in the antique shops, and our feet in a series of exquisite museums in the old watchtowers.

At length we escape to the banks of the River Dee and relax to the strains of a street musician's accordion as we watch flotillas of small boats cruising on the broad stream. Across the river lies Wales, whose land and language have resisted England's mastery since Roman times.



Drivers beware! Motorists risk a dip in the drink where the road rims Ellesmere basin on the Llangollen Canal.

A helmsman guides his motorboat atop the Pontcysyllte Aqueduct (facing page), which soars 120 feet above the River Dee. Pausing along the aqueduct's towpath, passerby G. A. Williams (below) tells the author: "Never knew anybody to fall off. Heard of them fallin' in, though, while takin' a shortcut home from the pubs."

NO, NO, MAN! You're not listenin'! It's thLLAN-GothLLEN! Put your tongue to say 'l,' but just breathe it, not say it. thLLANGothLLEN!"

Our teacher, an affable Welsh bobby, is trying hard to help us pronounce the name of the Llangollen Canal, a 46-mile branch of the Shropshire Union that runs to the upper reaches of the Dee.

Welsh is a language whose written form, with its profusion of w's, ll's, dd's, and tongue-boggling diphthongs, seems to the uninitiated like one gigantic typographical error. Spoken, it is sweet and musical.

"Better if you just listen," the bobby says. "If you try to read it, you'll go *gwyllt*—mad. But anyway, *croeso i Gymru*—welcome to Wales."

The Llangollen's final welcome for boaters is *godidog*—fantastic. Near the end of its course, it crosses 1,000-foot-long Pontcysyllte Aqueduct, which carries boats in a narrow cast-iron trough high above the Dee. The dizzying experience is one reason for the canal's popularity.

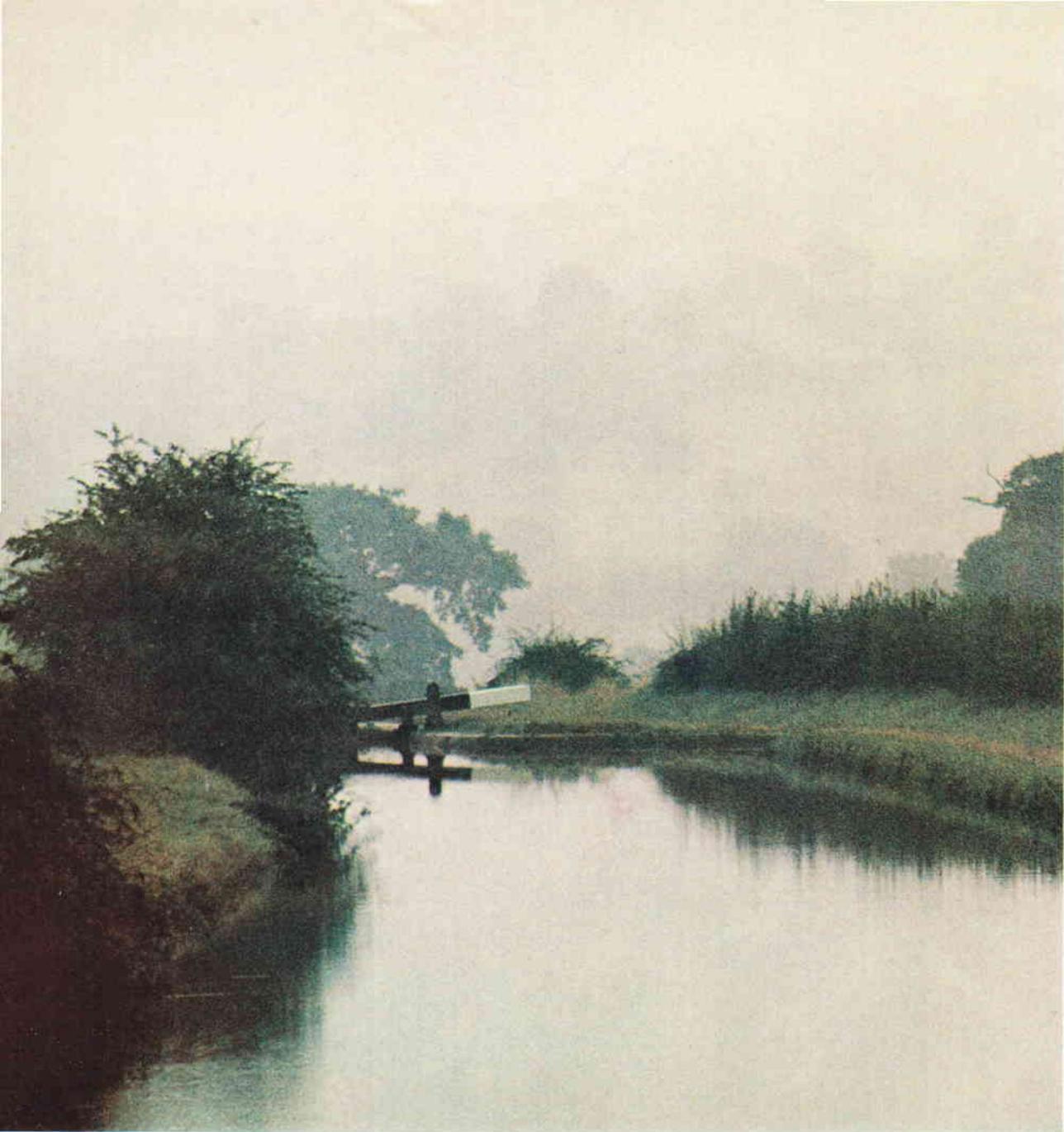
Another reason may be Carole Gregory's cooking.

She and her husband, Mike, live beside the canal at Hindford in Shropshire (preceding pages). Ten years ago Mike was the county's youngest farm manager, introducing new dairying techniques with old-fashioned energy on a 1,000-acre estate. He struck out on his own, buying a 20-acre farm and a herd of animals. When hoof-and-mouth disease swept the area in 1967, Mike's skill kept his herd healthy.

"But I couldn't sell them because of the quarantine.





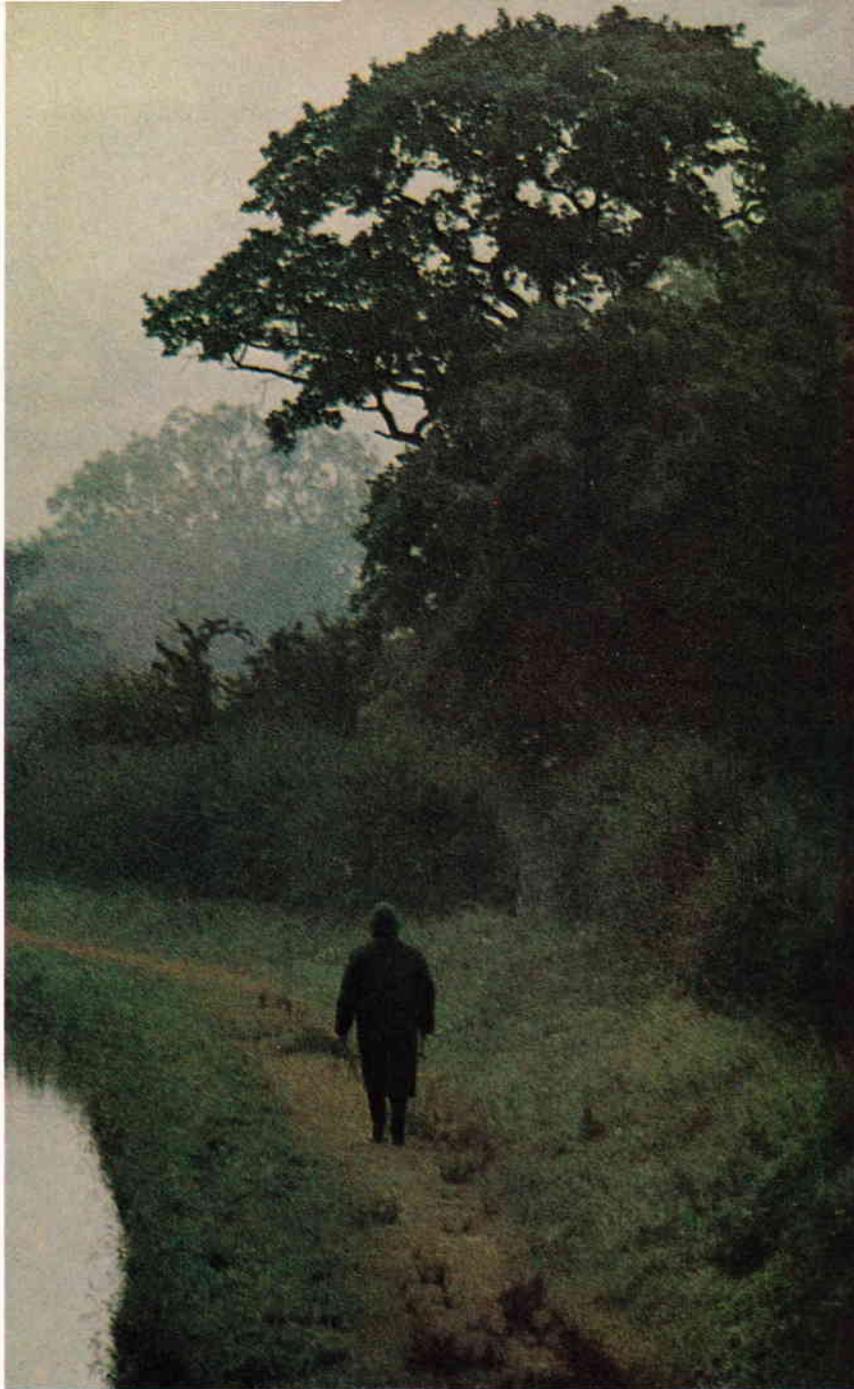


I was forced to try my hand at something else," he remembers. Opportunity—in the form of four soaking-wet girl canoeists—knocked at the door of Yew Tree Farm one stormy night in 1968. The girls sought food and shelter. "We fed them and let them sleep on the floor. That night Carole and I said simultaneously, 'I wonder if we could do anything on the canal?'"

Mike invested in a small stock of staples, and Carole put to use the farmhouse cooking skills of her childhood. They hung a sign on

the canal towpath modestly announcing teas and snacks.

Today, Carole's cooking is famous among canal connoisseurs. Her kitchen performance smacks more of legerdemain than cookery. She darts around like a purposeful wren, and in her wake appear superb breakfasts, lavish teas, and mounds of cakes, scones, and steak-and-kidney pies—all produced with a lively running commentary on children, customers, husbands, and the problems of the Gregorys' 18-hour day.



Mizzling mist veils a solitary traveler on the Macclesfield Canal towpath at Bosley locks.

"It rained during much of the trip," recounts the author, "but rain or shine, you always have a sense of privilege to be on these canals, so perfect in their settings. You never want to stop. There is always the fascination of what lies around the bend."

CAROLE'S BREAKFASTS inspire me to heights of cookery in the galley of *Fradley Swan*. No day of our voyage is complete that does not begin with bacon, eggs, grilled mushrooms, tomatoes, strong tea, and fresh bread. And no day ends without some gentle revelation.

We travel at foot speed. Sometimes, on the Trent and Mersey's open reaches, it seems we do not move at all, that England herself turns past us like some patient wheel rimmed with quiet villages, with hills plowed smooth as

cats' backs. In deep woods we moor by a tiny amphitheater of rock, dappled with fallen leaves. In a village church we watch blithe old men ring changes on bells whose tongues have shouted centuries of England's joy and sadness.

The weather relents, and gives us three days of autumn glory. It ends too soon, but I am well content. I have met that child who lived in England once. The past is not so long ago.

And tomorrow may be fine. □