

A CLASSIC STYLE

Aqua Narrowboats' latest is a 60ft semi-trad, which, with its bright colour scheme, portholes and brass fittings, is clearly inspired by traditional canal craft.

Mark Langley heads aboard...

Aqua Narrowboats have been steadily building narrowboats for both private customers and their sponsored hire fleet on the Trent & Mersey Canal since 2004. Recently, however, they have moved their boat-building enterprise to a new purpose-built facility in Foston, Derbyshire, while running their hire fleet from Barton Turns Marina.

Like most of their recent boats, *Shuffle Hop Toe* is a bespoke narrowboat based on a Colecraft shell, that is designed to Aqua's own standards. At 60ft long, it is almost of

a go-anywhere length and although this is the owners' first boat, they have lots of experience of hiring craft. They have also worked closely with the company throughout the build and the result is a long-term cruising boat for two, with space for guests.

Hull and superstructure

Colecraft shells are well-known for their graceful lines, both above and below the waterline – *Shuffle Hop Toe* is no exception, and the semi-trad stern boat has a superb look that's complemented by outstanding paintwork and signwriting. The hull curves in all the right places,

with green gloss paint taken down to the top bend. A large glazed cratch at the bow houses an electric brass trumpet horn and tunnel light. Unusually, brass has been selected for all external fittings, including mushroom vents and navigation lights – the trend these days is for chrome, but brass suits the boat well, especially given the red-green-and-cream paint scheme.

Black powder-coated opening portholes and side door windows also look better than shiny aluminium or chrome versions. A well-fitted canopy over the bow cockpit has large windows in the side; there is a matching aft cover for the

At tickover the boat barely ripples the surface.

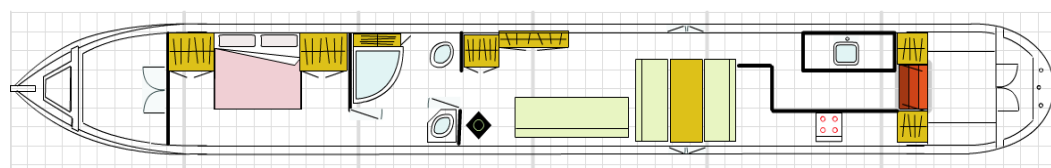




Four 150W solar panels give excellent charging and look much better than raised framed panels.



The rear cockpit can seat four when the boat is tied up.



rear cockpit, as well as two neat canvas covers for the pigeon box ventilators on the roof.

Four 150W semi-flexible solar panels are fitted flush to the cabin roof, which prevents them being snagged by lines. They also look a lot neater than some raised framed panels – though there is a slight reduction in efficiency in hot weather as they are in direct

contact with the steel surface.

The bow cockpit has large seat lockers either side, with the forepeak locker being useable for storage. An additional access door inside the cockpit means that the owners don't have to reach around the cratch and this also gives access to the bow-thruster.

At the stern, a large locker either side provides seating for

the crew, while small windows are in the upper sections of both aft doors. Two seats are fitted right on the counter, to be used when the boat is tied up, and two curved wooden supports can be added to the cover to avoid water pooling when the boat is left unattended. Both fore and aft cockpits have teak-effect decking material rather than painted steel, which gives them a warmer feel.

Galley

Those small windows in the back doors let a surprisingly large amount of light into the cabin around the two rearmost lockers and steps, which is often a dark area on many boats. The windows are covered by two padded cushions, attached by press studs, which can be easily transferred to the stern seats. Either side of the deep storage steps are cupboards: the port one contains the electric systems, while the one opposite functions as a drying locker and has supports for the tiller handle, mooring pins and so on, as well as room to hang coats.

The linear galley packs a lot in, including a large fridge, separate freezer, full-sized washing machine and plenty of storage. There are also two stainless steel-lined wine lockers under the floor, taking advantage of the shell's baseplate to keep drinks chilled. Aqua and the owners have avoided the temptation to fit in too many high-level cupboards, with a single one to port against the aft bulkhead containing a microwave, and two over the sink



Like the aft deck, the forward cockpit has two seats. The teak-effect decking gives a warm, slip-resistant finish.

FACT FILE

Length 60ft
Berths 2+2
Engine Beta 43
Price £160,000

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A light and spacious interior.



The extra dinette seating pulls out easily and the table extends as well.



The low-level sofa gives plenty of lounging space.

(with a curved cut-out for the shape of the porthole). These give useful extra space without making the galley feel closed in.

A linear three-burner gas hob made from black glass is to port and contrasts well with the light granite curved worktop. Under the hob is an oven and grill, with the deep red-painted cupboard doors adding a splash of colour to the room. The overhead pigeon box can give additional ventilation when cooking, and an upholstered infill fits snugly to avoid condensation and to block out light if people are sleeping in the saloon.

Saloon

A raised Pullman dinette comfortably seats four and converts to a double berth. There is plenty of storage underneath for bedding and guests' bags. However, the table and seats can be increased in size



A large shower and lots of room around the toilet.



Neat magnetic catches hold the bathroom doors open.

by a sturdy slide-out support, to enable six people to eat (the sections can be easily slid back to allow people to pass). The forward dinette backrest can also be reversed to allow the seating to face the saloon. The whole dinette is superbly engineered to work well and look good. Furthermore, all the internal upholstery and furnishings are

done in-house by Aqua.

Either side of the dinette is a pair of glazed side doors. Internally, louvre doors act as blinds, as well as allowing secure ventilation when the hatches are open, especially at night. There is plenty of light in the saloon, from the large portholes during the day and carefully positioned LED ceiling and wall

lights at night. Solid hardwood planking on the ceiling and under the gunwales goes well with the framed, cream-painted cabin-side panels. Hardwood flooring is both practical and easy to maintain. The rest of the open-plan space contains a large, low-level, free-standing sofa across from a set of cupboards under the starboard gunwale, with a TV sitting atop the shelf at the forward end. Against the forward bulkhead to port is a



Two drinks lockers in the galley floor are cooled by contact with the baseplate.



The galley fits in a large freezer as well as a separate fridge.

AQUA FURNISHINGS

Aqua Furnishings (aquafurnishings.co.uk) is an expanding aspect of the company that goes hand-in-hand with boat-building, while offering private customers all types of furnishing for boats – from porthole stoppers to full seating units. The large new Foston premises has enabled the company to expand their capacity greatly and open a showroom to allow customers to browse their products.



WINDOWS

Louvre doors on the windows act as blinds and control ventilation.

SPACE SOLUTION

The dinette can extend to seat six.

LIGHTING

Wall lights give subtle illumination.

STORAGE

Sideboards in the saloon add storage without being obtrusive.

Bubble drip-feed diesel stove, which is efficient and easy to control, while looking similar to a solid-fuel stove (but without the mess). More mundane background heating is provided by a diesel boiler connected to stylish chrome radiators.

Bathroom

The walk-through bathroom gives lots of space for ablutions, with a large shower taking centre stage. The central door leading into the saloon has the Jabsco macerator loo to one side, with the large washbasin opposite to port. Another pigeon box gives extra ventilation, in addition to the extractor fan placed above the shower cubicle. Mirrored bulkheads give added depth to the room and the granite worktops by the sink and on the cupboard behind the loo add to the storage space. A radiator, matching those in the rest of the boat, is fitted rather than a heated towel rail, which warms the space more effectively. Mounted flush in



A good-sized washbasin and lots of cupboard space in the bathroom. The mirrored bulkheads add depth.



STORAGE

High-level cupboards are of a good size but not overbearing.

WINDOWS

Windows in the aft doors are covered with seat cushions.

ROOF

The pigeon box adds light and has an upholstered infill.

HOB

The linear gas hob is very practical.

the floor are magnet catches that hold the doors open without any protruding bits of metal to catch the unwary.

Bedroom

A double bed quickly extends full length across the boat by sliding out a base section. Either side of the bed is a set of large wardrobes and cupboards, with even more room above. Much of the space under the berth is taken up by the waste holding tank, but there is still

room for storage. Neat shelves either side of the bed are ideal for cups of tea, without too much of a risk of the owners banging their heads against them. Under the two wide steps up to the front deck are carpet-lined storage areas that are ideal for shoes. The amplifier for the roof-mounted Omnimax aerial is also in here.

Engine and services

The solar panels feed into the domestic battery bank

via a Victron MPPT charge controller. This shows the state of charge via a big colour screen monitor, fitted below the engine instrument panel, and also the shoreline and inverter/charger functions in one place. A separate battery monitor has

also been fitted to keep an eye on the large domestic bank. A key advantage of having systems from one manufacturer, in this case Victron, means that as digital electrical systems become more advanced, they can communicate with



The new workshop gives Aqua extra capacity.

AQUA'S NEW PREMISES

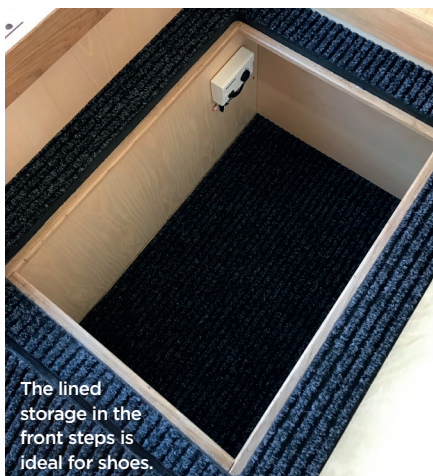
Aqua Narrowboats have recently completed a brand-new workshop for their boats, built to their own specification at Foston, Derbyshire. Until recently, Aqua were based at Mercia Marina and much of their fitting-out was done afloat or in dry dock. Now they can offer builds in a temperature- and humidity-controlled environment, which helps with modern paint finishes. They have also installed two 20-tonne cranes to enable them to move boats around. There is now room for the company to work on three or more craft at any one time.



The forward cabin has a lot of storage space, plus a wide bed that extends across the room easily.



A colour control panel for monitoring of the electrical systems.



The lined storage in the front steps is ideal for shoes.



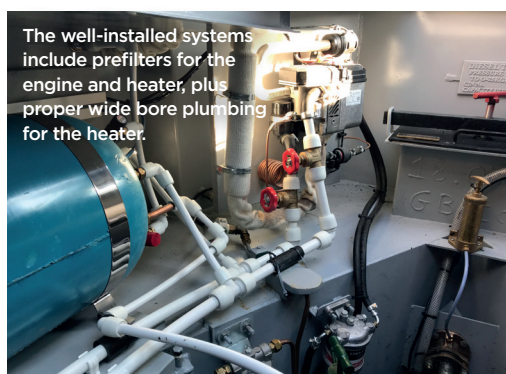
A very neat storage rack in the base of the drying cupboard includes proper cabin bilge ventilation.

each other – this is more of a challenge if different suppliers are used. Here the flow from the solar panels will take priority from mains charging, as the combi unit can be programmed to recognise solar input to the system, so making for greater efficiency. The wiring throughout the boat is very carefully routed, labelled and oversized to avoid any issues of voltage drop.

The Beta 43 engine is mounted to drive through a conventional stern gland, via a flexible coupling. Fuel pre-filters are fitted for the engine, and also the diesel stove, which draws from the main diesel tank. Unusually, there are two cooling skin tanks on the swim, connected by a box section across the baseplate at the very forward end of the engine bay. The plumbing arrangements for the engine should ensure maximum cooling through the tanks, even when working hard on rivers. A large horizontal calorifier on top of the starboard swim should be able to provide a lot of domestic hot water from the engine, though it can also be heated by landline immersion heater or the Webasto diesel heating system. A big silencer is well insulated to port and the whole installation is exceptionally neat, tidy and nicely finished.

Handling and underway

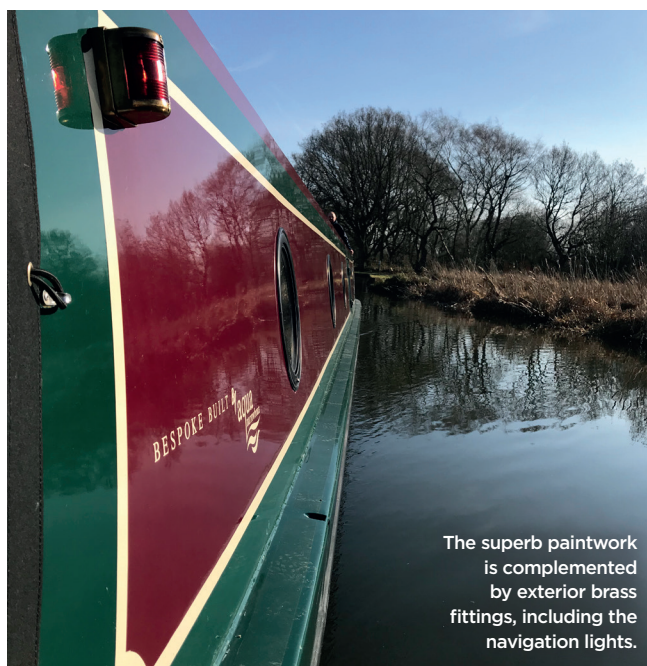
The Beta engine is very quiet, with the hospital-generator-type silencer effectively muting the exhaust note. Although no additional sound insulation has been fitted, the wood-effect trim on the deck boards probably has some sound deadening ability, contributing to the very low noise levels.



The well-installed systems include prefilters for the engine and heater, plus proper wide bore plumbing for the heater.



Pigeon boxes have their own waterproof covers.



The superb paintwork is complemented by exterior brass fittings, including the navigation lights.

The tiller is at a comfortable height and the engine controls fall easily to hand, including the electric bow-thruster touchpad.

Underway, steering from forward of the tiller is easy – the seats right on the counter are not for use when cruising, as the helm position is then within the tiller arc. However, a good perch can be had on the sides of the cockpit, which still leaves plenty of space for crew.

The boat handles well, pulling almost zero wash at tickover and, as is to be expected from a Colecraft shell, the bow cuts the water cleanly, with very little turbulence from the long fore and aft swims. The additional lip to the inside of the trad-style handrails inspires confidence in moving about the boat, as do the large panels of slip-resistant paint on the gunwales and roof.



WW'S VERDICT

Aqua have produced an excellent boat that meets all of the owners' long-term cruising requirements. A traditional colour scheme, complete with brass fittings, bucks the current trend for chrome and dark shades, and *Shuffle Hop Toe* adds welcome brightness to the canals. It also handles exceptionally well, with low-wash characteristics, and its Colecraft hull is sure to hold its value well. Furthermore, the interior is well fitted, with a layout that includes lots of storage without ever feeling cramped.

There can be no doubt that Aqua's experience of running a hire fleet is demonstrated in the design, with good access to all services and robust engineering systems. There can be no doubt too of the company's status as a top-flight boat-builder.