

TWO OF A KIND

Aqua Narrowboats will be exhibiting two bespoke craft at May's Crick Boat Show of a similar size and design, but with very different interiors.

Mark Langley takes a look...

Aqua Narrowboats is a well-established hire-fleet operator and boat-builder based at Mercia Marina on the Trent & Mersey Canal at Willington. Running a luxury hire fleet means that the company can build private boats to the same level of robustness and comfort as its holiday craft. Aqua prices upfront for a 'standard' bespoke boat, while offering a large list of optional extras, which ensures that both the design and cost are exactly as its customers want.

On a bright early spring day we took a look at two of its boats. The main focus of our attention, 60-footer *All You Need Is Love*,

will be the company's show boat at Crick in May, while *Ripple Effect* will also be exhibited at the event out on the adjacent canal, with viewing for both arranged at the Aqua stand (see page 87). As we discovered, the craft demonstrate the very high level of thoughtful fit-out that we have come to expect from the company.

All You Need Is Love

Shell and exterior

The Colecraft shell is superbly finished, with a 10/6/4mm plate specification. The bow is particularly graceful, with good-sized swims both here and at the stern. The paint scheme is



BUYER'S FILE



All You Need Is Love

Length 60ft

Berths 2+2

Engine Beta 43

Price from £108,995

Aqua Narrowboats:

01283 701041,

aquanarrowboats.co.uk



All You Need Is Love pulls very little wash out on the water.

based around large grey panels, with black framing and cream trimming, with a slip-resistant cream-finished roof. Unusually, a splash of purple has been added to the solid handrails and other features, which works surprisingly well. Chrome-finish deck fittings and double-glazed portholes also enhance the look of the boat. Black hull paint is taken up to the gunwales, which helps hide scratches and makes it easier to touch up.

Up in the bow, a large glazed cratch panel supports an excellent cover over the forward cockpit. The bow locker is not used for gas, but instead has opening doors set into the bulkhead allowing access from the cockpit without having to contort around the cratch. This gives lots of useful extra storage, plus two fixed side benches. The arrangement for drainage of the lockers, and the filler/vents for the stainless steel water tank under the deck, show how carefully Colecraft builds shells, employing its years of experience.

The stern is a semi-cruiser style, which Aqua has used in most of its boats, including its hire fleet. This combines the advantages of a semi-trad, with large lockers (one containing gas bottles to starboard, the other storage, including a stern anchor with attachment point) while having more open sides. It certainly feels more spacious



The purple detailing really enhances the boat's look.

when cruising with three or four people aboard than a semi-trad with enclosed sides.

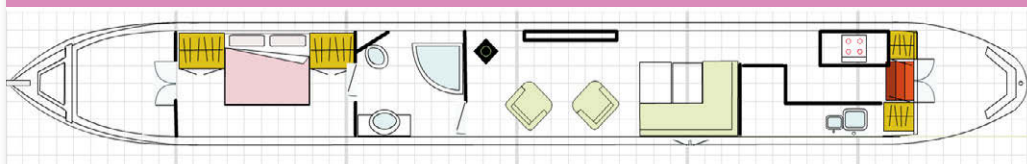
Galley

The galley is accessed down storage-holding steps from the aft deck. The rear doors are of the stable, or Dutch, type, so the upper parts fold back completely, clearing the deck lockers. The upper sections are also glazed, which, when the doors are closed, lets in a surprisingly large amount of light around the steps and aft cupboards – in most boats this can be quite a dark area. The electrics cupboard, with associated switches, is to port, while opposite is a superb hanging locker for coats, which has a useful map shelf above and a wooden support for mooring pins, windlass, chain hooks and the tiller arm.

At the bottom are ventilation outlets into the cabin bilge, to help maintain air movement under the flooring. The gas system shut-off valves and test point are also easy to access here and, as with everything aboard, are well labelled.

The galley has a solid black granite surface, which to port has grooved drainers set to run into the large 1½ bowl stainless steel sink. A 108-litre-capacity, 230V integrated fridge is fitted behind the smooth white gloss doors, together with plenty of storage units. On the starboard side, a linear, black glass four-burner gas hob provides plenty of space for pans, while helping keep them away from the cabin sides. A 6kg washing machine is also integrated, which can run from the shoreline or 3kW Victron combi inverter/charger.

BOAT LAYOUT





The good-sized solid fuel stove is set on a hearth that complies with the code of practice.

The forward part of the galley ends in an L-shape to port, and a variety of different cupboards make best use of the space under here, including a pull-out larder unit. The end of the run on the opposite side has some lovely curved shelves with decent fiddle rails, and a wine rack illuminated with LED lights. However, the wine rack lacks restraints, so if you did hit a lock gate with some force, the bottles might turn into mini torpedoes!

Saloon

The standard bespoke boat includes a large, open-plan saloon with carpet or vinyl flooring. Upgrades here include solid hardwood flooring, which, as demonstrated by our test boat, really matches the lighter oak woodwork and superb cream panelling of the cabin. A good-sized L-shaped dinette easily seats four and converts simply to a double berth, with plenty of storage underneath. The back cushions though are vertical, so additional scatter cushions might be needed for prolonged lounging. A side door is in a sensible position by the dinette.

In the open-plan area there are a couple of leather swivel chairs facing a small TV unit. An Omnimax aerial is fitted to the forward cabin roof for normal terrestrial digital channels. The forward bulkhead is half covered in a smoked glass mirror, which adds depth to the cabin without the kaleidoscopic effect of some mirrored bulkheads. The solid fuel stove is set to starboard, so the chimney is more at risk of low branches. However, this is unquestionably a proper installation, with a fully insulated hearth and double-skin chimneys. The rest of the boat is heated via

a Webasto diesel heater through some very attractive designer radiators in matt grey. The cabin is well lit, with both downlight LEDs and some wall-mounted LED fittings, which are touch-dimmable. With the lights turned off, the switch retains a soft blue glow, making it ideal as a nightlight. Under-gunwale strip lighting comprises RGB (red, green, blue) LEDs, which can be changed remotely to almost any colour combination.

Bathroom

The walk-through bathroom has



Oak woodwork, cream panelling and leather easy chairs in the spacious saloon.



The dinette makes up into a double berth and scatter cushions add comfort when it's used for seating.

a large 800mm quadrant shower on the centreline, behind which is storage space, dominated by a cupboard with easy access to all plumbing, including the drain pump, and ventilation for the cabin bilge. As with the rest of the boat, wiring and pipework are readily accessible, as they are all behind easy-to-remove panels – a sure sign of the experience gained running a hire fleet, but no less essential for a private boat.

A large ceramic wash basin is to port, with the Jabsco macerator loo against a 45°-angled cupboard opposite, so there is plenty of legroom when seated. This toilet pumps to a large tank under the forward berth, and the LCD tank gauge is usefully mounted next to the loo. The towel radiator is a good size for this spacious bathroom and, like the rest of the boat, large portholes let in lots of light while maintaining privacy. The door from the saloon and the one into the bedroom have very neat magnetic catches and doorstops which do not protrude when not in use – a superb touch.

Bedroom

A cross-bed dominates the



NEAT TOUCH

The linear gas hob gives good pan clearance.

PRACTICAL FINISH

Granite worktops are practical and hard-wearing.

LIGHT & BRIGHT

Windows in aft doors allow useful light into the galley.

GOOD SIZE

A deep sink drains to a sump which pumps overboard.

forward cabin – the king-size width is only tempered by the fact that the length of the bed is only fractionally over 6ft, which is a necessity of a narrow-beam boat as the spray foam insulation, lining materials and bearers eat into the available width. Either side of the bed are large wardrobes with a good mix of hanging and shelf space. There is also further storage in the two large square steps up to the front deck, accessed by big hatches. Low-level ventilation is ducted through the forward bulkhead, rather than the lazy “cut holes in door” method, which can let in howling draughts (and encourage owners to block them).

Engine and services

The Beta 43 engine is easy to access, with two large, phenolic ply hatches lifting out easily. The underside of the hatches have quite substantial sound insulation, with a polymeric barrier to absorb low-frequency sounds.



Storage under the forward step is deep and useful; low level vents allow for indirect airflow.

The engine also has a very large attenuation (hospital generator-style) silencer, fully insulated to avoid any hot bits from burning you when you go down the quick-release weedhatch. The engine drives through a hydraulically operated PRM 150 gearbox, flexible coupling and conventional stern gland. Under the stern tube is a sump for the bilge pump, which avoids water

sloshing around the entire engine bay, which sometimes happens with rope-packed stern tubes.

The large battery bank (five domestic batteries) sits to port, with the horizontal calorifier to starboard, along with the diesel heater. There are twin linked swim cooling tanks, which give the engine plenty of space to distribute heat when running. The space is well



Superb windlass and mooring gear storage in the aft hanging locker – and ventilation into the cabin bilge.

organised, ventilated and with everything easy to access – even the batteries for topping up.

Handling and underway

From starting up, *All You Need is Love* is surprisingly quiet – Beta engines are known for smooth, smoke-free running, but on this boat it is exceptional. At cruising speeds, you can still have a conversation with people on



The bright, well-lit forward cabin dispels the myth that porthole boats are gloomy. A cross-bed allows for a king-sized double berth.



A large attenuation silencer combined with excellent sound insulation under the deckboards makes for a very quiet boat.



The excellent magnetic doorstops and catches avoid any trip hazards.



Plenty of room around the corner-mounted toilet. LED under-gunwale lights highlight the glossy granite surface of the vanity unit.



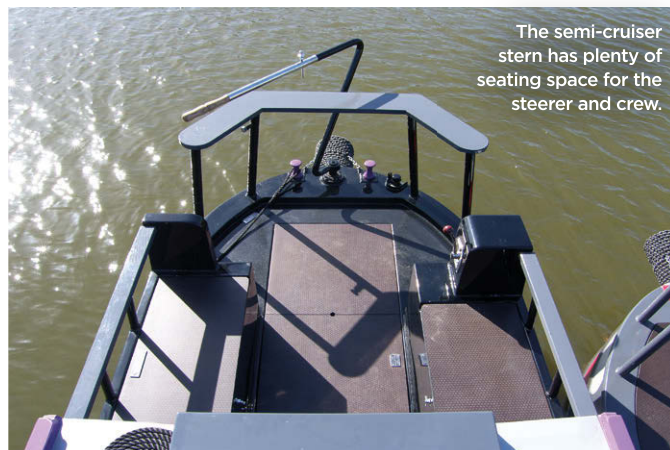
Nice Colecraft detailing: the locker drain is separate from the cockpit drain, and a vent from the water tank is directed overboard.



The bilge pump sits in a sump under a conventional stern tube gland. A fuel filter helps reduce potential contamination issues.

the deck, and even gongoozlers on the towpath, without having to raise your voice. There are no rattles and the engine controls are well set up, with easy, progressive control of the throttle. The tiller is quite heavy, but pleasant, giving very positive steering, even when reversing in the deeper waters of Mercia Marina. The hull is very slippery and pulls only a light wash, and barely disturbs the water at tickover. It tracks a straight line without constant adjustment.

Mercia Marina is not the easiest place to enter or leave at times, and pulling in and out of jetty moorings when there was substantial wind proved how easy this boat is to handle. The owners have decided against a bow-thruster, which appears to be very sensible given the quality of handling. Going hard astern on the engine stops the boat well without significant prop effect, so the stern doesn't slew, as sometimes happens with boats with poorer stern design.



The semi-cruiser stern has plenty of seating space for the steerer and crew.

WW'S VERDICT

All You Need Is Love is a great boat, being exceptionally well put together, with care taken to ensure it will look as good in the future as it does now. Maintenance of boats further down the line is not often on the list of priorities of prospective boat-owners, but having good access to all services, while still being comfortable and attractive, is the sign of a thoughtful and experienced boat-builder. The boat also handles well and has a superb layout for cruising and living afloat – something the owners will soon be doing.



Superb Colecraft lines.



The forward saloon is quiet when underway and a diesel heater adds warmth.

Ripple Effect

Although slightly shorter at 58ft, *Ripple Effect* shares many of the attributes of *All You Need is Love*, being built for long-term cruising and having a semi-cruiser stern. However, the interior layout rearranges the space to give a very different feel.

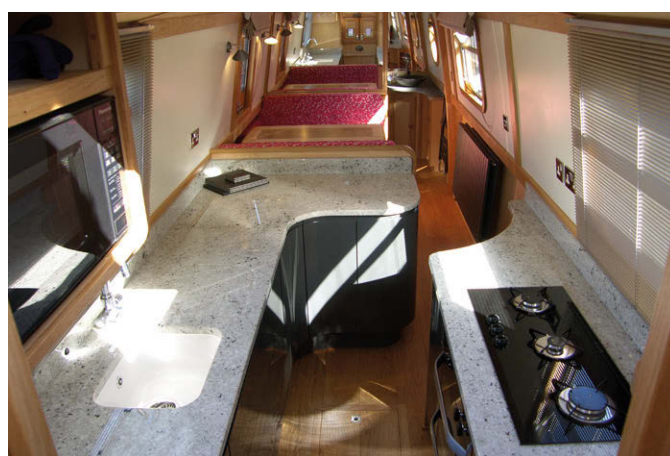
The galley is right aft, and has a similar layout to *All You Need Is Love*, but here a white granite worktop sits above cupboards finished in dark-grey gloss. The hob is a three-burner unit rather than four, but otherwise it is much the same. However, further forward, a Pullman (face-to-face) dinette is raised, giving a good view out of the windows and glazed side door, with space for four to eat. This converts to a decent double berth for guests.



The raised dinette has good views out.

The forward bulkhead is fully mirrored, which gives a feeling of space. However, the bulkhead is actually to the bathroom.

To ensure the saloon is completely separate from the aft galley and dinette, this has

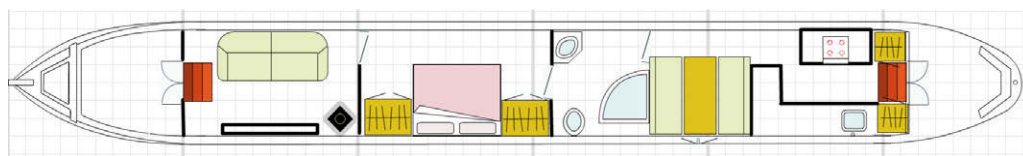


The galleys are similar on both boats. *Ripple Effect* has a white-mottled granite surface, corian sink and three-burner hob.

been moved to the front of the boat. Stepping down from the forward cockpit, you enter a space with lots of bookshelves, a large convertible sofa-bed, and a stainless steel-finish diesel stove to port. This comfortable

Externally, *Ripple Effect* has a similar look to *All You Need Is Love*, but the grey paintwork is carried down to the top bend of the hull. Large, rounded top-hopper windows are fitted for the most part, with portholes in the bathrooms. This ensures that the boat has a very bright interior and avoids the compartmentalisation look that can occur when the boat is chopped into a variety of spaces. The owners have opted for a bow-thruster, but the Colecraft shell here is also exceptionally good for handling, so hopefully it won't be used much.

Ripple Effect shows how the basic specification can be used in alternative layouts – and also increases the possibility to have six rather than four berths, so ideal if frequently cruising with friends and family. This is another high-quality craft, that's well worth looking at if you are considering a new boat. Also, you can try out Aqua's standard of fitting by hiring one of its craft, which might help further inform your choice.



The shower cubicle has a marble-effect backboard.



Neat illuminated cubbyholes either side of the bed are very practical.

room, around 10ft long, gives useful separation from the galley and a very quiet area to relax in when underway and to enjoy time to yourself.

Between the saloon and the galley/dinette, there is a walk-through bathroom; again, similar to *All You Need Is Love's*, but with some different finishes. The cross-bed in the main cabin has lots of storage, as well as lights and (glass-shelved) cubbyhole recesses either side of the head for water/phone/glasses. The heating controls are here as well, so the Webasto heating can be switched on without getting out of bed.