

By Julian Powis



# SHIPS AH OY!



**THE CHARITY HAS A COLOURFUL PAST. IT'S ORIGINS STEM FROM A SINGLE INCIDENT BACK IN THE 1950'S. ON A LONDON CANAL ONE DAY, A WOMAN CALLED CRYSTAL HALE WAS OUT IN HER NARROW BOAT WHEN SOME LOCAL BOYS BEGAN RUNNING ALONG THE TOWPATH AND THROWING STONES AT HER.**

**T**he Skipper and I sit on deck drinking tea. Our mooring on the canal is a peaceful refuge in central Islington. We catch envious glances from commuters walking along the towpath. We are on board 'Angel II', a 72-foot long narrow boat. It is run by The Angel Community Canal Boat Trust, a 25 year-old charity based in City Road Basin. It is staffed by two dedicated full-timers who, at this moment, appear to have the best jobs in London.

I am about to accept another cup of tea when the peace is broken by the arrival of a group of excited children. There are ten of them, ranging in age from about six to twelve, and they are all very excited about their day trip. Angel II's Community Development Officer, Rose, gathers the kids together in the bow and begins with some Health & Safety. 'Now if someone falls in today' she begins, 'there's one thing we mustn't do. Can anybody tell me what that is?' 'Laugh?' offers an eager six year-old boy. 'Are we allowed to throw stones at them?' asks a sweet-looking little girl.

Above the hullabaloo, Rose tells me, 'Because they are all on a day out, you do tend to get the

best out of kids. The worst thing that they do is get too excited, and I can manage that because I'm an over-excitable person myself.' She nods toward the hyperactive children and laughs, 'I can relate to them totally!'

Child at heart or not, Rose vigilantly directs the activity on the boat. The two group leaders that come with the children take responsibility for the kids, but together with Paul, Rose is responsible for their overall safety on board the vessel and working with the children. This includes instruction of how to complete tasks such as operating the locks.

There are several locks on the canal between ourselves and our destination of Victoria Park, and under Rose and Paul's supervision, each one will be operated by the children themselves. Paul explains the benefits of their approach, 'The kids have to develop listening skills, to understand how the locks work. Then they have to learn a sequence of events, doing one logical thing after another, otherwise the locks don't work.'

Paul is a down-to-earth man in his sixties, with over 45 years of experience on the water. He tells me, 'In the classroom kids are rewarded for doing well, but a lot of our kids never get those kind of rewards for their schoolwork.'





Whereas if they can do something practical like this, they can be good at it, and it boosts their self-confidence.'

And that's what a lot of the work appears to be about, building confidence. In the neutral space of a boat, children from some very troubled backgrounds can find that they are no longer at the bottom of the pecking order. A child can steer a long and heavy vessel, or move several tons of water with precision, and that may well stay with them.

I had been told that on today's day-trip, I could expect a mixture of lusty nursery rhyme singing and much fighting over bunks. As we enter our first tunnel I duly notice two nursery rhymes being sung at the same time - loudly, badly and echoing satisfyingly - and there are sporadic bunk-bed wars raging inside the boat. Rose explains, 'For some, just going out in a group with other children and communicating isn't something they've ever really had. Some of the refugee children are very isolated, they've come from very isolated families. They may have language barriers and they don't necessarily get a chance to mix with their own peers, let alone kids from this country'.

We arrive at our first lock. Paul ties up the boat whilst Rose and the children disembark to tackle the mammoth lock doors. There is much commotion and excitement as ratchets are raised, levers pulled and tons of water gushes around. Rose tells me, 'These kids are used to being put down and told that they can't do this and they can't do that. It's not positive for a child to be constantly told that they are not good at anything. Encouragement and support is what we do here, and it's the way that you get the best out of somebody.'

Rose continues, 'Just from the experience of having had an enjoyable week on a boat with some people from a different culture, there are questions you can then ask of them. Young children are generally not prejudiced, their prejudices come from other people, their family, their peer group, their general environment.'

Ever the pragmatist, Paul comments, 'Get ten youngsters eating round a table and that's quite good in itself.' Several locks later and we moor up again. The group noisily disembarks to have a picnic in Victoria Park while I chat with Rose and Paul over tea.

The Angel Community Canal Boat Trust works with all kinds of people, but is presently trying hardest to reach the more remote groups, termed 'B.M.E.R.' (Black, Minority, Ethnic Refugee) communities. Rose explains, 'This boat is a safe environment, and we get a lot of refugees who don't feel particularly safe or welcome in London. It's an opportunity for them to get out and see a beautiful different side of it without feeling like someone will ridicule or attack them any moment.'

It is hoped that the boat may also provide a catalyst to further explore the needs of these groups, and bring them together with other sections of society. In this regard The Boat Trust is working together with The International Latin American Organisation. This charity is currently attempting to link up their own youth groups with African and Caribbean youth clubs. Rose is planning to bring in Asian youth groups and get all parties to work together, possibly by later this year.

She says, 'People tend to ghettoise when they come to this country, I think for obvious reasons. We are currently thinking of unifying activities like sport and music events, and eventually putting mixed groups on the boat for a weekend residential, to see what comes of it.'

Such well-meaning plans sound admirable, but I'm warned that such teenagers will not be like the children I've met today. There are real dangers in attempting to bring together sections of the community that can harbour deep-seated animosities toward each other. Rose is aware it is vital that this ambitious project is well researched, widely consulted on, and user-led. She raises an eyebrow at me, 'We have to lay the foundations of the project very solidly, otherwise it could all backfire and we could have one big burning boat...'

Paul navigates to a turning point in the canal. At 72 feet, Angel II is just about the longest canal boat it is possible to have, restricted only by the length of the locks. He executes a perfect, if somewhat alarming, three-point-turn. We moor up and we are now pointing toward home.

A growing cacophony signals the children's return, full of *Sunny D* and *Monster Munch*. We are ready to take the boat uphill, back through the locks.

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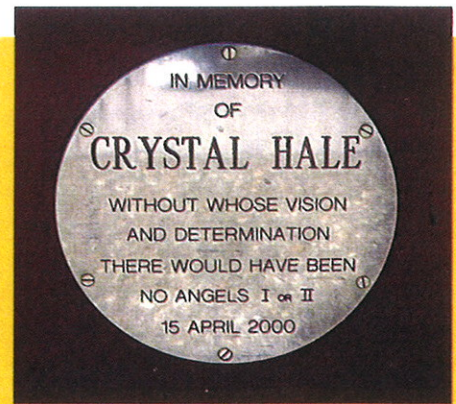
Paul now both operates the narrow boat and supervises the group at the locks. I am delighted to observe the children at the first lock correct their own group leaders on how to do it properly. Skipper Paul lets a girl of about ten steer the boat, she beams throughout.

Within a few hours we have successfully navigated our way back through several locks, returning fairly near to where we began. The children depart, waving goodbye to everybody and anybody in the vicinity of the boat. We wait before entering the last lock as another narrow boat is coming from the opposite direction. The sun is getting low in the sky, and the boat now feels weirdly empty.

Paul gazes at the unoccupied bunks, 'Last summer we were on the water for three months solid, taking groups up to Wales and all sorts of remote places.' It is apparent that his passion is getting kids out of London altogether. 'On a residential trip the first thing the kids usually ask about is the telly. We tell them that we haven't got one, and they can't believe it. Of course, after five days on the boat they want to stay on longer, they forget about the telly...'

What strikes me most of all from my day with Rose and Paul is their approach to the people they are trying to help. They combine a degree of fearlessness with passionate concern toward those for which the wider world has little time.

As we exit the final lock and head toward the overnight mooring, Paul reflects sorrowfully, 'Kids aren't allowed to do anything these days, everyone is scared of organising even basic school trips for fear of being sued, it's very sad.' He hands me a rope and we tie the boat up for the night.



**Origins... The charity has a colourful past. Its origins stem from a single incident back in the 1950s. On a London canal one day a woman called Crystal Hale was out in her narrow boat when some local boys began running along the towpath and throwing stones at her. Instead of shaking her fist, Crystal told the boys that they ought to try canal boating for themselves. She let them on board, and was moved by the positive effect it had. She started The Islington Boat Club to allow more young people without means to experience boating. There is a silver plaque to her memory on Angel II.**

**Land Lubbers... Many kids Rose and Paul take out for the first time never knew there was a canal in Islington at all.**

**On the Water... Over the past 30 years the charity has taken 60,000 passengers around the canals and waterways of London and beyond.**

The Angel Community Canal Boat Trust depends upon financial support from local residents, businesses and from charitable donations to maintain their service.

mail to: [info@inba.org.uk](mailto:info@inba.org.uk) [info@acct.org.uk](mailto:info@acct.org.uk)  
<http://www.acct.org.uk>

Registered Charity: 1103542