



WORTH THE WAIT



WORDS ADAM PORTER
PICTURES ANDY R ANNABLE

New boats from Blisworth don't come along very often and this one took 15 months to build, so we were intrigued to see what it was like

There's nothing more boring than watching paint dry – even if the paint is on the side of a narrowboat. And let's face it, when you're painting a narrowboat, there's quite a lot of drying time between coats and while the paint hardens.

And that's where Jason Clarke of Blisworth Tunnel Boats saw an opportunity. Boat painting is his main business but instead of watching the paint dry, he puts the time to much better use, fitting out boats.

It means that each one takes quite a while to finish, because he's not doing it full-time – but as he tends to build a spec boat and then put it up for sale, that doesn't particularly matter.

Jason has worked for some well known firms in the past and has built quite a few



boats himself too since taking over Blisworth Tunnel Boats 12 years ago, so he knows what he's doing.

We liked a boat he took to the Crick Show a couple of years ago because of its high quality woodwork. Now his latest boat is just finished after some 15 months of work and we were keen to see what he'd done this time.

Jason is keen to expand the boat-building side by taking on a partner. This could be a great opportunity for an experienced boat fitter to join the business.

EXTERIOR

This 58ft 6in boat is built on a very attractive shell by Tyler Wilson. It's one of their Joshers, so the bow is curvy and the whole bow area is longer than you'd find on one of their standard bows. In addition

to the usual details such as scrolls in the ends of the handrails and a boatman's beam across the roof, this boat also has a line of replica rivets below the gunwales, to emphasise the traditional look. Along the same lines, there are brass Grand Union style opening portholes and two pigeon boxes on the roof. These are glazed and have ventilation in each end. The whole boat has a look and feel of sturdiness and quality.

As you might expect on a boat built by a specialist boat painter, the paintwork is very glossy and deep. The colour scheme is a classic maroon for the panels, with borders of grey aft of the boatman's beam and black forward of it. A nice paint detail is a run of diamonds in between the two sections. It all looks very classy. As it's a spec boat, it's currently

Unnamed

£108,000

LENGTH:	58ft 6i
STYLE:	Semi-trad
BERTHS:	2+2
LAYOUT:	Standard
POWER:	Barrus 40hp

unnamed, but signwriting to the eventual customer's requirements is included in the price.

The gas locker is in the nose, while the well deck (which is planned to be covered by a cratch) has a set of doors in the forward bulkhead giving access to the bow thruster tube. The water tank, under the well deck, is made from food-grade ▶

THE BOAT TEST

plastic. At the stern, there are lockers both sides of the semi-trad deck providing plenty of storage.

The deck also has rear doors, which have been nicely decorated. A nice touch is the strip of metal chequerplate on the threshold.

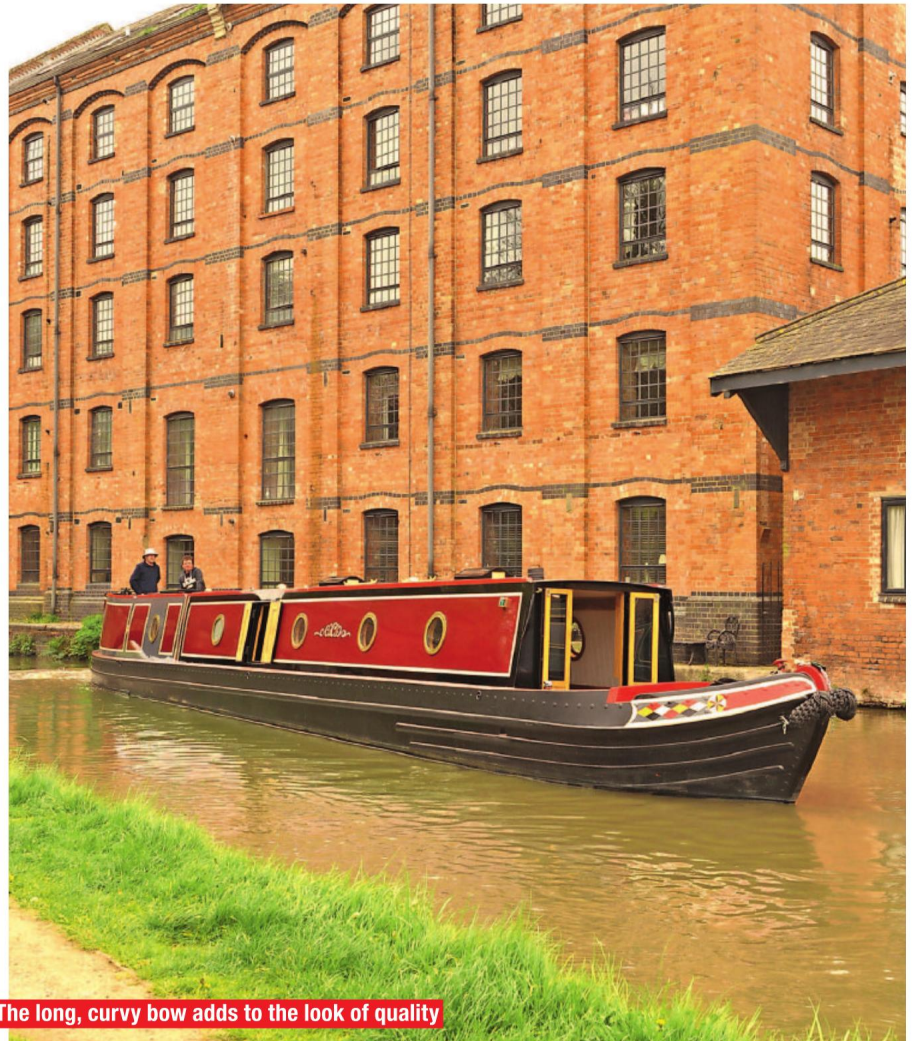
LAYOUT AND FIT-OUT

This boat has a standard layout, with the saloon and dinette at the bow followed by a U-shaped galley. The walk-through shower room is next, with the cabins at the rear.

The fit-out uses a lot of solid oak. It's European character grade wood, so contains a lot of attractive knots and burrs – you can see why it's called character grade. The 18mm thick planks are used below the gunwales and on the floor, where they're laid over 25mm ply boards. The floor in the shower room is slate tiles. The cabin sides are white-painted tongue and groove, to give a light bright look. Pine is used for the skirting, to give a bit of contrasting colour and texture. All the furniture is handmade from the characterful oak.

SALOON AND DINETTE

A couple of steps bring you into the saloon from the well deck through oak-lined glazed doors. The steps immediately indicate the level of thought and attention to detail that's been put into this boat: non-slip strips are made of ebony and have been inlaid to the treads. The treads themselves lift for storage and the whole step unit pulls out on casters to shelves; there's a TV point here, so you



The long, curvy bow adds to the look of quality

have options about where the TV goes. Above, there's a glazed, high level cupboard. The door has a stained glass design hand made by Martin Farrant at his little studio just the other side of the Blisworth Tunnel in Stoke Bruerne. Under



the gunwales is a unit containing shelves and a flat screen smart TV on a moveable bracket. The top of the unit has an inlaid line of kingwood, a dark wood from India. Further along is a black column radiator, which both matches and contrasts with the wooden interior of the boat.

The dinette consists of fixed L-shaped seating, with a handmade table. This is inlaid with more kingwood banding. There's space under the gunwales to store the table when it's not needed. The dinette converts into a guest double bed,

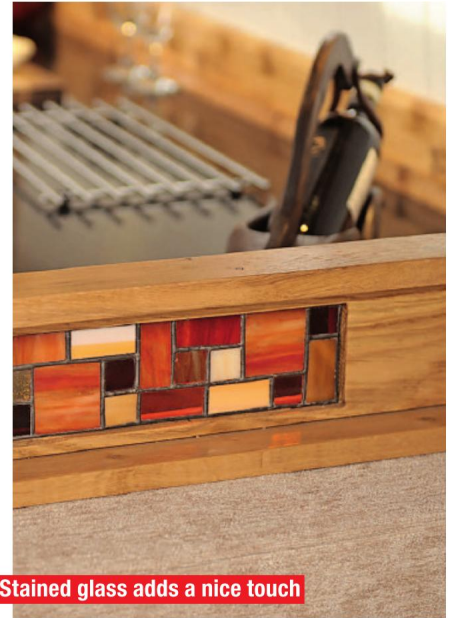


With the sink abeam the boat there's plenty of space

'The dinette converts into a guest double bed, by dropping the table onto shorter Desmo legs, which are stored in the base'



We loved the handmade table



Stained glass adds a nice touch

by dropping the table onto shorter Desmo legs, which are stored in the base.

There's a mass of other storage space down here too; further long term storage (or possibly for valuables or even a safe) is available through the back of the dinette seat, in the otherwise dead corner of the galley.

GALLEY

The U-shaped galley is a smart and practical space. A couple of black wrought iron poles help to divide the area from the saloon, and add to the traditional look, and there's another piece of stained glass set into the half-bulkhead.

The worktops are black granite and there's a matching black granite sink by Rangemaster, which is cold to the touch. It's teamed with a pull-out tap, deemed essential by Jason's wife, Ning, who's a keen cook.

She's also added other useful items, such as a bin which pulls out on runners from the cupboard under the sink, and came up with the layout of the galley.

At first it looks a bit unusual, with the sink across the boat rather than under the window. But actually it makes good use of space, with the draining board stretching into the corner and a large area of worktop available for preparing food. ▶

THE BOAT TEST

All the units are made from solid oak, with nicely constructed doors with granite handles. All the cupboard doors and drawers have soft closing mechanisms. The high level ones are glazed with frosted glass.

Equipment includes a full size slot-in oven with a grill and hob. There's also a compact Zanussi washing machine and a 12v Shoreline fridge with a freezer box. A remarkable amount has been fitted into a relatively small space. There's a set of oak-lined side doors, for feeding the ducks.

SHOWER ROOM

A door glazed with frosted glass leads from the galley to the shower room, with lovely traditional door furniture. The space is dominated by the very generous 900mm quadrant shower lined with a slate effect shower board. The shower fittings are by Triton and the pump is the latest model by Whale which turns on automatically when it detects water. Previously, automatic shower pumps worked by having a sump box which always eventually got clogged up; this one does away with that and just has an electric sensor to detect water. Alongside the shower, there's a cupboard and some little shelves making use of the space

Shower has automatic pump



The 4ft bed is a snug fit

between the shower and the cabin sides, as well as giving access to the pump.

Opposite, there's a good sized unit providing plenty of storage, with a granite top and a large round marble basin. The wall behind has a huge mirror.

The loo is a Jabsco macerating version; the top of the small unit behind lifts off.

There's a heated towel rail under the gunwale, and Ning has added a couple of towel hooks alongside.

CABIN

The downside of having such a large shower cubicle is that the door into the cabin is a little narrow – especially when you take into account the door handle. But for many who cherish room in their



Ebony inlay stops slipping

BLISWORTH TUNNEL BOATS

Blisworth Tunnel Boats is a real family firm. While it's Jason Clarke who runs the show, his wife, Ning, and their five-month-old son, Darwin, are usually around the yard, and his mum lives on site. Jason's brother, Michael, is a well regarded boat surveyor, and spends much of his time travelling around carrying out surveys and boat safety tests.

The firm is based at a small yard right next to the converted mill in Blisworth on the Grand Union in Northamptonshire. There's a covered

dock for painting, which is the company's main business. But there's also a regular income from the moorings on site.

Jason is keen to expand the boat-building side of the business, so it doesn't take quite so long to produce a boat – which would also make it easier to take on commissions. So he's interested in an experienced boat-fitter becoming a partner in the firm. This could be a great opportunity for someone to join a busy small business and make a real impact.



The boat revels in a traditional look

showers, this will be a compromise well worth making.

The bed is 4ft wide and has a run of high level units above the long side. The loo holding tank is under the bed, but clever positioning means it takes up less room than you might think. It sits almost down on the base plate rather than on top of the floor. The tank is also boxed in to limit the scope for smells to escape; all the connections are also boxed in but accessible if necessary.

Setting the tank low down means there's room in the bed base for a couple of decent-sized drawers above it. There's another, deeper drawer in the end of the bed base, using the space by the tank.

Either side of the rear steps are large wardrobes with mirrors on the doors. And they really are voluminous, and fitted with shelves and hanging space. One loses a little space to some of the boat's electricals, as the fuse panel is on the

outside wall. But the wiring has been boxed in with a door – a sort of cupboard within the cupboard – so you can't accidentally knock any of the cables, yet they're all still accessible.

The steps themselves have ebony non-slip inlays; the top one has a lifting tread, while the other two are drawers. All in all, this is a cabin with a lot of storage space for clothes.

TECHNICAL

The boat is powered by a 40hp Barrus Shire engine. The bow thruster hadn't been fitted when we tested the boat but will be an electric one by Lewmar. Electrical power comes from five 110Ah domestic batteries in a vented box in the engine hole, plus one for the engine and other for the bow thruster. A Victron 3kw inverter provides a 240v supply.

There's a shoreline hookup at the stern and the bow, so you won't ever have to



Tidy mind, tidy boat with enclosed electrics

run a cable along the length of the boat.

Access to the engine is pretty good. A single board lifts up, and there's a decent amount of space around the engine. The calorifier is also in the engine hole, as well as the Eberspacher diesel boiler.

ON THE WATER

This is a boat that feels immensely secure on the water. It's a decently heavy boat, and at the tiller it feels solid and responsive. We've always liked the way ▶

THE BOAT TEST



More granite accentuates stylish fit-out

Tyler Wilson shells handle, and this is a good example of its type. It goes exactly where it's pointed, it turns exceptionally well, and even goes backwards in a straight line.

Winding was easy, even without the bow thruster and the boat moves through the water very easily. All in all we couldn't fault the handling.

There's plenty of room on the stern deck for crew and the lockers mean they have somewhere to sit. The engine is nice and quiet, and the Morse control falls easily to hand.

The dials and some of the switches, though, are on the forward side of the column, so they're not in the steerer's eyeline, meaning you can't just keep an eye on them. Jason says he puts them there because there's less chance of accidentally knocking a switch. *Isque volorit magnihil magnihil ide quost,*



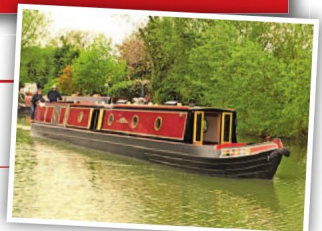
VERDICT

The boat has a great shell and a characterful fit-out – which is a winning combination. It looks the part both inside and out, with pretty lines, great paintwork and real craftsmanship on show in the woodwork. What's more, it

costs probably less than you might think; at £108,000 it's certainly a boat that looks more expensive than that.

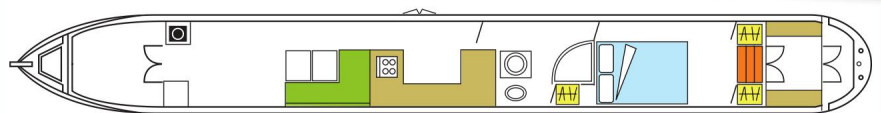
It's good to see a small company like this turning out such good quality boats. They

may take time, with the work slotted in between other jobs, but it's the end result which counts – and in this case it's a boat well worth waiting for. It's amazing what you can do instead of watching paint dry.



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Unnamed £108,000



Saloon and Dinette 14'6" Galley 7'10" Shower room 6'8" Cabin 10'6"

DESIGN AND DECOR

■ Granite sink: Rangemaster Amethyst – £190 rangemaster.co.uk

■ Stained Glass: Martin Farrant, The Old Stable, Stoke Bruerne. Prices vary. 07779 513167

LENGTH:	58ft 6in	ENGINE:	Barrus Shire 40hp barrus.co.uk
BEAM:	6ft 10in	INVERTER:	Victron 3kW victronenergy.com
SHELL:	Tyler Wilson. tylerwilsonboats.com	BOW THRUSTER:	Lewmar
STYLE:	Semi-trad		
FIT-OUT:	Oak		

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