

# — Fifty eight feet of — FREEDOM

Slow travel, digital detox and perfectly bite-size walks: why a canal boat adventure is the greatest family escape you never thought of...

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**T**HE POINT WHERE we realised it was all working fine was when we forgot that Molly was driving.

Molly is 14 and coping with everything a 14-year-old is coping with. Her normal refuges are Nirvana, the PS4 and slightly alarming artwork. She's usually terrified of human contact, especially when it's people she doesn't know.

And yet, as I sat with my wife Liz on the foredeck sipping tea and watching the Cheshire countryside float past, we had to kick ourselves to remember that Molly – child of the digital age, bundle of insecurities, emo in training – was at the tiller of a 58ft narrowboat, cheerily greeting other boaters, and relishing the idea of a walk wherever we stopped. This was a win. She even summed it up with a Nirvana lyric: "I think I'm just... happy."

I could try claiming that, with a 14-year-old and her ten-year-old sister Rosie, we have 'children at awkward ages'. But I'm pretty sure if you asked any parent, whether their child be two or 16 or 35, they'd probably say the same. When is *not* an awkward age? But it's an especially acute situation when it comes to walking. Fourteen and ten are the ages when the offspring really start to know how to rebel against the proposition of 'going for a walk' (even though you know they'll start out complaining but love it before too long). So parents sometimes have to work harder to sell the concept of a holiday with walking.

This is how we hit upon the idea of the canal boat.

It's so beautifully simple: a slower, older way of travelling, disconnected from the road network, with almost limitless options for pausing for a circular walk. And even more helpfully, a permanent footpath by the side of the boat whenever you just want a stroll or a game or a jog or some time to yourself. And particularly for the kids, just Something Different.



PHOTO: CHANNEL 4

**▲ ON DECK, ON FOOT, ON TELLY**  
Nick's been listening to Cat Stevens' *Tea for the Tillerman*; the Hallisseys in Marbury Country Park; and Timothy West and Prunella Scales on one of their *Great Canal Journeys*.

Originally an abusive slang term used by canal workers for idlers on the towpath, now embraced by boaters such as Tim and Pru.

According to the Canal & River Trust, there are 2000 miles of canal network in the UK. Our manmade waterways enjoyed a brief but spectacular working lifetime – conceived as the ultimate fast transport network, making millionaires of industrialists from Somerset to Strathclyde, before being swiftly superseded by the railways. Now they are leisure highways and conservation hotspots; a means of touching our heritage in a unique and instant way, and just slowing the heck down.

Narrowboating has become a TV phenomenon lately. BBC Four's 'slow TV' phase kicked off with a real-time journey along the Kennet and Avon Canal; Channel 4 gave us the endearing adventures of seasoned 'gongoozlers' Timothy West and Prunella Scales; and Channel 5 is teaming up celebrities as varied as Pete Waterman, Anne Diamond and Bill Oddie for canal tours blending light heritage and comic banter.

## LET'S GET GONGOOZLING

Nick and Liz (aft) pilot their 58ft narrowboat through Anderton, while Molly and Rosie (fore) soak up the sights and sounds of waterway life.

See the video at [walk1000miles/canal](http://walk1000miles/canal)





#### ▲ ALL THE COMFORTS OF HOME

Lazy times on board *Kathryn*. Top: A game of Oh Hell in the living area (shortly before it became violent). Above: The girls chilling out in their bedroom.

Those names could all be described without any offence being taken as ‘veterans’. But Liz and I had a feeling that canal boating could easily be a young person’s game too. And so it proved.

For our adventure, we settled on the gentle river country of mid-Cheshire. Two reasons for that:

1) According to our hosts Black Prince Holidays, the Cheshire network is calmer and quieter than most of their other bases, and less labour intensive: the county being substantially flat, its canals don’t need too many locks. This makes it a great introduction for novices who might not want to deal with a lot of boats coming the other way, and tricky flights of locks.

2) Though we’ve been away for many a year, Cheshire was home to Liz and me for around 20 years each, and it’s where we met and married. So this was a chance to inflict particular torture on the kids by saying things like “and over there is where I sat my GCSEs, how about that?”

Black Prince’s Cheshire base is at Acton Bridge, two miles north-west of Northwich. It’s on the



ADDITIONAL PHOTOS: HALLISSEY FAMILY



DISCOVER Cheshire’s canals

“It’s so beautifully simple: a **slower, older** way of travelling... with almost **limitless options** for pausing for a **circular walk**.”

Trent and Mersey Canal, a 93-mile waterway which opened in 1777, linking the River Trent in Derbyshire with the Mersey at Widnes. It was an industrial super-route, moving everything from coal and limestone to pottery and beer across the region and on to Manchester, Liverpool and Leeds.

Another of its major cargoes was salt, and salt is the story of our journey. Cheshire sits on vast deposits of brine at an easy-to-reach depth. The Romans mined it extensively; soldiers of the empire were paid in salt as it was a prized preservative (hence the word ‘salary’), so Cheshire was like the Royal Mint of Roman Britain. The industry has continued ever since, on a greater or lesser scale. The towns of Northwich, Middlewich, and Winsford are still known as the **Salt Towns**. And this canal linked them all.

So after a briefing and a lesson at the marina from expert boatman Danny Coleman, we were off on the salt superhighway, chugging towards Northwich on the stout vessel *Kathryn*, a 58ft Duchess 4 narrowboat with a double bed for me and Liz and twin beds for the girls.

#### ▲ STEADY AS SHE GOES

Left to go right, right to go left: getting used to the strange world of the canal boat and its tiller.

#### ▲ GIN O’CLOCK

After a stroll on the towpath, Liz does what every self-respecting gongoozler would do at this time.

Even more tellingly, Middlewich’s Roman name was *Salinae*.

Black Prince offers five itineraries from Acton Bridge. Four are week-long cruises, connecting with other canals to head either to Chester or Wigan, or to complete more complex circuits like the Cheshire Ring. But we opted for the shorter four-day tour, which heads to Northwich and Middlewich, before branching west on the canal’s Middlewich Arm to reach the Shropshire Union at Barbridge, then turning for home.

But that assumes constant daytime cruising. We planned instead to pause for walks and attractions, which meant we wouldn’t get as far as Barbridge. So we set Middlewich as our turnaround, and planned in walks for the way out and the way back.

On the first afternoon we made for the village of Barnton, getting used to *Kathryn* and managing our first few meetings with oncoming vessels. But before long, there was a bit of excitement: tunnels. Two of them.

In the early days of the internet, I remember a thing doing the rounds that would now be a Buzzfeed listicle. It was a list of things that are ‘100% true’, and one of them was: ‘Driving through a tunnel makes

you feel excited’. True enough in a car, mega-true in a canal boat of which you’ve been in command for only an hour or so, when the tunnel is only slightly wider and slightly higher than your boat.

Thankfully our first encounter – the 424-yard Saltersford Tunnel – takes some of the fear factor out. From the top of the hour to 20 past, it’s northbound-only. There’s then a no-entry gap of ten minutes, and from half past to ten to, it’s southbound only. Obey the timings and you won’t meet anything coming the other way. This concept is common to any tunnel with a bend inside it which means you can’t see the exit from the entrance.

The next one, 572ft Barnton Tunnel, is dead straight and thus isn’t timed. So we just had to make sure there was a) light at the end of the tunnel, and b) it wasn’t the light of an oncoming boat.

In both tunnels, the atmosphere was richly real. ▶



#### ▲ LIFE IN THE UNDERWORLD

Steering *Kathryn* slowly and carefully through the epic Saltersford Tunnel just outside Barnton.





▲ **AYE AYE, CAPTAIN**  
Molly at the tiller, as she was for most of the journey through the sweet Cheshire countryside.

The other is the Falkirk Wheel on the Forth and Clyde Canal which opened in 2002. That was a good year for boat lifts.

▲ **WALKS FROM THE MOORINGS**  
Opposite below: Following Witton Brook, an adjunct of the River Weaver, on a tranquil walk into the Northwich Woodlands.

## THE MOVEABLE FEAST

On the second morning, we hit upon another advantage of the narrowboat holiday. Our usual holiday format is self-catering cottage rental. It's wonderful of course, but we can often spend hours in the morning getting everyone up, showered and breakfasted, tweaking plans and getting out. Here, you can do all of that while you're actually moving. First person up makes tea and starts the engine, second up helps cast off, and you're away, making breakfast and freshening up as you head for the next horizon. It's got to be the only self-catering format in which that works; you can't do it in a cottage, campervan or motorhome. Just a thought.



Cool, damp, full of echo and drip; it was fun to reach out and touch the slime and mortar of two centuries as that arch of light at the end of the void got larger and larger.

As we passed into Barnton, an immense scene unfolded to the right. Here the canal hugs the edge of a high ridge above the valley of the River Weaver. And dominating the valley, glittering in the gloaming, is the vast sci-fi clutter of Winnington chemical plant.

Sounds hideous, right? But go easy; this place has great history. Founded by benevolent moguls John Brunner and Ludwig Mond, the site set records and trends for chemical production for over a century. It was one of the founding sites of ICI, and under the Brunner Mond banner, the company looked after its workers in the same spirit as Cadbury, Wedgwood and Leverhulme. The manufacturing process for polyethylene (such as you'll find in your tent or rucksack) was discovered here by accident in 1933. And to me it has always looked like something out of Frank Herbert's *Dune* novels or Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*, and that's not too much of a bad thing.

The kids weren't too bothered by any of that, of course. But when we moored up and took an evening walk along the canal to gawp at it all, under the fading light of the blue hour, a calmness set in over us that said we were onto something here.

The next day was all about walking. Firstly, a proper long walk around Marbury Country Park, which (over and above my local-boy prejudice) I think of as one of the best country parks in the land. Situated beside the canal in the grounds of a former estate that was modelled on the parkland of Fontainebleau in France, it's got lime avenues, an arboretum, hidden pathways, an outdoor swimming pool and sudden sweeping views

across Budworth Mere. The park is bordered by the Northwich Woodlands, a thriving green space that has been reclaimed from industry. So we walked for hours, heading beyond the Marbury bounds into Anderton Nature Park and up to Haydn Pool, previously all part of the chemical empire. Extraordinary.

The second half of our day involved climbing. When I first moved to this area as a lad, the Anderton Boat Lift was a rusting hulk, drooping in a vast basin opposite the smokestacks of Winnington. Happily today, this Victorian marvel is one of the great restoration stories of our time.

Opened in 1875, the lift linked the Trent and Mersey with the River Weaver, its two 91-tonne wrought iron caissons lifting and lowering salt barges up and down the 50ft drop between the two waterways. Like a vertical Suez Canal, it opened up a transport network spanning hundreds of miles that would otherwise have been stymied by this single cliff at Anderton. They called it the Cathedral of the Canals.

The lift served its purpose for over 100 years, initially powered by hydraulic rams and later by electrically-powered pulleys, until it fell into disrepair and closed in 1983. But after a mammoth 20-year financing push by local trustees and volunteers, it reopened in 2002, and it is now one of only two working boat lifts in Britain.

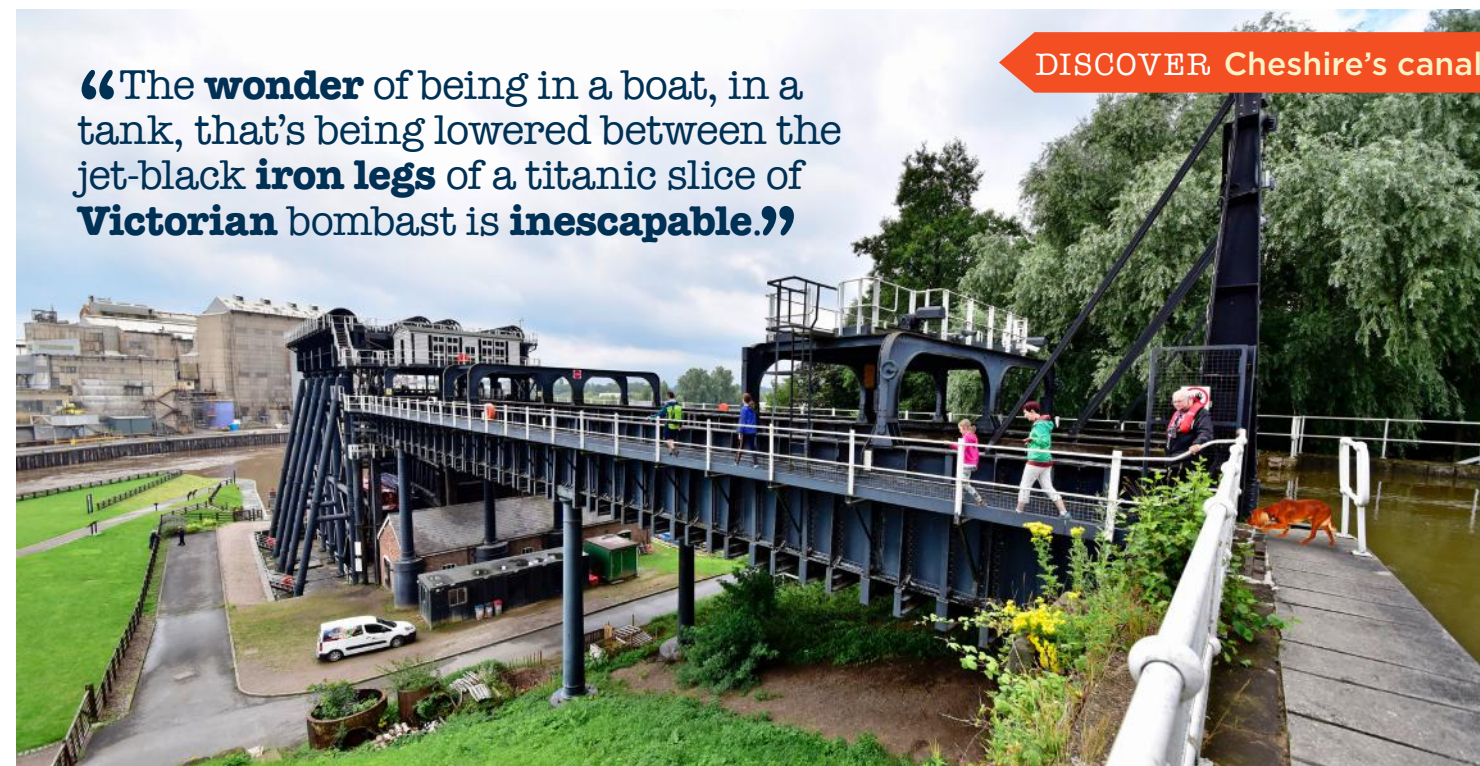
Much to the girls' excitement, we took a down-up ride on the lift. Not in *Kathryn*, as it's not part of our route, but in one of the tour boats run by the adjoining visitor centre. I mean it about the excitement; yes it was a delight for a middle-aged geek like me, but the wonder of being in a boat, in a tank, that's being lowered between the jet-black iron legs of a titanic slice of Victorian bombast is inescapable, whatever your age.

Even better was to come. For a small extra fee, those with a head for heights can 'walk the lift' – a tour into the uppermost mechanisms of the beast, weaving through the former control rooms and the cogs of the old pulley system, and popping out on the upper inspection deck for one of the most dramatic industry-in-the-countryside views I think it's possible to see. I still rank this as one of my best climbs of 2019, up there with Pen y Fan and Suilven. If you're going to scramble up a manmade mountain at some point in your life, make it this one.

Bidding farewell to Anderton, we boarded *Kathryn*, left behind the industries of Northwich and puttered out into the fields. Here Molly took over, happily weaving us past the reedbeds and under bridges as we sat, read, dined and chilled. Everything was green; the canal like a watery tree tunnel, the neighbouring River Dane showing off in crazy meanders. If we felt like pulling over to let one or two of the team go for a walk along the towpath, we did so; leapfrogging or waiting as either the boat or the walking party needed to. What a joy this boat-bimbling was: organic, whimsical, fun. I love the word gongoozling but this was something else. Gonmozying. Trampoozling. Gonglezambling. I'll work on it. ▶

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DISCOVER Cheshire's canals



▲ **CATHEDRAL OF THE CANALS**  
The Anderton Boat Lift is an engineering marvel. Rosie (briefly) took the wheel for a trip in the lift; later we climbed into the upper workings to hear how this elegant machine transformed the industries of the north-west.





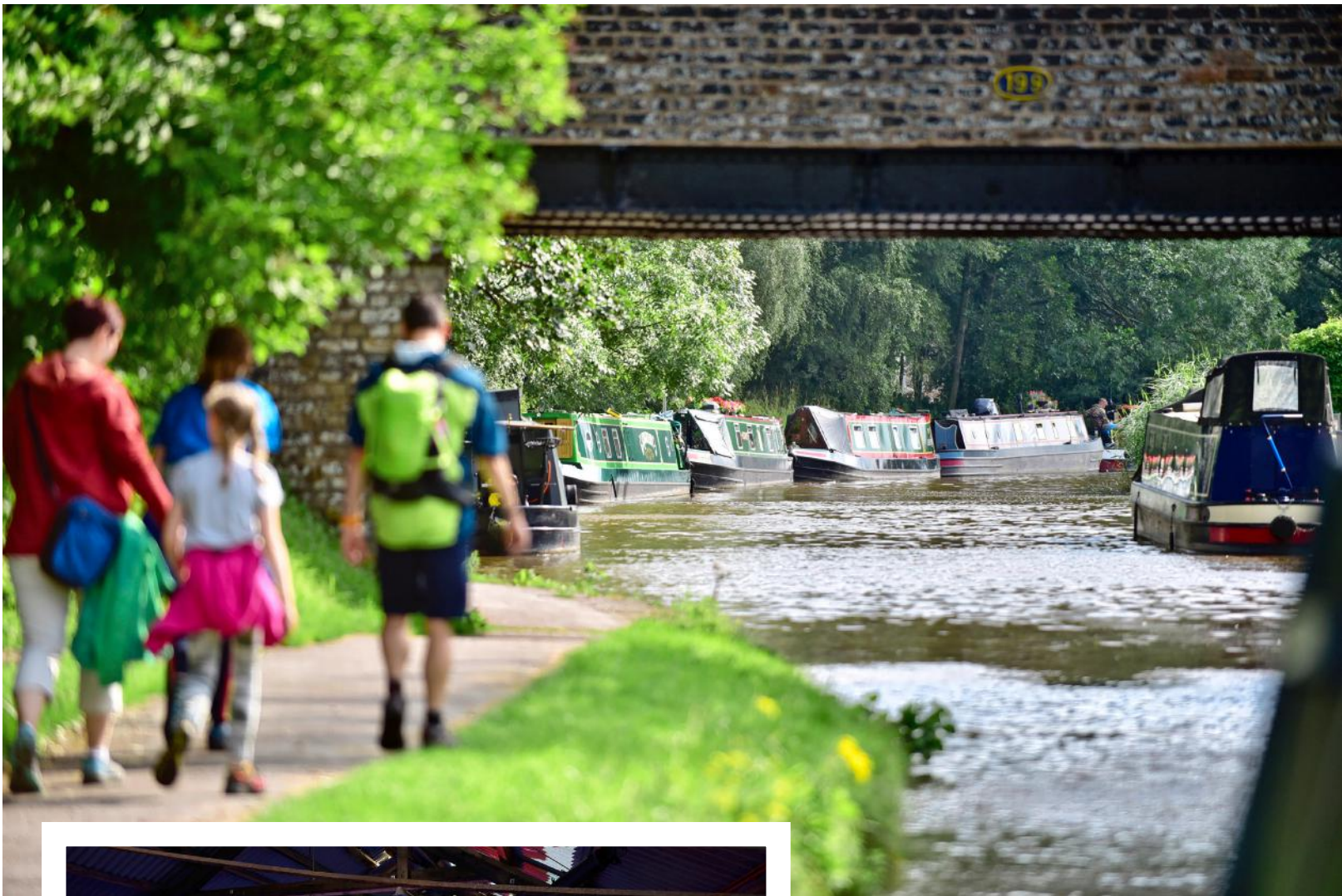


PHOTO: LION SALT WORKS MUSEUM

#### ▲ HEAVEN ON THE WATER

Top: A towpath stroll through the marina at Anderton (a view that hasn't changed much for more than a century.)

Above: The extraordinary scene at Salt Pan 1 in the Lion Salt Works at Marston.

Eventually signs of civilisation returned and the market town of Middlewich built itself around us. We passed through the Big Lock (our major lock endeavour of the trip) and moored up near a Rosie-sized play area.

Next morning, we swung the boat round (with only a minimum of farce and faux-swearing) and headed back. It was glorious: Molly near-inseparable from the tiller; even Rosie having a go in between chapters of Philip Pullman's *Northern Lights*, which, as she rightly pointed out, "has lots of canal boats in it".

We moored up at the Lion Salt Works in Marston, which again in my time was near dereliction but is today one of the most implausibly fascinating

industrial museums in the country. It was the last open-pan salt-making site in Cheshire, and it now tells the whole story of the county's saline empire. (It has also won a clutch of awards for the way it does so.)

Three of the original salt pans have been restored. You've no doubt seen recreations of more common industries like coal mining and cotton milling on your travels, but this is something else: vast square pans in hot, smoky, low-roofed sheds, with salt being raked out of a foul briny brew by mannequins (and the odd actor), then dried and cut into blocks ready for transport to the tables of the world. It's a remarkable story, made all the more beguiling by the fabric of the buildings: a hotch-potch of sandstone brick, weathered timber and corrugated iron, with the smell of the centuries locked within them. As Liz said: "It makes me feel ashamed to have lived in Cheshire all that time and not to have known this story." That's a museum that has done its job, I'd say.

Our final walk was down amongst the leftovers of the salt industry: Neumann's Flashes. A flash is a Cheshire word for a body of water created by the collapse of a salt mine, such as when (in the 18th and 19th centuries) the brine beds of Northwich were so overmined that they flooded and collapsed, later being used by ICI to store leftover lime waste. That's all over now, and what's left behind is an extraordinary set of habitats. The salt attracts seaside species like knotgrass and sea campion, while the alkaline soils from the lime beds nurture rarities like fragrant orchid, marsh helleborine and ploughman's spikenard. It's a stronghold for the dingy skipper butterfly and legions of waders, including broad-billed sandpiper and whiskered tern. Again, Molly and Rosie might have had only the

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#### ▲ FOLLOW ME

Rosie normally takes a lot of persuading on a walk, but this is Canal Rosie.

#### ▼ LOCK DOWN

Even if you're unsure of your lock technique, other boaters will always help.

fleetest of interests in marsh helleborines and dingy skippers, but this was a place to run, sit, babble, hide, seek. For me and Liz it was just headspace.

In the evening we went back through the tunnels, ready to hand *Kathryn* back next morning. The handover was bittersweet. We were sad to disembark (at least one member of the crew suggested stealing *Kathryn* and sparking some kind of low-speed boat chase) but in love with the boat-walking holiday. We had planned to do another this spring, bringing the grandparents this time, until you-know-what happened. We still intend to do it again on the other side of all this.

This was a trip that turned a Nirvana-dwelling teen into a cheery tillerwoman; turned two squabbling sisters into friends who walked hand in hand when they thought we weren't looking. A trip where we rediscovered home turf, saw it afresh, then slept soundly on the water like the Gypsies in Rosie's book.

I'm still working on a pleasing word for boat-walking. I'll let you know when I get one. Just needs a bit more research. **CW**



## Plan your trip

### WALK HERE

For a gorgeous canalside walk in our footsteps, download **Lion Salt Works** at [fto.com/bonusroutes](http://fto.com/bonusroutes). You can also find walks at other locations including **Neumann's Flashes** by going to [visitcheshire.com](http://visitcheshire.com) and searching *walks*.

### GETTING HERE

Northwich is on the A556 between Knutsford and Chester; Acton Bridge is two miles north-west of the town.



### BOAT HIRE

We booked with **Black Prince Holidays** (01527 575115; [black-prince.com](http://black-prince.com)). The company has nine bases around the country; others include Ely, Chirk, Lower Heyford and Falkirk. Our boat was flawlessly comfortable, and the introductory briefing and lesson clear, concise and friendly. Prices for our trip (based on four people in a Duchess 4 in school summer holidays) are around £1075.

**SPECIAL OFFER:** *Country Walking* readers can claim 10% off a 2021 **Black Prince holiday**. Choose from nine locations and boats sleeping between two and 10 people. Visit [black-prince.com](http://black-prince.com) and enter code **WALK21** at the checkout. Enjoy!

### WHERE TO EAT & DRINK

Beside the boat lift is the **Stanley Arms** (01606 77661, [stanleyarms-anderton.co.uk](http://stanleyarms-anderton.co.uk)) which has a canalside beer garden. Serves pub classics like ham, egg and chips for £11. In Middlewich we loved the **Kinderton** (01606 834169, [thekinderton.co.uk](http://thekinderton.co.uk)): pub classics, posh nosh and the frankly jaw-dropping Kinderton Kebab with spiced fries (£15).

### VISITING

The **Anderton Boat Lift** ([canalrivertrust.org.uk/anderton-boatlift](http://canalrivertrust.org.uk/anderton-boatlift)) is worth at least half a day of any canal trip, with its superb visitor centre and boat trips. Likewise the **Lion Salt Works** (01606 275066, [lionsaltworks.westcheshire-museums.co.uk](http://lionsaltworks.westcheshire-museums.co.uk)): hands-on storytelling as it should be.

### MORE INFORMATION

For more about the UK canal network visit [canalrivertrust.org.uk](http://canalrivertrust.org.uk) and for general tourism information, go to [visitcheshire.com](http://visitcheshire.com)