

Last year's first Village at War weekend at Stoke Bruerne set the organizers, the Friends of the Waterways Museum, a hard act to follow. There was all the initial novelty, which as a one off gets the punters in, but would they come again? And there was also that moment of a very special occasion with the unveiling of the plaque outside the museum to the 'Idle Women' - who had worked as boatmen during the war.

Four members of this octogenarian dwindling band were present, including Sonia Rolt and Emma Smith, authoress of *Maiden's Trip*. Tony Hales, Chairman of BW was also there, together with Roger Hanbury, Chief Executive of the Waterways Trust and each made fine speeches praising the gals' work, before a gathering of the great and the good of the canals. 'They were anything but idle', said Hales. Then followed a speech from Sonia on the urgent need to save our waterways for the future - all familiar stuff. And after the plaque unveiling, finally that poignant photo-call with the four gals on the back of a narrow boat that one of them had worked at some stage during the war. Those of us present felt we had witnessed the final act of a little piece of wonderful canal history - the brave endeavour of about thirty largely middle-class young women to play a truly challenging part in the war effort.

Beat that?

So how do you go about beating that? Well for starters, get the weather right. On that first weekend it was terrible, after the initial bright Saturday morning. Then Sunday was so bad that the entry parking charge was waived. But despite it all, that British stiff upper lip, which had seen us through the Blitz and beyond, persevered and some £1,700 was raised for the canal museum. More importantly, there were many newcomers to the canals and first visits to the museum, and those who came seemed positively to swim in canal nostalgia. So the organizers decided to move the date for this year to the Indian summer of Golden October, and the gamble paid off. The weather was fine to OK on the Saturday and brilliant on the Sunday, attracting



A village





Photographs by
Tim Coghlan



CLOCKWISE FROM CENTRE LEFT: All hands to the pumps: The display team with the water pump from the NFS Museum who made quite a splash; **Flower Power's Finest Hour:** David Blagrove, Chairman of the Friends of Stoke Bruerne Museum as the Man from the Ministry of Transport; **Demob happy in canal-Civy Street;** Pegasus Bridge – Stoke Bruerne: PARA look-alikes keeping their traditions alive. The author visited that bridge for the recent 65 anniversary commemorations; **She shall have music wherever she goes:** Sheena Bourn on her booty *Angel* as an Idle Woman inc. army surplus jacket, plus friends; **Who said war was no picnic?:** The field below the Top Lock was commandeered for the event.

Tim Coghlan takes a lighter look at this remarkable, now possibly annual reenactment, in which he survived an air raid, met Idle Women, ate Spam-a-lot and kept smiling through...

at war





very good crowds, and raising in all something in excess of £5,000 for the canal museum.

So what did this year have to offer? A case of *plus la meme chose* with an emphasis on 'plus'. Looking at the considerably increased array of 'souvenirs de la guerre', I was reminded of an incident a couple of years ago at our Braunston Historic Narrowboat Rally, when a visitor asked me what else was there to see besides historic narrow boats? I asked him in reply, if he were sitting in the grandstand watching Aston Villa playing at home, would he ask his neighbour what else was there to see besides the football? (Incidentally BW's Chairman Tony Hales is also a director of Aston Villa.)

Lots to see and do

New areas of open space had been requisitioned, especially the piece of land below the Top Lock on the opposite



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Listen to me very carefully, I will sing *zis only once*: Underneath Stoke Bruerne's arches with Miss Lola Lamour; **On Yer Bike:** Members of the March Vintage Cycle Club; **The NAZI Model Army:** Their tanks were always far superior to anything the Anglo-American Alliance could produce; **WOR EFFORT:** Sign courtesy of Miz Diz Lexia and Count Spelman.

side of the canal to the *Navigation Inn*. Here amidst tents and camouflaged caravans were displays of Jeeps, veteran cars, and very large working model German tanks, at least two feet high, complete with Panzer troops clinging on. Seen on their own, they looked almost like the real thing, and every now and then, under radio control, one of them would trundle out and work its way across the canal bridge and then along the quayside towards the museum. It made me think just how it might have been had the Eagle landed.

Also on display all over the war-zone were tents selling what used to be called Army Surplus – the kit that kept so many of the boatmen going during and after both world wars. I learnt that there is now a whole nostalgia cottage-industry out there selling it to would be WWII look-alikes, who have joined the likes of the English Civil War 'Sealed Knot', medieval jousts, Roman Legions, druids etc in doing historic re-enactments as almost their *raison d'etre*. They move like a travelling circus around the country and on to Europe – I saw them in their hundreds when I attended this summer's 65th Anniversary of the D-Day landings. They seem to pay their own way, and certainly did not charge much to Stoke Bruerne organisers for their services. And they all seemed to be thoroughly enjoying themselves.



If you sign up and join them, the choice for your WWII fantasy is endless. Besides being bloody British, you can appoint yourself an American general or a GI, or a Flying Fortress airman in a thick bomber jacket. Or, if you are good at putting your hands in the air, the F..... army. Not only is it the clothes. There are masses of no longer usable weapons to chose from, that start with rifles, Tommy guns and grenades, through to that must-have Bazooka, and maybe for that special birthday, the Sherman tank you have always wanted. I began to wonder what these WWII enthusiasts thought of us narrowboaters, and whether they considered lock-wheeling on a long flight in the rain as equally weird.

Proud and knowledgeable

Not all the kit on display was for sale. Some was owned by proud and very knowledgeable collectors, who were only too happy to talk you through their life's work. On my recent Normandy visit, I had learnt from our Holts Tour guide, that whilst by June 1944, we had driven the German Luftwaffe from the skies, and largely neutralised the U Boat menace, the German Army in terms of its organisation and equipment was still considerably superior to ours, and taking a defensive stand



LEFT: These men can take anything: Captain Mainwaring with members of the Pitsford Home Guard and a Sea Cadet parading by the lock.

BOTTOM LEFT: Don't mention my expenses: A Red Cap MP keeps Order! Order!

in the thickly wooded Bocage country, very hard to beat. I put this point to a man who in his tent on the village green had a considerable collection of both German and British kit on display. He agreed and pointed to the waxed German officer's leather field coat in reptilian green-grey hanging on a wall with beside it a British great-coat. 'This German coat was brilliant and would keep out the rain – that British one is nothing more than a thick blanket pretending to be overcoat, which would be a liability after ten minutes of soaking in the rain.' Echoes I thought of our brave boys in Afghanistan, and their poor kit.

Historic boats on parade

It was now time for a stroll up the towpath towards the tunnel – past the parade of the Pitsford Home Guard base camp - to see some fifteen historic narrow boats including Braunston's own pair *Nutfield & Raymond*, which had come to event. They were all familiar faces at our June rallies over the years and it was good seeing them, some of the female crew donning 'Idle Women' outfits. I heard the comment made more than once that this new event, if held in again in October, it would make a very nice end to the rally season, and would gain support in future years.

Next I paid a visit to Rene Artois' café in Nuvion, the converted museum café, which was understandably completely full, as entertainer and former working boatman Andy Collier was in full swing. So instead to the NAAFI tent for a spam burger, and then a well earned pint of Spitfire at *The Boat Inn*, one of my very favourite canalside pubs.

I was there only for the Saturday, so I missed out on Sunday's 2.00 PM *Reach for the Sky* Hurricane display from the Shuttleworth Collection - the budget only extended to the one fly-pass. In fact I heard it turned out to be something of an aerobatic display, which began with an air raid warning and ended with the all clear, and then Vera Lynn over the Tannoy with *The White Cliffs of Dover*, which reduced some of the older spectators to tears. Instead, I went to watch performing underneath the Stoke Bruerne bridge arches, the forces' sweetheart Miss Lola Lamour, singing the old big-band songs that we used to know.

Allied Assortment

My day ended with what was billed as 'Allied Assortment with display of Firepower. (loud bangs and noises)', which was just that. I passed on the Tea Dance with some lessons with JP and *All Ruzzit Buzzit*, as I have now come to terms with the sad fact that I am a strictly non-dancer. But I was told the event was a sell-out, as was the evening swing-band dance. It was now time to choo-choo me home, with hopes that we would all meet again next year. But that Sherman tank is not on my Christmas list. 📺