

President entering Braunston Marina in the late summer of 1989 and attracting the crowds:

This was her second visit in the author's time of ownership of the marina. The diesel tank by the marina entrance is still there as is the land to the right of the marina entrance which was excavated the following year to make new moorings. (Tim Coghlan)



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hen I acquired Braunston Marina in October, 1988, I knew very little about the canals and even less about their history, despite now being the owner of one of the most important sites on

both counts. The marina was bankrupt and very run down, and had very few friends. My main priority was to get it back in business, without also going bankrupt in the process, and for the first six months, I looked little beyond that.

When the spring of 1989 came along, after one of the mildest winters on record, which had allowed me to get on with putting the site back into some sort of order, I received a call from one David Powell, who introduced himself as the chairman of a group of steam-canal enthusiasts who called themselves the *Friends of President*. In brief he was finalising the summer cruising plans and could the boat stay the night in the marina one evening in May on its outward bound summer cruise from its home at the Black Country Museum? He had

heard that we had given the toilet block a makeover, and the showers would be most welcomed by the crew. *President* was somewhat late in arriving and I had already gone home by the time that it did. One of the staff who lived on his narrow boat in the marina said he would look after our guests.

Magical world

But I caught up with them the following morning, finding *President* moored up by the marina entrance under Thomas Telford's cast iron bridge, which had just been repainted by British Waterways. Both looked quite splendid in their contrasting black and white livery on that fine early summer morning. *President* was a magical world, reliving the brief-bygone era of steam on the canal. Everything was done as far as possible in the old way and its five or so crew even dressed in the type of uniform that the original crew would have worn after its launch in 1909 - a combination of a

A Friend of President

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Part I

TIM COGHLAN looks back on his twenty years of involvement with the last surviving steam narrow boat *President*, now in its centenary year

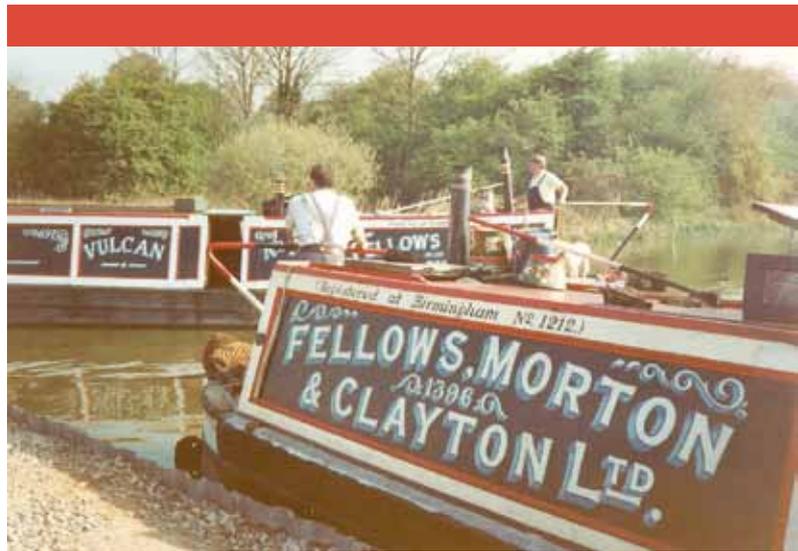
Canal pole dancing: After opening the 2005 Braunston Historic Narrowboat Rally, *Casualty* star Zita Sattar - great-great-granddaughter of first *President* Captain James Woodfield - takes the helm whilst present *President* captain Bob Compton tries to get off the putty. (Tim Coghlan)



collarless thick striped cotton shirts, open black waistcoats or donkey jackets, red scarves, cloth caps various, corduroy trousers and hobnail boots - with traditional white corduroy trousers for the captain and blue dungarees for the stoker.

There was all the bustle of imminent departure - the stoker had been up since five building up a good head of steam, and you could feel the heat coming out from the engine room's boiler and smell the special steaming coal from the funnel. The last crew member returned from the shower, full of fresh compliments on our improvements. There was that inviting smell of bacon butties coming up from small solid fuel stove in the boatman's cabin, where the captain and stoker slept, with the remainder of the crew, including the odd female billeted in the bunk accommodation up for'ard beyond the coal store. It was all a somewhat basic arrangement for these modern times, but no one seemed to mind.

All was now ready, and people seemed to emerge from anywhere and everywhere to see them off - the departure of anything in steam is always an eye-catching spectacle. The captain let off a shrill blast on the steam whistle, and then made two pulls on the handle that rang the bell in the engine room ahead of the boatman's cabin, to instruct the stoker to engage reverse. I now heard for the first time the whooshing sound of the large 32 inch bronze propeller starting to turn, making the waters around it surge from the deep. A crewman was up on the bow deck to pole the boat as required for there was little steerage in reverse. The boat slipped under Telford's bridge stern first, and then with dexterous poling from the bow, it turned its head southwards towards the official start of the southern Grand Union. With another loud whistle, it was on its way and soon out of sight. There was another whistle and they were off on a great adventure. I would have given anything to have gone with them, but with the marina to put back in business, it was like asking for the moon.

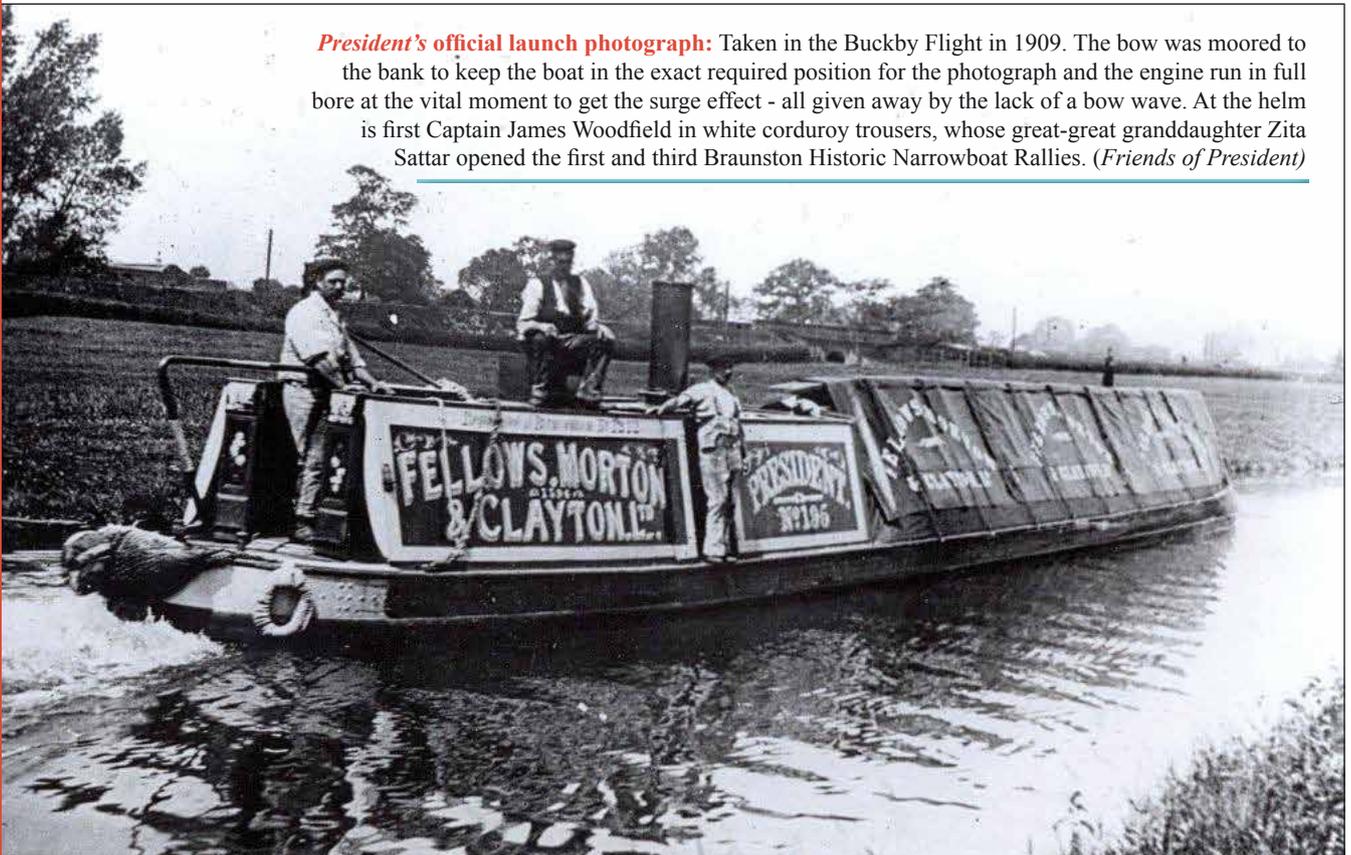


Another Friend of President: During that late 1989 *President* was visited by *Vulcan*, then moored on the canal at Braunston. *Vulcan* was built the year before in 1908. It is now owned a member of Braunston Marina's staff and is moored in the marina. Both boats would have worked from the FMC yard at what is today Braunston Marina. (Tim Coghlan)

Getting to know them

Later that year I had the chance to get to know the *President* team better, when I met them at the IWA National Rally at Waltham Abbey, where the boat was on display and we had a stand. I had a good look over the boat and met chairman David Powell. I was handed a leaflet, which gave the salient facts. In brief, *President* was built at canal-carriers Fellow, Morton & Clayton's dock in Saltey, Birmingham in 1909 at a cost of £600. It was known as a 'Josher steamer'

***President's* official launch photograph:** Taken in the Buckby Flight in 1909. The bow was moored to the bank to keep the boat in the exact required position for the photograph and the engine run in full bore at the vital moment to get the surge effect - all given away by the lack of a bow wave. At the helm is first Captain James Woodfield in white corduroy trousers, whose great-great granddaughter Zita Sattar opened the first and third Braunston Historic Narrowboat Rallies. (*Friends of President*)



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Mary (nee) Morton, grand daughter of the Morton of Fellows Morton & Clayton at the 2003 Braunston Historic Narrowboat Rally: Behind is the bow of *President* with Bob Jervis in sentinel mode. (Tim Coghlan)

David told me of his media-aimed plans for 1990, in which he asked me again for what he called 'our much appreciated hospitality'. The year would have much to celebrate and commemorate. During the winter, *President* would have a new Cochran dryback flue boiler fitted, the first since 1973, when the boat was rescued from dereliction and restored to steam by Nicholas Bostock and boatbuilder Malcolm Braine. The year would also mark the bicentenary of the opening of the Oxford Canal on the morning of New Years Day 1790, whose builder James Brindley never lived to see it finished. He had also built

to the fraternity of canal boatmen - after Joshua Fellows, one of the company's directors. *President* was one of 31 such steam narrow boats operated by that canal carrying company between 1889 and 1927, when the arrival of the semi-diesel single cylinder Swedish Bolinder 15 horse power engine made steam obsolete, and the engines were changed - some thirty years before steam became largely obsolete on the railways. *President* went over to diesel in 1925.

This change allowed savings in crew numbers and also for the boats to increase loads to twenty tons versus twelve, due to the much reduced engine room size, having no boiler, and not having to carry coal for it. Previously on the 54 hour Birmingham - London run, one ton of coal was simply expended in fuelling the engine. A horse drawn butty by contrast could carry 25 tons. Where the steam narrow boat succeeded was in carrying at speed valuable cargoes such as spices, tea, wool, cheese, sugar, wheat, barrels of beer and spirits, tinned goods and even bedsteads. And they were powerful enough to pull several butties, where this was possible. They could also travel 'fly', going non-stop day and night - something that the Friends of *President* would shortly experience at first hand.



Malcolm Braine, co-rescuer of *President* at the first Braunston Historic Narrowboat Rally in 2003: Seen at the helm of his *Cactus*, another former FMC narrow boat he rescued and restored. (Tim Coghlan)



***President* in its British Waterways days:** The boat passed into the northern maintenance fleet in 1953, and in the mid 'sixties the Bolinder engine was replaced by a twin cylinder Armstrong Siddley engine. Later that engine was removed and the boat left to sink. It was rescued by Malcolm Braine and Nicholas Bostock in 1973 and the full restoration to steam began. (Friends of *President*)

a number of other canals and his achievements were being commemorated by an alleged life-size bronze statue, for no one really knew how tall he was or indeed what he looked like as there are no surviving portraits. This statue was to be erected at Etruria at the start of the Caldon Canal near Stoke-on-Trent. It was being built in London and would be cast at the famous Bow foundry. *President* would collect it from close to the foundry, having gone south down the Grand Union and then bringing it up the Thames and the Oxford Canal, and on to Etruria via the Coventry and Trent & Mersey canals. Much was to be made of all of this, and on both the outward and return legs *President* would call at Braunston Marina.

Polythene mystery

On the evening of Wednesday 30th May, *President* arrived at the marina, accompanied by another former FMC steamer, *Vulcan*. In its hold, just forward of the steam-coal supply, was that Brindley statue, shrouded in polythene mystery, except for its protruding head. The body of the work,

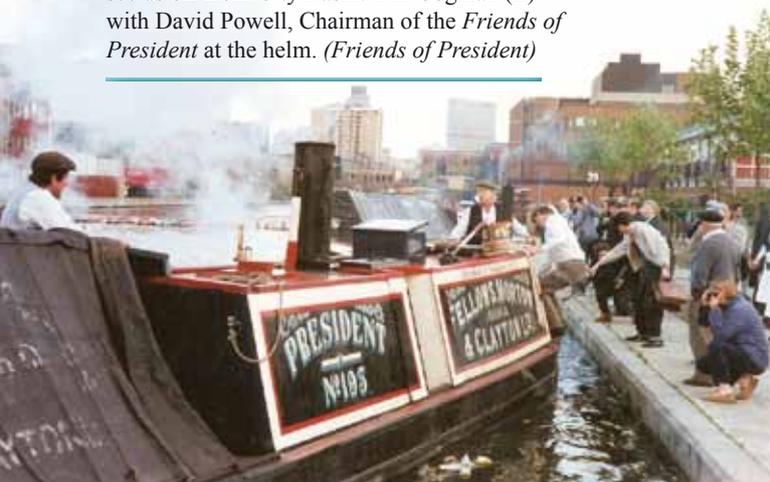


Canal builder Brindley gets a head of himself: *President's* visit to Braunston Marina on the way to delivering the new statue of James Brindley to Etruria. Tim Coghlan proposes an early morning toast, the photograph carefully choreographed by Gordon White of the *Rugby Evening Telegraph*. It made the front page. (*Rugby Evening Telegraph*)

to use a phrase, would not to be revealed until the statue's formal erection at Etruria. To me from what I could see of him, the man looked like an effete aristocrat on his way to meet Madame Guillotine. He seemed a long way from the tough man of much drive and little formal learning, who was more concerned with the welfare of his horses than his army of navies, as cynically the latter were the more easily replaceable.

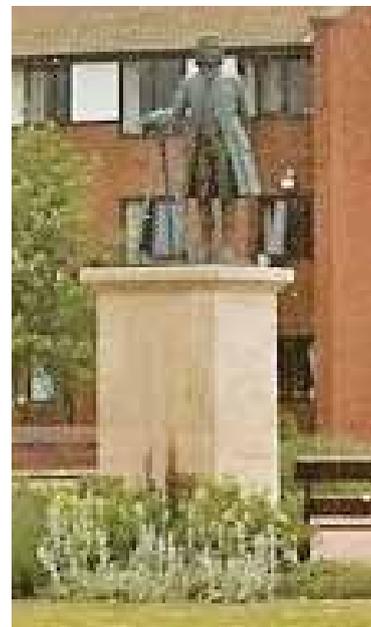
David was keen to get maximum publicity for the voyage – he owed it to the Black Country Museum, who owned *President* and desperately needed all the publicity they could get. It was a just and noble cause, and I immediately contacted the local media and arranged for a photo call early the next morning, before the boat steamed off to Hawkesbury Junction, to be followed the next morning by a meeting in Coventry Basin with

Start of the 1991 Fly Run: Crowds waited to see us off from City Basin. Tim Coghlan (L) with David Powell, Chairman of the *Friends of President* at the helm. (*Friends of President*)



the Lord Mayor of Coventry. The media loved the story and the *Rugby Evening Telegraph* ran it on its front page – the first time I ever found myself in that slot. Although I saw photographs of the unveiled statue in the canal press, it was some years before I saw it for myself when delivering a boat in that area, and it did look rather splendid against the backdrop of a modern canal-side housing development. Today it is now a much enjoyed new canal landmark – rather, I hope, like the canal-side housing development at Braunston Marina.

The Brindley-bronze-encounter left me with a desire to have a capriccio-esque statue of the three great canal builders together who had all worked at what is today Braunston Marina. I thought of putting it up at on the triangle of land at the marina entrance, where an ugly diesel tank then stood. The canal builders were the aforementioned Brindley and Telford, plus Jessop, the original builder of the Grand Junction Canal. However I discovered that such things did not come cheap. My enquiries revealed that £30,000 would be needed for just one like that Brindley – and about £60,000 for a job lot of all three together. It was a case of dream-on. As a last go, I inquired about just getting a head and shoulders bust of Brindley from that mould – the work after all had already been done – but I learnt that as part of the deal the cast had already been destroyed. It was simply hammered to pieces, which seemed iconoclastic in the extreme. Instead the proposed marina housing development was called Brindley Quays, and in this way his name is now commemorated at Braunston.



The statue of James Brindley at Etruria: The photograph was taken in 1994, four years after the statue was erected. It is now a much admired canal landmark. (*Tim Coghlan*)

Bicentenary planning

Late in 1989 I had received an invitation from the Oxford

branch of the IWA to attend a meeting at the old mill on the Cherwell River in Banbury, which was now converted into a theatre. I think we met in a rehearsal room, a room full of faces I had not seen before. The agenda was around what do to commemorate the forthcoming bicentenary of Brindley's Oxford Canal. Something had to be done, but just what? The canal as I have already mentioned was opened on 1st January, 1790, when a flotilla of boats, with dignitaries aboard, processed into Oxford preceded by the town band. Any attempt at a re-enactment of that was definitely off, with the last mile into Oxford then overrun by feral liveaboards, with the canal little more than a detritus of squalour, and the basin where formalities took place now shamefully filled in as a car park.

All sorts of alternative worthy project were suggested like towpath reinstatements and tree planting. Then I was asked

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President and escort Vulcan in the first lock after leaving City Basin. (Friends of President)

what I was going to do, the chairman prefacing his remarks with something like 'we need a big bang statement.' My old instincts that it is always dangerous to attend these types of meetings came back to me. I suggested a boat rally at the marina in early September 1990, after we had done our first expansion, and this was seized upon. Once I had put my head above the parapet, several people present came up with all sorts of ideas - historic narrow boats, fireworks, Morris dancers, canal theatre, real ale beer tent - the result of which was that the rally was a fantastic success. The consequence was the decision by ourselves and British Waterways to launch jointly in 1991 what transpired to be the first of nine Braunston Boat Shows over the following late May bank holiday. That boat show, now twenty years on, continues at Crick, and it is interesting how something as now well established as that came to be.

London to Braunston non-stop!

Around the time we started to plan the first Braunston Boat show, I was contacted David Powell about his plans for 1991. Together we hit on the idea of a recreation of a flyboat non-stop run from London to Braunston - David telling me it was at least 30 years since the last one was done.

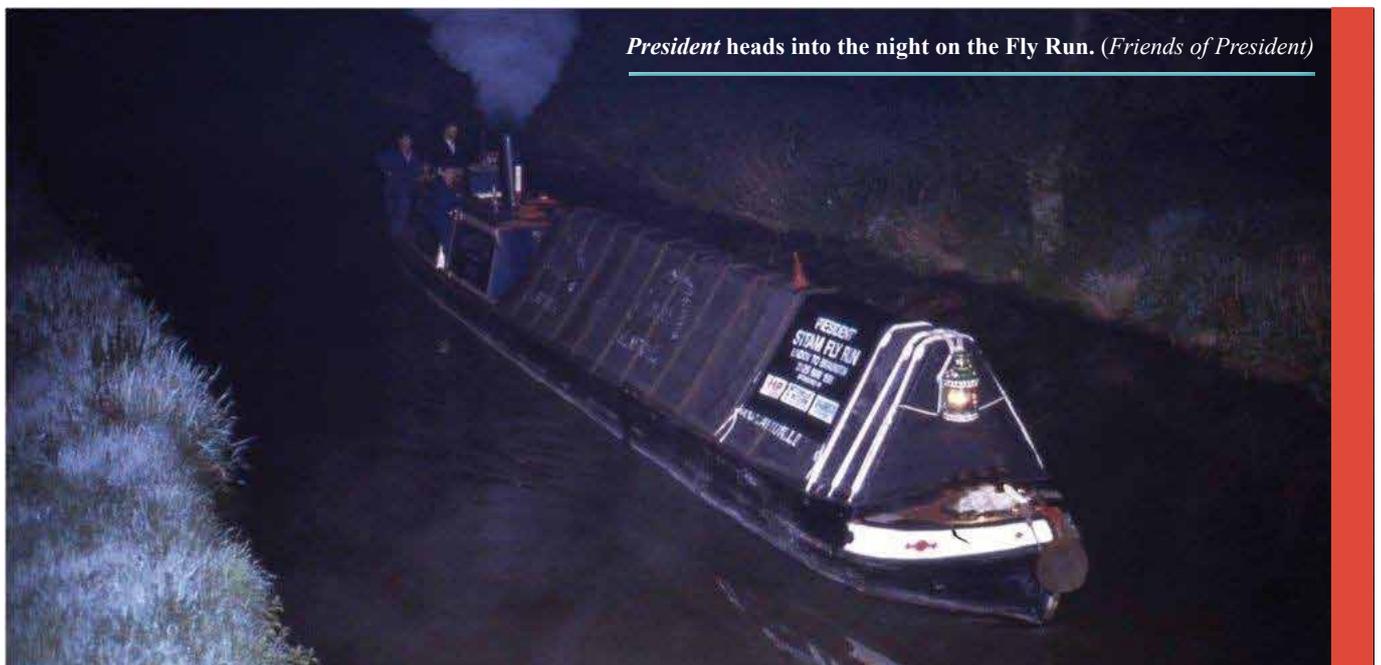
The run would be slightly more gentle - 48 hours to Braunston, covering 105 miles and 95 locks, versus the original 54 hours to Birmingham. It would culminate in the boat's triumphal arrival under the marina's famous entrance bridge on the Saturday night to a carefully choreographed combination of a fireworks display, the last bit of Tchaikovsky's *1812 Overture* with cannon boomed out over on the public address, and a full peel of bells from 'the cathedral of the canals' on Braunston hill. I was inspired by the impresario Victor Hockhausen, who did that sort of spectacular at the Albert Hall. If nothing else, it would make the show a memorable one, and it did.

British Waterways were immensely helpful in granting permission to use the locks by night. Crew volunteers were readily forthcoming, and Peter Chalk again volunteered his *Vulcan* as an escort. There was then only the question of sponsorship and eyes began looking at me. I talked to our partners at British Waterways and together we agreed to donate half the profits - whatever they might be - of the first Braunston Boat Show to the *Friends of President*, and the project was now underway. (The other half would go towards urgently needed towpath reinstatements on the Braunston flight.)

As a whatever for my input, I was invited to the start *President's* flyboat run from City Road Basin in London at 7.00 pm on the Thursday night before the show. I said I wouldn't mind also riding the boat as far as Camden Lock, whereupon I was told that this only if I observed the strict *President* dress code. This was achieved by a visit to Rugby's Oxfam Shop, where I also espied for £5 a dinner jacket which I was told had only been worn three times by the deceased, and has served me well ever since.

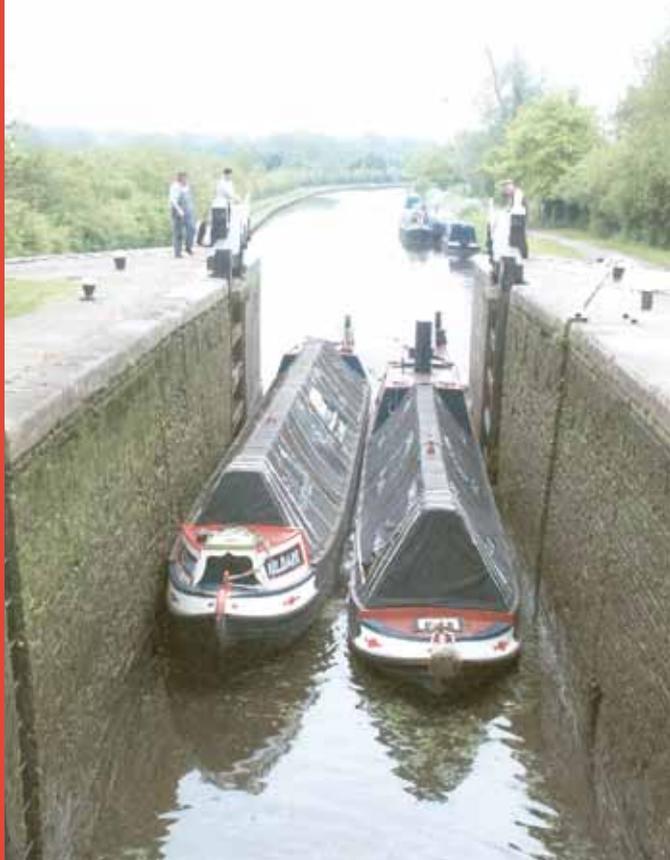
Special moment

When I arrived at City Road Basin that Thursday evening, I felt somewhat theatrical in my borrowed robes before quite a gathering of enthusiasts who



President heads into the night on the Fly Run. (Friends of President)

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President with butty Kildare in Denham Deep Lock, near Uxbridge early on a summer's morning in 2004 after its Thames run: The scene would have been very similar to when *President* and *Vulcan* passed through on the Fly Run. (Tim Coghlan)

had come to see us off on this then unique re-enactment, including the trip boat *Jenny Wren* in attendance for hospitality. David had been on the case in pre-publicising the run, and it had been well reported, including nationally in *The Guardian* the Monday before. It was a very special moment for me when I helped slip *President's* moorings, and then pushed it off, leaping on board at the last moment. Then to a loud blast on the steam whistle from David at the helm, and one ring to the engine room, the propeller surged into life, and we were away, to cheers and well wishes from the crowd. At last after two years of watching from the bank, I was onboard *President* at possibly its greatest moment since its restoration. The time aboard was only for a couple of hours, but it was exhilarating as we raced into the Islington Tunnel, building up speed before the chimney had to be lowered for going through it. From Camden Lock I walked back alone to City Road on the towpath, feeling somewhat conspicuous in my strange attire, but envious of the boats now heading into the night in the deep waters of the Regents Canal and the miles of lock free pound to Cowley.

Welcomed with a cake

I followed *President's* progress with much interest. All went well, with no breakdowns, despite its reconditioned steam engine and *Vulcan's* vintage diesel - both being pushed hard. The budget was 48 hours but they were at Braunston Bottom Lock in about 45, and had to wait before the official welcome there at seven by former working FMC boatwomen living in retirement in Braunston, who were re-enacting an old tradition that flyboat crews were welcomed in Braunston with a cake. Indeed some of the exhausted crew sneaked into the marina to



Fly Run end at Braunston Marina: After a non stop journey of 105 miles and 95 locks *President* and escort *Vulcan* arrived into the marina to a magnificent welcome of a fireworks display, the 1812 Overture and Braunston church bells. *Vulcan* is moored on the outside of *President* beneath Telford's bridge. (Tim Coghlan)

Youngsters visiting the *Friends of President's* modest stand at the first Braunston Boat Show. (Tim Coghlan)



use the showers, whilst the official pretension was maintained that the boats were still on their way, to arrive at 9.45 PM for that fantastic welcome.

To my astonishment that first show made profits of in excess of £3,500. This was small beer compared to the last in 1999 which made £55,000, but it was an excellent start, and allowed the show to go forth and multiply. In late August, Simon Ainley, then BW's Braunston Area Manager and I went to the IWA National Rally at Dudley, where we presented David with a cheque to the *Friends of President* for the unusual sum of £1,689.15, which was exactly half the profits. David commented 'It's the biggest cheque we've had this year.'

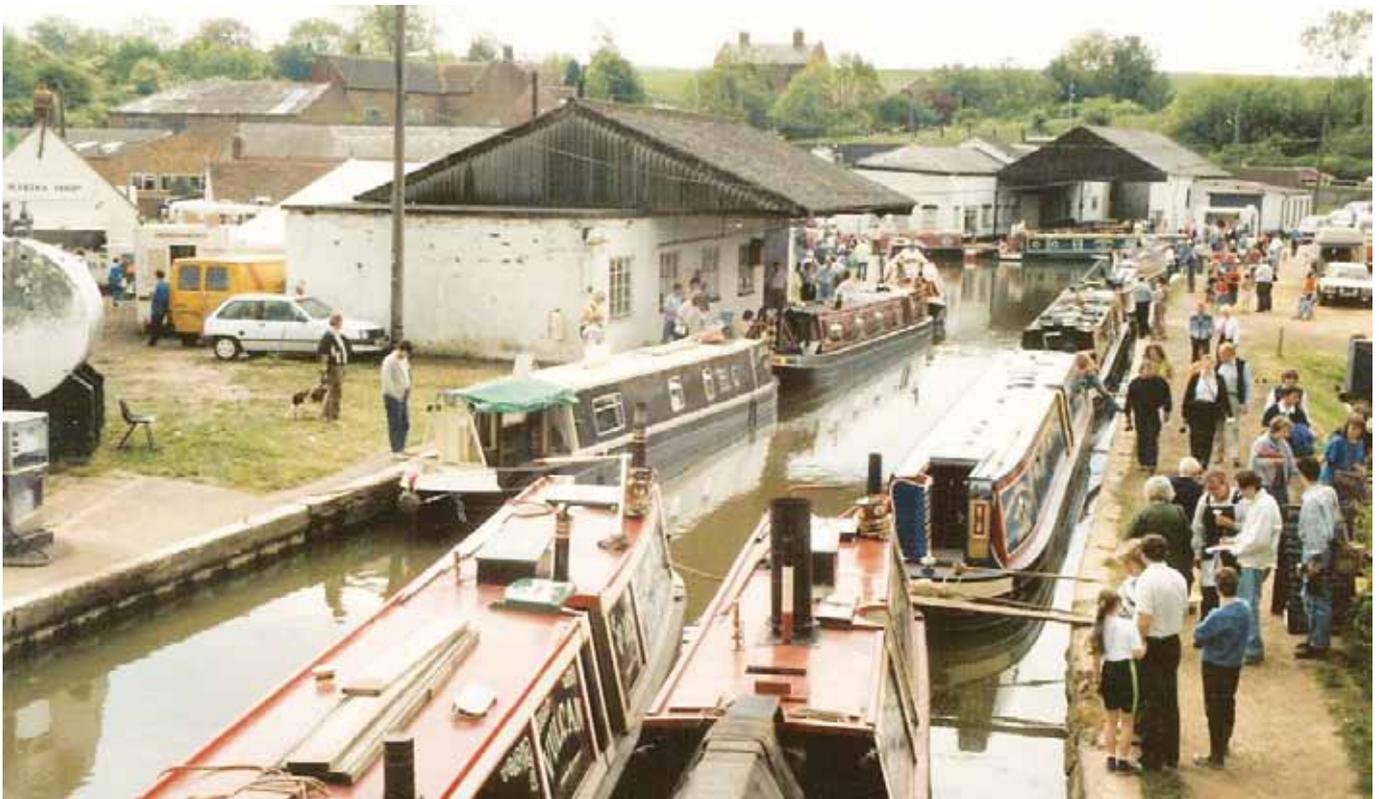


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In our next issue Tim Coghlan continues his story of his involvement with the Friends of President including a run down the Manchester Ship Canal.



Presenting the sponsorship cheque for exactly half the profits of the Braunston Boat Show at the Dudley IWA National Rally: Tim Coghlan (L) and Simon Ainley (R) of British Waterways and Chairman David Powell (centre). (Tim Coghlan)



The morning after the night before: *President* and *Vulcan* seen from Telford's bridge. Despite being the first Braunston Boat Show, the event attracted some 7,500 visitors as shown here. (Tim Coghlan)