



President & Kildare on their first visit to Braunston Marina as a pair in April 1992, and looking shipshape and Bristol fashion. (Tim Coghlan)

T

he year 1991 had been something of a spectacular year for *President*, with the successful reenactment of a fly run from London to the first Braunston Boat Show – in which I was involved

– being only one of its many appearances at various canal events, where this fine old narrow boat always seemed to steal the show. But there were mutterings afoot amongst the purists – that *President* simply processed and posed around the canal system. Some said it wasn't even a real canal steamer. And perhaps its greatest sin was that the boat never carried – which with barely accommodation for steam coal and crew, would have been impossible beyond token gestures like that Brindley statue.

But things were quietly happening behind the scenes that would make *President* and its friends into something far better. In September of that year, the butty *Kildare* was bought by the Black Country Museum, aided by the *Friends of President* and a

Science Museum grant. From next season *President* would have its 'first lady,' and together they would make a fine pair – giving the crew the challenge and fun of working a pair of boats under steam.

Kildare

Kildare's own history was something of a survival story. She was built as a butty in 1913 at a cost of £130 by Braithwaite and Kirk in West Bromwich for carriers Fellows Morton & Clayton (FMC). Like *President*, the boat was composite in its construction, with wrought iron sides and an elm bottom, the latter giving additional buoyancy in carrying loads on the shallow canals. Whilst it may have been at times paired with *President*, there is no surviving record of this, but the records themselves are pretty non-existent. *Kildare's* early claim to fame was that in October 1940, it was bombed and sank at New Warwick Wharf in Birmingham, and a photograph

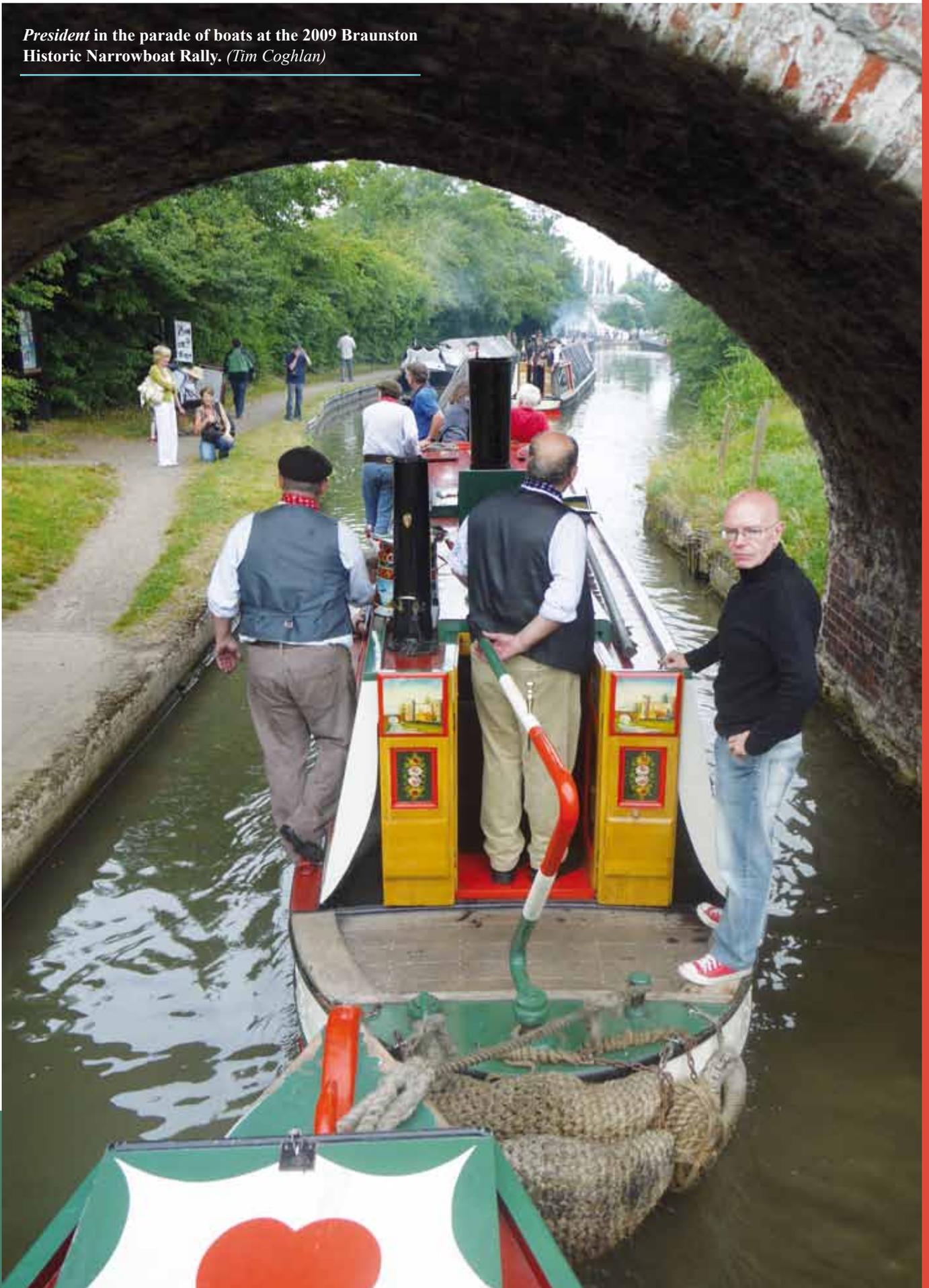
A Friend of President

President 100

Part 2

• **Tim Coghlan** continues his look back on
 • twenty years of involvement with the last
 • surviving steam narrow boat *President*, now
 • in its centenary year

President in the parade of boats at the 2009 Braunston Historic Narrowboat Rally. (Tim Coghlan)



survives of it largely under water. It was refloated and repaired and continued in the FMC fleet until 1948, when it then went through a variety of owners, including one of the last private carriers, Willow Wren, who changed its name to Snipe.

The *Friends of President* acquired *Kildare* from the Warwickshire Fly Boat's fleet – its name having now reverted to the original. Still an engineless butty drawn by a motor, it had been used as a camping boat – an innocent activity which had brought cheap adventure-holidays to so many young people, but was then being driven out of existence by the new obsessive health and safety regime. The hull shape was still original, although the elm bottom had long been replaced in steel. With little modification, the boat would be ideal for providing the much needed crew accommodation.

Refurbishment

During that winter a new fore-cabin, in the style of the original that had been removed years before, was fitted by Warwickshire Fly, who had the expertise to build an authentic looking one. Extensive works were then carried out by *Friends* volunteers to install proper washing facilities, including a hip bath for the engineer in the forward end of the boat, and a galley aft of the sleeping accommodation. The two boats were then repainted, with the sign-writing completed by the famous canal painter Ron Hough, who had served an apprenticeship in Nurser's Yard – now Braunston Marina – under the legendary Frank Nurser.

Maiden voyage

On 11th April 1992 the boats were ready for their paired maiden voyage. It was a modest affair, with a trip back to the Black Country Museum, via Braunston and Coventry. We had the honour of accommodating them for their first night underway. With our shower facilities, the engineer would not need the hip bath, nor would the crew the new washing facilities. And once in and tied up, the crew were off the *Plough* for dinner up in the village. So in one sense it was almost like old times, with what Frankie Howard called in *Up Pompeii*, the 'omnes modi connodi' largely unused.



ABOVE: All steamed in the engine hole: Another view of *President* during that first paired visit in 1992 (Tim Coghlan)

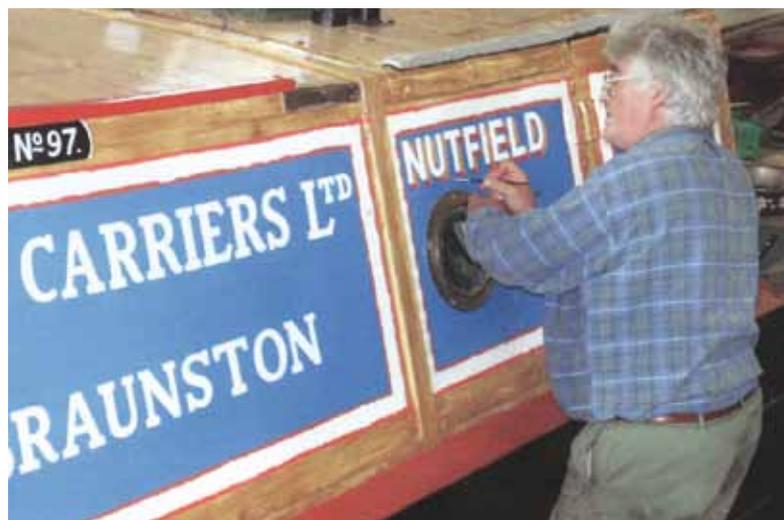
BELOW: 'In the wrong place at the wrong time' The bombing of FMC's New Warwick Wharf in October 1940 resulted in the sinking of four narrow boats, including the butty *Kildare* (L). All were salvaged. Ironically this is the only known surviving photograph of *Kildare* from its 35 years of FMC working days. (Boat Museum, Ellesmere Port)



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I took the opportunity to have a good look round, and it was a satisfying thought to me that half the money that the *Friends of President* had had to raise for their share of the *Kildare* purchase had come from the first Braunston Boat Show - although the *Friends* had done their part of the bargain by completing that fly run. The accommodation was basic, but a great improvement on the previous *Slumdog* arrangements, and both boats looked quite splendid in their newly painted livery. Now looking back, I cannot recall in the years that followed, when the boats ever looked so good as a pair. Each season the boats were well used, and twice there were major restorations to *President*, which then required that boat to be repainted. *Kildare's* paintwork was left very much as make-do and mend, until last winter when that boat received a makeover.



ABOVE, RIGHT: The famous canal painter Ron Hough, who in the spring of 1992 completed the sign writing on the repainted *President & Kildare*. He is seen here doing the same to the *Friends of Raymond's Nutfield* in 2004. (Tim Coghlan)

ABOVE: *President* in its steam-working days prior to 1928 One of only three known surviving photographs of the boat from its steamer days. Note the boy-boatman with his little dog - Jimmy Woodfield, son of the first Captain, James - on the cabin roof and his Uncle Sam in the engine hole. The Captain, not wearing white trousers, is in the engine hole. (*Friends of President*)



The crew of *President* at the Boat Museum at Ellesmere Port in May 1992. The start of the Big Food Run in which donated cans of tinned food were collected around the canal system for the St Laurence Children's Hospice in Romania. (*Ally Boxie*)

Back to carrying

During the summer of 1992, the boats were at last able to get involved in carrying in a way that had enormous media appeal for the boats, the Black Country Living Museum and the canals. The pitiful plight of children in Romanian orphanages, following the collapse of the Communist regime three years earlier was making national news. What was called the Big Food Run for the St Laurence Children's Hospice at Cernavoda, was organized by the new charity, Romania's Children Aid and the British Red Cross. For their part, the *Friends of President* made a long circuitous journey in May and June from Ellesmere Port, near Liverpool to Little Venice in London.

The boats collected tinned food for the Children's Hospice at various prearranged points, where people were able to come and make their donations. Then at certain unloading points, including Braunston Marina, the tinned food was loaded onto lorries, to go by road to Romania. In all, the boats collected 650 boxes of tinned food, with an estimated weight of 7 tons and a value of £10,000. I enjoyed simply watching the unloading at the old Braunston wharf, thinking of the extraordinary generosity of so many people in this country who had made this happen.

Support

By now Braunston Marina had been a paid-up member of the *Friends of President* for over two years, and we had done much to support them, with the boats calling two or three times a year at the marina. This included attending the now annual Braunston Boat Shows, which entitled them to a share of the profits from the show, all of which were given away to canal and local causes. Indeed, I noted in one of those years when reading the accounts of the *Friends of President*, that about 90% of the total donations they received were from that show.

But on the matter of my going boating with them, all I had still done so far was that two hours or so from City Road Basin to Camden Lock at the start of the 1991 Fly Run.

In 1993 the pair of boats, with the additional crew accommodation, now boldly made a fly run from London to Birmingham, with a stop over with us for that year's Braunston Boat Show, and again I could only sit and watch as the boats went by. The problem for me was simply taking time off during the summer months, when the recession was at its height and we had pared staff to the absolute minimum to ensure



***President* & *Kildare* calling at Braunston Marina en route to the 1994 Waltham Abbey National.** Top left are Ron and Judy Spencer, whom the author - seen centre in shirt and tie - would meet again on the Lea & Stort in 1996. (*Daventry Express*)

survival. That recession was late arriving on the canals and long in finishing, and in the process several marinas went bust. The low point for us was January 1995, when with all our best endeavours we only sold one small GRP canal cruiser for £3,500 in that whole month – today we sell at least fifty times that value and more. But later that year things picked up, although boat sales for the year as a whole were barely half of what they had been in 1991.

In the autumn of 1995, I was rung as usual by David Powell, Chairman of the *Friends of President* to discuss next year's programme – he was always remarkably adept at thinking up something new and headline grabbing. Indeed nothing gave him more pleasure than seeing the results of his efforts in the form a half page photograph in *The Guardian* of *President* puffing smoke in hot pursuit of a worthy cause. Encouraged by our late improvement in sales, I told him that next year I definitely would come out for a summer's day on *President* – a day, please, well away from the marina. He thought he had just the thing for me, a day on the Lea & Stort, which I had never visited by water.

Golden Jubilee

Next year would be the Golden Jubilee of the founding of the Inland Waterways Association. The Hertfordshire Branch had co-sponsored with British Waterways the



Fixed in a splice. David Powell, long serving Chairman of the *Friends of President* since 1989 and a driving force in its ongoing preservation as living heritage, seen here hands-on at the 2009 Braunston Historic Narrowboat Rally. (Paul Bennett)



Zita Sattar of TV *Casualty* fame and great great granddaughter of *President's* first captain James Woodfield, presenting a £2,000 cheque to the *Friends of President* at the 2005 Braunston Historic Narrowboat Rally. With her are her mother, grandmother and her new daughter – in all four generations of Woodfield descendants. During its 20 year involvement with Braunston Marina, the *Friends of President* has received donations totaling in excess of £20,000. This was through a combination of the old Braunston Boat Show, restoration donations from Braunston Marina, and since 2003, the biannual donation of £2,000 from the Braunston Historic Narrowboat Rally. (Paul Bennett)

production of souvenir glasses to commemorate the event, which would be made at the Nazeing Glassworks on the Lee Navigation. These would be collected in early May by *President* and taken to Birmingham for the World Canal Conference in late June. The journey would be via the Canal Cavalcade at Little Venice, the Rickmansworth Canal Festival then back to City Road, and another fly run to the Braunston Boat Show before the final dash to Gas Street Basin. I asked just how he intended to crew that lot, and he was full of bonhomie. The recession had produced loads of early retirees who would jump at this sort of thing – unlike, as he commented, us who still had day-jobs.

The plan was that I would join the boat at Harlow, the iconic symbol of new Essex, and all that is brash in Britain. The canal was just outside the railway station where I could park my car for the day and the boat would be there awaiting my pleasure, having loaded the souvenir glassware the previous day. I would then join them for the run down into London. I needed to be there by eight, which meant a very early start to allow for rush hour traffic on the M25.

Comedy inspiration

As I got finally out of my car and watched the commuters heading for their train, I was reminded of someone who had once called at the marina with a view to buying a narrow boat to use as a writer's den. He transpired to be a script writer, doing TV comedy sketches for famous male double acts, which in the past had included Morecambe and Wise – a type of TV that has since died of political correctness. His idea was to moor the boat on the Thames at Egham, so as to get out of the house for the day, and draw inspiration from the passing river scene. I commented that finding new comedy sketch ideas must at times be very difficult, and quite

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Loading the IWA Golden Jubilee souvenir glasses at the wharf near the Nazeing Glassworks. (Judy Spencer)

depressing. He agreed. When he had a bad start to the day, he would go and stand at the large Egham roundabout and watch the mad traffic going to work. And if that didn't work, he would drive to Surbiton Station and watch the commuters heading off on their daily grind, which normally did the trick. Observing the commuters going into Harlow Station, and having once been a Surrey/City commuter on the Effingham line - before I bought the marina - I now knew what he meant. This was made especially so as beyond the car park fence, on that bright early May morning, there were my big boy's toys for the day - *President* and *Kildare*, all steamed up and ready to go. For a moment I felt exhilaratingly free.

Meeting the crew

After a long circuitous walk, with the end always in sight, I finally reached the boats. I knew most of the crew from previous Braunston visits, including the captain for this run, Ron Spencer with his wife Judy. He followed two old FMC traditions, the white corduroy trousers for the captain and, when not running 'fly', of bringing his wife who was suitably attired in traditional boatwoman costume including bonnet. Both were recent redundancy-retirees, with all the time in the world, Judy having been a queen of PAYE at the Revenue. I heard something about getting a life.

President was ready to go, the hours of preparation that preceded the start having been done. Thanks to Judy, even my preordered bacon butty and mug of coffee were to hand - a menu which on a boat seems to taste better than breakfast at the Savoy. Judy's meticulous log - a true and accurate reflection of years in PAYE - recorded that a mere ten minutes after my arrival, we were underway, I

having hastily changed into my *Presidential* attire. Once on the move, what struck me most about the Lea and Stort was just how good the towpath was compared to the terrible ones north and south of Braunston. I learnt that people actually commuted from Harlow to the City on their bikes - perhaps inspired by local Tory boy, Norman Tebbitt. I spied *President's* old banger of a bike which looked as if it had been around as long as the boat, and asked if I could ride ahead on it to do the lock wheeling. Judy's log recorded that I began this



Job done and time for a cuppa. The forty boxes of glasses were neatly stacked on the port side to allow easier movement of the steam coal. This was stored forward to balance the weight in the boat, and humped to the boiler astern as required. (Judy Spencer)

at Aqueduct Lock, and continued with it for much of the day. A consequence was that at each lock I was preparing, as *President* approached with steam and a loud whistle or two, people would arrive from nowhere and begin to ask me all sorts of questions about the boat. As the least experienced crew member, I found all this humorously ironic. I was too embarrassed to confess I was the new kid on the block.

Crosswind trouble

The day became overcast with a stiff cold crosswind which gave the boats some trouble. Judy's log recalls that at Picketts Lock, the lock keeper Alf Scraggs advised us to 'give it some gun' as we came out, which 'worked wonders.' It also recalls, 'We left Tottenham Lock at 15.55 and Tim achieved an ambition – he steered *President* ably supervised by Ron, and has the photograph to prove it.' After six years of involvement, it was indeed a great moment for me. Little more than an hour later, her log recalls that at Old Ford Locks, 'Tim left us here to dash home in time to register his vote in the local elections, whilst we continued down to Limehouse Cut, keeping to the middle of the waterway as the pound was low.'

Religion

It is almost a religion in my family to vote, because of my grandfather who said that to do so was a mark of respect to those who had fallen in war for our freedom. He would go through all weathers to vote and would say, 'If you can't stand the politicians, then stand yourself!' I have always gone for that easy voting option, which on this occasion meant missing out on Limehouse Basin. Instead there was a cross-town dash to Liverpool Lime Street Station, in the middle of the City of London where I had once worked for nigh on twenty years, and then a train journey back to Harlow. This largely following the route we had come, with the canalized river often within a mere hundred yards from the train. I also found myself in the company of those tired now returning commuters, struggling

Author Tim Coghlan at last takes the helm – under the close supervision of Captain Ron Spencer. (Judy Spencer)



with their *Evening Standard* puzzles. I at least had a smile on my face. I had not only at last had a day on *President*, but had also steered under retiree Ron's close supervision of course. It was to prove a mere practice run for the real thing two years later on the Manchester Ship Canal. 



President's passing parade. As seen near Leamington Spa early in the morning on the fly run from Birmingham to the 2009 Braunston Historic Narrowboat Festival. (Tim Coghlan)



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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.