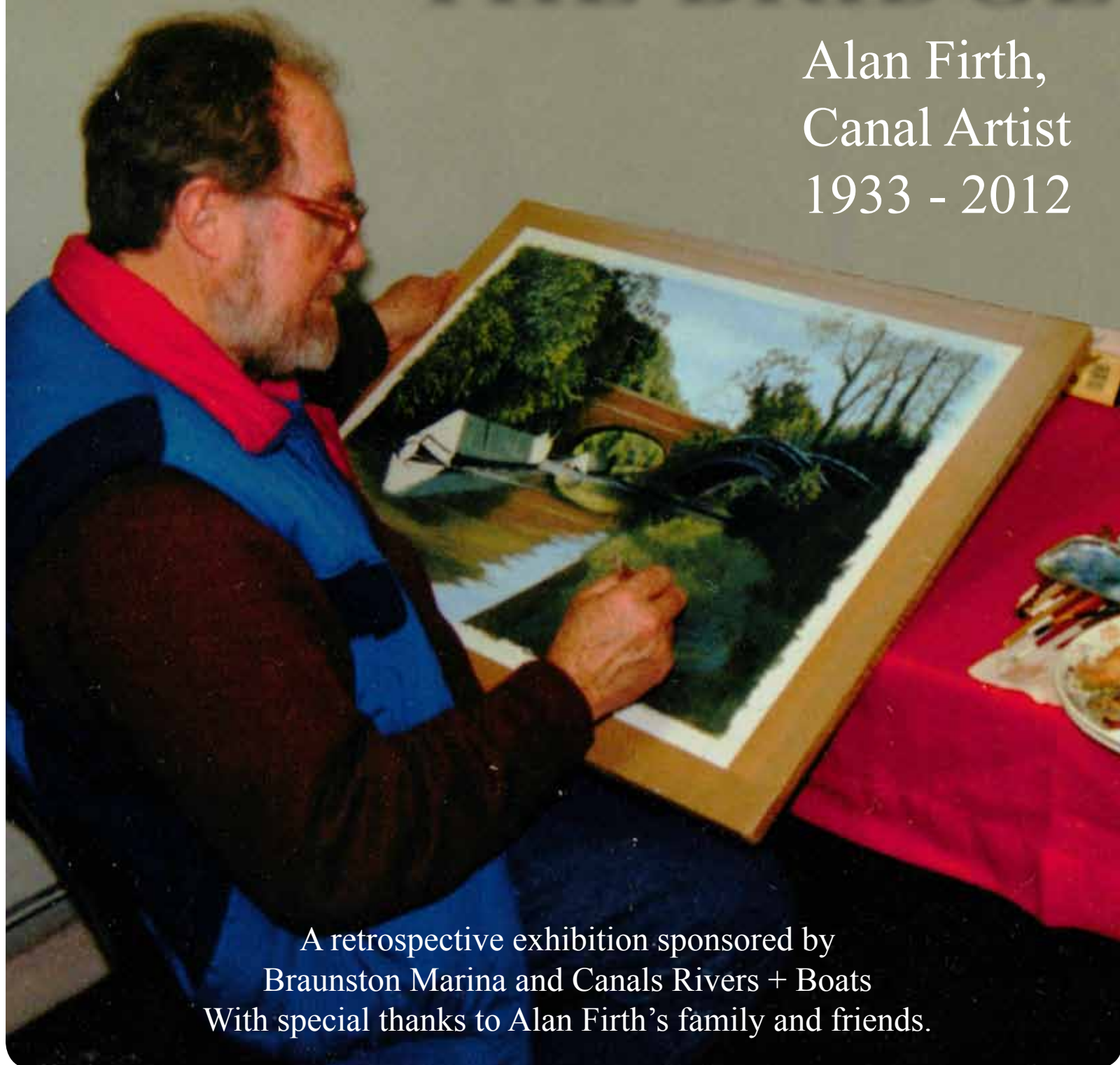


A special supplement for the Alan Firth Exhibition at the Braunston Historic Narrowboat Rally 2012.

# WATERS UNDER THE BRIDGE

Alan Firth,  
Canal Artist  
1933 - 2012



A retrospective exhibition sponsored by  
Braunston Marina and Canals Rivers + Boats  
With special thanks to Alan Firth's family and friends.



# Alan Firth

## - the 'odd lock' artist

*Tim Coghlan recalls the life and works, and his own personal memories, of canal artist Alan Firth who died recently after a long illness.*



There is one signature painting by Alan Firth that really has most of the elements of his canal artist style, technique and licence - his well-known painting of Bearley Lock on the South Stratford Canal. The high-rising lock, lying alone and isolated in the middle the countryside, a half mile north of the Edstone Aqueduct, is the only one on that canal that is not linked to a lock flight, and with it a barrel-shaped lock-keeper's cottage. Regardless of its correct name, it was just known to the working boatmen as 'Odd Lock'. Alan Firth was also a loner, and the 'Odd Lock' name had its appeal. As Terry Stroud, the main distributor of his works commented to me following his death, 'I probably sold more of his works than anyone else, and met up with him on a number of occasions, but I really knew very little about him as a person'.

The painting is simply called *Sunny Valley - Stratford on Avon Canal*, as its main subject is the famous Samuel Barlow's butty *Sunny Valley*. The butty was used in the wartime propaganda film *Painted Boats*, and is seen here below the lock, in all its glorious traditional livery. It is still the seemingly happy carefree days of the working boatmen - another world from today. Two boatwomen in traditional dress are chatting whilst enjoying a cup of tea. Beyond, up on the lock, their husbands are conversing whilst waiting for it to empty. There



*Sunny Valley - Stratford on Avon Canal:* A signature painting of 'Odd Lock' that really has most of the elements of Alan's style, technique and artist's licence. (Alan Firth Estate)

**Alan Firth canalside in 1993:** A photograph taken of him for the Wedgwood brochure *Waterways By Winter Moonlight*. Although there is a narrow boat behind him, it is not his. Alan never owned a boat and did not even go hire-boating with his family - but painting the canals as they once might have been, became his life's work. (Wedgwood)



**Manchester Ship Canal by L S Lowry:** Lowry, who Alan briefly met, had a profound influence on him - inspiring him to do his own thing and stick to it. It worked for both of them. (The Guardian)

is a butty in the lock just visible and coming down, and in the distance the two horses are grazing peacefully. It is the passing of these boats, held up for a few minutes by the emptying lock that makes this social occasion. It is a bright spring day, the towpath is alive with early yellow flowers and its hedge ablaze with white blossoms. God is in his heaven and all is right with the canal world.

Alan has used his artistic licence to the full. The *Samuel Barlow* boat had a previous name, and only adopted *Sunny Valley* for that film made in 1944, by which time the boatmen had long discarded traditional dress. And under whatever name, the boat probably never went near the South Stratford Canal. Finally there is Alan's hatred and fear of painting people. Eyes were his worst nightmare, and to get round this he would put people into heavily rimmed glasses of the type a boatman would not have been seen dead in. But here the boatwoman is contentedly wearing large *Nana Mouskouri* glasses beneath her traditional pink bonnet.

Terry Stroud commented that despite all of this - which could have left Alan open to ridicule - the painting was a great



favourite with the canal enthusiast and has been reproduced many times as prints of varying sizes, table mats, and greeting cards - some of which found themselves into frames to be displayed in boats. 'Alan was first and foremost a fantastic artist, whose distinctive style, which he developed, could warm to many. Few artists achieve that.'

Terry had a point. In the Easter run-up in about 1992 Alan called at our marina shop to deliver a mixture of his stock that we had ordered. I commented to him that I had been to see *Sunny Valley* the day before, for the first time, to give a valuation - as the then owner, who had spent a fortune restoring it - was now thinking of selling it. Alan went back to his car and brought in a framed greeting card version of the picture, which he then gave me. I so liked it that it has been on the wall above my desk ever since. In the depths of winter it has a special appeal. A few years ago the Inland Waterways Association described Alan as 'probably Britain's best known waterways artist'. It was a sentiment I could endorse.

### Early years

Alan was born in Blackpool in 1933. As a boy during the war, he got to know the Leeds and Liverpool Canal at nearby Wigan very well. He told me once that he would often help the boatmen who were reduced to working single-handed to travel the lock flight. 'If we could brew them a mug of tea we were very welcome and we often stayed for quite a journey. I consider myself fortunate to have seen the final years of the working boats. Now I am painting my memories and I rarely paint present-day canals.'

Alan completed his artistic training near Manchester, at what is today the Salford School of Art and Design. Here a formative incident occurred. He was invited to visit Lowry's small terraced house in Salford with a group of students. He once told me, 'Lowry was a very introverted and difficult man. I remember as we arrived, watching him through the window as he went round his canvasses putting price-labels on them - in case one of us impoverished students wanted to buy one! The largest were £60 - a bargain you might say, they go for hundreds of thousands of pounds now - but that £60 was half a year's student grant. Sadly, I knew one day they would be



**Hoar Frost - Grand Union:** A typical canal winter scene of which there are many by Alan. Here a pair of loaded *Samuel Barlow* boats are heading south down the Grand Union, the motor steered by the husband and the butty by the wife, who is wearing something like traditional boatwoman clothes. No other crew is apparent. The tree on the left looks very similar to one of those outside Alan's studio window. (*Alan Firth Estate*)



**The headquarters of Alan Firth Canal Art:** Alan and Anne's modest bungalow on the edge of Allesley Village, south west of Coventry. The attic conversion was carried out by Alan to make a workshop for framing the prints of his pictures - once he had retired from teaching due to ill health. The sitting room-cum studio was to the rear, where the open countryside, seen here, could be enjoyed and inspire. (*Tim Coghlan*)



**View from The Room:** The open countryside that Alan looked across whilst working at his easel. The two chestnut trees in the centre were incorporated variously into many of his paintings. The trees now have preservation orders. (*Tim Coghlan*)

worth a fortune, and I regret it to this day. But what I learned from Lowry was invaluable. He set out to be an artist in the fashion of the day, and failed miserably at it. So he decided to do his own thing and stick to it. It worked for him, and it's worked for me. People still question whether he was an artist, as they do about me. I just call myself a painter, and a canal one at that.'

### Teaching

To pay for his life as an artist, Alan had also trained as an art teacher. In 1960 he moved to Coventry to become art teacher at the Tile Hill Wood School, where he continued to teach until ill health made him take early retirement in 1983. This was due to his continuous exposure to a minute undetected leak in the art department's gas heater, which caused him lung damage and left him permanently short of breath. During this time, his first marriage to Joy failed, and ended in an acrimonious divorce. They had had two children; a son John, and a daughter Sarah, who is an artist. In 1975 Alan remarried to Anne, a maths lecturer at Hereward College in

***Into of the Mist - Grand Union:*** This painting and associated with it, *Out of The Mist* - also seen here - were typical of the artistic liberties Alan took. The paintings were inspired when he was on the Grand Union Canal one very misty morning in the 1960s. Suddenly the working boatmen Whitlock family came out of the mist, breasted up as seen here, and then went past and back into the mist. For artistic effect, Alan has the loaded boats running down the open canal breasted-up, which the working boatmen would never have done when loaded. They would have had the boats out on a long snubber (rope) as in the *Hoar Frost* painting. When returning empty in the 1960s, the boats might occasionally have breasted up in the long pounds, so meals could be shared and passed across. Also there would be no need for a second steerer, who could do other things. Alan also has the boats in Barlow's livery, which had long-gone by the time he saw this scene. However both paintings remain immensely popular, and *Out of the Mist* was Terry Stroud's best seller as a framed print. (*Alan Firth Estate*)



Coventry. Because they were both in their forties, they decided to adopt a pair of sisters, Sally and Teresa aged five and two and a half respectively, who had been taken into care. Alan used to refer to them as 'the twins' as they arrived on the same day. The new arrangements proved to be immensely happy.

Alan used his time in Coventry to continue his exploration of the canals to the north of the city, and to paint them, in which he began to build up something of a reputation. In an interview in 1981 he said, 'I met the late Joe and Rose Skinner on their boat *Friendship* at Sutton Stop. One of my great pleasures was spending an evening drawing on their boat and talking about their life on the cut.' But strangely, although Alan probably joined others going boating here and there (how else could he have acquired his extensive knowledge of the waterways?) he never owned a boat, nor even went on a hire boat holiday, which the young twins were always begging him to do.

Once retired, Alan now threw himself into his art and to make it pay, he began publishing prints and greetings cards of his popular paintings, doing his own framing in his bungalow loft which he had converted into a workshop, and doing the rounds of canal shops and attending waterway rallies. He had long before turned the far end of his sitting room at the back of the house into his studio. He had bought the house because it had a large modern window giving good views to the north, into fine open countryside. There was a valley immediately below and rising ground on the far side, which included two fine chestnut trees on the rising slope, which he included in his paintings whenever he could as a sort of signature. Lowry once commented; 'If people call me a Sunday painter, I'm a Sunday painter who paints every day of the week!' That was now Alan's life.

### Technique

Alan's chosen technique was to paint in gouache, a thick water-based paint, which dried quickly. A favourite tool, which he mastered to perfection, was using an airbrush, which allowed him to create his misty effects. His problem was that he struggled to finish and let go a work - he was always dissatisfied - and in consequence he never had any of his works on display in his house.

Terry Stroud recalled that he had once attended a rally at Moira Furnace on the Ashby Canal, where he had a stand. When walking around he spotted a canal society stand that was selling off one of Alan's original paintings very cheaply because it had suffered some water damage, and the owner had given it to the society to sell. The painting was probably the largest painting Alan ever did. It was a classic Firth - a working narrowboat somewhere on the Leicester Line, passing under a canal bridge at night with the moon rising through the bridge-hole. That moon, the left-hand side of the bridge, and the water flowing down to the left-hand corner all had watermarks of varying degrees. Terry later took the painting



***Out of the Mist - Grand Union*** (*Alan Firth Estate*)



to Alan when he was going to see him at his studio, and Alan said he would repair the picture there and then. The moon was no problem, and quickly sorted, the watermark to the bridge was painted over with ivy, and then Alan airbrushed and redid the water - just like that. Then when he had finished, Alan commented, 'I never liked the way I did the water in that picture. I'm glad you brought it back.'

I acquired Braunston Marina in receivership and in a rather sorry state in 1988. In the spring of 1989 we formally reopened the marina, including making the old rope shop into a shop selling chandlery and a mixture of canal items. My then general manager, who had been with the company before I acquired it, knew Alan of old - as I did not. He was a great enthusiast for Alan's canal-ware range, and wanted to make something of a splash with it for the formal opening of the shop. It was to be done by former working boatmen, Jim and Doris Collins who were now working for me. This we did and in so doing I first met Alan, and over the years perhaps got to know him as well as anyone else involved with the canals. I always enjoyed chatting to him when he came in to deliver his stock, and finding out what paintings he was working on.



**The inspiration for the *Between the Locks* plate:** The photograph of working boatmen Jim and Doris Collins approaching Lock No 2 on the Braunston Flight in 1961. For the painting Alan has set the scene by moonlight in thick snow. Alan often used old photographs as the inspiration for his paintings.  
(Mike Webb: *Braunston Boats*)

### Guild of Waterway Artists

In 1991, I started the Braunston Boat Show with Simon Ainley, the dynamic manager of British Waterways' Braunston office, with whom in many ways we were able to achieve so much. It proved a runaway success and grew rapidly. Each year we built on the previous show, adding new attractions. Amongst the staff of BW's Braunston office, was Helen Harding who was the local publicity officer. She was also a trained artist, and a member of the Guild of Waterway Artists. This was an organisation founded in the 1980s by a group of artists who were also waterways enthusiasts, with Alan Firth a founder member. British Waterways made 1993 nationally into the big year for the canals, as it was the bicentenary of

**An extract from the Wedgwood brochure for its *Waterways By Moonlight*:** with the *Between the Locks* plate. It was one of a set of eight collector's plates that would use Alan's circular paintings. The commission was probably the high-water mark of Alan's artistic career.  
(Wedgwood)



1793, the year of Canal Mania, when most of the Acts for new canals were passed through Parliament. As part of these celebrations, Helen suggested that the Braunston Boat Show should sponsor a marquee for the Guild of Waterway Artists in its office car park, which we did with very encouraging results. I cannot recall one of the well-known artists of the time who was not there. It was a veritable feast of canal art.

Alan of course was there very much to the fore, smiling and in good form, as besides his usual canal-ware, he had recently landed himself a jammy prestigious contract with Wedgwood. This was to make eight canal paintings, collectively to be called *Waterways By Winter Moonlight*, which would be reproduced on eight-inch round wall plates. These would then be sold as collectors' pieces. Wedgwood did a lot of that sort of thing at the time, their collector leaflets being a standard insert in Sunday newspaper colour supplements. People could subscribe for the set, to be issued one at a time over a period, so they could be paid for in instalments. The first one was now out, entitled *Between The Locks*, with the blurb proclaiming it 'An evocative new collector's plate inspired by a living part of our heritage that harks back to an age greater than our own.'

On Alan's stand was an example of that plate and with it,



**Barlow's Yard – Braunston:** The painting commissioned by Tim Coghlan to commemorate his first ten years of owning Braunston Marina. The photograph was 1953, but Alan has used his artistic licence to the full. Once again the painting has been set in mid winter, with snow on snow, and the old stables which ceased being used in the 1930s still in operation. The two trees seen from Alan's studio can be seen on the hill slope beyond. (Tim Coghlan)



and very much bigger - about eighteen inches in diameter - was his round painting for that plate. It was my first encounter with Alan together with an original of his works, and we had a long and enjoyable talk about it. Alan told me he had used a photograph of former working boatmen Jim and Doris Collins, approaching Lock 2 on the Braunston Flight.

The photograph, taken in 1961, came from Mike Webb's great booklet collection of photographs called *Braunston's Boats*. Alan had used his artistic licence to set the scene by moonlight, in thick snow. The boats are breasted up, and Doris is snug below in the cabin, one assumes making the evening meal, while Jim steers on into the night. Who was going ahead to open the lock is not made clear. Ugly Sixties add-ons to Braunston have been removed, and likewise that modern cruiser up on the bank. Instead are substituted Alan's beloved trees seen from his studio window. Alan told me he retained the selling right to the eight paintings, once the whole plate selling saga was over, and offered the painting to me for £750 on this basis. At the time I and the marina were up to our necks in debt, and I turned down the offer. It was one I have always regretted - like Alan with that Lowry.

### A special commission

The years continued and the Braunston Boat Shows came and went, during which time I saw quite a bit of Alan and enjoyed his new paintings coming through. Then at the May 1998 Braunston Boat Show, I went and visited Alan's stand and said that in October of that year, I would have owned Braunston Marina for ten years. As the bank had been paid off, I could now spend that £750 on commissioning a painting from him to celebrate this milestone, which often in earlier times had seemed impossible to reach. What I would like was a large painting of the marina as it might have looked back in its working days, to remind me always of my Braunston days.

During the show, we found time to go through copies of various old photographs I'd collected of the yard, including one which was nothing more than a photocopy of a *Coventry Evening Telegraph* article of 1953 on the launch of the wooden butty, *Lucy*. There were two photographs, one of which was the yard as seen from our wet dock looking towards the marina entrance. Alan's eyes lit up. It was just what he wanted.



**Winter Gathering:** Alan's new painting shown at the 1999 Braunston Boat Show - which proved to be the last of this very popular show. The peaceful winter painting was in fact based on a busy photograph that Alan took during the previous year's Boat Show. He used his talent to set it in mid winter. Alan later gave Tim Coghlan a special limited edition of one of only two large prints of this picture as a token of his friendship. (*Alan Firth Estate*)



**Press Call:** The painting *Barlow's Yard - Braunston* was a great success and used as a Christmas card both by Northamptonshire County Council and the IWA. A press photo-call was made near the spot from which the original photograph was taken in 1953. This was in order to promote the Council's Christmas card, which was also on sale to the public through its libraries. Tim Coghlan and Alan Firth with his painting, are seen with Janet Walls, Head of Publicity, Northamptonshire Libraries & Museums. (*Coventry Evening Telegraph*)

'Would I like the scene in winter? It could work ever so well.' I can recall him saying in that rich Lancastrian voice of his. I told him how I loved the winter scenes of the 17<sup>th</sup> century Dutch artist Hendrick Avercamp, especially his winter skies. Alan knew the artist well, and promised me just that. I lent him the article and away he went.

A few days later he rang to say could he come and see me and discuss what he proposed to do. I suggested he came over in a couple of days time for lunch at the then *Boatman Hotel*, and bring his wife, which he did. To my astonishment Alan first called at the marina office and produced the painting now well under way. He had done all the sketching, and the sky, canal water, and dock entrance had already been airbrushed in. He had also put his artistic licence in: - faraway people, horses, and those trees outside his studio window. Little more than a month later, he called again with the painting almost finished, for final approval and a choice of mount and frame. I simply went with his recommendations on both. And again we had lunch. Not long after that, the painting was finished and he came and presented it to me. And again we had lunch. It was all such fun. And the painting has been the pride of my home ever since.

I gave Alan all the reproduction rights to the picture, which was soon in demand. Northamptonshire County Council got wind of it and I was rung by Janet Walls, its Head of Libraries & Museums, who asked to use it for their official Christmas card that year, a request which gave me great pleasure. We had a photo-call at the marina to announce it, with Alan holding the painting with the view behind. In the official press release, I was quoted as saying: 'In their heyday, the canals sadly attracted very few artists, in contrast to the maritime trade. But now they are well served by some outstanding talent, which we are delighted to encourage and assist through our sponsorship scheme.'

The following year the IWA also used it as one of its Christmas cards. There have also been many print versions for framing, and I commissioned a one-off large signed print from Alan to present to Braunston church where it has hung in pride of place in the vestry to this day. The church spire features in the painting.

In 1999, Alan was back at the show with his latest Braunston scene called simply *Winter Gathering*. It was of the



**The start of the Jam 'Ole Run 1997:** The photograph taken on a misty late-October morning, of four of the fleet of eight boats at Braunston Marina, ready to depart in a commemorative run to Atherstone, and then down to Southall and back in a week. The village of Braunston is hidden in the mist. Alan used this as a basis for his painting. (Tim Coghlan)

canal outside the Stop House, a very peaceful winter scene of working boats moored up and a couple of distant figures. It was a lovely painting, which astonishingly was based on a photograph that Alan had taken of the workings narrowboats moored outside the Stop House in the middle of the previous year's show. His ability to spot pictures never ceased to astonish me. Alan said I could have it for £750, but I told him I had other plans.

### Jam 'Ole Run

The year 2000 would not only be the Millennium, but also the thirtieth anniversary of the last Jam 'Ole Run in 1970 - the last fleet-run of working narrow boats under regular contract. This we would be commemorating with a re-enactment fleet, and I wanted to give all the participants - some thirty or more - a souvenir print of a painting to be commissioned from Alan. The subject would be a photograph I had taken of the start of the 1997 Jam 'Ole re-enactment.

Alan was very reluctant. It was all people, but he said he would have a go. I know he really struggled, because the painting is dated 1999, but as October 2000 was approaching, I had to chase him to complete it, and get the forty prints done. I recall collecting them from his bungalow which I visited for the first time, and saw his studio, and those two trees beyond, with only days to spare. He was not at all happy. 'I don't like that picture. The people are terrible.' He also told me that that was to be his last painting; his arthritis was now making it painful to work. Years ago he had had an accident and broken two fingers and dislocated a third and they had now come back to haunt him. I felt dreadful that I had put him through all of this, and as a moorer and resident at Braunston Marina later fell in love with the painting, I was happy to on-sell it to him for that £750, and live with a signed print at the marina.

Alan said he would come see us off early on the Saturday morning, and maybe watch the boats two hours later going through Hillmorton Lock. Some of the fleet of a dozen or more old working narrowboats would be travelling loaded, and this now rare sight, he wanted to see again. But he did not come.

A few months or so later, Alan called at the marina shop. He had a present for me. It was a high quality full-size print of that Stop House *Winter Gathering* painting. He had had only two made, each for a special friend, and I was one of them. As usual we had lunch at what was now the *Mill House Inn*. It was to prove the last time we met.



**Jam 'Ole Run Re-run October 1997:** Following the completion of what proved his last painting, Alan made two limited edition prints - large and small - each of twenty, to be given to the large number of participants in the *Millennium Jam 'Ole Run Re-Run October 2000*. The painting followed the photograph fairly closely, but Alan also painted in the village and then finely airbrushed it so that it is just visible. He was very dissatisfied with this painting, mainly because it involved people, which he hated painting. (Tim Coghlan)

### The last years

In 2003 Alan at the age of only 70, had a severe stroke, which paralysed him and made him bedridden for the rest of his life of near ten years. Whilst he was in hospital Terry Stroud went to see him, and was hardly recognized. He suggested I did not go, as it only added to the pressures on Anne. Instead I sent him a copy of the third edition of David Blagrove's *At the Heart of the Waterways*, a canal history of Braunston which we had recently republished. By David's own choice, that Jam 'Ole painting was proudly placed on the new front cover. I heard from Anne via Terry that it had made him very pleased.

In about 2005, with the Braunston Historic Narrowboat Rally now into its third year, I was approached by painter Dusty Miller, the head of the Guild of Waterway Artists, to re-introduce the artists' tent. They were now being charged a lot at Crick Boat Show, where once it had been free at the Braunston Boat Show. I was happy to bring the tent back as a sponsored attraction to the event. I suggested to Dusty that we should make the first event special with a retrospective exhibition of Alan's work. I knew where a few originals were, starting with the one above the mantelpiece at home. Dusty approached Alan through Anne, and sadly he asked that we did not hold that exhibition.

With Alan's condition worsening it was decided that he and Anne should move to Yorkshire to live almost next door to the younger 'twin' Teresa and her family. To add to their troubles not long after the move, Anne developed cancer and died in 2009. Alan died in January this year in a nursing home, with his beloved 'twins', Teresa and Sally, nearby. When I heard news of this, my mind went to those lines in Puccini's opera *Tosca*: 'I lived for art, I lived for Love, never did I harm a living creature. Why, O Lord, why dost thou repay me thus?'

I have since spoken to Teresa at length, each sharing our happy memories of Alan. Ironically she has that 'Odd Lock' painting above her mantelpiece, which Alan gave her, and also the plate-painting of Jim and Doris. And yes, she would be very pleased for us now to have a retrospective exhibition of his works at this year's Braunston Historic Narrowboat Rally. And yes, she will lend us those originals, and the others that she and her siblings were given by Alan, including all the Wedgwood paintings, none of which was sold. She has been researching Alan's published paintings and reckons there are well over fifty of them alone, which we now need to track down. And yes, she is delighted to accept our invitation to open the *Alan Firth, Canal Artist - A Retrospective Exhibition*. 🍷





## *Pictures of time and place...*

*Alan Firth is known to have painted over one hundred canal scenes, many of which became classic postcards and greetings cards. Some are reproduced here:*



● *Somerton Deep Lock, Oxford Canal.*



● *Leaving Stoke Bruerne, Grand Union Canal.*



● *The Paper Dashers, Grand Union Canal.*



● *Evening Mists.*



● *April Evening.*



● *Summer on the Shroppie.*

**Reprinted from Canals Rivers + Boats magazine. Edited & designed by Chris Cattrall**