# Farewell to 'Diesel Dave'

Tim Coghlan recalls the life of Dave Odell, Braunston Marina's charismatic marine engineer, who recently died in tragic circumstances

**The Iceman Cometh:** Diesel Dave endeavouring to keep open the channel down to his boat *Forty Two* in the freeze-up of January 2011. *(Tim Coghlan)*

**Mists and mellow fruitfulness:** Among his talents, Diesel Dave was a good photographer. This early morning shot was taken by him of the view from his boat on its mooring at Braunston Marina in late October 2008. *(Dave Odell)*
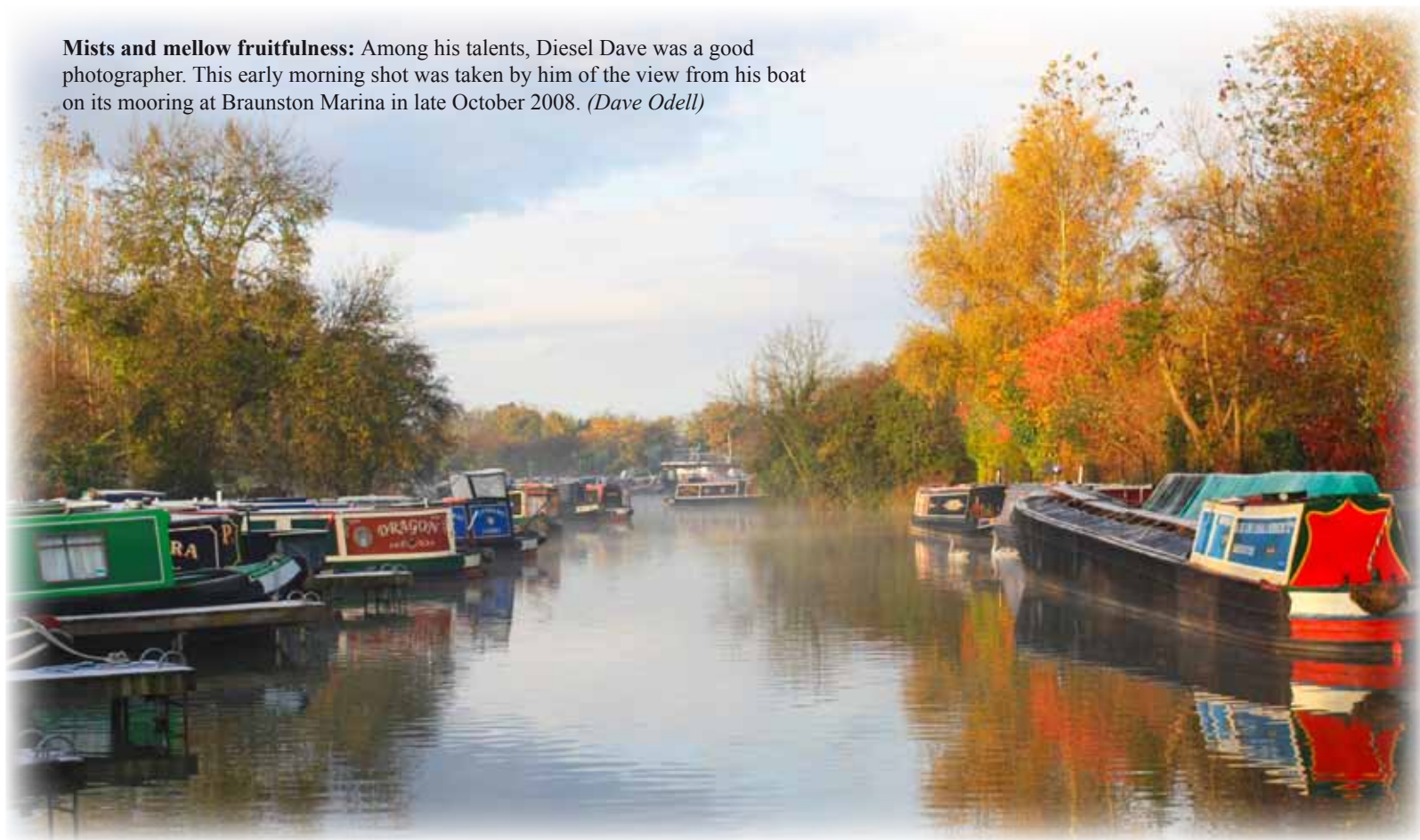
Dave Odell, known to one and all as Diesel Dave, was a great canal character. He is perhaps best remembered for his winter barbie-on-ice in the great freeze-up of January 2010. There he sat in the middle of the Lower Reservoir some yards from his boat, in silent splendour all on his own, beneath his Tony Hancock hat, cigarette in hand, and tinnies chilling on the ice. Even his two faithful spaniels had more sense than to join him. His friend Paula took the memorable photograph of this contended soul from the safety of his boat. It made the local newspapers and then inspired a visit from the regional BBC TV.

Dave led an interesting life. He was born in South London and after school, took up the leather trade, going on to the City & Guilds College, where he was the best student in his year. Soon he was cutting car seats for Jaguar and Aston Martin, making ladies handbags and thousands of wristwatch straps for the jewellery trade. Then he suddenly left to become a motorcycle dispatch rider, driving over a quarter of a million miles in London without an accident. He then followed his love of good cars, and Jaguars in particular, by becoming a chauffer, rising to having his own business. This was located next door to a family firm of undertakers, who provided him with quite a bit of work as a funeral escort. In return, when available and needed, Dave would drive the hearses or act as a pallbearer. He once quipped, 'I did death big time!'

Sadly his business failed in the 1990s recession and having been introduced to narrowboating by that very same funeral director, he moved onto a sixty foot narrow boat in Little Venice. This he renamed *Forty Two* - which was the answer to the question, in the first book of *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, to the meaning of life, the universe and everything. 'Except,' as Dave liked to quip, 'no one knew what the question was!' In Little Venice, Dave started repairing boat engines which he then did for three years, building up a trade and his experience. Then in 2004 he saw our advert in the canal press for a marine engineer - after our Ian Mulley went from slow narrow boats to working on Formula One cars - and the rest is history. (Ian has since moved on to restoring WWII German tanks somewhere in Leicestershire – marine engineers all seem to have a touch of the mad Johan in *Das Boot*!) Even though Dave had no formal training

as a marine engineer, he served us very well and was highly respected by many of our customers.

Dave held strong views on the destruction caused by religion and wanted nothing to do with it. His creed seemed inspired by those lines in the song Imagine by John Lennon:

*Imagine there's no countries/It isn't hard to do*
*Nothing to kill or die for/And no religion too*

In particular he did not 'do Christmas'. As his employer, it was great for me as he was happy to work in our docks through the Christmas break. So, with a little preparation, there would be no loss in downtime. He preferred to take the time off in the spring, to go cruising on his own.

His working through Christmas had an unforeseen bonus. Late in 2006, the historic narrow boat *Sculptor*, owned by the Stoke Bruerne Museum developed a hole in its side below the waterline. It was the size of a finger, and needed urgent repairs in dry dock. (The hole was temporarily plugged by the ever-resourceful Lorna York, rushing into the Museum's ladies' loo, and purchasing a packet of those things mentioned in the Camillagate Tapes. It did the trick, and she kept the remainder in her boating jacket in case other similar holes were sprung!)

We offered our large dry dock free over the Christmas holidays, and special arrangements were made with the insurers for the voyage to Braunston. Bar Christmas Day itself, a team of rolling volunteers from the Friends of Stoke Bruerne Museum came and did the necessary. I was happy to allow the use of the dock, because Dave was willing to be on standby throughout, whilst he worked in our small dock. He was immensely helpful and the repair a great success. It gave the boat another few years of life until funds could be raised for a proper restoration, which is now taking place at Brinklow Boat Services, with a new hardwood bottom then to be fitted at Ellesmere Port Museum.

Around the summer of last year Dave descended into a black hole that all of our best endeavours could not get him out of, and which resulted in his tragic end earlier this year. He had collected many friends in his

**It was New Years Day in the dry dock:** Some of the team from the Friends of Stoke Bruerne Museum led by Lorna Yorke, working on *Sculptor* on New Years Day 2007, with the urgent repairs and blacking now nearing completion. L-R Richard Cox, Peter Oates and Lorna York. Braunston Marina allowed the Friends free use of the large dry dock through the Christmas break. This was in part thanks to Diesel Dave, who did not 'do Christmas', and was on standby and very helpful. *(Tim Coghlan)*
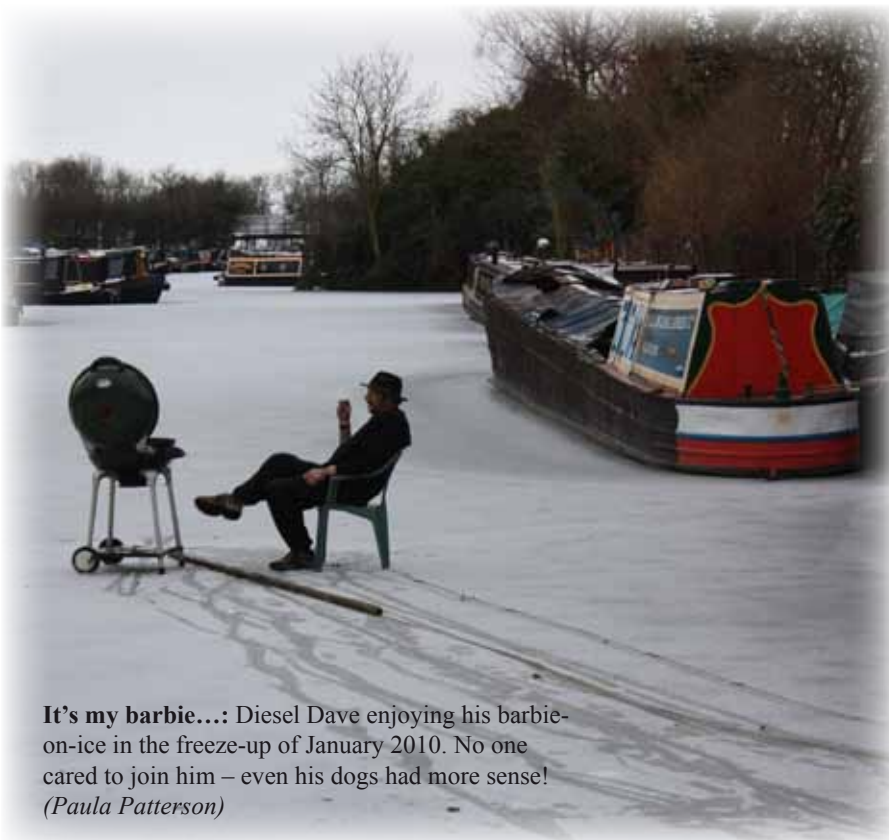


**It's my barbie…:** Diesel Dave enjoying his barbie-on-ice in the freeze-up of January 2010. No one cared to join him – even his dogs had more sense! *(Paula Patterson)*

journey through life, and several of them came to his cremation – including a contingent of boaters from Little Venice - so that the large crematorium chapel was almost full. The strictly humanist service was presided over by the now retired director of that London firm of undertakers, who began by telling the congregation that Dave had told him that he firmly did not believe in an after-life. "This is it', he would say."

His coffin, with his battered hat on top, slipped away to the opening movement of *Beethoven's Pastoral Symphony* – the same music used in that moment of *Dignitas* peace in the terrifying 1973 Charlton Heston si-fi film, *Soylent Green*. The comparison transpired to be unintended, although Dave would certainly have known the film. Afterwards the funeral director told me he had simply chosen it because it was such a beautiful piece of music. But he wondered if Dave would have preferred *Shine On You Crazy Diamond* by Pink Floyd. They had never discussed any of this.

His close friends, including a small contingent from Little Venice, recently scattered his ashes on the North Oxford Canal in the still glorious open country beyond Barby Bridge, where he now rests a freed spirit. I could not attend, but on hearing how it went, my mind turned to those lines from A E Housman's *A Shropshire Lad*:

*Speak now and I will answer;*
*How shall I help you, say;*
*Ere to the wind's twelve quarters*
*I take my endless way.*