

Canal delights unlocked

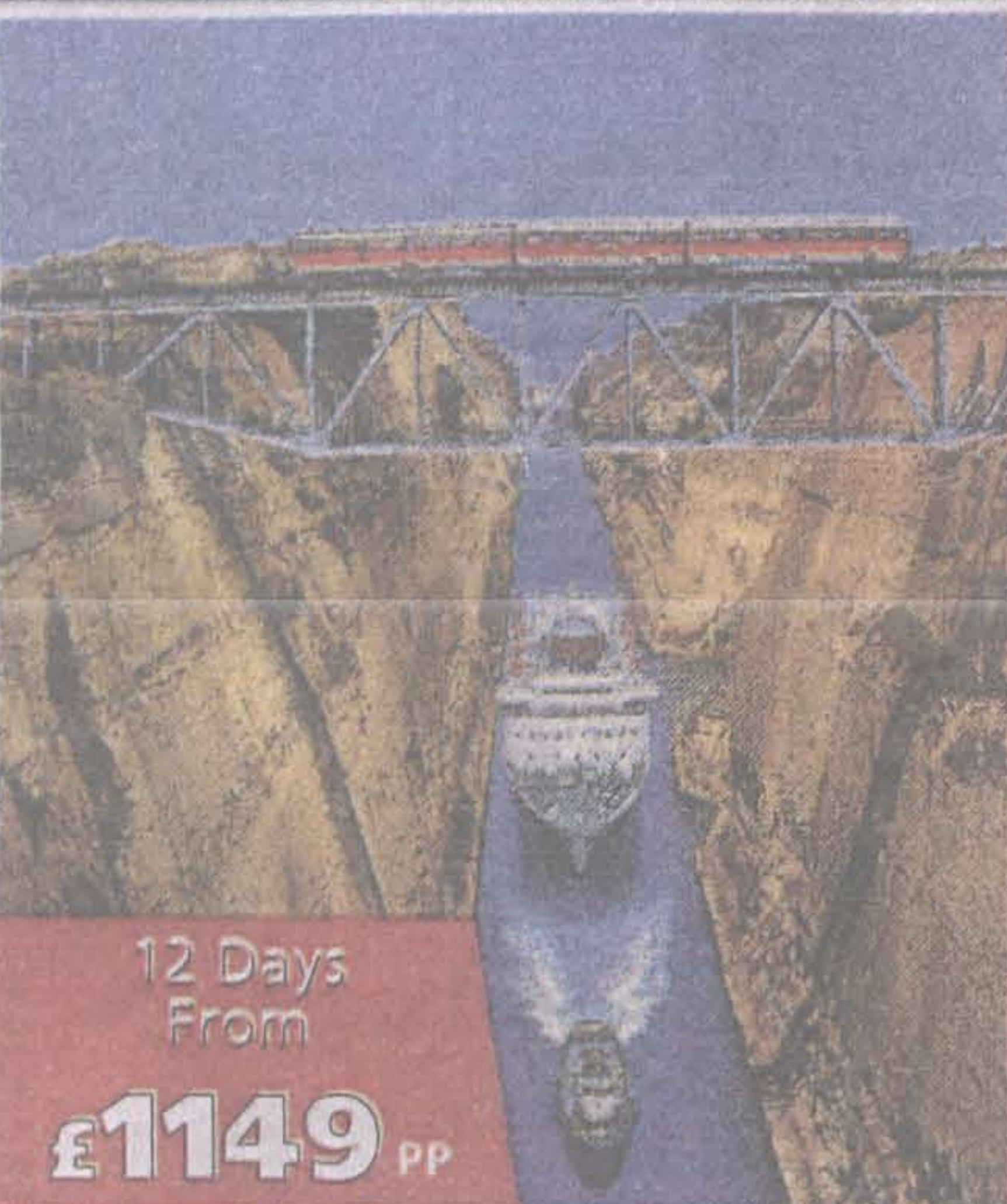
SUE WATT enjoys a waterways break aboard a specially-adapted barge that means her wheelchair-bound father can still indulge his love of sailing



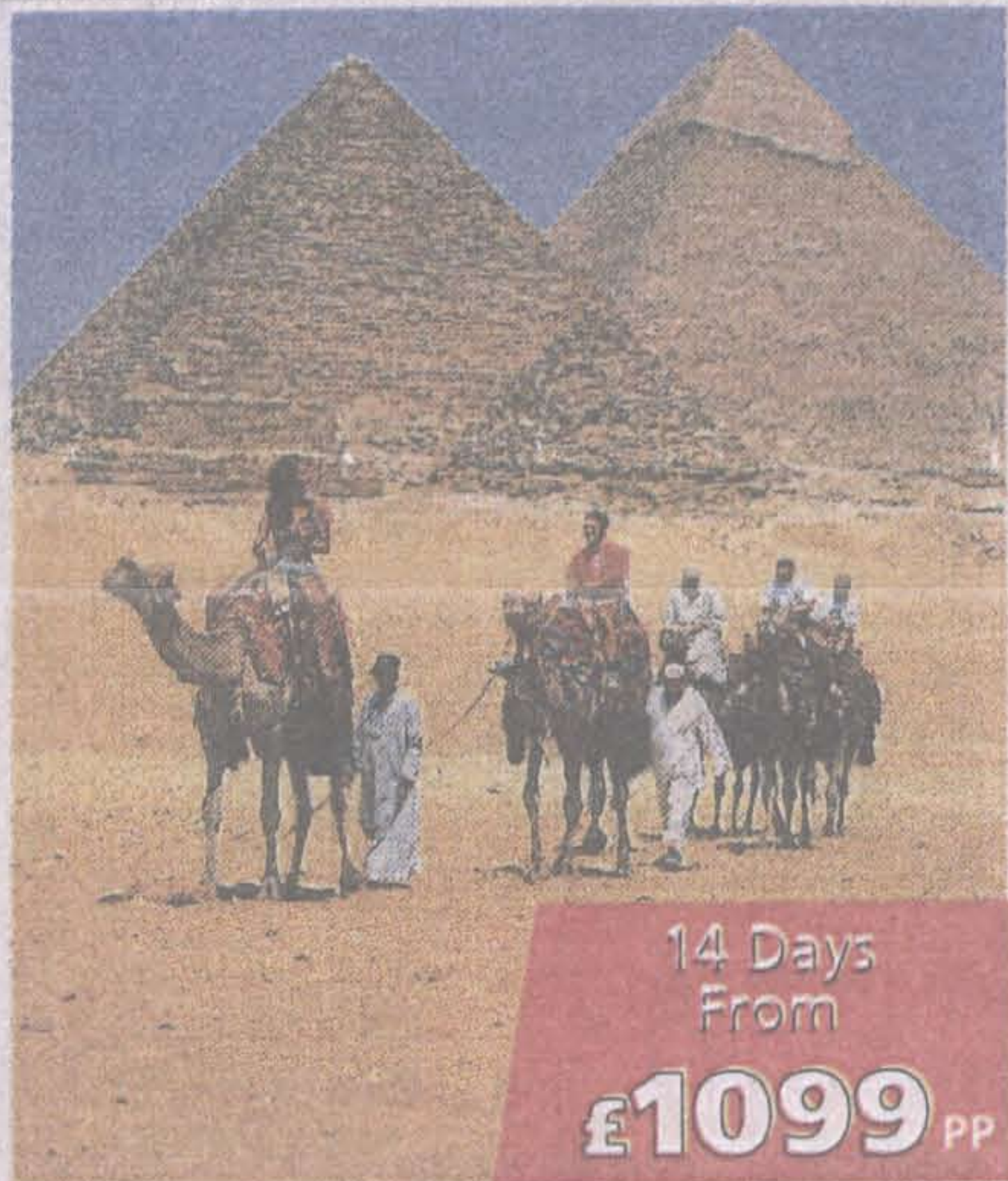
PLAIN SAILING: Kath and Will hard at work to get the narrowboat through the locks; chief duck feeder Jean entertains a feathered friend and Admiral Alfie relaxing in the sun on deck



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I ADMIT to feeling slightly nervous as we were introduced to Diana, waiting patiently for us in the quiet Wiltshire village of Great Bedwyn. It wasn't because she looked bigger than I had expected, more than 10ft wide and 61ft long, or because I knew nothing about canal boats.

It was simply that my partner Will and I were used to more active holidays full of thrills and adrenalin rushes. We felt that pootling along a canal might just be a bit too quiet.

Diana actually belongs to the Bruce Trust, a charity that provides four, wide-beam canal boats specially designed for disabled users on the Kennet and Avon Canal between Reading and Bristol.

My father Alfie, recently diagnosed with motor neurone disease, is now dependent on a wheelchair but having sailed all over the world and being a huge enthusiast for British canals, he was keen to get back on the water.

Comfortably sleeping 10, there was plenty of space for a wheelchair. With hydraulic lifts fore and aft, my father had access to the whole boat.

Next to the colourful saloon, the galley was compact but well-equipped and the bathroom, with its wheelchair-accessible shower, was fully set up for

disabled users. Derek, a volunteer from the trust, explained Diana's technical details to brother-in-law Dave, an experienced helmsman who we'd assigned as group leader.

We all had our roles. Will was Dave's second mate, Kath, my twin, was chief lock operator, I was galley slave and barmaid and most importantly Jean, our mother, was chief duck-feeder. Alfie, overseeing operations, was our admiral.

This year sees the 200th anniversary of the Kennet and Avon Canal which throughout the summer was celebrated in an exhibition at the West Berkshire Museum in Newbury.

Opened in 1810, primarily to transport cargo between Bristol and London, the canal struggled for business after the development of the railways. A creeping neglect set in, culminating in closure in the 1950s as many parts became dilapidated and impassable.

After 20 years of restoration by the Kennet and Avon Canal Trust, the waterway was finally reopened in 1990 by the Queen. The section we visited took us westwards to Pewsey and east to Thatcham.

We motored quietly through the Bruce Tunnel, with only a pinprick of daylight visible at the far end.

Stopping at the special mooring reserved for Trust boats, it was easy for my father to disembark using ramps provided on the boat and head straight to the gardens



• GETTING THERE:

The Bruce Trust (01264 356 451/brucetrust.org.uk) offers four boats for use by families and organisations for disabled, disadvantaged and elderly people from £650 per week (sleeping six to 12). Boats are available from March to October. Kennet and Avon Canal Trust (01380 721 279/katrust.co.uk)

of The Waterfront, a quirky canalside pub.

From Pewsey we returned to Great Bedwyn for lunch at the Three Tuns Inn and welcoming hosts Jan and Alan Carr, with Roly their old black Labrador. Our excellent meals included perfect roast beef and delicious seabass in lemon butter, followed by a generous trio of puddings.

Moving eastwards the next section of the canal kept us almost fully occupied opening and closing several heavy locks that groaned under the strain.

Occasionally, colourful narrowboats would glide past against a landscape of gentle rolling hills of lavender and chocolate-box villages with thatched cottages.

We visited the pretty town of Hungerford with its myriad antique shops and stayed at Kintbury, a small village with another popular and easily accessible waterside pub, the Dundas Arms, alongside the wharf.

In Newbury the canal meandered right through the historic centre, encompassing old locks, a swing bridge, 17th-century cottages and a beautiful arched bridge dating back to 1770. It was a real pleasure ambling along the towpath and around the busy market town with its broad, pedestrianised streets.

Chief duck-feeder Jean had been busy all week. Aggressive young coots fought off swans and cygnets for her bread while shy little moorhens and ducklings stuck close to their mums.

Shimmering blue kingfishers darted across the water as herons stood motionless on the riverside watching for prey and sparrowhawks soared overhead.

A keen birdwatcher, Alfie was in his element sitting astern and photographing this avian paradise. Canal life was quiet and peaceful with few adrenalin-inducing thrills but it was never ever dull.

When I asked my parents if they'd enjoyed the break, Alfie gave me the broadest smile and simply said "Brilliant!" That's the biggest thrill I could wish for.

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