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The Skye boat test



MANY PEOPLE DISCOVER THE DELIGHTS OF THE CANALS THROUGH A HOLIDAY AND SUBSEQUENTLY HAVE THEIR OWN BOAT BUILT. WE LOOK AT A HIRE BOAT THAT HAS THE STYLE OF A BESPOKE BUILD – IDEAL FOR A WOULD-BE BUYER TO TAKE A TEST-DRIVE VACATION

Words by Kevin Blick & Pictures by David Oakes

ABOVE Traditional and elegant Skye looks good in the winter sunshine on the Macclesfield Canal

LEFT Paintwork detailing on hull and hatches is excellent

If you are contemplating buying your first narrowboat then what better way to learn more about the subject than hiring one for a holiday. The only snag is that your average multi-berth, school-of-hard-knocks hire boat is not terribly representative of what you might want in your own boat.

Which is where Braidbar Boats come in. This family firm is based on the Macclesfield Canal at the edge of footballers' wives country in Cheshire and has been building narrowboats at its Lord Vernon's Wharf site for over 15 years. Owned by Iain and Luisa

Bryceland, it operates a small hire fleet, designed to reflect its bespoke boat building standards, both in quality of fit-out and interior layout.

Most of its hirers are already very experienced boaters and in fact many of its hire customers are potential buyers taking what might be called an extended 'test drive'.

DESIGN & EXTERIOR

Skye, the subject of this test is a boat that Braidbar has had on its hire fleet for a year.

It is a 58ft 6in traditional stern ↘



SALOON & GALLEY



ABOVE Open-plan saloon has pleasing solid wood look. Steps to front deck have inbuilt storage. Note trademark cruciform decoration

ABOVE RIGHT Well-planned galley is equipped with the basics. Note stylish cutaway bulkhead in front of dinette

craft, fitted out around a Tim Tyler hull. The layout is a relatively conventional one: an open front deck leads into the lounge, then through the galley to a convertible dinette. Beyond this is the shower room and finally the master cabin at the rear. It's a classic looking narrowboat that is very easy on the eye thanks to a handsome – and well executed – paint job in rich green with yellow coachlines and ornate name panels, courtesy of leading boat painter, Andy Russell. The side hatch and rear doors also open to reveal traditionally detailed linings. Though conceived as a hire craft, it features all the detailing that Braidbar would specify for a customer boat. The shell has a number of particularly nice touches including figured drain holes for the front deck, sculpted ends to the roof handrails and rear hatch, and shaped

fender eyes. Finally all the exterior metal fittings – window frames, vents and the Houdini hatch – are in brass. **FRONT DECK** Forwards of the 9ft deck is the gas locker which holds two cylinders, but the deck itself is completely open with no cratch or lockers: a private owner would arguably want the extra stowage provided by lockers but the hirer won't need it so it's a reasonable bit of cost saving. **SALOON** Skye is fitted out in a mix of ash and oak timbers. Above the gunwales, horizontally laid tongue and groove planks of solid ash are used while below

the gunwales it is finished in oak veneered ply. Solid oak is also used for cupboards, shelves and doors. The floor is in Douglas fir planking. The overall effect is one that will please the traditionalist who likes the look and feel of solid wood and planking yet still has a degree of style and individuality about it. There are nice finishing touches and design 'cues' visible in the saloon as elsewhere in the boat which reflect Braidbar's attention to detail: neat stop chamfer detailing round the windows and, in particular, the cruciform ventilation holes that can first be seen in the front steps (which as usual have lift-off tops for stowage inside). The saloon is a comfortable 11ft 6ins long and is quite simply furnished with just a large pair of comfortable swivelling armchairs. Along the

GALLEY & DINETTE



starboard side of the saloon are full-length oak bookshelves, built around the radiator (which for the radiator-haters among us could easily be further disguised by a front grille). These merge at the front into a corner cabinet with television and dvd on top. An unseen bit of detailing here is the ducting of low level ventilation from the front deck inlet to the base of this cupboard. Opposite the cupboard is a Morso Squirrel solid fuel stove with a tiled surround to match the galley splashback. **GALLEY** It's a well made but no frills galley; a layout intended for the holiday hirer or occasional user to cook those fry-up breakfasts rather than a live-aboard Christmas dinner – though, to be fair, the facilities are there to do that.

Essentially it comprises just a single 8ft line of maple worktop on the port side in which are set the single drainer stainless steel sink unit under the window and Vanette four-burner hob unit. Below the hob are matching Vanette grill and oven while at the other end is the fridge. If the cooking facilities are a tad cramped, there's no lack of storage space in the handsome oak dresser unit opposite on the starboard side. This boasts three base doors, three drawers and four top cupboards as well as having a built-in wine rack, and another one of those little cruciform patterns. The side hatch opens just aft of the dresser and benefits from another bit of Braidbar's sensible thinking: instead of the usual and sometimes less than secure shoot bolts it features a very substantial flip-over brass catch that can also be

screwed tight shut. Below the side hatch there is another useful shallow storage cupboard. **DINETTE** The stylish curved division between galley and raised dinette is a striking feature of the boat that can be seen right from the front doors. And there's more good thinking in the dinette itself, too. The dinette table top has been widened slightly so that it can be laid with four comfortable place settings. To accommodate the extra-wide table when collapsed down between the seats to form a bed, the forward edges of the seat bases can then be removed. More good storage space is found in large drawers under the seats and a third drawer under the table base. A decorative plate rack sits on the aft wall of the dinette area, decorated

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT Overall view of galley area, smart and practical dresser, wine rack and shallow cupboard under hatch, decorated hatch panels with security catches, dinette drawers, extra wide dining table, decorated plate rack

BATHROOM & CABIN



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT Pump-out toilet, good size shower, extending double bed with Houdini hatch over, small bathroom rad, over-bed storage, wardrobe has drawers under, corner basin

again with one of those cruciforms.

SHOWER ROOM

The shower room is accessed off the through corridor which limits its overall dimensions but even so the six feet long room does not feel unduly cramped.

Sensibly, a pair of half-width doors rather than a single door is used which makes entry and exit easier. Inside, on the front wall are an oval basin mounted on a corner vanity unit with the twin-flush Saniflo macerator toilet alongside and a full width mirror above.

To the rear is a good size shower cabinet with, to its outside, the calorifier cupboard and built-in airing cupboard above.

Though executed to the same high

standard as the rest of the boat, this is the only room that doesn't feel quite right with too many woods (oak, ash, maple) and styles in a small space. A simpler fit-out might perhaps have worked better here.

CABIN

No such criticisms can be made of the handsome cabin which once more mixes practicality with quality and low-key style.

The double bed is fitted with a slide out extension to bring it to king-size width – the mattress addition being hidden under the bed alongside the waste tank. At the head of the bed is an over-bed cupboard with a decorative finish, raised panel doors and reading

lights underneath.

At the foot of the bed the wardrobe unit is split half way with hanging space behind raised panel doors and three storage shelves below. Opposite the bed is a radiator with shelf over.

Portholes provide privacy whilst an opening Houdini hatch allows extra light into the cabin. A step (again with cubby locker space within) leads up from the cabin to the engine room, past another small cupboard for the likes of mooring pins to the rear deck.

ON THE WATER

The sound deadening, cushion drive and Crowther prop (see facing page) really prove their value on the water where *Skye* really is exceptionally quiet and

TECHNICAL DETAILS



Skye is powered by a Beta Marine 43hp engine and the installation is, as one would expect in such a well detailed boat, very well thought out.

Brackets are fitted to the shell before engine installation to enable tidy location of ancillaries like the Webasto central heating unit as well as various pipe clips and the result is a clean and tidy looking engine bay with no messy wires or pipes. Removable steel floor bearers aid access for maintenance.

The batteries (four leisure and one engine start) are well boxed off on the port side. Good quality, heavy duty master switches are also fitted.

A lot of work has been done to

minimise engine noise and vibration: the engine compartment is closely lined with insulating material and the engine drives through a Centaflex T-16 cushion drive. Braidbar also fits purpose-designed Crowther high efficiency propellers to its craft. It's an extra cost but one the company thinks is well worthwhile both for smoother running and greater response.

In another sensible bit of design the weed hatch is separated by a bulkhead from the rest of the boat and accessed via its own hatch on the rear deck.

This way there can be no accidental flooding of the boat in the event of the hatch not being properly secured – something that not just inexperienced

hire boaters have had happen to them!

The electrical system is entirely conventional; the engine has twin alternators feeding leisure and starter batteries and uses a Victron Multi 1200 50amp sine wave inverter/charger to supply its 220v AC. In addition there is a landline AC connection with manual switching between the two systems.

The inverter is installed in a cupboard on the port side at the rear of the engine room with 12v and 220v fuse panels below.

The instrument panel and throttle control lever is set on the side of this same cupboard. All the wiring is, once again, particularly neat and tidy.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT Well installed electrical cupboard, sensibly isolated weed hatch, Beta 43 engine features noise insulation and cushion-drive, tidy, convenient fusegear, Webasto heater unit



ABOVE Good looking craft has open front deck



ABOVE Access inside past engine cover



ABOVE Well placed controls

extremely smooth running.

Braidbar's Iain Bryceland believes the prop is a valuable safety feature: he's a strong believer that a narrowboat should be able to stop in half its own length and the combination of the strong 43hp engine and efficient propellor allow it to do just that as we were able to demonstrate.

Overall it's a very manoeuvrable, light to handle and stable craft.



ABOVE An example of the careful shell detailing



ABOVE Brass fittings and good paintwork provide finishing touches

CONCLUSION

Skye had been given a good spring clean before we arrived but it was still clear to see that it had survived the rigours of a year as a hire boat very well indeed – a credit to the quality of its construction and well thought out design.

To buy the equivalent boat now from Braidbar would cost around £85,000, which puts it in the middle rather than the top end of the bespoke price scale. Even so, there's no evidence of scrimping: it's a very solid, honest boat.

It might lack some of the exotic fixtures and fittings of other boats but you'd spend a lot more to get both those and the quality of *Skye*.

Last but certainly not least it comes from a small but highly experienced company – and one that is willing to share that experience and advice without imposing fixed ideas on customers.

Braidbar is proof positive that with the right approach there still is a big place for the small boatbuilder. 

SPECIFICATION: Braidbar Boats *Skye*

Length:	58ft 6in	Price:	£85,000 inc VAT
Beam:	6ft 10in		
Draught:	24in	Braidbar Boats	
Fuel tank:	60gal (270l)	Lord Vernon's Wharf	
Water tank:	150gal (680l)	Lyme Road	
Engine:	43hp Beta Marine	Higher Poynton	
Steelwork:	10:6:5:4	Cheshire SK12 1TH	
Electrical:	12v DC, 220v AC	Tel: 01625 873471	
	via Victron Multi 1200		
	inverter/charger, landline	www.braidbarboats.co.uk	

