

Ben Fogle's country travels: my trip on a Norfolk wherry

I travelled on an ancient cargo vessel in the Broads and felt as if I had gone back in time

Narrowboats can now be rented on the Norfolk Broads Photo: AP

By Ben Fogle

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This week I swapped the barren dunes of Namibia for the watery canals of the Broads, and took to one of the region's oldest cargo vessels, a Norfolk wherry.

The Broads were once a vital shipping route for East Anglia. The wherry evolved gradually around 400 years ago to transport heavy goods through the meandering network of rivers, canals and lakes.

The Broads are spread over more than 300 sq km, and most of the waterways are less than four metres deep. They came about after the peat excavations of the Middle Ages left long canals that were eventually flooded, creating watery highways on which more than 300 wherries could ferry their cargo under sail.

Today just a few original boats remain and I joined the Albion, run by the Norfolk Wherry Trust, for a sail. Her mast towered above the tall grass that bordered the waterways.

The wherry doesn't have an engine, so moving the enormous vessel out into the Broads is done with a long wooden pole called a quant. Like a punt, the quant is used to push the carvel-built boat through the water.

I speared the quant into the shallow water and fed it through my hands until I had the barrel in my shoulder. I then walked the length of the boat against the direction of travel. Unlike on canals, horses were never used in the Broads.

Without the 25-ton cargo that these wherries can transport, we were soon gliding through the calm waters past other pleasure craft and anglers on the shore hoping to hook an eel or a pike.

Shortly it was time to hoist the main sail, a mighty black canvas cloth. Traditionally, these sails were blackened with coal and herring oil to prevent sun decay. Using a winch handle, I began to haul the sail up the mast so that it caught the wind.

Sailing a wherry is very different from any sailing I have ever done, and I found there was limited manoeuvrability.

But there is something magical about sailing past fields and windmills, and farmers with their tractors.

As I basked in the summer sunshine, Frosty, one of the volunteers, played songs on his squeeze box. Swans paddled past, and for a moment I drifted back to a different era. It was a sublimely ethereal moment

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