



Boating through Stoke Hammond Lock.



The inland waterways inspire Charlotte's creations.



Creating linocut prints.



Artist and owner of historic boats, Charlotte Ashman.



Living history

Linocut artist **Charlotte Ashman** describes what it's like being the latest custodian of a motor-and-buttoy pair of historic working boats

I live and work aboard the historic motor-and-buttoy pair *Hyperion* & *Hyades*, continuously cruising mainly on the waterways around Northamptonshire and selling my linocut prints at canal festivals and on the towpath.

It was, however, a bit of a protracted journey getting here. I grew up near the canal in Blisworth and then after I finished university I rented a narrowboat for a little time, an experience which made me swear off boating and say I never wanted to live afloat again. That's when I moved onto a converted vintage 1950s bus and lived in a field for a few years.

Around 11 years ago, I went back on my word and bought a modern 60ft narrowboat for me and my daughter to live on. The chance to own *Hyperion* then came along five years ago and, initially, I just used it as a floating art studio for my linocut print business.

Reuniting a pair

Hyperion is an ex-Grand Union Canal Carrying Company Small Woolwich/Star Class working boat, built in 1935 by Harland & Woolf, which was delivering coal on the southern GU before I acquired it. It was one of the craft used by the trainee boatwomen during World War II (run by Barlows which leased it from GUCCC), and appears in both the books *Idle Women* and *Troubled Waters*. At that time it was paired with buttoy *Nebulae*, which is still also operating today with Star Crafts.

Christian Vlasto was one of the women who crewed *Hyperion* during the war. She was an artist and when I contacted her nephew he sent me a drawing that Christian did while sitting in *Hyperion's* cabin in the 1940s in response to me sending a picture of my linocut 'Kettle's On' [above left]. Christian's illustration had the same viewpoint – same type of kettle, a cloth hanging over the stove and a handbowl, but she also drew the steerer's legs in the hatches. It was a very magical moment realising that another woman had sat where I now sit close to 80 years ago and had drawn the same thing.

Butty *Hyades* was also built in 1935 and it was originally paired with *Hyperion*. I was offered the opportunity to borrow *Hyades* for a short time, and then it came up for sale. It felt wrong to split up the pair, so I talked myself into buying it as well – it was a good excuse to do some motor-and-buttoy boating, rather than taking my old liveboard and *Hyperion* everywhere separately. It also meant that my daughter could have her own space – she'll be at college next year so she'll live aboard *Hyades* rather than renting on land. It doesn't have very much in terms of modern facilities so we'll need to think about how to make it more comfortable.

Working boater lifestyle

Hyperion is now my home: I live like a Victorian would have in the original boatman's cabin. There is no shower or washing machine – I wash out of hand bowls, take our clothes to the laundrette and then hang them up to dry in the buttoy.

Having previously lived on a bus in a field for quite a while, it's not really too much of a hardship residing in a tiny cabin on a boat with no running water or mains electricity. Downsizing from the 60ft liveboard to *Hyperion* wasn't a massive culture shock. The cabins are designed so that everything is to hand – it's compact but practical. It's not everyone's cup of tea, but it's quite easy to live in a small cabin when boating because you spend most of your time outside anyway.

Aside from painting, I've not made any changes to the interiors of *Hyperion* or *Hyades* so far. There is, though, always something that needs to be done to keep these historic craft afloat. On a good day that's great because you can potter around getting jobs done, but on a bad day, when you're feeling stressed and exhausted, the fact that there's a list as long as your arm isn't necessarily the best thing. It's pretty much the same as living on any other boat, but your priorities and choices are slightly different. Everything you do has to be assessed: is it beneficial to



ABOVE *Hyperion & Hyades* breasted up and going through a lock.

the boat? Is it in keeping with the history? Are people in the future going to be able to undo it if they want to?

Making changes

I had *Hyperion's* engine changed because the old one needed a complete overhaul and new gearbox, which would have meant the boat being held up in a dock for months and months. I would have had no way of making an income. Replacing the engine was the best choice for me as I could keep working and running the boats, and that's what they were intended for – they were supposed to work.

BELOW *Charlotte* at work in the cabin.



JOE DIXEY



There were some rumblings about me replacing the engine and I was told it was an original Barlow's unit. It wasn't – the engine had already been changed at least once before. It's tricky making changes to a historic boat because it sort of belongs to everybody, it's part of our collective waterways heritage.

Hyades was run as a horse-drawn trip-boat on the Grand Western Canal down in Tiverton for a while. The cabin was extended at that time so that people could sit inside the hold. I might take off the extension and put it back to its original design, but it also needs a proper galley and shower installing at some point. Deciding how to go about that is the difficult bit, rather than the actual work. You have to consider what's best for the boat and how to maintain access to things like the knees and the bottom, which need regular maintenance.

Boating worries

The issues that you have as a boater with historic craft are pretty much the same as they are for any continuous cruiser. The worries about lack of funding for the inland waterways are perhaps a little heightened for me as my boats need the extra depth in the water, for bollards to be in the right places at locks and for lock gates to actually open enough for two boats to pass through. Getting stuck in a lock happened quite a lot last summer.

Am I going to be able to carry on boating for as long as I want to? While I'm doing my best to maintain *Hyperion & Hyades* as lovely heritage craft,



A completed heron picture, created using linocut printing blocks and layering different paint colours.



ABOVE LEFT
Hyperion at Banbury.

ABOVE BUTTY
Hyades being towed by motor Greenock in August 1961.

ABOVE CENTRE
Artwork entitled 'Still Night'.

TOP RIGHT
A linocut print entitled 'In the Lock'.



there's always the possibility of the canals not being navigable in ten years in the back of my mind.

Creative space

While the living space on *Hyperion* is compact, the hold provides plenty of room for an art studio. There are tables and storage for paper and paints, as well as the printing press I use for my linocut prints. There are also a few rows of planks at gunwale level where I set up my shop at the fore-end. I can get everything arranged inside and then just lift the cloths when I want to start trading – it's convenient when the weather's good but in the winter months the rain finds its way in and everything gets knocked over when it's windy. I've had a few years of trying to find the best way to store paper in a damp hold and preventing it from becoming mouldy or crumpled. That's been a learning process as these boats were never intended for long-term storage.

I've been a member of the Guild of Waterway Artists for around six years. I mainly make linocut prints, which involves a type of relief printing where you cut

away sections of the printing plate that you don't want coloured. A lot of my art features things that I see every day, so obviously there are boats, locks and views of the canal from a working boat perspective. I do have to step back sometimes and think about different subjects – not everyone wants to buy a picture of a boat or canal. I love doing birds because they're around all the time on the waterways, and wildlife has universal appeal.

Evolving art

I'm always trying new things, and I think every artist is constantly exploring what they can do to get the ideas out of their head and onto the paper. I've drawn, painted and made things since I was a young child, and I did a degree in fine arts sculpture. I was really into photography for a while too (I used to develop my own film and make experimental cameras out of cupboards), and I did a bit of etching at university. Obviously you're limited by space on a narrowboat and you can't have things like acids that will eat through metal on board. My family used to run a screen printing business, so the industrial application of print has always been an influence. Linocutting is my way of exploring new ideas within the bounds and practicalities of living afloat.

Everything that I sell is an original handmade print, with the exception of my greetings cards. My editions range from ten to 50 unique prints from each linocut printing plate, so you're buying something that hardly anyone else has. Greetings cards are affordable and I like the process of sending people notes in a digital age – it's more intimate.

Living history

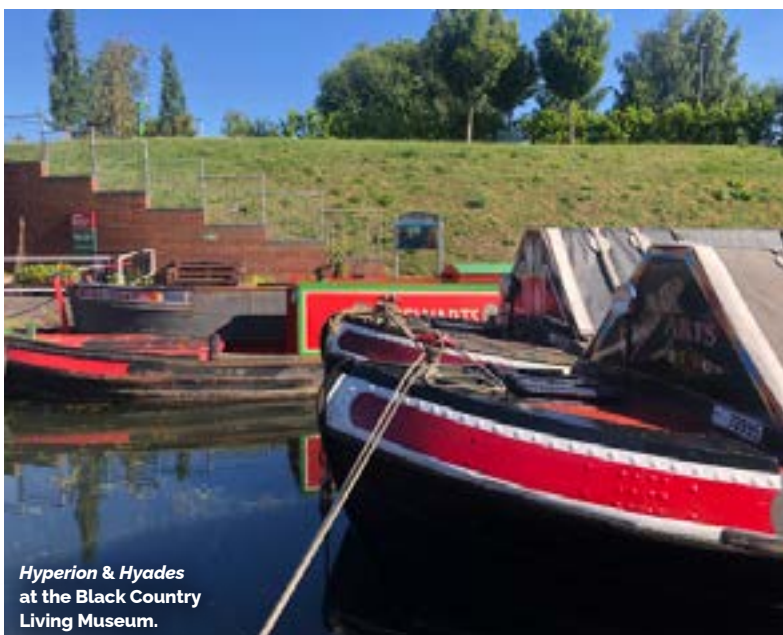
I mainly trade from the towpath, including at canal events and festivals, sometimes with the Guild of Waterways Artists. I get people coming over to have a look at *Hyperion* & *Hyades* and ask questions and it was the same with the bus. I love boats and vehicles that have a history. Any that were built by hand have unique curves and good lines too.

Some days I think I'd prefer to be coal boating, using *Hyperion* & *Hyades* for the purpose they were originally built. But there's only so much you can do when you've got a child at school and other responsibilities, and you have to make what you want to do work around them. My philosophy is that if you like something, live it. That's how I try to approach being a heritage boat-owner.

Charlotte's Arts

See [instagram.com/charlottes_arts](https://www.instagram.com/charlottes_arts) for more details about Charlotte's artwork and where she's trading. You can purchase her prints online from [etsy.com/shop/NbHyperion](https://www.etsy.com/shop/NbHyperion).

“It felt wrong to split up the pair, so I talked myself into buying *Hyades* as well”



Hyperion & Hyades at the Black Country Living Museum.