



Houseboats

We should encourage more houseboats in Poole Harbour

Andy Ross

Some fifty-odd years ago, my parents, my sister and I lived on a houseboat in Poole Harbour. MFV Bellerophon was a sturdy old wooden trawler made to a seagoing design and had served with distinction in the Second World War ferrying commandos to and from occupied Norway. She (for although the Greek hero Bellerophon was a man, our old tub, like all good vessels, was female) was in sorry state at first, with leaky timbers and shabby paintwork, but she floated well enough and her big old diesel engine throbbed to a deep rhythm that put our souls at ease. Once father got to work with his skills at carpentry, she was soon shipshape enough to bunk us down quite bearably at our mooring in Holes Bay.

We moved onto Bellerophon when my sister and I were still short of our teens. Father prompted the move to tide him over financially while he established his new engineering business in the heart of Old Poole. We kids were reading Arthur Ransome books at the time, about boys and girls of

our age messing about in boats, and we were thrilled with the romance of the whole adventure. Our mother was less enthusiastic about the change in our domestic circumstances. We had previously lived in a perfectly serviceable flat with all mod cons, and the boat, for all its joys, lacked most of them.

Imagine, if you will, those days of living as a family within the confines of a rather roughly converted cargo hold in a scruffy old boat that lacked electricity or running water. We filled a water tank once a week and flushed the water closet with seawater, and soon enough we rigged up a land line to power the lights and the radio, but the little gas stoves and hurricane lamps stayed with us to the end. A galvanised iron tub set in front of a squat black stove that burned wood offcuts kept us more or less clean and a local launderette took in our weekly wash. When it rained we put out bowls for the drips, and once a week we pumped out the bilges. It was a kind of paradise, with the added charms of a whole new social life of local sailors and assorted sea salts.



It didn't last. The engineering business prospered and we bought a house. This was a small terraced unit in a narrow street off West Quay Road, and much less glamorous than Bellerophon. But we had a roof and walls, windows and doors, a fridge and a television, and soon enough the luxury of a bathroom, so what for most people passes as normal life resumed for my teenage years and, well, the rest of my life.

The point of telling this tale is that boats are good to live on. They offer a lifestyle perfectly tuned to the special attraction of Poole and its glorious natural harbour. They reflect our national heritage as a seafaring folk, they nurture the virtues of independence and practical problem solving, and they teach respect for the power of the sea and the elements of wind and rain. More of us should benefit from the experience. Poole as a community would benefit too, both from the revitalisation of a local tradition that in our modern world is in danger of neglect and from the enrichment of our coastal areas. At present the coastline is

at risk of becoming a victim of a three-cornered battle between commercial operators of port facilities, rich yachtsmen who like speeding over the waters in elegant luxury, and nature lovers who care more about birds and fish than about human ambitions. Home owners can be trusted to treat their neighbourhood with more respect than industrialists or vacationers sometimes do and to regard their neighbours with more respect than do those who prefer wildlife.

The conclusion I draw here is that we can and should accommodate more houseboats in Poole Harbour. They would enhance the local scene in countless ways and they would help us as a community to solve an urgent practical problem. If we have too little land left for homes, one answer is to make our sheltered waters available for homes too, in organised marinas with modern facilities on hand. We could pioneer a whole new way of life in southern England. Poole can become a world leader in learning to live with rising sea levels on the Blue Planet.