

Life in the slower lane



From working on fast cars to building narrowboats Steve Wedgwood has made a dramatic change in lifestyle – we took his latest, *Tickingover*, for a spin

STORY KEVIN BLICK PICTURES DAVID OAKES

The jump from building racing cars to building narrowboats sounds like the sort of prodigious leap you'd see on Ski Sunday but Steve Wedgwood, owner of Wedgwood Narrowboats, has done just that.

And maybe it's not so big. After all, a recent survey on one of the canal forums discovered that many of its members were pretty indifferent to sport – with the exception of motor sport in all its forms. I guess an engine is an engine, whether it's a screaming multi-valve racer or a thudding two-cylinder diesel.

Steve is a relative newcomer to

boatbuilding but he's accelerating hard and *Tickingover* is his 12th bespoke build. And as well as these custom-made craft he is also building smaller and cheaper off-the-peg 'Venetian 38' series narrowboats.

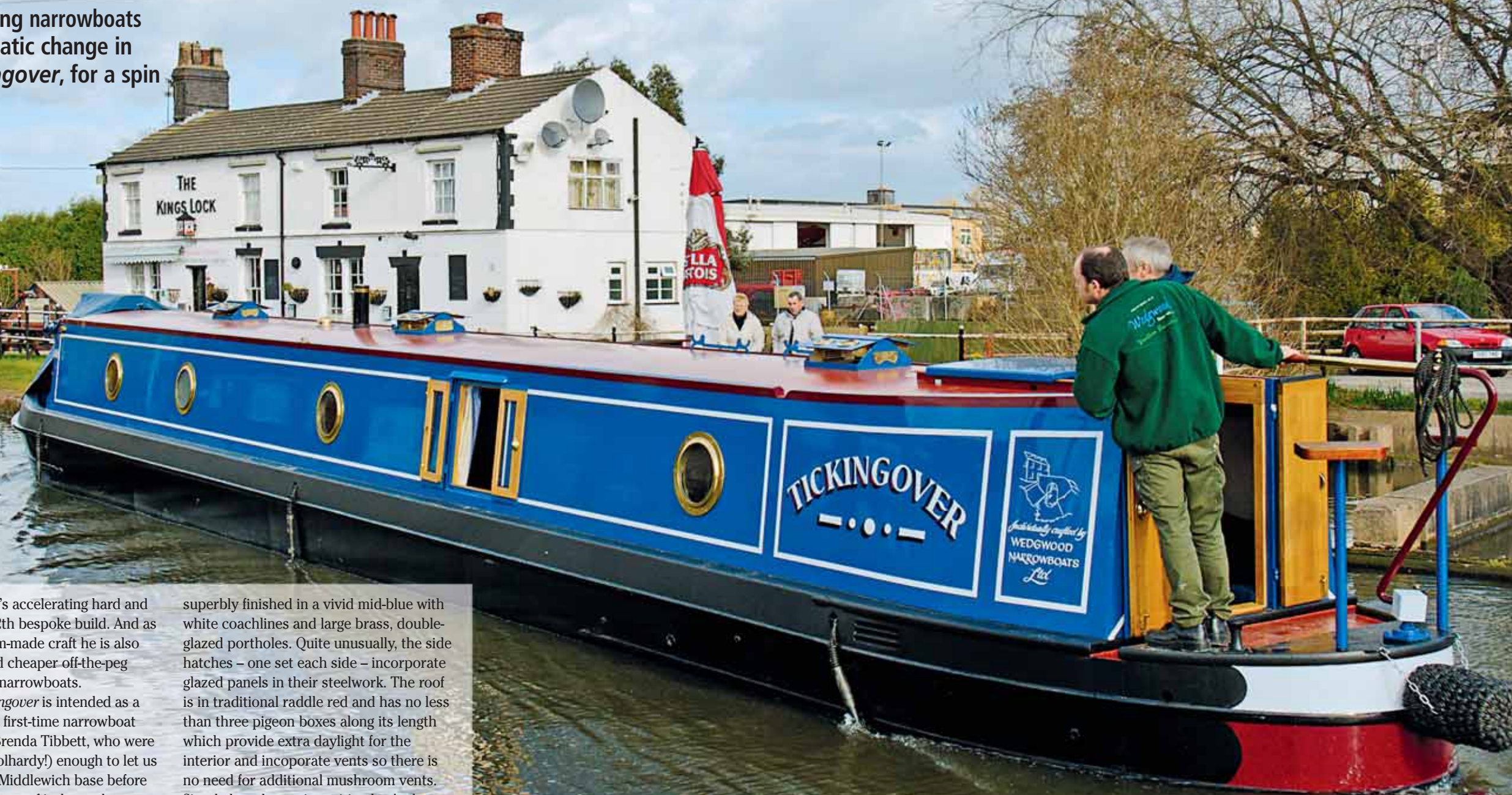
The 57ft 6in *Tickingover* is intended as a live-aboard craft for first-time narrowboat owners, Colin and Brenda Tibbett, who were kind (or perhaps foolhardy!) enough to let us try it out at Steve's Middlesbrough base before they had taken delivery of it themselves.

EXTERIOR

It's a good-looking boat that makes a strong first impression. The cabin sides are

superbly finished in a vivid mid-blue with white coachlines and large brass, double-glazed portholes. Quite unusually, the side hatches – one set each side – incorporate glazed panels in their steelwork. The roof is in traditional rattle red and has no less than three pigeon boxes along its length which provide extra daylight for the interior and incorporate vents so there is no need for additional mushroom vents. Simple but classy signwriting by Andy Russell provides the finishing touch.

The trad-sterned shell is by Liverpool Narrowboats, which Steve has used for a number though not all of his boats. ▶





STEVE WEDGWOOD

STEVE BEGAN HIS career in the fast lane as a race engineer on Esso touring cars. The change to the slow lane started about ten years ago when he and his wife Sheena hired a narrowboat and enjoyed it so much they eventually decided to buy a boat of their own.

By the time the boat was lengthened and remodelled they were hooked and Steve decided he preferred slow boats to fast cars. Not that his personal pace has slowed down.

They bought the existing chandlery at Kings Lock on the Trent & Mersey in 2003 and soon started narrowboat fitting out on the site. Then, just over a year ago, he also acquired the brokerage and chandlery at Venetian Marina in nearby Nantwich.



Bows of *Tickingover* are 'pinched' giving the attractive joshier look

◀ Liverpool, it would be fair to say, are at the more 'budget' end of the shell business but those they provide for Steve are to his own, unique design requirements, all intended to add a touch more traditional character to the craft. There's more uplift at the stern and the bows are 'pinched' to give a hint of the joshier look. Thoughtful touches include threaded sockets in the hull sides into which eye-bolts can be screwed, enabling mooring by secure, lockable chains in any 'dodgy' area. The roof rails have finger-grip edges, another sensible detail.

DESIGN AND FIT-OUT

There are bespoke builders and bespoke builders – those whose idea of 'tailor-made' is a choice of kitchen worktop material and exterior colours and those who will turn their clients' wildest fantasies into reality. Steve is very keen that his bespoke business will develop down the latter route.

And certainly *Tickingover* is quite different in style and layout from an earlier boat of his that was tied up alongside it at Kings



Eye-bolts screw in for secure mooring using chains



Pigeon box provides fresh air



the oak framing is Danish oiled rather than varnished so it has a matt finish. The floor is solid oak on a plywood underfloor.

GALLEY

Before describing the galley itself, it's worth spending a few moments looking at the neat solution to that always tricky entry from the trad rear deck over the engine and down into the interior. In *Tickingover* there's a well-placed electrical cupboard to port while opposite is a two-seater bench seat – a sort of vestigial reminder of the old boatman's cabin seating. There's not a lot of headroom but it's still a very handy spot to sit and keep the steerer company, especially on a wet, cold day when you don't actually want to stand out on the counter itself. And inside the bench is some handy storage space.

From here, it's another couple of steps

down into the main galley area which runs either side of the central gangway. It's a simple looking galley – one of the Tibbett's requests apparently was a simple (or what is fashionably called 'Shaker-style') interior rather than one bristling with routed edges and fancy frills.

On the port side the galley begins with a full-height shelved cupboard that offers generous storage space. After this, below a wood-edged laminate worktop is first a Candy Aquamatic washing machine with drawer above, then a single bowl sink and drainer unit on a double cupboard base. The galley on this side then ends with a set of three large, angled shelves.

Opposite, the starboard galley begins with, well, an empty space. It's something the owners requested – a place at the foot of the steps where you could briefly sit down or just 'dump stuff'. Not a bad idea if you're carrying shopping bags on board. The run of floor units begins with a Ranger 12v fridge at the rear, then a double cupboard, built-in Midi Prima oven and grill with a Spinflo hob above and a single cupboard with drawer above. In addition there are small wall

Simple but well-thought out galley has plenty of space for storage or sitting

cupboards at either end of the galley. A clever feature carried over from earlier Wedgwood boats is the fitting of drop-down kickboards below the galley units to give some useful extra storage – it's particularly handy for those wine bottles!

SALOON AND DINETTE

The L-shaped dinette sits on the starboard side ahead of the galley facing the side hatch opposite. Pulling out an extensions ▶



GOOD IDEA

Sit down here to talk to the driver or just dump stuff out of the way



Glass in hatch lets more daylight in



L-shaped dinette converts to double berth

◀ frame on its longer side means it is quickly converted to a double berth when needed.

The table is a two-piece affair on desmo type legs so it can be used as either a two- or four-seater. Or removed entirely so that the seat can revert to being a comfortable sofa. When not in use the table tops stow on the cabin side under the gunwale.

The main saloon area was lacking its free-standing seats when we tried out the boat but even with these in place the talking point of the area is sure to be the positioning of the multi-fuel Stovax stove which sits in the centre of the forward bulkhead, rather than in a corner – meaning, incidentally, that the boat's chimney is right in the centre of the roof.

The stove sits on a raised plinth whose drop-flap front accesses a space to store odds and ends. The plinth and surrounds are tiled in particularly smart gloss black tiles. Alongside the stove is a cupboard and there's

Tiling extends around the bathroom and the toilet is cleverly hidden behind a door



GOOD IDEA

Pipe from the central heating warms airing cupboard



a good length set of bookshelves running under the gunwale. Opposite, and well-placed for wildlife watching from an armchair is the second set of side doors.

BATHROOM

The full-width cross bathroom reveals some interesting layout ideas. It is entered from the saloon through a bi-fold door which folds back against the end panel of a four feet long mini-bath with bath/shower mixer tap that is installed crossways against the bulkhead.

The bulkhead is fully tiled and the tiling extends around to the cabin side at the end of the bath and to the side panel of the airing cupboard beyond, creating a three-sided shower enclosure at that end of the bath. A shower curtain completes the enclosure.

The airing cupboard is warmed by the calorifer



Stove is, unusually, in the centre of bulkhead



Light-filled, open aspect of the bedroom turns it into a surprisingly roomy space

that is installed there and also by a Finrad-clad extension pipe from the central heating. The bath plumbing and shower pump can also be accessed from here.

Continuing along the same side of the bathroom one finds a large (30 inches wide) door which opens to reveal the Thetford cassette toilet. (The door is not quite full height – another neat touch which lets daylight from the toilet window into the bathroom even when it's shut.)

This same door then hinges across to close off the bathroom from the cabin when it is in use. It is a clever idea, keeping the toilet out of sight when not in use but one that would have been even cleverer if only a few inches more space could have been found so that the toilet could have been used with the door shut, thus maintaining free access through the boat. They tried, says Steve, but the basic design idea would have been compromised.

We were also slightly anxious about the durability of such a large door swinging on what were relatively small hinges – a full length piano hinge might be longer lasting. On the opposite side of the bathroom a

round washbowl is set into a matching tiled top on a large vanity unit that has more shelves to either side of it.

CABIN

The cabin is a light, uncrowded space that scarcely feels like a bedroom. Why? For two reasons really. First, that wide doorway from

'It certainly demonstrates the sort of individuality you only find in bespoke boats'

the bathroom gives it an open aspect when entering from this end, with the minimum of intrusive bulkhead to hem in the view.

And the bed itself is a king size (five feet wide) cross bed; the major section being to starboard while the lower portion of the mattress sits in a slim under-gunwale cupboard to port whose front folds down to reach it and to form the bed base extension.

When the bed is folded away all you see is something resembling little more than a large sofa, making this area of the boat effectively a second day room for the owners.

There is a good amount of clothes storage space with full-height wardrobes either side

of the front steps and more storage under the bed – though only drop-open doors rather than the built-in shelves which would seem an easier way of accessing anything stored under there.

A small bedside table and overhead lockers are also provided: unusually these lockers are squared-off rather than running

right into the ceiling which Steve says helps make the room feel bigger and brighter.

From the cabin, steps lead out onto the front deck where there's a small drop-down table and a padded bench either side.

TECHNICAL

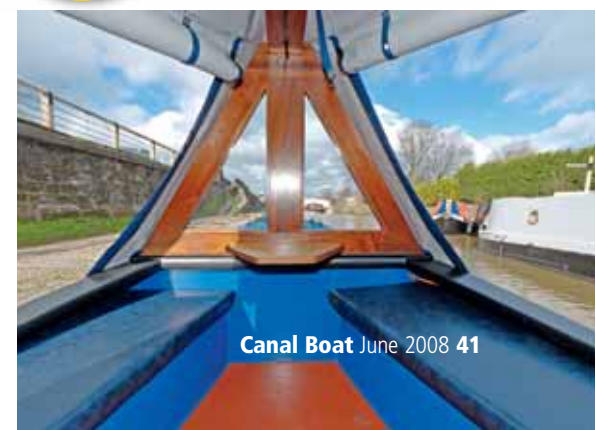
Tickingover is powered by a Vetus power 'package' which comprises the 42hp 417 engine, Technodrive TMC60 gearbox and water lubricated stern gland. It also has a Vetus 55kgf bow thruster.

Relatively unusually these days the Vetus also comes with a single 110amp alternator (rather than the usual two) which uses a ▶



GOOD IDEA

King-size bed folds away into a sofa, making this another day-room



BOAT TEST Wedgwood Narrowboats 57ft



The water pumps can be found under a wardrobe floor and there are separate ones for hot and cold circuits plumbed so that if one fails the other can double up to do both jobs. A sliding panel behind the front steps gives quick access to the bow thrusters and the main electric items are all tidily installed in the large cupboard.

Finally, all the Wedgwood boats are independently surveyed at stages during the build to ensure they come up to the RCD.

ON THE WATER

Unfortunately Steve's base at Middlewich, while ideally located at the junction of the Shroppie and Trent & Mersey canals, is not best-suited for boat testing with lock sections and the lack of winding holes making a journey rather long. But a quick trip through Kings Lock and the brief wider section of the cut there confirmed *Tickingover* to be a particularly sound, smooth and pleasant craft to handle.

CONCLUSION

Tickingover cost £88,000 which puts it in that difficult area of the bespoke market where a lot of boatbuilders are trying to prove that they offer something different.

It certainly demonstrates the sort of individuality you only find in bespoke boats but will that be enough? The competition is fierce and the boats so varied. You can judge for yourself at this year's Crick Show where it will be Wedgwood's display boat. **CB**

Easy access to the Vetus engine and neatly installed electrical systems was a priority

◀ Vetus no-voltage drop splitter to charge both the domestic and engine start batteries. In the case of *Tickingover* that means five 120aH domestics and a 96aH starter unit. Given that this will be a liveboard, it also has a sizeable 3000w Victron Multiplus inverter/charger to

produce mains AC supplies. Central heating is via a 5kW Webasto boiler.

The engine is easily accessed by lifting the main cover boards, though leaving a rather wobbly threshold step at the rear doors which hopefully the usual post-completion snagging will sort out. Further panels can be removed to access the batteries.

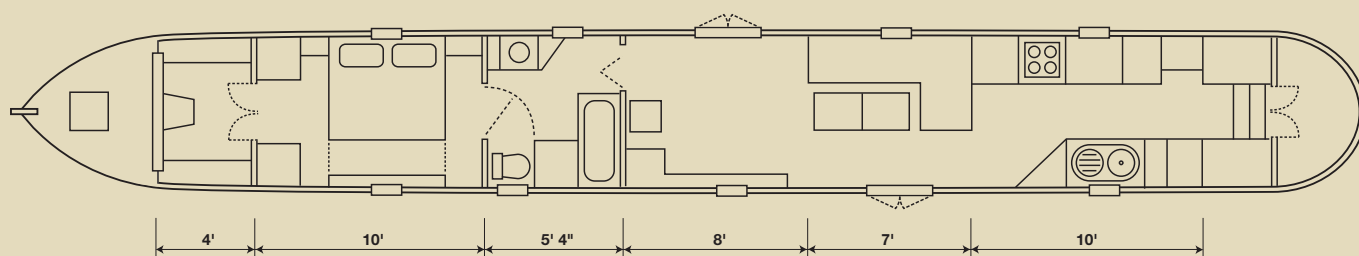
Good access to systems throughout the boat is something that Steve, with his technical background, has made a priority.

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS



Tickingover

£88,000



LENGTH: 57ft 6in
BEAM: 6ft 10in
SHELL: Liverpool Narrowboats
 Tel: 0151 207 5927
STYLE: Trad
FIT-OUT: Oak, partially painted

ENGINE: Vetus 417
www.vetus.nl
ELECTRICS: 1 x 110 amp
 alternator plus charge-splitter,
 3000w Victron Phoenix
 Multiplus inverter/charger

victronenergy.co.uk
SIGNWRITING: Andy Russell
 Tel: 01625 850853
homepage.ntlworld.com/boatpainter
WINDOWS: Procast
 Tel: 01623 860640

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 Booth Lane
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 Cheshire CW10 0JJ
 Tel: 01606 737564
wedgwoodnarrowboats.co.uk

Verdict: 'Distinctive features, good use of space with some interesting twists'

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