

# ALL ABOARD

Stoke Boats' latest craft is a 60ft narrowboat carefully designed to meet the needs of physically impaired boaters. **Mark Langley** takes a look...

**B**uilding and designing any boat is a challenge but producing one to enable wheelchair users and other physically impaired people to enjoy cruising poses more difficulties than normal.

The Lyneal Trust is based on the Llangollen Canal and specialises in offering holidays for disabled and elderly people. Over the last 20 years, three of its craft have been built by Stoke Boats, including its 45ft day-boat *Shropshire Lad*. After two decades of being hired out all year round, this craft was inevitably starting to become a little tired and was also having difficulty accommodating the

wider dimensions of modern wheelchairs. Furthermore, as most of its seating is on one side, when running at full capacity the boat had a noticeable list to port.

As such, a replacement was required, and the trust naturally approached Stoke Boats. *Shropshire Lady* is a 60ft day-boat, aimed at taking 12 people cruising, either as self-steer, or with two crew to help operate it. The size, much larger than most day-hire craft, allows a greater degree of comfort for people aboard, as well as providing more space for wider wheelchairs. We caught up with the new boat shortly after her shakedown cruise from the

## FACT FILE

**Length** 60ft  
**Engine** Beta 43  
**Builder** Stoke Boats  
[stokeboats.com](http://stokeboats.com)





Wide aisles allow easy access.

In addition to the aft tiller, there is a separate control pedestal for a wheelchair user to be able to helm the boat. In the other Lyneal Trust boats, hydraulic wheel steering is used; here, a simple joystick actuates an electrically powered hydraulic pump, which pushes a ram on the rudder stock to give easy control of the boat. The engine gear/throttle and bow-thruster controls are slightly further aft, for use when the tiller controls the boat, but still within reach of the joystick control position.

When seated in most wheelchairs, however, the

forward view is rather limited. The obvious solutions of a raised steering position or the lowering of the cabin roof are not practical, so instead a bow camera feeds to a large screen directly in front of the steering position.

### Aft cabin

The large lift easily drops a wheelchair, with its occupant and assistant, down to cabin level, at the touch of a button. Once inside the boat, there is a good-sized loo to port, which has a dump-through toilet sitting on a holding tank, with a wash



The cabin has plenty of space for wheelchair users.



The compact galley has enough space for preparing hot drinks and snacks.

basin, some storage against the aft bulkhead and a small radiator under the gunwale. The corridor space can, via use of a curtain across the boat, give more room for getting in and out of chairs with assistance, if required. Above the sink is a mirror – behind this are the circuit breakers and inverter, as well as fuel and water gauges.

If the lift is not needed, then more conventional steps can be inserted securely against it. The steps neatly store away aft of the toilet compartment when not in use.

Forward of the loo, and still to the port side, is a compact galley, with worktop, fridge, cupboards, shelving and two-burner hob. This provides enough facilities for tea-making and simple food preparation – more than sufficient for a day afloat. A glazed side hatch opposite the galley helps with ventilation. There is also a music system, which, with the addition of microphones on the aft deck and in the cabin, acts as a public address system – useful for providing a running commentary when on a skippered cruise.

### Main cabin

The large open cabin is the heart of the boat and is designed with the primary aim of giving those who come cruising the best view of the canal, whatever the weather. The deep windows created by dropping the gunwale level, provide a superb vista of the surroundings, while the overhead roof hatches flood the cabin with light. When it is too sunny, neat concertina-pleated semi-transparent blinds cut the glare from the roof lights, while thin-slat blinds can be pulled down to cover the top half of the cabin windows.

The woodwork throughout the boat is hardwood ply, finished in a grey veneer, with a lighter wood trim for a neat contrast. Combined with a pale floor and blue upholstery, the colour combination is not just soothing, but carefully selected to provide sufficient contrast for boaters with visual impairment.

The seating in the forward part of the boat comprises three fixed pairs of face-to-face seats, with a small table in-between. This has been designed by physiotherapists,

the engine bay there is the surprisingly compact electro-hydraulic pump which actuates the rudder stock via the joystick.

Forward of the engine, to port, is a bay where the large calorifier sits next to the hydraulic reservoir for the bow-thruster, and a waterproof enclosure for the system to operate the lift. The space under the platform lift can be accessed from within the cabin when the lift is raised – as this is outside, it has its own bilge sump. In fact, there are four bilge pumps: one for this space, as well as the hydraulic compartment, engine bay and bow cockpit. All fuses, electrics and systems have been well labelled to make turnaround maintenance easier.

### Handling and underway

The Beta engine has no exhaust smoke and is very quiet, demonstrating that the sound insulation and large exhaust silencer are effective in suppressing noise. Casting off, the boat nudges slowly forward at tickover with excellent control. Running around 1,200rpm the boat travels at 3mph, pulling exceptionally little wash. The tiller is light when handled manually, while the rudder position indicator is useful for those using the joystick; this small electric control takes some getting used to, but opens up the possibility of helping the boat to more people than the wheel steering position of the older craft.

The cabin roof appears a lot lower than many modern boats – this is an advantage as some of the bridges on the Llangollen Canal do not have generous headroom. The boat has a decent depth below the water, without compromising coming alongside more shallow banks. The long swims at the bow and stern help *Shropshire Lady* cleave the water well, while turning the boat is easy, even without the assistance of the bow-thruster.



Stairs lock into place when the lift is in the upper position.



The compact, well-laid-out electric panel behind the bathroom mirror.



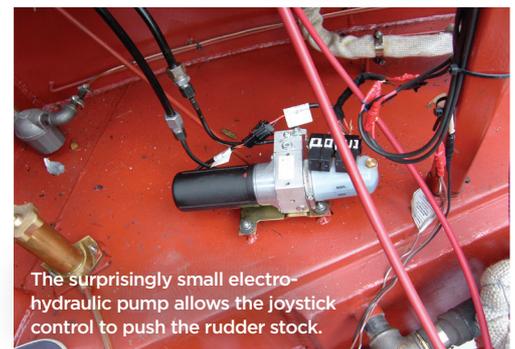
The spacious engine compartment.



Well-labelled services are a feature throughout the boat.



Hydraulic bow-thruster and easy-to-access weedhatch.



The surprisingly small electro-hydraulic pump allows the joystick control to push the rudder stock.

### WW'S VERDICT

While a review of an adapted day-boat might be unusual, it does highlight how a knowledgeable boat-builder can produce a craft to a client specification. Stoke Boats should be congratulated on building a boat that looks good, handles extremely well, and meets the varied users' needs. Another addition to

the fleet is planned in the near future, to potentially replace or supplement the currently weekly hire-boat, *Shropshire Lass II*. Some of the styles of fittings from the *Lady* will be carried over to this new boat, and it will enable more people to get out on the water who otherwise may have great difficulties getting afloat.



*Shropshire Lass II* is the current weekly hire-boat.