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100 years old and starting again

In June this year, a certain lady celebrated her 100th birthday. Instead of retiring gracefully from a life of hard work, she has had a major facelift and is looking forward to the millennium with a change of occupation. Her name is Wilskracht and she is a one hundred ton, twenty seven metre long Dutch barge. Her new owners, John and Marietta Wheaton from Fulham, London, described their baby to CAROLINE DEACON.



“**Y**ACHTIES” for nearly thirty years, John and Marietta had barely set foot on a barge. In the 1980s, they sailed a thirty-five foot yacht across the channel, and, en

route to the final destination, the Mediterranean, they toured the canals of France. They were smitten! However, this sojourn under sail had been cramped and fairly uncomfortable, and more recently they decided to splash out and become “bargies” instead.

As novices and with a limited budget, the Wheatons teamed up with two other families, including one disabled member, none of whom had been canalling before. Their barge needed to be wheelchair accessible, spacious and comfortable. Finding nothing suitable, they decided to start from scratch, and began scouring the



The barge *Wilskracht* in her original condition before the Wheatons bought her.

boatyards of Holland and France. Eventually they found *Wilskracht*.

Originally driven by sail, she was converted to a motor barge in 1935, and would have carried various commodities - grain, gravel etc. - through the canal systems of Holland. She remained a working motor barge until about twenty years ago, when her owner finally retired on board. A fire destroyed a bit of cabin, and the sea captain then moved into an old peoples' home, leaving *Wilskracht* derelict.

The families bought the empty hull and engine in 1989, from Friesland Boating - a hire boat and conversion outfit in Holland. There was a lot of structural work to be done; a small steelworks nearby installed a lift to carry people from the cabin below to the deck, and then she came home to Friesland Boating where the internal work was done. She is fully lined, centrally heated, with her own laundry and own onboard power producing 230 volts. Work took a year, and finally cost around £100,000.

Being able to use all one hundred foot of barge for living quarters has meant that the partners could create a spacious, luxurious home from home. There are three double bedrooms, each with their own bathroom, a living/dining room and an ample galley. Even the smallest bedroom would be considered large in other such vessels. The engine room is particularly spacious - four metres by two and a quarter. All three families have cruised together without coming to blows - perhaps the ultimate test.

To recoup some of their investment, the barge was initially chartered out, when not in use, to groups of disabled people. An “optional extra” was to have John on board as skipper. The experience was stressful at times, requiring him to handle the boat pretty much on his own. He had only been boating for two years, and felt in hindsight a few more years' experience under his belt would have helped.

One week John was on board with a group of six mentally handicapped Dutch people



John and Marietta Wheaton, the proud owners of *Wilskracht*.



The vast deck of the barge seen here during her restoration to a cruising boat.

and their two young helpers. They weren't used to running around, and John had to make sure they weren't going to fall overboard. This meant most of the time the party congregated in the deck house. When they wanted to come ashore, John had to get the boat there and then rush out and tie it up himself. After about the third day he got the two helpers calibrated so they understood how to put a rope on and wouldn't do harm to themselves. After that he said, it was marvellous because they were a very friendly and warm bunch of people, and the Dutch seemed far more accepting of disability than the British.

When *Wilskeracht* was shared by the three families, she was used only four months of the year, during the summer. A couple of years ago, the other two families decided they wanted to cash in on their investment in the barge. This coincided with John's selling his business and thus having more time for



One of the main bedrooms aboard - looks like an ordinary house.



The splendid saloon aboard *Wilskeracht* - enough space for anybody!

boating. *Wilskeracht* was put up for sale and John and Marietta spent the summer looking for a smaller boat they could run themselves.

Throughout the year, the boat didn't sell, and they couldn't find one they wanted. Eventually they decided stay with what they knew, feeling that there wasn't much difference between a fifty ton and one hundred ton boat, apart from the ropes being a bit heavier. They bought their partners out, and since then have spent the best part of five months a year aboard, working their way further and further south.

They told me their most frightening moment was when they were passing along the Moselle and were overtaken by a very large, fully laden barge, two thousand tons plus. They didn't have enough clearance and got caught in her quarterwave. When John slowed down to slip behind her, he lost control and was sucked in towards her so he had to speed up again and got trapped along side in the barge's moving

water. It was very violent and John had great difficulty controlling his own boat and getting out of it. It is a frightening prospect, losing control of one hundred tons of moving barge!

The most thrilling moment was when they came to a solid iron bridge that was lower than the deckhouse. In order to get under it, John used a technique the old boat people used. He backed off till the bridge was half way down the hull, then applied full throttle so the boat accelerated towards the bridge. Theoretically this should make the stem dip, and you hope it is going to dip enough to go under the bridge... and it did! They got under without smashing the deckhouse off. The critical point, he told me, is that the boat only dips while you are accelerating; once you get up to full speed you level out again, so they had to be accelerating while passing under... exciting stuff.

Being new to boating, they have many friends who want to come and stay, with

◆◆◆ A BOAT OF OUR OWN



Wilskracht as she is now after the restoration was completed. The barge is cruised extensively on the Continent.

romantic notions of how life on a canal boat will be. One of the visitors, Marietta told me, had a vision of swanning around on deck in a swimsuit, soaking up the sun, as they drifted down the canals. She pointed out that it's not like that, it often rains, and told her to bring something warm and something to keep the wet out. However, they were lucky with the weather, and she did parade around in her swimsuit. But when they realised how hard John and Marietta had to work, she soon chipped in

Marietta was struck by how different life is on the water. Non boat owners aren't aware of the leisurely pace, and what it is like being away from the noise and the hurly burly. In one place, she told me, she had to cycle every day over a motorway bridge to get bread.

and took over all the catering.

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On the way back, she stood and listened to the noise. It was incredible! She felt she would never again be able to cope with normal life. When their friend drove them back to England after that long summer on the barge, he wasn't driving fast - probably not over 60mph - but Marietta felt terrified. It seemed so fast! Life had just taken on a different dimension.

John was initially worried about that slowing down. He was afraid of just sitting and getting bored, but all he felt was guilt at enjoying himself - it's the Protestant work ethic he supposed. I reminded him that he was supposed to have retired, but he thinks of retirement as silly... he told me that he will retire two years after he dies, or perhaps, he said with a laugh, when he grows up he will retire.

In fact he has started up a new business venture, but now that the barge is theirs, he has refitted parts of it so he can liaise with his office from there, via GSM mobile phone, and the internet.

I asked him what had been the best moment so far? There have been too many

