



Left: Irish folk group *Moonaroon* aboard *Progress*.

MUSIC ON THE MOVE

Tony Jones finds out how a pair of working boats belonging to musician Stuart Miller are taking centre stage on the Oxford Canal

Right: A psychedelic perspective of a floating gig with *The Geees* aboard *Progress*.

Below: Stuart Miller at the tiller of *Tycho*.

It was a cold and windy November afternoon just a few days after we'd arrived at our winter mooring at Enslow Marina on the Oxford Canal. I was busily bashing away at my keyboard when my attention was drawn to the revving of a Petter engine somewhere in the nearby line of boats adjacent to our mooring. As you'll no doubt appreciate, a revving Petter must always take priority over a work deadline, so I closed my laptop and went to investigate the source of the glorious racket. And there on the back of a beautiful old boat called *Tycho*, was Stuart Miller. "It's stuck fast!" he exclaimed over the engine's slow, melodic chug. "That's what happens when you have a three-foot draught, I suppose."

Stuart and I spent the next half hour pushing, shoving, rocking and revving the boat, trying to free it from the mooring before *Tycho* eventually glided slowly away from the mud. I'd already noticed the printed canvas sign tied to its bulkhead and during a break in the proceedings, I asked Stuart what it was all about. "I've got two of these old working boats and every few weeks we host floating live-music events." Intrigued, I arranged an interview to find out more.

Tony: Floating gigs? How did it come about?



Stuart: Where do I start? I've been into canals and boating since I was a kid. I lived aboard in the mid-'90s and, apart from a few years, I've owned boats of some kind or another ever since. I've also been a

"I became the owner of two working boats almost by accident"



musician for many years too. I love jazz and I play the saxophone, and I recently got deep into folk and started playing the Irish whistle.

T: I see, but it's a long way from owning boats and playing the whistle to putting on floating gigs.

S: True. I guess the project started to take shape when I sold the company I'd been running for the last two decades. I'd been working so hard over the previous years that I was torn between needing a well-earned rest and not knowing what to do with myself. I needed a project but it needed to be rather more leisurely than my previous work. Then Covid hit and the world was turned upside down. Everyone was affected in



STUART'S BOATS

Progress

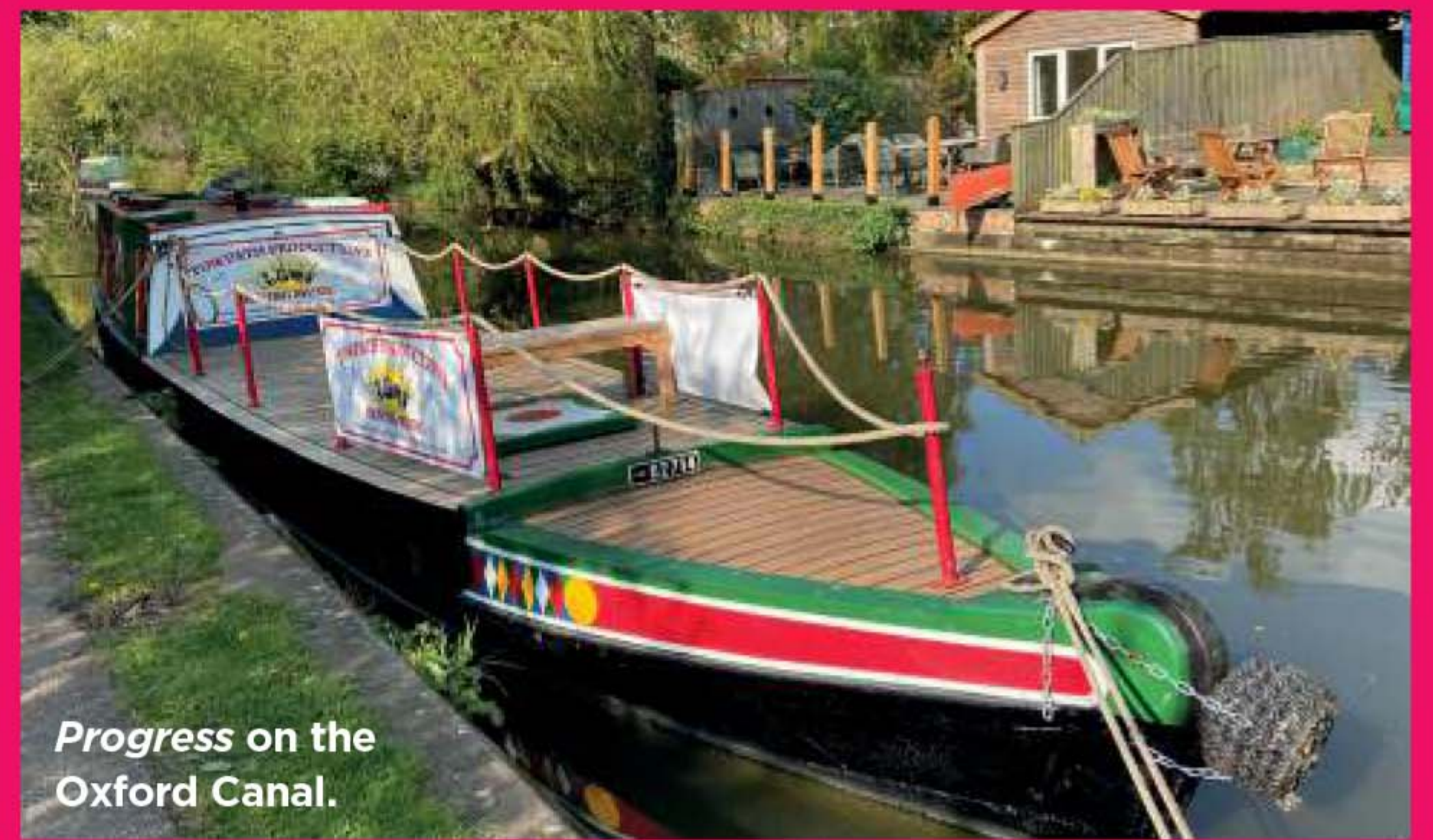
Progress is a wooden tug built in 1936 by Peter Keay for the Birmingham Canal Navigations to pull open Joey boats full of coal. It was originally horse-drawn until 1958 when a 1944 Fowler 2DYM was fitted.

It was later owned by David Blagrove who, from his cottage in Stoke Bruerne, used it as an educational boat, teaching hard-up London children about the canals and countryside. The rope around the deck was installed on the insistence of authorities to prevent visitors from going overboard. "I'm not sure it was very effective, but that was the rules he had to abide by," says Stuart. "When I saw the big tug deck with the ropes around, it struck me that it would make a fabulous stage and performance space."

David died four years ago and *Progress* was then owned by three gentlemen who continued with the trips until the demands of maintaining a wooden boat proved too great. Stuart bought *Progress* in 2020 - "I must admit, she's a bit of a diva," he says.

Tycho

Tycho, by comparison, is a beast at 71ft 6in long. Built by W.J. Yarwood & Sons of Northwich in 1936, it was one of eight Middle Northwich Star



Progress on the Oxford Canal.



Tycho's mean-looking ice-breaking blade.

Class boats, all of which were named after stars. However, the workmen who crewed *Tycho* didn't like it at all because it has rounded chines which make it rock rather easily.

During World War II, the Ministry of War was keen to keep the canals clear, ready for moving ammo and supplies if road networks were damaged. Six of the Star Class boats, *Tycho* included, were cut down from 70ft to 45ft and fitted with a large central rail and ice-breaking blades on the bow. When the canal was iced, a crew of half a dozen men would line up either

side of *Tycho's* central rail and rock back and forth as it cruised along, thereby breaking several inches of ice. Its rounded chines and rocking motion made it the ideal vessel for the job.

Her Russell Newbery DM2 18hp engine was replaced in 1958 by the Petter D3 it currently has, and although the curved fibreglass blue-tops are a much later addition, these are also now considered a heritage feature. Sadly *Tycho* is the only one of these converted ice-breaking boats that still has the awe-inspiring ice-blade. Stuart bought *Tycho* in 2020.

one way or another but, as a musician, I knew the whole music scene was hit particularly hard. It's difficult enough to make a living as a musician nowadays, but the Covid lockdowns destroyed almost every artist's livelihood overnight.

In the meantime, I'd been browsing through Apollo Duck at a couple of interesting-looking working boats. One of them, *Tycho*, I fell in love with straight away. Being moored in Cheshire it was quite a way from where I'm based in Oxford, so I took a risk and made an offer without going to see it in the flesh. The owner was undecided, so I consoled myself by going to look at another working boat lying more locally in Stoke Bruerne. Again, I was immediately smitten. *Progress*, a wooden tug, was mine before I left the waterside. Then, a few days later, the owner of *Tycho* called me up and accepted my offer as well. That's

how I became the owner of two working boats almost by accident.

I don't know what made me imagine such a thing but I remember looking at the tug deck on *Progress* and thinking 'That would make a great stage for a gig!' And once the seed was sown the idea seemed to take on a life of its own.

T: I imagine there were a few hoops to jump through before you could host a gig aboard a boat, particularly while Covid restrictions were still in place.

S: That's right. But to be honest, everyone we spoke to at the council and CRT was really helpful and understanding, especially considering it was such an unusual request. We weren't selling tickets or creating crowds because the boats would be on the move while the musicians were playing, so we didn't fall foul of any trading or Covid gathering regulations.

Believe it or not, the most difficult challenge for the first gig was finding musicians. The people I approached thought it was a bit strange when I told them I wanted to give them money to play a gig on a canal boat. Thankfully, the first gig went really well and more people were up for it when word got around that some crazy bloke was paying hard cash for artists to play gigs on his boat.

T: How were the shows funded if you weren't selling tickets?

S: To be honest, the shows aren't a money-making venture. I pay the musicians to play and people just come to watch the travelling show for free. It's more of a community-enrichment project, funded from the sale of my business. Our mission is to make music, not money.

BUSKING FOR FUN

Some of the artists who play Towpath Productions shows are talented buskers from the Oxford area. You might even see Stuart himself occasionally busking in the city centre. Any money he collects is donated to homeless charities or given to other buskers in Oxford, many of whom are also homeless.

T: What's the reception been like?

S: It's been nothing short of fantastic. The first gigs happened just as the lockdown restrictions were easing. While there weren't any crowds,

“I remember looking at the tug deck on *Progress* and thinking ‘That would make a great stage’”



Above: Instrumental group *The Owl Light Trio* play to towpath users while *Progress* quietly cruises along. **Left:** *The Kirals* play Americana and folk music aboard *Progress*.



so to speak, there were plenty of people to play to. Folk were stood on bridges, in their gardens, on the towpath, looking out of the windows of houses and hanging out of their boats as we cruised past. It was so cool.

One lady was leaning out of the side hatch of her boat and, as we passed, I could see that she was in tears. She told us that she'd been holed up in her boat during the lockdowns and us passing by with the beautiful music playing had filled her with so much happiness she'd burst out crying. "It made me feel like everything is going to be okay again," she told us. It brought a lump to my throat and we've been friends ever since. Her name is Rose and she's always there every time we go past, hanging out of the side of her boat and smiling. That's the kind of reaction that makes this project worthwhile.

WATCH THE SHOWS

Most of the shows are recorded by Ryan from Future Human Design and are available on the Towpath Productions YouTube channel- including the performance that brought Rose to tears.

Below: Stuart has recently learned how to play the Irish whistle.



Here are just some of the acts which have performed aboard Stuart's boats for Towpath Productions:

- The Kirals
- The Gee's
- Steph West
- Moonaroon
- The Jolly Grogsters
- Tamara
- The Owl Light Trio
- Sam Twigg Johnson & The Sometimes Band
- The Holy Fools
- Celine
- Austentation
- Tu-Kay & Ryan
- Bossa Nouveau
- The Hex Collective
- Yuko
- Billy Watman
- Tim Friers & The Mercenaries
- Shantyman Steve
- Black Cat Tango
- The Scott Gordon Band



Above right: *The Holy Fools* play on while the boat passes through locks.

T: That's a lovely story and a great example of the community-spirited motivations you mentioned earlier.

S: Yes, exactly that. And that's not the only example. There have been several other similarly heart-warming encounters. For instance, a lady who lived next to the pub we set off from came out to speak to us. We told her about the show and she seemed so happy about it. A few minutes later she came scurrying over to us with a tray full of cupcakes that she'd been baking and started handing them out to the musicians and the crew. And she's done the same for every show we have put on since then too.

Her name is Elizabeth and she's so lovely. I occasionally go on Radio Oxford to promote the shows, explaining who is playing, where we'll be and the times etc. I happened to mention Elizabeth and her cupcakes during one of the interviews, so the DJ asked me if she'd come into the studio for a chat next time – which she duly did. She was awesome, of course, but none more so than when she

told the DJ she had to leave because a batch of cupcakes were ready to come out of the oven. It's wonderful and crazy experiences like that which make this project so fulfilling.

T: How many gigs have you done, and what kind of music do you favour?

S: We've done about 30 gigs so far, largely folk, jazz, rock and classical artists who write and perform their own material. Musicians put their heart and soul into creating new music but it can be tough to get a break with a new sound. These artists are invariably passionate about what they do and the performances are of such a high standard – we're really lucky to get the opportunity to see them doing what they do best.

We've had bodhrans, ukuleles, guitars, violins, cellos, drums, accordions, banjos, saxophones, double bass and even a harp on board. You never know what you're going to get at one of our shows.

T: Where and when can readers see the next performances?

S: Most shows occur on the last Sunday afternoon of the month between April and October, although performances can flex with the weather as you might expect. We've trialled a few routes on the south Oxford Canal but we mainly cruise from the Plough Inn at Wolvercote to Jericho in the centre of Oxford, before changing the artist and turning around to go back to the Plough. We cruise at near tickover and we'll often linger at a bridge if there are people there watching, so in total it's about five hours of performance time.

GET ON THE GUEST LIST

To find out where, when and who will be performing next, visit towpathproductions.co.uk.

Right: *Tycho's* tug deck makes for a perfect stage.

Below: Steve Badcock of *Black Cat Tango* performs while Stuart gets ready to set off.

