



Feeling trapped by her city-bound life and dreaming of adventures in far-flung countries, horticulturalist and writer Alys Fowler heeded the advice of a friend to explore her home city of Birmingham like she would the wilderness. Words: *Tor McIntosh*. Illustration: *James Boswell*

Into the (un)known

Equipped with a bright red packraft and a folding bicycle, Alys Fowler set about paddling Birmingham's extensive network of canals over the course of a spring and summer. The result was a slow-paced urban adventure – documented in her emotional and honest memoir, 'Hidden Nature: A Voyage of Discovery' – that allowed her to view her city from a different perspective and took her on a highly personal journey.

"It was a humble adventure," explains Fowler, reflecting on her urban voyage paddling the 100 miles of waterways

that make up the Birmingham Canal Navigations. "It's flat water, it doesn't go anywhere and you don't have to be very fit." Choosing to explore the network – a familiar but mysterious watery world within easy reach of her city home – came at a time when Fowler craved peace and solitude and ached to lose herself in a pursuit that would allow her to connect with nature. But paddling along her local waterways became more than just a physical journey; it provided her with the time, the space and the freedom to listen to her inner voice and answer some tough questions. In doing

so, she examined her new identity as a gay woman, having fallen in love with Charlotte, a work acquaintance and mutual friend of fellow paddlers Sarah and Ming, and faced the reality of the end her marriage to H, an American artist who suffers from cystic fibrosis.

Fowler writes candidly in her memoir about the turmoil in her head and her struggle to process her conflicting feelings: the excitement of falling in love with Charlotte and the anguish of the breakdown of her marriage. She writes: "I didn't want to erase my straight past: I was proud of my marriage... it is my

history. But I also felt trapped by the unsettled nature of my life. I knew which path I wanted to be on and I would wake often surprised that I felt no regret at coming out. But I was scared of the unknown. I missed the security of my hidden nature."

The external world of the Birmingham Canal Navigations, from bustling city centre canals to rarely explored rural waterways, certainly played its part in Fowler's introspection, providing her with an easily accessible, open area in her city where she could go for some quiet thinking time. Reflecting on the physical and mental space that the canals offered her, she muses: "I feel there's a sort of freedom [on a canal]... but it completely goes against what you imagine you would associate freedom with. You can get on the water and, once you're in the middle of that canal, you're on your own. And while you can only go forward and backwards, you have this feeling of being able to go anywhere."

Opting to explore the canals in a portable packraft (a blow-up kayak that fits into a rucksack) not only gave Fowler the ability to explore the canals whenever she wanted to – adhering to traveller Audrey Sutherland's mantra 'Go simple, go solo, go now' – it provided her with a different view of canal life. "When you're in a packraft or a canoe, you're actually really close to the surface of the water and that totally changes your perspective," Fowler explains. From this paddler's-eye-view, she passed numerous disused factory buildings, journeyed through intimidating tunnels, peered into suburban back gardens and observed a variety of people using the urban canal space.

Her vantage point on the water also enabled Fowler to discover the nature that survives in the often-harsh canal environment. "The diversity that was along the edge of the canal was

incredible, it was amazing – it was a truly wild space in the city," she recalls. "[Canals] are lovely in that way. They are completely bound up in the urban ecology environment, which only allows certain things to grow." She initially hoped to find a more exciting range of wildlife, but that in itself became intriguing as she learned what species were hardy and determined enough to survive in the watery margins. In 'Hidden Nature', she writes enthusiastically about the less-loved nature she encountered from her small boat, such as buddleia, eels, pigeons and duck mussels.

As she packrafted along her city's waterways, Fowler saw plenty of evidence of the work undertaken by the Canal & River Trust to improve access and maintain sections of the Birmingham Canal Navigations. Despite the Trust's work, she's fearful that, without continued protection and support, these public spaces are vulnerable to being lost to urban regeneration, with the constant threat of private developments being built right up to the edge of the canals. Fowler passionately believes the more people use the canals and towpaths, the more likely they are to defend them. "I feel a wide user group is really important," she explains. "I want everybody to have great access to these canals because I think they're wonderful, they offer access to nature and they're a really different space that you don't find anywhere else in the city."

After almost a decade living in Birmingham, paddling along the canals and observing the city from a new angle allowed Fowler to fall back in love with her home city and gave her a renewed appreciation of its waterways: "I find the Birmingham canals – maybe it's just because I'm turning into a Brummie – to have a sort of joy that I don't find anywhere else". ★



WATERWAY SAFETY

The following guidance should be observed when using any watercraft.



Wear a buoyancy aid at all times together with splash proof clothing, even on the driest of days.



Pack spare clothes, a towel, a warm hat, a charged mobile phone, first aid kit and safety rope.



Don't forget your puncture repair kit, if you're using an inflatable vessel such as a packraft.



It's sensible to take food and drink for the journey. Paddling is tiring and there are rarely shops along the river.



As with any outdoor pursuit, tell someone where you're going and when you expect to be back.



A license is required when travelling along canals and rivers, which goes towards to the maintenance of our canal and river network. There are flexible and affordable options for smaller craft.



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