

Mark at his first book signing in July.

I CAPTURE THE CANAL

Photographer and waterways volunteer Mark C Baker has published three books of canal pictures. He reveals his environmental bugbears and shares tips for taking the perfect picture

My early childhood was spent in Berkhamsted, Hertfordshire, with the Grand Union Canal running through the town. I would pass over it or walk along it pretty much every day, on my way to school or the shops, as well as on family walks. This got canals into my bloodstream. We moved and no longer lived close to a canal, but my school offered a Making of the Landscape O level course, which combined history and geography and focussed on the study of the Industrial Revolution. Canal transport was one of the key components.

I moved to Newbury as an adult and it took a little while before I explored the local stretches of the Kennet & Avon Canal. However, once I did, the towpath almost became a second home! I usually make sure I take some sort of camera with me, as you never

know what you will see and you may never do so again. It is all about being ready to snap whatever opportunities present themselves. It might be a kingfisher hunting, a boat with a funny name passing by, or, as on one memorable occasion, the last Vulcan bomber overflying the canal on its way to make an air show appearance.

GETTING INVOLVED

I do not own a boat and have very limited experience afloat. However, in recent years I visited a floating cinema when it passed through Newbury, which included a short trip along the canal. I have taken opportunities to volunteer as crew on local work boats, undertaking off-side vegetation management, as well as helping to move the Canal & River Trust's welcome boat *The Admiral* to and from events. A couple of years ago I found myself on a 60ft narrowboat, helping to move it up the Stratford Canal, along part of the

Grand Union and down the Oxford Canal, as far as Fenny Compton. This six-day trip highlighted the different characteristics of the three waterways and it was lovely to get the view from the middle of the cut.

I became conscious that I was not making much of a direct contribution to my local community and given that I was doing a lot of walking along the towpath of the K&A, I decided to see if I could get involved with my local canal. I was inspired by the vision of those that built the network in the first place, and those who saved and restored so much of it.

TOWPATH TASKFORCE

I found out about the Towpath Taskforce in 2013, a relatively new innovation from the young CRT. My local group only meets once a month in Newbury and attendance can be flexible, allowing me to fit my volunteering around other commitments. Routine tasks include litter picking, vegetation management and painting. We have also got involved in path maintenance, installing and replacing signs, renewing benches and various other tasks. When a long length of water vole-friendly soft bank repair was installed on



Locking up at Devizes.

A grey wagtail plucking an insect in mid-air.



A pony out for a walk near Hamstead Lock.

the western outskirts of the town, the Newbury group was asked to undertake the final stage, planting the coir rolls. It gives me much satisfaction to see how this has matured and become established over recent years.

One of the big benefits of being part of the Towpath Taskforce has been the other opportunities that you find out about. I have been on CRT stands at local events, such as the Newbury Waterways Festival, and assisted with dormouse monitoring. I got involved with the national duck feeding campaign, putting up signs locally and distributing free

duck food, encouraging a move to healthier alternatives to bread. This even included a brief interview by the local ITV franchise.

ENVIRONMENTAL AWARENESS

I have been part of the K&A's Environmental Champions group for a number of years, trying to promote a strong and diverse canal environment. Currently I am involved with an innovative project led by one of CRT's environmental scientists to use an adapted angler's bait boat (a small radio-controlled craft) fitted with fish-finding sonar,

with the intention of monitoring silt build-up in particular sections of the canal.

Probably my biggest environmental bugbears are litter and dog mess. The disregard shown by a minority to both the fragile environment and other users of the canal makes me angry. I usually start a litter-pick as a wishy-washy liberal, but by the end I can transform into a rabid, ranting reactionary! Canals have attracted litterers and fly-tippers for decades and ease of access means this is likely to continue. Education is perhaps our best weapon – people need to do the right thing, even when

“One of the big benefits of being part of the Towpath Taskforce has been the other opportunities that you find out about”

no one is watching.

On the positive side, awareness of the pressures on the environment and the need to protect and promote the natural spaces that are left, have probably never been greater. There is widespread and growing interest in our flora and fauna, and many former industrial areas have been transformed. Money might be tight, but some funding can still be found for environmental improvements.

Overall, while there will continue to be challenges, I am optimistic about the future. Canals have a key role to play as linear oases, providing valuable habitat and acting as wildlife corridors, linking with other natural areas.

FINDING PHOTOGRAPHY

My interest in photography stems from the time when, as a youngster, I was allowed to borrow my mum's Instamatic camera for a school trip to the tennis at Wimbledon. I am also indebted to the secondary school that I attended, which had a darkroom that sixth formers were encouraged to use. A couple of the teachers and I put ourselves through O level Photography, learning lots of the basic principles, as well as how to develop and print black-and-white images. We also studied a selection of famous photographers.

My interest continued, although it was frustrated by not having



Moorhens fighting feet first.



Sunset at Newbury Wharf.



Autumn at Kintbury.

easy access to a darkroom once I left school. Eventually I simply became an enthusiastic holiday snapper, although I still had some artistic pretensions. The digital photography revolution reignited my enthusiasm and allowed me to take large numbers of pictures and to play around with them, without needing a darkroom. It also enabled me to use the resulting images in a number of different ways, creating presentations and teaching material, producing personal photobooks, sharing with other photographers online and eventually fulfilling a lifelong ambition to publish my own books of photographs.

I currently use a couple of Nikon DSLRs, of which the D7000 gets the most use. I also have a good-quality Sony compact camera for those times when I want to travel light; I like its sweep panorama feature, which makes it easy to produce eye-catching ultra-wide angle views. I have a small number of Nikon lenses, the staples being an 18-105mm kit lens for general views, 70-300mm telephoto lens for



Boating east of Bath.

wildlife and a 105mm macro lens for close-ups.

CAMERA COUNSEL

My advice to novice photographers is, firstly, always make sure you keep at least two copies of the photographs that you take. There is nothing worse than losing images that often cannot be replaced.

Secondly, take a lot of photographs. Digital photography allows large numbers of images to be taken without incurring huge costs and the more photographs you take,

the more you learn. Try different variations – settings, angles, composition – to find out what works and what jars. Ask others for their opinions and be prepared to break ‘the rules’, too. It won’t always work, but when it does, the results can be stunning. Look at the work of other photographers, but try to develop your own style.

Finally, go quietly. Noise will send a lot of wildlife scurrying for cover. However, standing or sitting quietly for a few minutes, in the right places, can bring wildlife to you. At certain times of the year, wildlife is on a tight schedule. Territories have to be defended, mates found and young raised. Provided you are not being too intrusive, the wildlife is often under pressure to keep going, offering you photographic opportunities.

PICTURES IN PRINT

My professional background is as a teacher and adviser of computing/ICT and my first book aims to explain, to those without a technical background, how modern digital technology works.

Given the large number of canal



The Lock, Stock & Barrel pub, Newbury.

photographs that I had already taken, my growing interest in the network and how it fits in with UK history, and my expanding knowledge of the K&A, the UK Canals series seemed an obvious next step. At first, books on digital technology and canals may seem like a strange combination, but for me, they are a perfect fit.

I hope to expand the number of UK Canals titles over time. Whenever I travel around the country, I try and find opportunities

to stop off and visit local canals, always taking a camera with me. The Oxford and Basingstoke canals are relatively local, so would make good subjects. Favourite spots include Foxton Locks in Leicestershire and the Stourbridge Canal at Wordsley. As I already have quite a few images of different sections of the latter, it is high on my current list for consideration. Then there are all those canals that I have not yet visited. So many canals and so little time...

WIN THE KENNET AND AVON CANAL IN PICTURES!

Three copies of Mark Baker's photographic book up for grabs

We're giving away three copies of *The Kennet and Avon Canal in Pictures*, courtesy of Mark C Baker.

To enter, post or email your answer to the following question:

How many books of canal photographs has Mark C Baker published?

Answer

Title Initial Surname

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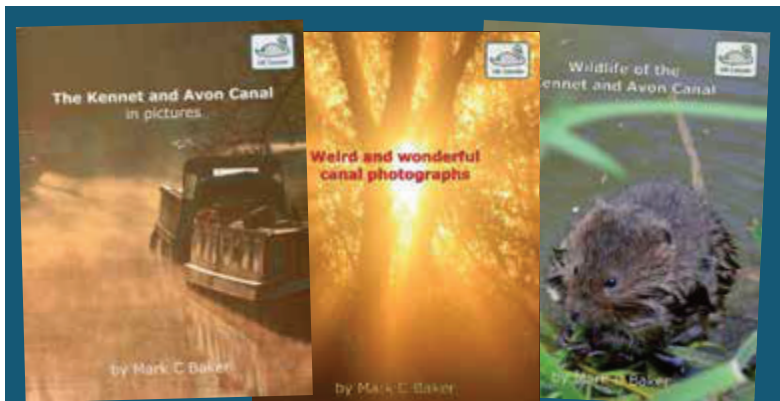
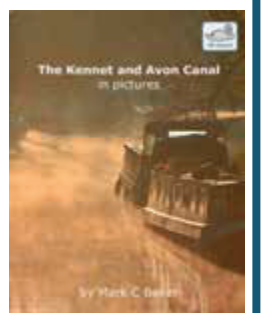
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Post your answer to:

CBTK&A Book Competition, 151 Station Street, Burton-on-Trent, Staffordshire DE14 1BG, or email your answer and details to editorial@waterwaysworld.com.

Tick to get all the latest updates and offers from *Canal Boating Times* and *WaterwaysWorld*.

Terms and Conditions: The competition closes on 11th October 2019. The prize consists of one of three copies of *The Kennet and Avon Canal in Pictures* by Mark C Baker. No cash alternative. Open to readers in the UK and Ireland only.



Find out more about Mark's three books of canal photographs, including links to purchase them, at educationvision.co.uk/books.