

## a passage from poland

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Anyone who has studied the canal scene in this country cannot fail to have noticed how much the narrowboat market has changed in recent years.

Chris Hill...soon realised that the three or four boats a year he was producing would not allow the business to grow as planned. He also found that a few well-publicised cases of builders going into liquidation had made some buyers nervous about handing over even modest sums of money as a deposit on a boat whose delivery date was measured not in weeks but in years. And, when the boat was complete and they had paid the Mercedes Benz size price for it, they expected Mercedes Benz style after sales service.

One particular ambition was to offer a top quality boat with a more middle of the road, £1,200 a foot, price tag. From past experience, he knew that there were no builders in this country that could supply what he was looking for so he decided to investigate the possibility of setting up a factory abroad. While researching this, he found that another British company that already had factories on the continent was thinking about branching out into narrowboats.



The company, Paneltex UK, specialises in making insulated vehicles and trailers for organisations as diverse as supermarkets...and the military. It did not take the two companies long to realise that Paneltex's production skills and network of contacts abroad, and The New Boat Co's knowledge of the narrowboat market and well established sales operation made them ideal partners. They decided to set up a joint venture company called Aqualine Marine which is registered in this country.

Paneltex's main European factory is in Poland so this seemed the logical place to consider as a base for Aqualine. The northern part of Poland includes Gdansk which is famous for shipbuilding, and the surrounding area has a history of furniture making using locally available hardwoods such as oak and ash. A decline in both these industries means that there is a plentiful supply of suitably qualified welders and time served wood workers.

The next steps were to develop the design of the narrowboat, recruit managers and staff, and rent a suitable factory. The basic design of the new boats was agreed and line drawings prepared in this country. This information, along with all the necessary regulations, was sent to Poland where the final plans were developed using a 3D computer aided design (CAD) program.



The whole exercise was conducted at an incredible speed. In July 2003, Jon [Corker, MD of the Aqualine factory in Gdansk,] went to Poland to try to find a company that could produce the steel shells, and a factory where Aqualine could fit them out. He soon realised the value of being in total control of the building process and came back to this country to put together a proposal to build the shells in house. With this approved, he went back to Poland and, in four weeks, had found a suitable factory.

Contracts were exchanged in November and there were a scant five months to produce the first boat and transport it to the UK where it was put on display at the 2004 Crick Boat Show.

Two questions that are often asked are "isn't Aqualine simply taking advantage of cheap Polish labour?" and, more bluntly, "aren't you exporting jobs which could have been done by British workers?" To these Aqualine points out that the cheaper labour costs have to be weighed against the cost of transporting the boats back to this country and that any remaining saving are then passed on to the customer. It also claims that, due to the decline in apprenticeships in the UK, the appropriate skills do not exist over here so there was no option but to go abroad.

# AQUALINE

MARINE LIMITED

The shell is made, unusually, from steel that has been grit blasted and epoxy primed prior to delivery. This should ensure that the paint above and below the waterline has the best possible to key to stay on longer. The steel is also delivered already cut to shape and marked to indicate welding positions, using CNC plasma technology. This speeds up construction and makes for a more consistent shell which is easier to fit out with prefabricated components.



When the shell is complete, it is wheeled onto a trolley into a separate air conditioned paint shop where it is thoroughly degreased and painted using an ICI paint system that carries a guarantee. The shells then return to the production line for fitting out. They are first insulated using Styrofoam – rigid sheet that is claimed to be superior to other types of foam insulation. It is normally considered to be too expensive to use in narrowboats but Paneltex buys large quantities of it for use in delivery vehicles which reduces the price to a more realistic level.

The roof is lined with tongued and grooved hardwood with expansion joints left to allow for movement. Diagonal tongued and grooved hardwood is used on the cabin sides at the rear of the boat while the galley and saloon receive panels of veneered plywood and solid timber. Tongued and grooved hardwood is also used for the flooring in the saloon, galley and corridor, leaving the bathroom tiled and the bedroom carpeted.



Since so much hardwood is used in the interior, Aqualine acquired 42 cubic metres of ash and 14 cubic metres of oak which was kiln dried and is now stored at the factory. The abundant supply of hardwood means that there is no skimping on thicknesses and even some of the unseen framing is made from oak or ash. All the fixed furniture is made in the workshop before being installed in the boat. This allows it to be made more quickly and means that all the furniture can be built simultaneously.

Being isolated from the normal network of chandleries and suppliers by 1,000 miles of land and water, Jon's general philosophy is to be as self-sufficient as possible so any item which can be made in the factory is made in the factory. These include porthole liners, panelled doors and switch panels. The major exception to this rule is the engine and any equipment like pumps, boiler and galley equipment which could go wrong. These are shipped from the UK to Poland so that, should there be a warranty claim, it can be simply dealt with in this country.



The style of fitting out occupies the middle ground between elaborate traditional and minimalist modern which should ensure that it appeals well to its target buyer. This is reinforced by the comprehensive specification with its solid fuel stove and diesel fired boiler, 1.2kW inverter/charger, electric macerator toilet, granite worktops and [240V] fridge.

A range of fixed price "menu options" is offered and these include a larger engine for extended river use, a convertible dinette in the saloon, a bow thruster and a Houdini hatch. However, one of the most popular additions is a washing machine and either a 230-volt alternator or larger inverter to power it.

*I must confess to being slightly sceptical when I learned that narrowboats were being built by Polish shipbuilders but, having seen at first hand the way in which the parts of the operation were assembled, and examined the finished product, I have to say that I am impressed.*