



BEHIND THE SCENES AT *Waterworld*

R.H. In early 1999, with little previous knowledge of writing for television, I was putting together a proposal for a television documentary series on canals based on reconstructing the journeys and adventures described by L.T.C. Rolt in his book *Narrowboat*. In April, I was approached by Central Television who were co-incidentally in the early production stages of a six-part documentary series on the canals of their region. This became an ideal partnership. I was able to offer the production team my research skills while in return I

would gain a considerable insight into the methods that go into producing a television documentary.

The whole process has been extremely informative and interesting and certainly worth sharing, so wearing my *Canal & Riverboat* hat, I interviewed the producer of the series, Keith Wootton about how 'Waterworld' came to the screen...

R.H. So why make a documentary series about canals?

K.W. We thought our audience would

*It's about to hit the screens of the Midlands. Throughout 1999 a production team have been researching, filming and producing a series of six half-hour television programmes about life on and around our canals. One of our team was also on their team. Writer **RICHARD HILL** worked as a research associate on the series and here he talks to the producer.*

be hooked on them! Everyone knows something about the canals. They perhaps grew up alongside the 'cut', played on the towpath, and even chucked in a bike or two. So there was strong nostalgia appeal. But very few people are aware of what's happened since. Those who remember the canals as oily ditches will be astonished to see

◆ **LEFT:** Keith Wootton, Producer of *Waterworld* which was made by Carlton Television's Central Region.

how things have changed - in most parts at least. Youngsters who think the canals are for 'old fogeys' will be gobsmacked to see so many teenagers and students on narrow boat holidays. Those who think narrow boats are little more than floating caravans will be amazed at the sophistication of boats costing a hundred grand and more. The average viewer knows even less of the canals' 200 year history, how they were built, and how they were saved from the brink of extinction. There are so many ways that this series will intrigue and surprise the average viewer. It has something for everyone.

R.H. *Why make this series now?*

K.W. Remarkably, it's a subject not visited by television in years, perhaps because recent developments on the canals have been invisible to mainstream media. Yet the boom in leisure boating, and worldwide awareness through the Internet, has seen a surge in public interest. It just needed a programme maker to cotton onto it, and we're very happy to be the one! It was also perfect timing with the new millennium. What other aspect of 18th century industrial Britain has survived to the 21st century, still operating in much the same way it always did? You might say the canals form a link between the old millennium, and the new. Brindley would have been impressed!



◆ Alan and Trish Akehurst, two of the canal enthusiasts interviewed during the making of the series.

R.H. *In what way will this series appeal to a mainstream audience?*

K.W. Whether your interest be boating, booze, history, wildlife, engineering, art, horses, restoration (the list goes on) this series has something for you. Its broad subject matter, with a backdrop of sunny British countryside, should be enough to grab anyone's interest, especially in January.

R.H. *How do you estimate how much knowledge a 'typical' viewer may already have about canals?*

K.W. There's no such thing as a 'typical' viewer. But by talking to people

generally, you get a sense of how much they know. I was surprised how much people did know about the canals, and how many had ventured onto the waterways themselves. The best guide though, is how people react when they hear you're working on a particular subject. I was bombarded with questions from curious onlookers, which suggested tremendous public interest.

R.H. *Why and how did you become involved as Producer?*

K.W. It was a series I was very keen to make. It was 'filmic', involved meeting lots of interesting characters, and meant I could explore further a subject that interested me too.

R.H. *What programmes are you best known for to date?*

K.W. With 'one off' documentaries, you're normally 'best known' for your most recent ones. In my case, adventure films about an expedition to the North Pole, and a hot air balloon crossing of the Andes Mountains. By comparison, the canals were pleasantly warm and down to earth!

R.H. *Did you have any previous experience or interests in canals?*

K.W. Not really. Like many people, I grew up near a canal, and messed around on the towpath. I don't recall ever throwing in a pram though. For the last twenty years, I've worked at our studios in Bridge Street, right next to Gas Street Basin in Birmingham. We



◆ Shooting a flight of locks in the Midlands from a helicopter camera platform.

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Continued...

➤ recently moved to new studios, but only across the basin. I'm a great fan of the dramatic changes here to breathe new life into the waterways. So, having worked alongside them for 20 years, maybe the canals got into my blood too!

R.H. *What was your starting point?*

K.W. A phone call to British Waterways, who were marvellously supportive. Many of our key characters worked for them, so we couldn't have made the series without them. Having said that, working with them was a joy because of their attitude - entirely positive, but without interfering, or trying to control what were doing.

R.H. *How long did it take to form a clear and focused idea of what this series was seeking to express?*



K.W. I suppose I had some idea after three months' filming! We did not set an agenda at the outset, because we wanted the canals to tell us their own story. The challenge came in editing, working out how to link the various shot elements together in a flowing storyline.

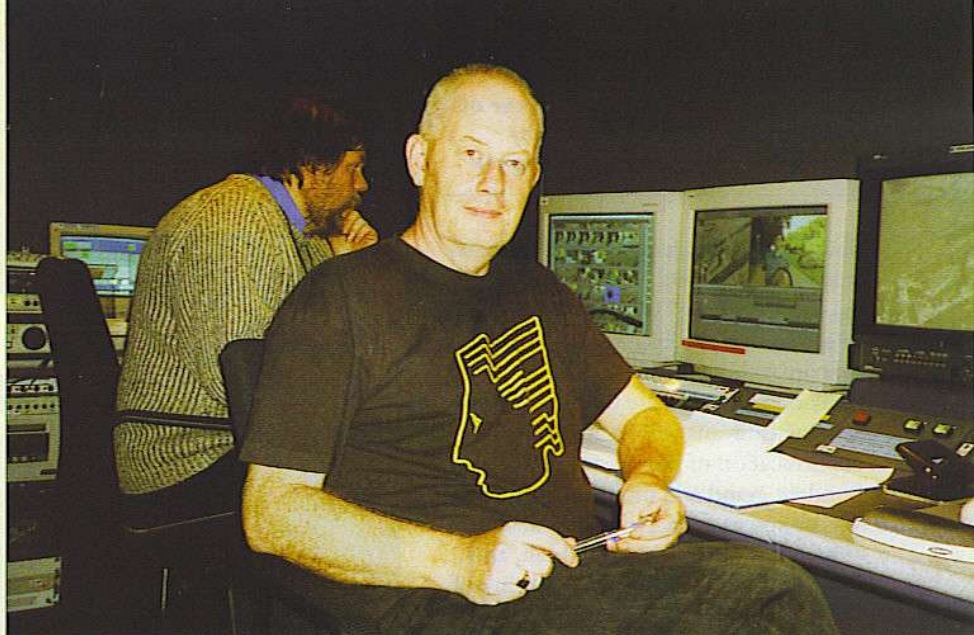
R.H. *How did you decide what to include and what not?*

K.W. Hopefully, years of experience as a programme maker tell you what is of interest to a general audience, and what's not. Sadly, many aspects, which we ourselves found fascinating, were discounted, because they may not have held the attention of a large non-expert audience, at peak viewing time. So apologies in advance to those who think we could have delved into more scientific, technical or historical details, but I think those would have sent large sections of our audience reaching for the off button.

R.H. *How did canal people react when you made your initial approaches?*

K.W. Some with inevitable suspicion, until they realised we were serious about telling the canals story. But word quickly got around on the towpath telegraph that we had 'canal cred', and the degree of co-operation and hospitality we received was generally brilliant. In that sense, one of the easiest series I've ever made.

◆ **Peter and Maggie Chamberlain who were interviewed about their lives on the canal.**



R.H. *What are the difficulties in striking a rapport with subjects to persuade them to reveal their true character?*

K.W. We generally found people extremely keen to tell their stories, and to foster greater understanding of what the canals are about. Though some of the older working boat people were too nervous to appear on camera. They would happily tell us their stories in front of a teapot, but not a camera. My greatest regret is that we could not persuade them, their generation being the last.

R.H. *How do your subjects change between informal discussions and when they are 'on camera'?*

K.W. It's entirely natural for people to be more nervous and camera, and less spontaneous. But I prefer to talk on film as soon as possible, rather than having 'rehearsal' beforehand. People normally tell their stories better first time round. But documentary style filming is not like 'live' television. If people 'lose their way' when telling bits of their story, we can always stop the camera, and start again. Most people relax after a few minutes, and forget the camera is there. We work hard at putting people at ease. The more relaxed they are, the better their natural personalities come across, which is better for the camera.

R.H. *Did you experience any unexpectedly revealing, challenging or even harrowing responses from any subjects?*

K.W. Only an angry boat yard owner who chased us off his car park, accusing us of trespassing! Shame - we were thinking of interviewing him for the series. Otherwise, the reception we received throughout was warm and

welcoming, though I must have answered hundreds of questions from onlookers curious about what we were filming, and when the series would be screened.

R.H. *What was the most difficult part of filming?*

K.W. Everyone says the appeal of canals is their slow pace, but for a film crew, that can be a big drawback. Once on a boat, it might be hours before you can get off again, and that time might not be very productive in terms of shot material. Having hauled all the equipment off the boat, usually at a bridge, there's then the problem of linking with crew vehicles which means waiting for taxis, or shuttling cars around the countryside before you start. Bit of a nightmare!

R.H. *How did you overcome the problems of filming within the confines of the interior of boats?*

K.W. With wide-angle lenses or, in very cramped spaces, broadcast quality mini DV (digital video) which could be tucked into corners.

R.H. *What were the funniest things that happened during filming?*

K.W. Our hunts for water voles, bats, kingfishers and crayfish, all of which had the knack of appearing not at all, or, worse still, only when the camera was switched off.

R.H. *The cumulative series lasts three hours. How many hours of 'footage' did you record?*

K.W. I've not worked it out and, shooting on tape, it's not that relevant, as it is with the high cost of film. To capture those 'magic moments', you might roll for long periods, for just a few seconds of useful material. This especially applies to wildlife, which refuses to do anything on cue, and wanders around for ages quacking or squeaking, with total disregard for the cost of a film crew. So how much footage you shoot depends on the subject matter, and is not really a factor.

R.H. *Which aspects of the filming were most visually interesting?*

K.W. The photographic and scenic appeal of the canals is so broad; it's hard to say. But the steam boats, with their glorious whistles, are hard to beat. And

◆ **Derek and Pam Whitlock** aboard their boat, *Bojo*.



the convoy of working boats at Braunston last summer was a splendid spectacle.

R.H. *As the series also deals with the historical, how do you bring to life significant people or events from the past?*

K.W. With archive film, some from our own library, but mostly with photographs from various libraries. Our major source was the British Waterways archive at Gloucester, where we viewed nearly 7,000 photographs. There is an enormous and well-catalogued archive resource of canal photographs, going back a century and more. The practical problem is sifting through them all to select material. Archive cine film is not difficult to find, but only tells bits of the story, in more recent times. We felt that still images were a more comprehensive portrayal of canal history.

R.H. *On average, how many viewers do you hope or anticipate will watch each episode?*

K.W. We hope for 30% of our regional viewing audience (9.6 million) for that particular timeslot. Repeat showings of the series elsewhere often mean that the audience can continue to grow for months or even years after original

transmission. But our priority is the regional audience.

R.H. *What do you feel is the greatest strength/s of the series?*

K.W. Its' enormous variety of subject matter, fascinating archive photographs, and an insight to a world few are familiar with. Using Tom Rolt's book 'Narrowboat' as a linking device also gives the series a strong sense of nostalgia, and a unique insight to the man who was so instrumental in preserving the waterways we have today. ↓

◆ THE series, narrated by Timothy West, produced by Keith Wootton and edited by Graham Puntis will be broadcast over six weeks in the Carlton Television Central Region (formerly Central Television). This region includes all or parts of: Buckinghamshire, Derbyshire, Gloucestershire, Herefordshire, Leicestershire, Lincolnshire, Nottinghamshire, Oxfordshire, Shropshire, Staffordshire, Warwickshire, West Midlands, and Worcestershire. Viewers in this region should check television listings from around 18th January or check out the 'Latest News' section on the *Canal & Riverboat* website at www.canalandriverboat.co.uk