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**BOAT TEST**

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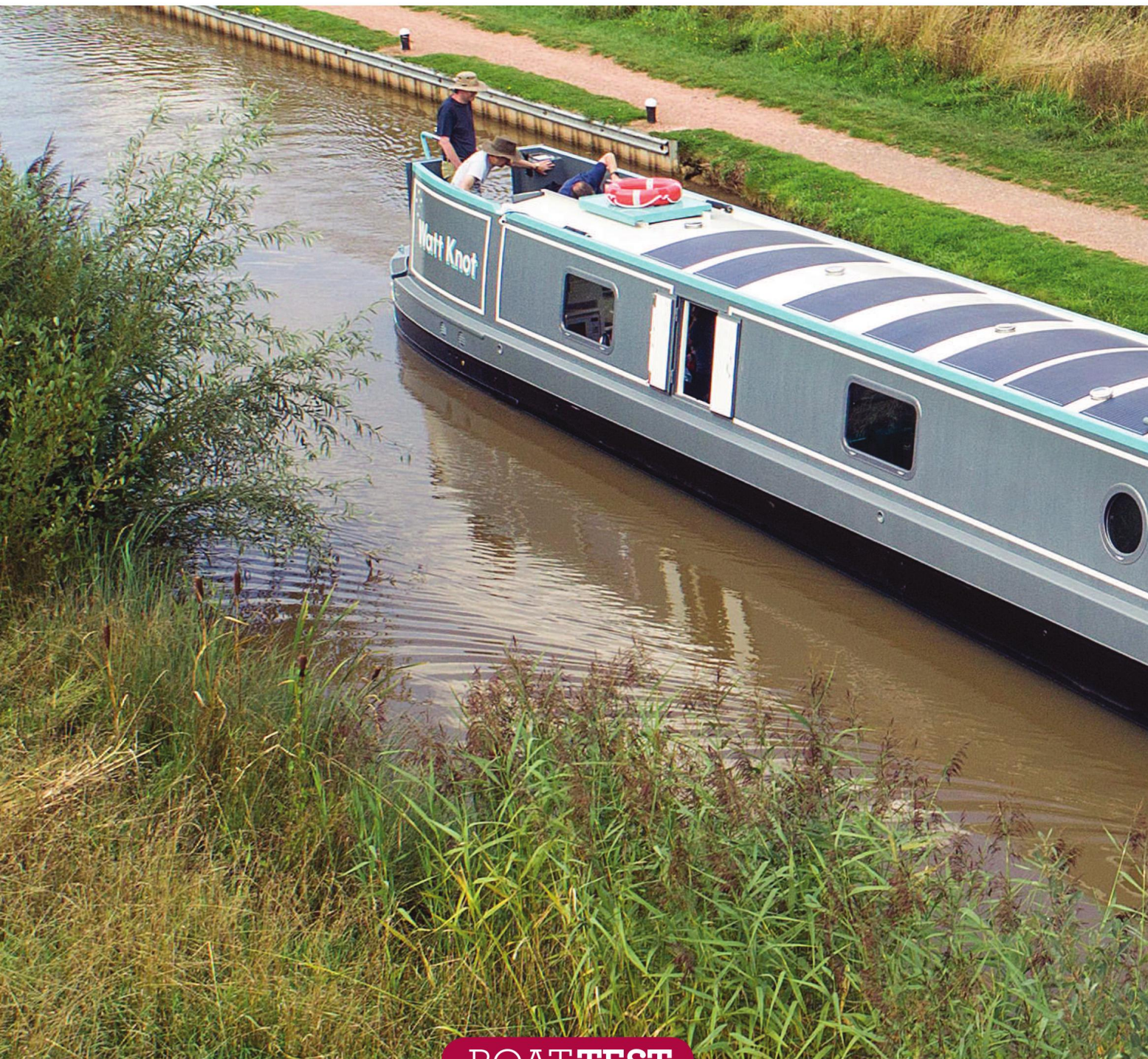


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## BOATTEST

EACH MONTH WE PUT NEW BOATS THROUGH THEIR PACES

Performance • Interior • Specification

# YOU BEAUTY

When Australian couple Karen and Jonathan Warren took a hire boat holiday on the Mon and Brec, little did they know that the UK would become their new home

WORDS BY **ADAM PORTER** PICTURES BY **ANDY R ANNABLE**



**L**ots of people would like to have a complete change in their lives by swapping land for water, but only a small proportion of them actually go through with it. But Karen and Jonathan Warren have gone for it in a big way, as they've left behind a life in Australia to live on a narrowboat.

Having made the decision to move from one side of the world to the other, the choice of boat was quite important. For Karen, the inside was a key priority: she wanted something which would match the

style of the couple's house in Sydney. For Jonathan, a hybrid drive system was his top requirement as he liked the idea of being able to cruise silently, not to have diesel fumes in locks and tunnels, and be able to have a gas-free boat.

The couple subscribed to *Canal Boat*, and saw our review a couple of years ago of one of Ortomarine's first boats. Karen liked its style, and Jonathan liked the gadgets on board — so they got in touch. Just a few days after they moved on board their new boat, we went to look at it.

### Exterior

*Watt Knot* (the name had to be something electric related!) is a 58ft 6in boat on a Mike Christian shell by Tyler Wilson. Mike Christian is the name they give to their slightly cheaper hulls, although apart from one fewer rubbing strakes you'd be hard pressed to tell the difference. There's still a very pretty bow, good quality steelwork, and the long swims under the water which make handling so good.

As this is a gas free boat, the locker in the nose is available for storage. It has a



The interior design was important to the Jonathan and Karen, mirroring their house in Sydney

larger than usual hatch, so bigger things, such as electric folding bikes will fit. There's another locker across the well deck to give access to the bow thruster tube. At the stern, there are lockers both sides of the semi-trad deck — but they stop short, in order that the rear doors can open fully, and to give better access to the boat's sizeable battery bank which is set across the boat in the engine hole.

All the covers are lockable. There are deck lights which can be turned on



The white theme is combined with vivid colours

remotely by a smartphone app (as can the heating and the hot water).

The roof carries eight 160-watt solar panels, of the semi-flexible type which are fixed flush to the roof. These are the latest model, which are reinforced with a layer of aluminium to make them less easily damaged. The mushroom vents also have a sleek look, as they're the flat type, made of stainless steel, by Vetus. The windows are doubled-glazed units by Caldwell's which also have a thermal break, to help prevent condensation.

The colour scheme is a contemporary light grey, with cream coach lines and bright blue handrails which really makes the boat stand out. The sign writing has cleverly incorporated the stars of the Southern Cross, which feature on the Australian flag.

### Layout and fitout

This is a reverse layout boat with the galley at the stern. A breakfast bar divides the galley from the saloon.

Next comes a walk-through shower



Steps from the stern deck lead into the galley

room, with the cabin at the bow. The fitout is where Karen's influence can be seen. She didn't want any natural wood on show, so the whole interior is basically white, with vivid splashes of colour used for furnishings and details. The painted interior is given a bit of texture by having butt and bead below the gunwales, and a ceiling which is routed to look like tongue and groove. Above the gunwales in the cabin, a marine vinyl is used. This has a 3mm foam backing, which provides a bit of



The light and airy galley continues the white theme

extra insulation, but is also UV stabilised, mildew and stain resistant, and fire retardant. It's a material which is used a lot in the yachting world, but rarely seen in narrowboats.

The whole look is very clean, sharp, and modern — just like many Australian houses. The floor is a luxury vinyl tile, which fits together with a click system. Karen didn't even want wood for the porthole liners, so polished aluminium has been used instead.

### Galley

A set of steps leads from the stern deck down into the boat, and there's a radiator behind. On one side is a cupboard, while the other side has an open area with coat hooks. Also here is a touch screen with all the information you need about the boat's electrical systems.

The galley itself has glossy white units and a dark laminate worktop set with a round stainless steel sink and drainer. The units come from Howdens, kitchen makers by appointment to the Queen. Using ready made units allows Ortomarine to fit out their boats more quickly, and at a good price. To maximise storage space, there are extra drawers in the plinths.

In keeping with the boat's colour scheme, a white Indesit electric oven has been sourced. Other equipment includes a Belling induction hob, a washer drier, and a microwave. There's a set of side doors, and a smart grey column radiator. The breakfast bar has a couple of stools, and acts as a break between the galley and the saloon.

### Saloon

One of the most unusual features of the saloon is a fitting in the ceiling which takes an eye bolt — which Karen uses for

TRX-style keep fit equipment. It's like having a gym on board, without taking up much room.

On one side of the room there's an under gunwale media unit with a white JVC TV, and network ports. Both Jonathan and Karen are continuing to work part time, so good communications are important. Jonathan is working on Australian time — so starting late at night and continuing into the early hours.

The sofa is a modular unit by Nabru, and has storage in the base. The couple opted for storage over having a sofa bed; they instead have an inflatable mattress for when guests come to stay.

### Shower room

Doors made by Howdens but adapted to fit the tumblehome of the cabin sides are used at either end of the shower room. The



The vanity unit is fitted with a basin by Roca



### THE OWNERS

### THE OWNERS

Karen and Jonathan Warren had a hire boat holiday on the Mon and Brec back in 2013, and it made quite an impression on them because when they decided they wanted to make a big change to their lives it was the canals which attracted them. The couple aren't planning to restrict themselves to just the waterways though. They'll continuously cruise and are getting electric bikes so they can explore further afield, particularly wanting to visit historic sites around the country.

They've not managed to give up work completely yet. Jonathan works as an IT engineer for Commonwealth Bank, and is working part time — but on Australian time, which means very late nights in the UK. Karen is an accountant and is continuing to work for a number of clients in Australia.



Wet weather gear to hand!

shower cubicle is a good size, at 900mm by 760. It's lined with tile-effect panels, and the shower fitting has an eco button, to save water.

The vanity unit carries a smart basin by Roca, and there's a mirror above which is heated and has a light up surround, which comes on when you wave your hand by the side. There's storage in an under-gunwale unit. The loo is a Jabsco macerating unit, with the holding tank immediately behind, under the bed in the cabin – meaning the pipe between the two is commendably short.

### Cabin

More Howdens units have been used in the cabin, not least because Karen wanted the high-gloss white finish to continue in this room. The pre-made elements include the curved corner pieces. There's plenty of storage with wardrobes and drawer units with soft closers, and no space has been wasted as there are more plinth drawers. Even though the loo tank takes up some of the space under the bed, there's still plenty left for storage, with big fitted drawers.

The bed itself extends to 4ft 6in, and has an attractive padded headboard to add a splash of colour to the room. Above the head of the bed is a run of high level cupboards. One contains the controls for the roof-mounted TV aerial. There's a handle which can be used to raise or lower it, and turn it to point the right way; a box tells you how strong the TV signal is, so you know when you've got the direction correct. A modem lives behind a panel in another of these cupboards.

At the bow, there are uPVC doors and windows onto the well deck – something that has become an Ortomarine trademark. It's not a traditional choice by any means, but gives good security and draught proofing, as well as loads of light.

### Technical

*Watt Knot* is fitted with the top of the range system by Hybrid Marine. It's based on a Beta 50hp engine (an upgrade from the usual 43hp unit) with a 10kw electric motor bolted on one end. This acts as a motor to



Touch screen displays boat's electrical systems



The bed extends to 4ft 6in and is fitted with drawers

drive the prop when in electric mode, and converts into a generator to charge the batteries when the diesel engine is running. There are two alternators which get a bit hot, so there's a fan to pull air into the engine hole to help keep them cool.

The battery bank consists of 24 two-volt cells, giving a 48 volt supply for the motor. They have a self watering system fitted, and are self venting. There are also two 12 volt batteries, one for the engine starter, and another which powers the 12 volt systems on the boat – such as the lighting and the pumps. These batteries are charged from the 48 volt system. For a 240 volt supply, there's a 5kw Victron inverter.

The batteries can be charged in a variety of ways. There's the electric motor when the engine is being used, a shoreline if the boat is in a marina, and eight 160-watt solar panels on the roof. Another area where Ortomarine are experts is the monitoring of all these systems (the boat building firm grew out of an automation and control company) so there's a touch screen just inside the boat which shows the whole electrical set up, and can tell you in some detail what's going on – how much power is going in and out of the batteries, and what the state of everything is. It's clever and impressive stuff.

*Watt Knot* is also equipped with GPS tracking. Not only does this mean you can tell people where you are, even when you appear to be in the middle of nowhere – the system can also alert you if the boat is moved when you weren't on board.

### On the water


Hybrid systems are much more common now than they were a few years ago, but



The Hybrid Marine powerplant

when using the electric motor rather than the diesel engine the quietness still comes as something of a surprise. You can hear the water pass the boat and being churned by the prop, and you can hear what towpath walkers and your locking crew are saying to you. And it's while working locks that the system comes into its own, because when you're waiting for the lock to be set, or while you're in the lock going up or down, you're not using any power at all. When you are going along under power, a display tells you what percentage of the available power you're using, and how much you're taking from the batteries. At canal speeds, you use very little – but there is quite a bit of oomph available, for when you need a bit of a blast of power to wind, for example.

The Tyler Wilson shell handles superbly, as we've come to expect, thanks to its long swims. It responds very well to the tiller, and goes exactly where it's pointed.

The semi-trad deck means there's plenty of room for crew to keep the helmsman company, and the lockers give them somewhere to sit. Altogether, being on this boat is a thoroughly enjoyable experience. 

## ORTOMARINE

Ortomarine had an interesting birth, growing out of a firm which specialised in electrical control systems for industries including water, oil and gas, and food production. Rob Howdle and his partner (both in the business and in life) Caroline Badger brought Rob's brother Dave on board, complete with 20 years of experience in building boats for Black Prince.

It means it's a real family firm, with Dave building the boats, Caroline running the business and Rob providing lots of the technical expertise. Rob and Dave's sister, Patty Denning, is also involved. She started working on interiors and soft furnishings, but now paints the boats – having trained for a year with the previous painter, who wanted to retire.

The automation business meant Rob was spending a lot of time in far flung places, so the growth of the boating side has meant he's been able to cut down on flights to Kazakhstan, much to his and Caroline's relief.

Rob's automation and electrical skills show up in all the boats, though. The monitoring systems on board are some of the most advanced we've seen, and make an Ortomarine boat stand out from the crowd.



## VERDICT

This is a stridently modern take on a narrowboat – there's almost nothing traditional about it at all. Outside, the colour scheme gives the boat a contemporary look, while the inside is one of the slickest we've seen. And that's before you even begin to consider the hybrid drive system and the clever electrics and monitoring system.

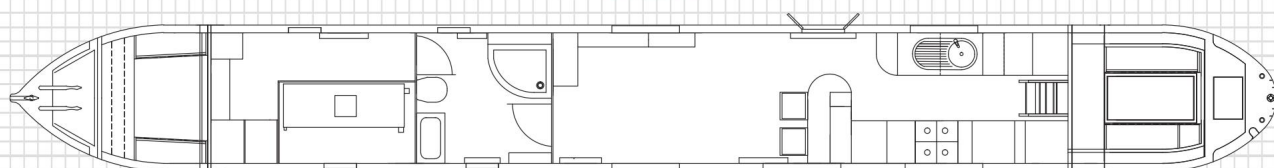
What's perhaps most surprising is the price. With such an individual look and lots of technology on board, you'd expect the bill to be creeping ever upwards. But in fact Ortomarine says a boat just like this today would be around £135,000. That's a good price for a boat with this level of bespoke content, and a

hybrid drive system. And while much of the furniture is off the shelf rather than hand made, it's still good quality stuff – and the whole boat is built on a quality shell.

What the owners have achieved is a boat which really is unique to them, and their Australian way of thinking. They wanted a feeling of Australia even though they're thousands of miles away, and they've succeeded. It's like the perfect combination of quintessentially British canal boat with bold Australian design, a reminder of the home they've left behind. It would have been easy to get the mix wrong, but in fact it's a great success.

## SPECIFICATIONS

£135,000



**LENGTH:** 58ft 6in  
**BEAM:** 6ft 10in  
**SHELL:** Mike Christian by Tyler Wilson  
**STYLE:** Semi-trad  
**FIT-OUT:** Painted tongue and groove, marine vinyl

**ENGINE:** Hybrid Marine  
[www.hybrid-marine.co.uk](http://www.hybrid-marine.co.uk)  
**INVERTER:** Vetus 5kw  
[www.vetus.com](http://www.vetus.com)  
**BOW THRUSTER:** Vetus 75kgf  
[www.vetus.com](http://www.vetus.com)

## DESIGN AND DECOR

**GALLEY UNITS:** Howdens Greenwich gloss white.  
[www.howdens.com](http://www.howdens.com) £poa

**ECO SHOWER:** Bristan Frenzy.  
[www.bristan.com](http://www.bristan.com) £129

**WHITE OVEN:** Indesit Aria IFW 6340 WH  
[www.indesit.co.uk](http://www.indesit.co.uk) £197

**TV AND RADIO ANTENNA:** Vision Plus Status 570  
[www.visionplus.co.uk](http://www.visionplus.co.uk).  
 £149.95

**SOLAR PANELS:** Photonic Universe 160W semi-flexible.  
[www.photonicuniverse.com](http://www.photonicuniverse.com) £310 each

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