The superb paint finish on the properly prepared steelwork includes metallic effects.

BOAT REVIEW

TRUE BLUE

Length 60ft **Berths** 2+4 **Propulsion** Vetus serial hybrid **Price** £250,000 **Bluewater Boats** *bluewaterboats.co.uk* 01926 811699

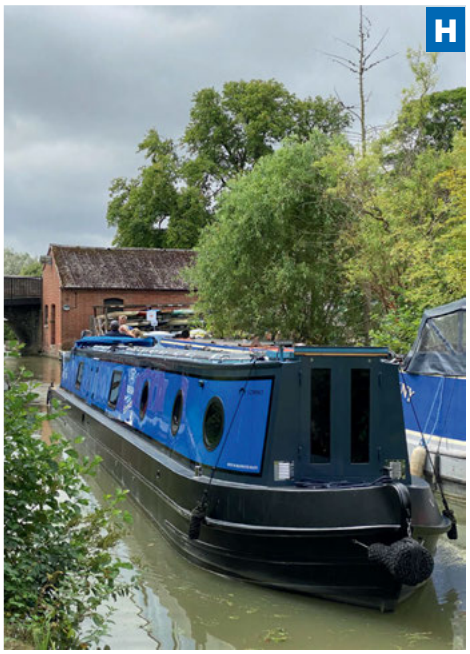
Showcased by Bluewater Boats at this year's Crick, *True Blue* is a bespoke 60ft narrowboat with hybrid propulsion and sleek, modern styling. **Mark Langley** paid it a visit on the south Oxford Canal

Tinted windows and bright paintwork help create a modern, stylish look.

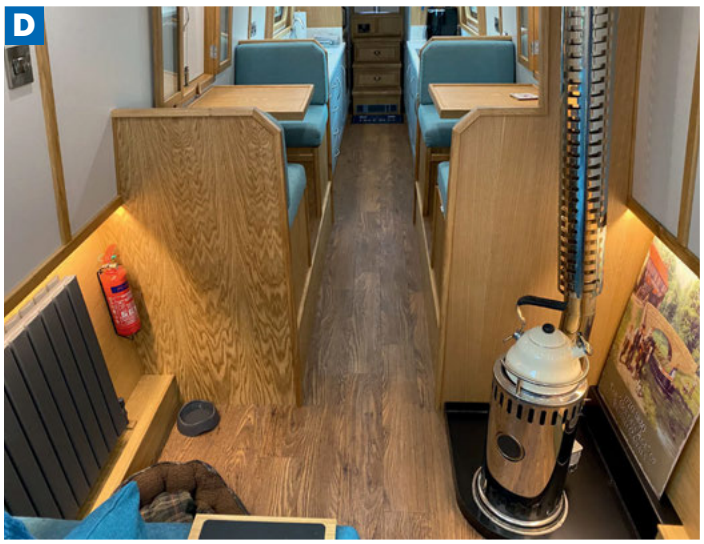
AT THE CRICK BOAT SHOW IN 2023, JILL AND STEVE PORTER WERE IMPRESSED by the two bespoke narrowboats exhibited by Bluewater Boats: *Coffin Dodger* and *Essex Girl* (the latter reviewed in the WW July 2023 issue). Shortly after, they called into Bluewater Boats base near Leamington Spa and the outline of *True Blue* was born. The build was swift and the completed boat was on display at this year's Crick. We caught up with the owners on a dull and windy summer's day on the south Oxford Canal at Cropredy Marina.

Steve and Jill are experienced boaters – both with inland boating, having had shares in a shared-ownership narrowboat, but also seagoing craft. Steve owns specialist Atlantic bluefin tuna fishing sports boats, which operate under the name True Blue Charters – hence the name of their new narrowboat. Steve is also an RYA Motor cruising instructor, so has a good deal of knowledge of boats, their engineering and use.

True Blue is a 60ft narrowboat with hybrid propulsion, designed for extended cruising and eventual residential use. The owners liked the layout of the Bluewater Boats on display at the 2023 show, so merged quite a few of the ideas. This has led to a boat where a very social stern deck is balanced by having no forward cockpit. Internally, the layout is essentially reverse, with a stern galley followed by the saloon, bathroom and forward master cabin.



A The forward part of the pram canopy is easy to erect – the full canopy turns almost all the boat into useable accommodation. **B** The aft deck provides a very social space with easy access for the helm to step across or to reboard crew. **C** Pulling very little wash at Cropredy Marina. **D** The forward part of the canopy folds down and stows forward of the hatch. **E** The C-shaped tiller actuates the rudder stock via a slot in the aft dodger. The tiller is surprisingly light. **F** The foredeck is still useable for mooring – a raised handrail is very helpful for moving around and reboarding. **G** Thirteen 150W solar panels fit on to the roof. The hatch in the forepeak allows access to the water tank. The bollard on the gunwale is ideal for forward spring lines. **H** Handling is very good in tight spaces, aided by the controllability of the electric motor.



A A full-sized domestic washing machine. **B** Removeable aft steps have drawer storage and an electric plinth heater in the step base. **C** The base of the dinettes holds the batteries which are sealed from the cabin, with external vents to keep them cool. **D** Good circulation space in the saloon – plenty of room for Molly the dog to settle opposite the stove. **E** Lighting is a mix of warm and cold white LEDs, used to good effect. **F** Big open shelves lack fiddle rails but are deep. **G** The unusual inset sink in the galley is practical. **H** A proper, built-in bin and recycling unit. **I** The microwave and 230V oven are at a good height.

A mix of matt white and oak finishes gives a modern and calm, but not clinical, feel.

The large three-seater sofa-bed faces the entertainment unit.

Shell and exterior

Unusually for a boat-builder these days, Bluewater builds all its own shells, whether it's a narrowboat, wide-beam or Dutch barge. This gives them control over every stage of the production. The steel shell is very shapely, both above and below the water. Long swims fore and aft aid water flow and there are no visible joins in any of the hull or cabin plating. The welding and finish to the steelwork are superb. This has also been protected for the future by full shotblasting of the steel before a two-pack epoxy primer was added to the superstructure and two-pack epoxy blacking applied below the waterline.

The cabin is long, sweeping almost up to the bow, while tapering in so that good visual lines are maintained. The short foredeck has a large bolted-down access hatch which allows maintenance to the big integral water tank, rather than having a separate water tank within the boat itself. Unusually, along the gunwale, about 8ft from the bow, there is a raised stainless-steel bollard each side, which is ideal for running proper spring lines when moored up. The conventional aft bollards are positioned so both breast and spring lines can run from one bollard.

The cabin has bonded-glass, double-glazed windows with quite heavy tinting. There are large portholes forward and rectangular ones aft. These dark-framed windows work really well with the superb metallic paint. This spray-finish coating was applied over multiple layers of additional primers and undercoats, then topped with an acrylic urethane Alexseal topcoat. This final layer protects the paint underneath and is even buffable, to deal easily with the inevitable minor scrapes from overhanging vegetation over time.

Up on the roof are 13 solar panels, plus low-profile stainless-steel vents, TV and 4G aerials, and the chimney of the stove. Small LED navigation lights, along with a broad-beam tunnel lamp and trumpet horn, are also fitted. Unusually, there is a raised stainless-steel handrail, which Bluewater has fitted to a number of boats. This is highly practical, both for walking along the gunwale, but also to position side fenders when required.

"*True Blue* is an exceptionally well-designed and engineered boat"

The aft deck is massive. There is a stern seat, fully upholstered, with storage under. This is well shaped, with a curved backrest, so that it won't catch on anything when manoeuvring. The C-shaped tiller arcs through a cutout in the base of the seat

There are also two side seats, which give the boat a semi-cruiser stern layout, while allowing easy crossing from one side to another for the helm, which is more practical than a full U-shaped stern seating area. The lockers also have low-level lights in for night-time use and there is Tek-Dek synthetic wood flooring, which is very attractive and highly practical – being both warm to the touch and very slip resistant. A large multi-section pram canopy fully covers the deck as well, which can be easily lowered for cruising on narrow canals.

Galley

A large hatch and twin central doors lead down into the cabin with three steps – the top two having drawers in them, and the bottom one containing a 230V plinth fan heater for instant warmth. If required, the steps can be removed for access to the lower two rearmost cupboards. Either side of the steps are more cupboards, with a mix of storage and equipment, plus the exceptionally impressive main electrical cupboard on the starboard side. Indirect ventilation at the back of the boat is taken through the electrics and airing cupboards, which is very useful.

The galley is a linear design and aims to give maximum working space without using too much boat length. On the port side is an AEG induction hob – this is, sensibly, a gas-free boat, so cooking is using the ample electrical supply of the hybrid system. There is also a single cavity oven/grill and separate microwave further aft in the starboard cupboards, practically set at a mid-height rather than eye level. Underneath the granite worktop is also an integrated freezer and full-sized washing machine.

On the other side, there is a massive pull-out double refuse bin, with separate sections for recycling. Most boat bins are too small and this is perfect. There is also an integrated fridge – like the freezer, a 230V model as the mains power is 'always on'. There are also plenty of cupboards and a set of deep drawers, all with a pale blue matt finish to the doors. Lighting is particularly well positioned, with a trio of LED downlights over each worktop, plus a central pair, to avoid working in shadows.

Saloon

As you move into the saloon, there are a pair of raised single dinettes, each with a side door and glazed interior panels. These are very practical and can be left up as sofas if required, as well as providing good guest beds. The raised base of the dinettes also holds the batteries – four each side. Having over 300kg of batteries further forward than normal helps with ballasting, and also allows more storage aft – often the space behind the stairs is used for the batteries. It also means that access is very good, and Bluewater has added a large but discreet hull vent on each side to give additional airflow into the battery compartment, which is sealed from the cabin.

The saloon also fits in a three-seater sofa-bed further forward to starboard, with a stainless steel drip-feed diesel stove to port within a steel hearth base. There is a TV and associated systems within an attractive sideboard against the port hull side, with even more storage alongside the forward bulkhead in the form of shelves and cupboards, and including a neat cubbyhole for cables and chargers. The open shelves on the boat do not

have fiddle rails but are a good depth. As well as the diesel stove, there are two big designer radiators in matt grey, running from the Webasto heating system.

The design of the interior is very modern without being clinical. The cabin sides are white matt panels and grooved panels on the ceiling, with solid oak trim. The general woodwork of fixed furniture and the hull side are oak faced, with an engineered wood flooring, which is very robust and easy to maintain. The lighting is excellent, with cold white LEDs in the ceiling lights and warm LED lighting under the gunwales, to accentuate the two main materials of the cabin. There are useful glass shaded reading lights above the sofa, as well as one above each dinette to act as a table light, which also produce diffuse as well as directional illumination.

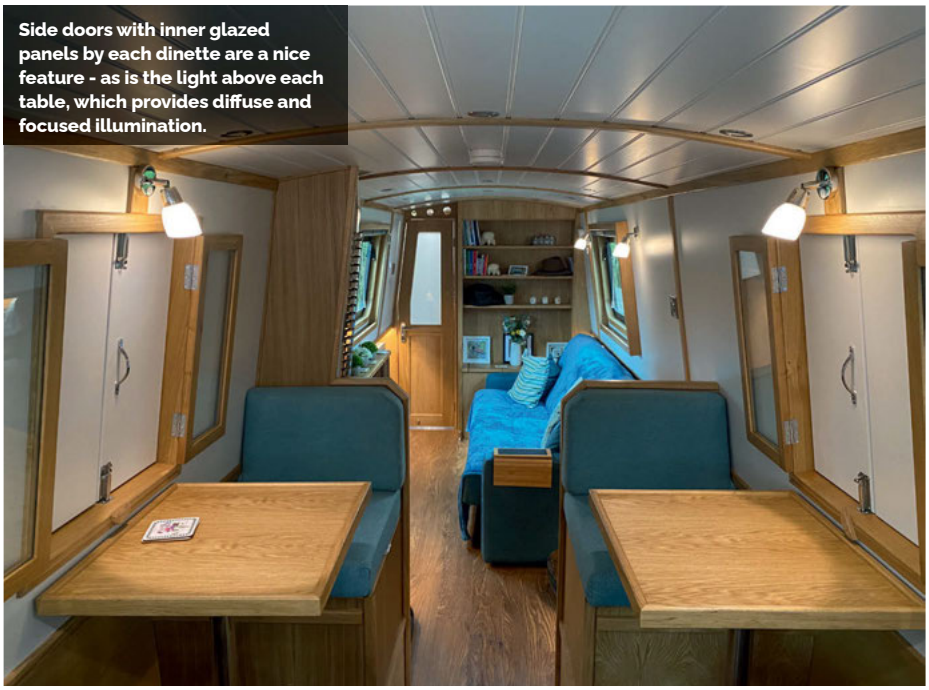
Bathroom

The walk-through bathroom has both doors to port, which does save a little space compared to when the doors are on opposite sides. The doors are half-glazed, which lets more light flow in, without some of the more interesting shadow effects fully glazed doors can give of bathroom occupants to those in the saloon. Unusually there are three quite large holes to act as vents above both of the doors – while this undoubtedly improves airflow, it also might allow more noise to be transmitted between cabins.

There is a big square shower tray with two doors, making for very easy access. A rainfall shower and handheld spray are fitted, with a good-sized tray for toiletries in the shower. There is cupboard space, including for storing porthole stoppers, between the shower and the cabin side.

Opposite the shower, against the bulkhead, is a vanity unit with a large square basin and a mix of open and cupboard storage. Between the shower and vanity unit is the loo – a separating dry (composting) toilet, which collects the liquid waste in a container to empty ashore. There is a lot of floorspace in the bathroom, with heating from a large towel radiator, plus good lighting and ventilation.

A large, square shower with twin doors is highly practical and spacious.



Side doors with inner glazed panels by each dinette are a nice feature - as is the light above each table, which provides diffuse and focused illumination.

Bedroom

The large fixed double berth is at the heart of the master bedroom. The bed curves in towards the bow, to match the shape of the cabin and hull. The matt finish of the white cabin lining, plus the continuation of the under-gunwale lighting, make the space feel quite big. Unusually, the glazed forward doors have a sliding hatch above, which makes them more useable than just a set of emergency exit doors. Either side of the doors are the low-level vents, set into the bulkhead, which could create draughts at head height in winter.

A nifty set of lit-up flaps give a space for a drink, while mains sockets either side provide charging for phones. There is also another double mains socket at the bottom end of the bed – great for a vacuum cleaner or winter frost heater. Under the bed is access to the bow-thruster, with more storage further aft in the form of big, deep drawers.

Good storage and a well-positioned washbasin in the bathroom.

Against the aft bulkhead is a full-height wardrobe, with hanging space in the upper half and drawers at the base. There is enough floor space to move around and get dressed, with room for a free-standing laundry basket, if required. There is another large radiator in here as well to keep things warm – though with such excellent insulation and double-glazed windows, the boat will be snug and virtually condensation free year round.

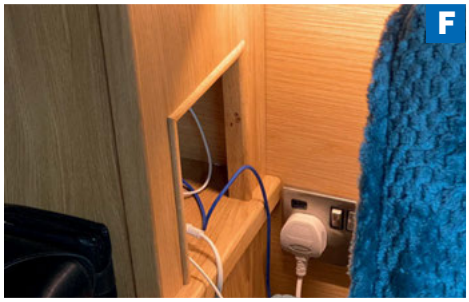
Propulsion and services

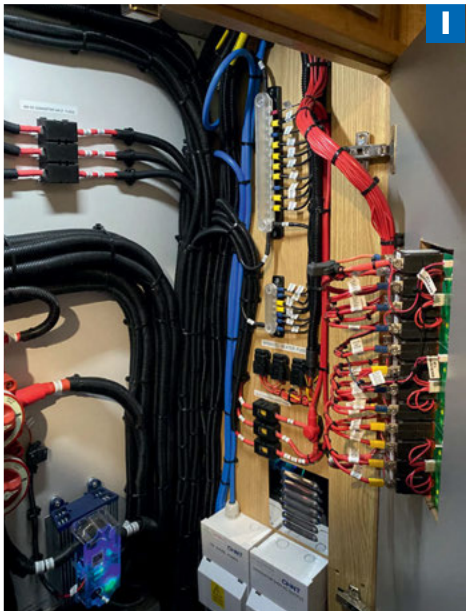
Having had a conventional diesel engine in their shared-ownership narrowboat, Steve and Jill were very keen to have a serial hybrid propulsion system, with the aim of minimising the use of the generator. They have gone for a Vetus eLine system, which produces up to 11kW of output. This is a 48V motor, which draws power from the lithium iron phosphate batteries stored under the dinettes. Each 200Ah battery is 24V, so each pair of batteries is wired in series, then the four pairs in parallel give the required voltage and capacity. The system stores 41kWh of energy, with around 30kWh useable, assuming the bank is not dropped below 75% of capacity.

There is a low-speed (1,500rpm) 6.5kVA Vetus diesel generator, which is keel tank cooled with a dry exhaust, though the generator sits within its own sound-reducing enclosure. The motor itself is covered with a sturdy, removeable box that can safely be stood on while going down the weed hatch – some installations leave the motor vulnerable to accidental damage. The motor has its own skin tank for cooling as well.

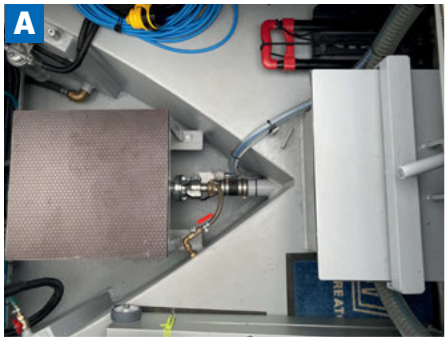
To charge the batteries, the generator output or shore power is routed through a 10kVA Victron Quattro combi inverter-charger. This is well-sized, both for charging the batteries and providing more than enough 230V power for the domestic loads – undersizing the charging system on a hybrid boat is poor practice.

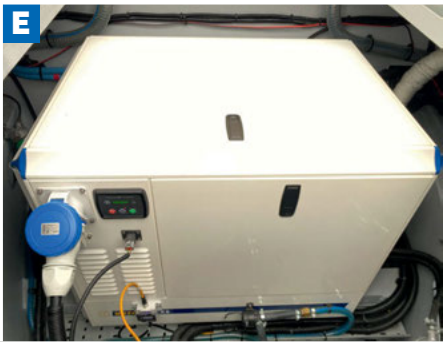
Bluewater has taken the other extreme and over-engineered the systems, including a high degree of redundancy. For example, instead





A The hatch above the front doors is useable, not just for escape and ventilation. Vents in the forward bulkhead might be draughty in winter. **B** The large towel radiator gives ample warmth in the bathroom. **C** The separating/composting loo is practical, with plenty of legroom around it (all users need to sit down with this type of toilet). **D** The wardrobe has a practical mix of hanging and drawer space. **E** A fixed large double berth right in the front of the boat has the bow-thruster under it and a lot of storage. **F** A cable organiser cubbyhole keeps things neat by the bookshelf. **G** Big drawers under the bed and a useful low-level power socket. **H** LED reading lights have a nightlight function. The fold-up mini table is useful, and includes a lightswitch and mains socket. **I** The electric system is heavily engineered and exceptionally neat.





A A cover in the engine bay protects the electric motor frame and shorepower cable, as yet unused and still coiled. **B** The 200Ah 24V batteries being sized up before being fitted underneath the dinettes. **C** The electrics cupboard has a mass of well-ordered cabling and components in a ventilated space. **D** At cruising speed the motor is running around 800rpm, drawing 40A (around 2kW). **E** The 6.5kVA low-speed diesel generator is quiet and can quickly recharge the battery bank, if required, as well as heat the hot water.

of a '12V service balance battery' supplied by a charger for domestic supply, there are three direct 48V-to-12V converters: one to supply the lighting, one to supply the shower and water pumps, and one to supply the Webasto heater. If a unit fails, supplies can easily be rerouted. The 13 solar panels, generating a maximum of 1,950W, are also split into two banks, each with a Victron 250/60 MPPT charge controller.

If that wasn't enough, the mains electric system is protected from stray earth currents when plugged into shore power, not by a simple, cheap (and possibly not that effective) galvanic isolator, but a proper 3,600W isolation transformer, which protects the line, neutral and earth, from any stray currents.

All of this is controlled by a Victron Cerbo GX touchscreen, which also links out via 4/5G to an app for remote monitoring. The electric motor and generator are controlled by the Vetus touchscreen, mounted just inside the aft doors, with linking to the Cerbo GX to auto start the genny, if required, when the battery reaches a certain level of discharge (and only at times prescribed, to avoid starting up during the night). The whole installation is absolutely meticulous in its tidiness, with every cable double-labelled so you know its function.

The hot water can be heated by the generator when running or from the Webasto diesel heating system. There is also a 1kW immersion in the calorifier, which could be run from the solar panels if there is an excess of charging.

Handling and underway

True Blue is a very quiet boat. The motor is barely a hum and, unless you're going full throttle, it's often drowned out by the noise of water around the stern.

On the day of our test, a broadside wind in the marina could have made things tricky, but the boat reversed well and turned in the marina without issue. The variable control bow-thruster is useful when performing turns, but the boat handles really well.

Approaching a very busy Cropredy Wharf, a combination of moored boats and approaching hire craft meant some very close-quartered boat handling, not helped by overhanging bushes around the site of an old lift-bridge. The electric motor can be run very slowly, almost down to just a few revolutions, much slower than a conventional diesel – this makes handling the boat so much easier.

When we had a chance to speed up, the boat moved very well with almost zero wash, despite being on a narrow and very shallow section of canal. The tiller was quite light – more so than the similar design on *Essex Girl*, possibly due to reduced prop wash from the electric motor turning a much smaller prop on *True Blue*.

Cruising at a healthy canal pace, with around 800rpm prop speed, draws around 40A, which is roughly 2kW power draw. This gives around 15 hours' useable cruising from the battery bank, assuming no energy input. While out for two hours' cruising, typical of canal use, including two locks and passing a lot of moored boats, we used 5% of the battery bank (2kWh).

During the unseasonably poor weather of our test, the solar panels were still putting out 360W, with domestic loads taking around half of that. On sunny days, upwards of 1,400W output is common. So far, the generator only runs infrequently and, as yet, the owners have not even plugged into mains electric at the marina. Indeed, the shore power cable was still coiled in its original wrapping in the engine room!

WW VERDICT

True Blue is an exceptionally well-designed and engineered boat, built for someone who knows a huge amount about boating, by a company with a track record for building, from the baseplate up, exceptional inland steel boats.

David and Sharon Warner, the owners of Bluewater Boats, are very knowledgeable and work hard to ensure that their customers have the best experience when buying a genuine bespoke vessel. Though *True Blue* takes its inspiration from other recent Bluewater builds, it is genuinely different and a thoroughly fabulous craft, inside and out, that handles brilliantly.