Chris M. Jones discusses the historical details of his favourite artworks produced for WW’s sister publication NarrowBoat

Back in early 2006, WW Magazines published its first issue of NarrowBoat – a title that not only broke the mould in being dedicated entirely to the history and heritage of the waterways, but also by having an illustrated front cover – a brave thing for a publication that would be heavily reliant on historical photos.

The new quarterly title rapidly built up a large and loyal following and its carefully constructed front covers of bygone canal-carrying scenes have become its signature feature, setting the tone for its high production values and helping it stand out on newsagents’ displays.

The illustrations are the work of the magazine’s long-term contributor and now History Editor, Chris M. Jones, who has combined his passion for waterways heritage and art. Although his work often depicts the waterways of a century or more ago, he elects not to use conventional watercolours or oils but that most modern of methods – computer generation, which enables him to achieve a high degree of realism.

As well as producing an attractive image, Chris’s primary consideration is to ensure that his work is as historically accurate as possible. His main source material is, unsurprisingly, archive photographs, which enable him to exactly replicate such minuscule details as styles of lettering, rigging, ropes and the attire of the working boaters.

It is also this insistence on realism that sets Chris’s work apart from other historical waterways art, which tends to give a romanticised, ‘chocolate-box’ view of the past. For Chris, genuine accuracy is about capturing the workaday aspects of the cut: if a boat’s paintwork is likely to be faded, or a boatman’s face blackened by coal dust, he’ll show it as such.

His authentic portrayal of life on the cut is certainly popular with NB readers, particularly among ex-working boaters and those from canal backgrounds, and his work has sparked many a discussion in the magazine’s letters pages.

Next year, Chris will produce his 50th cover for the magazine, and we felt it was time his work was given a spotlight in WW. So, we asked him to talk us through the historical aspects of a selection of his favourite illustrations in his own words.

There are a number of photographs in existence showing the steam narrowboats of well-known carrier Fellows, Morton & Clayton underway on canals. However, in this image I wanted to highlight the fact that these boats were also operated, fully laden, on rivers, as shown here on the tidal Thames at Silvertown in east London, not far from where the Thames Barrier is today.

Although the boats would have been under the command of licensed Thames Watermen, one of whom can be seen at the stern in his blue uniform, navigating tidal waters was a risky business and the boatmen needed to be skilled.

In order to emphasise the danger of travelling so far downstream from the Pool of London, I’ve shown a westerly torrential summer storm whipping up the incoming flood tide and making for choppy waters. The darkened sky also highlights the plumes of smoke from the steamer’s funnel to dramatic effect – a detail that could have been lost on a brighter day.

This is an imagined scene with various details, such as architecture, boats, ship and lighter, taken from old photographs.
If this illustration of the Warwick & Napton Canal (today’s northern Grand Union) were an old photo reproduced in a book, the caption would almost certainly refer to the new modern railway forging ahead and leaving the antiquated canals behind. In fact, the picture shows that the boat’s owner Charles Nelson used both inland craft and railway wagons to distribute his cement products around the country. Several traders used a combination of boats and wagons to play the canal and railway companies off one another to keep their rates down. Nelson had three wooden steamers, all quite different in appearance at the stern, with the boat shown here, Jupiter, having a distinctive upswept V-shaped counter. This and other details in the illustration were taken from a poor-quality old photo, though it was worth the effort purely to show this unusual type of craft.

I’ve long been interested in the boats that ran in and out of the Potteries area of North Staffordshire, particularly their appearance and resplendent decoration. As such, when the magazine published a feature on the famous fleet of Potter & Son of Runcorn, it provided the perfect opportunity to illustrate a full-length boat in all its decorative glory and give an insight into its rig and how the cargo was stowed. Fortunately I was able to find an old grainy photo of a Potteries boat at just the right angle, which I studied to get the proportions reasonably accurate. Recreating the decorative paintwork of a 19th-century boat was difficult as so few detailed photos of them exist. Still, I’m confident it is as accurate as I can make it, having used a number of images which give mere glimpses of paintwork. One cheeky indulgence of mine was to paint the cabin block with a scene from Moby Dick with the famous white whale spouting a plume of water while under attack by Captain Ahab’s crew in a rowing boat.

When it comes to the crew of any boat, I usually try to show their faces to some degree, even if it is in profile; on this occasion, however, it was not possible due to the boatwoman’s bonnet, so to compensate I added a child as an extra point of interest. Some artists paint pictures of boats without visible figures, but to me they always look strangely lifeless. Besides, to put boaters out of view is to potentially overlook a significant part of the canal-carrying story.
I am particularly proud of this image, which shows the entrance lock from the River Severn into the dock basin at Gloucester, with steam paddle tug Enterprise preparing to tow several narrowboats upstream at daybreak. It is also a reminder that in the world of commercial carrying there was no nine-to-five shift. Even the sailors aboard the nearest ship in the dock basin are already at work, preparing for another voyage.

I created this image purely from my imagination as the view is impossible to see in reality, unless suspended on a rope from a crane. The architectural details of the buildings and boats are taken from the study of old engravings, photos and even an oil painting in Gloucester Museum.

I’ve always been fascinated by ports, where narrowboats come into contact with barges and seagoing ships, though the events shown in this scene, with the boatmen waiting for the first tow of the day, would have been a routine part of their lives.

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Another of my favourite illustrations, this depicts a 19th-century scene of a longboat laden with coal from the Cannock coalfield on the River Severn downstream of Stourport.

The boatman at the tiller is based on a character in a wonderful old photo I uncovered. To some, his complexion might seem unusually dark, but this is probably what people looked like when they worked outdoors seven days a week.

Many boaters in the 19th century would have had a greater knowledge of boat-handling on river and canal navigations than their 20th-century descendants. In earlier times journeys were often much longer and boaters had to acquire many skills during their working lives.

The boat Ellen could easily have been fitted with a square sail set on a tall mast extension. It might even have had a water sail, which was a tarpaulin submerged beneath the surface so the current could fill it and propel the boat downstream. Note the heavy coiled rope on the cabin roof attached to a large lump of stone. This could be thrown overboard and dragged behind the boat to act as a mud anchor and allow the boatman to keep control of his craft should the current be too fierce following a spell of rain. Boaters of the 20th century would have heard about these techniques from their parents and others, but they would have no cause to use them due to the changing patterns of trade.
This image typifies the canal scene of the 1940s and '50s with the old boats looking shabby and tired as a consequence of their heavy wartime workloads and reduced dockings. Their condition is not a reflection on the working boaters but a consequence of the lack of investment in canals during this period. Also represented by the painted flags on the butty’s deckboard is the sense of patriotism after the victory of World War II.

The boats belong to S.E. Barlow, who was a major carrier on the south Midlands canals. At the time when British Waterways was painting its craft in the infamous blue-and-yellow livery, Barlow made an effort to keep his boats in the traditional style.

What is particularly noticeable is the craft’s coal-stained paintwork which no amount of mopping down would remove. Those born after 1970 may not realise just how filthy the country was back then, when, long after the Clean Air Act of 1956 was passed, every surface of towns and cities was covered in a layer of soot.
We rarely experience severe winter weather nowadays, but years ago spells of intense cold were fairly routine during the season, with the canals freezing up for days or weeks, forcing the canal companies to put their ice-boats into action. Ice-breaking was always carried out with reluctance as it was an expensive business and there was no guarantee that the boatmen would move their craft once the canal was opened. No boatman wanted to leave their mooring to be stuck in iced-over countryside miles from shops and stables after another overnight freeze. Managers of large fleets could order their men to move but many coal boatmen were independent carriers and could do as they pleased.

This image has a hidden story in the sunken boat in the background. John Walker, whose name is painted on the cabin side, was an independent boatman who owned a small fleet of motors, butties and horse-boats, and was employed by Ovaltine to carry coal to its works at Kings Langley. Walker could be relied upon to make deliveries while the company slowly acquired its own fleet over several years and spread the capital outlay as easy credit did not exist back then. This is how some smaller fleets came into existence with people like John Walker playing an important role in canal carrying.

The sad part of the story is that Walker fell foul of the Great Depression of the early 1930s – with no work, the sunken boat has been left to rot.

One of my favourite pictures is this scene of T.W. Toovey’s wide boat Langley. I had to use a photo to get the proportions right, which was essential as the craft has such attractive lines and fine decoration. Illustrating a wide-beam craft in a portrait format page is never an easy job but this angle, viewed from above, shows off its decoration, proportions, rig and working appearance. I was tempted to show the boat in bright sunshine to enhance the decoration but the strange theatrical light shining from the left enhances the boat shape and makes it twice as good, at least in my view.