

Inland Waterways News

Electric boats (Part 1. Part 2 appears in Winter 2002 edition)

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How are submarines powered? Why, by electricity, or at least by electricity produced by either diesel or nuclear gensets. Now, I'm not suggesting for a moment that you install a small nuclear device in your prized '67 Freeman, but what if you just used the mains to charge a set of batteries, and cruised all day for a pittance?

Surprisingly, it is not only possible, but becoming increasingly popular in inland waterways in England, the States and Switzerland. The traditional wisdom is that, despite the obvious advantages of quietness, low running costs and virtually nil maintenance, electric boats are slow, don't accelerate and have limited range. In fact, as the owner of the only true electric inboard in the country (as far as I know: let me know if you have one) I can vouch that nothing could be further from the truth. How does the world record for an electric boat of 135 knots grab you? Or 24 hours cruising on one set of batteries at an average of 4.5 knots? Of course, it's the old story: you can have only two out of these three characteristics: cheap, good or fast.

In my opinion, though, inland (and I stress inland) waterway cruising is not about haring from A to B in the shortest possible time. So take your time, unwind, listen to the birds — and go electric boating, as I've done with the middle one of my three boats (15' petrol outboard, 20' inboard electric and 26' inboard diesel).

The classic Thames launches of the late 1800s had only three power options — oars, steam engines or electric motors — given that the internal combustion engine had not yet been invented and that horses were deemed unsuitable for cruising, the ladies and gentlemen being what they were. By the early 1900s, there were several hundred electric boats, a well established network of recharging points and a thriving industry. Then along came the internal combustion engine, when fuel was cheap and plentiful, and within ten years the electric boats had vanished. By 1980, when the first of the oil crises struck, a lot of the relatively quiet petrol engines had been replaced by the noisy, smoky, smelly diesel and the idea of a simpler way had been lost to all but the cognoscenti.

The simplicity of the electric powered boat has to be seen to be believed. There is only one moving part in the typical electric set-up, and it can turn in either direction, thus obviating the need for a gearbox. Running costs? Well, laughable really. A day's cruising for 50p? Yes! The annual service? Allow £20 for a set of brushes and a little battery terminal grease.

I'll talk more about the works in my next article, so don't go away, keep paying your subscription and I'll show you a whole new world! In the meantime, some websites that may be of interest: www.dcboat.com/electric.htm, electriclaunch.co.uk and www.rivedefrance.com for an electric-powered Haynes 43 on the Canal du Midi.

