SHQ: Why are canal boats covered in beautiful artwork?

During the Victorian era, canal barges were used not only as a form of transport but also as homes for many people. Canal boats can still be seen today on our canals and those of you that have been to Sutton Cheney Wharf near Market Bosworth will have seen some of the boats there covered in beautiful hand-painted art. But why do the boats have all these paintings on them and why are the pictures often of flowers or castles? Here are some facts to help answer this question:

Before canals, goods had to be transported by horse and cart along muddy, pot-holed roads. Boats could move much larger loads and very quickly canals became cheaper and quicker forms of transport.

Did you know that canal boats could carry 30 times more weight than a horse and cart?

The cabins (the living quarters of the boats) were tiny and looked set to stay that way.

The wives and other women folk of the boatmen took great pride in their boat-homes and the limited space on board made them even more determined to make every item bright and attractive.

The boat families were poor and lived in cramped conditions, so it was only natural for them to paint their dreams on their walls and precious barge ware. Although this era of art was often referred to as the 'Roses and Castles' era It wasn't just pictures of roses and castles. Flowers could be anything from daisies and dahlias to chrysanthemums and pansies. The castles could also be country houses, churches, cottages and lighthouses.

The boat people wanted to appear as cultivated and refined as possible in front of Victorian land-dwellers who had a tendency to look down their noses at the people who lived on the barges with their dirty cargo and often illiterate children - being always on the move made school attendance difficult.

With brightly painted romantic landscapes covering every available surface, crocheted lace hanging in the cabin and everything scrubbed and polished, the boat men and women displayed their pride in their trade and created solidarity with their fellow boaters.

The invention of the Railway meant competition for many canals. Trains were faster than boats and it soon became cheaper to send goods by railway than by canal. This led to a steady decline in the use of canals to transport cargo.

By the 1960s many working boats were no longer in use due to competition from the roads and railways. Some were converted into leisure boats while others fell into disrepair. A few have now been repaired and restored to how they would have looked.

This week, we would like you to try to create a piece of 'canal art' by choosing a design from one of the many webs sites which show pictures of artwork (some helpful references are listed below).

Choose your colours carefully – remember, the artwork you see on canal boats was always brightly coloured.

If you are not sure, choose a simple design – a single flower or a castle tower.

You can use felt-tips, pencil crayons, or paints. Make your artwork as bright as possible.

We look forward to seeing some of your creations.

Useful websites to look at for ideas for your artwork: (there are lots of images too on the internet if you search for 'Roses and Castles Canal Boat Art)

https://canalrivertrust.org.uk/enjoy-the-waterways/canal-history/roses-and-castles-canal-folk-art

https://www.blackcountrymetalworks.co.uk/narrowboat-products.htm

This YouTube clip shows how to paint a canal boat rose:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tJWcN38Hgzk