


**Please cite the Published Version**

Kaaristo, Maarja  (2024) Pacemaking and placemaking on the UK canals. *Geographical Journal*, 190 (2). e12525 ISSN 0016-7398

**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.1111/geoj.12525>

**Publisher:** Wiley

**Version:** Published Version

**Downloaded from:** <https://e-space.mmu.ac.uk/633164/>

**Usage rights:**  [Creative Commons: Attribution 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

**Additional Information:** This is an open access article which originally appeared in *Geographical Journal*, published by Wiley.

**Data Access Statement:** The author elects not to share data due to ethical considerations (ethnographic data).

**Enquiries:**

If you have questions about this document, contact [openresearch@mmu.ac.uk](mailto:openresearch@mmu.ac.uk). Please include the URL of the record in e-space. If you believe that your, or a third party's rights have been compromised through this document please see our Take Down policy (available from <https://www.mmu.ac.uk/library/using-the-library/policies-and-guidelines>)

## SPECIAL SECTION

## Geographies of Inland Waterscapes

# Pacemaking and placemaking on the UK canals

Maarja Kaaristo 

Department of Marketing,  
International Business and Tourism,  
Manchester Metropolitan University,  
Manchester, UK

## Correspondence

Maarja Kaaristo, Department of  
Marketing, International Business and  
Tourism, Manchester Metropolitan  
University, BS.6.31 Business School,  
All Saints Campus, Manchester M15  
6BY, UK.  
Email: [m.kaaristo@mmu.ac.uk](mailto:m.kaaristo@mmu.ac.uk)

## Abstract

This paper focuses on the complex relationship between pace and place, offering a novel lens for understanding mobility within the context of canal boating. Drawing on fieldwork on the canals in north-west England, the paper focuses on mobile placemaking practices. Canal boats act as physical and material but also ideological pacemakers, guiding the boaters towards subscribing to the idea of slow living, where certain canal-based pace-myths play an important role. Pacemaking on the canals is therefore a form of placemaking, realised through the mobility of the vessel, materialities of the infrastructure, tempos and temporalities, representations and stories about canal life as well as the bodies on board and on towpaths as canal boaters modulate and manage their experience and performance of pace. The investigation of the interplay between the slow pace, rhythms, embodied practices, canal infrastructure, and the prevalent pace-myths offers valuable insights into the ways places are shaped by the pace of mobility, thus expanding the concept of placemaking. By foregrounding pace as a key concept in mobility studies, the paper demonstrates the need for a more nuanced understanding of the temporalities associated with different modes of movement.

## KEYWORDS

canals, mobility, pace, pacemaking, place, placemaking

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

There are over 5000 miles (8000 km) of navigable inland waterways (canals, (tidal) rivers, lakes, reservoirs) in Great Britain (Inland Waterways Association, 2021). The canals, constructed primarily in the latter half of the 18th century, played a pivotal role in transportation during the Industrial Revolution. However, as the railway system emerged in the mid-19th century, their usage gradually declined (Maw, 2018). Having lost their significance in transport, today's canals have transformed into industrial and natural heritage sites, subject to both 'bottom-up' (such as volunteer maintenance activities) and 'top-down' (such as extensive restoration projects or waterfront development) placemaking initiatives throughout the 20th and 21st centuries (Wincott et al., 2020). Consequently, the inland waterways have evolved into multifaceted spaces for living, working, commuting, leisure and tourism.

From a geographical perspective, canals and rivers can be seen as liquid, linear places, extending across various locations and locales and forming networks and rhizomes (Kaaristo, 2020a). In human geography, research has traditionally focused on the place-making aspects of the production, staging, performance and practice of places, with less

This is an open access article under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/) License, which permits use, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

The information, practices and views in this article are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the opinion of the Royal Geographical Society (with IBG).

© 2023 The Author. *The Geographical Journal* published by John Wiley & Sons Ltd on behalf of Royal Geographical Society (with the Institute of British Geographers).

emphasis on temporalities and timings. However, places are 'replete with temporal structures, phases, and paces at a range of scales' (Edensor, 2012, p. 54). Thus, like other places, waterways are also 'constituted through mobile practices along much wider and extensive networks of flows and mobilities' (Adey, 2017, pp. 96–97) and 'different speeds, tempos and rhythms of mobility are critical benchmarks for producing differences and contrast between and within places' (Germann Molz, 2010, p. 344).

Therefore, paying more attention to pace would enhance our theorisation of mobilities in geographical thinking (Iaquinto, 2018), and consequently, the relationship between place and pace. Yet, as Tim Edensor (2011, p. 189) states, the temporal aspects of mobilities have still not received enough attention. This statement remains relevant a decade later (see Amit & Salazar, 2020, p. 2). On the one hand, there has been an increase in studying places through rhythms following the renewed interest in Henri Lefebvre's (2004) rhythm analysis, rekindled after the publication of the English translation of the 1992 book. An important milestone in engaging with Lefebvre's work more meaningfully is the edited book *Geographies of Rhythm* (Edensor, 2010). However, compared to rhythm (e.g., Blue, 2019; Edensor, 2010, 2012; Mels, 2004; Walker, 2021), the notion of pace – especially in relation to place – has been much less discussed, even though 'the social practices of people-in-place create the daily rhythms and thus the pace of a place' (Amit & Salazar, 2020, p. 4). Significant exceptions to this include the work of Jennie Germann Molz (2009, 2010, 2018) and a recent edited book by Vered Amit and Noel Salazar, who recommend paying more 'attention to both temporal and spatial dimensions of mobility, through a focus on pace and pacing' (2020, p. 2).

In this paper, I will investigate pacemaking as a temporal aspect of placemaking, concentrating on boaters navigating the canal and river network in the United Kingdom and explore the potential of the 'new mobilities paradigm' (Hannam et al., 2006; Sheller & Urry, 2006) to reveal fresh perspectives on the connection between pace and place. The paper is structured as follows: I will begin by examining the literature on the dynamics of pace and place. After introducing the study methods, I will identify the key elements of pacemaking within the canal context, namely, materialities and meanings. A focus on boats and water as important pacemaking elements will allow an exploration of the sensory and embodied experiences of pace. Following this, I will analyse the representational dimensions of pacemaking, examining the creation and cultivation of the concept of a slow place within the waterway environment. This is followed by the conclusion demonstrating how pace plays a key role in how a waterway is experienced as a place. By interrogating the relationship between placemaking and pacemaking, the paper expands our understanding of how particular 'paced' practices make watery places.

## 2 | PACE WITHIN MOBILITIES THEORY

Mobility as a theoretical concept emphasises the importance of paying attention to how 'peoples, objects, images and information travel and hence produce and reproduce social life and cultural forms' (Urry, 2000, p. 49). Although the subject of movement itself is not new in human geography, it was often viewed 'a special and temporary phenomenon' (Olwig & Hastrup, 1997, p. 6), and approached with somewhat sedentarist and static assumptions about the societies and cultures before the emergence of a more coherent mobilities theory (Salazar & Glick Schiller, 2013). It was the body of academic literature belonging to the 'new mobilities paradigm' that began to seriously focus on the practices, embodied and sensory experiences, materialities, imaginations and power relations of mobilities and, by natural extension, immobilities (Hannam et al., 2006).

Considering the dynamics between mobilities and immobilities also requires paying greater attention to pace, which has been defined as speed or tempo of an activity or movement (Germann Molz, 2010, p. 330), or speed combined with rhythm (Iaquinto, 2018, p. 570). Examining the relationship between rhythm and pace is crucial: Germann Molz (2009) argues that the pace of movement is determined by rhythms, and Kaaristo (2020b, p. 60) similarly suggests that the convergence between velocity and rhythm is key to understanding pacing. In discussing leisure boating mobilities in England, Kaaristo (2020b, p. 73) further contends that the slow-paced boating life, as perceived by boaters, 'is a result of intersecting natural and administrative rhythms to which the boaters respond with particular practices and strategies'. It is therefore essential not only to consider pace but also to investigate the practice of 'pacing' by employing:

A deliberate emphasis on interrogating the momentum for a temporal composition of mobility, the rate at which people may seek to enact or deploy their movements, as well as the conditions – socioeconomic, political, financial, relational or aspirational – under which these moves are being marshalled, represented and contested. In other words, this is an emphasis on temporality as a form of action, a process of actively

modulating or responding to how people are moving rather than the more usual focus in mobility studies on where they are heading.

(Amit & Salazar, 2020, pp. 2–3)

Pacing, as an act or a practice, is controlled, directed and influenced by ‘pacemakers [which] may be regions or points in space, durations or instants in time or relations in space and time – their role is always the same, they “pace” behaviour’ (Parkes & Thrift, 1979, p. 360). Like a medical device that stimulates and regulates cardiac impulses, there are both human and non-human pacemakers in the world that determine the pace of human mobilities. For example, urban electric lights function as pacemakers for the city dwellers (Parkes & Thrift, 1979) while the rhythmic changes of daylight and darkness set the pace for canal boaters’ cruising every day (Kaaristo, 2020b).

In the perceived fast pace of modern life, characterised by hypermobility, increasingly technologically mediated lives, acceleration and time–space compression (Eriksen, 2001), pacemakers become ever more important, as they hold significant power over individuals’ lives. To counterbalance this fast-paced lifestyle, concepts related to ‘slow living’ (Parkins, 2004) encourage people to engage in their everyday lives more meaningfully by taking the time to appreciate the present moment and making sustainable and ecological choices. These ideas are often present in the way tourism and leisure are imagined and promoted, evoking feelings of nostalgia and a desire for a more idyllic and wholesome life (Dickinson & Lumsdon, 2010). Consequently, pace is not only ‘coded with particular ideological and moral significance in the cultural imaginary’ but also associated with a politics of mobility of Western modernity (Germann Molz, 2009, p. 271).

In other words, any pace is imbued with power because ‘the one who sets or regulates the pace is not necessarily the same person who is subject to pacing’ (Olwig, 2020, p. 187). However, it is crucial not to create a false equivalence by equating past temporalities with slowness and wholesome balance and assuming the contemporary time regime is fast and immediate. Various activities and practices can indeed have multiple paces, but these do not necessarily presuppose a shift between temporal regimes; instead, they ‘reveal the coexistence of multiple periodicities, and by implication a lack of coordination between scales and registers of temporal order’ (Shove et al., 2009, p. 3). Moreover, pace is not determined solely by temporalities but is also intertwined with spatialities. I will therefore next explore the connection between pace and place.

### 3 | PLACE AND PACE

Sheller and Urry (2006, p. 214) argue that research on mobilities should consider the physical and experiential aspects of various modes of movement, viewing them as a form of material and social ‘dwelling-in-motion’. Despite being ‘an essential component of the place ontology’, mobilities have largely been neglected in extant literature on place (Lassen & Laursen, 2021, p. 4). Place has often been conceived as a relatively fixed entity, defined by its tangible properties and various geographical and territorial boundaries that often form the basis of individuals’ self-perception, identity and belonging. Nevertheless, more recent theorisations of place view it as relational and constituted through a variety of networks and flows of humans, non-humans and materialities (Adey, 2017).

If place is to be understood as relational and fluid (Massey, 2005), mobility becomes one of its key characteristics (Bissell, 2020; Cresswell, 2006; Sheller & Urry, 2006). This means apprehending place as ‘a multi-temporal setting rather than a space frozen in time; as conditioned by human as well as non-human agencies; and as an affectively and sensorially inhabited environment’ (Edensor et al., 2020, p. 2). According to this perspective, mobilities have the power to affect, change and constitute places (Lassen & Laursen, 2021), and ‘any understanding of place needs to be sensitive to the diverse ways in which different kinds of mobility make and remake place’ (Bissell, 2020, p. 106). In other words, we must acknowledge that ‘it is not only people who move but ... places also shift their locations’ (Gregorič Bon & Repič, 2016, p. 1).

Water-going vessels have often been used as metaphors for the dynamism and flexibility of places. We are invited to ‘[i]magine place as being like a ship. It is not something that stays in one location but moves about within networks of agents, human and non-human’ (Hetherington, 1998, p. 185). Thinking about places, therefore, directs our attention to those materialities and their properties that make them meaningful: water bodies, for instance, are frequently perceived as key, even most attractive elements of a place (Völker & Kistemann, 2011). As Veronica Strang (2009, p. 199) explains, ‘water embodies nature itself, and even places that are plainly human artefacts (such as reservoir lakes) are rapidly re-configured as “natural” environments’ projecting calm, beauty and relaxation. Yet canals are more complex, as they are

perceived as concurrently 'natural' and 'unnatural' (Krause et al., 2020), attractive and unattractive (Pitt, 2018), and as nostalgic heritage sites as well as locations for waterfront property development (Wincott et al., 2020). These dynamic and lively places, composed of human, non-human, organic and inorganic subjects and objects such as water, the human and non-human animals, flora, boats and built environment (including various specific waterway structures such as the locks, bridges, tunnels, weirs) are thus places of juxtapositions and contradictions.

Parkes and Thrift (1979, p. 353) have argued that 'time makes space into place'. Indeed, places are often characterised by specific paces and 'people change places to change pace' (Amit & Salazar, 2020, p. 4), whether for vacations or change of residence. For example, New York, famously nicknamed 'The City That Never Sleeps' is thought of as busy and hectic. The Canal and River Trust (CRT), a charitable organisation that owns and manages nearly two-thirds of the waterways in the UK, emphasises waterways as slow-paced and charming rural and urban outdoor spaces with their towpath code of 'Share the space, drop your pace, it's a special place' (CRT, 2015, p. 7). Germann Molz (2018) refers to these narratives in which different places are associated with particular speeds, tempos and rhythms as 'pace-myths'. The tourism industry often utilises pace-myths, but they should not be mistaken for inherent properties of the places in question: 'pace-myths, especially those that represent certain places as inherently slow, tend to overlook the way these places are embedded in broader spatiotemporal constellations' (Germann Molz, 2018, section 'Deceleration').

A key pace-myth of the British canals is that they are places determined by slow pace, 'a specific form of spatio-temporal engagement with the world, which does not foreground speed and the destination, but rather the slow journey taken through waterway landscapes' (Duggan, 2021, p. 14). Here, the slow mobility of boats has become a signifier of slow living, a conscious and deliberate practice of trying to experience time in a more attentive and meaningful manner (Parkins, 2004). Yet, canals and rivers can also be places of frenetic activity as boaters rush around and must move quickly when operating locks and cyclists commute to work on busy towpaths (Bowles, 2016; Kaaristo et al., 2020). The pace of movement on canals, as well as in other places, is relational – 'there is no threshold or minimum limit to slowness or deceleration that we can use to judge particular instances against' (Vannini, 2014, p. 120). As Matteucci and Tiller (2022) demonstrate in their paper on package cycling tours as a form of slow tourism, the idea of pace is highly subjective and not linked to actual speed or mode of transportation. For the studied cycling tourists, having control over their pace is crucial to the concept of travelling slowly (Matteucci & Tiller, 2022, p. 10).

Canals are not merely passive settings for human activity, nor are they isolated entities detached from other places. Instead, 'people and place are inseparably linked' (Iaquinto, 2020, p. 339). As liquid linear places, relational and material, constantly changing socio-natural hybrids (Kaaristo, 2020a), canals, with their multiple mobilities and associated pace-myths of slowness and relaxation, are continuously recreated. Through ongoing place-making processes, various actors 'recognize, define, and create' places (Lew, 2017, p. 450), both spontaneously and experientially, as well as in a more planned and top-down manner (Courage et al., 2020). The 'murky, more brown than blue' canals embody ambiguous and ever-changing relationships, with people finding them simultaneously 'attractive and repellent, risky and relaxing' (Pitt, 2018, p. 162). On the waterways, the various placemaking activities that include engaging with their ecological, historical, infrastructural – and temporal – properties have therefore created a hybrid watery counter-spatiality (Gearey, 2024) 'for citizens to use, claim, feel and consume in different ways' (Wallace & Wright, 2022, p. 198).

## 4 | STUDY METHODS

Methodologically, this paper employs mobile ethnography (Büscher et al., 2011), as I moved alongside my research participants, including canal boaters, enthusiasts and volunteers on and near the waterways of north-west England. The methods for data co-creation were participant observation and semi-structured interviews. I regularly attended open meetings and public events of canal enthusiast societies as well as navigation authorities in Greater Manchester. I also volunteered monthly with local groups doing various maintenance tasks such as vegetation clearance, gardening, painting and litter-picking. Additionally, I joined holiday and liveaboard boaters, which allowed me to learn how to manoeuvre, steer and moor narrowboats as well as operate the locks, the majority of which are self-operated on British narrow canals. These various events, meetings and encounters on and near the waterways were recorded in the field diary.

In addition to participant observation, I conducted 20 interviews with British canal boaters, 8 women and 12 men, ranging in age from 24 to 82. The interviewees were all white and mostly middle class, therefore most of my findings presented in the analysis sections apply to this segment of canal boaters. However, data from my long-term participant observation on the canals are also used to demonstrate and discuss the socio-economic diversity of contemporary canal users in the UK. The interview locations were chosen by the research participants and took place



either on boats, canal-side, or in homes, cafes or offices. The semi-structured interview protocol was designed based on the literature reviewed prior to the start of the fieldwork and covered topics such as everyday life, sensory experiences, emotions, temporality and boating practice. I continuously modified this interview protocol based on my own boating experience gained through participant observation, for instance, adding more detailed questions about the technical and material aspects of boating as my boating competence grew. Participant observation also informed both the selection of and interaction with the interviewees (Honigsmann, 2003). The interviews lasted about an hour on average. All the interviewed research participants were given a participant information sheet prior to the interview, and all signed an informed consent form. All the interviewees, except for one, requested to be referred to using their first names when quoted directly. The interviews and field diaries were fully transcribed using the qualitative data management software NVivo, which I used for conducting thematic analysis of the interviews and field diaries. The software facilitated organisation and coding of the data, helping to identify key themes and patterns. A significant theme that emerged from the data was the slow pace of the canals, both in terms of the physical movement of the boat and the concept of a slower lifestyle. I will explore the main topics related to this theme in the analysis section below.

## 5 | ANALYSIS: INLAND WATERWAYS AS PACED PLACES

To gain a deeper understanding of the pace of a place, it is essential to consider the various mobile practices that regularly occur and shape the meaning, physical structure and purpose of that location (Binnie et al., 2007). The following analysis will focus on inland waterways as paced places, examining the two main topics that influence the pace on canals: materialities (such as the boat and water) that allow for the embodiment and practice of pace; and meanings, which encompass the perceptions and representations of canals and boating life.

### 5.1 | Material pacemakers: the boat and the water

The key material 'pacemaker' (Parkes & Thrift, 1979; Salazar, 2020) of canal life is the boat, most popularly a narrowboat, a type of boat with a maximum length of 72 ft (21.9 m) and width of under 7 ft (2.1 m) designed specifically for the narrow canals in the UK (see Figure 1). The relaxed pace of canal life is primarily facilitated by the slow movement of canal boats, as the speed limit on the UK's narrow canals is 4 mph (6.4 kmph). To maintain this speed, boaters must coordinate their physical, technical and material interactions with the boats and canal infrastructure, involving navigation, manoeuvring, mooring, handling ropes and operating locks and swing bridges.

One of the crucial tasks when steering the boat is to ensure the vessel is moving at a correct pace, achieved by regularly looking behind and checking the water trail, the wash, behind the boat. When waves or the wash hitting the canal banks are visible, the speed should be reduced (Fallon, 2012). This is a necessary step to prevent harm to the canal banks, avoid debris from entering the water, and prevent objects such as discarded ropes or clothing items from the canal bed from becoming entangled in the boat's propeller, which may cause the boat to become immobile for a shorter or longer period. There are also other reasons to maintain a slow and steady pace well below the maximum limit, such as ensuring not to disturb anglers often seen sitting along the towpath or avoiding damage to your own or other boats, as well as canal infrastructure in general when approaching locks, bends, junctions and bridges. Pacing the canal cruising, therefore, depends on an interplay between the visual, auditory and tactile elements, as the boater needs to keep an eye on the surroundings, hold the tiller and respond to it as necessary, all the while listening to the sound of the engine. This allows for, as well as requires, more attentive engagement with the surrounding environment, enhancing the boater's awareness of sounds, smells and visual cues, contributing to the development of a distinctive relationship with the canal and the overall perception of place (cf. Matless, 2005).

These physical properties of canal life also bring with them a certain ideology or philosophy of slow living, often referred to as 'boat time' by boaters (Bowles, 2016), which means appreciating a more mindful and slow-paced way of life. The pacemaking capability of the canal boat becomes a means of consciously slowing down, which in turn becomes an important feature for placemaking, as slow pace becomes 'synonymous with canals' (Fallon, 2012, p. 149). Slowness on the canal is therefore 'more than anti-speed. ... Rather, slow is embodied in the qualities of rhythm, pace, tempo and velocity that are produced in the sensory and affective relationship between the traveller and the world'



**FIGURE 1** Slow pace of a moving place: a narrowboat navigates the Ashton Canal in Manchester. *Source:* Author's own photo.

(Fullagar et al., 2012, p. 3). This is characterised by certain pensiveness and attentiveness to the environment, brought about by the abundance of time as the vessel allows its inhabitants to connect more deeply to the whole of canal network:

I like the fact that you move – I quite like a holiday, where you're not just in one place all the time, but you have that autonomy over where you go and how far you go. And the fact that the speed – because of the nature of the boat, you can't go any faster than the boat goes, and it forces your whole kind of outlook to slow down in a way. That kind of steadiness about it, there aren't waves and there aren't bumps. You're just going along, it's a steady and smooth pace. It's so peaceful and gentle. And you can just sit there. Especially when my friend was steering, and I was just sort of sitting at the front of the boat and watching the world go by or reading. And the sun's out and countryside's lovely, and it feels so pleasant and 'yeah, this is how it should be!' If life was at this speed, everybody would be far less stressed and there would be no war [laughs].

(Angela, 41)

However, the ideology of slow-paced canal life is not by any means a universal for all boaters and the practice of boating is not always necessarily only characterised by slowness. Instead, multiple paces can be at play at any given time, or the boat can sometimes also become a constricted and confining space that, depending on the number of people on board, can feel slightly overwhelming or sometimes just boring.

When it rains, we did feel a bit, it felt a bit claustrophobic. A bit like, well, I know we've got quite a few locks coming up on this stretch and it's pouring down with rain – and I don't really want to, so let's just moor it and sit here and be miserable for half a day.

(Hannah, 34)

The same pacemaking materialities that determine the slow pace of boating can also act as catalysts for very fast-paced activities. Operating the locks is normally a faster-paced activity, especially if there is a queue of boats waiting to get through. Additionally, should any kind of problem occur when going through a lock, boaters would need to react very quickly to the changing circumstances around them to avoid the boat sinking. This is something that can happen very quickly: should water get in, a narrowboat could sink within minutes. 'Inevitably, [boating] pace appears to be totally different. It's slower, you know. Unless an emergency happens on the boat, then you're scrambling around, thinking, "Oh, I gotta do that; I forgot to do that; let me go back and do that"', as Derek (75) explains. Less dramatically, boaters also sometimes race against time to find a mooring space before it goes dark – boating in the darkness is inconvenient and for the hired boats it is also prohibited.

Additionally, the main conflicts on the canal also revolve around pace: one of the primary issues boaters describe is their perception that cyclists are going too fast on the canal towpaths. Similarly, boaters must be considerate of other moored boats when passing them, adopting the right speed so as not to upset the socially accepted pace of the canals:

I mean, it's very nice and slow and relaxed – and people walking past us. But we got told off quite early on because it's very difficult to judge your speed. So, we were going through a moored-up area and despite, you know, the sign saying, 'Please slow down for moored boats' – we did slow down, but clearly not enough to their liking. So, after being told off a couple of times, it's just realising what speed people wanted us to go past.

(Darren, 41)

Negotiating these different paces can sometimes create certain tensions and contestations (Kaaristo et al., 2020). Therefore, while the canal boats and water are the key pacemaking materialities of the canal life, the notion of a slow pace of living on the waterways is also a place-myth (Germann Molz, 2018) to an extent, since in practice boating enables both speed and slowness on the canal.

Additional important material pacemakers of the canal are the canal infrastructure, which allow boaters to interact with the history and heritage of this environment through physical engagement with the various artefacts, buildings and places. The use of historic infrastructure enables boaters to have a close connection to the past, as they navigate through 200-year-old working heritage assemblages. For example, canal locks still operate in the same way they did when they were first built, with boaters using windlasses (L-shaped handles) to manually wind paddles to fill and empty the locks. Through their physical engagement with the environment, boaters can observe signs of wear and tear on stone bridges, bollards and lock-side stone surfaces that have been slowly worn away over the years. These materialities serve as tangible evidence of past boating communities and create a connection with history (Bowles, 2016; Kaaristo & Visentin, 2023).

The slow pace of journeys on canal boats is a complex performance of mobility, place and pace: the canals are linear places, forming a network of thousands of miles, and it is the mobility of the boat that links these various locations and environments through which the boat travels. Travelling at a slower pace allows for a more immersive experience of the environment for the boaters, with more opportunities to see, hear and feel the surroundings, with the pace generating divergent sensations. Practising pace on the waterways is physical and often intentional, as it amplifies the perception of the locations the boat travels through. The boat is a moving place, wherein tempos are expertly carried out and the configuration of human and boat simultaneously serves as a pacemaker and placemaker. Yet, this experience of mobility on the water is more than just the interplay between pace and materialities; the meanings ascribed to this particular type of movement are important as well. I will discuss these meanings next.

## 5.2 | Meanings of the slow pace of canal life

The pace of life on the canal is explained in the boating manual, *How to Be a Considerate Boater*, created by a waterways training centre to teach beginners boating etiquette. 'The idea of owning a boat is to get away from the high-speed motorway driving and slow down to a pace that is relaxing and gives you time to think and look at your surroundings' (WWT, 2017, online). However, when boaters talk about the slowness of the canals, they mean more than just the



physical speed of 4 mph. The canal boats create not only physical but also a social and cultural pace, which can differentiate canal life from life on dry land, sometimes perceived to be governed by the 'tyranny of the moment' (Eriksen, 2001).

Well, when you live in London, it's all very hectic and very rushed, the sea of humanity of the people all around you. So, it's nice to get away and have a bit of space and feel relaxed. It's different to driving a car, where you're having to concentrate all of the time. Here, you have to concentrate, but not with the same intensity. So, it's the change of the pace of life, which is nice. It's good to have that opportunity to do that. So I'll go back nice and relaxed and fresh.

(David, 68)

The speed limit imposed by navigation authorities, out of concern for the physical canal infrastructure, results in a particular pacing system. This is expressed in boaters' self-regulation and management of temporal practices on the canals, which are determined by the imposition and self-imposition of a value and ideology system centred on the idea of slowness. While liveaboard boaters juxtapose their lives on board with those living on dry land (Bowles, 2016), leisure boaters compare the time spent on their boats with other activities such as work, vacations and daily life at home. For them, the boat becomes a pacing machine that allows for active switches between the perceived accelerated life at home and the slower life on water characterised self-reliance, sustainable living, resistance to consumerism, a strong community spirit and a connection to nature and its elements (Smith, 2007).

This purposeful deceleration by boaters is valorised by society at large, as it embodies the British canals' prominent pace-myths (Germann Molz, 2018) of 'slow living' and 'slowing down'. These myths are evident in the UK media narratives of the past decade as exemplified by popular TV programmes such as *Great Canal Journeys*, *Canal Boat Diaries* or *Barging Round Britain*. In 2012, the Canal and River Trust was established, replacing British Waterways. While emphasising the significance of the past, the CRT also pledged to create a brand-new future. The organisation's original slogan, 'Keeping people, history, and nature connected', highlighted a crucial layer of boaters' perception of temporality and their surroundings, demonstrating the ongoing material presence of the individuals in the place-making process as well as the natural or manufactured objects utilised in various time and space specific practices (Pred, 1984, p. 280).

The canal heritage encompasses numerous historical landmarks, such as 50 scheduled monuments, over 2700 listed structures and four UNESCO world heritage sites, in addition to the waterways themselves. Some boaters view the slow-paced canal as almost a time-travelling device that serves as a prompt for their historical imaginations and provides an authentic backdrop to their everyday lives:

You've got the engineering, which is the aqueducts, you've got the overbridges, you have the roving bridges where the canal towpath changes from one side to the other. Each canal was built in accordance with the local available materials, so they have a uniqueness in that, let it be bricks, stone or metal. If you cruise in Birmingham, they've got lots of cast iron bridges, which have the name of the foundry stamped into them, like Horseley. We're now said to be post-industrial nation and yet there's all the heritage from these things to show. You have the canal side buildings, it's good to see they are brought back into the use, even if it was another function, rather than buildings just being demolished. And to me the landscape of a canal is not necessarily the countryside, but within the city.

(Barry, 66)

Nevertheless, the predominantly white and middle-class canal boaters in north-west England do not wave to every stranger they encounter on the towpath, nor do TV programmes feature the equally slow pace of other activities that occur on towpaths or beneath bridges and underpasses. These activities can involve houseless people spending time in tents set up along the canal under railway arches or motorways built over the canals, or shadowy figures under bridges, lingering for hours (waiting to sell or buy drugs, sex, or both). Their stillness and slow practices are often perceived as antisocial or undesirable, particularly when night falls. Canals, with their sometimes-secluded towpaths and numerous bridges and tunnels, are therefore also places that afford engagement in practices that need to be hidden from gaze of the public or CCTV cameras (Atkins & Laing, 2012). While the unhurried movement of middle-class boaters is frequently associated with eco-friendliness, sustainable living and authenticity (Germann Molz, 2018), the similarly slow-paced placemaking practices of other individuals can be viewed as problematic, dangerous or unsettling.

Some urban areas along the canals are known for antisocial behaviour, including boat vandalism incidents. While these occurrences are often isolated, they can be perpetuated in guidebooks and media discourse, shaping boaters' and the general public's expectations and perception of these areas.

Most of it was rural, but I do remember going on to some kind of concrete kind of bridges and things like that – graffiti and things, yeah. Oh, yeah – we did get shouted at by some, you know, young lads, when we were going through one part. So that was an interaction of a not particularly welcome variety. I think we were mainly slightly concerned that they might start throwing things at us. I think it was just towards the end of our trip, when we started going through urbanesque, I would say, it wasn't through a built-up area.

(Hannah, 34)

In contrast to the present perception of the slow pace of canal life, canals were once working spaces where boatpeople aimed to move their cargo as quickly as possible. Canals themselves were considered fast and efficient means of transportation compared with the roads of the time (Sidaway et al., 1995). However, as transportation and commerce have shifted to other forms and canals have become more recreational, the pace of canal life has slowed down. This slowness is now not just a physical speed but also a social and cultural pace, valued and embraced by canal boaters. There are people who reside on waterways primarily due to necessity, as older canal boats can be relatively affordable, rather than choosing this lifestyle for its unique temporal qualities. Nevertheless, a significant number of canal dwellers do embrace the concept of 'boat time' (Bowles, 2016) and the distinctive tempo that comes with it, whether it was their primary motivation for moving onto a boat or not. Canal boating today involves a reimagining of the past, present and future, manifested through the practice of boating itself. Yet, this practice is distinct from its historical counterpart, as its meaning has changed over time with canals transforming from bustling spaces of working boats to slow-paced places for leisure and wellbeing, even if the tempo of the boats has remained similar.

The slow pace of canal life is a central aspect of the boating experience, encompassing physical speed, but also social and cultural tempo. It is imposed by canal infrastructure and speed limits but is also embraced by boaters seeking a mindful and sustainable lifestyle. Society at large valorises this slow pace as it embodies the myth of 'slow living', highlighting the natural environment and canal history, often also reflected in media and television programmes. However, it is crucial to recognise the complexity of pace and its varying perceptions depending on power relations and context. Although the slow pace of canal life can provide an alternative experience of time and mobility, perceptions of this pace may vary across societal groups, influenced by power dynamics and the context.

## 6 | CONCLUSION

Canals embody a unique 'meshing of time (ruination), space (channels, paths, routes, verges), human hand (engineers, dredgers, boaters, conservationists) and nature (principally, water)' (Wallace & Wright, 2022, p. 189). This convergence fosters a distinctive socio-natural landscape, interweaving complex connections among land, water, humans, animals, urban and rural areas, organic and non-organic materials, various tempos, temporalities, images and symbols. Through the analysis of how boaters engage with the waterways in north-west England, this paper has discussed how the waterways as places are shaped by the slow pace of mobility and examined how the pace of movement of humans and non-humans through space and time leads to the creation and recreation of watery places. By highlighting the notion of pace-myths, acknowledging that canals are not always solely defined by slowness, and delving into the power dynamics that shape perceptions of pace, the paper contributes to our understanding of the temporalities of mobility and demonstrates how places can be formed through the slow pace of movement.

The canals and rivers in the UK are complex hydro-social systems featuring heritage civil engineering structures that are essential components of the country's (post)industrial landscape. Canal mobilities are largely determined by (and dominantly relate to) the canal boats as key pacemakers. The lived experiences of boaters and their relationships with their boats as material entities are central to understanding how places emerge through temporal practices. Boat movement is an interplay of mobility and immobility; as slowly moving places, boats are experienced both through and as lived experience and they function as pacemakers of the canalscape, guiding the bodies to be paced in ways that alone they could not. Boaters adapt to the 'boat time' (Bowles, 2016) of canal life, accepting boats as significant pacemakers and subscribing to the prevalent pace-myths (Germann Molz, 2018) of slow-paced living on the waterways. However, maintaining this pace requires conscious effort and attention.

Pacemaking on the canals is therefore a form of placemaking, co-created by the mobility of the vessel, materialities of the infrastructure, tempo and temporality, the bodies as well as the ideas and ideals of those on board. As a practice, canal boating is characterised by the simultaneous slow-paced mobility (Fallon, 2012) and quicker actions during specific tasks, such as going through the locks (Bowles, 2016), all the while being influenced by the various faster-paced institutional rhythms (Blue, 2019) of those who live on land. As boaters (consciously) shift their habitual temporal regimes, the change of pace can be simultaneously attractive and restrictive.

Mobilities involve not just movement but also coordination with materialities and their meanings within a timeframe. Many boaters' relationships with canal history and heritage contribute to a sense of temporality maintained through the engagement with historical canal materialities. Appreciating the past, boaters envision a future where the ideas of nature, (industrial) heritage and community aspects coalesce, fostering a distinctive understanding of pace and place. Pacemaking can therefore be seen as a temporal dimension of placemaking that highlights the ways in which pace is not simply a characteristic of movement, but also plays an essential role in the formation and experience of places. As such, this study has enriched the broader discourse on the temporalities of mobility by focusing on the role of pace in placemaking. Future areas for research could include the ways in which various individuals and communities navigate and manage different paces in a rapidly changing world, as well as the broader implications of the shifting temporalities for urban planning, heritage management and the promotion of more sustainable lifestyles.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Professor Gary Warnaby, Dr Francesco Visentin, Dr Phil Emmerson and the two anonymous reviewers for their feedback and support.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The author elects not to share data due to ethical considerations (ethnographic data).

## ORCID

Maarja Kaaristo  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2803-0418>

## REFERENCES

- Adey, P. (2017) *Mobility*. London, UK; New York, NY: Routledge.
- Amit, V. & Salazar, N.B. (2020) Why and how does the pacing of mobilities matter? In: Amit, V. & Salazar, N.B. (Eds.) *Pacing mobilities: Timing, intensity, tempo and duration of human movements*. New York, NY; Oxford, UK: Berghahn Books, pp. 2–17.
- Atkins, M. & Laing, M. (2012) Walking the beat and doing business: Exploring spaces of male sex work and public sex. *Sexualities*, 15(5–6), 622–643. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1363460712445984>
- Binnie, J., Edensor, T., Holloway, J., Millington, S. & Young, C. (2007) Mundane mobilities, banal travels. *Social & Cultural Geography*, 8(2), 165–174. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14649360701360048>
- Bissell, D. (2020) Mobilities and place. In: Edensor, T., Kalandides, A. & Kothari, U. (Eds.) *The Routledge handbook of place*. London, UK; New York, NY: Routledge, pp. 99–108.
- Blue, S. (2019) Institutional rhythms: Combining practice theory and rhythmanalysis to conceptualise processes of institutionalisation. *Time & Society*, 28(3), 922–950. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0961463X17702165>
- Bowles, B.O.L. (2016) 'Time is like a soup': Boat time and the temporal experience of London's Liveaboard boaters. *The Cambridge Journal of Anthropology*, 34(1), 100–112. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.3167/ca.2016.340110>
- Büscher, M., Urry, J. & Witchger, K. (Eds.) (2011) *Mobile methods*. Abingdon, UK; New York, NY: Routledge.
- Canal and River Trust (CRT). (2015) *Better towpaths for everyone. A national policy for sharing towpaths*. Canal and River Trust. Available from: <https://canalrivertrust.org.uk/refresh/media/thumbnail/8535-national-towpath-policy.pdf>
- Courage, C., Borup, T., Jackson, M.R., Legge, K., McKeown, A., Platt, L. et al. (Eds.) (2020) *The Routledge handbook of placemaking*. London, UK: Routledge.
- Cresswell, T. (2006) *On the move: Mobility in the modern Western world*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Dickinson, J. & Lumsdon, L. (2010) *Slow travel and tourism*. London, UK; Washington, DC: Earthscan.
- Duggan, M. (2021) Cruising landscape-objects: Inland waterway guidebooks and wayfinding with them. *Cultural Geographies*, 29, 167–183. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1474474020987247>
- Edensor, T. (Ed.) (2010) *Geographies of rhythm: Nature, place, Mobilities and bodies*. Farnham, UK: Ashgate.
- Edensor, T. (2011) Commuter: Mobility, rhythm and commuting. In: Cresswell, T. & Merriman, P. (Eds.) *Geographies of mobilities: Practices, spaces, subjects*. Farnham, UK and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, pp. 189–204.
- Edensor, T. (2012) The rhythms of tourism. In: Minca, C. & Oakes, T. (Eds.) *Real tourism: Practice, care, and politics in contemporary travel culture*. London, UK: Routledge, pp. 54–71.

- Edensor, T., Kalandides, A. & Kothari, U. (2020) Introduction. Thinking about place – Themes and emergent approaches. In: Edensor, T., Kalandides, A. & Kothari, U. (Eds.) *The Routledge handbook of place*. London, UK: Routledge.
- Eriksen, T.H. (2001) *Tyranny of the moment: Fast and slow time in the information age*. London, UK: Pluto Press.
- Fallon, J. (2012) 'If You're making waves then you have to slow down': Slow tourism and canals. In: Fullagar, S., Markwell, K. & Wilson, E. (Eds.) *Slow tourism. Experiences and mobilities*. Bristol, UK; Buffalo, NY; Toronto, ON: Channel View Publications, pp. 143–154.
- Fullagar, S., Wilson, E. & Markwell, K. (2012) Starting slow: Thinking through slow mobilities and experiences. In: Fullagar, S., Markwell, K. & Wilson, E. (Eds.) *Slow tourism: Experiences and mobilities*. Bristol, UK; Buffalo, NY; Toronto, ON: Channel View Publications, pp. 1–8.
- Gearey, M. (2024) Place-making in waterscapes: Wetlands as palimpsest spaces of recreation. *The Geographical Journal*, 190(2), e12477. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1111/geoj.12477>
- Germann Molz, J. (2009) Representing pace in tourism mobilities: Staycations, slow travel and the amazing race. *Journal of Tourism and Cultural Change*, 7(4), 270–286. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14766820903464242>
- Germann Molz, J. (2010) Performing global geographies: Time, space, place and pace in narratives of round-the-world travel. *Tourism Geographies*, 12(3), 329–348. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14616688.2010.494684>
- Germann Molz, J. (2018) "Travel too fast and you miss all you travel for": Slower mobilities and the politics of pace. In: Clancy, M. (Ed.) *Slow tourism, food and cities. Pace and the search for the "good life"*. London, UK: Routledge, pp. 15–32.
- Gregorič Bon, N. & Repič, J. (2016) Introduction. In: Gregorič Bon, N. & Repič, J. (Eds.) *Moving places: Relations, return and belonging*. New York, NY; Oxford, UK: Berghahn, pp. 1–20.
- Hannam, K., Sheller, M. & Urry, J. (2006) Editorial: Mobilities, Immobilities and moorings. *Mobilities*, 1(1), 1–22. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1080/17450100500489189>
- Hetherington, K. (1998) In place of geometry: The materiality of place. *The Sociological Review*, 45(1), 183–199. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-954X.1997.tb03461.x>
- Honigmann, J.J. (2003) Sampling in ethnographic fieldwork. In: Burgess, R.G. (Ed.) *Field research: A sourcebook and field manual*. London, UK; New York, NY: Routledge, pp. 121–139.
- Iaquinto, B.L. (2018) Backpacker mobilities: Inadvertent sustainability amidst the fluctuating pace of travel. *Mobilities*, 13(4), 569–583. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1080/17450101.2017.1394682>
- Iaquinto, B.L. (2020) Understanding the place-making practices of backpackers. *Tourist Studies*, 20(3), 336–353. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1468797620927308>
- Inland Waterways Association. (2021) *IWA directory of the inland waterways of Great Britain*. Chesham, UK: IWA. Available from: <https://waterways.org.uk/waterways/using-the-waterways/waterways-directory>
- Kaaristo, M. (2020a) Waterway: A liquid place. In: Edensor, T., Kalandides, A. & Kothari, U. (Eds.) *The Routledge handbook of place*. London, UK: Routledge, pp. 168–178.
- Kaaristo, M. (2020b) Rhythm and pace: The diurnal aspects of leisure Mobilities on the UK canals and Rivers. In: Amit, V. & Salazar, N.B. (Eds.) *Pacing Mobilities. Timing, intensity, tempo and duration of human movements*. New York, NY; Oxford, UK: Berghahn, pp. 59–78.
- Kaaristo, M., Medway, D., Burton, J., Rhoden, S. & Bruce, H.L. (2020) Governing mobilities on the UK canal network. *Mobilities*, 15(6), 844–861. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1080/17450101.2020.1806507>
- Kaaristo, M. & Visentin, F. (2023) Absence as an affordance: Thinking with (out) water on the inland waterways. *Cultural Geographies*, 30(1), 87–102. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1177/14744740221100838>
- Krause, F., Pikner, T., Raudsepp, M., Kasemets, K. & Kull, A. (2020) The unnatural: Six excursions towards a situated concept. In: Kannike, A., Pärn, K. & Tasa, M. (Eds.) *Interdisciplinary approaches to culture theory*. Tartu, Estonia: University of Tartu Press, pp. 140–170.
- Lassen, C. & Laursen, L.H. (Eds.) (2021) *Mobilising place management*. London, UK: Routledge.
- Lefebvre, H. (2004) *Rhythmanalysis: Space, time and everyday life*. London, UK: Continuum.
- Lew, A.A. (2017) Tourism planning and place making: Place-making or placemaking? *Tourism Geographies*, 19(3), 448–466. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14616688.2017.1282007>
- Massey, D. (2005) *For space*. London: Sage.
- Matless, D. (2005) Sonic geography in a nature region. *Social & Cultural Geography*, 6(5), 745–766. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14649360500258245>
- Matteucci, X. & Tiller, T.R. (2022) Package cycle tourists' relationship to time and pace. *Tourism and Hospitality Research*. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1177/14673584221102701>
- Maw, P. (2018) *Transport and the industrial city: Manchester and the canal age, 1750–1850*. Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press.
- Mels, T. (Ed.) (2004) *Reanimating places: A geography of rhythms*. London, UK: Routledge.
- Olwig, K.F. (2020) Pacing mobilized. In: Amit, V. & Salazar, N.B. (Eds.) *Pacing mobilities: Timing, intensity, tempo and duration of human movements*. New York, NY; Oxford, UK: Berghahn Books, pp. 181–189.
- Olwig, K.F. & Hastrup, K. (Eds.) (1997) *Siting culture: The shifting anthropological object*. London, UK; New York, NY: Routledge.
- Parkes, D. & Thrift, N. (1979) Time spacemakers and entrainment. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 4(3), 353–372. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.2307/622056>
- Parkins, W. (2004) Out of time: Fast subjects and slow living. *Time & Society*, 13(2–3), 363–382. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0961463X04045662>



- Pitt, H. (2018) Muddying the waters: What urban waterways reveal about Bluespaces and wellbeing. *Geoforum*, 92, 161–170. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2018.04.014>
- Pred, A. (1984) Place as historically contingent process: Structuration and the time-geography of becoming places. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 74(2), 279–297. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8306.1984.tb01453.x>
- Salazar, N.B. (2020) The ambiguous role of ‘pacemakers’ in the paradoxical quest for a proper pace of life. In: Amit, V. & Salazar, N.B. (Eds.) *Pacing mobilities: Timing, intensity, tempo and duration of human movements*. New York, NY; Oxford, UK: Berghahn Books, pp. 19–35.
- Salazar, N.B. & Glick Schiller, N. (2013) Regimes of mobility across the globe. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 39(2), 183–200. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2013.723253>
- Sheller, M. & Urry, J. (2006) The new mobilities paradigm. *Environment and Planning A*, 38(2), 207–226. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1068/a37268>
- Shove, E., Trentmann, F. & Wilk, R. (2009) Introduction, Time, consumption and everyday life. In: Shove, E., Trentmann, F. & Wilk, R. (Eds.) *Practice, materiality and culture*. Oxford, UK; New York, NY: Berg, pp. 1–13.
- Sidaway, C., Price, T.J. & Probert, S.D. (1995) Transportation via canals: Past, present and future. *Applied Energy*, 51(1), 1–17. Available from: [https://doi.org/10.1016/0306-2619\(94\)00031-9](https://doi.org/10.1016/0306-2619(94)00031-9)
- Smith, D.P. (2007) The ‘buoyancy’ of ‘other’ geographies of gentrification: Going ‘back-to-the water’ and the commodification of marginality. *Tijdschrift voor Economische en Sociale Geografie*, 98(1), 53–67. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9663.2007.00376.x>
- Strang, V. (2009) *Gardening the world. Agency, identity and the ownership of water*. New York, NY; Oxford, UK: Berghahn.
- Urry, J. (2000) *Sociology beyond societies: Mobilities for the twenty-first century*. London, UK; New York, NY: Routledge.
- Vannini, P. (2014) Slowness and deceleration. In: Adey, P., Bissell, D., Hannam, K., Merriman, P. & Sheller, M. (Eds.) *The Routledge handbook of mobilities*. New York, NY: Routledge, pp. 136–144.
- Völker, S. & Kistemann, T. (2011) The impact of blue space on human health and well-being – Salutogenetic health effects of inland surface waters: A review. *International Journal of Hygiene and Environmental Health*, 214(6), 449–460. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijheh.2011.05.001>
- Walker, G. (2021) *Energy and rhythm: Rhythmanalysis for a low carbon future*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Wallace, A. & Wright, K. (2022) The post-industrial English canalscape: From enclosure to enlacement. *Cultural Geographies*, 29(2), 185–202. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1177/14744740211029275>
- Wincott, A., Ravenscroft, N. & Gilchrist, P. (2020) Roses and castles: Competing visions of canal heritage and the making of place. *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, 26(8), 737–752. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13527258.2019.1693412>
- WWT 2017 = Willow Wren Training. (2017) *How to be a considerate boater*. Available from: [www.willowwrentraining.co.uk/considerate/howto.html](http://www.willowwrentraining.co.uk/considerate/howto.html)

**How to cite this article:** Kaaristo, M. (2024) Pacemaking and placemaking on the UK canals. *The Geographical Journal*, 190, e12525. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1111/geoj.12525>