

Never a cross word

Ashley Knowles has been bamboozling Guardian cryptic crossword lovers under the pseudonym Boatman since 2008. As his first 50 puzzles are collected in one volume he shares his secrets with DUNCAN HALL

COMMUTING home to Keymer from his financial analyst day job, Ashley Knowles might be another businessman on his laptop.

But 57-year-old Ashley is the cryptic crossword lover's nemesis Boatman, spending his journey creating fiendishly difficult puzzles for *The Guardian*.

"I think all setters see themselves as the archetypal evil genius based in a mountain retreat trying to destroy adventurers who dare to break into our lair," he says. "But the adventurer always wins."

As a child Ashley loved puzzles. It was his future wife Bernadina Lloyd who turned him onto the cryptic in 1997.

"She introduced me to the grandmaster of *The Guardian* style of puzzle Araucaria [aka the Rev John Graham]," he says. "His style was full of wit and good humour. He was making an art form out of it. My wife made puzzles for her own amusement so I created one for her one Christmas."

His puzzles were eventually published in the enthusiast magazine *1 Across* before being picked up by *The Guardian* in 2008. Each of his crosswords has a theme and contains a mischievous desire to play with his solvers. "I'm hoping that you will go down blind alleys, be puzzled and then delighted to find a way out, or go on a wild goose chase looking for an anagram which doesn't exist," he says. A typical Boatman crossword will feature anagrams, spoonerisms, puns, homophones, words written backwards and require a certain amount of general knowledge and lateral thinking. His pseudonym came from the 10 years Ashley spent living on a 30m Dutch barge in London and in Brighton Marina. He first came to Brighton at 21 studying for an MSc at the University of Sussex, before moving back to be with Bernadina. When his daughter was born he gave up the boat and the trio moved to Ditchling. They are now in Keymer, where they have been joined by a "very lazy" greyhound and several fish.



Ashley Knowles aka Boatman. Photo by Bernadina Lloyd

Ashley loves to spend his Sundays cycling over the Downs. But much of the time he plays with language to create clues. "I might have 15 words which are related in some way, or 15 clues which will link together." After finding a suitable grid from the 60-strong *Guardian* crossword archives the hardest part of the process is making the words fit: "Like a jigsaw puzzle without knowing the finished picture." His editor Hugh Stephenson ensures his clues are not too devious and words don't get repeated across the week's puzzles.

Ideas come all the time. "I will see a word in a newspaper and think that would make a good clue. 'Trapdoor' is 'rood part' written backwards, which is a synonym for a crosspiece. I might be able to build a puzzle around it. It's a process of discovery.

"It's debilitating really!" ♦



BOATMAN - THE FIRST 50

Ashley is joined by fellow crossword setter John Halpern (aka Paul, Mudd or Punk) and *Guardian* crossword editor Hugh Stephenson for a free in-conversation event at Waterstones in North Street, Brighton, on Thursday 19 January from 7pm. *Boatman - The First 50* is available from www.ypdbooks.com (£10.95).