

## Amazing aqueducts - Whitchurch to Llangollen July 2017

The Llangollen canal meanders around the Welsh border and is one of the most popular holiday routes for narrowboaters. If you're wondering why, it could be because it's got pretty countryside, plenty of places to stop, only 2 locks on the whole stretch from Whitchurch to Llangollen, 2 tunnels, and 2 aqueducts including the spectacular World Heritage site Pontcysyllte Aqueduct, appropriately nicknamed 'The Stream in the Sky'. What's not to like?



Pontcysyllte Aqueduct - the Stream in the Sky

My husband David and I took our first ever narrowboat holiday in 2016, just for a weekend, and so in 2017 we decided to try out a whole week and see if we could improve our boat handling skills!

### Day 1 - heading to Ellesmere

Our boat was available to pick up at 2.30pm on a Saturday, but we'd asked Whitchurch Marina if we could collect it on Sunday morning instead and they kindly agreed. It's about 6 hours' cruising from Whitchurch to Ellesmere where the first pubs can be found, so we were aiming to cruise all afternoon and then moor up at Ellesmere for the night.

Jane was in the reception at Whitchurch Marina to welcome us and was really helpful, even taking us through the theory of operating locks, as this was going to be our first go at using them since we started narrowboating last year. She then handed us over to Ed, who gave us a brilliant introduction to our boat and how everything worked, including advice about the etiquette of waiting at tunnels and aqueducts. He gave us suggestions about where to moor on the route and where to get a good meal on our last night! He even came with us on the boat until we had negotiated the first swing bridge before waving us off on our narrowboat adventure.

As there were only 2 of us, we had chosen one of the smaller boats in the ABC Boat Hire fleet. The Black Headed Bunting was just perfect for us, especially as the galley is at the back of the boat, so when you are making meals and drinks you can still talk to your tillerperson.

Black Headed Bunting - you can just about spot the sink at the back of the boat



Even though there are no locks on the Llangollen between Whitchurch and Ellesmere, there are a few swing bridges, so we got some practice at using our windlass to open and close them. The cruise is then quiet and

peaceful, and we were able to spend time looking at the lovely countryside and spotting a duck with all her chicks under her wing - aah! We decided to have lunch 'on the move' so I put together a salad and and we took it in turns to leave the tiller to eat.

Shortly before reaching Ellesmere, we could see the Ellesmere tunnel coming up. It's only short (87 yds), and we could see there was nobody coming the other way, so we gently cruised in.



Entering the tunnel

As we did though, 2 men on a boat behind us started shouting 'speed up!' I was on the tiller and couldn't understand why they wanted me to go faster through a tunnel until one of them shouted 'I can't stop!' As their boat was now on a collision course with ours I did speed up - it wasn't until afterwards that I wondered why they couldn't go into reverse to slow down, but maybe they were even newer than us at this narrowboating lark and had a bit of a panic...

Once we got to Ellesmere we remembered that Ed had suggested we don't go up the Ellesmere Arm, so we didn't, but cruised past it and found a mooring next to the towpath just after the Arm. It turned out to be good advice, as the Arm was full and we would have had to go all the way up just to turn round and come all the way back again. We were also facing the right way to carry on cruising the next day so we were happy with our little spot.

Ellesmere junction - it's so pretty! We moored just out of the picture on the right hand side.



Time to leave our boat in search of an evening meal - we walked up the Arm and saw an advert for a Greek restaurant called 'Meze'. We decided to go there and got a really tasty meal - £15 for 5 courses to share AND a big bowl of chips! Suitably fed and watered, we retired back to our boat where I unearthed the bottle of Baileys I had brought with me and plotted our route for the next day (basically just keep going, that should be easy).



Boats moored on the arm, and then the Greek Restaurant - yum!





## Day 2 - the Castle on the Hill

We set off at 8.30am with our aim for the day to reach Chirk, where Ed had given us another tip about a good place to moor. It was a beautiful day with gorgeous countryside, and in what seemed like no time at all we found ourselves passing the top of the Montgomery Canal at Lower Frankton.



Entrance to the Montgomery canal - one picture was taken on the way to Llangollen and the other on the way back a few days later, hence the difference in sunshine!



The Montgomery is slowly being restored, and you can only go down it if you have booked your boat's passage beforehand. It looked really pretty as we cruised past. After the junction, the bridge numbers on the Llangollen start again with a 'W' after them, and once you've gone past bridge 11W, you know the locks are coming up. David moored us up on the centre rope before the first lock, and then I was able to untie us and hop straight back on the boat to go into the lock - easy! After that, there was a short stretch before the 2<sup>nd</sup> lock where we repeated the operation, only to find ourselves waiting for a canoe to come out of the lock which was a bit of a surprise. Immediately after the 2<sup>nd</sup> lock we saw some water points on the right hand side, so we pulled over to top up our water before carrying on towards Chirk.



Mooring up on the centre rope before going through the locks...

Now the cruise started getting really interesting, as the Chirk Aqueduct is immediately followed by the Chirk tunnel. I had been a bit nervous about the aqueducts, but once we were on the Chirk one I loved it - fantastic views of the viaduct and the surrounding countryside. There's even a notice on it telling you not to walk on the edge, as if anyone would do that....



No pedestrians allowed!

You can see the viaduct on the left and the entrance to the tunnel just after the aqueduct.



There was a boat behind us going into the Chirk tunnel, so after getting David to switch all our lights on including the headlight, I sped up a bit just to make sure nobody tried to hit us from behind again!



There's light at the end of the tunnel...

Upon emerging from the tunnel, we looked for an inlet on the right hand side where Ed had told us we could moor. It was almost immediately after the end of the tunnel so we overshot it and had to reverse back to get into it. Just one spot left, just the right size for our little boat. Cruising completed for the day and it was only 2.30pm!

Perfect spot to moor the Black Headed Bunting just after the tunnel.



By now the weather was absolutely glorious, the kind of day you don't often get in the UK, so we decided to make the most of it and walked up to Chirk Castle through the countryside. The castle is on a hill (not the one in the Ed Sheeran song) with stunning views to all sides. It's a National Trust property and well worth a visit, especially if you are a member.





Chirk Castle on a beautiful summer's day

Having walked all the way back, our thoughts turned to food, so after watching

'Eggheads' on our tv (yes, there was a good reception!) we walked into Chirk itself and decided to eat our evening meal at the Hand Hotel in the centre. The food was really good and the bar area was furnished with an eye-catching carved Welsh dragon which was apparently made locally.

Welsh dragon at the Hand Hotel



Having enjoyed our pub meal, it was a 10 minute amble back to our boat; the mooring inlet we'd chosen was lovely and quiet and we had a great night's sleep!

### Day 3 and the Case of the Missing Hose

We were up and breakfasted early, excited at the prospect of getting to the famous Pontcysyllte Aqueduct and our final destination at Llangollen. Casting off at about 7.45am, we cruised through gentle shady countryside, through the Whitehouse tunnel (191 yds), and onwards to negotiate a Lift bridge at Frontcysyllte.



It's not crowded, even in July!

Entering the Whitehouse tunnel



I was just thinking it wouldn't be long now before the aqueduct when we rounded a corner and there it was facing us with a boat coming across it in the opposite direction! We had to hurriedly get our boat over to the other side of the canal, out of their way, before we could see the aqueduct was clear and we could proceed. David had agreed to man the tiller over the aqueduct so that I could get some pictures, and I excitedly walked over to the 'open' side of the aqueduct, only to quickly scuttle back to the other side - it's really scary! There is literally nothing but a sheer drop between you and the Dee Valley below, and even though we knew we

were quite safe in our little channel full of water, it's got to be one of the most breathtaking experiences I have ever had. Just have a look at the photos...



Waiting for a clear run



On it - I reckon the aqueduct is singing "Me and my shadow"



It's ok if you look to the right...



Wow what a view!





The River Dee underneath us



And the view behind - we're being followed...

Once safely over the aqueduct you find yourself at Trevor basin where Thomas Telford stayed at the Trevor Inn while the aqueduct was being built. Telford was the architect who designed the Pontcysyllte and it took 10 years to complete. We made a sharp left hand turn to continue our journey along the Llangollen canal, and just after going under the first bridge, a man on the towpath walked towards us shouting 'there's chaos just ahead!' The canal gets very narrow on the final stretch to Llangollen, and there are a couple of sections where it is one-way. Even though there is an occasional passing place, it's a good idea for one of your crew to get off the boat and walk up ahead so that they can tell you if it's safe to proceed. That hadn't happened on this day and so there was a bit of a boat traffic jam!



Warning of one-way section coming up - send your runner ahead to see if it's clear

Having waited for it to clear, we had a lovely cruise into Llangollen with incredible views over the Dee valley to the left of us virtually all the way.



Passing place - it's really narrow!

Stunning view of the valley from the canal



Upon arriving in Llangollen, we moored up at one of the water points near Bridge 45W (this is permitted, unlike other water points where waiting is restricted to half an hour). David walked to the nearby café to buy our mooring permit - you have to pay to moor at Llangollen but it's only £6 for 24 hours so hopefully won't break the bank. We hadn't topped up with water since the previous day, so we decided to get the hose out and.....it was gone! Despite my suspicious questioning of my poor husband ("are you sure you put it back in the boat?") David was adamant that he put it back there safely after our last top up, so we could only conclude that the phantom hose stealer had purloined it while we were moored up at Chirk.... A very kind couple in the boat moored next to ours let us borrow their hose, and I phoned Whitchurch marina to let them know. We reckoned we'd probably manage for water until we got back to Ellesmere and decided we could call in at Blackwater Meadow marina there to fill up again before the end of our holiday.



Moored up at the water points in Llangollen

Having solved that little dilemma, we decided to go and explore Llangollen, but before we'd actually left the canal we spotted rides being organised on a horse-drawn narrowboat (£7 a ticket), cruising up a small feeder canal -

there is no turning point on the feeder so hire boats can't go up it, but the horse drawn boats just turn the horse round and tow the boat back again! It was a lovely experience, so peaceful with no engine running; it must have been much quieter in the days when all boats were horse-drawn.



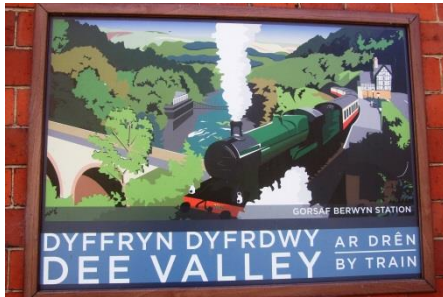
Horse drawn boat - so peaceful





We then decided to continue our holidaymaking with a trip on the Llangollen steam railway. The railway was closed in 1968 but rescued by local enthusiasts, and the train now looks very splendid indeed and was a pleasure to be aboard. It was £15 a ticket to go to Corwen and return.

Llangollen steam train - what a beauty



After a bit of souvenir shopping we had a meal in one of the many eateries in Llangollen, before walking back up the hill to the canal and our boat. We noticed that almost everyone had already turned their boat to be ready to set off back towards Trevor the next day, but by now it was dark so we decided to turn in the morning. Time for my evening tumbler of Baileys!

#### Day 4 - let's just get back through the locks, it won't take long...

Our next door neighbour started their engine up at 6.15am but didn't go anywhere, so having been woken up early we got up and were away at 7.30am - the neighbour still hadn't cast off!



Llangollen basin

After turning round in the Llangollen basin, we cruised out of the town and had the most blissful journey back to Trevor, only 2 hours from Llangollen to Trevor, taking our time and not meeting any boats coming the other way. We passed a man walking his dog along the towpath who told us that 3 boats had travelled ahead of us at 5.30am; now that's just ridiculous.....

Time for a second crossing of the magnificent Pontcysyllte aqueduct and David did a superb job on the tiller again, although just before the end I could hear him keeping himself focussed on the task by talking to himself aloud "look straight ahead, look straight ahead". He says it's ok so long as you don't look down! I took the opportunity to take in one last look at the incredible panoramic view. If you do this route, glance across the valley as you return from Llangollen to Trevor. If you're lucky you'll see a boat crossing the aqueduct and it looks spectacular.

We cruised on merrily back towards Chirk, through the Whitehouse tunnel, then the Chirk tunnel, back over the Chirk Aqueduct - we had thought about mooring up at the Lion Quays Hotel at bridge 17, but as it was only 12 noon when we got there we decided we would carry on, go through the 2 locks and then finish our day's cruising at the Jack Mytton Inn at Hindford (first stop after the locks). At about 12.30pm we were approaching the locks when we noticed what looked like a HUGE queue of boats all along the left hand side of the canal. As we got nearer, people on the towpath started signalling to us that we should pull over. It turned out this was the queue to go back through the locks and everyone was temporarily mooring up while they waited. I jumped off the boat to see how many boats were ahead of us and counted 11. With etiquette at locks being for boats to take it in turns to come through up and down, it looked like we were going to be there for quite a long time! Never mind, it was a nice day and we chatted to some of the other boaters in the queue, had our lunch, and by 1.30pm we were up from 12<sup>th</sup> to 7<sup>th</sup> in the queue. We finally got through the locks at 3.30pm, and thought how lucky we were that we had started out so early.

The long queue for the locks.... (spot the boat going the other way and just getting some water)



Having escaped from our lock-queueing extravaganza, we got to Hindford at 4pm. There were quite a few boats already moored up, but luckily for us our little boat just fitted into a gap in the mooring inlet right next to the pub. As the day wore on, it seemed as though every ABC Boat Hire boat on the canal decided to do the same as us and we ended up at the head of a parade of smart green and red boats - check out the picture!



Pretty boats all in a row

Our dining experience that evening was at the Jack Mytton Inn next to the canal - its pub sign is a curious picture of a man riding a bear.

Jack Mytton was an eccentric local aristocrat born in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century who inherited a substantial estate when his father died when Jack was only 2 years old. One of his many practical jokes was to arrive at a dinner party at Halston Hall riding a bear, hence the picture on the pub sign bearing his name. History lesson aside, we dined on Bear Pie (I don't





think it was made out of bears) and Bangers & Mash. It was the most delicious meal of the whole week and I thoroughly recommend stopping there if you can 'bear' it!\*

\*Please note: since writing this blog, the Jack Mytton Inn has apparently closed down which is a great shame (updated information June 2018).

### Day 5 - Ellesmere Revisited

Having made such brilliant progress yesterday, we set off for Ellesmere at 9am and arrived just after 11am, meaning we'd got almost the whole day at leisure! First port of call was Blackwater Meadow marina to pick up a replacement water hose, and then we ambled into Ellesmere. After about 20 minutes we found ourselves at the 'Ellesmere' itself and we treated ourselves to a boat trip around the lake (£5 for half an hour) - this time skippered by someone else so we could relax and look at the scenery. The Mere is 70ft deep in the middle and was formed 10,000 years ago when the ice age ended. Today it's really pretty with water lilies, a folly at the far side, and plenty of wildlife including Jemima Puddleduck who came to say hello to us.



Lovely lilies

Miss Puddleduck



We spent the rest of the day wandering around looking in the little art gallery and various quirky shops, before plumping for the Black Lion public house for our evening meal, which was delicious and reasonably priced. Time to go back to the Black Headed Bunting where I was sad to find I was draining the final glass of Baileys from the bottle ☹

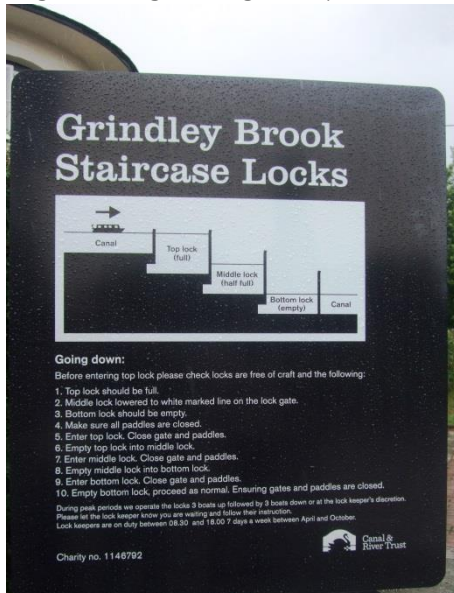
### Day 6 - confounded by the wind!

By this point in our holiday I had decided I wanted to practice my boat manoeuvring skills, so I thought I would try to take our boat over from the towpath on the left of the canal, to the right hand side where the water points were and we could top up our tank. I took the boat forwards out of our moorings and turned it slightly so that the stern was now facing the right hand side of the canal. So it should have been a simple matter of going into reverse and ending up at the water points, right? Wrong! A strong cross wind had whipped up overnight, and all that happened was the boat swung back to where I'd started. After a couple of fruitless attempts, an experienced boater who was already moored at the water points started shouting instructions at me to help me over. Turned out that in such windy weather I needed to use a lot more revs to counteract the effect of being blown about. Once we'd successfully moored up, I thanked him for his help; he replied in a gruff voice "we've all got to learn".

Having topped up our water, we spent the day lazily cruising our way back to Whitchurch. Ed had given us a tip of where to spend our final night aboard and where we could moor, but first of all I wanted to have another go at boat manoeuvring (glutton for punishment), so tried to turn the boat round in one of the winding holes near the marina. Once again the wind sabotaged my attempts, pushing the boat sideways just when I'd got it halfway round, so I ended up with

the boat drifting out of the winding hole sideways to the narrower part of the canal. By this time I was rapidly losing confidence, until David appeared next to me and said "look at the stern". So I looked, and wondrous to behold, it was very slowly turning and success was eventually achieved. Phew!

Having turned back again, we proceeded to cruise just past Whitchurch Marina to the top of the Grindley Brook staircase of locks. There are moorings there and a winding hole just at the top, so we turned the boat there (I let David do it, aren't I generous) and moored up for our final night facing the right way to travel back to the marina in the morning.



Here are the instructions

And the view from the bottom



We had a look at the staircase itself which consists of 3 locks in a row, followed by another 3 locks quite soon afterwards. There's a friendly café right by the staircase and we went in for a cup of tea. I was slightly unnerved though by two gigantic effigies of Rosie & Jim which appeared to be suspended from the wall, they didn't look very happy up there.....

What are we doing up here Rosie?



Ed's recommendation for our final evening meal was the Horse & Jockey restaurant and bar, which is just a 5 minute walk from the locks and 10 minutes from our moorings. It's very popular so we did book a table a few hours before, but it was well worth it as the food and ambience was really good and welcoming.

### Day 7 - time to say goodbye

Just 20 minutes' cruising got us back to Whitchurch for 9am, to reluctantly part with our floating home after an unforgettable week on the Llangollen. No wonder it's popular - we'd love to go back again and perhaps try the Montgomery canal next time. If you're thinking of cruising the Llangollen, don't think any more - just do it!





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