

Pepper's Little Adventure - Alvechurch to Lapworth August 2016

It's August 2016, I've been employed in the ABC booking office since last November, and this is my very first foray into the experience of cruising on the British waterways. Joining me on a short break from Alvechurch Marina in Worcestershire are my husband David, our friend Carol, and the star of the show, Carol's dog - a Staffie-Collie cross called Pepper. Pepper has never been aboard a boat before so we have no idea how she is going to react to a life on the water...

The boat we've hired is a 66ft cruiser stern narrowboat called the 'Little Gull'. It looks pretty big to me! It's great though, as it's got a dining area, well equipped galley, and 2 separate bedrooms with their own bathrooms so plenty of space for everyone. We plumped for a boat with what's known in the trade as a reverse layout, meaning that the galley and dining area are at the back of the boat, handy for making cups of coffee or tea for the helmsman.



Our boat - the Little Gull

We arrive at Alvechurch Marina on Friday afternoon and helpful staff assist us with trolleys to transport our belongings and groceries onto the boat, before Richard the marina technician carries out our handover and introduction to the Little Gull and how everything works. And then we're off, heading north towards Birmingham on the Birmingham and Worcester canal. We're not going to Birmingham though - we've decided to try what sounds like a nice scenic route along the Stratford canal towards Lapworth. Apparently you can cruise to the top of the Lapworth flight of locks and then turn the boat around before actually going through any locks - easy(we hope)!

I completed a helmsmans training course earlier in the year and so should be feeling confident, but I haven't actually steered a boat for 4 months now so I feel pretty rusty and quite nervous. This isn't improved any by the first challenge we come to, a bridge on a bend with a boat moored up on the other side of it. I manage to avoid hitting the bridge and the boat but end up stuck in a load of trees and bushes on the wrong side of the canal, feeling like a complete fool. David is a bit better at getting out of jams than me so he gets us going again and soon I can appreciate the beautiful scenery, cruising past sweet canalside cottages and pretty bushes and flowers. Pepper is busy spotting ducks in the water and looking longingly at them, but luckily she's too scared of any water that looks deep so she doesn't dare jump in to get them!



I'm sure I could get those ducks....



After just over an hour, we arrive at the Hopwood House pub and decide to moor up just before Bridge 67 and have our evening meal there. They don't allow dogs in the pub so we have to eat outside but it's a lovely day so that's no hardship. Being a sports enthusiast I try to watch the Rio Olympics on our tv but discover that we are in a spot with no reception. Never mind, you don't really go on a canal boat holiday to watch tv so I'm not too upset about it.

Spot the canal boat underneath the pub name!

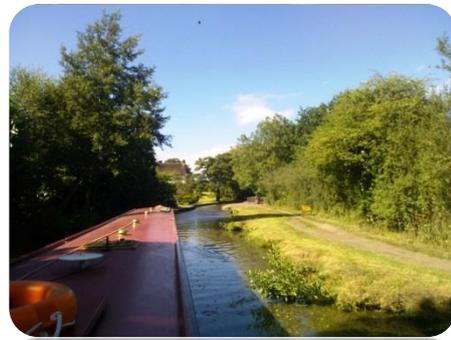


Overnight we discover that we didn't pick the best place to moor up as there is a service road alongside us and lorries start driving down it early in the morning! Turns out that if we had carried on under Bridge 67 we could have moored up on the other side in a much quieter spot, but you live and learn....we also discover while moored up that Pepper seems to have an aversion to strange men - every time a man walks past our boat she starts barking at them, but if women walk past she's not at all bothered. Weird....

Saturday morning it's drizzling outside so we fortify ourselves with sausage sandwiches, including a special sausage for Pepper, then at 9am on the dot we cast off and are on our way again. David and I have been taking it in turns to be at the tiller and it happens to be my turn when we approach the enormous Wast Hills tunnel. Built in the 18th century, 2493metres long and taking just under an hour to get through, it's one of the longest canal tunnels in the country. I'm very proud of myself when I manage to steer us all the way through and only bump the wall once. I was lucky though, we didn't meet anybody coming the other way! And another piece of luck is that we come out of the tunnel into glorious sunshine.



Wow! We weren't expecting that!



Soon we approach Kings Norton junction in the canal - we know that we need to turn off right onto the Stratford canal, but even if we didn't there is a helpful signpost at the junction. Turning is a strange experience; it seems for ages as if the boat isn't going anywhere but we think this must be due to the effect of two canals meeting each other and creating a cross current, as another boat on the other side of the canal seems to be similarly dawdling to us and eventually we all get going and carry on our respective ways. Shortly after turning we come to an interesting old structure which turns out to be the Lifford Lane guillotine stop lock. Constructed in the early 19th century, this is now a Grade II listed building and is the only guillotine gated stop-lock on a canal. It isn't in use anymore but consists of two black wooden 'guillotines' suspended over the water which used to drop down to stop the water from one canal

affecting the water level in the other. Makes me smile when, just after passing through, a slightly worried man in a boat coming the other way looks at it and asks me "what's that?" He looks a bit scared.....



After a while just enjoying the peace and calm of the canal and spotting ducks, herons and even a kingfisher, we find a quiet spot to moor up for lunch. We've brought the makings of a buffet lunch so it's easy to just lay it all out on our dining table and help ourselves. We've got good television reception too so spend half an hour catching up on the Olympics (for anyone reading this in years to come, 2016 was the year when we won 67 medals and the world's eyes were on Usain Bolt and Mo Farah).

We've got the canal to ourselves...

After lunch, I'm thinking it would be nice to top up the water supply on the boat to make sure we've got plenty for showers etc. There are ample water points along the canal and it's easy to connect them to your boat (you are shown where on your handover), and we find one just before Bridge 19. Having done that I'm happy we won't need to top up again and we cruise on towards our next attraction, the Shirley Drawbridge and public house. Here I hop off the boat and experience a feeling of power as I use our British Waterways key to stop all the traffic, raise the road and keep all the motorists waiting while David steers the Little Gull through. The car drivers are all very patient as we pass through underneath the drawbridge and I make sure I've lowered the road again and raised the barriers before getting back on the boat.

The road is officially open again, and we are on our way.



After Shirley our thoughts turn to whether to turn the boat tonight for our return journey, or leave it until tomorrow morning. The consensus is to turn tonight, just in case we have any difficulty as it's the first time any of us has tried to turn a 66ft boat without a trainer telling us what to do and we know the winding hole is only 70ft long so not much room for manoeuvre. We negotiate a hydraulic bridge that we need to use our windlass to open, and then start our turn in the winding hole just after Bridge 27. For the uninitiated, this is how the RYA Inland Waterways Handbook describes how to turn in a winding hole:

"Always put the bow into the winding hole never the stern, otherwise you will damage the prop. Push the tiller over and start turning into the winding hole.

Glide gently up to the deepest part, applying reverse to stop with the bows resting gently on the bank.

Now apply revs in forward gear with the tiller pointing the way you want to go.

The stern will motor across to the other side of the winding hole.

Push the tiller the other way and reverse off until you are clear. As before, if you can use prop effect it will help you turn."

I'm ashamed to say that we ignore this brilliant advice, spend what seems like half an hour getting nowhere and eventually get the boat turned with the help of David pulling it round by the rope, looking a bit like a farmer leading a reluctant donkey. A passer-by walks past along the towpath in the middle of it all but he makes no comment so maybe he doesn't realise just how inept we are. Or perhaps he does but he doesn't want to embarrass us. Or perhaps he's in a world of his own and totally oblivious to our plight. Then again, he could be all too well aware and chuckling away to himself. Oh dear, my imagination is getting out of hand with all the possibilities, let's just forget all about him.



Anyway, recovered from our traumatic experience, we happily carry on back up the Stratford canal to the Wharf Tavern at Hockley Heath. This time we find a quiet and traffic-free spot to moor up just beyond a few other boats, and head off hungrily for our tea. Great news! The Wharf is dog friendly and we are all able to dine indoors. Pepper decides she is exhausted after all the excitement of imaginary duck chasing and promptly

stretches herself out for a snooze, but her peace is short-lived as she proves immensely popular with some of the other customers and they all want to fuss her and tell her what a lovely dog she is. She knows that, but it's always nice to make sure everybody else does too.

Leave me alone, I'm trying to have a nap...



After our meal we are all ready for an early night, but we do catch up with the Olympics on our tv and find out that Andy Murray is through to the final(he won) and the GB women won the cycling team pursuit and broke the World Record! We have a couple of gin and tonics to celebrate such momentous achievement before heading off to our comfy beds.

Sunday morning we discover a handy convenience store plus a post box near the Wharf Tavern so we can get the Sunday papers before casting off for the cruise back to Alvechurch. The weather's not as sunny as yesterday but it doesn't stop us enjoying the scenic cruise, especially now we feel more confident at the tiller than when we started. We pass a colourful steam powered narrowboat coming in the opposite direction and I manage to get a photo of it before it goes out of view.

It's like going back in time..



Just before we leave the Stratford canal to rejoin the Worcester and Birmingham one, a hire boat comes cruising past us in the opposite direction and a slightly puzzled looking lady calls across to me "Excuse me, what canal are we on? Where are we going? I'm supposed to be the map reader!" Oh dear, I hope they didn't think they were on the way to Birmingham.

Through the guillotine lock, round the corner at Kings Norton junction, and we are heading back through the Wast Hills tunnel. David is at the tiller this time, and after a while he starts to wonder about a mysterious light he can see in the distance. Is it another boat coming towards us? Is it the end of the tunnel? Is it perhaps a ghost ship? None of us can work it out, so Carol and David amuse themselves making ghostly cackling noises which echo off the tunnel walls in suitable spooky fashion. Right in the middle of their ghoulish wailing we find we are indeed about to encounter a boat coming towards us - their crew give us faintly suspicious looks. I guess they heard us then!

Out of the tunnel and I take over the tiller again for the final run into Alvechurch Marina. We pass an entourage of hire boats who have just set off for the start of their holidays, all looking cheerful and eager as they set off on the first leg of whatever journey they've got planned.

Back and safely moored up, we arrive at about 5.30pm and the marina staff have left for the day, but that's ok - our hire period was officially until tomorrow morning so we drop the boat keys off in the postbox that's provided. It was great, we all had fun, and I can't wait for our next adventure on the canals. Even Pepper gave it her pawprint of approval, before going home to dream about ducks ☺



Blue skies, nothing but blue skies.....can't wait till next time!