



The Rashbrooks on Tour 2013

Day 1. Saturday, Worcester, Worcestershire

It's that time of year again – the first week of the school summer holidays and we are going canal boating! This year it will be me, my husband Simon, my daughter Sarah and her friend Jade. Sadly this year my son can't come with us as he has found himself a job! We will miss him but it can't be helped and he definitely needs the money!

We are picking our boat up from Goytre Wharf which is near Abergavenny and plan to do the length of the Monmouthshire and Brecon canal. We have heard that it is extremely beautiful, being nestled between the Brecon Beacons and the Black Mountains with some spectacular scenery.

After picking up some supplies in Worcester (mostly for the all important English breakfast!) we set off in the car and are there a mere 90 minutes later despite the M50 being down to one lane. Goytre Wharf is somewhat off the beaten track, down a country lane but a real surprise when you turn the corner – an absolutely gorgeous setting – we can see the fleet of Red Line Boats all lined up along the wharf and on the other side lots of private boats, mostly motor cruisers, alongside what looks to be a busy café/restaurant with lots of tables and parasols outside.

In reception I introduce myself to Sue, the marina administrator who I have spoken to many times from the Booking Office. It is really lovely to be able to put a face to a name and she is very welcoming – our boat is ready to go and she takes us through it, pointing out the water tank, the gas tanks, the heating, advising on the toilets and showers etc and then leaves us to unpack our suitcases and supplies. There is a lot of satisfying clinking of bottles during the unloading of the supplies! Wardrobe space is a bit limited so we actually decide to put our empty suitcases in the boot of the car to save space. We are then directed by Sue to the secure car park around the corner and when we come back she hands us over to Nathan, an engineer, who advises us (but mostly Simon!) on the engine, the gears, cleaning out the weed hatch, the bilge pumps and the oil.

Unfortunately it has started to rain – nothing major but a kind of persistent drizzle – typical really – we have had about 8 weeks of sunshine but it decides to rain on our first day! Anyway Nathan very kindly helps us by steering us around quite a tight corner to go northwards towards Brecon and jumps off as the boat is cater corner by the grass verge – we are off and on our way!

We cruise very slowly – at tick-over really, past a very long line of moored boats – some narrowboats but a lot of small motor cruisers. We will discover over this week that quite a few lucky people have a little motor cruiser moored at the bottom of their garden too – and on a Sunday afternoon or whatever they just jump aboard and tootle along the canal to the nearest pub! Bliss.

By now it is raining quite heavily – the girls disappear inside and Simon and I get out the waterproofs – despite the rain it is fairly warm and we really don't care about the rain anyway – it's that kind of holiday – wet! We are just glad to be on our way and looking forward to the coming week.



We're off!

Nathan has told us that a good place to stop would be Govilon where there are a couple of pubs that both offer food and that this is about 3 hours cruising from Goytre with no locks. In fact we won't come to our first lock until tomorrow evening or the following morning! One of the attractive things about this route for the girls is the fact there are only a few locks! He has also told us that the canal is very shallow and he is not wrong! At times you can hear the rudder scraping the bottom of the canal even though we are keeping to the very centre and the deepest part. The sides of the canal are very overgrown in parts, full of bull rushes and weeds and so far there are hardly any straight bits, the canal is very winding so we are taking it very slowly and enjoying the views despite the rain. Almost immediately you can look to your right and see the Black Mountains and on our left above us are the foothills to the Brecon Beacons.

Well Nathan was spot on in his timing – we left Goytre at 4.15pm and get to Bridge 98 at 7.15pm. PLEASE NOTE - just before this bridge is a beautiful little private marina called Govilon Yard with private moorings but also some mooring rings for visitors and in retrospect we should have stopped there – as it is, there doesn't seem to be any suitable spot for mooring near Bridge 98 and we cruise on past. The difficulty is that it is now really raining quite hard and we seem to be getting further and



further from the pubs! Eventually we spot a length of canal where we can get close to the side and jump ashore. We use mooring pins and tie the boat up.



The view – even despite the rain

Suddenly we are all a bit tired and Simon and I are also very wet so we decide to eat on board after all tonight. It is very cosy with the rain pattering onto the roof, the lights on, condensation on the windows and the smell of some pasta cooking. We eat this with a simple cheesy sauce, watch a film on the DVD player and then fairly early to bed.

Day 2. Sunday

The next day Simon and I wake early as we always do on boats although we actually both slept quite well. The day is looking more promising with a sort of watery sunshine filtering through the clouds. I start on breakfast – bacon, sausage, egg, mushrooms, beans, tomatoes – the full works to ‘set us up for the day’ as my Mum used to say.



We get going about 10am and trundle along very slowly – we pass very little traffic but when there is something coming towards us it always seems to be on a bend or by a bridge where we are bound to get stuck! Because of the shallowness of the canal we spend quite a bit of time putting the prop in reverse to try and shed it of weeds. The best thing though is that everyone is in the same boat (!) . Basically this canal is so shallow that it doesn't really matter how experienced you are – you WILL get stuck.

The best thing to do is to have a sense of humour about everything we find – there is one particularly hairy moment where we are coming around yet another bend to find someone moored on it – some 2-3 feet from the side and another boat coming towards us! Help!! For a hysterical 10 minutes all 3 boats were wedged sideways at diagonals to each other and we thought we'd never get free. But we did – and the trick is not to panic and just laugh.



This gives an idea about how narrow the canal is – now imagine 3 boats all trying to pass!

Route wise we discover that if we had travelled for another 30 minutes or so last night we would have been at a place called Gilwern. We stopped there on the way back – perfect moorings, 2 pubs, a fish and chip shop, a butcher and a convenience store! Moor just before (on way back) or after Bridge 103 (on way to)



Anyway we cruise along and though we experience some showers the weather is much brighter today.

It really is very beautiful along here – the showers are leaving everything looking very fresh and colourful – there are butterflies of every type on this stretch as there are huge amounts of buddleia on both sides of the canal. And dragonflies too – great big ones with huge iridescent wings sparkling in the sunlight.

Look out for a tree which was struck by lightning just past Bridge 112 – I tried to take a photograph but it didn't come out very well I am afraid.



[The Lightning Tree](#)

We cruise through Llangattock where there are good moorings and a bright yellow pub called The Bridgend Inn and then over a stone aqueduct and onwards.



We decide to moor up for a break and a sandwich and stop between Bridge 117 and 118. After eating, Simon and the girls walk into Crickhowell for an explore leaving me with my book and a bit of peace and quiet. Lovely.

Apparently Crickhowell takes a good 20 minutes to walk to but is a pretty village with some pubs and shops.

When they return we carry on and now the weather is much improved. We have decided to head for bridge 133 where there is a water point – we must fill up today, and more excitingly there is a Pub which has been recommended to us, The Coach and Horses at Llangynidr.



Mooring at Llangattock – you can see the yellow pub in the distance



How pretty – and the weather is looking up too – this is where we stopped Sunday evening.

We have a little rest – I phone ahead to the Coach and Horses to book a table and am advised that it is the Beer Festival will we mind – it might be a bit noisy. Well no we don't mind at all – we like a good Beer Festival – so off we go. The place is buzzing – a lot of the festival has moved indoors because of the showers today – although now the weather is fine and we are greeted by a very exuberant and enthusiastic waitress who shows us to our table. We are given menus and choose our food and there is a band playing soft rock songs quite loudly. The food is lovely. Served promptly and yet we don't feel rushed. A great evening and I would highly recommend the pub.

Day 3. Monday

We reckon that we can get to Brecon today. We calculate (according to Nicholson's Guide 4) that it should take us around 6 hours. We have some breakfast and set off before 10am – today will be lock day – 5 close together and then one more much closer to Brecon. The first one is literally around the corner from where we moored – in fact we walked past it last night to get to the pub. When we get there we find a 'volunteer lock keeper' – these people give up their time free of charge to stroll between the locks with their windlass and just generally help out. He asks the girls and I whether we need any help – but we are old hands at this really and decline.



Old hands!

When he watches the girls he nods and says we've got them well trained and is happy to leave us. I do think it's a good idea to have this help actually because some of the corners turning from lock to lock are extremely tight – as well, this is the type of canal that couples choose to do on their own exactly because there are so few locks, and it's always handy having help with the locks when there are only two of you – it certainly speeds things along.

At the second lock on the right is a view of a little stone hamlet with a stream rushing through it – the perfect picture postcard and I envy the people living in such a beautiful spot.



Who lives in a place like this? Some lucky people

So we are through the first 5 in no time and then onwards towards the Ashford Tunnel. We had been told by Nathan to look out for unlit craft – such as canoes and that if we could see the light at the end of the tunnel we should go ahead. The trouble with this advice is that you can't see straight into the tunnel until the front of your boat is nearly in it. Anyway, although we can't see any light at the end, we go for it – we figure that if a boat was coming towards us then we would at least see its headlight! And it turns out that there *is* a boat ahead of us but going in our direction. Which is why we couldn't see the end of the tunnel.



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This is what the tunnel looked like as we approached – pretty difficult to tell whether it's OK



Now look at it – once the boat in front of us starts to emerge

Once we have committed ourselves to the tunnel we just hope for the best. It is so LOW! I understand completely now why we have to advise guests they can't put bikes on the roof – at times in this tunnel the driver has to bend down below the level of the boats roof for fear of smacking his head! And the short aerial on the roof is bent back and scrapes along virtually the whole way.

We are also in fear of coming across some canoeists – we don't fancy having to reverse all the way out again!

But everything is fine and we emerge to bright sunshine and a lovely view.

Next we come to Talybont-on-Usk a sweet little village (there are bicycles for hire here if you are interested in stopping for a few hours and taking advantage of the many bike trails around)

There is also a café, a convenience store and 3 pubs – all of which look lovely but we didn't have time to stop.

It's at this point we come to the electronic lift bridge at the end of Talybont – this is the first time I have been actually nervous as we will be STOPPING TRAFFIC!



[The view as you emerge from Ashford Tunnel](#)

Sarah and I jump off while Jade and Simon hold the boat and we walk round the corner to read the instructions by the bridge – our guide book tells us they are clear and easy to understand – and so they are. Firstly you have to walk over the bridge and shut 2 heavy gates to stop traffic coming from that direction – you really need someone on the other side to make sure no traffic comes over a yellow line on the road – but it is pretty clear to traffic that they must stop – otherwise the counterweight to the bridge would land on their bonnet and crush their car! Most people in the vicinity will be local too so will know to take care when coming around the bend. We run back to Simon and ask him to come towards us slowly – the timing is just right – we simply press a button and keep it pressed and the bridge is slowly rising as he approaches at tick-over and is fully up as he starts to go through. Once through he draws up to the side of the canal whilst we press another button to lower the bridge, go and unlock and push back the gates and we are done. A successful mission!



The electronic bridge – and a tight squeeze

Shortly after there are 3 more lift bridges but they are raised by means of a windlass – much harder work! And just beyond Bridge 145 there is a whole hillside of very white very free range chickens! Quite a sight.

We tootle along – more breath taking scenery – the hills on our left are becoming mountains now and to our right are steep valleys.

At times the canal is really quite wild – at one point I steer through a bridge and come face to face with so much vegetation I disappear into it – let go of the tiller in a panic – which Simon grabs and I emerge no worse for wear but covered in greenfly!



Tight corners and lots of vegetation!

Soon though we start to see signs of civilisation again – we can tell we are approaching Brecon, albeit ever so slowly as more and more houses appear – some with their little motor cruisers moored at the bottom of the garden. We pass what looks like a very nice pub called the Royal Oak at Pencelli (Bridge 153) and are tempted to stop for an afternoon drink but plough on. We pass a long, long stretch with lots of moored boats and then the weeping willows start to appear which always seems to herald the outskirts of a town.



Weeping Willows

We pass an impressive wooden sculpture of a miner with his Shire horse and cart of coal and then before we know it are in Brecon. The canal terminates here and there is a basin in which to turn but we don't go that far as we like to suss out the lay of the water before having to turn the boat round – possibly in front of an audience!

We moor facing the end of the canal just before the Bridge 167 and decide to stroll into town to do some shopping. There is an Aldi within a couple of minutes walk and we stock up with vital supplies – like wine!



The horse and cart (with a tourist reading the plaque, he's not part of the sculpture!)

Later that night we walk further into town to look for somewhere to eat. There are several places to choose from – a Chinese, an Indian, a couple of hotels – unfortunately we have a bit of a fussy eater with us in Jade, so plump for the Wellington Hotel as they do pub fayre and she can choose a burger or some chicken – the only things she will eat!!

But the choice is definitely there if you wish for something a little more exotic.

We return back to the boat to retire – and about 11pm a big bunch of local lads who look to be in their teens decide to jump in the basin for a swim!! Which is noisy but actually quite amusing.

The next morning we stroll into town again as I forgot a couple of things yesterday – get some shopping and then it's time to turn the boat round. It has to be said that Simon does this very well – there is plenty of room in the basin but it is worth pointing out that even though this basin is for winding, that boats are moored all around it and it is a bit scary turning the boat, as you are a bit paranoid about damaging someone else's boat. The trick is just to take it very slowly I think.



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So we are off again and re-tracing our steps back the way we came – everything looks different though as we are passing things at a different time of day. We decide to stop at Talybont that evening and eat on board and then on Wednesday evening we stop at Gilwern and do the same.



A view of Brecon Theatre Basin



Moored at Gilwern and filling up with water.

Remember this is a really good place to stop whether going to or from Brecon – with pubs, shops etc all within a few minutes walk and with good mooring too. Thursday morning Simon walked into Gilwern and bought the most delicious sausages and bacon from the local butcher there – fantastic.

So we start off on Thursday morning at about 10.30am and aim to get to Pontymoile basin today – so past our start off point at Goytre and then we estimate about another 3 hours cruising to this point which seems to be the furthest point anyone reckons we (or any other canal boat) should go. If you remember it takes about 3 ½ hours to get back to Goytre – so we should be at Pontymoile for about 6ish allowing for a quick stop. Then it will be an easy day on Friday to get back to Goytre and we will spend the night on board the boat at the marina to be ready for departure first thing Saturday morning.

We get to Goytre in what seems no time – we must be getting used to the shallowness and the bendiness of the canal!

However, once past Goytre things slow down – a lot. It is so shallow now that you can see the bottom – and fish too! And the weeds at the sides of the canal are encroaching right into almost the centre line. We often have to put the boat into reverse to spin debris off the propeller and twice we have to stop completely and open the weed hatch to clear it. We have had previous trips where we have never found one bit of weed! So from one extreme to the other!



Shetland pony field – and see how shallow the canal is!

The difficulty in cruising is more than made up for by the beauty surrounding us though. We still feel as though we are clinging to the side of a mountain with valleys to the left of us and rolling hills to the right. We pass in succession, a field full of Shetland ponies, a couple of them have a foal and they look like those toy horses you get on wheels for toddlers to push around – so cute. Then a field full of what look to be ex pit-ponies and then absolutely bizarrely a field full of rheas! Actually we thought they were ostriches but on our return to Goytre, Sue told me they were rheas. They are hidden behind some high bushes and I was unable to get a photo because of this but I assure you they are there! Just after the 2 fields of ponies.

The sun is blazing hot today – but because we are on the water we don't feel overheated. Please note, this can be dangerous (both Simon and I felt a little light headed that evening, I think we did get a very mild touch of sunstroke) so it's important you wear a hat and drink lots of water.



[The Pit-ponies](#)

Time is ticking on and we are not making quite the progress we thought we would so we revise our plans and decide to stop at Bridge 55 because the guide book tells us that there is a charming thatched pub (haunted by Martha the Ghost no less!) just 100 yards east of the bridge called The Horse and Jockey.

However this is not to be.... The problem is that there is absolutely nowhere to moor the boat! The vegetation on the side of the canal is quite jungle like in its proportions – and that coupled with the fact the canal is so shallow we can't get that near to the edge makes it a risky business to try to jump ashore. I am afraid my mountain goat days are behind me and it would be far too uncool for either teenage girl to even try!

I wonder how many customers this pub loses because of this problem and why they don't send someone down once a week with some hedge trimmers or something to clear some space for thirsty and hungry narrow boaters!



So we decide to persevere onwards to Pontymoile as originally planned. We arrive at about 7ish so quite a bit later than planned and we didn't have an official stop for lunch as we would have done in our original plan – but it's all cool, we have had a super day, seen things we've never seen before (rheas! shetland foals!) and the weather has been phenomenal.

Pontymoile basin is a bit of a disappointment to be honest – after such an eventful and exciting day I think that subconsciously we expected the bunting to be out to welcome us! Crowds to be cheering, bands to be playing! Instead it's a very plain stone basin with a few weeds.

There is plenty of space however so we moor up and go in search of food. By this time it is getting on for 7.30 and we are starving! We walk south for what seems ages past bridges 51, 51a, 50 and when we get to bridge 49 everyone wants to give up – rather unwisely we had neglected to check the guide book before starting – we have been walking for 20 minutes or so but I insist we try just one more bridge and low and behold just around the corner we spy benches and tables on the side of the canal, and the sound of much jollity – dogs barking, children playing, the clink of glasses. This pub is called The Open Hearth and my goodness I would SO recommend it – and actually when we got back we looked it up and the reviews of it on Trip Advisor are really good too. Simon had a curry which was patently homemade and smelt divine, I had a homemade steak and ale pie with homemade (genuinely) chips and the girls had homemade beef burgers that looked to be about 1/2lb in weight with chilli and homemade chips and even Jade pronounced it good! It just happens to be my birthday so I am very pleased.

The only trouble is that when we leave it is getting dark and I have visions of us falling in the canal – we did make it back OK but I wished we had thought to take the torch with us! Good tip!

Next morning we are up early so we can turn the boat in the basin without anyone watching! It is sad that this is our last day – but at least we know it will be one of the prettiest and a slow one so we can take our time and really enjoy the views for the last time.

We actually manage to moor up for some lunch this time too and are about 30 minutes away from Goytre at about 4ish. I decide to ring ahead to ask if it's alright to come into the marina to moor – as we know that some boats will be going out this afternoon we don't want to cause any obstruction to new boaters. Nathan answers the phone and advises that there will be a spot for us in around 30 minutes so that works out brilliantly. We moor at the diesel filling and pump out station which is great as it has proper mooring posts/rings.

Sue and Nathan come over to have a chat and ask us how it went which is when we find out that the ostriches were rheas.



[On the way to The Open Hearth – still beautiful weather](#)

For dinner we went to the Goytre Arms which is around 20 minutes walk away on the far side of the canal to the marina (you walk under the canal to reach the road!) and it was really nice with tasty food and efficient, pleasant service.

So again it was home to bed for the last time – the next morning we were up early to re-pack the suitcases and were home by 11am – refreshed, happy and with lots of lovely memories.

See you next year!

Becky Rashbrook, Booking Office Administrator, ABC Boat Hire.



ABC BOAT HIRE



What a view !



Moored up for lunch in the sun!

www.abcboathire.com



Sarah and Jade – our little helpers



How lovely it would be to live here