

By Waterways World employee Rebecca McGrath

## Taking to the water

Every form of employment has its hazards and when I began working at Waterways World, it was perhaps inevitable that I'd soon be lured into taking a canal boat holiday. After spending many lunchtimes poring over the latest edition, savouring the scenic photographs and studying the details of various destinations, I began to have an idyllic vision of gliding along a remote waterway on a glorious summer's day.



Being under 30, I was aware that I didn't quite fit the profile of a typical hire-boater - yet it's perfectly natural for someone of my age to enjoy the great outdoors, to have the desire to travel and to seek out a supply of good food and drink. Admittedly, few of my friends had experienced such a jaunt but this didn't bother me - there's no point in following the crowd, otherwise I'd end up holidaying in Magaluf.

As my fiancé also shared my enthusiasm for such a trip, we booked a four-day cruise on the Grand Union Canal with Alvechurch Boat Centre at Gayton Marina. "A popular spot", I was told in the WW editorial office before the trip, where I stayed long enough to have a whole library of guidebooks thrust at me, along with various bits of advice on 'window sills' and a 'windy lass'. To be honest, it all went a little over my head but I'd soon learn....

### TREPIDATION

As our preparations for the trip consisted of little more than buying a stock of provisions and bundling a few clothes into a rucksack, this lack of planning became a concern on the car journey down to Northampton. We would be heading out on a busy section of canal, and yet we didn't know the first thing about boating. As young people, we were woefully inexperienced for this kind of venture - we'd never so much as tied a rope or towed a caravan - how were we going to handle a 49ft narrowboat?

At the stern Zoe began to explain some of the technical aspects of boat operation. Although there was a lot of information to absorb in a short space of time - including working the locks, mooring up, recharging the boat's batteries and the process of actually steering the thing - Zoe was a great teacher. With my fears vanishing, my excitement began to return and reached its peak when we set off with Zoe at the helm. However, when she offered us the tiller and my beloved stretched out his hand, my feeling of trepidation swiftly returned.

### TAKING THE HELM

Narrowboats are powered from the rear - a very obvious fact that seemed to escape my betrothed as we yawed from one side of the canal to the other. Watching him heave the tiller back and forth, as though this motion was actually responsible for powering the vessel, and with boats moored either side of us, the danger seemed clear. Zoe stayed calm, however, and gently instructed the manic captain on how to assume the best steering position, standing in the middle of the stern looking down the centre of the boat.

After helping us make the turn north at Gayton Junction, Zoe jumped ship - having either decided that we'd grasped the basics, or fearing for her life. Once she'd cheerfully waved us off, I noticed an expression of concern creep into the Captain's countenance - like me, he realised we were now alone.

I have to admit that for the first 15 minutes or so we found the going very easy. Although Zoe had shown us the workings of what I referred to as the 'gear stick' (a Morse control), which changed between reverse, neutral, forwards on tickover and light acceleration - we stayed on the slower speed while we got the hang of steering. It was some relief to find this section of the canal quieter than we had expected, and creeping through the peaceful rural landscape with the sun beating down, my idyllic vision of boating was already being realised. Then came our first major challenge - a bridge.

### A BAD START

In most cases, bridges are easy to negotiate, involving little more than slowing down and concentrating a little harder on steering. But the bridge in question - No 45, I believe - was being used that day as a location for a photoshoot. Up on the bridge the photographer was snapping away at a brightly painted narrowboat floating in the middle of the canal. At first I wasn't concerned - the other boat was clearly visible from some distance and the Captain would soon notice it and begin to slow. However, another very obvious fact that seemed to escape him was that narrowboats have quite a long stopping distance - like a BMX bike, there are no brakes.

Only when we were within a few yards of the boat did the Captain see fit to put the engine into reverse and try to power his way out of the crisis. It was too late, of course. After drifting hopelessly forwards for several yards, there followed a sickening thump of boat colliding with boat and a vision of the *Titanic* flashed through my mind.

Although I still cringe to think about it, the collision wasn't anywhere near as bad as I first thought. The couple aboard the assaulted vessel were quite happy to laugh off the incident as we apologised profusely and pleaded our boating ignorance. I hope they didn't curse us too much once we'd passed on.

## MOORING

Although we were a little shaken by the incident, we didn't let it get the better of us and after a few more miles, we slightly increased our speed. I also decided that it would be in my interest to take the tiller for a while, feeling that if we both learned the art of steering the boat – and bringing it to a stop – then the trip might run a bit more smoothly. By this point too, the Captain was looking as though he was ready to be relieved and quickly scurried below deck to grab a beer.

Several hours later, at around 7.30pm, I was still at the tiller when a sign at Bridge 32, advertising bar food at the Sun Inn in Nether Heyford, proved too tempting to resist. With several boats moored up just beyond the bridge, we decided this would be as good a place as any to stop for the night, and I then had the task of bringing the boat to the towpath. By this stage the Captain had completely discharged his responsibilities, and, other than hollering a few words of encouragement over another beer, was happy to leave me to it. After a few minor difficulties I was successfully able to make the manoeuvre and my beloved jumped onto the towpath to grab hold of the centreline (the rope located in the middle of the boat's roof).

However, it was when we came to secure our vessel that we realised we'd forgotten all the advice we'd been given back at the marina, and we clumsily attempted to hammer in some metal pegs to tie the boat to. Having observed that things weren't quite going to plan, our brand new neighbour – a liveaboard called Stuart – kindly came to our aid and showed us how to use our mooring clips to secure the boat on the aluminium piling of the towpath. While he helped us tie the boat in position, he told us that he had only started living on a narrowboat earlier that year, having, like us, never been on one before. "It's something I've always wanted to do", he said, "and I don't regret it one bit."

Thanks to this act of generosity, within the hour we had strolled into Nether Heyford and located the Sun Inn, and we certainly weren't disappointed with the fine fare we were served. Climbing into bed that night, we were exhausted but elated at having completed our first day on the water.

## LOCKS

After breakfasting in the homely interior of our boat, the next morning we set off to face down our fears at Buckby Locks. With around two hours of cruising before the flight, we had plenty of time for mental preparation, but instead we simply allowed ourselves to relax and take in the sights.

Not long after we had passed through Weedon Bec, our dreamy state was interrupted by the M1, which follows the canal for several miles. Looking across to this noisy strip of activity, the whole concept of a motorway seemed suddenly absurd. Less than 24 hours ago we were travelling down this very sedate pace of the canal, it seemed like it was from another planet.

Arriving at the flight in the early afternoon, we followed the advice we'd been given at Gayton and moored up to watch a narrowboat pass through the first of the seven locks. Assuming the role of gongoozlers, we observed the every move of a lone boater as he opened the gates and jumped back on his craft to power it through. Everything we had been taught about locks now fell back into place and I felt confident that if one person could carry out this laborious task, then, with a little care, the two of us would be able to do it. As an aside, the following month I sold this same gentleman a copy of *Waterways World* at the Crick Boat Show, and I was pleased to tell him that he had unwittingly provided us with a lesson in lock operation.

Having decided to give it a go, on our way back to our craft we encountered a couple who suggested we share the lock with their boat. The gentleman at the tiller patiently talked me through the process of easing our boat into the lock chamber, while his wife showed the demoted Captain how to use the windlass and push open the gates. After the first three locks, we were beginning to get into a stride when the couple had to pull over to attend to some mechanical difficulties. I hope this wasn't an excuse to be rid of our amateur efforts!

Although we tackled the following four locks without much difficulty, I certainly think we underestimated not only the amount of work involved, but the length of time it would take to pass through the flight. Perhaps inconceivable now, our trip took place in the early summer when, for fear of drought, efforts were being made to preserve water. Because the locks closed at 4.30pm, we received help from a couple of BW staff members on the last two to speed our passage. With the final lock conquered, it seemed only right to celebrate our achievements with another meal out. Mooring as soon as we could at Buckby Wharf, we headed the short distance to the adjacent New Inn to enjoy a traditional pub curry.

## **WINDING**

The next morning we turned right at Norton Junction, just a short distance from where we were moored, and headed onto the narrowest and most remote part of the canal system we'd encountered so far – the Leicester Section. It was certainly some time before we encountered another boat and to have this rural waterway to ourselves was magical.

We had been warned that Watford Locks would be quite a challenge for us newcomers and, desiring a relaxed cruise back to base, in the late afternoon we consulted our Pearson's Guide to find a suitable place to turn. The map indicated that a turning point – or winding hole – was located just before the flight. However, when we arrived at this point, we realised we had again forgotten all the advice we'd been given back at base. After a period of debate and deliberation, we resolved to pass the entrance of the winding hole and then reverse back into it. This, we soon learned, was the wrong way.

After encountering some difficulty, help was at hand once again as a well-built chap emerged from his boat and shouted over instructions, until he was able to grab hold of the front mooring line and tow us around.

Day's excursions over, that night we moored beside Bridge 5 where we prepared a simple meal and enjoyed an early night. There's nothing like fresh air and exercise to help you sleep.

## **BACK TO GAYTON**

The next morning we continued retracing our steps on the Leicester Section, heading past Norton Junction and down the Buckby Flight. After just three days, locks had become second nature to us, or so I thought until I saw the Captain take an unscheduled dip in the water.

Perhaps it was the lure of lunch at the café at Whilton Marina, but as we proceeded down the flight, I noticed his approach to lock-keeping becoming steadily more erratic. After he hopped on to the boat to grab the centreline rope, I watched as he jumped back to the towpath but his left leg disappeared thigh-deep into the water.

Although unscathed, he was forced to change his sodden jeans and leave his soggy shoe on the boat's roof to dry in the sunshine, where it stayed all the way back to Gayton marina.

## **POST MORTEM**

Although the route of our trip isn't considered especially beautiful, interesting or challenging, we found ourselves thoroughly absorbed in every aspect of it. Admittedly, we could have been more adventurous, but if we'd been rushing to cover miles we perhaps wouldn't have found the experience so enjoyable. My only real regret is not having passed through a tunnel.

One of my overriding memories of the trip is the friendliness of the people we'd encountered. Every time we were in need of help, someone always came to our rescue. Another superb feature was the weather; as the accompanying pictures will prove, we had wall to wall sunshine throughout our entire trip – a rare occurrence last summer.

They say you learn from your mistakes and, as we seem to have got almost everything wrong on our first trip, it seems fair to suggest that the next time we head out on the waterways we'll be a lot more competent. And there certainly will be a next time – we found holiday hire-boating a truly relaxing experience and we hope to encourage our friends to give it a go.

I'm still reading *Waterways World* during my lunchtimes and picturing myself cruising along a remote waterway on a glorious summer's day – only this time, I know how it feels to be there.