

Captain Slog

Saturday 7th May

Arrived mid-afternoon in mixed weather. Met up with potential new owner Terry which was something of a surprise to us all – nice chap. Had a long chat and did the Cook's tour of the boat – he seems quite enthusiastic.

The boat looks grand after the winter works.

Made the 'traditional' visit to the Clifford Arms for our evening meal – it helps to keep the step count up for the *HP Wellness Campaign* (is that English). Anyway, I forgot to bring the HP Pedometer – what about a Memory Loss Campaign.

Stayed in the Marina overnight – we were determined to see the final episodes of *Spiral*. One new problem – as the series reached its bloody climax I felt the drip drip of something unpleasant on my leg.....not red but clear....water leaking from the front skylight. Heavy rain after weeks of sun has probably done for the sealant.

Sunday 8th May

Intermittently sunny, windy but no rain.

Late start as usual (can't get the crew).

Out of the marina without hitting anything despite the wind – what a lot of sharp turns.

Right at the Junction onto the Staffs and Worcester, lunch at Bridge 96. Slightly more effort in the afternoon – moored above Filance lock overnight.

Bright sunny evening but still windy. Chef in action on board – ate in.

Monday 9th May

Pam's Birthday! Another blustery day, cotton wool clouds and more than occasional sun.

Only five locks and about 6 miles until the heavens opened at 16:00 and we moored for the night near the Fox and Anchor at Cross Green– to be sure of somewhere to take Pam for her birthday. Reasonable choice and reasonable food. We returned to the boat at 21:00 just as the skies filled with lightning and the skies opened again. Both skylights now dripping – condensation it is not.

Two observations for the day:

1. Gailey Wharf BW toilet has its own library including *Gray's Anatomy* – just how long do you need to read that.
2. The schoolchildren in canoes near Slade Heath are taught to stand up (is that wise), salute and shout as one "Aye Aye Captain". Great fun and you must salute back. I suspect surly 'Sir' is taking the mick but the kids love it.

Tuesday 10th May

After heavy rain overnight we woke to sunshine, a very damp towpath, blossom all over the boat and sunshine which gradually disappeared as the day progressed.

The bottom end of both the Staffs and Worcester and Shropshire Union suffer from their proximity to Wolverhampton but this is left behind by Bridge 4 heading north on the Shroppie.

16.2 miles and just 2 locks (the stop lock at Aurtherley Junction and Wheaton Aston. Brewood for lunch and just beyond Gnosall Bridge 35 overnight (where the satellite signal was ok for the first time since leaving Great Haywood).

Wednesday 11th May

Wet start improving to a fine finish, non-stop to Market Drayton, 13.6 miles & 5 locks.

Interesting tight section through Woodseaves Cutting which made a pleasant change from the wider straight sections which were much like the Bridgewater.

Moored for the night just north of Bridge 62. Market Drayton much like many other northern rural towns (e.g. Congleton) – once a pretty place it now comprises takeaways, charity shops, Ethel Austin and Iceland whilst a large supermarket thrives on the outskirts (in this case Netto and Lidl – not even Tesco).

Thursday 12th May

12 miles and 22 locks to Nantwich where we moored for the night just beyond the aqueduct. Crowded but squeezed the 58foot into a 60 foot gap without touching/upsetting the neighbours.

Rain held off all day until the last lock at Hack Green – the heavens then opened with a vengeance (but briefly).

Is an advert for a Secret Nuclear Bunker a contradiction in terms?

Evening meal was at the Aroi Thai in Pillory Street – very good, the waitresses straight from the Cathay Pacific training school. Pam didn't enjoy hers too much though so not much of a guide really).

Friday 13th May

The same weather again – bright sunshine occasionally with always a threat of a very heavy downpour.

11 miles and 5 locks (if Bunbury =2). Lunch just beyond Bridge 107 where the groceries promised in Nicholsons no longer exist.

Evening mooring at Bridge 113 where the Poacher's Pocket 'themed' pub promised in Nicholsons no longer exists – spot the trend.

Strange to be back on broad locks and at the staircase where we swapped water with a boat coming the other way. Shared the rest of the locks with a Chas Harden hire boat except Beeston Iron Lock where local advice was to go singly as the sides are bulging – not mentioned in Nicholsons).

Walked around a half empty Tattenhall Marina, at least twice the size of Great Haywood – although in favour of moving here from Heritage it no longer seems such a good idea – it is bleak and situated in something of a dead end. Easily accessed through a hole in the fence from the towpath, the berths are all un-gated.

Saturday 14th May

Weather – more of the same.

Slow journey towards Chester – into a headwind, a mile long ribbon of moored boats beyond bridge 114 and a fishing competition which seemed to be about who had the longest pole and who could keep it across the canal until the last moment before the boat arrived. God knows what happens if a fish bites at the same time – miserable bunch.

Chickened out of going down into Chester after bad reports about being untied on Saturday nights + 5 double locks down and back would be hard work for two having experienced the very stiff gates on Friday.

It turned out to be a good decision as we walked to the centre from bridge 121. There is no sense of arrival by canal, no basin, no permanent moorings and no movement on the canal – altogether a fairly barren experience. The city makes no effort to welcome boaters although Tower wharf may be more interesting - we didn't get that far.

The city itself, the walls and cathedral are magnificent and of course worth the walk.

Our evening meal was at The Old Trooper nearly adjacent to our mooring – standard stuff but good VFM.

Sunday 15th May

Weather overcast and drizzly all day – stayed put.

Walked down the road to the Moor-and-Ride service and took the bus into Chester to walk the walls and shop ☹.

On our return we walked into Christleton in search of a post box. A very pretty village with a remarkable variety of attractive housing both large and small.

Back at The Old Trooper for dinner – chef is getting lazy.

Monday 16th May

Another gloomy day and a lazy one.

Ambled back to Tattenhall Marina having successfully manoeuvred Withorpe several hundred yards backward to the winding hole at bridge 121.

At the Marina we filled up with diesel and emptied one pump out and spent the rest of the day moored up mostly sheltering from the rain. Overnight mooring is free for GH boats.

Late afternoon we walked towards Beeston Castle with no real expectation of getting there. At the road exit to the Marina there is a large open farm and shop which sells nothing useful – ‘gifts’, cakes and loads of ice cream – nice on a summer’s day but not a dank May day.

Visitor moorings are near the reception block, laundry and showers which is handy.

Tuesday 17th May

Cloudy but warmer and no rain

From Tattenhall to the Middlewich Branch mostly in the company of a 54 foot collected that day from Gt Haywood Boats (at Tattenhall) and heading for the Leeds and Liverpool. They are expecting to be on the boat all summer – lucky people.

Moored above Cholmondeston Lock and Venetian Marina – 6 locks and 7 miles. Good mooring in the company of large number of 48 hour moorings despite the remote location.

Wednesday 18th May

After the quiet waters of the Shropshire Union to Chester it was a surprise to find ourselves on the waterways equivalent to the M25. At one point there were 10 boats queued to head east to Middlewich and it didn’t improve as the day progressed. Averaging over an hour per lock we finally called it a day at Middlewich above Wardle Lock. A pleasant mooring in a quiet residential area with a recently refurbished towpath – much better than the junction mooring suggested in Nicholsons.

Quite why so many boats were all heading in the same direction at the same time is a mystery – it certainly wasn’t because of the weather. Another day of cloud and heavy rain but it did improve late afternoon.

7.5 miles and 3 locks

Thursday 19th May

A good day, sunshine all the way. 8.66 miles and 15 locks so much easier when it isn’t raining. Even the T&M around Middlewich looked vaguely attractive in the sun – it isn’t.

Glad to say that Lock 57 Café/Brasserie is still in business. For £5 you can moor on the non-towpath side (thereby avoiding the lock moorings), refundable with the evening meal which was excellent.

Friday 20th May

Another sunny day but not exactly tropical.

10 locks and 3.5 miles to a mooring just short of Bridge 135 at Church Lawton. Splendid tranquil evening – the same location as our mooring on the Cheshire Ring in 2008 although it would have been ok to moor at Red Bull. Very uneventful day apart from some over enthusiastic paddle winders

coming in the other direction, proud of the fact they had done 33 locks in a day – sounds like torture to me.

Saturday 21st May

12 locks, the Harecastle and 12 miles. Lunch at the Festival Park Toby where we had intended to stay for the night but the only spare mooring was less than ideal.

Instead we pressed on to Barlaston in the afternoon much assisted by an enthusiastic lad on a bike whose 'hobby' was helping boats through the locks. All five locks from Etruria to Stoke were prepared in advance – what a thoroughly laudable hobby! – we tipped him generously. Anything that gets you through Stoke quickly is a bonus – this is a very dreary uninteresting stretch – in 1977 when Shelton Steel works was still operational it was no prettier but it was a whole lot more exciting.

Sunday 22nd May

9.5 miles and 10 locks. A very autumnal day – strong winds and always the threat of rain.

Pressed on to Meaford Locks after our usual late start. Passed a trip boat between locks 32 and 31 which I had thought was a day out for some poor unfortunates – turned out it was a boat load of Stoke supporters heading to the Britannia Stadium for the last match of the season – so I was right.

A brief stop above Star Lock for lunch then below for water. In a mixture of sharp showers and bright sunshine we progressed towards Weston. We made a brief detour into Aston Marina - £12 overnight mooring and a bistro that closed at 17:00 – it was 16:50 so beat a hasty retreat. A 180 degree turn in a howling cross wind proved an unnecessary manoeuvre – had I but realised, the marina has a loop exit a few hundred yards down the canal.

Evening meal at the Saracen's Head staring out from the conservatory onto a calm sunlit evening – it is never like that at the tiller.

Monday 23rd May

A very very blustery day. We walked to Weston Hall then turned right to Salt and back along the canal via the very attractive Bridge 82, its grandeur maybe connected with Sandon Hall. Basically we were putting off the return to GH.

Ambled down to Weston Lock and Hoo Mill at the slowest pace possible passing some old acquaintances on William James, a fabulous Northwich Trader, at Bridge 77.

And so to GH which always seems to appear very much earlier after Bridge 76 than I anticipate. We filled up with diesel and emptied the pump out in a monsoon.

Back at F13 the downpour passed as we walked to Shugborough.

Another glorious end to an otherwise inglorious day (weather-wise).

Tuesday 24th May – clean-up day.