

“How do you fancy a free canal holiday?” “What’s the catch?!”

My brother Martin had bought a 32’ narrow boat, which needed transporting from Penkridge in Staffordshire to Keynsham near-Bristol. He was looking for volunteers to do the 2-week journey. I was delighted to do the first leg for him, as I had been on many narrow boat holidays in the 1980’s and enjoyed them immensely. There is nothing better than mixing a canal holiday with as much ringing as you can, so I planned a route where we could grab the most towers on their practice nights or Sunday ringing. I had worked out that we could get down as far as Abingdon with the available time I could spare.

The boat was moored at Otherton Boat yard near Penkridge. From what I gather the yard was selling the boat on behalf of the owners, in the same way that an estate agent would sell a house. There are even surveys carried out on the structure of the boat, which Martin was witnessed when the boat was lifted out of the water. Martin had arranged for the boat yard to do a service and make sure that the boat was “ship shape” and ready to do the long journey south.

Saturday 19 August

Martin and Jane took my crew and I (Lizzie & Chris) from their house in Lambourn Berks, to Penkridge on the Staffs & Worcester Canal, and made sure that we were settled in and ready to “set sail”. The boat was named “NEMO” as you can see from this photo, and on the face of things it was a very nice boat. However, there were problems right from the start. At first Martin noticed that the fridge had been replaced with a 12v plug in Cool box. The Rubber mat on the deck was missing. Those were the obvious things. Then we tried to get things to work. The power to the fridge was disconnected from the main batteries. We managed to connect that in a “Heath Robinson” fashion. The biggest problem was (as we were about to find out) that we had no tools with us.

So we were off. Martin navigated the boat to the first lock; it was pouring with rain by now. The fan belt was slipping badly; the boat yard engineer should have checked it before we left. We decided not to go any further that evening because it was raining so hard and we were hungry anyway. On closer inspection of the engine we found the Radiator Cap blowing water. Martin tried to phone the boatyard on his mobile, but they had gone home by this time. He was not a happy man! So he left us to our tea and said he would sort it out over the phone that evening. I got a call from Martin later that evening, an engineer was coming to get us sorted out in the morning.

Sunday

Just before the engineer arrived, the man from the boat yard came. He wasn’t at all happy about the text message that Martin had left him; I don’t know what it said but it had put him in a very bad mood! He had a replacement radiator cap, but when we tried to start the engine it was dead! Just then the engineer arrived and the other man left.

The reason why the engine was now dead was because Martin and I had connected the fridge wire to the starter battery, and it had drained it overnight. He managed to “jump start” it from the other battery and we then discovered that the leaking Radiator Cap was the symptom of another problem. The engine’s cooling system circulates water from the canal. The problem was that water weed ended up getting sucked into the system blocking it up. Once the engineer had cleared the blockage and done a number of other things, like tighten the fan belt, we were off; it was about 12.30 by then and we were now over 3 hours behind schedule and our first grab (which was Wolverhampton St Peter (12 bells 33cwt) for evensong) was now out of the question.



When we arrived at Aldersley Junction to get onto the Birmingham Canal Navigation (BCN), we realised that we needed something called a “conversation key” which unlocks the paddles to operate the locks. We turned the boat around and headed back to the nearest boatyard, where we bought a couple of keys for £11 then did a U-Turn and we were heading back to the junction.

It was then that we noticed that in doing the U-Turn we had sucked up some weed and the cooling system was blocked again. We moored up and had a look at the problem. Being as I still had no tools (other than 2 spanners, both the same size) I took the cover off the weed hatch (which had previously not been looked at) that was held down by 4 wing nuts. To my bitter disappointment the weed hatch was clean but the filter was missing, which meant that the blockage was further up the system. Then to make matters worse I couldn’t re-secure the cover to the weed hatch because the bolts had corroded so much that the threads were gone.

I called Martin again and told him the bad news, and then called out the engineer again. He said he would be with us first thing in the morning. We then went to the nearest pub and had a Sunday roast for tea, then back to the boat for the night.

Monday

Martin called in the morning saying he was taking the day off work so that he could bring some tools. I told him he had better add to his list of shopping, a Mallet (to knock in the mooring spikes) and a hose & connectors (to fill the boat with fresh drinking water) both essential items that were missing. The engineer fixed the problems and we were on our way again by about 11.00am. Into Aldersly junction we went (again), and up the Wolverhampton Locks. There are 21 locks in all that take you to Wolverhampton Town Centre (21 is the bottom lock). We were making good progress until we were about to come out of lock 17 when it became apparent that the propeller had come off!

We pulled the boat out of the lock moored at a safe distance away. I called Martin and told him the bad news. He was about an hour away by this time. There was nothing we could do so we found a café and had a late Full English Breakfast and a big mug of tea.

Martin is a bit like Bob the Builder - Can he fix it? Yes he can! When he turned up things started to happen. I had visions of me jumping in the canal with Chris's swimming trunks on to push the propeller back on the shaft, but there was no need. It could be done through a "Prop" hatch, which I couldn't see because I hadn't dismantled enough of the decking. Within an hour we were off again.



Fortunately Martin decided to come with us until we had arrived at the top lock. We made good progress up the locks and met some other boaters coming the other way, which is nice because you talk about where you have been and where you are going. I think that everyone was impressed with what we were trying to do; I was impressed myself because Abingdon seemed a world away from Wolverhampton. Some people hadn't even heard of Abingdon!

When we had cleared the top lock at about 4.30pm, our priority was to fill up with fresh water and find a decent place to moor for the night. There was a BWB yard where you could fill with water and dispose of your rubbish. Not only that, there were decent toilet and shower facilities which were well worth using because the facilities on the boat are cramped and need emptying frequently - not a pleasant task!



Martin used this time in the yard to have a poke around his boat. And, as he jumped off the roof onto the deck, the deck collapsed! He managed to fix it with a few screws but said it wouldn't put up with much strain. Then, when he was fiddling with the engine, a jet of hot water shot 20 feet into the air! A hole had appeared in one of the radiator hoses. As luck would have it he was able to find replacements at a fairly local stockists, who was prepared to deliver them to our boat.

We had little to eat on board, so I went off to find some food for tea. We all fancied some good old English "Fish 'n' Chips". I had a bit of a shock as I walked into the town centre. There was not one Fish 'n' Chip shop, but there were any amount of Pizza, Kebab shops etc. I did manage to find one of these that did Fish 'n' Chips, but it turned out not to be very nice fish at all!

When the parts were delivered, Martin fitted them quickly and we were up and running again. We said goodbye to him as he made his way down the towpath to his car a couple of miles away. We decided to moor up on a mooring where there was no pedestrian access, which suited me because we were safe from the Chav's, Drunks and Junkies. By now we were 24 hours behind schedule and it was only day 3.

Tuesday

Chris and I were up early the next morning, it was a lovely sunny day; we cast off just before 7.30am. We were both determined to catch up as much time as we could. We went through the 3 locks at Tipton by about 11.00am. But as we left the last lock we had a weed blockage again. This time I had tools to fix things myself.

This stretch of canal is probably the most boring and the most awful canal that one could wish to use; it stretches on as far as the eye can see as you travel through mile after mile of urban wasteland. Finally, by 2.00pm, we arrived in Birmingham. It was like an oasis, one minute you are going past derelict factories and the next you are going through Gunwarf Quays. Our original plan was to ring at Solihull (12 bells 21 cwt) on the Tuesday evening, but that meant using more locks to get to the Grand Union Canal. I favoured missing out another evenings ringing and heading down the Worcester & Birmingham Canal and joining the Stratford on Avon Canal because there were fewer locks so we would be sure to make better time.

As soon as we left the Birmingham Gas Street Basin (which looked a lot like Gunwarf Quays) and headed down the Worcester & Birmingham canal, the scenery started to improve. We passed Birmingham University and the Cadbury factory at Bournville. Shortly after we joined the Stratford on Avon Canal at the Kings Norton Junction. Lizzie hopped of and picked a bowl of

blackberries as we travelled, but had to hop on quickly when we reached a tunnel. We stopped at the next village to get some very necessary provisions. Then we were back on the boat again and pressed on. By the time we did the first 4 Lapworth locks it was 8.00pm and we decided to call it a day. We had a great days cruising despite a couple of minor breakdowns that I was able to fix, we had covered over 30 miles with only 7 locks. We were back on schedule!

Wednesday

The next day was showery and we had many locks to operate. 15 Lapworth locks to Kingswood Junction on to the Grand Union Canal and then the legendary 21 (+2) Hatton locks into Warwick. Heavy showers were never far away, we were soaked many times over, but we did have the great fortune to share the "Wide locks" with an extended family in a very long hire boat who were great fun. They were only coming down as far as Warwick and going back up the locks the following day. There is something to be said for a one-way journey!

I went into town and picked up a Chinese takeaway and found out where the 2 churches with bells were: St Mary's (10bells 24cwt) and St Nicholas (8 bells 15cwt), they ring on alternate Wednesdays. When we were refuelled and dried out we walked back into town to the nearest church (St Nicholas) where we soon found out that the ringing was to be here that evening. Everyone made us most welcome. Ringing never ceases to amaze me, where ever you go you are never with strangers, just friends you haven't met. We rang all the usual stuff we ring at home as well!



Thursday

The following morning we filled up with fresh water again, and we were off, another long day's cruising, which took in a lot more locks. I was somewhat nervous when we shared several locks with a brand new private Narrow Boat on its maiden voyage, in comparison Martin's boat looked ready for the scrap heap. My biggest fear was scratching their shiny new paintwork. But they were nice people as well and didn't mind too much the odd bump together. We followed them all the way to the junction with the Oxford Canal (the Napton Junction) where they turned in the opposite direction and waved to us as they went.

As far as I was concerned we were in the home straight now, my plan was to get to the Napton top lock by nightfall. However we were about 2 locks up the Napton locks when Chris fell down the steps into the boat. He had hurt his leg badly; there were 2 big bleeding grazes, one which came up like a fried egg. He was in a lot of pain, but we propped him up at the tiller while Lizzie and I worked the locks. It was a pity that this had happened because we were enjoying a perfect evening weather wise, in some of the most beautiful scenery you could wish to see. We arrived at the top lock as the light was beginning to fade. We added up our lock total for the day, it was no less than 32! Chris had a couple of pain killers with his tea and was right as rain by the morning.

Friday was a bit ambitious but I was determined to get down as far as Lower Heyford (6 bells 10cwt) where we were hoping to join the locals for Ringing practice. Although we had an early start it soon became obvious that we were not going to make it. The Oxford Canal was the busiest waterway I had ever experienced. There were queues at the locks and any amount of moored boats that you have to slow down for as you pass. Plus for the first time in a couple of days we had the weed problem back, although not as severe as before because I had made my own filter system in the weed hatch. At the end of the day we only made it down as far as Aynho by nightfall.

Saturday

Progress on was as painfully slow as the day before, with queues for fresh water and waste disposal as well as the locks. As we rolled into Oxford several hours later than planned, I noticed that the charge warning light was on which suggested to me that the alternator was faulty. There was nothing I could do about it by then, I could only hope that the boat would start in the morning. We went to a local pub for a meal and ended up going to bed by 9.00pm because we were all shattered.



Sunday

Our last day had arrived. All we had to do was to get the boat to Abingdon and our job was done. Fortunately the engine started and we were off. We went through the last lock on the Oxford Canal onto the Thames, and then had to wait at the massive electrically operated lock while we bought a pass to use the river. The river was so wide compared with the canals and a lot faster too. There were 4 of these huge locks that held many boats.

When we arrived at Abingdon I phoned Martin telling him where we were moored and the bad news about the alternator. We cleaned the boat and then went for some lunch before his friends took over from us. We were home just before 9.00pm. Although our holiday had been a nightmare at times we have some very fond memories about our adventures, even if we only managed to grab one tower.

Steve Hough

We should have realised before we took on the task that NEMO spelt backwards is OMEN!