

A visit to Britain - May 2010

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Some British waterways

On a recent visit to our son in Bristol and our daughter in London, we managed to visit several British waterways and look at some interesting vessels. However, the first vessel we saw on the trip was an Irish one, on its way to Wales. While queueing for the ferry at Rosslare Harbour, we spotted a wooden boat on a trailer; we were told it was a newly built Wexford or Slaney cot, destined for the Mon & Brec (Monmouthshire and Brecon Canal) and the rivers Usk and Wye in Wales. Its 82-year-old builder had worked by eye and this would probably be his last boat.

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The Fourteen Locks

Crossing southern Wales, we turned off the M4 at Junction 27 to visit the Fourteen Locks on the Mon & Brec. There is a visitor centre (with caf   and car park) just minutes from the motorway, and it's a good place for a break from driving. Restoration work is under way on four of the locks [www.fourteenlocks.co.uk and a blog on www.fourteenlocksetr.co.uk] but there is access to the other ten.

The Mon & Brec was originally thought of as two canals, the 33-mile Brecon & Abergavenny Canal (finished in 1812 and now fully restored) and the Monmouthshire Canal (finished in 1799). Thomas Dadford Junior was the engineer for both. Ardnacrusha drops boats about 100 feet in two locks; it was built with twentieth-century technology, lots of concrete and German engineering. The Fourteen Locks drop boats 155 feet over half a mile, using eighteenth-century technology, stone and Anglo-Welsh ingenuity. The fourteen locks include five pairs, one group of three locks and one single, and there was a very elaborate system of side ponds to make best use of the water supply.

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The Chelmer and Blackwater Navigation

We stayed in self-catering accommodation near Maldon in Essex. The house was beside an old mill " and Beeleigh Lock on the Chelmer and Blackwater Navigation. The navigation was built between 1793 and 1797 to link the town of Chelmsford to the sea. It is about 14 miles long, with 13 locks. It was never nationalised and continued to carry freight until 1972. Recently, the Company of Proprietors of the Chelmer & Blackwater Navigation Limited [www.cbn.co.uk] agreed that Essex Waterways Ltd, a division of the Inland Waterways Association, should take over the day to day management and maintenance of the waterway. Much work is done by volunteers from the IWA and the Chelmer Canal Trust.

Some small boats are kept in a marina on the summit level in Chelmsford, but the main inland boating centre seems to be at Paper Mill Lock, with many canal craft, kayaks and rowing-boats, tea-rooms and many people enjoying themselves looking at the boats.

There is a basin at Heybridge, with a sea lock giving access to tidal waters. Outside the basin, two sailing barges had taken the ground; boats on a small pontoon had their own holes in the mud and, on the other side of the lock, a former

fast attack vessel, now called Defender, was undergoing renovation. Inside the basin, there was a mix of seagoing and inland craft, with a trip-boat and rowing-boats for hire; a small area was blocked off as a boatyard.

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Maldon

Hythe Quay at Maldon is home to many of the surviving Thames sailing-barges [www.thamesbarge.org.uk]. We visited twice, once in the morning, while the tide was in, and again in the evening, when it was out [www.thequeensheadmaldon.co.uk].

There were no trips on offer when we were there, and no barges moving under sail, but one did cast off under power, move down the estuary to turn and come back to a different quay. There were many other vessels of interest, as well as a boatyard with wooden boats being repaired.

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The Thames

We hired a small battery-powered 19' day-boat from Kris Cruisers [www.kriscruisers.co.uk] for a trip on the Thames. We went upstream through Romney, Boveney and Bray Locks, noting the lock mechanism, which boaters can use by themselves when keepers are off duty.

At Maidenhead, workboats were busy at the bridge. We went up as far as Boulters Lock [thames.me.uk/s00740.htm], where we chatted with the lockkeeper about the African Queen hotel-boat [www.african-queen.co.uk], formerly the Shannon Princess.

On some stretches of the river, we might have been in the middle of the countryside; on others, magnificent houses and boat-houses lined the banks. Even more interesting was the variety of boats: barges, narrowboats, cruisers small and large, rowing-boats and launches.

The following day, we saw various workboats on the Thames in central London and leisure craft at Richmond.

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The Kennet & Avon

Travelling westward to Bristol, we visited Aldermaston Wharf on the Kennet & Avon Canal, the southernmost of the east-west routes across England. It's a broad-gauge waterway (max beam 14'), using the rivers Avon at the western end (Bristol to Bath) and Kennet at the eastern (Newbury to Reading and the Thames), with a canal in the middle. It was completed in 1810, closed in the 1950s but reopened in 1990, thanks largely to the Kennet & Avon Canal Trust [www.katrust.co.uk].

The Trust continues to raise funds for the waterway, running trip boats, a museum, two pumping-stations and four tea-rooms, one of which was at Aldermaston Wharf. Nearby is Lock 95 (of 106), originally turf-sided but now with elegant scalloped sides. A narrowboat was working its way through as a fire-engine crossed the bridge; the narrowboat crew then operated the hydraulic controls to lift the bridge, stopping all the traffic.

Further west, we visited the Caen Hill flight of locks near Devizes. The main part of the flight is from Lock 29 to Lock 44, sixteen locks close together, with side-ponds, but there are 29 locks altogether on the ascent to Devizes. We were told that an ascent can take four hours.

On the following day, we visited the elegant Dundas Aqueduct on the K&A. The narrow Somersetshire Coal Canal [www.coalcanal.org] joined the K&A here; a short section has been restored, with a visitor centre, trip-boats and hire-boats, moorings and a caf  .

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   Brian Goggin 2010