

# Rambler's epic voyage on the Royal Canal - May June 2011

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Rambler's epic voyage from Grand Canal Docks to Richmond Harbour on the Royal Canal

Is fÃ©idir linn - we beat that canal - we moved that barge - were among the sentiments expressed in Richmond Harbour on the evening of Wednesday June 29th 2011. A remarkable evening for the crew of the Heritage Barge, Rambler; the film crew were creating a wonderful film but the boat crew had successfully handled the Star!

Still to happen was a barbecue for the camera, the Grand Finale at Lanesboro, rafting up with other heritage barges and the wrap party that followed. All great memories, but for the boat crew, this was the real day of achievement.

The Beginning

After months of planning and preparation, the trip began in Dublin's Grand Canal Docks on May 21st when Rambler dropped onto the Liffey for an hour of filming, before entering Spencer Dock and then proceeding along the dropped levels of the canal under Sheriff Street Bridge. She then headed for the Railway Bridge at North Strand, where disaster struck when the bridge failed to lift. Eventually Rambler and the boats from the Dublin Rally returned to Spencer Dock and stayed there overnight. Sunday blew a gale and the fleet struggled back to Grand Canal Docks, in two groups because one tide window was not long enough for all the boats to get through. There was another of these false starts a few days later, with Skipper and crew suffering strain and frustration and returning once again to Grand Canal Docks. At the time, it all seemed impossible.

Finally, on the third attempt, on Thursday June 9th at midday it happened. There was indeed a God! The bridge lifted as arranged and Rambler was hauled through the shallows into Lock No 1, on the real Royal Canal at last. There followed an all afternoon battle along this level, then winching the boat into Lock No 2 at Binns Bridge, Drumcondra and a very late finish with an overnight stay in the lock chamber.

The Journey

Friday morning 9 am the film crew arrived to Rambler whose crew had been long up, had breakfasted on board and readied the boat for action. This was to be the standard routine throughout the shoot and as usual, Dick Warner would climb on to spend the day on Rambler. Overnight, water levels had recovered and the journey along the walls of Mountjoy and through Phibsboro went smoothly. The bridge at Liffey Junction saw the first myth shattered, she sailed serenely through! Another day or two of this and open countryside would be reached and real canal travel could be enjoyed.

From this early point it was apparent that two crews existed, working and living together but separate entities. The film crew had this six part epic to create which would, hopefully, end up as a stunning thing to wow the pundits. The barge crew had to move this leviathan along the Royal Canal to the Shannon, a feat which had not been accomplished in many decades. Rambler had been in Dublin for years, largely untested and with dimensions to test the Royal Canal system. The aqueduct through the M50 roundabout was a taste of things to come, in the film-making world. Aerial shots were organised and Rambler's crew toiled to haul her backwards across the aqueduct " three times!! This exercise was repeated throughout the trip and contributed to that camera crew " boat crew divide. Take Two Take Three was never a joke. The Deep Sinking at Clonsilla was perhaps the last of the horror-area stories to threaten this venture and it lived up to its reputation. The canal at this point, travelling through a rock-cutting, was shallow with lots of debris and banks too high, for any possibility of a tow through this nightmare.

Skipper John would relate, weeks later "el could have cried that day! " Ropes, bodies pushed to the limit, determination, all joined in to make this second Royal Obstacle another myth to be left behind. That day was to prove one of the longest and toughest with the crew walking to the GAA club to chill out. Next came what seemed like heaven, a day off!

Monday started bright and early and Rambler got a workmate " Peter Hayden of the RCAG kindly gave his Scudge to act as camera boat for the rest of the trip. There followed a couple of days through Maynooth to Kilcock with lots of camera stuff and interviews holding up the boat!!

I caught up with the crew at Ferns Lock, No 17 and the day's travelling got us to Moyvalley at 8 pm with only a short Take Two Take Three at Enfield on a really glorious afternoon. A meal in Fureys that evening with all the crew was an enjoyable event; things were looking better on both fronts as Rambler was making progress and the weather was good for filming. Next day came Ribbontail and the Boyne Aqueduct both major film scenes, with aerial stuff and the usual takes, all getting very tedious. We arrived in late to the Hill of Down, only to return on a minibus to Fureys for more filming.

The very old but trustworthy, six cylinder Ruston air-cooled engine was certainly working hard. Running times of twelve hours and more were common and an engine-room fan, installed in the early days, ensured some comfort in going below to check on things.

On Friday June 24th Thomastown Harbour was reached with an unbelievable two day break ahead. Rambler was tidied up that evening and people scattered in various directions. Boat and engine had not let anyone down but Sunday during a family outing, the propeller fell off! All hands got involved, the propeller was recovered, measurements taken off the shaft to get a new nut made, and by mid-morning on Monday, cameras were rolling again.

The journey up to the summit level and across through Mullingar to Coolnahay was reasonable enough with the odd grounding and re-takes. The drop down to the Shannon had no myths built up and everyone was looked forward to this period. I re-joined the crew at Coolnahay as the shots of a very pretty lockhouse and descendants of lockkeepers were being organised. The day ahead entailed twenty lock cycles, ten each for Rambler and Scudge, plenty of retakes and

overnighting in Ballynacargy, another myth dispelled! We overtook the WI weed-cutting team at midday, a tremendous job being undertaken by the friendly crew. This was another typically long, hard day but all felt the goal was in sight and the arrival date for Richmond Harbour was being guessed. By the weekend of June 25th, we had arrived in a wet and miserable Abbeyshrule, a fitting end to another hard-worked week but Richmond was a lot closer and another two-day week-end to be enjoyed. On Monday the drop through a couple of locks and along a particularly twisting stretch of canal, brought the team to Foigha Harbour and was followed with a day of aerial shots and overnighting at Mosstown.

#### The Finale

The last canal-day had arrived. Lunch at the unopened Longford Branch was followed by a long evening of film stuff before the final lifting bridges and locks were left behind and Rambler sailed serenely into Richmond behind Scudge, cameras rolling away and the crew drained. Mission accomplished!

She was described as too deep, too high and too long for the system, but the sheer determination of her crew had brought her through. The small group in the harbour that evening, enjoyed the staged barbecue, and were conscious of the achievement of the washed out crews, both boat and film. A midweek day off was the prize which allowed time for wound-licking.

The trip to Lanesboro and the final scene with Chang Sha was a fitting end to it all. Rambler was recognised as the star and her crew as the conquering heroes, with the Wrap Party the deserved prize. The boat crew had bonded with a common conviction that they could get Rambler through and their experience would stay with them forever. The film crew will produce a masterpiece, a once in a lifetime experience for everyone, with the film as a record to last forever.

Is fÃ©idir linn, go lÃ©ir

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Photos by Ben and Joe Treacy

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{gallery}Memories - Ramblers Journey on Royal Canal 2011{/gallery}

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