



2014 Easter Mini Break – The Rashbrooks Return !

Please note – all of the photos shown were taken on our return journey when weather was fine but dull!

We have a holiday abroad planned this year – a special treat as Stuart will be leaving for university in September, but Simon and I are itching to be on the canals again and so very last minute we look at what's available boat wise (not that many as it is Easter weekend) and choose a Dove class boat out of Gailey marina, near Stafford.

I fancy a fairly easy lock free route – I have heard it suggested that Norbury and return is a good route over 3 nights, with only 2 locks out and 2 on the way back. So we plump for that.

Gailey is a thriving boat building business as well as a holiday hire base – and they are particularly well renowned for their exceptional level of customer service. We have introduced ourselves to David the owner and manager of Gailey Wharf and to Katie the administrator who I speak to on a regular basis in my capacity as a booking clerk at ABC Boat Hire. Our boat isn't quite ready (remember we only booked it this morning!) but David suggests a couple of places we can go – there are 2 pubs just up the road and a Dobbie's garden centre which is where we go for a cup of coffee while we wait the half hour he says it will take to be ready.

On our return we are instructed to unload and then to drive our car further up the pathway to a secure car park which is locked at night which is good for our peace of mind. And we do have a key should we arrive back at an unexpected time. Trevor, an engineer takes us through the boat – it's all fairly standard and we have taken a few Alvechurch boats out before so we know mostly how it all works.

This boat is just beautiful though – 2 full bathrooms and the 2 fixed cabins separated by the galley and dinette area. All the boats built at Gailey have special little tweaks – such as the dinette double being slid out rather than using the table, better storage – even the paintwork is a slightly different design to the Alvechurch Boats at other marinas. We are very impressed.

Trevor is kind enough to help us turn the boat through some moorers and a very sharp left and then he jumps off and we are underway!

Katie has advised us that the normal first evening stop off is at the Fox and Anchor – roughly 2 hours cruising away but it is possible to get much further. We decide to see how it goes. It



is just so lovely to be out on a boat again! On the way we pass several really good places to moor up on our return – just an hour or so from the Wharf.



We're off!

This afternoon everything is very sunny and sparkly and we are really hoping for the weather to keep up but seeing as it is a bank holiday weekend we are not holding our breath!

Initially, immediately out of Gailey there are lots of industrial warehouse type buildings and what look to be abandoned lorry trailers – even a couple of buildings that look like high schools, but this only lasts about 15 minutes or so and then we are out into beautiful countryside.

The canal is very rural here – fields of sheep and cows, beautiful little cottages and idyllic barn conversions and just a couple of short hours and we are cruising past the Fox and



Anchor. We decide that we will stop here after all, the smells are just too enticing and we haven't eaten since Brunch!

We moor up and the girls and I stroll along to the pub to see whether we need to book a table. We are advised that yes we do, but no we can't as they are fully booked, but to turn up anyway as there are always cancellations!

We decide to go along straight away and luckily we do get a table within a few minutes. This is a Vintage Inn so the food is what I would call 'gastro' quality. Very nice.

We have a long leisurely supper, go back to the boat and pop on a DVD and then we snuggle down for the night.



Fox and Anchor, Cross Green 01902 790786

Next morning we are up nice and early for the obligatory fried breakfast – which Simon cooks, result! And then we are off again.



Not long after leaving our spot we pass under the M54 motorway which is horrendously noisy and we are glad to be leaving it behind! The Staffordshire and Worcestershire canal is one of the oldest and we are about to enter a very narrow cutting which was once called Pendeford Rockin' after a local farm. This is actually so narrow that you can only fit one boats width – I don't think you would get a widebeam through here! There are designated 'passing' areas but it is a good idea to have someone at the front on sharp lookout in any case. It takes us about 15 minutes I suppose to cruise the length of the cut and at times the cliff sides loom over us and it can feel quite claustrophobic – I am reminded of the Voyage of the Dawn Treader in Narnia, sailing into uncharted territory, but we are very lucky and get through without meeting anybody.



As you can see, VERY narrow!

Straight after we emerge from this strange crevasse, we encounter what is actually a suburb of Wolverhampton. Hugely tall poplar trees line an extremely straight bit of canal that runs alongside a housing estate with paths and lawns full of people walking their dogs and children playing on bikes and skateboards and the like.



Once past this we will be very near the turn at Autherley Junction and we know from our guide book (Nicholson's 4 is the one we are using and the type we favour) that immediately following this sharp right turn there will be a lock. Not much of one it has to be said – it only has a drop of 6 inches, but never the less someone will have to get off and open gates etc.

We can see the turn coming up and I am afraid that we completely misjudge it and the nose of our boat goes straight into the wall of the towpath – slightly embarrassing but there is no one around to see anyhow so the girls and I jump off and hurry under the bridge to the first lock gate. The drop is so shallow it is actually hard to see whether the paddles need raising or not, but after a few seconds pushing at the gates in vain we decide that they do! Amazing how much a couple of inches of water weighs!



First lock and a very sharp right coming up!

When we are through we find ourselves at a Napton Narrowboats marina and decide to moor up and visit their shop as we forgot to bring sugar. They have a few supplies and we purchase a small bag of sugar and then decide to carry on.



The next stop we decide will be Brewwood (pronounced Brood) which looks to be a very pretty village worth having a look at.

We cruise steadily on and now we find ourselves in the real countryside – once past Bridge 3A there really is no sign of civilisation apart from the motorway bridge again – if you can imagine we have turned onto the Shropshire Union and are now travelling north, parallel to the Staffordshire and Worcestershire Canal we went south on – so this is the same M54 we went under earlier today!

The Shroppie as it is affectionately known is one of the more modern canals and is beautifully straight, with lovely little brick built bridges and fields on both sides as far as you can see.





Approaching Brewood though at around Bridge 9 you can sense that we are approaching civilisation again – the Bridges become more elaborate like Avenue Bridge with its balustrades – see picture below



Avenue Bridge

On our right we can see the very tall and elegant spire of the village's 16th century church. Apparently this village was originally a Roman fort built to defend Watling Street – more about which later, as we are going to pass over it!

We decide to moor up but there are rather a lot of boats moored now, mostly liveaboards it looks like. So we are actually past the village and alongside Countryside Cruisers headquarters before we can find a spot in which to fit.

We moor up and have some sandwiches and coffee and then Simon and I decide to go and explore the village. The girls are not keen so we leave them pottering around on the boat.



Brewood Church

Brewood is what I can only describe as extremely posh. Every house we pass is absolutely immaculate, we walk past a private school for girls with actual polished brass gates and a posse of young girls in jodphurs on horseback – even the horses are shiny. I feel like I am in an episode of Midsomer Murders! The clothes shops are boutiques rather than chain stores – no prices - there is no supermarket but rather, old fashioned butchers, bakers, green grocers and even an old style chemists with jars of coltsfoot rock in the window! It is utterly charming. Much of the architecture in the square is original and apparently the entire market square is riddled with underground vaults and passages interconnecting Speedwell Castle on the square and the public houses and eateries surrounding it! Presumably so the inhabitants didn't have to get wet or mingle with the hoi polloi on the square! What it is to be rich eh?

There are several restaurants, hotels and pubs here and if it were evening we would have definitely stopped here as we would be virtually guaranteed a great meal and even better people watching.



But it is only round 4pm and we only had lunch a couple of hours ago so we decide to carry on.



Speedwell Castle, Brewood

So we walk back to the boat and start up again.

Now we are coming up to Stretton Aqueduct and this really is something as the aqueduct goes over the A5. Otherwise known as Watling Street – the road built by the Romans that goes from Dover to London (A2) and then from London to Wroxeter (A5).

As we go over I think how odd we must appear to the traffic below – a boat gliding over their heads must seem quite a sight I imagine – it is normally cars going over the boats! You can see from the photo how amazingly straight the road is though. They certainly don't make them like that anymore!



Stretton Aqueduct and the A5 or Watling Street

We sail on and it is at this point that we realise that because we spent so long in Brewood we are not realistically going to make it to Norbury without having a really long cruising day tomorrow. Therefore we decide we will turn back at the next winding hole. We spot a nice looking pub on the water's edge near bridge 19 at Wheaton Aston called The Hartley Arms and decide we will eat there tonight and so turn at High Onn Wharf just past Bridge 25. This is only really about one hours cruising from where we had originally been headed, but when you take into account it's an hour each way then it makes sense to stop now.

We manage to moor up right opposite the pub and it is a short walk over the bridge to get there. This is an older pub – not exactly 'spit and sawdust' but more basic than the previous night. However we are pleasantly surprised by the prices and the quality of food.

Back to the boat and a few games of Cheat and we are ready for bed!



Next day it is time to trundle back – we stop at Brewood on the way to get some supplies for that night's tea as we will be eating on board tonight – and manage to find a Spar shop amongst all the posh stores and coming back we spot lots and lots of Orange tip butterflies!



Stretton Aqueduct again

There are literally scores of them – their colours are exactly the same as the inside of a Cadbury's cream egg – white and orangey yellow but of course it is Easter Sunday today! So very appropriate.

Sunday is much more overcast and dull than Friday and Saturday has been and I apologise because all our photos were taken on the way back – so they really don't do the prettiness of the route justice.

We moor up near Bridge 75 on the Staffordshire and Worcestershire Canal for tea giving us we think around 30 minutes cruising in the morning to Gailey which is a very pretty spot in the middle of nowhere, very peaceful.



The next morning it actually takes about 45 minutes to cruise into Gailey Wharf where luckily marina operatives are on hand to help returning boats moor up – it is very busy and boats are squeezed tightly together so it would take more skill than we have to not crash into something! That said, even the marina staff knock the boats about a bit – which makes us feel much better about our prang on Saturday!

All in all it has been a fabulous Easter weekend – very relaxing and not at all strenuous, lovely company, lots to look at and keep us amused, plenty of good stop off points, and it has only drizzled a bit yesterday afternoon! So for a Bank Holiday we feel we have done very well. I would definitely recommend this route for a first timer or novice, as it is mostly straight and only a couple of locks.



The Cadbury's Crème Egg Easter Butterfly (also known as the Orange Tip!)



ABC BOAT HIRE