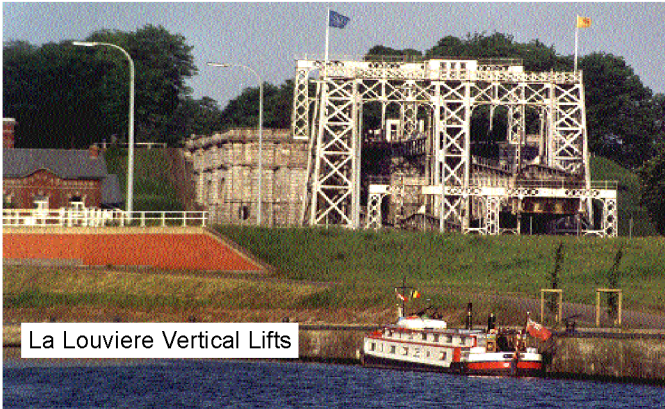




## A NARROW BOAT IN EUROPE

by Jim Macdonald



Quite rightly the HNBOC is concerned with UK canals and historic craft, and it ceased to be a cruising club many years ago, but I thought that members may be interested in some of the technical aspects of my last years boating with the converted BCN boat *Elizabeth*, which in the main took place east and south of her

normal haunts. I've owned her for 34 years and run out of English canals until we restore some more, so had to look elsewhere.

After a red board trip up the Thames, followed by the usual "sludge" up the Oxford, *Elizabeth* was craned out at Blue Lias Marina, near Stockton, in early May and taken to Calais Docks, where she was re-united with her natural element, without having to suffer that nasty corrosive salty stuff. She then spent the summer clocking up well in excess of 3000 miles and 1000 locks in five countries, doing no less than four lifts like Anderton, and two inclined planes like Foxton!

I'm certainly not the first person to have gone to Europe with an English narrow boat, for there must be well over 40 modern, narrow beam, steel craft currently drifting around the waterways between the Baltic and the Mediterranean, but I doubt there are any "proper" narrow boats, or many as old as *Elizabeth* to have done it before; the hull being well over 100 years old, and the conversion being over 65 years old. The engine is a youngster of about 40! Also, most of the journeying was single handed, except that I did have a small brown dog plucked from the mire of the Bridgewater canal at Monton, (which strangely also happens to be his name) to keep me sane!

Actually, single handed boating on the canals of Europe is not at all difficult, for in the case of manual locks without a resident keeper, the navigation authority (VNF in France) supply an "eclusier volante" or flying lock keeper. This is in effect a company paid lock wheeler, but on a motor bike or even in a van, who rushes ahead on the towpath and sets every lock and bridge for you, so that you don't have to make any real effort. They are often quite surprised and sometimes pleased, if you then show that you are able to shut the odd gate, but it's unlikely that you will be trusted to lift a paddle. Rather they will undertake this highly skilled task for you, but if they are inexperienced (very common in summer, when students are employed) and you don't watch out, they may flood your boat or smash all your crockery by lifting the paddle on the wrong side of the lock, just like Hatton and Knowle.

On the automatic locks you often have full control of everything, setting up the lock as you approach it, with the turn or pull of a lever hanging from a wire, a hundred yards before the lock, or by passing through a radar (or even laser) beam, or best of all



by “zapping” the lock using an infra red portable control unit, just like the TV control, a sort of electronic windlass. Where there is a proper lock keeper on the electrically operated locks, as is always the case on the bigger locks, one finds that they are highly skilled and passage of the big locks is smooth, uncomplicated and hardly ever traumatic.

On the smaller canals the locks are mostly to a standard dimension; so called Frecinet sized, after the Minister of Works under Napoleon (the third?) who in about 1875 instituted a standard size of lock and hence boat, which is 38.5 x 5.05 x 1.6 metres. This lock size is universal over France, Belgium and Holland. The boats which fit these locks are called Peniches in France, Spitz Barges in Belgium and Holland and they are effectively the narrow boats of mainland Europe. They load up to about 350 tonnes, but because of silting (just like the UK) they may only get about 250 tonnes on board if they are to negotiate the shallower waterways. On many later canals the locks are bigger and a very few, on pleasure boat only waterways, are smaller.

The only real locking problem that one is likely to encounter is if one has to take a narrow boat to the uphill end of a lock when locking upwards; for instance if there are other boats in the lock behind you. The reason for this is that often the only paddles at the top end are gate paddles and whereas these don't affect a Peniche, they can play havoc with a narrow boat. They can inundate the front of the boat or cause a severe roll as the lock level covers the flow of water from the paddle. Been there, done it and even got the photograph! Personally I'd never be happy with a modern boat with a bow cockpit under such circumstances, but then I'd ban front cockpits even in England, for they are otherwise dangerous.

The one place where I did have the odd worrying moment was on the German Mosel, where, because the 4000 tonne locks were closed for annual maintenance, I took *Elizabeth* through the tiny locks alongside, which are really intended for the small high speed boats so beloved by the Germans. The locks are 18 metres long by 3 metre beam, and *Elizabeth* is 18.8 metres long (61ft 9 1/4 inches) even with the rudder at 90 degrees and the folding washboards vertical. I used to call these washboards my Calder and Hebble boards, because they enable me to get *Elizabeth* up to Salterhebble through the 57 ft long locks, but now I call them my Mosel boards. Yes, travel does broaden the mind!

In many ways the English narrow boat works well on Continental waterways from a navigation point of view, but the accommodation restrictions associated with 7ft beam are of course totally unnecessary where even the narrowest locks are about 8 1/2 to 9 1/2 feet. Where the narrow boat does fall down is when it comes to cruising speed. Most narrow boats move in deep water at about 5 mph and one or two with more modern massive engines might hang on to 6 mph with a lot of wash. *Elizabeth* cruises happily at 7 1/2 kph (slightly less than 5 mph) in deep water, and if pushed she can do 10 kph, but it's not pleasant! At these speeds it's certain that almost everything else on the canals of Europe will pass you eventually. True, the Peniches tend to crawl along the Frecinet canals at about 4 kph, but when they get on the rivers or deep canals they rocket along at speeds which are commensurate with their 120 ft waterline length and no narrow boat would catch them.

What is even more galling is that most hire craft are overpowered and faster than your narrow boat and inevitably they use this speed to pinch the locks from you! The fastest boats are the motor yachts and cruisers (mostly German or Germanic Belgium) who completely ignore the speed limits and wash the banks away in a very disturbing manner, especially on the older, little used canals of France. Where the narrow boat does score over every other boat, is in speed of locking. One can hammer through the locks



at very high speed, never using ropes and operating the mechanism whilst entering the lock at full speed and only then holding back, with plenty of room to stop, and reverse to the back of the lock before the paddles go up! I reckoned that on some flights I halved the locking times of hire cruisers and yachts

It's when one just has to use ropes, as in the big locks (which may be so massive that one could wind in the chamber if one wanted to, and it has been known for certain narrow boats to wind in the chambers, without it being the will of the steerer) that one discovers the shortcomings of the narrow boat. It's simply that narrow boats aren't designed to be tied up in locks, they are designed to keep moving! The single front stud is useless in big locks, because often the line has to run aft and it then fouls the cratch board, or in the case of a converted boat the forward part of the cabin. What one needs are Sampson posts, as fitted on some of the 6 plank Bridgewater narrow boats, or anser pins at the forward part of the boat ( as well as at the stern) on the gunwhale. Also a central dolly or cleat on the cabin top is useful, but can be dangerous in making the boat roll uncomfortably if used injudiciously.

One other great difference when narrow-boating on the Continent, is one's use of fenders. It goes without saying that you need big squashy fenders between the hull and the concrete wharf when tied up, even when a Frecinet barge passes. When it's a 4000 tonner on a big river (which certainly isn't going to slow down) you need not only the fenders, but proper springs and thoughtful tying up to avoid the "draw" rolling the boat to a disturbing degree. The effect of a big vessel passing you can be to drop the water level by over a couple of feet.

On English canals I would never think of using fenders in a lock, but in mainland Europe ones attitude soon changes! The reasons for this are manifold, but one important factor is that inevitably, however hard one tries, one is always coming into the locks very much faster than one would wish; it's a combination of the much deeper water, and the small blockage factor so that the boat does not slow down as you enter the chamber, even with a boat drawing 3 ft 2 inches. The resultant shattering blow as the reversed propeller walks the stern sideways is not pleasant. Another problem is that in the very big locks, one may find oneself running along the concrete wall of the lock for minutes on end, and it's not unusual for the current to push the boat back onto the wall even after you have manoeuvred it towards the middle of the lock.

To my mind plastic fenders look wrong on narrow boats and barges and they aren't very practical as they don't last very long either. This is because the locks never have rubbing boards and invariably when the gates open they go well inside the recesses in the lock wall providing a nice trap to rip off the fenders. In many cases there are protruding angle iron supports which if one was a cynic would make one think they were there specifically to rip open any plastic fender. The answer is to copy the practice of the working boatmen who have had, like the narrow-boaters, about 200 hundred years to devise good working practice. They use wooden fenders which are a bit of 3" x 3" softwood about 3 ft long and tapered at each end, suitably drilled, and suspended on a length of cheap rope. These are used on all craft from 350 to 4000 tons and they work very well as long as you make an effort to avoid getting them trapped in the lock gate or ladder recesses! They work so well that in future I'm thinking of using them in English canal tunnels, because those silly safety chains make a mess of my paintwork!

Other essentials for an easy life in the rest of Europe are a very loud horn, a good anchoring system, a VHF radio, a good pair of binoculars, a sea loo which pumps over the side ( no pump outs or Elsan disposal the other side of Dover), a very big fuel



tank and two ropes of about 120ft, but you won't need these most of the time.

If any members of the HNBOC are thinking of going foreign, I would be most happy to drink their beer and give more detailed information and advice.



Ronquieres Inclined Plane

Photos: J.Macdonald

Finally, I must say that having been boating in foreign lands every year for the last 15 years with different, but relatively “normal” boats, the reception which I got from having an historic vessel was astounding. I've had every nationality on board, and had lock keepers stopping the traffic so they could look over the boat. The popularity of a vintage boat was summed up one day when an elderly boating gentleman saw my boat, staggered down to the wharf as I was mooring up, and gasped (in French) as he admired the rivets and listened to the Gardner “ Mon Dieu! C'est plus mieux que Beethoven”!

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## PROGRESS AT THE WOODEN CANAL BOAT SOCIETY

Autumn 2001 has been an exciting time at the W. C.B.S. During November work has been in progress at the Heritage Boatyard site on Knowl St, Staleybridge. Phase 1 of the development of the site, the construction of retaining walls and a brick boundary wall, has been carried out. This was paid for with a £29,400 landfill tax grant as part of the Greening of Greater Manchester programme. The W.C.B.S. wishes too thank Marshalls who supplied top quality bricks for the wall at a heavily discounted price. Landscaping is being carried out by W.C.B.S. volunteers and new gates are under construction at nearby Mottram Joinery.

The next phase of work at the boatyard will involve the excavation of most of the site, to allow narrow boats to be side slipped from the Huddersfield Narrow Canal. Work will then be started on the restoration of the Runcorn Wooden Header *Hazel*. Funding for the excavation work still has to be secured.

The W.C.B.S. still needs help from competent volunteers, particularly those who have experience of preparing funding bids, or who would enjoy developing more outlets for goods collected on re-cycling trips.

Chris Leah