



The Huddersfield (very) Narrow Canal

Photos: Steve Wood



The start of the journey along the Huddersfield Narrow Canal
Bream in Lock 1W - Ashton - under - Lyne

Steve Wood writes

On the evening of 23rd June the crews of 13 boats gathered at Portland Basin Marina for a briefing on the “Pennine Explorer Cruise” organised by Huddersfield Canal Society and a team from Canal & River Trust’s Manchester, Pennine and Potteries Waterway.

A limit of 12 had been set by CRT as the highest number that could be escorted through Standedge Tunnel in a day. A few people dropped out and others came in and a 13th boat also joined the cruise, but would pass through the tunnel a day later.

There had been some debate about whether *Bream* would fit along the canal. I had measured her at 70’5” long and 6’9” wide. It was thought that she might struggle for length on the tightest bend in the tunnel but I was keen to go and it was agreed that I would be allowed to join the group but had to be last through on the day.

I joined friends in Castlefield and we were the second of three pairs through

Manchester city centre. The inevitable rain did nothing to dampen spirits as I saw a city I thought I knew well from a completely different perspective. The penultimate lock underneath Piccadilly has a less than wholesome reputation but it was still a surprise to see so many discarded needles and bottles on the lockside. We moored at the top of the Rochdale 9 at the junction with the Ashton Canal.

The following morning we made an early start up the Ashton flight. The New Islington area is well known to enthusiasts of modern architecture, largely because of the famous Chips building which is right beside the canal. When we reached the Etihad Campus, home to Manchester City, I managed to pick up a couple of coats on the propeller and more than an hour was lost cutting them off. As we passed a large supermarket, a CRT team was busy removing trolleys from the water. I drifted through in neutral gear without problems. The rest of the day was relatively uneventful, though the assistance of the first of many volunteers we were to see that week was



much appreciated. We arrived at Portland Basin and the boat was gauged for the tunnel by CRT. I was quite surprised that they measured her as even narrower than I previously had; 6'8" but at least I knew I wasn't likely to get stuck.

That evening the whole group met up for the first time, the others having come down the Peak Forest Canal. Our itinerary was circulated and plans made for the following day. I was to take the lead as I had the biggest, deepest drafted boat so would benefit most from the topping up of the pounds overnight.

Saturday morning saw the cruise proper get under way. I was met at lock 1W by CRT volunteer Roger who as it turned out was to stay with me the rest of that day. We soon worked out a method of working and the climb to Stalybridge passed without incident. I moored up and after thanking Roger with the customary tea and biscuits visited the supermarket next to the canal. That afternoon my crew member for the week arrived, and Eve and I spent the afternoon getting to know some of our new travelling companions. The evening was spent at the legendary Stalybridge Station Buffet Bar, where all present agreed that the pie and peas were delicious!

Sunday went well, not least as it was one of the few dry days all week! Scout Tunnel is narrow and shallow so I crawled through here against the water flow at a snails' pace. For the first time we got

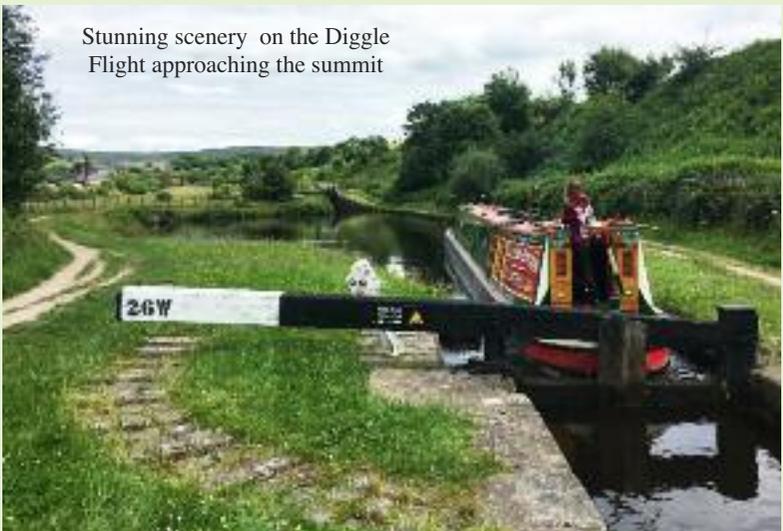
a real sense of the beautiful Pennine scenery as we approached Mossley. On reaching Roaches Lock I was allocated a space on the bank and for the first - but not the last - time, couldn't get within two feet of the towpath. The evening

entertainment in the local pub was a showing of the film about the restoration of the canal.

Monday was planned as a longer day, with 18 locks and 6 hours boating to the summit. *Summerborn* led the group and I followed, just before 7am. CRT were manning lock 17W where there was a problem with the bottom gates and risk of serious water loss. Julie and Gary gave me a hand me through lock 21W. This is the first of two (in)famously narrow locks which many historic boats struggle with but it didn't give me any problems other than being slow to operate. We paused for a late breakfast in Uppermill and set off again, now third in line. Above lock 23W we had problems with a lack of water. This pound has a (very slow) water point and *Summerborn* was filling up. *Owl* had also stopped to use it and by the time I had come around the corner we had taken out three lockfulls and were starting to scrape the bottom. I walked back to the previous lock to stop anyone else coming up while the problem was sorted out with the assistance of CRT once more.

By the time we were moving I was second again. The Diggle flight has two ground paddles on the same side at both top and bottom, which is a real help as you cannot cross the locks at the top end. We reached lock 30W without problems but it took forever to empty. After half an hour we were able to pass through the lock and complete our climb

Stunning scenery on the Diggle Flight approaching the summit





up to the summit. We reported the problem to CRT who came for a look. It emerged that lifting the bottom paddles did not move anything below the water. Several hours were spent improvising a solution and eventually everyone reached the summit around 8pm

Standedge Tunnel is invariably the first thing people think of when the Huddersfield Narrow is mentioned. The first boat into the tunnel was steered by Keith from the Canal Society, a little after 7am and boats continued to enter every 45 minutes or so. CRT provide a pilot who stands at the back of the boat and talks you through the various sections. He also checks in with Marsden control centre at four points in the tunnel. You need good concentration for a couple of hours but it is well worth it. A few of the wider cabined boats caught their handrails a couple of times but nothing worse than happens in many a bridge hole. We didn't get lucky and see a train in the parallel tunnel, but it is a remarkable experience and I would recommend it to anyone. Emerging into the daylight as the last boat of the day at Marsden was an experience I will long remember.

passing open fields at other times.

The early starters were on the move soon after 7am but unfortunately the timing of boats between locks wasn't always right and water levels quickly became a problem in a couple of places. Drawing a lock can make 9-12" difference in some pounds so it is important to draw paddles on the lock ahead to stop water being lost down the bywashes. Several locks have restrictors meaning that you can't always tell from a distance whether they are up or down. With so many people around both from the boats and volunteers, crews lost track a couple of times on who had done what and paddles were not closed properly on a couple of occasions.

The combination of these problems and very wet weather meant that a number of bywashes were incredibly lively. On a couple of occasions my boat was pushed into shallow water before I could even get out of the lock. The guillotine lock 24E was the shortest on the whole canal. My boat fitted in with very little to spare even after lifting the bow fender and we were watching both ends very closely as she descended. Slaithwaite is a remarkable little



Emerging from the tunnel at Marsden

The descent from Marsden starts with a flight of closely spaced locks. The canal generally hugs the north side of the valley whereas the roads are on the south side. The feeling almost all the way from the summit to Slaithwaite is rural, often in woodland and

place where the restored canal runs down one side of the main street. The road bridges here were the lowest we saw all week.

We had all moored in the pound in the centre of Milnsbridge overnight and when the time came to leave it wasn't long before the



level was down so much that some boats were grounded and listing. Water had to be run down three locks to get everyone afloat again. The run into Huddersfield is particularly fascinating. Much of the canal takes a new channel or levels have been changed to accommodate later developments such as a factory which was built across the line of the canal. The solution here was to move a lock and tunnel under the factory. Spectacular and it works well. There are several examples of such creative thinking along the canal; a credit to everyone involved in this “impossible” restoration.

Our mooring in Huddersfield was right in the middle of the university. Boats breasted up on both sides of the canal, making quite a sight for passers-by. The towpath here is well used by students and others from the local community and it is no surprise that quite a few cameras were spotted during the day. That evening “74 Club” plaques were presented to all crews before Alan from HCS led a walk showing a number of historic locations around the town.

On Saturday, the shorter boats continued through Sir John Ramsden’s Canal, where the locks are shorter and wider, with three longer boats preparing to turn for the return journey. Everyone got together one last time for a social evening hosted by the Calder Navigation Society at South Pennine Boat Club. A very enjoyable evening was had by all before we headed off in various directions the following morning.

It was a remarkable week for many reasons. Despite the incessant rain people enjoyed themselves immensely and the Huddersfield Narrow Canal turned out to be a fascinating and enjoyable journey. Yes, there were problems in places but most of these came because we were travelling in convoy. Having since completed the return journey I can say that water management is not an issue with 2 boats travelling together in the same way it is with 13.

Other conclusions I have from the week are as follows:

- Standedge Tunnel is great fun to travel through and is not likely to damage boats as used to happen when they were towed in convoy.
- The canal has amazing scenery and passes some delightful towns, in particular Uppermill, Marsden, Slaithwaite and Huddersfield itself.
- It doesn’t take a week to do the canal, but if you have the time take it and enjoy the scenery and villages.
- It is not very single-hander friendly, especially on the east. A number of locks do not have access directly below and shallow water at lock landings means that pulling to the side is not always possible.
- The locals and CRT (both staff and volunteers) are wonderful and passionate and kept us going with their can-do attitude. Nothing was too difficult or too much trouble. Thanks to them all for making this a wonderful memorable trip.



**Tied by the university
in Huddersfield**