

Fjord Empress Adventure

Friday, August 30th. After receiving instruction about the boat from the Andersen folks, including going through the first three Middlewich locks with us, we were off and cruising at 2:30. We decided Sandy would be the Skipper and primary helmsman, and I would be the crew, working the locks (you need muscles for many of the locks) and sparing Sandy at the helm. Our ultimate goal was to cross the Pontecysstle Aqueduct in Wales. From Middlewich, it is all upstream to the aqueduct.

Here is Sandy standing with our 62 foot long, 15 ton boat, the Fjord Empress.



Our first challenge after the Andersen folks abandoned us was a hard right off the Trent and Mersey Canal onto the Middlewich branch of the Shropshire Union Canal. We pulled the maneuver off but it was not graceful. I am sure the folks on the other side of the canal had some good laughs at our expense.



Looking good cruisin' the canal.

After that we managed to cruise five hours and moor long after most, if not all boats anywhere near us had long since moored for the evening.



We ate most of our meals on the boat, just a couple of times in pubs.

ABOUT the LOCKS



There were a ton of them. Each was at about 70 feet long and a little bit wider than the boat. The elevation change per lock was between 3 feet and a bit more than 11 feet. Sandy handled each and every one. All I did was work the lock paddles (which either fill or drain the lock) and gates (which either keeps water from entering the lock or from draining too quickly) and meet her at either the top or bottom of the lock when she pulled out of the lock. Only twice there were enough helpers at a lock that I could ride the boat down and out of a lock with Sandy.

The lock above is full, waiting for a boat to pull in and lower to the canal below. If there was a boat wanting up, then the lock would have to be drained and then filled after the boat pulls in.



Here is Sandy pulling into her first lock all by herself after making a crazy hard right turn onto the Middlewich branch of the Shropshire Union Canal.



Pulling into an open lock going up. Sandy can take pictures and handle the boat at the same time! That's me standing at the top waiting on her so I can close the gates and open the paddles at the other end of the lock to fill it.





The look for Sandy was very different going into locks going down versus up. Going up she had a huge target (see picture two above.) Going down she was most going in blind as you can see above. Yet she always prevailed. That's me with my trusty windlass to open the paddles to drain the lock (and lower the boat.)

Saturday, August 31st. Our only hope of making it to the Pontecysstle (pon-ti-sill-tee) Aqueduct (the locals just call it "the Duct") was to spend the next two days cruising hard. Starting at 7:45, we cruised the remaining portion of the Middlewich branch and onto the Main Shropshire Union Canal for a short while before turning hard right onto the Llangollen Canal, and its four consecutive Hurleston locks, the total rise 34 feet, three inches. We have heard many pronunciations for Llangollen, but my favorite is the way the Welsh say it - claw-naw-klen sounded far in the back of your throat. The first lock of the Hurleston lock heading upstream was barely wide enough for the boat. Maybe 1 inch on either side, but probably less. Two volunteers worked that lock, one to work the mechanism and one to watch that the boat didn't get hung up.

From there it was through the primarily rural/agricultural countryside. If you like looking at sheep and cows, this would be a terrific trip for you. We stopped in mid afternoon in Wrenbury, where we had drinks at Dusty Miller, a wonderful pub and restaurant along side the canal. By now we had gone through our first lift bridge. Hydraulically operated both up and down by cranking the mechanism with our trusty windlass, it was fun the first time. Not so much the latter lift bridges - hard work. Needless to say I got my workouts in by working lock mechanisms and the lift bridges. Thank goodness for the few Canal & River Trust volunteers who assisted with some of the locks.



The Dusty Miller pub on the canal in Wrenbury. That is an electrified lift gate you operate on the canal. You shut down traffic so you can go through.

After leaving Wrenbury we cruised about 2.5 more hours through three more locks before mooring for the evening. For dinner we walked about a mile back to WilleyMoore, a pub and restaurant at the second lock of the three we recently had gone through. A great Fish and Chips meal and drinks. I had a terrific dark beer, Stone the Crows. By the way, in England fish and chips is always served with peas, either cooked plain or smashed. We were glad that the restaurant served them as regular plain.

Our total cruise time for the day was 11.5 hours. After reviewing our maps in the evening, we were pretty much resigning ourselves that we weren't going to make it to The Duct, but thought we could make the Chirk Aqueduct and Tunnel.

It has been remarkable to watch the English people's love affair with their dogs. Lots and lots of people have dogs, in town, in restaurants, on boats, hiking, wherever. The boat dogs are particularly fun to watch. I've seen them jump on and off moored boats, run along the roofs of boats, generally having a grand time. They were almost all off leash and very well behaved. And quiet.



Cheers!

Sunday, September 1st. A word about bridges and the canal in general. You might think that cruising under bridges is no big deal, but that is not the case. The canal narrows for the towpath to go underneath so for almost all bridges, it is like threading the boat through a needle. And they are rarely perpendicular to the canal, so you were many times making a blind run through the bridge, just hoping nobody was coming. And you often have to duck or get hit in the head by the bridge.



Also, in many places along the canal, it narrows, for whatever reason, manmade or vegetation overgrowth, making the canal passable by barely one boat. Misjudging a narrow section means bumping into the side of the canal or another boat, or doing crazy maneuvers to avoid each other, or just getting stuck in the shallows on either side of the canal. By the end of Sunday, it felt more like bumper cars with 15 ton boats, avoiding other boats the best you can. Most of time you are successful.



The canal above looks wider than it is. Every few miles there are winding holes that are 70 feet in diameter, so boats like ours have a place to turn around if you want. The Llangollen canal is usually about 20-30 feet wide, but often times much narrower. Depth in the middle of the canal may be about 4 feet deep although there were a few places where our boat dragged the bottom. If you get too close to the sides in places, you can get stuck because the depth drops to zero.

Okay, Sunday the 1st was another long day upstream. We cruised just outside Whitchurch, and of course it was terribly congested because there was a boat rally there to raise money to rebuild a branch of the canal directly through the town. Again we cruised through beautiful farm land, plenty of cows, sheep and crops. We finally moored near Hinford, after another almost 11 hour day. We were tired, but positioned well to make the Chirk Aqueduct and Tunnel, and a moderate chance of making it to the Pontecysstle Aqueduct.

Monday September 2nd. After cruising 23 miles the past day and a half with no locks, we started with two. By 10:00 after the landscape had changed to mostly forest and hilly, we came to the Chirk Aqueduct. It really is more impressive seeing it in person than pictures. Immediately after the aqueduct, there is no time to enjoy the view because you dive into the Chirk Tunnel, 459 yards long. Sandy was a trooper getting through that thing. It was sort of fun and stressful at the same time. Later that day, I cleaned brick dust from the leading edge of the top of the boat.



Train going over upper bridge at Chirk Aqueduct. That's Sandy on the aqueduct in the picture below.





Sandy taking it across the Chirk Aqueduct.



The Chirk Tunnel right after the Aqueduct



The Chirk Tunnel



Sandy guiding us out of the Chirk Tunnel.

Because we made such good time we decided to make a run for the Pontecysstle Aqueduct. Sure glad we did. After cruising through the shorter Whitehurst Tunnel (a mere 89 yards,) we got our first look at the Pontecysstle Aqueduct from a distance. It is as impressive as described and stands out as a tribute to man's ingenuity. The steel trough that runs through it is the original from when built in 1802.



As we finally approached it, you could see the sheer drop off one side. There is a concrete walkway on the other side, and it is a popular tourist destination. I am sure some of the pictures of us and our boat taken by the scores of people along the aqueduct will be shared across the world in emails or social media.



Getting ready to cross the aqueduct.



The boat behind us following us across the aqueduct.



Yours truly at the helm.

Cruising the aqueduct was not uncomfortable, and the view off the side pretty spectacular. The biggest challenge was not dropping the phone while taking pictures.

After crossing the aqueduct, we made a not so graceful turnaround, and went back over the aqueduct and started our journey back to Middlewich. The water flows all downhill from the aqueduct. While we went up 28 locks going, it is going down the same 28 locks. And the hundred some odd bridges.

We retraced our path, past where we spent the previous night, and moored in Elsmoor. All that is left are three relaxing days back.



Here is me bringing the boat back through the Chirk Tunnel on the return trip.

Tuesday, September 3rd. I have not mentioned the weather. It has been remarkable. In general each day has been about the same, with some variation. Usually it starts with a gorgeous cool morning. At some point it gets cloudy, the wind picks up and it rains, but just by the time you get your weathers on, it clears up. Then you go on for a while and the process repeats. It often rains while the sun is shining and few clouds in the sky.





Typical mornings on the canal.



One of the rainbows we saw.

Anyway, we continued our trek back to Middlewich. We were in great shape, and it was mostly pretty slow relaxing cruising now. Relatively short days cruising. We chugged past Whitchurch without issue because most rally boats were gone. Through some lift bridges (yuk) and finally stopping just short of Wrenbury. We walked to the Dusty Miller pub and had an excellent dinner and drinks.



Wednesday, September 4th. Happy Birthday April! Sandy & I took no pictures today. We slept in, got started at 9:30 and cruised for 6.75 hours. It was mostly easy cruising. We only got sideways once. Lots of locks and bridges, but took our time and nailed them. One of the locks broke and they shut the lock down briefly. But it didn't really affect us much. We just got stuck in a queue with us being the third boat.

We talked with a boat of Norwegians that left Andersen the same day as us and had to return their boat Friday also. They only made it to Elsmeer. However, I believe their goal was mostly to travel to the next pub for dinner. We have been hopscotching them for the past two days.

People on the canal are pretty friendly folk, renters and owners alike. There have been a couple of gruff people, I think owners who think the canal is no place for folks like us. But in general people like to talk and converse. Everyone usually pitches in at the locks if there are two or more boats waiting to use them.

There has also been plenty of animals, both domestic and wild. Near Middlewich, plenty of swans. Throughout, lots of ducks seemingly having a good time. Lots of songbirds, herons and the like. The cows and sheep bellied up to the canal for drinks. We even saw a peacock along side the canal; one field was full of bunnies. Occasionally squirrels.









Thursday, September 5th. Slept in and after breakfast finally hit the canal at 8:53. The weather this morning couldn't have been nicer, but quickly changed to cloudy and intermittent rain, and cool winds. But by the time we finished, it was beautiful and sunny again.



A view cruising through Middlewich.

We ended up in a queue of boats again which slowed us down, but no longer cared as we were in the home stretch. We were pleased to be pulling out of the last lock right by Andersen Boats at 2:15. We moored in their private mooring space, confirmed checkout at 9:00am Friday, and made arrangements for a taxi to take us to Manchester after we checkout. The boat is mostly cleaned and tidied up. Bags mostly packed. Had dinner at The White Bear pub and restaurant in Middlewich. Good night!

Friday, September 6th. Good morning. Time to check out, catch a taxi and continue on to the next part of our trip.

Last modified: 10:50 PM