

ACROSS THE PENNINES

By Terry Needham

In summer 2018 I was joined on the Shannon by three volunteers who work at the Downpatrick & County Down Railway. Naturally one of our first stops was Dromod to visit Michael Kennedy's Cavan & Leitrim railway collection. David, Norman and Tommy's mechanical skills were greatly appreciated in solving a cooling water leak at Carnadoe and we enjoyed a pleasant cruise to Lough Key and back to Lough Erne.

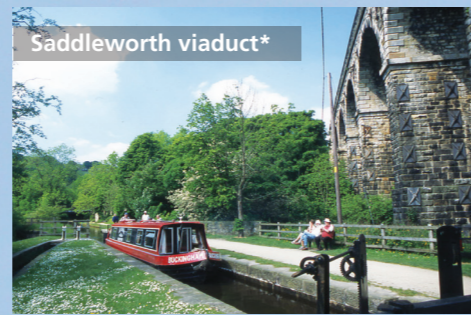
At the end of September, the same crew joined by Raymond, flew to Manchester to transit 'the Everest of Canals'... well, that's what the brochure calls the Huddersfield Narrow Canal (HNC) which has the highest navigable summit level in Britain. Bob arrived by car and David's son Aston also came for a couple of days.

The vessel was a 58ft long narrowboat hired from Shire Cruisers whose base is at Sowerby Bridge, the end point of our journey. It is unusual to be able to hire a boat for a one-way passage as generally canal routes are circular or one-way and back again. The crossing of the Pennines is made via

the Standedge Tunnel which is only open in favourable conditions on certain days by pre-booking. David's experience on northern canals was invaluable in the planning of a trip that could easily have been frustrated by too little or too much water.

Reaching the Ashton Canal's historic boatyard at Ashton-under-Lyne, a suburb of Manchester, on Saturday afternoon we were introduced to the boat by David from Shire Cruisers and soon set off past Portland Basin into the Peak Forest Canal. The surroundings were very green and rural although never far from built-up industrial areas and the towpath well used by joggers and dog walkers. The afternoon's run to Romiley finished at an excellent Indian restaurant.

Next morning, we retraced our way to the junction at Portland Basin passing again under the only bascule bridge that we encountered. Now began the HNC itself and a lunch break at Stalybridge, the first of a number of railway stations investigated by the rail fanatics. Our evening halt was at Roaches Lock, Mossley. On Monday we took the train into Manchester city centre for the Museum of Science and Industry, a huge collection containing the original Rocket locomotive. The walk back along the canal was very impressive for the concentration of Victorian civil engineering in canal, rail and roads.



Saddleworth viaduct*

On Tuesday, with 14 locks passed so far, we began canal cruising in earnest but still climbing gently, only 10 locks that day.

In the afternoon we walked back down the River Tame, crossing it on stepping-stones to see the fine Saddleworth Museum at Uppermill, then a stiff but rewarding climb to Church Inn for dinner.

Wednesday was more intense, eight locks in the Diggle flight took us to the entrance of the Standedge Tunnel to meet our chaperone Trevor. He explained that as a chaperone, not a pilot, any damage incurred was not his responsibility. After a safety briefing (no petrol engines, no GRP hulls, no gas fires, keep one's head and hands well inside the vessel) we entered the longest, highest, roughest hewn, darkest canal tunnel in the British Isles.

At over five kilometres in length (actually 5,189m), it is a unique experience with no light and limited ventilation for nearly two hours. A later railway tunnel lies close alongside and each passing train creates a blast of air through the three or four connecting passages. At each of these Trevor telephoned to confirm that all was well.



Diggle flight*

The tunnel opened in 1811 after 16 years of digging, stands 645ft above sea level and burrows some 638ft beneath the Pennines. At one time, towing horses would have been walked across the Saddleworth Moor, high above as no towpath was provided through the tunnel for them and boats were 'legged' through. After many years of disuse, the tunnel was reopened in 2001 and is considered one of the United Kingdom's seven wonders of the waterways.



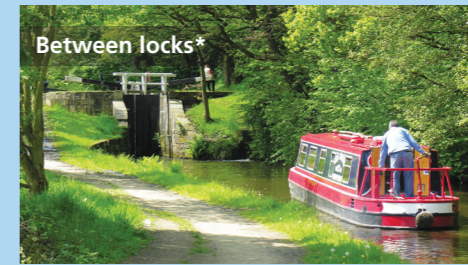
Inside Standedge tunnel

Breaking as it were into Yorkshire, we quickly cleared 20 locks downhill to Slaithwaite, including the only guillotine lock on the HNC. These were not exactly a flight but so close that the next one was usually in sight. After 28 locks and the tunnel in one day we felt that we had earned a good dinner at the Italian restaurant. Thursday, we continued down the Upper Colne valley reaching Huddersfield in the afternoon. The railway station here is so grand that it would pass for a parliament building in a small country! The canal side campus of the university looked inviting but we moored a little further on past Aspley Basin.



Tunnel entrance at Marsden*

Friday's first bridge was unusual – a vertically lifting section. Fortunately, it was an electrified, push-button mechanism for a small



Between locks*

road. Everywhere on the canals we found that the original civil engineering was restored or recreated as faithfully as possible. As many large mills used the waterways of the narrow Pennine valleys, there was a historic feeling to the journey. Some huge buildings appeared to be abandoned but many have been redeveloped as apartments or offices.



Lift bridge

Now commenced the Huddersfield Broad Canal (nine locks of 14ft wide) which had carried the Yorkshire Keels. However, the lock length reduced from 70ft to 58ft so the cruiser had to be carefully positioned at an angle to fit in. Our heading also changed from eastwards to northwest and our route began to climb. An earlier heavy rainfall came close to activating flood warnings which would have prevented passage on the river section, so for a short while we motored upstream on the wide River Calder before entering the Calder and Hebble Navigation.

The purpose of a mysterious stout stick carried on the cabin roof was now revealed to be the oak handspike necessary to operate the peculiar rack and pinion mechanism used for opening sluices.



C&H lock spike

At Salterhebble we found another guillotine lock, much heavier than the first as the canal is broader. Guillotines are used where the lock is too close to a road for the normal balance beam to swing. 15 locks on this day carried us uphill through Brighouse and then a short detour into the Hebble Brook, a blind arm of the canal, where we moored for the last night.

The handover to Shire Cruisers was quick and efficient and we had time for one last railway station visit, Sowerby Bridge itself. We also looked over the Tuel Lane Lock in the town



Salterhebble Lock

centre at the start of the Rochdale Canal. With a fall of 6m, this is the deepest in England, a modern replacement of two original locks. The minibus to Manchester Airport drove over the mountain motorway in little over an hour to retrace five days boating. Only an active crew of six could have passed all 98 locks so quickly! The technique was to have two teams of winders on the bank, one always keeping ahead to set the next lock.

At the end of the summer season we enjoyed very fine weather. Only a handful of narrowboats were moving so no traffic problems arose. The earlier summer drought had closed the tunnel for a while. We were the sole boat to pass that day. David's planning and daily check with the Canal and River Trust ensured a smooth passage. The holiday was quite physically active but very convivial, we all enjoyed it, even the crew member who said, 'I was promised a ride on a boat and now I have walked almost the whole way!'



Photos: Terry Needham

Many thanks to Nigel Stevens from Shire Cruisers for providing additional images marked thus*

Acknowledgements and Useful Information:

Terry and his crew hired from Shire Cruisers:

<https://www.shirecruisers.co.uk/index.php>

Discover more about the Canal and River Trust at: <https://canalrivertrust.org.uk/>



Lock 16E HNC*